THE PRODUCTION OF
Hindu-Muslim Violence
IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA
PART I

Introduction
Explaining Communal Violence

Among the many paradoxes and contradictions that must confront observers of India is the competing imagery of violence and non-violence, symbolized in two recurrent representations of that country. One is the image that has been flashed countless times during the past half-century in the media and the cinema of the bloody riots that occurred immediately before and after Independence as a consequence of the events associated with the simultaneous partition of the country into two new, mutually hostile sovereign states that immediately fought their first war and have since fought two more. The second image is that of the saintly Mahatma Gandhi traversing the country for decades proclaiming the message of non-violence and devising strategies of nonviolent opposition to British rule that have since been adopted round the world by the weak to fight against exploitation and discrimination by the strong and privileged. The two images merge in Attenborough’s film, Gandhi, when Gandhi appears in Noakhali in the province of Bengal during the pre-partition riots there to end the killing. He is shown lying on his bed, fasting to death against the violence, which is brought to an end as the repentant, weeping murderers deposit their weapons at his side.

Forty-five years after Independence, the world was presented with another image of India, that of violent mobs of Hindus descending upon the old, mainly Hindu religious town of Ayodhya to climb upon a five-hundred-year-old mosque to destroy it. This image was then followed by the pictures flashed round the world of Bombay in flames from the riots that followed after the destruction of the mosque a thousand miles away. Few people outside India, however, knew that similar riots also took place in cities and towns in large parts of the country, in which Muslims, having seen one of their mosques destroyed on BBC television or having otherwise learned of it, were now being
slaughtered, allegedly because they came out into the streets in shock and outrage and engaged in riotous behavior.

Even fewer people—indeed, only specialists—know that Hindu-Muslim riots and anti-Muslim pogroms have been endemic in India since Independence. They have occurred and recurred in many cities and towns throughout the country, but especially in the northern and western parts. Their frequency and intensity have fluctuated from time to time and place to place, but hardly a month passes in India in which a Hindu-Muslim riot does not occur that is large enough to be noted in the press. But there are also many such events on a smaller scale that occur much more frequently. Indeed, it is likely that not a day passes without many instances of quarrels, fights, and fracases between Hindus and Muslims in different places in India, many of which carry the potential for conversion into large-scale riots in which arson, looting, and killing may take place.

Neither in December 1992, nor on most of the occasions between Independence and 1992 in which so much destruction of people’s lives, homes, and property have occurred, have many saintly figures appeared to quell the violence. In fact, both these images—of frenzied, murderous masses in India and saintly figures moving about spreading their message of nonviolence as a cure for their frenzy—are part of a grand discourse of violence that I hope to undermine in this book. Riots are not explained by the spontaneous furies of mad mobs nor are there any weeping murderers among them nor can they normally be stopped by saints.

On the contrary, it is a principal argument of this book that the whole political order in post-Independence north India and many, if not most of its leading as well as local actors—more markedly so since the death of Nehru—have become implicated in the persistence of Hindu-Muslim riots. These riots have had concrete benefits for particular political organizations as well as larger political uses. Hindu-Muslim opposition, tensions, and violence have provided the principal justification and the primary source of strength for the political existence of some local political organizations in many cities and towns in north India linked to a family of militant Hindu nationalist organizations whose core is an organization founded in 1925, known as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Included in this family, generally called the Sangh Parivar, are an array of organizations devoted to different tasks: mass mobilization, political organization, recruitment of students, women, and workers, and paramilitary training. The leading political organization in this family, originally called the Jan Sangh, is now the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), currently (2001) the predominant party in India’s governing coalition. All the
organizations in the RSS family of militant Hindu organizations adhere to a broader ideology of Hindutva, of Hindu nationalism that theoretically exists independently of Hindu-Muslim antagonisms, but in practice has thrived only when that opposition is explicitly or implicitly present.²

The benefits for the consolidation of Hindu communal sentiment behind the organizations of militant Hindu nationalism in the RSS family of organizations and the Shiv Sena in the western state of Maharashtra (which also adheres to an ideology of militant Hindu nationalism) have been great: they have served to bring these parties to power in numerous states in India outside the south and have at last brought them to power at the Center,³ in New Delhi, as well. These formations have launched numerous Hindu-oriented campaigns since Independence in which the Muslims have been portrayed directly as obstacles to the achievement of national aspirations or have been clearly assumed to be the main obstacle. The two most massive such campaigns were the cow protection movement of the mid-1960s and the Ayodhya movement of the mid-1980s and early 1990s. In the former movement, there was no Muslim structure to stand as the centerpiece to be brought down; but, obviously, it was the Muslims of India, who slaughtered and ate beef, whose opposition was implied. The political context at that time, however, did not provide the same potential benefits for the RSS family of organizations as the context that existed in the 1980s during the Ayodhya movement.⁴

For, after a brief resurgence in its strength after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and the installation of her son, Rajiv Gandhi, as prime minister, the Indian National Congress, India’s dominant ruling party since Independence, began a severe decline in its fortunes in U.P., the most important state in the country, which has since spread to most of the other Indian states as well.

The years 1988–89 were to mark the beginning of the end of Congress dominance in the state and the country. In a bitterly contested national election campaign centered around north Indian personalities, the Congress was defeated by a coalition of non-Congress parties in 1989. When that coalition itself disintegrated and new elections were held in 1991, the leader of the Congress, Rajiv Gandhi, was assassinated in the midst of the campaign; the Congress was nevertheless once again returned to power under Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao, whose government lasted its full parliamentary term till 1996. While the Congress was weakening even during its last term in power after losing its popular leadership from the Nehru-Gandhi family, and while its rivals among the left parties were unable to consolidate their strength and emerge as a stable alternative governing force, the militant Hindu
organizations, including the BJP, were gathering strength from the mass mobilizations associated with the Ayodhya movement.

The Ayodhya movement made explicit use of a Muslim structure, a mosque, which stood for a religion that militant Hindus—and many non-militant Hindus as well, for that matter—disdain as foreign, immoral, and evil. But, even more important, just five years short of the celebration of India’s fiftieth year of independence from British rule, this mosque stood in the minds of its enemies as the mark of an earlier “slavery,” as they called it, of Hindu subjection to Muslim rule. The movement also created martyrs, especially after the killing of sixteen Hindus in Ayodhya in 1990, who were then portrayed in a grossly exaggerated and fantastic manner as the latest in a long series of martyrs to the cause of the removal of the defiling mosque from its place in the Hindu town of Ayodhya on the allegedly sacred ground of the god, Ram. This movement was also accompanied throughout north India by deliberate provocations directed against Muslims, whose effect was certain to bring down violence upon them, as it did massively in many cities and towns in northern and western India between 1989 and 1993. The movement also contributed significantly, along with other changes taking place in India at the time—particularly the controversy over reservation of places in public sector jobs for a large section of India’s Hindus commonly referred to as “backward castes”—to a major transformation in the sources of strength of the BJP, to such an extent as to turn the BJP of the 1991 and 1996 elections in its northern India stronghold state of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) into a virtually new and much stronger political formation than ever before. It should be clear enough by now, therefore, how valuable Hindu-Muslim opposition, antagonism, and violence have been to the fortunes of the BJP.

But Hindu-Muslim riots in India obviously did not begin only with the Ayodhya movement. They have been a recurring feature of modern Indian politics for nearly a century. Moreover, there have been periods during which Hindu-Muslim rioting has occurred in what are commonly referred to as great “waves” or “chains.” These periods include especially the years 1923–27, after the collapse of the noncooperation/Khilafat movement against British rule in India in which Hindu and Muslim political and religious organizations and groups worked together; 1946–48, when massive waves of rioting and massacres preceded, accompanied, and followed the partition of India and the consequent formation of the two successor states to the British Raj of India and Pakistan; and the succession of riots that occurred between 1989 and 1993 during the Ayodhya movement.

But it would be a mistake to confine our gaze only to these great waves of
rioting, for there has never been a period in modern Indian history, most especially in the north, when Hindu-Muslim riots have not occurred. It is a crucial part of the argument to be developed and demonstrated in this volume that the maintenance of communal tensions, accompanied from time to time by lethal rioting at specific sites, is essential for the maintenance of militant Hindu nationalism, but also has uses for other political parties, organizations, and even the state and central governments. It is necessary, therefore, for a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of the persistence of Hindu-Muslim rioting and its manifestation from time to time in great waves, to examine as well its appearance in relatively quieter times and at sites where it is endemic.

