

Of Cabbages and Kings and Why the Sea is Boiling Hot: How Communities Decide to Fight*

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On a sunny winter's day in the mid 1950s, a cow ate a lentil plant in a backwater South Asian village named Panipur. A quarrel ensued between the owner of the cow and the owner of the plant. It rose in volume and grew in numbers as first neighbors and then strangers joined sides. It swelled over a period of 3 days to some tens of thousands of angry men, and ended with the arrival of armed authorities who dispersed the crowd by firing into it and killing several people.

It was an ordinary story, oft-repeated. The owner of the cow followed Islamic practice, the cultivator of the plant belonged to a lowly Hindu caste. If the structure of such conflicts were illustrated (Figure 1), three entities would be delineated: two embattled communities (A and B) and one more abstract group of authorities (X). A and B clash; X intervenes to reimpose peace.

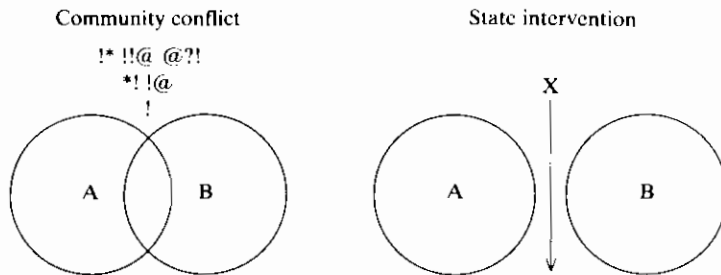


Figure 1. Structure of communities and state in civil conflict.

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This simple diagram would seem to describe conflicts all over the world—ethnic, religious, nationalist, racial—arising from hostilities commonly described as “age-old”, “intractable” and “hopeless” [1]. When X weakens, in the erstwhile Soviet Union, for instance, then A and B (and sometimes C and D and so on through the alphabet) go for each other, with no restraint from a superior controlling force. Panipur appears to be a good example of this abstract structure: Muslims and Hindus fought each other; policemen arrived from outside the village and saw to it that they stopped.

But when one peers beneath the dust and din of battle (through long and detailed interviews with participants and their descendants), other dynamics are detected that contradict the notion of inevitable and irreconcilable civil strife, and they are more situational, more rational and more amenable to alternative solution. For one thing, a close hearing of people’s stories casts doubt on the diagram of roles offered here. The very concept of community is problematic, as it becomes clear that communities are not static institutions, but rather organic formations, constructed and reconstructed for specific purposes in historic time. My concept of state, too, refused to hold steady. Officialdom, both the individuals who comprise it and the abstraction it represents, has a far more active part. State and community play out a complex game, cows and peasants and police, cabbages and kings all interacting, combining and re-combining until ultimately the seas of social conflict are stirred to boiling point [2]. In this paper certain kinds of influences exercised by states on civil strife are explored, especially those symbolic ones that help to shape the ideas and therefore the actions of the ordinary people who make the crucial moves.

Influences Overt and Symbolic

First, some influences that are overt and obvious should briefly be mentioned. Laws are passed, judicial rulings made, budgets enacted, employment policies created and rescinded, and on and on. These actions of state can serve as *provocations* for conflict between communities, although it may be more accurate to say that they embody struggle among peoples at the same time as they advance it [3]. Significant, too, are informal actions of the agents of state, especially those in direct contact with communities. At the time of writing, warfare rages in Los Angeles, evoked by a sequence of official actions or actions by officials: the police beating of Rodney King; a court’s decision to locate the officers’ trial in a white suburb; and the acquittal of the accused policemen. This drama illustrates well a second type of overt state action that frequently shapes community conflict: *intervention*. How and when force is exercised directly and simply affects the course of struggle. In Los Angeles, the timing and method of police intervention in various areas of the city has had a powerful impact on the course of events, including the later restructuring of community relations.

While much could be said about the role of states on this overt level, this paper concentrates on another category of influences. Beyond physical consequences, official actions also communicate symbolic meanings. When authorities are deployed, which authorities, dressed in what gear, bearing what technology, where precisely they are stationed, conveyed by what means, all bear meaning and suggest a second sense in which the state influences community conflict: by helping to shape the consciousness of the protagonists. What matters here is not simply what authorities do, but what their actions symbolize, another lesson clearly taught in Los Angeles. It is this more subtle and nuanced process that becomes especially apparent in the study of Panipur.

