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# Hindu–Muslim violence in unexpected places: theory and evidence from rural India

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## ABSTRACT

What factors explain the recent rise of Hindu–Muslim violence in rural India? Using the 2013 communal riots that broke out in Uttar Pradesh’s Muzaffarnagar and Shamli districts as a theory-building case, this article advances two arguments to account for this important development. First, it holds that these clashes must be understood against the backdrop of the high-stakes 2014 general elections, which generated incentives for several national and regional parties to use conflict as a means to win votes. Second, the paper demonstrates that politicians chose to strategically instrumentalize violence among rural—rather than urban—communities because of the lower likelihood of backlash expected from rural voters. In contrast to urban voters, who have repeatedly experienced such clashes and who have developed a willingness to punish violence-wielding politicians, rural voters’ relative lack of exposure to communal riots made them both more easily mobilizable and less likely to sanction elites in 2013. Qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews, official government records, and newspaper reports from two rural (Muzaffarnagar and Shamli) and one urban district (Meerut) in Uttar Pradesh as well as New Delhi provide support for these arguments.

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India

## Introduction

The scholarship on Hindu–Muslim riots in India has long held that elites’ acts of omission (Wilkinson 2004) or willful commission (Brass 1997, 2003; Jaffrelot 2003) lie at the heart of major communal episodes. This literature has noted that riots serve to polarize the electorate along the Hindu–Muslim cleavage (Jaffrelot 2003) and/or unite Hindus who would otherwise be divided along caste lines (Wilkinson 2004). Riots can also electorally benefit politicians in many ways, and recent work has found that the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been the main beneficiary of such conflict (Jaffrelot 2003; Dhattiwala and Biggs 2012; Ticku 2015; Iyer and Shrivastava 2018).<sup>1</sup> As such, some scholars have held that communal clashes have served a crucial function in helping the Hindu right achieve its revivalist goals in India (Saha 2004; Hansen 2019).

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In August and September 2013, Hindu–Muslim riots broke out in the districts of Muzaffarnagar and Shamli in the western part of India’s most populous state, Uttar Pradesh (UP). According to official government data, by September 16, 2013, 55 individuals had perished in the violence (Government of Uttar Pradesh 2013a). Unofficial figures, however, suggest that the death toll crossed 100 fatalities (Sawhney 2015). Moreover, the clashes displaced between 40,000 and 51,000 individuals (Human Rights Law Network 2014; Mody 2014).

In keeping with existing trends—where riots in India have been found to target Muslims (Brass 2006; Wilkinson 2008)—the majority of those who died in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli belonged to the Muslim community. By the time the clashes came to an end, 62 individuals had perished in the violence, and 42 of the victims were Muslim (Jain 2013). The main script about the precipitants that generated the clashes holds that a fight over the alleged stalking of a Hindu girl had led to a dispute between two of her relatives and a Muslim youth, who had reportedly been harassing her (Kirpal 2013; Berenschot 2014). All three men subsequently perished, and their deaths, in turn, culminated in deadly communal violence in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli.<sup>2</sup>

While the conversion of such quotidian incidents into active conflict is consistent with extant understandings of Hindu–Muslim violence in India (Brass 1997, 2003), the Muzaffarnagar and Shamli riots are puzzling in several ways. First, contrary to the mainly city-centric nature of such violence, particularly in the northern and western parts of the country (Horowitz 2001; Varshney 2002),<sup>3</sup> the 2013 riots disproportionately affected Muzaffarnagar and Shamli’s villages.<sup>4</sup> Second, whereas many districts in UP—including Aligarh (Brass 2003), Meerut (Brass 2004), and Moradabad—are known to be “riot-prone,” Muzaffarnagar, where Hindus and Muslims share long-standing economic ties in the sugarcane industry, has historically been conflict-free (interview with a journalist, Muzaffarnagar, December 19, 2015; Khyati 2016). In keeping with Ashutosh Varshney’s (2002) argument about civil society, then, the presence of these inter-ethnic associational ties has been understood to be a cause of communal peace in the district (interview with a Muslim religious leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015), and the associational networks should have theoretically protected Muzaffarnagar from the 2013 riots. Third, the ruling party in the state—the Samajwadi Party (SP)—appeared to have strong reasons to contain the anti-minority violence. This is because the SP enjoyed considerable support among the state’s Muslims: approximately 54% of Muslims across 45 assembly constituencies in UP, for instance, had voted for the SP in the 2012 legislative assembly elections (Devasher 2014). And yet, the party failed woefully at quelling the riots. Fourth, and finally, the violence broke out more than a year after UP’s 2012 assembly elections—which are widely understood to be the high-stakes contests in India (Deshpande 1993)—and more than three years before the assembly elections of 2017. In short, state-level electoral competition, which is generally understood to heighten Hindu–Muslim rivalries in India (Wilkinson 2004), was absent when Muzaffarnagar and Shamli succumbed to communal violence in 2013.

What factors, then, account for the outbreak of these riots? More importantly, given the largely urban nature of Hindu–Muslim violence in India, why did villages in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli experience conflict? What role, if any, did political actors play in giving rise to these clashes? And finally, what can such incidents tell us about future dynamics of communal violence in Uttar Pradesh and in India more generally?

In addressing these questions, the principal focus of this article is to account for the *rural* nature of the 2013 violence. The central argument is that given the distinctly high stakes associated with India's 2014 general elections, politicians from competing parties tactically chose to instrumentalize conflict among rural, rather than urban, communities because the likelihood of backlash from rural voters—who have largely lacked exposure to such clashes—was expected to be low. In other words, the riots in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli can be interpreted as a deliberate electoral strategy to drive wedges between Hindus and Muslims with an eye towards winning Lok Sabha (the lower house of India's parliament) seats in UP.