My first question, therefore, is: why do Hindu-Muslim communal riots persist in India? Or, put another way, how have such riots become endemic in that country? Consider in this connection the available data on Hindu-Muslim riots for the period 1960–93. Using a restrictive definition of riot-proneness, Varshney and Wilkinson have pointed out that the incidence of Hindu-Muslim communal riots in India is skewed towards urban India in general and towards 24 cities in particular. There are, therefore, only certain sites in which riots may be considered endemic. At the same time, while the incidence and timing of Hindu-Muslim riots vary from region to region and city to city, it is not incorrect to consider India as a whole a country in which Hindu-Muslim riots persist and are endemic. First of all, the number of such riots in the worst-hit cities account for only half the total incidents in the country. Second, even the worst-hit cities are scattered throughout a very large part of the country, in ten of its states. Third, from time to time, new sites that have either never before experienced large-scale Hindu-Muslim riots, or have not experienced them in several decades, have entered or reentered the lists.

Given the situation just described, a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon of persistence must account both for the dispersion of rioting in India in time and space and for its concentration in particular sites. The explanation to be provided in this volume will attempt to encompass India as a whole through an analysis of the discursive framework of communalism that affects, however differentially, all parts of the country where Hindus and Muslims abide side by side. However, I will focus the detailed analysis of riot production on a single site, the town of Aligarh, where riots have persisted since Independence, and which stands as a choice exemplar of riot persistence for other reasons as well, especially because of the presence there of the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). The Pakistan movement itself grew out
of conditions in U.P., and the AMU was one of its storm centers. Consequently, in the minds of many Hindus, the AMU stands in for the Muslims of India, for Partition and the creation of Pakistan, and for so many of the ills that afflict Indian society. Without the presence of the AMU, the Jan Sangh, the BJP, and other local communal groups would have had greater difficulty in establishing a strong presence in this city.

A second question is: why do Hindu-Muslim riots ebb and flow, appearing now here, now there at different times? As noted above, Hindu-Muslim riots sometimes occur in what appear to be great waves that spread from town to town and region to region of the country, affecting a great number of sites either simultaneously or one after the other. Those great waves are usually associated with large-scale political movements that precede them. On the other hand, there has never been an extended period of time in India since Independence when Hindu-Muslim riots have not occurred in some town or other, apparently unrelated to any broader movement in a region or in the country as a whole. So, there is persistence as well as variation in the country as a whole and at particular sites.

A third question concerns how it happens that large-scale violent events, in which mostly Muslims are killed, mostly by the police, get classified in the press, by the authorities, and by the public as riots rather than pogroms. I have argued elsewhere that there are two types of struggles that take place when riots occur. The first is the violent conflict between riotous groups and between rioters and the police. The second is the rhetorical struggle that takes place afterwards to control the interpretation of the riot, determine its meaning, explain the violence. It is at this stage that classification occurs. However, such classification is often automatic: often one explanation emerges dominantly, and sometimes a hegemonic consensus arises that lasts for a long time in the form of a master narrative that requires no knowledge of facts on the ground for its immediate acceptance. Such a master narrative exists in India, comprising two key elements. First, riots in general are perceived as spontaneous occurrences that arise out of petty quarrels that become converted into mass frenzies through the spread of rumors that exaggerate the precipitating incident. Second, Hindu-Muslim riots in particular are said to arise from the prejudices and hostilities that exist between these two religious groups, such that there is a natural tendency to expand any quarrel between a Hindu and a Muslim into a riot. In order to prevent such conversions of quarrels into riots, it is commonly urged, peace committees and other forms of intercommunal cooperation need to be developed to combat them. It is in this way, almost automatically and without reflection or
challenge, that trivial incidents involving Hindus and Muslims that precede large-scale riots are said to have been their cause. The automatic mechanism that produces such an explanation is based upon the deep-seated belief that popular passions are aroused as much by a preexisting history of communal antagonisms and a pervasive atmosphere of tension between Hindus and Muslims as by the actual or perceived circumstances surrounding the precipitating incident. It is my purpose in this volume to demonstrate that neither the prior history of communalism nor the immediate circumstances surrounding the so-called precipitating incident, nor the two alleged causes combined, provide a satisfactory explanation for the outbreak of large-scale Hindu-Muslim riots or anti-Muslim pogroms. On the contrary, the decisive factor is the action that takes place before the precipitating incidents and immediately thereafter, action that is often planned and organized and that fills the intermediate space and time between past history and immediate circumstance.

The fourth question asks: what interests are served and what power relations are maintained as a consequence of the wide acceptance of the reality of popular communal antagonisms and the inevitability of communal violence?

These four questions may be summed up in a nutshell as issues of persistence, differential incidence/timing, classification/meaning, and power. They are large questions that require diverse approaches. They raise issues of causality, function, and discourse. Issues of persistence and incidence/timing seem to require causal and/or functional analysis: why do riots persist, occur here and not there, occur now and not then? Whose interests are served by the occurrence, persistence, or disappearance of Hindu-Muslim riots? The struggle over meaning, explanations, and power relations requires attention to discourse. To what extent is there a communal discourse that accounts for the persistence of communal rioting over time by providing a framework of explanation and meaning, an ordering of relations between Hindus and Muslims, and an ordering of the respective relations of these two categorical groups to the state? Further, to what extent does such a discourse itself contribute to the persistence of the violence that it claims to explain? I will make use of methods appropriate to each type of analysis in an attempt to arrive at as full a picture as possible of the mechanisms that lead to the production of riots in India and of the dynamic processes that precede them, produce them, and explain them after their occurrence. The framework that unites the various themes and questions pursued herein is a theoretical formulation, a kind of ideal type, of the manner in which large-scale riots are
produced in sites where riots are endemic, whether in Aligarh, other parts of India, or other parts of the world.

THE DYNAMICS OF RIOT PRODUCTION

The primary approach taken in this volume to the dynamic process of riot production has some affinity with theories of collective action and social movements, developed most notably in the works of Tilly, Tarrow, McAdam and others of their colleagues. That affinity as well as the differences were noted in part in Theft of an Idol, but will be restated and elaborated briefly here. In agreement with this group of scholars, riots are conceived in this book as a form of collective action, one among a number of repertoires of collective action that developed in India primarily in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As much, therefore, as the great movements of noncooperation and civil disobedience and a whole host of other nonviolent forms of agitation, demonstration, and protest, riots have become a common and even an anticipated form of collective action.

The term “anticipated” is used here in two senses. People expect riots to occur from time to time and in certain places in India without being able to predict exactly when and where they will occur, but they also anticipate and expect riots during particular types of mass mobilization. Euphemistic terms have even been developed for the latter, such as “direct action.” A different rhetoric is also used during movements in which Hindu-Muslim violence is anticipated, an inflammatory rhetoric of hostility with scarcely-veiled encouragement to listeners to act out against the other community. Most commonly, the rhetoric is laced with words that encourage its members not to put up any longer with the attacks of the other but to retaliate against their aggression. There are also specific forms of action that are designed to provoke the other community into aggressive action, which is then met with a stronger retaliatory response. These forms include, especially, processions through neighborhoods inhabited primarily by persons from the other community, and the insistence by processionists that shopkeepers “down their shutters” and close their shops to honor whatever demand is being made during a demonstration. In the latter case, a demonstration ostensibly directed against the state or local administration may turn into a communal riot.

Consistent with the Tilly-Tarrow conceptualization of the development of social movements, every great wave of rioting in modern India has been preceded by new mobilizing tactics that become integrated into the new repertoire and promote violence. For example, between 1923 and 1927, the rioting
was accompanied by competitive movements for the conversion and reconversion of Hindus and Muslims in many localities in India—again especially in the north and west—to the other religion. Also common at this time was the interference of political and religious organizations in religious processions organized by the other community, especially the opposition of Muslims to the Hindu Ram Lila processions that marched through localities in which Muslims were concentrated. In contrast, the great massacres of 1946 to 1948 were more directly linked to political actions and mobilizations around the demand for Pakistan.

The various forms of religious and political mobilization that were developed in these earlier waves of violence have persisted into the present, but they have been subordinated to more direct appeals to Hindu religious sentiment and solidarity that confront and directly offend Muslim religious sentiments. These have included *yatra* (journeys) from one Hindu religious site to another or from one emotionally charged nationalist site to another, of which the most famous was the *rath yatra* of the BJP leader L. K. Advani in 1990 from the Hindu temple of Somnath in the western state of Gujarat to the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya. Although this *yatra* was aborted before it reached U.P., it gathered a massive following of Hindus and was accompanied by rioting in its wake at numerous sites through which it passed. Other actions associated with this movement included the carrying of bricks from all parts of India—and even from far-flung parts of the world where Hindus reside—to be consecrated and carried to Ayodhya to be used in the construction of the new temple to Ram at the site of the destroyed mosque; the carrying of the ashes of “martyrs” killed by the police at Ayodhya during the first assault on the mosque in 1990; and the travel of thousands of *kar sevaks* (volunteers) to Ayodhya to participate in the work of construction itself. In the localities of India, the passage of the *rath yatra* or the movement of *kar sevaks* was preceded or accompanied by “street corner meetings, the blowing of *shankh* (conch shell), clanging of *ghanta-gharial* (ringing of prayer bells and striking at a plate of alloyed metals), hoisting saffron flags in the daytime and *mashal* (flaming torches) at night on terraces, and organizing *mashal jaloos* (processions bearing lighted torches).” In the western state of Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena adopted the tactic of blocking the Bombay streets with *maha-aarti*, that is, gatherings for mass Hindu worship, mimicking the similar street-blocking that had for long accompanied Muslim *namaz* (worship) at prayer times.

