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# Peace by committee: state, society, and the control of communal violence in Bhagalpur, Bihar

Aditi Malik <sup>a</sup> and Monica Prasad <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Political Science, College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, MA, USA; <sup>b</sup>Sociology, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

## ABSTRACT

Why do communal provocations generate violence in some moments but not in others? Drawing on 52 interviews and archival and ethnographic evidence from Bhagalpur, Bihar, we develop a theoretical framework to explain how communal conflict might be controlled. In Bhagalpur, we find that a state-society partnership has helped the city to avoid active violence since 1989. Civil society elites gain and maintain local followings by drawing on their access to the state to resolve quotidian problems for their constituents. Doing so cements their status in their communities and imbues them with the credibility to calm communal tensions. These findings illuminate the governance strategies through which state actors might delegate the performance of important state functions, such as maintaining order, to non-state groups. They also reveal a range of tactics through which state-society partnerships might thwart communal conflict in divided societies like India.

## Introduction

Over a few days in September 2015, several pieces of strategically placed meat appeared in the city of Bhagalpur in northeastern India. A piglet with its neck cut had been placed on a rug in a mosque, and three pieces of beef had been thrown into a Hindu area of the city.<sup>1</sup>

Bhagalpur was instantly on alert. In 1989, false rumors of attacks on Hindus had culminated in a major riot in the city that had killed over one thousand individuals and left countless others homeless from arson and looting. It was one of the worst episodes of Hindu-Muslim violence in modern India.<sup>2</sup> In September 2015, older residents who had lived through 1989 feared that history was repeating itself. They knew from bitter experience that it did not take much to start a communal riot in Bhagalpur.

But in 2015 things unfolded differently. This time a riot did not occur.

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**CONTACT** Aditi Malik  [amalik@holycross.edu](mailto:amalik@holycross.edu)  Assistant Professor of Political Science College of the Holy Cross Worcester, MA 01610; Monica Prasad  [m-prasad@northwestern.edu](mailto:m-prasad@northwestern.edu)  Professor of Sociology Northwestern University 1810 Chicago Avenue Evanston, IL 60208

\*Both authors contributed equally to this work.

Provocations such as pork thrown in mosques and beef thrown in temples are commonplace in India.<sup>3</sup> When scholars investigate communal riots, they often uncover some such initiating incident, or other seemingly minor issues – such as disputes over the route of a religious procession or damage to an idol – at their origins.<sup>4</sup> In ethnic riots across the globe, moreover, precipitants of this nature have been found to hold “great significance” and “actually evoke . . . violence.”<sup>5</sup> But most small incidents do not become riots.

This paper argues that it is in the handling of such events that the course for communal violence is set. Through an in-depth analysis of one city where several factors conducive to Hindu-Muslim riots are present to this day, we find that active conflict has been controlled because state actors have successfully drawn the leaders of existing civil society groups into ongoing cooperation with the state. Our argument advances prevailing understandings of governance strategies through which state authorities can delegate the performance of important state functions to non-state actors and highlights the means by which state-society partnerships can successfully resolve intractable problems such as communal violence.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. We begin by developing a new theory of state-society partnerships as a channel for controlling communal conflicts. This theory builds on, but goes beyond, the existing literature. We then explain our research design and case selection in the second section and our methods and data in the third section. Next, we discuss the major state and non-state actors in Bhagalpur and chart the origins of the city’s state-society network. We then detail the tactics that its members have used to avoid Hindu-Muslim violence since 1989 before elaborating on the reasons for the partnership’s success. We offer three major reasons for this success, which pertain to the reputations and credibility of non-state actors, the ability of these leaders to call on the state for resources and legitimacy when necessary, and the maintenance of specialized functions between state administrators and civil society.<sup>6</sup> The article concludes by discussing the implications of this work for promoting social order in India and beyond.

### **Preventing communal violence through state-society partnerships in Bhagalpur and beyond**

After witnessing a major upsurge in the early 2000s, the literature on communal violence in India can today be divided into two broad camps that favor either civic institutions or electoral incentives as the primary means to prevent such conflict. According to Ashutosh Varshney, a chief proponent of the civic associations argument, “preexisting local networks of civic engagement” between Hindus and Muslims in India stand out as “the single most important proximate explanation for the difference between peace and violence” across the country’s cities.<sup>7</sup> In peaceful cities,

Varshney argues that members of inter-communal civil society organizations have “policed neighborhoods, killed rumors, provided information to the local administration, and facilitated communication between communities in times of tension.”<sup>8</sup>

Other researchers have interpreted communal riots as the outcome of electoral competition and democratic politics. In places where riots can be electorally beneficial, these scholars have argued that actors within “institutionalized riot systems” work together to give minor incidents communal color and thereby foment violence.<sup>9</sup> Steven Wilkinson, who has championed electoral incentives as the main cause of Hindu-Muslim riots as well as their containment, has further demonstrated that such clashes occur close to elections in India. According to his argument, riots “are best thought of as a solution to the problem of . . . build[ing] a winning political coalition.”<sup>10</sup>

While both camps in this debate illuminate important facets of the logic of riot violence, this earlier literature has been criticized for being somewhat sociologically thin and for positing a false dichotomy between civil society and electoral incentives as the principal means to prevent such conflict.<sup>11</sup> In challenging this binary, newer work has adopted qualitative methods to more precisely trace the mechanisms behind riots and their prevention<sup>12</sup> and has also offered richer understandings of social life.<sup>13</sup>

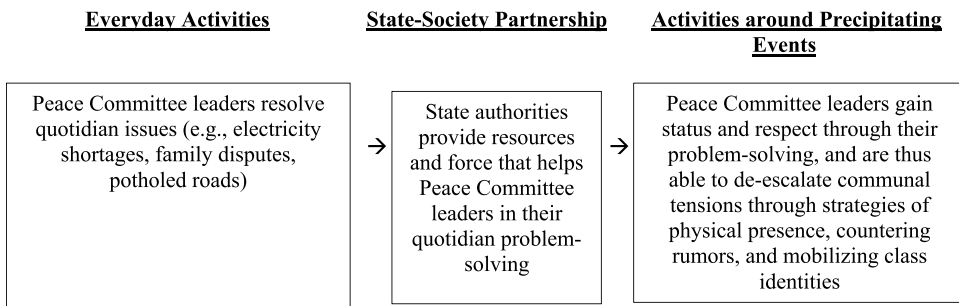
Ward Berenschot and Raheel Dhattiwala's contributions are especially insightful in this regard. These two scholars have drawn our attention to a range of intermediary groups that mediate relationships *between* state and society. Berenschot, in particular, has argued that both the electoral politics and the civil society perspectives miss the crucial role of patronage networks in enabling communal violence. In patronage democracies, he notes that brokers mediate between society and the state to help citizens navigate bureaucratic barriers and access state services.<sup>14</sup> His work has further shown that the same networks that provide citizens with access to the state during peacetime can be mobilized to instrumentalize communal violence in the presence of appropriate elite incentives.<sup>15</sup> Like Wilkinson and Brass, he thus finds that patron-client relations are often appropriated to generate riots when an election is approaching, as this is a context in which some politicians stand to benefit from conflict.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, through her ethnographic study of the 2002 Gujarat riots, Raheel Dhattiwala has demonstrated that both legitimate state institutions, such as the *panchayat*, and illegitimate institutions, such as vigilante and criminal groups, worked together to monitor and sanction citizens who tried to participate in violence in Ahmedabad.<sup>17</sup> Rather than depending on clientelistic exchanges of resources, then, her research has highlighted that a combination of fear and respect for local leaders prevented citizens in some Ahmedabad neighborhoods from rioting.<sup>18</sup>

These studies from India complement many existing insights from across the developing world where researchers have uncovered partnerships between state and non-state actors to carry out functions such as distributing patronage,<sup>19</sup> promoting welfare,<sup>20</sup> and establishing social order.<sup>21</sup> Taken together, these findings have also considerably advanced our understandings about the ways in which state-society linkages can serve to control violence. For example, evidence from Indonesia has shown that by bringing critical information to state elites, vigilante groups have helped the state to avert sectarian strife and terrorist attacks.<sup>22</sup>