While the 2013 riots stand out as the deadliest outbreaks of communal conflict in Indian villages in recent times, anti-Muslim violence has occasionally spread from urban epicenters to neighboring rural locales (Brass 1997). Since 2012, beyond Muzaffarnagar and Shamli, village-level communal riots have also occurred in Pratapgarh (Bhatt 2013), Gautam Buddha Nagar (Janhastakshep 2015), and Sambhal (Sahu 2017) districts of Uttar Pradesh as well as Alwar (Goswami 2017) and Patan (Bhan 2017) districts of Rajasthan and Gujarat, respectively. Similarly, during the 2002 Gujarat riots, some of the worst anti-Muslim attacks took place in rural parts of Panchmahal and Dahod districts. Thus, by investigating the Muzaffarnagar and Shamli clashes, this article develops an account of a crucial emerging trend in communal conflict in India. It also provides one of the first systematic analyses of the worst communal riots to have occurred in the country since the Gujarat pogrom.

## Data and methods

The data for this project come from 65 original in-depth interviews, which were conducted in 2013, 2015, and 2016;<sup>5</sup> official government records, including police First Information Reports (FIRs), hospital records, and court documents; and English and Hindi newspaper reports. The respondents interviewed include politicians and political party leaders, police officers, religious leaders, village leaders, civil society leaders, human rights activists, journalists, and academics from Muzaffarnagar, Shamli, Meerut, and New Delhi. By conducting fieldwork in each of these locations, the research design includes both urban and rural settings as well as districts that experienced high (Muzaffarnagar and Shamli) and low (Meerut) levels of violence. Finally, because several key politicians and academics reside in the national capital, New Delhi was also included as part of the study.

Interviews with politicians were used to probe *whether*, *to what extent*, and *where* it made electoral sense to organize riots in 2013. At the same time, because political leaders would presumably have vested interests to deny their involvement in driving violence, police officers, religious leaders, village leaders, civil society leaders, human rights activists, journalists, and academics were also interviewed. Respondents were selected using a snowball sampling strategy: the key selection criteria were that interviewees had either witnessed the 2013 violence or that they were experts on UP's electoral and communal politics.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. It begins by developing a theoretical account of voter sanctioning. The paper then provides a timeline of the 2013 riots. Subsequently, it establishes the high stakes that surrounded the 2014 general elections, particularly in UP. The fourth section highlights the roles that the BJP, SP, and Bahujan

Samaj Party (BSP) played in contributing to the clashes. From there, the article marshals empirical evidence to support the claim that compared to their urban counterparts, rural voters' lower exposure to communal riots and, in turn, their lower likelihood to sanction elites rendered the villages of Muzaffarnagar and Shamli especially appropriate sites for organizing conflict. The paper concludes by identifying future areas of scholarship to advance our understanding about the dynamics of communal violence in diverse societies.

### A theory of voter sanctioning

Beyond India, organizing conflict has been found to yield electoral dividends in Kenya (Malik 2018), Zimbabwe (Kriger 2005), and Sri Lanka (Hickman 2009). When interpreted in this light, elites' decisions to drive violence could simply be understood as rational vote-maximization. But, under some conditions, instrumentalizing conflict could plausibly result in costs for politicians. And while some scholars have highlighted the ways in which clientelist parties can punish voters for casting their ballots against them (Stokes 2005), until recently, relatively little work had considered the conditions under which voters might punish elites.

Over the last few years, however, a series of experimental studies have found that voters can and do sanction elites who they deem unworthy of political office. Much of this work has focused on voters' responses to corrupt politicians (Mares and Young 2016; Klačnja, Lupu, and Tucker 2017). The insights from this body of scholarship suggest that when voters have information about candidates' corruption or criminality (Banerjee et al. 2014) as well as local government capacity and responsibility (Gottlieb 2016), they typically prioritize politicians' performance and punish underperformers.

This idea of voter sanctioning has also found some resonance in the literature on political conflict, wherein experimental work has shown that when voters are aware of a candidate's use of violence, most of them will vote against rather than for such a politician (Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas 2016). The upshot of sanctioning in some cases, moreover, has been found to be large enough to "offset [the] electoral advantages [that] violence may provide" (Rosenzweig 2017: n.p.).

This article holds that given the possibilities of voter sanctioning, politicians will make careful assessments not only about the costs and benefits of violence but also about the optimal locations where such conflict might be organized. To avoid punishment from voters, furthermore, if politicians choose to drive violence we should expect that they will do so in places where residents lack the awareness about the politically or electorally-motivated nature of conflict. An observable implication of this theory in contemporary India is that politicians will refrain from organizing communal violence in cities where voters have repeatedly experienced Hindu–Muslim riots.

This theory is probabilistic rather than law-like: it does not suggest that voters will always punish violence-wielding politicians or that Indian elites will always steer clear of orchestrating riots in cities. Indeed, in some contexts, instrumentalizing conflict may even yield recurring electoral rewards.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, for sanctioning to occur, voters must have some exposure to violence, they must gather information about the politically-driven nature of conflict, and they must know about the involvement of specific parties or candidates. Admittedly, such learning takes time, but media and investigatory commission reports can provide this pertinent information. Given the

importance of learning to the processes described here, this theory holds that if violence was initially organized at time  $t$ , the earliest that sanctioning could occur would be at time  $t + 1$  (or in electoral terms at the time of the next election). Finally, sanctioning is only possible when conflict-wielding parties are stable and violent politicians repeatedly contest elections. In places where parties are fleeting and where candidates frequently enter and exit the electoral arena, even if voters have information about those who organized conflict at time  $t$ , they will lack the opportunity to cast their ballots against such elites at time  $t + 1$ . Finally, just as voters can sometimes lack the necessary opportunity or knowledge to sanction politicians, so too, elites can occasionally miscalculate the efficacy of violence (Varshney 2013; Rosenzweig 2017). When this occurs—and in the presence of voters’ knowledge about those who orchestrated conflict—politicians become especially vulnerable to punishment.