Although, therefore, Hindu-Muslim and other forms of collective violence in India are expected, anticipated, have a fairly stable set of forms of action
that are fortified by new forms from time to time, and a distinct rhetorical form as well, they differ from the nonviolent forms in critical ways aside from the violence itself. However frequent and anticipated and however accompanied by new forms of mobilization that become integrated and legitimized in a repertoire of mobilizing acts, the riots that follow from them are illegitimate. Their illegitimacy, moreover, is acknowledged both by those who deplore the violence and by those who enact it. The authorities and the English-language press invariably condemn the violence that ensues after Hindu-Muslim riots, but the promoters of the violence also recognize its illegitimacy by claiming that the aggressor community was not aggressing, but was acting only in desperation in defense against the attacks of the other.

Another critical difference between these violent and nonviolent movements follows from the illegitimacy of the former. Their violent manifestations appear spontaneous, undirected, unplanned—and even the most carefully planned and well-organized assaults on the other community are designed to appear so. Since such riotous violence is illegitimate and the elements of preplanning in it are disguised, the struggle that takes place afterwards to explain it—that is, to control its interpretation—is crucial. The most common explanation is that the violence was in fact an unplanned, spontaneous expression of the deep feelings of an aggrieved people, but there are many others that will be illustrated in this volume. Here I want to note mostly the multiple functions served by capturing the meaning of a Hindu-Muslim or any other intercommunal, interreligious, interethnic riot in a particular way. These include legitimizing illegitimate violence, concealing the extent of preplanning and organization that preceded it, and maintaining intact the persons, groups, and organizations most deeply implicated in the violence by preventing punishment of the principal perpetrators.

The illegitimate and hidden aspects of riotous violence have posed almost insurmountable obstacles to those who have set out to analyze them. Only one author, not an academic, has dared to engage in actual participant observation of riots. Most who care to ascertain the “facts on the ground” appear after the riots to interview their victims. Within a few days, however, often even the victims, coached by lawyers, have prepared their accounts, been advised what to emphasize, who to name and blame, what to conceal. Most social science studies of riots in the West have not even been based on any direct or indirect observation of the events themselves, but on information derived from census and other “datasets.” In this study, a variety of instruments and methods have been used to penetrate the dynamic processes of riot production in contemporary India, which will be discussed below.
Before doing so, however, I want to outline the specific structure and argument that will be used to organize the information and data collected.

Phases in the Production of Riots

The structure and argument to be developed in this volume depart from nearly all previous studies of collective violence by insisting that, in sites where riots of a particular type are endemic, they are a grisly form of dramatic production in which there are three phases: preparation/rehearsal, activation/enactment, and explanation/interpretation. In sites of endemic riot production, preparation and rehearsal are continuous activities. Activation or enactment of a large-scale riot takes place under particular circumstances, most notably in the case of competitive political systems in a context of intense political mobilization or electoral competition in which riots are precipitated as a device to consolidate the support of ethnic, religious, or other culturally marked groups by emphasizing the need for solidarity in face of the rival communal group. The third phase follows after the violence in a broader struggle within, but also outside, the local community to control the explanation or interpretation of the causes of the violence. In this phase, wider elements in society become involved, including journalists, politicians, social scientists, and public opinion generally. This third phase is marked by a process of blame displacement in which the social scientists themselves become implicated, a process that does not isolate effectively those most responsible for the production of violence, but diffuses blame widely, blurring responsibility, and thereby contributing to the perpetuation of violent productions in future.

In India, all this takes place within a discourse of Hindu-Muslim hostility. The second major theme of the book concerns the link between this discourse of Hindu-Muslim antagonism and the practice of violence enacted in what are called Hindu-Muslim riots. The third theme is that the practice of violence, especially in sites where riots are endemic, becomes embedded in what I call institutionalized riot systems. These systems of riot production are marked by two interrelated features: the existence of a multiplicity of roles, in which there is a specialized division of labor.

It is an essential part of the argument herein that the third phase in riot production, the interpretation phase—and the struggle for control over the explanation of riots that occurs during this phase—is as important as the production itself, as in any dramatic production. Finally, the keynote of this phase, suffusing it, is a process of blame displacement in which all are involved and
whose end result is the diffusion of responsibility in such a way as to free all from blame and allow the principal perpetrators to go scot-free.

The explanation of riot production to be developed herein relegates all spontaneity theories of the causes of riots to the realm of blame displacement. It is the most common form of blame displacement, in fact. Such theories are at worst utterly false, at best—and invariably so—misleading.

Although the primary focus of the book, therefore, is on the dynamic process of riot production, that is, on how riots are produced rather than on why they happen, several causal explanations of Hindu-Muslim violence in India will nevertheless be examined. In the course of this examination, conventional social science techniques of correlation and regression will be used to uncover associations from which causal explanations are often inferred. For the rest of my analysis both of the functional utility of persisting riots to a multiplicity of social, economic, and political groups and of the struggle to control the meaning of riots, the principal sources will be interviews and personal observations carried out in India during field trips over the thirty-eight years from 1961 to 1999. Newspaper accounts of riots will also be used, though my experience with such accounts is that they are invariably deficient, sometimes utterly false, and altogether inadequate for serious social science research on the subject of collective violence. Public and confidential documents will also be used, but they are sparse on this subject and some potentially useful reports are inaccessible.

Before laying out the outline of this volume, I want to take up some methodological issues concerning causal analysis of collective violence and indicate how I will make use of causal explanations as well as alternative methods of functional analysis and the analysis of discursive formations in interpreting and understanding the incidence and dynamics of the production of riots and pogroms in contemporary India.

**EXPLANATION: CAUSE, FUNCTION, DISCOURSE**

*Problems of Causal Analysis in the Comparative Study of Forms of Collective Violence*

Virtually every scholar who has written about riots, pogroms, and other forms of collective violence seeks their causes, and not a few scholarly articles feature the word in their titles. Many of those who seek causes also seek cures—as if dealing with an illness—or solutions, as if dealing with a social problem. Commissions of inquiry are often appointed after particularly serious riots or after a wave of riots. Their charge is invariably to determine the causes of
the riot or riots in question. Their purpose is often different from the work of scholars. It is to assign responsibility, especially upon the state authorities and their agents, administrative officers, and police. In this case, riots are seen as problems for the authorities, disturbances of law and order in which their own competence and effectiveness in allowing riots to occur and in failing to control them when they do occur are judged. Such an approach introduces a secondary search for causes, namely, for the failure to control a riot in its early stages and allowing it to get out of hand.

Numerous problems have arisen in the literature that seeks causes for riots. One is that participants in riots often do not conform to expectations based on the imputed causes. For example, many participants in riots whose causes have been said to be poverty and unemployment turn out to be employed. Such a finding raises another kind of causal issue, that of individual motivation for participation. But the two sets of findings, one based on ecological factors, the other on individual motivations, may conflict. In statistics, this is, of course, the problem of the ecological fallacy.

It will be argued throughout this volume that it is essential to the understanding of the dynamics of riot production that we separate explanations for riots seen as crowd behavior from explanations for individual behavior in riots. Yet, this is not an easy task, for the former usually take the form of justifications masquerading as explanations, while individual actions are normally hidden from view in the hubbub and furor during large-scale rioting, after which individual motivations are obscured by the public explanations, especially those offered by political persons. Three solutions to this analytical problem are proposed here. The first is to note how a discourse of public good and evil becomes integrated into individual thought and behavior, thereby providing an internal motivation for the instigation of and participation in acts of violence. Second, I note throughout the volume the multiplicity of types of violent action that occur during large-scale rioting under the cover of the discourse of communalism, actions that cannot be explained or justified in terms of that discourse, but can easily be fit into more parsimonious explanations of individual pursuit of political advantage, profit, and vendetta. But it must at the same time be recognized that there can be no perfect separation between public explanations and private motivations, that the ecological fallacy is not merely a problem of methodology but a deliberate and often impenetrable form of political and public obfuscation. Third, all forms of deep psychological interpretation of individual motivations for participation in riotous activity will be eschewed as essentially futile; instead, the focus will be on the hidden face itself, what can be made visible behind the mask of discourse.
Another problem concerns the relationship between the immediate acts that precipitate riots and the “underlying causes” that make it possible for such acts to be followed by large-scale crowd violence. There is often a discrepancy here, as well, between imputed underlying causes and the immediate acts that precipitate an event classed as a riot. It is not, say some scholars, the pig in the mosque or some other insult to the religious beliefs of Muslims or Hindus that is responsible for riots in India, but the economic issues that lie behind these incidents; rivalry between Muslim and Hindu manufacturers and wholesalers in urban areas, disputes between Hindu and Muslim villagers over land.

