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Riots and rebellion: State, society and the geography of conflict in India

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that different types of politically motivated violence in South Asia are associated with different forms of governance and relationships between society and the state. This variation in local governance in turn is the product of unevenness in state formation across the political geography of India. It classifies conflict events in India in 2015 and 2016 into conceptual categories of sovereignty-neutral and sovereignty-challenging, theoretically reflecting the commonsense distinction between riots and rebellion. It presents evidence that different categories of state-society regimes at the district level are associated with different patterns of sovereignty-neutral and -challenging violence. It finds that urban-adjacent *hegemonic* state-society regimes are associated with high levels of sovereignty-neutral violence, *revised* state-society regimes with traditionally restrained state capacity are associated with high levels of sovereignty-challenging violence, and *fragmented* and *accommodative* regimes in the agrarian hinterland are associated with intermediary positions in both categories.

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Political and social violence is rife in South Asia. Scholars have sought explanations for this violence in the competition over resources, ethnic and social grievances, the absence of social capital, electoral incentives and physical geographies that might make violent conflict feasible. But the study of internal violence in the Indian subcontinent is deeply bifurcated. Some scholars seek to explain the prevalence, intensity, character and duration of the multiple internal wars and insurgencies in India, Pakistan and, until recently, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Others attempt to understand violence among religious, ethnic or sectarian groups, in which the object of violence is usually not the state but other communities, and violent clashes and reprisals occur instead of armed conflict. Due to sub-disciplinary boundaries within the scholarship on political conflict, these two categories are rarely, if ever, incorporated within a single framework.

This article proposes such a framework, focusing on the spatial distribution of different forms of violence in India. To do so, I make a principal distinction in forms of violence based on the intentions, and related repertoires, of violent conflict, building theoretically on the commonsense difference between riots and rebellion. When state and non-state actors clash over the basic legitimacy of the state in a particular area, I term this *sovereignty-challenging violence*. When violence is deployed between and among

communities to discretely influence policy, mobilize electoral support or settle scores within a fundamentally unchallenged structure of state power, I term this *sovereignty-neutral violence*.

The political geography of violent conflict in India reveals patterns that suggest that these two types of violence might be causally connected. With some notable exceptions, areas with high incidence of insurgency typically have low incidence of social violence, and vice-versa. In this article, I argue that the nature of state capacity and the state's relationships with society provide a coherent conceptual framework that can explain the geographic dispersion of sovereignty-challenging and -neutral violence in India.

More broadly, I contend that the unevenness of the capacity of the Indian state across its national territory is a significant cause of the patterns of politically-motivated violent conflict. Such unevenness is a legacy of processes of state formation during the colonial era, in which the government privileged concrete strategic goals over the establishment of uniform standards of authority within its borders. Due to these processes, the Indian subcontinent under colonial rule became a patchwork of heterogeneous sovereignties, suzerainties and zones of administrative neglect (Naseemullah & Staniland, 2016). As India achieved independence, the scope of state power over territory increased, as the government sought to knit together diverse territories into a coherent system of national authority. Yet the unevenness of the state's presence across its territory has persisted in practice. Some areas

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approach Weberian sovereignty, whereas in others, the state is all but absent. This has led to dramatically different relationships between the state and social actors across India's political geography, which in turn can shape discrete types of conflict.

In spaces where the state is omnipresent, the state's coercive and infrastructural powers are seen to overwhelm any rival governance actors, and the population looks exclusively to the government for the provision of key public and social goods. Control of the apparatus of government is thus essential for material progress, and groups compete to gain or retain state power to access its resources and rents, often through violent means. I argue that in these *hegemonic* regimes, associated with metropolitan governance or proximity to cities and towns, we see higher incidence of sovereignty-neutral violence and little sovereignty-challenging violence.

In spaces where the state apparatus at the local level is traditionally weak or even wholly absent, government actors might not have everyday coercive capacities necessary to preempt or interdict rebellion. But further, the long-term weakness of the state's capacity to provide key social goods, including a monopoly of violence, undermines the authority of the state and encourages populations who feel underserved by the government to seek alternatives. Social groups seeking to fill this void are as likely to compete with or struggle against the state itself over political authority as to engage with it, particularly when the state or its capitalist clients choose to latterly reassert their authority coercively in response to economic opportunities or security mandates. In these *revised* regimes, we see high incidence of sovereignty-challenging violence.