## **A timeline of the Muzaffarnagar and Shamli riots**

### ***Triggering events and the government’s initial response***

On August 27, 2013, a brawl reportedly broke out between three Muzaffarnagar youths (two Hindus and one Muslim) over the purported stalking of a local Hindu girl. It is alleged that Sachin and Gaurav Singh—two Hindu Jat cousins<sup>7</sup> who hailed from Malikpura Majra village—clashed with a Muslim youth named Shahnawaz, from neighboring Kawal village, for reportedly harassing their sister. The brothers beat Shahnawaz, who succumbed to his injuries at a local hospital. At 1:45 pm that same day, Muslim villagers from Kawal retaliated against Sachin and Gaurav who also died on August 27 (Singh 2013). Thus, by the end of the day, three murders had occurred in the district and 11 individuals were admitted to the Muzaffarnagar District Hospital (MDH 2013) as “Medico-Legal-Police Cases” (MLPC).<sup>8</sup> By the morning of August 28, the number of MLPC cases had increased to 19 (MDH 2013).

Following these events, the police and district administration in Muzaffarnagar acted quickly (interview with an INC party leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015; interview with a human rights activist, New Delhi, January 6, 2016). By 8 pm on August 27, the District Magistrate (DM) and the Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) had visited Kawal and arrested 16 people for their roles in the murders (Singh 2013). Many respondents noted that due to these expeditious actions, they expected tensions to dissipate quickly (interview with a village leader, Khubbapur village, Muzaffarnagar, December 20, 2015; interview with a civil society leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015). However, on August 28, the DM and SSP were abruptly transferred from their posts. The prevailing sentiment is that the transfers were ordered because the officers—who were widely perceived to be even-handed administrators—had refused to capitulate to government pressure from the ruling SP and release the arrested individuals, most of whom were understood to be Muslim (interview with a BJP politician, Muzaffarnagar, December 19, 2015; interview with a civil society leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015; Kirpal 2013). Finally, although district records indicate that a new DM and SSP began their terms on August 28, some interviewees stated that these positions lay vacant for a period of 24 hours (interview with a BJP politician, Muzaffarnagar, December 19, 2015; interview with a human rights activist, New Delhi, January 6, 2016). This vacuum

reportedly “gave people time to flare up communal sentiments” (interview with an INC party leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015).

### ***The threat of the Muslim male and riot escalation in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli***

The situation took a decided turn for the worse beginning on August 31 when Hindu Jats scheduled a *mahapanchayat* (grand village council meeting) for September 7, 2013 (Singh 2013). The *mahapanchayat* sought to bring together clan leaders and villagers to discuss—apparently in response to the alleged stalking and the subsequent events of August 27—the protection of Hindu women. The main item on the agenda of the meeting, therefore, was “*beti bachao*” (save our daughters).

Given the sensitivity that surrounds matters of female honor in rural parts of northern India (interview with a journalist, Muzaffarnagar, December 19, 2015; interview with an INC party leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015), it is not surprising that over 50,000 Hindus reportedly attended the *mahapanchayat*, which was held in Nagla Mandaur village (Anand 2013). At the meeting, BJP politicians and local Jat leaders explicitly framed Muslim men as a threat to Hindu women and Hindu society (interview with a journalist, Muzaffarnagar, December 19, 2015; interview with a human rights activist, New Delhi, January 5, 2016; Naqvi 2013). This rhetoric, which has also been deployed to drive other communal riots in India (Anand 2005), quickly turned the *mahapanchayat* into a demonstration of Hindu aggression, and anti-Muslim slogans were purportedly raised at the meeting (Anand 2013; interview with a journalist, Muzaffarnagar, December 19, 2015).

According to one expert on the subject, the rapid rise of Hindu nationalism since the 1980s and 1990s has owed much to the construction of the Muslim male “as both a political and cultural threat to Indian unity” (Saha 2004, 155). In one sense, then, the September 7 meeting can be understood as part of a larger right-wing Hindu project to develop a national consciousness that is grounded in a hegemonic Hindu culture (Saha 2004). Against this background, it follows that when they left the *mahapanchayat*, Hindu attendees were riled up. Their rage, in turn, had grave consequences for local Muslims (interview with a journalist, Muzaffarnagar, December 19, 2015; interview with an INC party leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015). An FIR lodged by 22 Muslim villagers at Shahpur police station in Muzaffarnagar, for instance, reveals that as a group of Hindu Jats were returning to their homes, they raised “communal slogans and tried to kill Muslims [who they passed]” (Government of Uttar Pradesh 2013b). Informed observers similarly stated that on the evening of September 7, several Hindus attacked Muslims in their villages (interview with a journalist, Muzaffarnagar, December 19, 2015; interview with an INC party leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015). These events contributed to “an atmosphere of commotion and panic” in the district (Government of Uttar Pradesh 2013b).

By nightfall, five to six Muslims had been killed in Muzaffarnagar and by noon the next day, this figure had climbed to 49 (Singh 2013; Mody 2014). On September 8, violence spread to Shamli, and curfew was subsequently imposed in Muzaffarnagar, Shamli, and Meerut. The military was called in to Muzaffarnagar and Shamli on September 8, and 10 new MLPC patients were admitted to the MDH (2013).

Despite these measures, village-level murders and arson attacks continued on September 9 and 10 (Amar Ujala 2013). In fact, 13 new MLPC admissions were recorded at the



MDH (2013) on September 9, and by September 10, the Hindi press reported that 90 riot-related arrests had been made (*Dainik Jagran* 2013).