A critical problem in assessing the relationship “between underlying causes and immediate precipitants of racial disturbances” in the United States has been that the former are “relatively stable,” whereas the latter “are random occurrences, the kind of events which occur daily in most communities and usually are disposed of routinely.” Spilerman found little or no connection or correlation between the standard list of underlying causes and the occurrence of black ghetto riots in the 1960s. Instead, he found that the strongest predictor variable was the size of the Negro population. He then asked the question, which is of central importance in this study as well, how one explains the escalation of random, routine occurrences that affected black-white relations in American cities into large-scale riots. His answer is the existence of racial consciousness among the black population that allows “bystanders to the conflict to interpret it in primarily racial terms,” and to respond accordingly, a consciousness stimulated not by differences in the extent of unemployment, dilapidated housing conditions, and other economic disadvantages experienced by blacks, but by racial solidarity produced uniformly across the black population in the United States, primarily by means of television coverage of the problems confronting them throughout the country. In this study, it will be demonstrated that not television, but a pervasive discourse that emphasizes Hindu-Muslim differences and hostilities in India, provides the framework that allows the escalation of trivial incidents into major riots. But this process also is neither automatic nor spontaneous; it requires the presence of other factors that will be spelled out below, principally political-process factors that Spilerman does not discuss.

Social scientists and political scientists are divided among methodological individualists, that is, rational choice and game theorists, devotees of the case study method, and dataset enthusiasts. Between and within these alternative approaches, there are other divisions as well. In the search for causes, is it not necessary, say some, to consider places where riotous violence has
not occurred as well as those where it has occurred? The question here is: why here and not there? What are the social, economic, and political differences between places where riots have occurred and places that have been free from riots? One method adopted to answer this kind of question is “paired comparison analysis,” which can be done by using statistical data or by historical narrative comparison. Either way, the method is designed to pair two sites or two sets of sites that are as much alike as possible except in the one respect under consideration (the dependent variable), namely whether or not they have experienced incidents of collective violence.

Game theorists, notably Fearon and Laitin, have sought to develop comprehensive theories of conflict, including interethnic conflict. Like the proponents of paired comparison, they have also challenged the validity for the development of a theory of interethnic violence of an exclusive focus on the situations that lead to violence, arguing that, in fact, interethnic cooperation rather than violence is the norm. What is required, they argue, is a theory that explains both why violence is so infrequent, given the numbers of potential conflicts in the world or any part of it, and why the norm sometimes breaks down. They have developed a model to explain both situations, derived from a theory of games, in which the crucial issue concerns the control of individual opportunism that threatens the relations between ethnic groups. They identify two mechanisms that are used for such control. The first, which they call the spiral equilibrium, controls individual opportunism through the fear based on knowledge that an infraction of interethnic relations will lead to mutual violence that will spiral out of control. The knowledge is sufficient most of the time to prevent such dangerous infractions, but when it is not, the violence that ensues is likely to be awful.

The second mechanism is “in-group policing” by which any member of one ethnic group who commits an infraction against a member of another ethnic group will be disciplined by his own group. Violence between ethnic groups ensues only when the intraethnic policing mechanisms fail. The authors are aware that their model leaves out many other critical factors, whose inclusion would require a further extension of it, but have provided examples of empirical situations to demonstrate its applicability. There will be occasion to refer later to examples that relate to their hypotheses in the discussions of riots in Aligarh. For the present, it is sufficient to note first that riots can follow from a breakdown of either equilibrium situation, but that the frequency of rioting and the type that has occurred in Aligarh since Independence falls primarily in the category of the spiral equilibrium that repeatedly breaks down. Second, as will be argued later, a different game is being played in Aligarh, a
political game of brinkmanship whose purposes are not to maintain interethnic cooperation and prevent violence, but to keep always in readiness the mechanisms to bring group relations to the brink of conflict, and to let the violence loose at times considered advantageous to one side or the other or both.

Whatever the method in the literature on collective violence, the search for causes remains primary. I believe it is overemphasized and often misplaced, for the following reasons. First, for all the scientific pretensions of causal analysts, the search for causes cannot be separated from the values of the observer, whether politician, judicial enquiry commissioner, scholar, or journalist. It is obvious in the case of the politicians, more subtle in the case of social scientists and historians, but it is nevertheless present amongst all, whether consciously or unconsciously, by design or in the implications of our findings. Indeed, all categories of persons just mentioned merged to produce probably the most famous riot inquiry of the twentieth century, the Kerner Commission Report on the racial disturbances in the 1960s in the United States: former politician Governor Kerner, acting as judicial commissioner, other politicians, and members of interest groups—racial, labor, and business—a team of social scientists, and, of course, all making use of newspaper reports as well as their own sources for their findings.

Second, the search for causes easily turns from an expression of the values of the observer and his identification with those perceived as the victims of violence to the assignment of blame. If the cause of riots is system strain, structural conditions, or any general condition prevailing in society, then blame may be dispersed or dissolved or it may be directed towards the regime considered responsible for the strains. If it is perceived as poverty, inequality, unemployment, or discrimination, again, depending upon whether these in turn are considered aspects of a general social transformation or are seen as themselves caused by state policies, blame may be dispersed or concentrated on the regime. In the case of interethnic violence, cause and blame may be placed upon the prejudices of particular groups and their upbringing, their “family values,” or upon objective conditions of economic interaction, competition, or perceived exploitation of one group by another. And so on.

All these forms of causal analysis are deficient, Keith argues, because of their adherence to a Humean model of probability that makes use of statements of the form “if $x$, then $y$,” or, put more precisely, statements that most probably the phenomenon $y$ (in our case standing for riots) will follow whenever $x$ (the cause or causes) recurs in a social situation. This kind of focus ignores or downplays in particular three aspects of human action and strug-
Explaining Communal Violence / 21

gle, namely, intentionality, process, and meaning.28 In other words, first, it ignores or underplays the self-fulfilling and self-denying prophecies, the possibility that riots may be willed actions, concerted productions of thinking, acting people who may also decide to cancel a performance. Second, following from the first, it ignores the dynamic processes of riot production, being satisfied instead with explanations that focus on social, political, or economic conditions or on spontaneous crowd responses to stimuli such as rumors or atrocities perpetrated against ethnic compatriots by members of a rival ethnic group or police brutality against the former. Third, it ignores the constant struggle to control the meaning of riots after they occur, to represent them appropriately, which then feeds back into both common-sense and social-science causal explanations converted into cures. The primary focus in this volume will be on these three elements of riot production and representation, from out of which I will also seek to generate causal statements that are limited and cautious with regard to their truth claims. The causal statements that will be made herein, however, will not be of the “if . . . then” variety. It will not be said, for example, that, if the possibility for enhancing a party’s electoral chances will be increased by a riot, there is a high probability that a riot will take place. It will be said only that large-scale riots are associated with intensified party/electoral competition in which the causal arrow points from riots to intensified competition rather than the reverse. It will also be inferred that the instigators of such riots have in mind such a result in which their side will be favored.29

Permeating all the forms and varieties of causal analysis applied to the study of collective violence—sometimes hidden, but often quite explicit—is a foundational substratum of opposition between those who attribute collective violence primarily to the prejudices, hostilities, aggressions, and propensities to violence of particular peoples, segments of them, or the populace in general, on the one hand, and those who argue to the contrary that one must look elsewhere for explanations of violence, not only to other underlying causes, but to the mechanisms for crowd mobilization. In its simplest form, the opposition is between those who perceive collective violence, especially that which takes the form of riots, as arising from the acting out spontaneously by mobs of feelings that pervade a population, on the one hand, and those who perceive mass mobilization as a difficult task at best that requires a degree of skill, planning, and organization on the part of specialists.

The problem with this dichotomization and indeed with most of the causal arguments concerning riots and other forms of collective violence is the neglect of the intermediate space in which riotous activity actually takes place,
that space between popular sentiments and state action that is occupied not just by the social science category of “riot participants” gleaned from police reports but by those who organize and plan acts of violence, which include a whole range of specialists carrying out a variety of tasks. Indeed, the framing of the causal debate in the terms described above has served no purpose so much as obfuscating the operations of riot systems, the mechanisms of pogroms, and the organization of collective violence.30

There is a further question, moreover, that goes to the heart of the problem of causal reasoning in the contemporary social sciences and the uses to which it is put in the explanations for riots as well as the solutions offered to prevent, control, or suppress them. Caught up in the scientific pursuit of the causes of riots, all observers who have participated in that pursuit have either failed to see or paid insufficient attention to the fact that a fully satisfactory explanation will always remain elusive, and, further, that the very pursuit of causes is itself implicated in the political process. A full causal explanation of a complex event such as a large-scale riot can never be arrived at. Every attempt to do so must involve reduction and concentration on sets of manageable, observable “variables.” But riots involve often many thousands of people who, despite the existence in today’s world of widespread electronic devices of surveillance, seek anonymity in crowd action and to a high degree still succeed in doing so. A full explanation of a large-scale riot, pinpointing all the true causes, would involve some kind of exercise in repetition of the event in the manner of Jorge Luis Borges.31 Social scientists seek to avoid this by reduction or by modelling, both processes that cannot fail, by the very methods of reduction and abstraction, from feeding into the interests and purposes of individuals, groups, governments, and societies that seek satisfying explanations.