We build on these burgeoning studies in our article. However, we also extend their findings in three key ways. First, because Berenschot and Dhattiwala have both examined particular neighborhoods within a larger “riot-prone” city, it is not clear whether and how their conclusions about state-society partnerships can apply beyond the limited context of small neighborhoods. For example, a common finding of their work is that the geographies of these neighborhoods, with narrow streets that can be blocked to riotous outsiders, are critical for physically controlling violence. But in the context of an entire city, in which there are many wide spaces for citizens to gather, the generalizability of this claim remains unclear. Second, both these authors have produced in-depth accounts of Ahmedabad, whereas our study details state-society partnerships in another part of India. Third and most importantly, in these works the origins of peace-oriented systems are either not examined systematically, or are traced to historical contingencies. Berenschot, for instance, attributes the maintenance of peace in the neighborhood of Ram Rahim Nagar in Ahmedabad to historically contingent factors.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, Dhattiwala’s examinations of Ram Rahim Nagar and Makarba do not detail how a state-society partnership for peace developed over time. Instead, she focuses on describing how these partnerships operated to contain violence at the time of the Gujarat riots in 2002.<sup>24</sup> Thus, these works are unable to shed light on the *intentional* crafting of state-society partnerships that could control violence across an entire city.<sup>25</sup>

This paper, by contrast, details an intentional state-society network that has served to contain communal conflict in Bhagalpur, Bihar since 1989. In doing so, it focuses on one particular instance of state-society linkage, namely the *Zila Shanti Samiti* (District Peace Committee) of Bhagalpur. Our examination of this organization, however, should not suggest that violence prevention can only be performed by groups that call themselves Peace Committees. Indeed, groups that go by other appellations, such as slum committees or neighborhood (*mohalla*) committees, may be able to carry out similar functions.<sup>26</sup> Thus, our goal is not to develop arguments about “Peace Committees” specifically, but about the general category of groups that can mediate between the state and society.



**Figure 1.** The state-society partnership for controlling communal violence in Bhagalpur, Bihar.

As shown in [Figure 1](#) below, we find that the peace infrastructure in Bhagalpur begins with the efforts of civil society or the members of *Zila Shanti Samiti*. We further argue that the ability of civil society leaders to contain communal crises stems from their everyday activities. Upon first glance, these quotidian activities bear little relation to promoting peace. However, by resolving daily logistical problems such as electricity shortages and potholes in public roads, non-state elites are able to elevate their standing among their communities. This status is critical to the abilities of these leaders to be heard during times of crisis. Their reputations as problem-solvers also explains how and why they are linked to the state: in Bhagalpur, connections with state actors aid civil society groups in resolving constituents' everyday problems by providing them with resources, force, and legitimacy, and thereby empowering them to address citizens' quotidian concerns. In these ways, the state helps to develop the Peace Committee members' reputational capital. In return, state authorities are able to gather critical information about various sections of Bhagalpur's society and achieve a point of leverage among the town's residents, which they use to orient civil society leaders and their constituents toward peace.

In detailing Bhagalpur's peace infrastructure, we recognize and emphasize that this system only works when state actors have incentives to control violence. By contrast, when state actors stand to benefit from conflict, they will not attempt to partner with civil society networks to contain communal riots. Thus, our argument is an addition to – rather than a refutation of – extant perspectives that place the ultimate responsibility for the control of communal violence on the state and political leaders.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, our findings are important for understanding exactly what the state can do if and when state actors are interested in controlling violence. Rather than using force, which is a mechanism that has received considerable attention in the existing literature,<sup>28</sup> our work shows that state authorities can also contain violence by reorienting civil society networks toward peace. In settings such as present-day Bhagalpur, we find that the Peace Committee operates as a tool in the hands of the state; moreover, this civil society “tool” is able to

accomplish goals that the state itself cannot. Thus, while our argument complements the electoral incentives perspective, it also incorporates the insights of scholars such as Varshney to highlight the important role that civic associations can play in de-escalating riot violence in contemporary India.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to the extensions that it provides to the civic institutions and electoral incentives perspectives, our argument offers a mirror image to Berenschot's claims about the role of patronage networks in enabling communal violence. Specifically, we show that Bhagalpur's intentionally-created civil society network has mobilized for peace on multiple occasions. Painstakingly assembled since the 1989 violence, this network has evolved from a system of neighborhood patrols to a web of state and community-level leaders who work together to defuse communal tensions. As opposed to controlling violence once it has already begun, Bhagalpur's peace system squarely focuses on diminishing potential conflict precipitants.

Although it is not exactly a patronage network, as it does not dispense jobs and state access for loyalty, this system nevertheless provides material benefits to all involved. On the one hand, by engaging with this network, local *Shanti Samiti* leaders develop sources of power and attain critical access to the state. Such access, in turn, can aid them in pursuing their ambitions, as they become part of a wide-ranging network of Bhagalpur elites and routinely hobnob with the city's top administrators.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, individual state actors who comprise this system are able to avoid punitive transfers.<sup>31</sup> On the whole, society becomes more legible to the state, individual citizens come to receive some help with their everyday problems, and the state achieves its own ends for controlling violence, which typically causes heavy damage to local commerce.<sup>32</sup> This is certainly not an ideal situation, as ideally citizens would not need to rely on intermediaries to ensure electricity supply or fulfil other quotidian needs. Nevertheless, the structure of relationships in Bhagalpur renders civil society leaders capable of reining in communal tensions. Because of this structure, as we detail below, when *Shanti Samiti* leaders try to calm local Hindu-Muslim disputes, followers listen.

Of course, Bhagalpur's peace infrastructure is not the only model through which state and non-state actors could viably partner for peace. On the contrary, depending on a host of factors, the primary onus for containing communal violence could variably fall to the state on its own<sup>33</sup> or to civil society on its own.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, this study highlights one case in which the success of the city's peace network lies in its ability to tie together the interests of state authorities and civil society leaders. Without the backing of the state, non-state actors would be unable to call upon coercive instruments of formal authority, which are sometimes required to calm rising tensions. They would also be less capable of helping their constituents. Similarly, without their

partnership with civil society, Bhagalpur's administrators would lack the necessary information and the ability to identify potential troublemakers and de-escalate tensions around precipitating events.

### Research design and case selection

Because many of the reigning theories emphasize electoral incentives for communal violence, and in light of our interest to better understand the potential mechanisms for controlling such conflict, we sought to identify a case with substantial Hindu and Muslim populations where electoral incentives would predict elite instrumentalization of Hindu-Muslim violence and the outbreak of riots. Bhagalpur, Bihar, a city in the eastern part of India's Hindi belt, fulfilled these criteria.

According to existing theories, not only should Bhagalpur have succumbed to recurring communal violence since 1989, but it is, in many ways, a "most likely" case for such conflict. First, and as previously noted, the city has sizable Hindu (69.92%) and Muslim (29.05%) populations, and thereby satisfies Varshney's demographic criterion for places in India where communal riots could occur.<sup>35</sup> Second, whereas recent studies have shown that the incidence and scale of Hindu-Muslim violence has declined due to weakening electoral incentives across much of urban India since the early 1990s,<sup>36</sup> these incentives are firmly in place in Bhagalpur. In fact, the latest trends in Bihari politics suggest that there is an increased likelihood for electorally-motivated communal violence to break out in places such as Bhagalpur in the future. This is because, whereas politics in Bihar had long revolved around questions of caste – with Muslims playing an important supporting role in forming political coalitions – the Hindu-Muslim divide has emerged as a salient electoral cleavage over the last few years.<sup>37</sup> This cleavage has largely gained relevance due to the increased eagerness and activities of Hindu nationalist parties to carve out an electoral domain for themselves in the state.<sup>38</sup>

As a result of these efforts, coalitions between backward castes voters, members of the BJP, and lower caste Muslims, which had served to dampen the incentives of Hindu nationalists to provoke communal violence,<sup>39</sup> have come apart in recent years. In 2014, in particular, the rise of Narendra Modi and the BJP in the Lok Sabha caused a rupture between the Muslim section of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's coalition and the upper-caste-dominated BJP faction. Kumar, whose government had overseen a dramatic wave of development in Bihar, distanced himself from the BJP, and forged a rival alliance with the prior Chief Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav.<sup>40</sup>