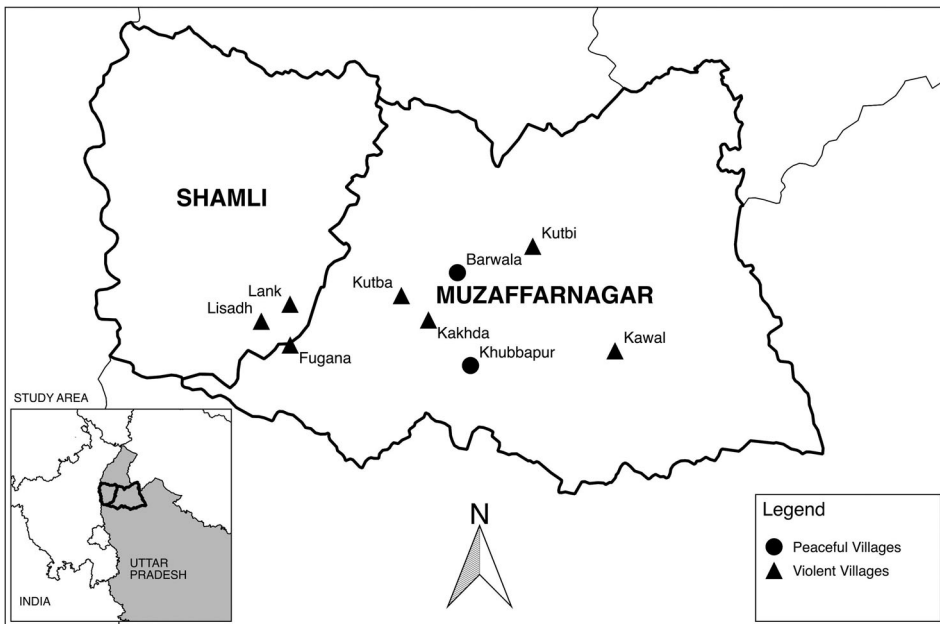
By the time the violence reached its zenith, 140 villages had purportedly witnessed active conflict (Mody 2014). The worst-affected villages were Fugana, Kakhda, Kawal, Kutba, Kutbi, Malikpura Majra, and Nagla Mandaur in Muzaffarnagar and Bahawadi, Lank, and Lisadh in Shamli (Raina 2013; Sharma 2014). Despite being located only a few kilometers away from conflict-ridden sites, however, some villages—such as Khubbapur and Barwala in Muzaffarnagar—remained peaceful (Figure 1).

Moreover, although Muzaffarnagar and Shamli were the epicenters of the violence, low-level clashes broke out in neighboring Saharanpur, Baghpat, and Meerut districts. Thus, it is important to note that there was both village-level and district-level variation in the incidence and scale of the riots (Figure 2).

Such microspatial variation has been observed in other incidents of Hindu–Muslim riots in India (Berenschot 2011; Dhattiwala 2016). In emphasizing the methodological bias involved in only examining sites of conflict, many scholars (Varshney 2002; Berenschot 2011; Dhattiwala 2016) have provided an important rationale for explaining these variations. Drawing on their reasoning, this project, too, includes both violent and peaceful sites as part of its research design.

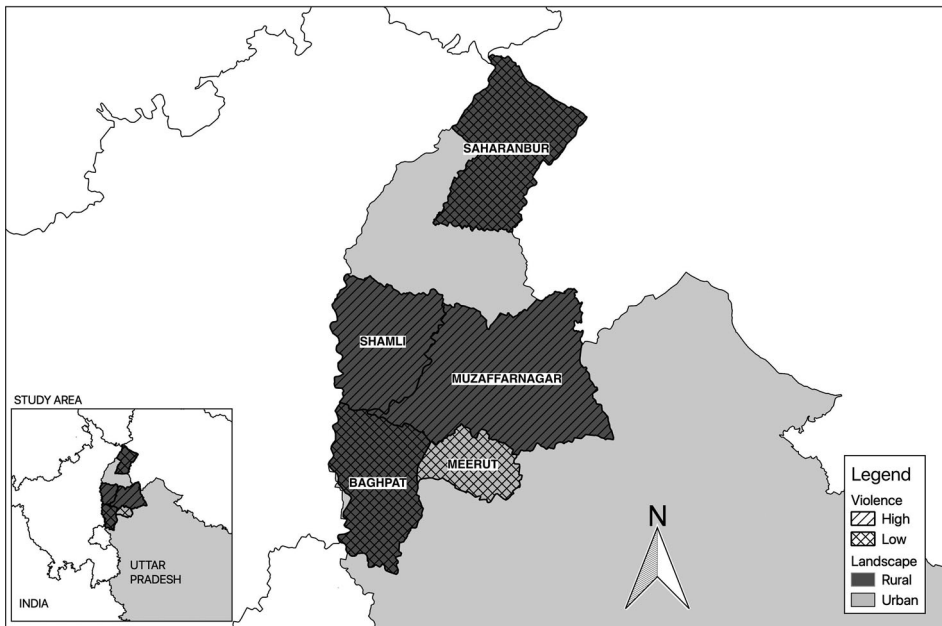
### The high-stakes 2014 general elections in Uttar Pradesh

Beyond events that occurred within the context of virulent Hindu nationalism, the Muzaffarnagar and Shamli riots can also be understood against the backdrop of the 2014 general elections, which carried unusually high stakes for several political parties.



**Figure 1.** Spread of Hindu–Muslim violence in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli districts, Uttar Pradesh.





**Figure 2.** Spread and intensity of Hindu–Muslim violence in districts of Western Uttar Pradesh.

For the BJP, the elections were critical for making a comeback on the national stage (Susewind and Dhattiwala 2014; Pai 2014a, 2014b). Because the largest number of parliamentary seats—80 in all—come from Uttar Pradesh, the BJP needed to perform well in this state. As such, senior party leaders had begun making UP-specific preparations almost a year prior to the elections (Pai 2014a). Nevertheless, Hindu nationalist forces faced an acute challenge in securing an electoral victory in UP, as the state’s sizeable Muslim community was unlikely to support the BJP. This meant that the party had to consolidate non-Muslim votes.