First, it was the nature of the state itself that *defined the moment as opportune for community struggle*. Through a history of intricate and pained contests, a new state, Pakistan, was formed from the dissolution of British rule. Along with the creation of this Muslim state, the very definitions of "Muslim" and of "community" were reconstructed. In East Bengali villages, to be Muslim before the creation of Pakistan was to be disadvantaged. Most landlords were Hindus, most Muslims tillers.†

When Pakistan was formed with a government decisively dominated by Muslims, people in the village of Panipur read the change in detail. Golam, the Muslim man whose cow ate the plant, said:

"[Hindus] did us many wrongs in those days [before Independence]. . . . We were less strong because the state belonged to them. The Hindus outnumbered us. So we were afraid of them."
But now the state belongs to you. Are they afraid of you now?
 "Yes, they are . . . they are afraid of us just as we were afraid of them in the past. They are afraid of us now because it is Pakistan now."

What seems a simple description of change is not so. Golam's statement contains a number of telling inaccuracies. "We were less strong because the state belonged to them," he said. But the state did not belong to Hindus "in those days"; it belonged to the British. Nor did it exactly "belong" to Golam in the present. True, he was Muslim and most rulers were Muslim (in that sense he shared identity with the state), but only in that sense, for in truth, the state "belonged" to a military dictatorship with very decided class biases. Affluent city dwellers prospered at the extreme expense of people like Golam. In other context, Golam himself bitterly complained of that reality and saw himself as allied with his poor Hindu neighbors in a battle for resources.

† Certainly, there was a Muslim merchant class, as well as upwardly mobile farmers, hungry to increase their land interests. There was, too, a tradition of Muslim governance: pre-independence Chief Ministers of the province of Bengal had been Muslim, as had many local authorities. But power relations were closely (if not simply) identified with religious identity, and in that schema Muslims considered themselves to be powerless.

What Golam meant becomes a little clearer when we factor in the question of numbers. "The State belonged to them," he said, closely followed by the observation, "the Hindus outnumbered us. So we were afraid of them." To equate state power with demographic numbers makes conceptual sense, although again, for Golam that equation was not quite true. Hindus did not outnumber Muslims in Golam's own world of direct experience. They did in India as a whole, but in East Bengal [4], where Golam lived, Muslims were a large majority, and in Panipur itself, Hindus and Muslims were about equal in numbers.

Wrong as they are, both statements—who owned the state and who outnumbered whom—shift into focus if by "State" Golam meant influence and power. For while the pre-independence state belonged formally to the British, in fact Hindus were more influential than Muslims, both as civil servants and as leaders of nationalism. It seems obvious that Golam would fear that influence.

But in fact it is not exactly obvious why it mattered to Golam that leaders and bureaucrats—representatives of the state—were Hindus. In his own village, the only elected official was a Muslim and always had been. He himself, a small landholder, had virtually no contact with agents of the state. No policeman had ever visited his isolated village before the upheaval. Neither had a single public official (according to popular lore). Taxes were collected as levies by the big landlord whose fields Golam tilled.

What did matter to Golam was that the landlord was a Hindu, as were most big landlords in the vicinity, although most Hindus were not landlords. Most Hindus in the vicinity of Panipur belonged to a lowly caste called Namasudra. A once tribal people, they tilled the land under conditions as tortured and meagre as Golam's own. Indeed, Bengal is unusual in India in that its Muslim population derives from conversions by the poorest and most oppressed of Hindu peasants. Hindus and Muslims, therefore, come from very similar stock, if not the same stock entirely. To the extent that Hindus outnumbered Muslims, therefore, they also shared with them important interests and struggles, as well as cultural and ritual practices. Golam's statement that "we were afraid of them" because "they outnumbered us" was therefore not entirely ingenuous. What he did fear, no doubt, was the economic power of a very small number of Hindu landlords, who were equally feared by Golam's Namasudra neighbors.

The state did not "belong to them", nor did "they outnumber us". Yet certain Hindus did enjoy power and influence before independence, and to Golam's mind that power and influence were symbolized by the state: "They are afraid of us just as we were afraid of them in the past. They are afraid of us now because it is Pakistan now."

Although it was not "Pakistan now" at the moment we spoke but Bangladesh, an ellipsing of eras of some significance [5], it was very true that Hindus feared Muslims now. I heard Hindus say exactly that again and

again in conversations with them. It was not true, however, that their fear was just the same as the Muslims' fear in the past, nor that it derived in any simple way from the existence of Pakistan. The Muslims' fear had been closely linked to economic subservience. The Hindus feared their peers, which they had not at the time of the melee.

In fact, the fight had happened precisely because "they" were not afraid. Golam, a Muslim, had set his cow in a field where it could eat the plant of his neighbor, a Hindu. That was a pretty cheeky thing to do. The Hindu protested, as everyone, Golam included, admitted he had a right to do. He did more than protest; he seized Golam's cow and held it hostage. That was enormously impudent, not the behavior of a frightened man. The Hindu became frightened, however, after the whole business was concluded. The Muslims, in the wrong to begin with, did not do what they normally would have done, which was to posture a bit, finally apologize and make amends for the injured plant. Instead, they massed, sent word to Muslims in surrounding villages and, as one informant said, "decided to riot." That they acted so atypically was precisely because *they* knew it was Pakistan. But the Hindus were taken by surprise. "They changed the social rules," complained one man. And indeed they did, because they knew there now was a Muslim-dominated government and they expected it to favor them over the Hindus.‡

Because the state had constituted itself in terms of religious identity, these Muslim villagers enforced a new set of power relations on their Hindu neighbors. The new state symbolized a change which so far in the village existed only as potential. By rioting, the villagers made it actual.