With regard to the second statement, that the pursuit of causal explanations is implicated in the political process, I mean that this pursuit in itself constitutes a political struggle that occurs invariably after every riot, for the capturing of its meaning, for the establishment of a hegemonic consensus, which in turn will influence, even determine power relations in society thereafter—relations among groups, within groups, and between state and society. It is not only a question of control of policy decisions taken in the aftermath of riots to prevent their future occurrence, but of deciding what is the social problem of which riots are the outcome, who are the persons and groups to blame for their outbreak, and whether or not those persons and groups deserve blame and punishment or are to be seen as victims deserving immediate succor and future amelioration of their condition. It may also
lead in some societies, including India, to definitions of groups as either loyal and patriotic citizens or antinational persons owing loyalties to a foreign power.

Functional Analysis

The persistence of a system, a set of institutions, or practices such as collective violence may sometimes be better understood by a form of functional analysis used by Robert Merton in his classic study and explanation of the persistence of the political machine in American big-city politics. How, he asked, could an institution universally associated with corrupt and criminal practices for which no public figures had a good word to say and all respectable citizens condemned persist for a century in the great American democracy? He argued that there was no simple causal explanation, particularly no explanation that singled out some “powerful subgroups in the society” manipulating things from behind the scenes. On the contrary, he found that the machine performed necessary functions for society and served the needs of many groups.

Merton did not see his kind of functional analysis as a displacement of “causal interpretation,” but as a supplement to it. He did not say that the machine persisted because it fulfilled “x, y, and z” functions for particular individuals, groups, and society as a whole. He argued rather that it was simply not in the interest of any substantial or powerful social force in society to displace the machine, from which at the same time particular social, political, and institutional forces benefit. In that case, it would not necessarily follow that the machine would not persist if it failed to perform the stated functions, since it would still be the case that no powerful force would gain from its destruction.

I intend to make use of a kind of Mertonian functional analysis in my search for an explanation for the persistence of Hindu-Muslim riots and anti-Muslim pogroms in contemporary India. No societal functional necessity for the persistence of riots will be assumed nor will it be argued that there is any kind of “feedback loop,” such that riots benefit certain groups, who then support directly or indirectly the persistence of riots. It is sufficient for my purposes simply to note that riots serve the interests of particular individuals, groups, organizations, and even society as a whole in concrete, useful ways that are beneficial to them. Further, I will adopt one of the more common uses of the term function, that of use or utility, and will speak of the functional utility of the persistence of Hindu-Muslim riots in India for a wide variety of inter-
ests, groups, institutions, and organizations, including ultimately the Indian state. Under these circumstances, it is not possible to produce a broad enough consensus in society to eliminate violent riots from Indian public life, just as it was not possible for a century to eliminate the machine from American public life.

**Discourse**

Much of my recent work and a good part of the present volume are concerned with the question of the struggle for control of the meaning of riots in their aftermath. Although I will take up causal issues below, especially with regard to the association between riots and political competition, and I will also seek to demonstrate the functional utility of riots in India, I am especially concerned with the analysis of the explanations for the occurrence of riots given by ordinary people, politicians, the media, the police, and the civil authorities. These explanations will be treated “as representations,” whose construction and organization as well as “the types of function they serve” need to be analyzed in and for themselves as part of the struggle of social and political forces in contemporary Indian society.

I intend to show also that a hegemonic discourse exists in Indian society, which I call the communal discourse, which provides a framework for explaining riotous violence. That framework allows Indian citizens, particularly its dominant castes and classes, to accept the persistence of such violence in their society without seeing it as a fundamental flaw in their democracy, their essential nonviolence, their acceptance of Indian cultural diversity, in short, their ideals. People claim to live according to ideals and become uncomfortable when the discrepancy between their ideals and the prevalent practices in their society is too stark. There are only a few ways of dealing with that kind of discrepancy. One is denial. Another is recognition followed by some form of social action in the direction of reform through political organization, social work, writing, cultural protest, resistance, nonviolent demonstration, or the taking up of arms. There is a third way that is the most prominent in all societies with recognized severe social problems, including India, namely, blame displacement. Blame displacement makes it possible to acknowledge the existence of evils such as riotous communal violence and pogroms by attributing violent practices to others or to natural human propensities that must be accepted by any realistic person as a part of life. It makes it possible, also, either to accept the violence as inevitable or to direct rhetoric or action towards one’s favorite causes that may or may not have anything to do with the violence.
Explaining Communal Violence / 25

The Study of Riots in India

Argument among Historians

Historical analysis of Hindu-Muslim communal conflict, its causes and preconditions, has been highly contentious in character. Contemporary historians of India do not even agree on whether or not there existed before the nineteenth century anything that could be called Hindu or Muslim communal identities, and, a fortiori, on whether or not Hindu-Muslim conflict was endemic. On one side are those who argue that Hindu-Muslim consciousness and conflict are largely modern constructions, in which the British colonial rulers played a major role, either through deliberate “divide and rule” policies or through the ways in which they categorized, classified, and counted the various peoples of India.34 Historians who accept this point of view also tend to see Hindu and/or Muslim communal consciousness or communalism as forms of ideology or discourse connected to class, group, and elite political interests. In this perspective, the creation or development of communal consciousness is an instrument of struggle, either against the British or between Hindus and Muslims for political advantage or supremacy. In the course of struggle, communal violence could be and often was the result of conflicts framed within a communal discourse.35

On the other side are historians who argue that there is more continuity between past and present, extending backward at least to the early eighteenth century and, in some arguments, into the earlier period of Mughal rule. In this view, interreligious strife and riots that resemble contemporary Hindu-Muslim conflict were present, even endemic, in premodern times.36 Arguments concerning the causes of Hindu-Muslim violence flow logically from these distinctive views, with constructivists taking the position that communalism is a cover that hides a multiplicity of mainly political and economic causes, while those who emphasize continuities between past and present modes of conflict place greater weight on their religious significance and on the existence of strong communal identities that preceded them.

My argument in this volume and elsewhere has been on the constructivist side. Whatever similarities, continuities, and persisting idioms may be found before the nineteenth century, it would seem idle to overemphasize them. The consolidation of the heterogeneous Hindu and Muslim groupings on the subcontinent and the politicization of the differences between them are overwhelmingly a modern phenomenon deeply connected with the striving for control over the modern state apparatus, involving a claim to rightful inheritance on the part of Hindu and to self-determination on the part of Muslim
leaders. In the course of the struggles for power that developed during British rule, intensified in the late nineteenth century, and culminated in the division of India in 1947, a discourse of Hindu-Muslim difference was created that has struck deep roots in both communities and acquired a partly self-sustaining momentum that at the same time continues to be fed by political competition. In the construction of this discourse, competing historiographies and historians have themselves played and continue to play substantial contesting roles.37

Contemporary Social Science Studies

Most available social science methods have been applied to the study of riots in South Asia. Contemporary and historical case studies are by far the majority. Asghar Ali Engineer has been the most prolific writer on Hindu-Muslim riots in India since Independence.38 In countless articles and numerous edited books, he has chronicled virtually every major riot and many smaller ones. Deeply committed to secular, universal values, he has blamed neither Hindus nor Muslims as communities for the carnage that has been inflicted upon the victims of communal riots. He has instead consistently pointed the finger at the politicians, on the one hand, and at forms of economic competition between Hindus and Muslims, on the other hand.

The incidents that precipitate riots in Engineer’s view are sometimes secondary, sometimes primary, but they either hide or reveal the hands of politicians and political movements. Minor disputes are exploited by “petty-minded politicians” who do not shrink from the sacrifices in human lives that follow upon their exploitation of such disputes for their political advantage.39 At times, political movements themselves are the cause of violence, as in the famous “Ramshila pujan processions” of militant Hindus carrying bricks to Ayodhya in the movement to bring down the Babri Mosque there and replace it with a temple to the god Ram. Riots followed in the wake of these processions in almost every part of the country.40 For Engineer, therefore, the primary cause of communal riots in India is the pursuit of political advantage at any cost.