Several respondents stated that the Nagla Mandaur *mahapanchayat* was part of the BJP’s efforts to win over Hindu Jats, who have historically rallied behind the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) party (interview with an RLD party leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 20, 2015; interview with a BSP party leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015). The interview below sums up the importance that Uttar Pradesh held in the BJP’s 2014 calculations:

UP has the largest number of seats ... It is politically a very important state. UP, Bihar, and West Bengal will [give] you a Prime Minister. And so for the BJP, winning UP [in 2014] was critical; there were strong regional parties [there] that had to be defeated. (Interview with a human rights activist, New Delhi, January 6, 2016)

For their part, the SP and BSP were equally keen to do well in the general elections, especially in UP. This contest was a crucial test of the Samajwadi Party’s ability to maintain Muslim electoral support. Meanwhile, the BSP—which had been struggling to hold on to Scheduled Caste voters for some time (Pai 2014a)—was eager to swing Muslims towards the party (interview with a civil society leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015; interview with an SP leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015; Khan 2014).<sup>9</sup> Finally, because

the Congress had long fallen out of favor with UP's voters and the RLD had joined the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in 2011—effectively nullifying its chances in the 2014 election (Rajalakshmi 2014)—the race in Uttar Pradesh came down to the BJP, SP, and BSP.

Tables 1 and 2 provide constituency-wise and district-wise breakdowns of the last two parliamentary and assembly contests held in UP prior to and up to 2014, respectively.<sup>10</sup> The assembly-level party-wise data are provided for the BJP, INC, SP, and BSP. All other parties, including independents, are clubbed under the “Others” category.

As Table 1 highlights, the BJP witnessed a historic shift in its fortunes in Uttar Pradesh in 2014, amassing a remarkable 71 out of 80 parliamentary seats. Consistent with existing evidence on the parties that benefit from communal riots in India (Ticku 2015; Iyer and Shrivastava 2018), respondents held that the BJP was able to achieve this outcome due to its role in orchestrating the 2013 riots (interview with a Muslim religious leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015; interview with a civil society leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015). Notably, furthermore, although the BSP failed to secure a single seat in the state in 2014, it did amass Muslim support, particularly in the riot-affected areas (Susewind and Dhattiwala 2014). Meanwhile, the SP suffered a loss of 18 seats between 2009 and 2014.

Beyond these results from the parliamentary elections, Table 2 demonstrates the highly competitive nature of state-level contests in Uttar Pradesh. Given that UP has the largest legislative assembly (Vidhan Sabha) in India with 403 seats, both national and regional parties have eagerly sought to carve out electoral domains for themselves in the state. The sheer number of seats up for grabs in the state, then, highlights that political parties' performances in UP vitally impact their national and regional influence in India's competitive multi-party system.

### Political machinations and the 2013 riots

To give the alleged harassment and subsequent three 2013 Muzaffarnagar murders the communal color necessary for riot violence (Brass 1997, 2003), BJP and BSP politicians took on critical functions. Whereas BJP leaders raised the communal temperature at the September 7 *mahapanchayat*,<sup>11</sup> BSP politicians organized their own meeting on August 30, at which they raised “vociferous demands for justice for [Shahnawaz,] the Muslim boy” who had died on August 27 (Kirpal 2013; also see Jain and Masih 2014). In their efforts to consolidate votes from Hindu Jats and Muslims respectively, then, both these parties capitalized on the August 27 incident (interview with a Muslim religious leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015; interview with a civil society leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015).

For its part, the SP, too, appears to have created conditions that were conducive to lethal violence. The party had reportedly been dabbling in communal polarization in Uttar Pradesh for several months prior to the outbreak of the riots (interview with a journalist, Muzaffarnagar, December 19, 2015; interview with a village leader, Kakhda village, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015). In fact, since the SP's victory in the 2012 assembly elections, incidents of Hindu–Muslim violence in UP's villages had escalated drastically. An August 2013 report, for instance, noted that UP had witnessed at least “34 clashes in [the first] 16 months” of Akhilesh Yadav's (the state's Chief Minister from the SP) regime (Naqvi 2013, 3). Moreover, although Muzaffarnagar and Shamli experienced

**Table 1.** Constituency and party-wise breakdown of the 2014 and 2009 parliamentary elections in Uttar Pradesh.

Constituency	Winning Party (2014)	Winning Party (2009)
Agra	BJP	BJP
Akbarpur	BJP	INC
Aligarh	BJP	BSP
Allahabad	BJP	SP
Ambedkar Nagar	BJP	BSP
Amethi	INC	INC
Amroha	BJP	RLD
Aonla	BJP	BJP
Azamgarh	SP	BJP
Baghpat	BJP	RLD
Bahraich	BJP	INC
Ballia	BJP	SP
Banda	BJP	SP
Bansgaon	BJP	BJP
Barabanki	BJP	INC
Bareilly	BJP	INC
Basti	BJP	BSP
Bhadohi	BJP	BSP
Bijnor	BJP	RLD
Budaun	SP	SP
Bulandshahr	BJP	SP
Chandauli	BJP	SP
Deoria	BJP	BSP
Dhaurahra	BJP	INC
Domariyaganj	BJP	INC
Etah	BJP	IND
Etawah	BJP	SP
Faizabad	BJP	INC
Farrukhabad	BJP	INC
Fatehpur	BJP	SP
Fatehpur Sikri	BJP	BSP
Firozabad	SP	INC
Gautam Buddha Nagar	BJP	BSP
Ghaziabad	BJP	BJP
Ghazipur	BJP	SP
Ghosi	BJP	BSP
Gonda	BJP	INC
Gorakhpur	BJP	BJP
Hamirpur	BJP	BSP
Hardoi	BJP	SP
Hathras	BJP	RLD
Jalaun	BJP	SP
Jaunpur	BJP	BSP
Jhansi	BJP	INC
Kairana	BJP	BSP
Kaiserganj	BJP	SP
Kannauj	SP	SP
Kanpur	BJP	INC
Kaushambi	BJP	SP
Kushinagar	BJP	INC
Kheri	BJP	INC
Lalganj	BJP	BSP
Lucknow	BJP	BJP
Machhlishahr	BJP	SP
Maharajganj	BJP	INC
Mainpuri	SP	SP
Mathura	BJP	RLD
Meerut	BJP	BJP
Mirzapur	Apna Dal (AD)	SP
Misrikh	BJP	BSP