To say "hy rioting" suggests a second way in which the state was party to what happened in Panipur: *by defining the nature of the actions taken*. What actually happened in the field of battle was a very stylized sequence of gestures. Here is Golam's description:

"The fight continued for three days. . . . The two sides were sitting facing each other for three days."

Were they literally fighting for three days?

"No, they were just sitting for 3 days and nights."

Sitting for three days and nights! There wasn't fighting?

"Now and then someone would chase someone else, a little jostling would happen."

So culture-bound was my picture of a riot—people running about, smashing things, looting things, beating each other up—that I literally did not believe my ears. People sat, faced off, for 3 days, a ritualized battle of

‡ "These cows and plants are symbols," said a Muslim elder. "After Partition, the minority community didn't take it well. . . . In the British time, we had to obey the British laws. . . . There was no point in being angry. We felt it, but we didn't express our anger. Why couldn't they now accept our rules?"

stubborn sides, each waiting for the other to blink. Thinking it was a riot, I had on some level been disposed to accept the action of the police, however much I regretted the deaths and wondered if they had been strictly necessary. But after all, tens of thousands of rioting villagers armed with spears and poles and axes seemed sufficiently intimidating to warrant a fairly vigorous intervention.

Only slowly did it dawn on me that what had happened was highly controlled. People had been injured, but none mortally. Men who had fought and been wounded told me that all the blows had been carefully aimed at limbs, because everyone worried about the social consequences of killing. The more details I heard, the more I visualized the event as a giant sit-down strike with a little skirmishing on the side rather than a riot. Yet the label "riot" had distinctly predisposed me to accept a form of intervention that was extremely questionable once I had formed a different picture of what happened.

Who had first called it a riot, I wondered in retrospect? Had I imposed an inaccurate conception on my dialogue with the villagers? [6] That seemed possible, steeped as I was in the archival records of British rule. Civil unrest very frequently appears in police, judicial and press reports as "riots" (or, with that inimitable British knack for euphemism, "disturbances", sometimes when particularly condemned, "atrocities"). Returning to my taped interviews, I found with considerable relief that I had carefully framed my questions to people in vague terms of "trouble", using a Bengali euphemism for a wide range of activities. Indeed, far from fishing for news of riots, I had come upon this particular "trouble" by accident. My study involved investigating sites where communal conflicts were not reported in the archives as well as those where they were. Panipur was in a "peaceful" zone".§

I was only making small-talk with an old Hindu woman when I said, "There wasn't any trouble here, was there?" To my surprise, she answered:

"Oh yes, there was, so many times. There were riots. Then all the Hindu people left."

She used the English word "riot" in her Bengali sentence. In the stories that followed, people repeated the word again and again. Illiterate farmers, people who had never heard English spoken until a television recently arrived in the district, nonetheless used that bit of living linguistic history—a word introduced by foreign rulers and applied by their Bengali successors to an event beautifully constructed in a Bengali vocabulary of gesture—two

§ Everyone I had interviewed so far had confirmed that bit of historic record. "We [Hindus and Muslims] were good friends", I was told. There were never troubles between communities because, "we share common borders." "The Namasndras and the Muslims were both cultivators. they worked side-by-side, so there was no animosity between them."

masses of armed men sitting for days on end faced off in a field of controversy.

Was there a relationship between word and deed for the villagers? The label had not dictated a set of behaviors, since what the “rioters” did in the field was not “riot-like” (to my western conception). But the moral implications of the word may have helped to reconcile the villagers to a brutal state intervention. Every teller of the story of Panipur expressed outrage at some point. Hindus were outraged that the Muslims gathered to “riot”. Muslims were outraged that the Hindus behaved so provocatively. But no one, not a single individual, criticized the police for killing people. Everyone agreed that the crowd was fleeing when the shots were fired. Some people accused the police of biased aim. But nobody thought it was out of the ordinary for the police to shoot live bullets into a highly controlled and by then departing crowd. To be sure, had a different word been applied to the event, conceptions of authority and obedience might still have dictated certain attitudes towards the police action. That the British used the word riot to label these other sorts of demonstrations, however, suggests the fear and condemnation with which they regarded them, and the moral entitlement they claimed to squelch contentious gatherings, even if peaceful, with force. By collapsing various collective actions into a single category—“riots”—they justified to themselves harsh treatment. That the word found its way into the Bengali language, replacing a more forgiving conception, suggests that these subjects of an imperial state learned a new conception of community strife. New words do not usually find favor unless they express new meanings. Communalism was not a traditional problem in India until late in the British rule, and it began to appear in Bengal only in the 20th century [7]. How the designation of its expression in an English language of disapprobation and criminality may have influenced its course deserves closer study. In the event of Panipur, we cannot know precisely how much traditions of intervention inherited by the Pakistani rulers influenced their actions, but we can know that the language in which it was discussed and their behaviors mirrored closely those of the British colonialists before them.¶