Beth Roy has produced an exceptional case study of a single Hindu-Muslim riot in a village in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, that occurred soon after Independence and Partition. She has reconstructed the course of the riot from its beginnings in a trivial conflict to the full-scale confrontation that ultimately resulted. Although the way in which this riot developed and its relatively minor consequences in casualties and injuries appear almost quaint in comparison
with the seriousness and brutality that accompany urban riots in con-
temporary South Asia, her case study nevertheless illuminates many aspects of
the process of riot production that will be analyzed throughout this volume.
Of particular interest is her analysis of how a trivial conflict between two vil-
lagers, one Hindu, the other Muslim, over an incident of one villager’s cow
eating the plants of the other developed into a politicized confrontation between
Hindus and Muslims in the surrounding area. She argues further that the vil-
lagers did not act spontaneously, but deliberately, choosing to riot. Moreover,
she has noted distinct stages in the development of this riot that, though diªer-
ent from my conceptualization of the phases of riot production, neverthe-
less are consistent with the view that riots are indeed deliberate productions.41

Paired comparison analysis has been done by Varshney. Varshney and
Wilkinson42 have pioneered in the creation of an extensive dataset for all riots
noted in one of India’s leading English-language newspapers between 1960
and 1993. Both authors in their separate and joint works have insisted that
“To explain the causes of violence we must . . . move beyond explanations
which ignore the many times and places where, though communal tension
may exist, riots do not take place.43

Aside from the general problems that the method of paired comparison
shares with causal theorizing in the social sciences, discussed earlier in this
chapter, there are three additional problems specific to it. One is that it may
lead to downplaying the significance of collective violence in those places where
it does occur. This is clear enough in the case of Varshney’s paired compar-
isons of specific sites and in the Varshney and Wilkinson comparisons of the
incidence of riots by state and city in India. By localizing and regionalizing
the sites of violence in India, they do not refine their gaze, but instead dis-
perse it. In Varshney’s case, it leads as well to a doubtful conclusion that civic
engagement between Hindus and Muslims can prevent violence, when it is
more likely that the creation of institionalized riot systems overrides and dis-
placements whatever forms of civic engagement and interethnic cooperation exist
at specific sites. But neither alternative argument can be proved on the basis
of such comparisons.44

The second problem is that such comparisons, by diverting one’s gaze from
the specific sites of institutionalized violence, fail to reveal the dynamic
processes of riot production. They claim to tell us why riots occur here, not
there, but they do not tell us how they happen. Until we know how they hap-
en, the former question cannot be answered.

Third, the method of paired comparison as it has been generally used in
practice suffers from a fundamental flaw of misidentification or inadequate specification of the actual sites of collective violence. The sites of riots are too often referred to as the cities in which they occur rather than the specific neighborhoods or street locations from which they originate or to which they are even sometimes confined. When, as in the United States, it has often been the case that the entire black ghetto has been affected by riot activity, there is some justification for using the cities as the named sites when what is actually meant is the black ghetto within those cities. However, it is never the case in either the United States or India that an entire city becomes a site of collective violence. It is also rare that all parts of a city that share similar demographic features are affected equally or even at all. In such circumstances, the method of paired comparison by city or town is a kind of unnecessary and wasteful methodological flourish, for such comparison would be better done within the specific city or town, comparing instead the neighborhoods and streets that are affected with those that are not. In this volume, I specify as clearly and precisely as possible those localities that have been repeatedly, occasionally, or never affected by communal rioting. I demonstrate also that, while there are demographic, economic, and caste/communal differences that distinguish the populations in such localities, it is political activity, organization, and leadership that demarcate most clearly the riot-prone or riot-affected from the less affected localities.

Kakar has adopted a psychoanalytic, social-psychological approach to the study of riots in India, finding their source in mass persecutory fantasies. Although his approach falls squarely in a primordialist interpretation of intercommunal relations and ethnic violence that I have consistently opposed in all my writings on ethnicity, nationalism, and collective violence, there are nevertheless some points of contact between his work and mine. Our approaches coincide insofar as we both, along with the leftist historians in India, agree that the “representations of collective pasts” and the way “collective memories are transmitted through generations” are of considerable importance in contributing to the persistence of communal violence in India. Kakar adds to this perspective the argument that these “representations of collective pasts” are psychic ones, not just intellectual ones. They do not merely justify collective violence, they explain it. I will have occasion to refer to several explanations from my interviews that suggest a form of psychic delusion on the part of those militant Hindus who speak from the vantage point of the communal discourse. Their statements do indeed suggest that they harbor persecutory fantasies. Moreover, these fantasies seem also to have become quite widespread among middle- and upper-class, upper-caste Hindus in northern India.
However, Kakar carries his psychic argument too far, into a kind of psychological essentialism. For example, he argues that “the Muslim butcher in his blood-flecked undervest and lungi, wielding a huge carving knife was . . . a figure of awe and dread for the Hindu child and of a fear-tinged repulsion for the adult.”49 But this fear that may conceivably afflict Hindu vegetarians can hardly extend to all “Hindus,” since it is the same butcher who slaughters the goats that nonvegetarian Hindus love to eat. More important, it is difficult to accept Kakar’s argument that it is “religious ultimacy,” fed by “an arsenal of ideational and ritual symbols” on both sides of the communal divide that makes communal riots so much more “violent and . . . difficult to control” than other types of collective violence.50 This is a form of objectification of religious difference that does not hold up in at least two respects. It does not differentiate communal violence from, say, the slaughter of landless Scheduled Castes by Hindu landlords in Bihar and South India, or even more atrocious forms of genocide in places such as Rwanda and Burundi or Cambodia, where religious conflict is not at issue. Second, neither the killers interviewed by Kakar nor those I have interviewed appear to me to be motivated by “an arsenal of ideational and ritual symbols.”

Further, Kakar repeatedly writes of Hindu perceptions in general, seeing them as causes of the tension that leads to riots, as if riots simply follow from particular tensions, such as a Bihar government move “to raise the official status of Urdu” that, he argues, “was perceived by the Hindus as a step down the road of Muslim separatism which led to the Ranchi riots in 1967.”51 Kakar here not only presents “the Hindus” as an undifferentiated mass, but mistakes precipitants for causes.52 Further, Kakar adopts the utterly misleading social-psychological approach, going back to Le Bon, that treats riotous crowds as an undifferentiated mass of individuals who adopt the identity of the crowd, losing their own in the process.53

This view of the crowd is all made up, pure conjecture that has been shattered by the personal participant observations of Bill Buford.54 It is one of the principal arguments of this book that we cannot understand what happens in riots until we examine in detail the multiplicity of roles and persons involved in them and the justifications presented concerning them by their promoters and participants. The argument that individuals lose their identity in crowds belongs among those interpretations of riots that displace blame onto entire collectivities, who cannot be held responsible for their actions because they have lost any sense of what it is that they do as individuals. Kakar takes the argument even further towards the primordialist perspective by arguing that group identity in general “is inherently a carrier of aggression,”55 thus
placing the ultimate responsibility for communal violence in the irrational tendencies of the human psyche, in other words precisely nowhere.

Tambiah has included in his massive work on riots in South Asia case studies of Sikh violence in the Punjab and the anti-Sikh massacres in New Delhi in 1984, as well as the riots that accompanied and followed the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya in 1992. His work and mine are in agreement, especially, on three aspects of collective violence in India: (1) the tendency for explanations of riots to be variously contextualized in a manner that suits the interests of political actors and others involved in the struggle to control the meaning of riots in their aftermath; (2) the routine rather than exceptional character of violence, making it, in effect, an aspect of the political process that is as predictable/unpredictable as other aspects; (3) the existence of a multiplicity of roles performed in the production of riots, a kind of division of labor that makes arguments concerning the spontaneity of riots suspect.56

The focus of this volume is on the production of Hindu-Muslim communal violence in post-Independence India and its relationship to the construction of the categories “Hindu” and “Muslim” in modern Indian history. In the course of my research, I have arrived at three conclusions concerning the persistence of Hindu-Muslim communal violence in the specific form called “riots.” The first, based on my analysis of the available evidence marshalled in favor of various causal interpretations, is that no single causal explanation of Hindu-Muslim riots and anti-Muslim pogroms will suffice to explain all or even most instances of such collective violence in India. Nor could it be otherwise, given the vast differences from instance to instance in what are classified as riots in India, ranging from fights between small groups that lead to injuries with or without the death of one or more parties to vast conflagrations that occur in many areas of a large town or city leading to tens or even hundreds of deaths, large-scale arson, looting, and property destruction.

It is, in fact, rather a loose form of scientific analysis that would lump the latter with the former. It is also extremely dubious even to classify the larger events as a single instance of the phenomenon. An event described as a riot or pogrom that takes place more or less simultaneously in widely spread areas of a large town may or may not have been precipitated by a single incident, have spread to other areas by means of news, rumor, or “contagion,” have
been preplanned or spontaneous. In other words, such a large event as the Bombay riots of December 1992 or the Aligarh riots of 1990–91 may be one riot or many, each with its own precipitants, underlying enmities, and sets of interests involved.