It was against this background that the events described at the beginning of this paper unfolded. The 2015 assembly elections in Bihar turned, to a degree unusual in the state, not on caste issues, but rather on a clear pro- and anti-BJP division. Polls conducted in the months before the election showed that the



contest remained very close throughout the campaign, with the lead swinging between the Nitish Kumar-Lalu Yadav coalition and the BJP faction.<sup>41</sup> As is well-established in the existing literature,<sup>42</sup> an electoral rivalry between the BJP and its opponents that turns on the mobilization of communal identities is ripe ground for politicians to foment communal violence. Thus, this was exactly the kind of context in which we should have seen communal provocations and the mobilization of religious identities, and indeed, there has been rising communal violence in the state of late,<sup>43</sup> including in the districts of Munger and Aurangabad.<sup>44</sup>

Additionally, Bhagalpur is a compelling case to investigate because memories of the 1989 carnage remain fresh in the minds of many local residents.<sup>45</sup> In the fall of 1989, rumors over the killing of Hindus following a religious procession through Muslim neighborhoods had ignited deadly communal clashes across the city.<sup>46</sup> The violence took place at the height of the Hindu-nationalist *Ramjanmabhoomi* movement, and Bhagalpur was one of several places that succumbed to deadly communal conflict during this time. Even so, the sheer scale and brutality of the violence distinguished the town's riots, with official sources putting the death toll at around 1,000.<sup>47</sup> Women's breasts were cut, children were speared to death, and residents recalled a pond turning red with blood, and rushed burials in mass graves.<sup>48</sup> The carnage also significantly damaged Bhagalpur's famous silk industry in which Hindus and Muslims had long worked side by side.<sup>49</sup> This legacy of violence combined with a troublesome police record<sup>50</sup> and weak state capacity in Bihar<sup>51</sup> all point to the possibility of renewed communal conflict in the city.

Finally, studying a case that has experienced major conflict in the past but has avoided the recurrence of such violence since is important for methodological and theoretical reasons. In fact, it is precisely by investigating such "negative cases" that we can see the "the dynamics of restraint" to keep violence at bay.<sup>52</sup> The selection of Bhagalpur also allows us to guard against the possibility of endogeneity. Had we chosen to study a site without violence in its past, we would have been vulnerable to the criticism that the state-society partnership for peace we describe is a result of absence of violence, rather than a cause of absence of violence. As the empirical sections of this article detail, however, the current peace infrastructure in Bhagalpur was created in the aftermath of the 1989 riots and did not exist prior to that time.

While the main focus of this paper is to elucidate the mechanisms that have served to control violence in Bhagalpur, for analytical leverage we also include comparisons with several cases where communal conflict has taken place. These cases include the Bhagalpur riots of 1989, on which we have original interview testimony; a nearby town that experienced violence in recent years but did not host a state-society partnership to control such conflict at the time, as described to us by one of our interviewees; and secondary sources on communal violence elsewhere in India.

## Methods, data, and methodological caveats

Our study combines three kinds of original data. First, we draw on 52 in-depth interviews – conducted between 2016 and 2019 – with journalists, academics, social workers, businesspeople, religious and caste leaders, members of the local administration, police officers, and members of the *Zila Shanti Samiti* and its associated bodies in Bhagalpur. The two authors worked separately and individually to conduct these interviews, all of which were carried out in Hindi. Research assistants in India then transcribed these conversations and translated them into English. Second, to understand the development of the city's peace infrastructure, we compiled newspaper articles on inter-communal relations in Bhagalpur as well as the 1989 riots, and collected over twenty years' worth of attendance logs and meeting summaries from the records of one civil society organization. Finally, we conducted ten days of participant observation around the 2019 general elections to illuminate some of the elements of Bhagalpur's unique state-society partnership.

In carrying out the interviews for this project, we were aware that some interviewees might overstate the role of the *Zila Shanti Samiti* in de-escalating communal tensions. To take account of this possibility, we adopted three strategies. First, we interviewed many respondents who were not members of the Peace Committee, including police officers who might be expected to emphasize their own roles in controlling violence, since failing to prevent conflict can routinely result in the transfer of police personnel in India.<sup>53</sup> However, these interviewees credited members of the *Shanti Samiti* for de-escalating communal tensions in Bhagalpur. Second, over repeated trips to the city between 2016 and 2019, we sought to develop a relationship of trust with our respondents, and our interview data indicates that we were relatively successful in this endeavor. In fact, over time several respondents shared sensitive information with us, which could have been damaging to their reputations had we revealed it to anyone else. For example, a few interviewees recounted instances when they had touched pieces of meat that are forbidden by their religions.<sup>54</sup> These conversations suggest that our respondents were not simply trying to portray themselves in a positive light. Finally, we collected a range of archival and media reports, which we used, where possible, to verify our interview data.

## The formal and informal state

Ranjeev Singh<sup>55</sup> sits behind a large desk in an air-conditioned office guarded by three khaki-uniformed police personnel. Singh has a large angled board in front of him on which he writes messages, and which prevents others from seeing what he is doing. A group of a few dozen people is waiting outside in plastic chairs in the shade of a tree; one or two at a time, guards inspect them

and let them inside to meet with Singh. In Bhagalpur, the air conditioning, the good lighting, the cool tiles of the office, and the metal and wooden office furniture are elite comforts, the signifiers of Singh's official position as a representative of the Indian state.

A supplicant comes before Singh's desk. His complaint is that criminals in his hometown have tricked his brother, who is clinically insane, into signing over his ancestral land. All of the discussion is in proper Hindi, rather than in one of the local dialects common in Bhagalpur. The next case is of a poor couple who complain that criminals have been cutting and taking the wheat from their fields. The couple do not sit down, but stand behind the chairs in front of Singh's desk. At one point, the man and the woman start talking simultaneously. The police guard standing by Singh's desk says, "one at a time," and they both fall silent. We then observe a third case in which a woman reports that she has been receiving death threats over her land. She starts crying. "*Aap shant ho jaiyye*," says Singh authoritatively, you calm down. He dispatches each case within two or three minutes. Singh is efficient, and seems to be effective, making quick phone calls to the relevant authorities where necessary, and zeroing in on the evidence required. Our local informant tells us that he has a good reputation.<sup>56</sup>

A few miles away, in an area called Urdu Bazaar, Amarnath "Pintoo" Yadav\* holds an evening session in a bamboo-lined patio area just off the inner courtyard of his home. On the patio are a cot, two cushioned seats, a table, and several stacked plastic chairs. Whereas Singh's office is pristine and air-conditioned, on Yadav's patio mosquitoes bite our ankles. Two of his friends sit at his side, one clad in a dhoti, the other carrying a loud mobile phone. A young boy brings us tea as a ceiling fan turns.

Yadav helps local residents with all kinds of issues, but he is particularly involved with resolving domestic disputes. On the night of our visit, a woman in a blue and white sari, an inhabitant of a town forty miles away who is visiting local relatives in Bhagalpur, drops in unannounced to discuss various issues she is confronting. They include her daughter's wedding and some land, some paperwork that needs filing, and a pension. There is a table on the patio, but on this particular occasion Yadav pulls up a plastic chair to the cushioned seat where the woman is seated and asks after her family. They discuss her case in a local dialect, and he asks her to come back the next morning with her daughter. For the hour or so that we are there, she is the only supplicant to request his services.

Yadav's position is not official. He has been helping residents in and around Bhagalpur in these ways since 1989, when the riot caused a collapse in the city's market infrastructure. In the aftermath of the violence, he helped to reestablish and maintain local vegetable markets. He tells us that these actions helped him gain a reputation for effectiveness. Today, Yadav is a popular leader among local residents, and citizens now frequently come to him to seek his services for

resolving domestic disputes and securing help with various kinds of paperwork. He reports that the locals prefer his services because he is far easier to access and less expensive than going to court. Yadav sees anyone who walks in, and he says the entire neighborhood knows his hours – 8 am to 12 pm and 6 pm to 11 pm, although he can get called away by other business. His popularity among citizens has also made him well-known to the administration.<sup>57</sup>

Pintoo Yadav is not an official functionary of the state, but in Bhagalpur the formal state – composed of people like Ranjeev Singh – expands its capacity by drawing upon people like Yadav. Yadav is also a member of the District Peace Committee, a corporate body created by the local administration to carry out several functions, including violence prevention.