*(Continued)*

**Table 1.** Continued.

Constituency	Winning Party (2014)	Winning Party (2009)
Mohanlalganj	BJP	SP
Moradabad	BJP	INC
Muzaffarnagar	BJP	BSP
Nagina	BJP	SP
Phulpur	BJP	BSP
Pilibhit	BJP	BJP
Pratapgarh	AD	INC
Rae Bareli	INC	INC
Rampur	BJP	SP
Robertsganj	BJP	SP
Saharanpur	BJP	BSP
Salempur	BJP	BSP
Sambhal	BJP	BSP
Sant Kabir Nagar	BJP	BSP
Shahjahanpur	BJP	SP
Shrawasti	BJP	INC
Sitapur	BJP	BSP
Sultanpur	BJP	INC
Unnao	BJP	INC
Varanasi	BJP	BJP
<b>Party-wise performance</b>	<b>BJP = 71</b>	<b>BJP = 10</b>
	<b>SP = 5</b>	<b>SP = 23</b>
	<b>INC = 2</b>	<b>INC = 21</b>
	<b>AD = 2</b>	<b>BSP = 20</b>
		<b>RLD = 5</b>
		<b>IND = 1</b>
<b>Total seats</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>80</b>

severe riots in August and September 2013, both districts had witnessed many mild communal incidents in the months preceding these clashes (interview with a civil society leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015; Suresh 2016).

Elite miscalculation provides an explanation for why the SP—a party that relies heavily on Muslim support—allowed anti-Muslim violence to occur. In the years before the Muzaffarnagar and Shamli riots, SP leaders had apparently come to see small communal incidents as a way to advance their electoral interests in UP (interview with a journalist, Muzaffarnagar, December 19, 2015; interview with a social sciences professor, New Delhi, December 15, 2015). The governing logic seemed to be that by maintaining an environment in which low levels of Hindu-Muslim tension prevailed—but were kept from boiling over into active conflict—the SP would convince Uttar Pradesh’s Muslim voters that it was the best guarantor of their security (interview with a village leader, Kakhda village, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015; interview with a Muslim religious leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015). Consider the perspective of the interviewee below:

It [the SP] wanted some tension to be there between the two communities ... It believed that “if we scare them [Muslims], perhaps we will benefit.” But when the mob took things into its own hands, then the situation went out of control. That’s when the government started losing its grip on things ... Subsequently, it tried to assuage Muslims by distributing compensation and government jobs but no compensation can make up for what people experienced during that time. (Interview with a journalist, Muzaffarnagar, December 19, 2015)

Another interlocutor similarly noted:

They [the SP] were in power in the state, and by not stopping the clashes, they had an indirect hand in the violence ... The best way for the SP to consolidate its support base was to come in

**Table 2.** District and party-wise breakdown of Uttar Pradesh's 2012 and 2007 assembly elections.

District	BJP (2012)	INC (2012)	BSP (2012)	SP (2012)	Others (2012)	BJP (2007)	INC (2007)	BSP (2007)	SP (2007)	Others (2007)
Agra	2	0	6	1	0	2	0	7	0	0
Aligarh	0	0	0	4	3	2	0	2	1	2
Allahabad	0	1	3	8	0	1	1	8	2	0
Ambedkar Nagar	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	5	0	0
Amethi	0	2	0	2	0	0	2	1	1	0
Amroha	0	0	0	4	0	1	0	1	2	0
Auraiya	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	2	1	0
Azamgarh	0	0	1	9	0	0	0	7	3	0
Baghpat	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	1	0	3
Bahraich	2	2	1	2	0	1	0	3	2	0
Ballia	1	0	1	5	0	0	0	6	2	0
Balrampur	0	0	0	4	0	2	0	2	1	0
Banda	0	2	1	1	0	0	1	1	2	0
Barabanki	0	0	0	6	0	0	0	5	2	0
Bareilly	3	0	2	3	1	2	0	4	2	0
Basti	0	1	2	2	0	0	0	3	1	0
Bhadohi	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	2	1	0
Bijnor	2	0	4	2	0	0	0	7	0	0
Budaun	0	0	2	4	0	1	0	3	0	3
Bulandshahr	1	2	2	2	0	1	0	7	0	0
Chandauli	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	3	1	0
Chitrakoot	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	0
Deoria	1	1	0	5	0	0	0	4	3	0
Etah	0	0	0	4	0	2	0	1	2	1
Etawah	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	3	0
Faizabad	1	0	0	4	0	0	0	3	2	0
Farrukhabad	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	2	1	0
Fatehpur	1	0	3	2	0	2	0	3	0	0
Firozabad	1	0	1	3	0	0	0	2	0	2
Gautam Buddha Nagar	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Ghaziabad	0	0	4	0	1	1	0	1	0	1
Ghazipur	0	0	0	6	1	0	0	6	2	0
Gonda	1	0	0	6	0	0	1	1	3	0
Gorakhpur	3	0	5	1	1	2	1	5	1	1
Hamirpur	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	0
Hapur	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	0
Hardoi	0	0	2	6	0	0	0	8	1	0
Hathras	0	0	2	1	0	2	0	1	0	1
Jalaun	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	3	0	0
Jaunpur	1	1	0	7	0	0	0	6	3	1
Jhansi	1	0	1	2	0	0	1	2	1	0
Kannauj	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	2	0
Kanpur Dehat	0	0	1	3	0	0	0	4	1	0
Kanpur Nagar	4	1	0	5	0	3	2	3	2	0
Kasganj	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	2	0	0
Kaushambi	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	3	0	0
Kushinagar	1	2	1	3	0	3	1	0	3	0
Lakhimpur Kheri	1	0	3	4	0	1	0	2	4	0
Lalitpur	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Lucknow	1	1	0	7	0	4	0	2	2	1
Maharajganj	1	1	0	2	0	1	0	1	3	0
Mahoba	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0
Mainpuri	0	0	0	4	0	1	0	0	4	0
Mathura	0	1	1	0	3	0	1	2	0	2
Mau	0	0	1	2	1	0	0	2	0	1
Meerut	4	0	0	3	0	1	0	3	1	2
Mirzapur	0	1	1	3	0	1	0	3	1	0
Moradabad	1	0	0	4	1	2	0	3	2	0
Muzaffarnagar	0	0	2	3	1	1	1	4	0	1