Although, given these difficulties, no single cause of riots can possibly be adduced successfully, I have also found that there is at least a kernel of truth in all but the most bizarre explanations of riots. There is sufficient evidence, for example, that riots between Hindus and Muslims often occur where Hindu and Muslim areas are in close juxtaposition to each other, in nasty slums where landlords or businessmen of one or the other community seek to displace persons from the other community in order to acquire valuable real estate, and at times of intense political competition and mass mobilization when different political parties seek to mobilize the votes of one or the other of the two communities. But the mere presence of any one of these factors or any combination of them is neither necessary nor sufficient to produce large-scale riots. At the same time, it is also the case that many or all of these factors and others to be discussed in this book are present in all large-scale riots.

For many social scientists and historians, the obvious solution to the causal dilemma here is simply to resort to a multicausal explanation, either through the listing of all the factors discovered to have operated in one or more cases or through statistical methods of correlation and regression that will assign percentages of explanatory power to each of the active variables. But, as I will show in this volume, this also will not do. It will not do principally because, when one examines the actual dynamics of riots, one discovers that there are active, knowing subjects and organizations at work engaged in a continuous tending of the fires of communal divisions and animosities, who exercise by a combination of subtle means and confrontational tactics a form of control over the incidence and timing of riots. But their control is not total. Some of the pogroms that have occurred in India in recent history have been shown to have had a high degree of organization and preplanning, notably the anti-Sikh pogroms after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and the Shiv Sena–organized pogrom against Muslims in Bombay in January 1993. Even in these cases, however, control is not total. So, while the production of many large-scale riots can be seen as deriving from the political interests and calculations of specific organizations, groups, and leaders, many other interests also then come into play whose actions at the multiplicity of sites in which violence occurs require secondary explanations.

It is the combination of “objective,” underlying factors of demography, economics, and electoral competition with intentionality and direct human
agency that makes causal explanation of riots in general so difficult. We can surely say that Krystallnacht in Germany was a preplanned, coordinated attack on carefully specified targets, namely, the Jews and their property and religious objects. But even this attack was designed to appear spontaneous, to fool outside observers. What makes riots and pogroms in India or the United States or nineteenth-century Russia so much more difficult to analyze and comprehend is that they combine objective and intentional factors, spontaneity and planning, chaos and organization. They are best conceived as dramatic productions in which the directors are not in complete control, the cast of characters varies—some of them being paid, some of them acting voluntarily for loot or fun—and many of the parts have been rehearsed, but others have not.

This then brings me to the second argument of this book, that, where riots are endemic, what I call “institutionalized riot systems” exist in which known persons and groups occupy specific roles in the rehearsal for and the production of communal riots. In such systems, a central role is played by what I call “conversion specialists,” those whose task it is to decide when a trivial, everyday incident will be exaggerated and placed into the communal system of talk, the communal discourse, and allowed to escalate into communal violence.

The production of communal riots is very often a political one, frequently associated with intense interparty competition and mass political mobilization. This was true before Independence as well as after. This fact goes a long way also towards understanding Gandhi’s emphasis on nonviolence as the basis for the mobilizations against British rule in India. Nonviolence may have been a religious principle for him as well as a political tactic of the weak against the strong, the relatively unarmed against the armed, but it also arose from his profound knowledge of Indian social and political life, from his own understanding of the violent mechanisms that could so easily be brought into play under the cover of the vast mass movements that he launched, which would undercut their purposes and direct local political energies to other targets. Moreover, there were other politicians already playing a different game of direct instigation of communal violence for other political purposes.

The institutionalized riot systems or networks that exist in riot-prone cities and towns comprise a multiplicity of roles that I have identified elsewhere. A good part of this book will be devoted to showing how and when they come into operation. For now, it need only be noted that they include informants who carry messages to political group leaders of the occurrence of incidents that may affect the relations between Hindus and Muslims; propagandists
who create messages to be conveyed to particular segments of society, to the press, to the general public; vernacular journalists who publish these messages in the form of “news,” poster plasterers who place them on walls, rumor-mongers who transmit them by word of mouth; recruiters who collect crowds from colleges and universities and goondas (thugs) to kill, loot, and burn when the time is ripe.

But there are two roles that are crucial in the dynamics of riot production, designated herein by the terms “fire tender” and “conversion specialist.” The fire tender keeps the embers of communal animosities alive by bringing to the notice of the politicians, the authorities, and the public situations that are known to be sensitive in the relations between Hindus and Muslims. These situations may be genuine or bogus, they may refer to incidents that actually happened naturally or that were created deliberately for the purpose of stoking communal passions.

The second role, that of the conversion specialist, is the pivotal one of turning a mere local incident or a public issue affecting the two communities into one with riot potential by inciting a crowd and giving a signal to the specialists in violence to let loose the violent action: stone throwing, stabbing, or arson. The conversion specialist is generally, if not always, a political person. He is part of the political group whose interests are to be served by the violence and may even be a leader in the group. He usually does not himself engage in violence, but instigates others to do so when the political context favors it.

The third and fourth arguments concern the issue of riot persistence. Since much if not all of the information to be presented in this book concerning the mechanisms of riot production is known to the leaders of the country, the journalists, the local authorities where riots occur, and to the literate and illiterate public, and is deplored by all, how is it that riots persist? The question is especially puzzling since the politicians and the authorities know where and when riots are likely, who the principal riot-mongers are, how to prevent riots and to control them when they break out. How is it that they do not do so always? In fact, how is it that they do so only irregularly?

The first answer to these questions refers primarily to large-scale riots and those that occur in waves. There is a clear association between such riots and waves of riots, on the one hand, and electoral competition and mass political mobilization. Not only is there an association, but the evidence to be presented below demonstrates that there is a direct causal link between riots and electoral/political competition, such that Hindu-Muslim riots are a product of actions designed to consolidate one community or the other or both at
the local, regional, and national levels into a cohesive political bloc. Riots do in fact have that result. Riots precede elections and intensify political competition. Riots accompany political mobilizations around religious symbols and contribute to the strengthening of the movements, which in turn solidify communal solidarity in subsequent elections.

The second answer is functionalist: riots persist because they are functionally useful to a wide array of individuals, groups, parties, and the state authorities. In other words, this particular form of endemic, recurrent violence is a function of the unwillingness, failure, or lack of desire of such bodies and entities to take preventive measures, the effectiveness of which are well known whatever the imputed causes of particular incidents, which vary widely. Their functional utility is in turn heavily influenced by the political benefits that derive from them.

The third answer is that there exists in India a discourse of Hindu-Muslim communalism that has corrupted history, penetrated memory, and contributes in the present to the production and perpetuation of communal violence in the country. Large-scale riots involve considerable mass participation in their enactment as well as a commitment to the belief on the part of many people that they could not have been prevented by the actions of well-intentioned persons or governments. It involves a belief that they are in fact endemic to and a consequence of fundamental hostilities, prejudices, and passions in society. It is necessary here to say a few words about the origins of this discourse before proceeding further.

The discourse of communalism: history, memory, and communal violence in post-independence India

India is a country whose peoples live today under the signs of several great historical ruptures that are perceived as having disrupted the historical reality of the pre-existence of an Indian nation and prevented its full realization in political form: the prolonged rupture that is seen as the Muslim conquest of the subcontinent, the establishment of British rule in the eighteenth century, and the division of the country in 1947. Two of these events are associated in the minds of most Hindus and in the ideology of militant Hindu nationalism with the large Muslim population of the country. Despite the contrary attempts of secular nationalist leaders and historians, a divisive history of India has acquired a hegemonic place in the school textbooks and in the national mythology of the country which defines the millennially long arrival of both
the religion of Islam and Muslim arms into the subcontinent as a foreign, Muslim conquest. Despite the fact that probably 95 percent of the Muslim population of the subcontinent is of indigenous origin, descendants of converts to Islam, Islam is considered in the history of the Hindu nation “as a foreign element.”

The millennium that saw the establishment of Islam and Muslim rulership is seen as one coherent period in Indian history, the period of the Muslim conquest that followed upon the classical Hindu period. Both periods are defined in communal-religious terms, the first as the “Hindu period”—though it encompasses the rise of other world as well as specifically Indian religions such as, respectively, Buddhism and Jainism—the second as the Muslim period. The first period is described as the glorious age of imperial Hindu achievement in politics and culture, the second—despite its own glories of art and architecture, which are acknowledged—as a period of conquest, destruction, and consequent decay of Hindu civilization. The Hindu practices, customs, and superstitions that exist today are a consequence of that decay and, as many Hindu reformers of the nineteenth century argued, did not exist in the past. To revivify India and build a great, new, modern nation-state, it is necessary to “revive the true ideals of the past.”