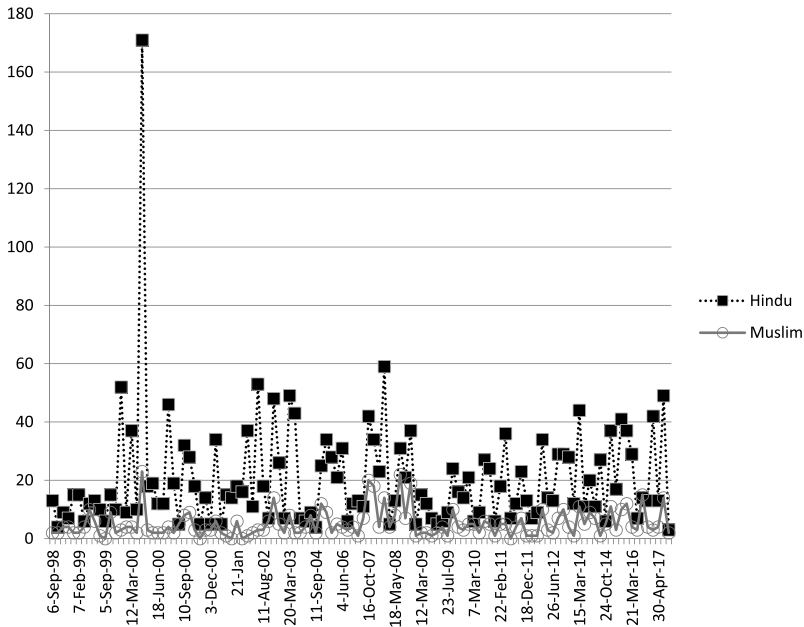
### The origins of the peace committee in Bhagalpur

Organizations devoted to promoting peace have reportedly existed in Bhagalpur since the 1960s, but prior to 1989, these entities functioned more as discussion groups than quasi-administrative bodies.<sup>58</sup> In the late 1980s and early 1990s, worldwide interest in community policing led to a rise in more active “peace committees” in India and beyond.<sup>59</sup> One of these organizations, the “mohalla [neighborhood] committee” of Bhiwandi, established by police chief Suresh Khopade, proved to be so successful in reducing violence that it was replicated in places like Mumbai.<sup>60</sup>

In light of the efficacy of the Bhiwandi model, when state administrators tasked with controlling communal violence were sent to Bhagalpur in the wake of the 1989 violence, they too turned to the idea of community policing.<sup>61</sup> In this case, state authorities and ethnic and religious elites set up Bhagalpur’s Peace Committee along caste and religious lines. As part of this system, leaders of particular communities became the liaisons between their subgroups and the state.

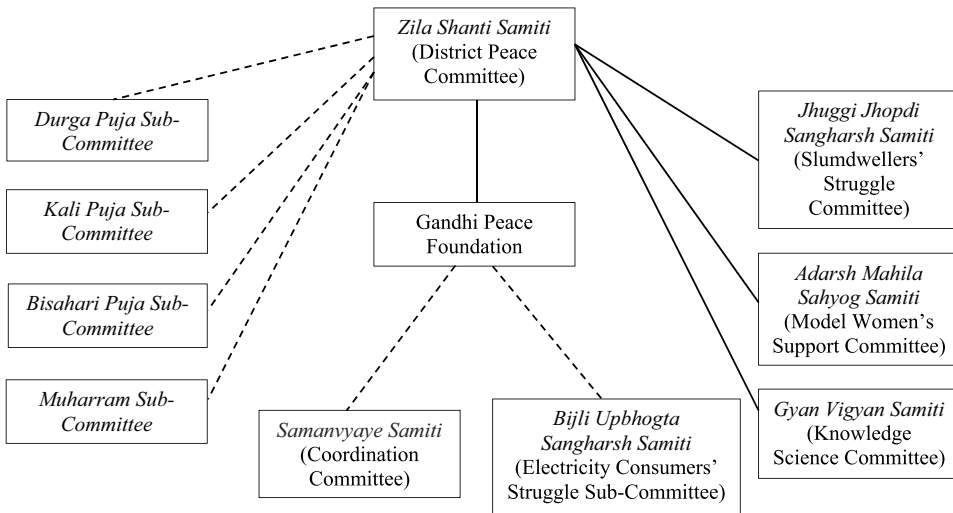
Following an episode of looting in 1992, Bhagalpur’s Peace Committee established a system of nighttime patrols.<sup>62</sup> Every night, hundreds of volunteers patrolled the Muslim neighborhood of Tatarpur, where the looting had occurred. The administration provided backup and infused the patrols with symbolic legitimacy by handing out official-looking identification cards to volunteers.<sup>63</sup> Emulating Tatarpur, other Muslim areas soon began to adopt the same practice. These initiatives ensured that Hindu processions could pass through Muslim areas uninterrupted, and vice versa.<sup>64</sup> Eventually, the *Zila Shanti Samiti* developed several specialized wings – such as the *Durga Puja Sub-Committee*, *Kali Puja Sub-Committee*, *Bisahari Puja Sub-Committee*, and *Muharram Sub-Committee* – to prevent communal conflict around religious festivals and processions.

In 1992<sup>65</sup> and 2005<sup>66</sup> members of the *Zila Shanti Samiti* received awards from the state government for their roles in promoting social order in the city. According to 118 attendance logs of the Bhagalpur



**Figure 2.** Number of Hindu and Muslim attendees at Bhagalpur GPF meetings, 1998–2017.

chapter of the Gandhi Peace Foundation (GPF), a subgroup affiliated with the Peace Committee, the town’s peace infrastructure has continuously boasted a mixed membership of Hindus and Muslims.<sup>67</sup> As shown in [Figure 2](#) below, between September 6, 1998 and July 8, 2017 both communities regularly participated in GPF meetings, although the presence of Hindus has consistently exceeded that of Muslims. Concretely, our data show that the median percentage of Hindu attendees at GPF meetings during the above period was 59.83%, while that of Muslims was 14.76%.<sup>68</sup> GPF meeting summaries further revealed that both communities have frequently aired their concerns at these sessions. These concerns pertain to developmental issues such as floods and electricity but also to social matters like communalism and ethnic tensions. Finally, and as shown in [Figure 3](#) below, today’s *Zila Shanti Samiti* structure, formalized in 2003,<sup>69</sup> includes numerous specialized bodies and affiliated organizations. The membership of this peace system is comprised of individuals from different religious groups, socio-economic strata, and political parties, and supporters of the BJP, Congress, and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) are all part of the contemporary Peace Committee.<sup>70</sup>



#### Legend

- - - Sub-Committee
- Affiliated organizations

**Figure 3.** The peace infrastructure in Bhagalpur, Bihar.<sup>71</sup>

### The tactics of the peace committee

In moments of crisis, Peace Committee leaders employ several different tactics to prevent communal violence in Bhagalpur. These tactics mirror and counter the strategies of riot provocateurs in three important ways. First, while those who seek to initiate conflict often carry out physical incidents or attacks, members of the Peace Committee travel to the precise locations of such events to calm escalating tensions. Second, since rumors play a major role in fomenting riots in India, *Shanti Samiti* elites attempt to counter rumors before they spread. Third, whereas violence specialists mobilize communal cleavages to generate violence, civil society activists emphasize class identities to prevent religious conflict.

### Bodily provocations and bodily responses

The existing scholarship on communal violence has emphasized the physical nature of the incidents that spark riots in India, such as damage to idols, physical fights, and the appearance of offensive meat.<sup>72</sup> Riots also take a great deal of physical work, from distributing weapons and tools to organizing demonstrations to convincing ordinary individuals that fighting is in their interest.<sup>73</sup> In analogue, the Peace Committee relies on physical tactics and

face-to-face encounters to counter such incidents and disrupt riot logistics, and the use of cellular phones has become particularly important in the efforts since the early 2000s.

