

Revisiting the Working Class Neighbourhood in Modern South Asia: July 2014

Paper title: Cooperation and Protection in a Peaceful Neighbourhood

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Abstract:

This paper is an outcome of a PhD thesis that uses mixed methods to explain spatial variation in Hindu-Muslim violence in Gujarat (western India) in 2002 across towns, rural areas and neighbourhoods. The ethnographic component comprises 21 months of fieldwork in Ahmedabad city, where three intermixed slum neighbourhoods are compared to explore microspatial variation in the violence. Existing literature on ethnic violence in India associates two primary factors with the occurrence of violence: electoral calculations, and economic deprivation resulting from industrial closure in parts of the country in the 1970s and 1980s. Keeping these influential explanations in view, the research design holds constant the electoral configuration of the neighbourhoods as well as their history of economic struggles following the closure of textile mills in Ahmedabad in the 1980s. It then proceeds to explain why the levels of violence were different in all three neighbourhoods despite a similar history and political incentive.

Specifically, in view of the theme of this conference, this paper explores one of the three neighbourhoods which experienced complete peace during 2002. It crucially answers the puzzle: why did Hindus cooperate with Muslims in peacekeeping at a time when opportunistic defection and engagement in attacks against Muslims was materially beneficial and socially acceptable? Drawing upon theoretical frameworks of clientelistic exchanges

between voters and politicians and mechanisms of principal-agent issues of commitment, I argue that monitoring in a spontaneous form of collective action, such as violence, needs to be differentiated from monitoring voting behaviour which is a phenomenon that occurs over time. Ethnographic evidence from the neighbourhood crucially pointed towards a hidden force of enforcement underpinning what seemed to be communal cooperation. An unexpected combination of legitimate and illegitimate institutions in the neighbourhood doubled up as an enforcement mechanism that overcame commitment issues between Hindus and Muslims.