This process of historical rectification also has been accompanied by a demonization of the Muslims as a separate people, a foreign body implanted in the heart of Hindu India, perpetually “warlike,” who “believe it is their religious duty to kill infidels.” Muslims are also held responsible for the partition of the country because so many of their leaders remained aloof from the nationalist movement and ultimately fought for the creation of the separate independent state of Pakistan. The memory of the partition and the violence associated with it is ingrained in the minds of most Hindus and is kept alive by the constant tension in the relations between India and Pakistan. During the last decade, the “memory” of Muslim violence in Indian history has been kept vivid also by the militant Hindu demand to recapture and restore temples allegedly destroyed by Muslim conquerors and replaced by mosques, a movement that led to the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya on December 6, 1992.

The periodization of Indian history that achieved ascendancy in Indian nationalism—not just militant Hindu nationalism—in the late nineteenth century was itself largely a product of British history-writing of the mid-nineteenth century that sought to place British rule within the long sweep of Indian history. Slightly refurbished by Indian nationalists, it emerged as the tripartite division of Indian history as a movement from “classical glory” to “medieval
decline” under Muslim rule to a “modern renaissance”⁶² of a new India which, in its secular version, encompassed Muslims, but in its Hindu nationalist version either did not or did so only grudgingly. In the latter version, as Chatterjee has put it in his discussion of one Bengali example, “a stereotypical figure of ‘the Muslim’” emerged, “endowed with a ‘national character’: fanatical, bigoted, warlike, dissolute, and cruel.”⁶³

Although Muslim history and Muslim character in the Indian subcontinent were blackened and demonized in these ways and often were used to justify demands by Hindu nationalists in the nineteenth century for the British to rectify matters and restore to Hindus their rightful place in the new India emerging under colonial rule, ultimately the target of this historiography was the British, then the West in general, and finally the great powers, particularly the United States. India soon was perceived in the minds of Indian nationalists, when they gradually directed their aims towards the elimination of British rule, as a potential great power, the equal of the great powers of the West. It was a great, modern state that Indian nationalists, both secular and Hindu, sought to create after Independence.

In the pursuit of that goal, the Muslims of India came to be seen, particularly by Hindu nationalists, as an obstruction, along with Pakistan, whose very existence has, in the minds of such Hindu nationalists, been the principal post-Independence obstacle to India’s achievement of its rightful place in a world dominated by great nation-states. This historical consciousness and teleology of Hindu nationalism has framed the modern discourse of Hindu-Muslim communalism and violence. The demographic distribution of the peoples of India and the landscape of the country have become populated with lieux de mémoire⁶⁴ that signify the violence done by Muslims to the Hindu body, the dangers of the Muslim populations that reside in the midst of Hindus in cities and towns, and Muslim institutions that teach Muslims to become traitors, all of which must be reformed, replaced, or extirpated before India can become whole, united, and powerful.

In the first category, signifiers of the violence done by Muslims to the Hindu body, are the mosques, said to number three thousand, that are alleged to have been built upon the ruins of Hindu temples destroyed by Muslim conquerors. In the second, signifying the dangers to the Hindu body in the present, are the concentrations of Muslim populations in cities and towns, described by militant Hindus as “mini-Pakistans.” The leading example in the third category, signifying the traitors in the midst of the country, is the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) located in the town of Aligarh in western Uttar Pradesh, ninety miles south-southeast of Delhi. The AMU was in
fact one of the principal sites from which the ideology of Muslim separatism and then the Pakistan movement developed and spread in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It stands today in Aligarh on the outskirts of the city as a symbolic presence that signifies to militant Hindus the persistence into the present of Muslim separatist, communalist, and anti-Hindu designs, and justifies, along with the existence of “mini-Pakistan” in the center of the old city, violence against Muslims that is enacted in periodic outbreaks of large-scale rioting. Aligarh has become, in fact, one of the principal sites of Hindu-Muslim violence in all of India since Independence up to the very recent past.

**PLAN OF THE VOLUME**

I have selected Aligarh as the site of the present study and have chosen to focus on a single site for several reasons. First, as just indicated, it has been for more than a century, since the founding in 1875 of the Mohammadan Anglo-Oriental College that later became the AMU, a principal site of Hindu-Muslim tension. Second, numerous riots, large and small, have occurred in Aligarh both before and since Independence. In fact, since Independence, though there have been other cities and towns in India in which riots have been endemic and where some much larger riots and pogroms have occurred, it will be shown below that Aligarh stands close to the top, in some respects absolutely, in others relatively. In absolute terms, it has been second in the state of Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) in the number of known riots and deaths associated with them since Independence. Moreover, relative to its size, that is, by a crude measure of deaths per thousand persons, it stands close to the top in the country as well. Third, during thirty-eight years in which I have gone back and forth to Aligarh for research, I have heard here all the explanations for riots that are commonly given for riots everywhere else in the country: demographic, economic, and political. Finally, the city, as will be demonstrated later, is characterized by many of the features that characterize other riot-prone cities: notably, the relative size of the Hindu and Muslim populations and their juxtaposition in relation to each other, the existence of economic competition between segments of the two communities in particular trades and industries, and a history of intense electoral competition.

I have chosen to concentrate here on a single site rather than several sites for methodological reasons. First, although I have gathered considerable materials from several other sites of the same sort to be presented herein, and have published some of it elsewhere, I have concluded that studies from different
sites of riots that have occurred in the same time period or at different times cannot explain their occurrence at a particular site at a particular time. For example, I have analyzed the post-Ayodhya riot in the metropolis of Kanpur in 1992. An even worse riot occurred in Aligarh in 1990–91. Why did the Kanpur riot not occur the previous year, and why did no Aligarh riot occur in the following year? No form of ecological analysis can answer such a question. To answer that kind of question, diachronic rather than synchronic analysis is required. Second, concentration on a single city makes it possible to focus one’s gaze more closely and intently at the specific localities in which riots have occurred within it, to determine what especially characterizes them. In other words, one achieves thereby a more fine-tuned look at riots than is possible when one classifies an entire city as riot-prone and seeks to compare it with other equally large units. Third, whereas much work has been done in attempting to explain “waves” of rioting, including many analyses that have claimed to have found a “contagion” effect in the spread of riots from one site to another in a short time period, I am not aware of any studies that have looked at rioting in a different way, namely, as a phenomenon endemic to a particular site or sites. While I remain alert in this volume to what is happening elsewhere when rioting does and does not occur in Aligarh, I am seeking an explanation for its persistence at this site, which can in turn be generalized as an explanation for recurring riots elsewhere as well. Fourth, during the thirty-eight years in which I have visited Aligarh, I have collected all the available election data for the city since Independence, down to the polling booth level, which I have converted into a large dataset that has made it possible for me to analyze precisely the relationship between riots and electoral competition.

Although Aligarh is a site of persistence, it is also a site of variation in two respects. First, even here, where Hindu-Muslim tensions seem to be always on the edge of violence in some parts of the city, there have been periods of relative relaxation. Those periods of abatement in rioting need to be explained as well as the numerous explosions. Of course, it is obvious that no society can live with continuous rioting, so there must be some break. If there is not, the situation is best described as a civil war. Since this is not the case in Aligarh, the absence of rioting in the town at certain times must be explained as well as its presence at others. It will be shown that presence and absence are explained by the same sets of factors.

Aligarh is a site of variation in another respect as well, namely, in the differential spatial incidence of rioting within the city when it does occur. Not all parts of the city are always affected by Hindu-Muslim riots and some
have never been touched by it. For these reasons, it will be possible to demonstrate at this one urban site precisely in which localities rioting occurs, and to point out the differences between them and localities where rioting is not endemic, in ways that are not possible by the paired comparison method that selects entire cities as sites.

The rest of this volume is organized into five parts. Part II, consisting of four chapters, first presents a description of the general features of the demographic, caste, and communal composition of the city, then provides a detailed history of riots in Aligarh since Independence, with a separate chapter that focuses specifically on the great riots of December 1990 and January 1991, followed by a chapter that discusses the relative decline in riotous activity in the city during the following decade. Part III, consisting of two chapters, focuses on those factors in the social composition, distribution, and economic characteristics of the population that have commonly been considered conducive to Hindu-Muslim riots. Part IV, comprising five chapters, marshals evidence primarily from interviews and electoral data to demonstrate the close connection between riots and political competition. Part V contains three chapters that focus on the discourse of communalism and alternative contextualizations of riotous violence by politicians, police, and press. The conclusions concerning the persistence of riots and pogroms in Aligarh are provided in Part VI. A postscript has been added that brings the situation in Aligarh up to date as of the February 2002 elections. I have also included a discussion of the pogrom in the state of Gujarat that began at the end of February 2002 and continued until the end of March, with sporadic incidents of violence for weeks thereafter.