For instance, when the 2015 pig incident occurred, committee members immediately notified each other via a phone tree and gathered at the mosque and temple where the pork and beef had been thrown.<sup>74</sup> The leaders then removed the offending meat, and some of them went door to door to deny that anything untoward had taken place.<sup>75</sup> In another incident, a half-slaughtered cow escaped from a Muslim who was butchering it, and collapsed near a temple. *Shanti Samiti* “members quietly buried the slaughtered cow” and ensured that “no one came to know.”<sup>76</sup> As a result, “the situation remained calm throughout.”<sup>77</sup> In a case that involved a religious procession and the immersion of an idol, Peace Committee leaders and state administrators formed a barricade half a kilometer long to protect the idol along its route.<sup>78</sup>

In recalling these various incidents, some respondents spoke about their mediation in heroic tones. One case, for example, involved an idol of the Hindu Goddess *Kali* emerging from a pond. Tricksters had buried the idol on top of bags of raw chickpeas. When the chickpeas encountered water, they grew in size, and slowly pushed the idol up toward the surface of the water. This created the illusion that the idol was spontaneously emerging from the pond. Local Hindus then attempted to frame the matter as a miracle and argued that they should be able to claim the pond as hallowed religious ground for their community. In a sensitive setting such as Bhagalpur, such an event could have easily sparked violence. Members of the Peace Committee who arrived at the pond thus decided that the only way to intervene was by entering the cold water, removing the statue, and revealing the trick that had been played:

**R:** Nobody was ready to get into the water.

**R:** So we went inside.

**Q:** Okay.

**R:** The night was cold; we went into the cold water by removing our clothes . . .

**R:** When we entered the mud, we found a bag there. We touched and found that there were chickpeas inside. So after much difficulty, we brought the heavy cemented statue outside. About 100 to 150 police personnel were present to prevent any untoward incident.

**R:** The DM (District Magistrate) and SSP (Senior Superintendent of Police) were both present.<sup>79</sup>

In extant studies of Hindu-Muslim riots, research from Gujarat has similarly highlighted the role of bodily responses in preventing communal conflict. In Ahmedabad in 2002, for example, physically blocking outsiders from

entering Muslim areas was key to maintaining peace in various parts the city.<sup>80</sup> In a related vein, some Bhagalpur *Shanti Samiti* leaders also mentioned their past attempts to block the entrances to Muslim neighborhoods and contain the spread of conflict in the town.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, at the level of a city as a whole, our findings highlight that other bodily tactics such as discreetly removing offending meat and carefully escorting religious processions are likely to be more effective in neutralizing provocations and averting large-scale communal violence.

### **Rumors and counter-rumors**

It is well-recognized that rumors play a central part in generating riots in India.<sup>82</sup> In Ahmedabad, for instance, Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi has shown that following the burning of the S-6 compartment of the Sabarmati Express, rumors that local Muslims had hacked two Hindu peacekeepers to death precipitated widespread anti-Muslim attacks.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, our respondents recalled that rumors about the killing of Hindu students and the subsequent immersion of their bodies in local wells had spawned Bhagalpur's 1989 riots.<sup>84</sup>

Thus, one of the Peace Committee's main tactics to prevent communal violence involves countering dangerous rumors. On some occasions, debunking such rumors has turned out to be surprisingly easy. In 2014, for example, when a rumor about the theft of an idol degenerated into members of both communities throwing stones at each other, the administration quickly called upon Peace Committee elites to calm the situation. After arriving at the scene, *Shanti Samiti* leaders showed the bystanders that the idol in question was still in its place. As it turns out, no one had actually thought to check.<sup>85</sup>

In instances where disproving rumors has not been possible, *Shanti Samiti* activists have tried to spread more palatable versions of events, even if these have been untrue. During the 2015 pig incident, for instance, several respondents told us that they had spread a false counter-rumor and alleged that an eagle had dropped the piece of flesh at the mosque in question.<sup>86</sup> Two interviewees took credit for this idea, and both acknowledged that they had fabricated the claim about the eagle. Nevertheless, each noted that the counter-rumor had served to prevent violence:

**R:** The key role was played here by [a Muslim leader, Respondent 13]. There were others also, but any amount of praise for both of them will fall short . . .

**3rd person:** It was these two only who let out the tale that an eagle had dropped these pieces of flesh.

**R:** It was actually I who suggested this idea to him. If I had proposed the idea directly, people would have taken it wrongly, because a Hindu [would be seen as] trying to cover up [the situation]. So only a Muslim could have said this to



Muslims. I had immediately whispered it in his ears, that this is a little amount of flesh, it could have been dropped by some eagle or any other bird flying around, it is not something very big.

**Q:** Which was not true?

**R:** No it was not true; that had been purposely thrown at the mosque.<sup>87</sup>

The Muslim leader referred to, on the other hand, claimed this was his own idea:

**R:** I said a lie at the right time, that an eagle [dropped it].

**Q:** What do you mean?

**R:** This is my thought and *Allah* filled me with it. People believed it and it was removed from there immediately.<sup>88</sup>

A more laborious incident of purposeful falsification occurred in 2014, when a Hindu statue at a temple in one of the city's Muslim areas was found to be damaged in the middle of the night. After making the discovery, the head of the local police station, a Muslim, promptly called on leaders of the *Shanti Samiti*. According to our interviewees, the police officer was worried that the incident could lead to communal strife, which in turn, could result in his suspension or termination.<sup>89</sup> As one respondent put it, he "had completely panicked" and begged the committee to intervene.<sup>90</sup> Members of the *Shanti Samiti* discussed the situation and "after a while and a lot of thinking," decided to wake up a local statue artist whom they brought in to fix the idol that very night; the man reportedly used plaster of Paris and red and yellow paint to restore the idol to its earlier form.<sup>91</sup> The next morning, "the temple priest" told one of our interviewees, "'today the statue has a new shine to it.' I asked, 'how come?' . . . He did not understand it and I told him that maybe God himself appeared."<sup>92</sup>

### ***Salience and counter-salience***

Beyond physically de-escalating tensions and debunking dangerous rumors, members of the *Zila Shanti Samiti* also appeal to citizens' economic self-interests to prevent violence. In doing so, they emphasize that having a reputation as a communally violent city can damage commerce in Bhagalpur.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, they attempt to mobilize class identities over religious ones to keep Hindu-Muslim riots at bay. As one interviewee explained:

**R:** What we understand is that the big people who have large followers and are educated – be they of Hindu or Muslim – are using the poor people for fighting by saying wrong things to them, while they themselves sit and never go to

fighters . . . In the riots, all the poor people are killed and no big people, be they of [the] Hindu community or [the] Muslim community. Those who were the poor and who had scarcity of food, were killed. Those who had something did not get killed . . .

**Q:** This is what you want to make people understand?

**R:** We make people understand and it is working, it is developing slowly . . . [T]he economic condition of the people is getting better, people are earning, they are wearing better clothes, eating better food, and in this way too, reform will happen. It will happen slowly.<sup>94</sup>

Likewise, another respondent held:

I would like to tell you that the Hindu brothers and Muslim brothers here don't want to fight amongst themselves because they do business together, their children spend time together. People [have] realized [this] and [taken] the initiative in every locality to spread the awareness that they should not engage in mutual hostilities and mend their relationships . . . Who is the Peace Committee? What is the meaning of it? It means five people who go there and say that fighting is going to spoil everything, the children will be adversely affected and the business will also suffer.<sup>95</sup>

A third interviewee similarly noted:

Sometimes you have to make them understand that maybe the incident has happened somewhere but people can be harmed by your sword or maybe, you yourself may get harmed [by] the sword. What will happen to your family? What help will the government be able to give you? They will give two lakh rupees. Until when will your family be able to sustain themselves with that? Your four children that you have will immediately end up on the streets.<sup>96</sup>

Taken together, we argue that these tactics of immediate physical presence, countering inflammatory rumors, and mobilizing class identities rather than communal ones constitute a multi-pronged repertoire to prevent communal conflict in Bhagalpur.

### **Explaining the success of the peace committee**

In the preceding section of this paper, we detailed the three main strategies that members of the Peace Committee use to dampen communal tensions. But why have these strategies worked? When *Shanti Samiti* leaders try to de-escalate tensions in Bhagalpur, why do ordinary people listen? For example, when civil society elites suggested that an eagle had dropped the piece of meat in 2015, why was the mob willing to believe them?

There are numerous accounts from other parts of India of people trying, and failing, to maintain calm in the wake of communal provocations. Drawing on his research from Gujarat, for example, Ward Berenschot has described the case of a citizen in Ahmedabad who made a speech appealing for communal

harmony during the 2002 riots, and emphasized the negative economic consequences that would follow from major violence in the city.<sup>97</sup> However, his words only attracted stone-throwing from the crowd.<sup>98</sup> Undeterred, the man bravely came out of his house and stood on a plastic chair to speak to the angry mob.<sup>99</sup> But his words had no impact.<sup>100</sup> To explain why the Bhagalpur Peace Committee has been more successful in its efforts, this section argues and illustrates that the incentives of *Shanti Samiti* members, state administrators, and ordinary citizens of the town have all come to be oriented toward peace.