Finally, in India's vast agricultural hinterland, intermediate *fragmented* and *accommodative* regimes present profiles of violence that are conditioned by whether commercialization has led to local contestation over the state's power and resources. The presence and authority of the state, and the relationship it has with society at the local level, can provide a more comprehensive explanation for the complex landscape of violence in India than forms of violence taken separately, and may be helpful for understanding the relationships between state capacity and violence in other post-colonial countries.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I outline the extant literature on the geography of violence in India, noting the bifurcation between studies of riots and of insurgencies; I then present a framework and associated evidence that aims to integrate the two. Second, I introduce a typology of governance regimes, based on colonial state-building strategies, that explores the roots of variation in state-society relations and their impacts on violence. Third, I present empirical evidence for the relationship between state-society regimes and forms of violence in contemporary India. The article concludes with some reflections on the theoretical link between state capacity, sovereignty and conflict in India and beyond.

1. Forms of violence in india

Since independence, India has had various, sustained episodes of internal violence. The roots of some of these episodes can be traced back to practices of colonial governance. Practices of primitive accumulation and repression gave rise to peasant insurgencies, and many argue that policies that created divisions among religious communities led to the violence that preceded and accompanied Partition (Aiyar, 1995; Guha, 1983; Kennedy & Purushotham, 2012). The context of Indian independence itself – widespread communal violence, the coercive integration of princely states and early interstate competition over the princely state of Kashmir – marred an otherwise relatively peaceful process of decolonization, with an orderly transition of administrative and

representative institutions, achieved without an armed struggle.

Endemic violence has persisted well beyond independence, however. As the post-colonial state established itself, new challenges to its security and legitimacy emerged. Many of these were initially understood within the general rubric of political instability accompanying modernization (Gurr, 1970; Huntington, 1968). Rising disorder in India was associated with the decline of the Congress Party as a cohesive, programmatic institution capable of mediating the demands of an aspirant, restive and fragmented population (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987; Kohli, 1990).

Over time, two divergent perspectives of internal violence emerged. The first concerned challenges to the fundamental security of the Indian state by insurrections seeking to challenge it in particular national geographies. Analysts have sought to explain these challenges within a broader framework within security studies of the causes of civil war. The second has sought to understand contentious or violent inter-group relations in multi-ethnic democracies such as India, highlighting the importance of identity for political mobilization and intergroup competition. The two research programs unintentionally obscure one another's insights, however, because of disciplinary and sub-disciplinary divisions in the study of political conflict that separate insurgencies and riots into subjects of international relations and comparative politics, respectively. The result is two conceptually distinct geographies of political conflict that are rarely considered together.

1.1. Insurgencies

From the 1980s onward, internal wars in developing countries have been established as a central object of enquiry for conflict and security studies through a belief that state failure presents a clear danger to international security. In India, serious challenges to the Weberian monopoly of coercion in its periphery coexist alongside a strong, powerful state apparatus that is in little danger of collapsing. Thus, scholars have applied case-specific and cross-national theories of civil war onset, intensity and duration to the continent-sized case of India not to predict total state breakdown, but rather for assessing where territorial insurgencies were likely to occur and why.

Two broad approaches have guided the study of major intrastate conflict, in India as elsewhere. The first, reflecting the notion that violent politics after the cold war would likely be conducted on ethnic lines (Chua, 2002), is that of the violent expression of political grievances among ethnic groups in plural societies, particularly those with significant “horizontal inequalities” (Cederman, Gleditsch, & Buhaug, 2013; Horowitz, 1985; Stewart, 2008). The second argues that internal conflict is more likely where insurgent conflict is more feasible: in places in which the coercive capacity of the state is too weak to forestall or interdict rebellion, features of physical geography enable guerrilla warfare against superior forces, and the presence of alienable resources fuel conflict against the state (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Collier, Hoeffler and Rohner, 2009).¹

These explanations go a long way to explaining the nature and spatial variation of insurgencies in India. Ethnic separatist rebellions in Punjab in the 1980s and in India's northeast – and implicitly among tribal-majority regions of the “Red corridor” and the Muslim-majority Kashmir Valley – arise out of a latent sense of group-based inequity, combined with ethnic outbidding by political entrepreneurs and the failure (or willful disruption) of ethnic

¹ A third, less spatially predictive, approach focuses on the internal organization and external linkages of insurgent groups as a means for understanding the intensity of insurgencies and the cohesion or fragmentation of rebel groups (Mampilly, 2011; Staniland, 2014; Weinstein, 2007).

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