(Continued)

**Table 2.** Continued.

District	BJP (2012)	INC (2012)	BSP (2012)	SP (2012)	Others (2012)	BJP (2007)	INC (2007)	BSP (2007)	SP (2007)	Others (2007)
Pilibhit	1	0	0	3	0	1	0	2	1	0
Pratapgarh	0	1	0	4	2	2	1	3	0	2
Rae Bareli	0	0	0	5	1	0	5	0	0	1
Rampur	0	2	1	2	0	0	1	0	2	0
Saharanpur	1	1	4	1	0	0	0	5	0	2
Sambhal	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	2	2	0
Sant Kabir Nagar	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	1	2	0
Shahjahanpur	1	0	2	3	0	2	0	3	2	0
Shamli	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Shrawasti	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	0
Siddharthnagar	1	0	0	3	1	0	2	2	2	0
Sitapur	0	0	2	7	0	0	0	4	4	0
Sonbhadra	0	0	1	2	1	0	0	2	0	0
Sultanpur	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	3	2	0
Unnao	0	0	1	5	0	0	0	2	5	0
Varanasi	3	1	2	1	1	3	0	2	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Total seats</b>	<b>403</b>					<b>403</b>				

as the savior of the Muslims. And that's where the plan backfired: they didn't do enough to stop the violence quickly and so now more and more Muslims are shifting [their] support to the BSP. (Interview with a political science professor, New Delhi, December 17, 2013)

In the aftermath of its failure to quell the riots and protect Muslims, the Samajwadi Party provided various forms of compensation to those affected by the clashes (Government of Uttar Pradesh 2014) (Table 3).

However, these efforts were deemed inadequate. A March 2014 pre-election survey, for instance, found that 39% of Muslims in UP were dissatisfied with the SP's handling of their security and rehabilitation concerns (Ahmed 2014, 2–3). Thus not only did the party grossly miscalculate the extent to which it could rely on communal conflict to win over Muslim support but its subsequent efforts to commiserate with victims and survivors also proved to be insufficient.

### *Why were the riots rural?*

There are two primary reasons for the city-centric nature of Hindu–Muslim violence, especially in northern and western India. First, the recuperation of cultural values that Hindu nationalists have sought under the banner of “Hindutva” politics has resonated

**Table 3.** Details of post-violence compensation provided by the Samajwadi Party to victims of the riots.

Description of assistance	Relevant numbers	Funds/compensation provided
One-time Rehabilitation Assistance	952 families	476,000,000 rupees
Compensation for Movable Property	543 types	21,473,648 rupees
Compensation for Immovable Property	62 types	6,412,160 rupees
Compensation to Dependents of the Deceased	35 individuals	52,250,000 rupees
Compensation to the Critically Injured	14 individuals	1,400,000 rupees
Compensation for Minor Injuries	105 individuals	2,100,000 rupees
Provision of Refugee Shelters	41 shelters	37,700,000 rupees
Provision of Jobs	35 individuals	–
<b>Total Financial Assistance</b>		<b>597,335,808 rupees</b>

with urban, class-conscious voters (Saha 2004). Second, apart from a few exceptions such as Bengal and Hyderabad, Partition-related violence affected the northern and western provinces, leaving an indelible divide between Hindus and Muslims in these regions.

Why, then, did the 2013 Muzaffarnagar and Shamli riots break out in rural districts? Consistent with the theory detailed earlier, the evidence gathered for this project shows that the violence occurred in villages because contrary to their city-based counterparts, politicians did not expect rural voters—who had little to no prior exposure to communal conflict—to sanction them. To illustrate this claim, the research draws on interviews from Meerut—an urban area, which experienced mild violence in 2013—and villages in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli.

Based on 1950–1995 riot data, Meerut is India’s fourth most riot-prone city (Varshney 2002). Prior to 2013, when two fatalities occurred here during the Muzaffarnagar and Shamli violence, the last deadly clash in the city took place in June 2004 and claimed three lives (Engineer 2005). To explain Meerut’s recent quiescence, interview respondents held that the town’s residents have gathered that there is a link between political interests and communal conflict; moreover, they are now willing to resist efforts that could result in violence (interview with a civil society leader, Meerut, August 22, 2013; interview with a journalist, Meerut, August 24, 2013).<sup>12</sup> As one interviewee explained:

When riots occurred here in the past, it was the ordinary people who suffered while the politicians benefited ... So we learned over time not to fall prey to these polarization efforts. Now too, there are efforts at polarizing voters along Hindu–Muslim lines but I believe that a large-scale riot is unlikely to occur here, and that’s because ordinary people are not going to get riled up by these tactics. (Interview with a local businessman, Meerut, August 22, 2013)

A second respondent explicitly noted the sanctioning risks that politicians would run if they tried to instrumentalize communal conflict in Meerut:

[Small] communal incidents [may] take place from time to time but big riots now are unlikely. A major reason for the reduction [in] communal riots [in Meerut] is there is a lot of awareness among the people. They [ordinary citizens] suffered a lot during previous riots ... Political reasons are there [for communal violence]. People [i.e., politicians] bank upon their vote bank and they try to encash a particular section of the [society]. For that also there is awareness among the people [now] ... [They (politicians)] can no longer encash upon the common man. In fact, if a riot happens now, people are very clear: whosoever is responsible, they [voters] are willing to turn against him/her and are [ready] to vote for someone else in the next election. (Interview with a senior police officer, Meerut, August 21, 2013)

Comparing the trajectory of urban Meerut with rural Muzaffarnagar and Shamli unearths a crucial element of the underlying political calculus: mobilizing riots in villages is considered far less risky than doing so in urban areas. To quote one interviewee:

... We already know that Indian cities are polarized. In Meerut, the Hindu–Muslim divide is still deep but parties know that they will suffer losses if they organize a riot. So now everything is turning on what happens in the villages; the voting patterns are more or less predictable in the cities. It’s the rural areas that matter and elites can easily organize riots there. (Interview with a political science professor, New Delhi, December 17, 2013)

Residents of Muzaffarnagar and Shamli similarly emphasized the ease with which rural voters can be mobilized into violence:



They [rural voters] don't understand the costs and benefits of riots for politicians. They only look at one thing; which party is saying that it will take care of me ... So they are very easily instigated; it can be done in a second, and this instigation is what causes trouble ... Until now, riots have affected cities. But these riots [Muzaffarnagar and Shamli] started in the villages and they impacted the villages. And I expect that this this trend will continue into the future. (Interview with a journalist, Muzaffarnagar, December 19, 2015)

The respondent above clearly notes that rural voters lack an understanding about the link between political interests and communal conflict in India. Given the absence of such information, we should expect that they would not be in a position to punish violent politicians. This is precisely what happened in 2013. As one interlocutor explained:

Riots used to occur in cities. But when they broke out in the villages here, mostly uneducated people participated. They were being provoked, yes, but they didn't understand why. All they knew is that allegedly this girl had been harassed by a Muslim. And then the chaos followed. Now if someone had tried this in a city—like Meerut or Aligarh—the people would not have been enticed. And had any violence occurred at all, voters would have held the politicians to account. But what can one expect from villagers who haven't experienced riots and who don't understand their political nature? So, the riots happened, people died, and some parties even benefited as a result. (Interview with a Muslim religious leader, Muzaffarnagar, December 21, 2015)

Taken together, the data collected from Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, and Shamli demonstrates that the 2013 clashes were deliberately organized in rural areas to avoid sanctioning from voters. Moreover, in choosing to drive conflict in villages, politicians leveraged powerful narratives that resonated with rural voters: whereas the BJP emphasized the Muslim male threat, the BSP focused on justice for the community. This potent cocktail culminated in the worst communal violence that had occurred in India in over a decade.

## Conclusion

This research has shown that the 2013 Muzaffarnagar and Shamli riots—and the subsequent rise of communal clashes in other rural parts of India—reflects a concerted change in elites' calculations about the electoral utility of Hindu-Muslim violence. Specifically, the article has argued that in order to avoid sanctioning from urban voters—who have historically experienced such conflict—violence-wielding politicians are now deliberately focusing on instrumentalizing riots in rural areas. In the case of Muzaffarnagar and Shamli, the article has also demonstrated that politically connected individuals succeeded in their efforts to mobilize conflict because they crafted powerful narratives that convinced voters to fight.

Based on these findings, future research ought to look more closely at the relationship between political parties, elites' incentives to drive violence, and communal conflict. For their part, emerging studies have already cautioned that the BJP's triumphs in the last two parliamentary elections, coupled with the party's increasing influence at the state level, are signs of the unmistakable rise of a majoritarian, "ethno-state" in India (Jaffrelot 2019). Uttar Pradesh's ruling BJP government's July 2019 recommendation to drop 75 cases of arson, assault, and vandalism—against nearly 400 who were accused of participating in the Muzaffarnagar and Shamli riots—provides evidence for this claim (Sharma 2019). As such, additional research could further illuminate the factors that influence politicians' assessments of the costs and benefits of conflict as well as their

decision-making about *where* to instrumentalize violence. Beyond enhancing our knowledge about Hindu–Muslim riots in India, these studies will have vital implications for our collective understanding about the link between elite incentives and communal conflict in diverse societies.

## Notes

1. In a related vein, simulation studies have highlighted that fewer governments led by the Indian National Congress (INC) would have resulted in significantly more riots in India (Nellis, Weaver, and Rosenzweig 2016).
2. According to an alternative narrative, however, a motorcycle collision between a Hindu and a Muslim triggered the riots (Khyati 2016). Due to space constraints, this article focuses on the alleged harassment in its discussion of the triggers that led to the violence.
3. Horowitz (2001, 382) notes that riots are predominantly urban because precipitants and the ethnic heterogeneity of cities support instrumentalizing such conflict. Similarly, Brass (1997, 20) finds that the possibilities to mobilize large groups of people, easily spread rumors, and carry out attacks with anonymity make urban areas more riot-prone than their rural counterparts.
4. Shamli was carved out of Muzaffarnagar district in 2011. While Muzaffarnagar and Shamli were the epicenters of conflict in 2013, three adjoining districts—Meerut (urban) where two deaths occurred and Saharanpur (rural) and Baghpat (rural) where one fatality each were reported—experienced low-level clashes.
5. While the author was working on a related project in Meerut in August 2013, violence broke out in Muzaffarnagar. As it was not advisable to travel to this district at the time, the village-level fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh was carried out in 2015 and 2016. In the meantime, the author conducted interviews in Meerut and New Delhi. Thus data collection took place in 2013, 2015, and 2016, and the period under investigation here is the timeframe in 2013 prior to and during which the riots occurred.
6. In India, this has been the case in the towns of Ahmedabad and Vadodara in Gujarat.
7. The Jats are an agricultural community who live in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, Rajasthan, and Punjab. Jats practice many different religions, including Hinduism, Islam, and Sikhism.
8. This is one of the categories under which communal incidents in India are classified. The other category is “Accident.”
9. Since 2002, the BSP has had some success in increasing its vote share—from 9% in 2002 (Verma 2002) to 20% in 2012—among UP’s Muslims.
10. All results are as reported by the Election Commission of India.
11. One BJP politician even stands accused of circulating a fake video about the deaths of Sachin and Gaurav on YouTube (Raghuvanshi 2015).
12. The following data demonstrates Meerut’s decline in the incidence and scale of Hindu–Muslim conflict: while 184 and 49 individuals died during communal riots in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively, between 2000 and 2010, only three riot-related deaths occurred in the city.

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