In advancing these claims, we nevertheless caution that the success of the Peace Committee should not be interpreted as a resolution of preexisting divides between local Hindus and Muslims. In fact, in their conversations with us, *Shanti Samiti* leaders often expressed hostility about members of the opposing community. For example, whereas some Hindu respondents drew symbolic divides around issues such as vegetarianism,<sup>101</sup> Muslim leaders articulated grievances about their treatment by the Indian state<sup>102</sup> and questioned the victimization of their community in violent events around the globe.<sup>103</sup> In light of such evidence, we argue that Bhagalpur's Peace Committee has chiefly attained a negative peace for its residents. Rather than being based in trust and mutual understanding, this peace is merely marked by an absence of active violence.<sup>104</sup>

In examining the production of riots in India, Berenschot has emphasized the material benefits that rioters can accrue from engaging in communal conflict.<sup>105</sup> Specifically, he finds that for the brokers who arrange the logistics of riots, rioting helps their patrons – that is, communal politicians – to maintain power. This is because through their access to politicians, brokers receive the power to resolve minor issues. In return, they deliver votes, loyalty, and – when necessary – the manpower to foment electorally beneficial violence to political elites. Brokers also repay the actors who commit the actual violence in riots in various short-term and long-term ways. The short-term rewards include incentives such as money and liquor while the long-term ones entail prized benefits such as jobs and small businesses. Meanwhile, politicians ensure that police look the other way, and threaten them with demotion if they do not. The patronage network that Berenschot describes thus provides material benefits to its constituents up and down the chain.

In contrast, we do not find patronage networks to be central to controlling communal riots in Bhagalpur. Indeed, they may not be possible in our case, because whereas a handful of people can *cause* violence and receive individual rewards for doing so, *not participating in* violence throughout an entire city requires cooperation from a much larger group of people. Even if it were possible, it is far from clear that the resources necessary to reward a city-wide population for nonparticipation in violence are available in an underdeveloped context like Bhagalpur.

Nevertheless, in keeping with Berenschot's findings, we do find that material benefits in general – if not specifically through a patronage network – are crucial to the effectiveness of the Peace Committee. We suggest that the members of Bhagalpur's Peace Committee are influential for two main reasons. First, because these individuals, like Pintoo Yadav, are selected from a group of people who are respected and embedded within their communities, they enjoy credibility within those communities. Second, the participation of these actors in the *Shanti Samiti* network helps them to develop and maintain their reputations as problem-solvers. Importantly, these reputations often rest on Peace Committee leaders' abilities to solve quotidian problems – *not* necessarily related to communal issues – that ordinary citizens might be facing. The forum of the Peace Committee also gives them access to state administrators, and *Shanti Samiti* elites use this access to bring their constituents' problems to the attention of administrators. In doing so, they further cement their reputations as problem-solvers.

Thus, ordinary citizens listen to Peace Committee leaders because these individuals help them in their daily lives. At the same time, by working with the *Shanti Samiti*, state administrators gain the ability to prevent violence and avoid sanctions. In these ways, material benefits can be identified throughout Bhagalpur's peace infrastructure, but these networks are not of individual patronage. Instead, what Bhagalpur's peace infrastructure has engendered is a mutually beneficial relationship between its state and civil society wings. On the one hand, this partnership has allowed individual state actors to develop and preserve their administrative careers by proving themselves capable of controlling violence. At the same time, *Shanti Samiti* members have become integrated in a well-connected network of local elites and have gained access to the state and the city's top administrators.<sup>106</sup> In a country where ordinary citizens are rarely legible to state authorities,<sup>107</sup> this arrangement has enabled community leaders to resolve residents' everyday concerns, including those that are *not* necessarily linked to communalism, as we discuss below.

### ***Resolving quotidian problems and building credibility among citizens***

Members of Bhagalpur's *Zila Shanti Samiti* regularly work to resolve different problems for the city's residents. Whereas some individuals like "Pintoo" Yadav provide cost-effective dispute resolution, others help citizens gain access to local schools, ambulance services, and medical camps.<sup>108</sup> More recently, members of the Peace Committee have played a critical part in bringing order to the city's red light area.<sup>109</sup> In these ways, the *Shanti Samiti* has come to comprise an informal and parallel state that accomplishes several critical functions which the formal Indian state is unable or unwilling to fulfill.

In a part of India where residents experience chronic electricity shortages to this day, perhaps civil society leaders' most notable contributions lie in their vociferous advocacy to improve the electricity supply. According to the 2011 Human Development Index Report, only 30.5% of Bihar's households had access to electricity for domestic use in 2008–2009.<sup>110</sup> This figure was the lowest across all Indian states.<sup>111</sup> In Bhagalpur specifically, the situation has sometimes been so dire that electricity shortages have resulted in violent protests.<sup>112</sup> Over the years, the Peace Committee has consistently sought to bring attention to this issue, as evidenced from the minutes of one meeting in 2013:

Mr. [name] coordinator brought attention to the horrible electricity issue in the city. He requested for urgent improvement of electricity supply and entry of companies in the electricity sector. The oil of the transformer located at Mandarroja was supposed to be changed last year but the transformer has not been changed. When the electricity phase suddenly goes off during nighttime, there must be [a] provision for dealing with defects immediately so that people get [their] electricity supply . . . Prof. [name] said that there must be improvement of electricity supply in the south side of Bhagalpur, potholes on the *Lohiyapul* [Lohiya Bridge] must be cleared up, and when the "No Entry" signboard is out, then the trucks must be restricted from passing through those areas.<sup>113</sup>

In a related vein, the logs of the Gandhi Peace Foundation indicate that there is an entire sub-committee – known as the *Bijli Upbhogta Sangharsh Samiti* (Electricity Consumers' Struggle Sub-Committee) – that is dedicated to the matter of electricity in Bhagalpur. The *Bijli Upbhogta Sangharsh Samiti* has occasionally also worked with a number of other organizations such as the *Jhuggi Jhopdi Sangharsh Samiti* (Slumdwellers' Struggle Committee) and the *Adarsh Mahila Sahyog Samiti* (Model Women's Support Committee) to pressure state authorities on key aspects of local development. Even though electricity shortages have typically dominated these concerns, Peace Committee members have regularly discussed issues of gambling, drugs, traffic, potholes in roads, water and ambulance access, and compensation for residents affected by traffic accidents.<sup>114</sup>

At first glance, the developmental matters listed above might appear to bear little relation to the maintenance of communal peace. However, our respondents argued that such issues can directly affect peace, especially around sensitive events like festivals and processions. On these occasions, potholed roads can impair the movement of religious processions and loose electricity wires can endanger the lives of procession attendees. More importantly, and in light of our prior discussion about the linkages between state and society, neglecting such matters can negatively impact the credibility of the *Shanti Samiti* in the minds of local residents. As one interviewee explained:

If this development work is not taken care of, then we the people of [the] Peace Committee will be questioned because we hold meeting[s] and make rosters with the administration about the area and timing of the procession to which the people [must]

agree. But [if development work is not taken care of] they [could] also say that we did not make the administration do the work that they are supposed to do. These things can disturb the peace.<sup>115</sup>

The residents of Bhagalpur appear to have an expectation that Peace Committee members should use their access to state administrators to help their communities.

In addition to focusing on developmental matters such as electricity shortages and potholed roads, and due to their privileged access to the administration, Peace Committee members can also solicit force from the state to help resolve citizens' daily problems.<sup>116</sup> For example, some *Shanti Samiti* leaders have aided residents to record "First Information Reports" (FIRs) at local police stations. The first official documentation of an offense that triggers the investigation of a crime.

beyond the domains discussed above, several respondents spoke of how their embeddedness among the general public enables them to contribute to residents' everyday lives. As one interviewee described:

Madam, this is one thing that there is a contribution of every member of the Peace Committee in their society. From marriages to death to everyday living . . . their contribution remains constant. Whenever there is anything in society . . . leave alone matters of peace, if there is anything in their society, marriage etc., they support in that.<sup>117</sup>

Another respondent detailed the broader social service causes to which the *Shanti Samiti* regularly contributes:

We celebrate the anniversaries of big people. We set up relief camps. We do service work. On the occasion of *Chhat Puja*, we put up a camp. We do a lot of such work among ourselves. We also have cultural activities, and we organize discussions.<sup>118</sup>

Interviewees emphasized that their embeddedness in local communities helps them to be heard in times of potential crisis. To quote one respondent:

[The local man listens to me because] I am always standing [with him] in his hours of grief and happiness. Whenever anything is happening in society, I stay there. So he [gives] you respect, listen[s] to you, instead of considering speaking back. Then you [can] explain things to him.<sup>119</sup>

Some interviewees also acknowledged the role of the state in helping them to achieve this embeddedness:

**Q:** Why do people listen to you?

**R:** They see us everywhere. In every procession, *puja*, ceremony. In every street. They have to meet us in every occasion to organize, [to] take suggestions . . . If the administration issues any notice, [they do] not send it directly. They send it through us.<sup>120</sup>

Taken together, then, our research finds that owing to their varied leadership roles, in which the state has played a vital facilitating function, Bhagalpur's civil society elites have been able to improve their standing among local residents.<sup>121</sup> This status gives them the authority to credibly speak up and de-escalate tensions around precipitating events in the city.<sup>122</sup> As one respondent summed up:

He [the potential troublemaker] gives significance to walking with you, to your being in the Peace Committee. It might be [due to] the administration's attachment to you or because of the time you are investing in your social environment. On some matter or the other, he was demoralized and agreed to your word, and you were able to help defuse the situation.<sup>123</sup>

### ***The partnership with the state***

Beyond the efforts of *Shanti Samiti* leaders to de-escalate communal tensions, the state plays an important role in connecting civil society elites with their followers. Indeed, it was the state that initiated the current version of the Peace Committee in Bhagalpur, and to this day, the administration vets potential members and provides them with the resources and legitimacy to gain standing among local constituents.

To begin with, Peace Committee members are recruited through the recommendations of existing *Shanti Samiti* members. Once state authorities receive these referrals, they run a background check and write a report on each recommended candidate. In doing so, they try to weed out potentially problematic individuals. As one interviewee explained:

[State officials want to make sure] that [the] person is [a] fit on all counts . . . That there are no problems, no cases against him . . . That this person does not do any wrong job. [He] neither wants to sell land [n]or has [he] got [anything] to do with alcohol. And that he has [not got] anything going on with anyone else."<sup>124</sup>

The administration also calls and runs the committee's meetings.<sup>125</sup> It selects the officers of lower-level committees in Bhagalpur's peace network<sup>126</sup> and determines the dates for the immersion of idols during religious festivals.<sup>127</sup> Of course, many of these decisions involve dialogue with members of the *Shanti Samiti*, and the state regularly organizes meetings for this purpose. Once they are convened, state-society meetings offer a space to rehearse the logistics of controlling violence and solicit information about issues that could present problems in the future.<sup>128</sup> In recent years, state authorities have further implemented a number of innovative measures to maintain and strengthen their partnership with civil society actors in Bhagalpur. As of 2018, for example, the administration had developed a system to break down complex tasks – such as cleanliness and procession discipline – and grade the performance of the Peace Committee.<sup>129</sup> Recently, a decision was also reached to

devolve planning meetings to the level of the *panchayats* so as to collect more fine-grained information about relations between Hindus and Muslims and identify potential hotspots for violence.

In accounting for the efficacy of this partnership in maintaining communal peace in Bhagalpur, a member of the administration offered the counterfactual of Jamui, a small town located about 70 miles away. Until very recently, Jamui was not home to a *Shanti Samiti* and its state authorities had therefore found it difficult to control communal clashes. But recent reforms have generated a state-society nexus in Jamui that is comparable to the one in Bhagalpur:

In Jamui last year, there was communal violence . . . at that time as an administrator, I was camping in Jamui. In Bhagalpur, when something like this happens we know the people to call immediately, and they immediately come and assemble and then we have a discussion and then people start resolving [the situation]. [But] in Jamui, we did not have a formally constituted committee, so when a situation [arose] it [was] very difficult to know whom to call, whom to talk to . . . [W]e were in a fix . . . Somehow we [found] some people with whom we could talk but after it was resolved, we decided we would have to constitute a Peace Committee. A new Peace Committee was actually formed in Jamui, and since then we have not had any communal discord.<sup>130</sup>

By aligning the interests of civil society elites with the goals of the state in these ways, we find that the administration in Bhagalpur is better able to read the territory it governs. The meetings with local *Shanti Samiti* elites help to ensure that information flows up to the administration, as these elites bring granular knowledge about potential trouble spots to the attention of state authorities. In turn, the administration ensures that its own preferences flow down through civil society leaders to the ordinary citizens of Bhagalpur.

### **Separation amidst aligned interests**

The final reason that Bhagalpur's peace infrastructure has been able to avert communal riots is because its state and civil society wings have maintained specialized and separate spheres of influence. Despite the alignment in the interests of state and civil society, we find that the two fields have remained separate in practice, and many of our interviewees insisted upon the need for this separation. They argued that in order to be successful, alignment between state and society cannot be incorporation, as there are functions required of the local peace system that only one side is equipped to perform. For example, for all of their tales of heroism, civil society respondents held that the backup force provided by the administration is necessary for maintaining peace in Bhagalpur:



See, we are civil society . . . We can only fold our hands in front of someone and try to make them understand. But the administration has the force with them . . . People should be a bit scared of the administration. Now it is fine for two people to fight, but there should be fear that we might end up in the police station.<sup>131</sup>

This interviewee notably used the words “civil society” spontaneously in English.

Whereas state backup is necessary on the one hand, the voluntary and informal mechanisms of Bhagalpur’s civil society are no less critical for averting communal riots. In fact, many *Shanti Samiti* leaders explained that their distance from the state is vital to their success, as even the presence of the police can threaten the neutrality of their peace messages. Describing the circumstances around the discovery of beef in a Hindu area of the city in 2015, for example, one respondent recalled:

It was election time, they thought that [the] Muslim people did this [i.e., threw the beef pieces] on purpose. [The] situation became quite tense. When it became tense, then [the] administration people arrived. When they intervened and tried to bring them to negotiate with each other, the situation became more tense where they [local Hindus started] saying that the administration is protecting the Muslim community.<sup>132</sup>

Under such sensitive circumstances the presence of the police can not only escalate communal stressors, but it can also threaten the neutrality of the *Shanti Samiti*. As such, the Peace Committee needs to work by itself to effectively de-escalate tensions:

The administration needs the Peace Committee. We are among the common public. When we come [to a site of tension], then the reaction at the police, the different effects that that has, that “the police pushed me, that the police hit me,” that doesn’t happen. After all, it is me [a member of civil society] who is pushing, it is me who is sending him away.<sup>133</sup>

Moreover, another interviewee highlighted that:

Lodging a police complaint against someone [can] ruin the person for life. It affects his character. So the administration wants that . . . the Peace Committee should [carry out] the first intervention, and [that] the situation should be resolved this way.<sup>134</sup>

Finally, the state is at a disadvantage in defusing precipitating events because the frequent transfers of administrative officers typically render these individuals incapable of developing relationships of trust with local residents. This makes the task of gathering credible knowledge from local residents difficult for state authorities to achieve on their own.<sup>135</sup> Thus, our research finds that while there are ends that the Peace Committee cannot achieve by itself, there are also functions that the state cannot perform without the help of civil society leaders working on their own.

This autonomy and distance between the formal state and members of the *Shanti Samiti* in Bhagalpur is preserved by the fact that members of the Peace Committee perform their duties on an entirely voluntary basis. When asked

about this arrangement and the possible effects of converting their roles to paid positions, state officers and civil society leaders both argued that any form of payment would tarnish the reputations of *Shanti Samiti* elites in the minds of local residents.<sup>136</sup> An administrative official explained the issue as follows:

**R:** The day they start getting money they will create chaos.

**Q:** Why?

**R:** Then they will become agents.<sup>137</sup>

Along similar lines, a member of the Peace Committee held:

If the government starts giving us a salary, we will become subordinate to them . . . If we take money, then we have to go by what [they] say. [For example,] the government tells the policeman to stand there and the policeman stands.<sup>138</sup>

In sum, both wings of Bhagalpur's state-society partnership for peace are interested in maintaining the symbolic boundaries between the two wings, and believe that this separation is crucial to the successful functioning of the peace system.

The case of Anurag Yadav\* (no relation to "Pintoo" Yadav) offers a powerful example of this dynamic. Yadav, who was one of the initiators of the 1989 riots, still resides in Bhagalpur today. In our conversations with him, he boasted that he enjoys a large following among certain local Hindu caste groups.<sup>139</sup> However, due to his role in the 1989 violence and an ongoing criminal case against him, the administration is unwilling to work with him. Nevertheless, members of the *Shanti Samiti* have chosen to informally incorporate Yadav into their networks. They argue that they have done so because communal conflict cannot be prevented if civil society elites only work with individuals who are already oriented toward peace. Engaging with men like Yadav – who might have an interest in instrumentalizing conflict – is essential for containing violence because these are the individuals who can calm their followers when tensions emerge.<sup>140</sup> Indeed, some interviewees went so far as to suggest that Yadav's association with the Peace Committee had helped him to avoid a life of crime and violence in recent years.<sup>141</sup>

Anurag Yadav's example also helps to explain why some authors have been skeptical about the possibilities for Peace Committees to contain Hindu-Muslim riots in India.<sup>142</sup> Superficial readings of the Peace Committee's links to actors with criminal backgrounds such as Yadav could lead to a suspicion that the *Shanti Samiti* is itself involved in illicit activities. However, our respondents argued that while it is easy to orient peaceful individuals toward peace, the real work lies in working with those who are not peaceful, and who have large followings, to prevent *them* from organizing violence.<sup>143</sup> These are precisely the kinds of citizens from whom the formal state needs to distance

itself. For example, our respondents recalled that when Yadav had attempted to form a political party and enter formal politics in recent years, it was the Peace Committee rather than the state that thwarted his endeavor.<sup>144</sup>

Altogether, then, the evidence suggests that even though members of the *Shanti Samiti* occasionally need the force of the state to control communal provocations, it is precisely because state and non-state actors perform specialized functions within Bhagalpur's peace nexus that this system has effectively diminished the precipitants that could give rise to violence. The city's state-society partnership has made it possible for *Shanti Samiti* elites to build their credibility among local constituents, and thus to be heard in moments of crisis, and this arrangement has also enabled state authorities to gather vital information about potential troublemakers. In this manner state authorities have been able to devise plans to defuse trigger events. In short, we argue that the success of Bhagalpur's state-society partnership hinges on the fact that the Peace Committee is not seen as part of the state.

### Conclusion and implications

Through an in-depth examination of communal politics in Bhagalpur, Bihar, this article has illustrated a range of strategies through which state and civil society actors can come together and de-escalate precipitating events in conflict-prone places. In the case of Bhagalpur, our research has shown that state authorities have carefully selected locally-embedded non-state actors to calm tensions between Hindus and Muslims since the 1989 riots. These elites, who enjoy reputations as problem-solvers in their communities, have been able to physically access sites of skirmishes, counter rumors, and mobilize class-based identities to defuse potential triggers of communal conflict.

The crucial element in making the system work lies in civil society actors solving quotidian problems for local residents, which *Shanti Samiti* leaders accomplish with the help of the state. Resolving such problems increases their status and following, which enables them to be heard during moments of crisis. Meanwhile, by aiding civil society elites in resolving everyday issues for their constituents, the state has curated a group of local leaders with strong problem-solving reputations, and through them gains information and control over the society that it governs. In these ways, the peace system in Bhagalpur has produced a set of incentives for state and non-state actors to *collaborate* in controlling violence.

Despite the success of this peace infrastructure, however, it remains possible that violence could return to Bhagalpur in the future. This is because concerted efforts at provocation stand to undermine the state-society partnership that is currently in place. In particular, recent events suggest that the state's willingness to counter violence is declining. In February 2018, for example, the Bihar government made the controversial decision to appoint an officer as the

Director General of Police (DGP) who had previously served as the Superintendent of Police in Bhagalpur in 1989.<sup>145</sup> This individual's role in the events of 1989 had allegedly led to widespread anti-Muslim attacks across the city.<sup>146</sup> Following his recent re-appointment, Bhagalpur fell prey to a disturbing incident of violence around a Hindu nationalist procession in the Nathnagar area, which left 35 individuals injured in April 2018.<sup>147</sup> The clashes subsequently spread to Bihar's Aurangabad and Munger districts. Although our respondents described this event as a minor skirmish that they had successfully defused through their usual methods,<sup>148</sup> the reappearance of conflict nevertheless points to potential cracks in Bhagalpur's prevailing system for containing violence. Furthermore, the enduring suspicions between local Hindus and Muslims strongly indicate that if elites' incentives further turn toward violence, there are numerous issues that they could use to instrumentalize communal conflict.

In addition, and as we have previously noted, the lack of violence in the city is not indicative of a positive peace, based on trust between citizens. Rather, peace has been maintained despite ongoing misgivings between local Hindus and Muslims. As one respondent noted:

The peace that exists among people now is not real peace. The peace that there was before independence, or before the riots in Bhagalpur, that peace is not there. The peace that is here now is the peace coming from fear.<sup>149</sup>

In her research conducted in the aftermath of the 2002 violence in Ahmedabad, Dhattiwala uncovered similar inter-communal dynamics. In fact, she found that even in those neighborhoods that had remained peaceful during the 2002 riots, there was an "adherence to ethnic solidarity [that] was often made in the same breath as detest[ation] for the other community."<sup>150</sup> As such, our research points to the limits of an agenda that seeks to simply maintain peace, and it also raises critical questions about how secularism could be made meaningful in positive terms to citizens. In this regard, we suggest that the avoidance of active conflict in places such as Bhagalpur is only a necessary minimum for rebuilding the social fabric of divided communities afflicted by past violence.

Even with these caveats and limitations, however, the findings of our research are important for three major reasons. First, as opposed to places like Hyderabad,<sup>151</sup> Ahmedabad,<sup>152</sup> and Aligarh,<sup>153</sup> Bhagalpur has received scarce attention in the extant literature on Hindu-Muslim violence in India. What research does exist, moreover, has largely focused on the events of 1989.<sup>154</sup> By contrast, this article has shed critical light on the city's avoidance of conflict since the late 1980s. Second, as opposed to work that has championed civil society<sup>155</sup> or state authorities<sup>156</sup> as the prime actors to control communal violence, this work has highlighted the strengths of a systematic and *intentionally-created state-society system* to promote social order in

conflict-prone places. Third, although recent fact-finding investigations – including those around the February 2020 Delhi riots<sup>157</sup> – have revealed that Hindu and Muslim leaders can sometimes spontaneously come together to protect their neighborhoods from deadly conflict, spontaneous cooperation is neither predictable nor guaranteed. Our study proposes that such partnerships could be intentionally created in preparation for the possibility of conflict. We reiterate, moreover, that such work does not need to be limited to groups that explicitly call themselves “Peace Committees.” Through their access to the state, other entities can also gain the credibility, resources, and legitimacy to effectively quell communal violence. The implication of this article, then, is not that researchers must study Peace Committees per se, but rather that scholars should examine the origins, mechanisms, and consequences of informal linkages between state and society in more depth and consider the conditions under which these systems could help to contain violent conflict in divided societies.

Finally, we suggest that state-society partnerships could offer a promising and relatively inexpensive means for controlling communal conflicts in ethnically fraught societies beyond India, including places such as Bangladesh,<sup>158</sup> Kenya,<sup>159</sup> Nigeria,<sup>160</sup> and Indonesia.<sup>161</sup> In each of these nations, long-standing grievances between local communities are easily available to violence entrepreneurs. At the same time, non-state actors already perform many functions that typically fall to the formal state. By taking into account the social cleavages that are particular to and available for mobilizing conflict in these countries, state-society partnerships could help to foster communal peace. Moreover, the intentional crafting of linkages between state authorities and non-state actors could prove to be less disruptive to democratic norms and institutions than alternative strategies like limiting free speech. Indeed, as the case of Bhagalpur illustrates, when conducted properly, state-society partnerships could even accomplish goals that elude the Weberian state.

## Notes

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- 76 Respondent 1.
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The authors declare that there is no actual or potential financial or personal interest or belief that could affect their objectivity regarding this research. The authors have had and will have no financial, personal, or other relationships (actual or potential) with other people or organizations within three years of beginning the submitted work that could inappropriately influence, or be perceived to influence, their work.

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## ORCID

Aditi Malik  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0641-455X>

Monica Prasad  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9674-560X>