In the event, not only the intervention but the form of punishment imposed was significant, for the penalties *defined a new set of power relations* among the villagers. Here, too, the British left a legacy, an institution called collective responsibility which justified enforcing fines and sentences on selected members of groups in community conflict, whether or not they personally had participated [8]. Having quelled the crowds at Panipur, the authorities arrived in ceremonial force, selected some 300 people of each religion and judged them guilty of disorder. They were made to pay large

¶ In retrospect, I wish I had been attuned to this issue of language while I was still in Bangladesh, and that I had questioned the villagers about their use of the word “riot”. Life is littered with missed research opportunities and, for the time being at least, this one must be numbered among them.

fines and required to stand for an hour with their eyes fixed on the punishing sun.

One would think such even-handedness would express neutrality, a determination to protect everybody's rights equally and to hold everybody equally responsible for misdeeds. But what both Hindus and Muslims learned from the experience was something very different. Both sides understood that the confrontation had been initiated by the Muslims. It was they who decided the time had come to change things: "We had often compromised in the past, and now we decided to fight," they said. Said the Hindus, "they changed the social rules." True neutrality on the part of the Pakistani authorities would have been expressed by harsher punishment of the Muslim community. That they held both sides equally responsible told the Hindus precisely where they stood in the new order:

"When we sought justice from the responsible people, we didn't get it. They didn't take any interest in our troubles. . . . [They] only offered vague words of consolation, but they never did a single thing to help. They would say, 'Forget it, these things are natural. You are a minority, so you have to bear some troubles.' They would pat our backs and send us away."

Formal neutrality becomes its opposite in the context of unequal power [9]. What mattered to the villagers of Panipur was who could win justice, and the punishment made clear that the Hindus could not. "Was there a true reconciliation?" I asked a Hindu farmer. "We were forced to reconcile," he replied. "But in our hearts we have never reconciled. We still have the apprehension that it could happen again in the future."

Conclusion

By defining the opportune moment for struggle, the nature of collective actions and a new set of power relations through the formal process of judgment, the state, indeed a series of historic states, strode through that village in Pakistan. Certainly, the villagers were nobody's puppets; they were not manipulated or deceived into actions they had not truly decided upon for themselves. But their renegotiation of power in Panipur was conducted in terms defined by the state, which thereby became a party to the transaction. If we are to understand these affairs, we must explore the symbolic as well as concrete ways in which law and state appear in them. We must redraw "too neat" diagrams in three dimension with broken lines (Figure 2).

Notes

- 1 One example of a study which basically follows this scheme is Neil Smelser's classic *Theory of Collective Behavior* (The Free Press: New York, 1962).

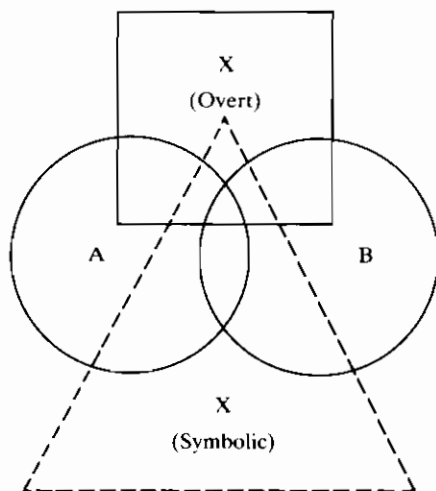


Figure 2. Interaction of communities and state in civil conflict.

- 2 For an elaboration of the idea of state as player in social change, see Theda Skocpol in *States and Social Revolution* (Cambridge University Press: London, 1979). What I mean to suggest in this paper is a rather different picture of the role of the state. I see it not as a decisive institutional counterweight to classes, but as the embodiment of certain dominant cultural conceptions. My study addresses a link Skocpol suggests but does not elaborate between what happens on the level of State and conditions for social change at the grass-roots.
- 3 See Dionne Jones and Monica Jackson's work on *Levels of Interracial Conflict: Manifestations of Symbolic and Competitive Racism* (unpublished paper, 1992).
- 4 East Bengal became the eastern wing of Pakistan in 1947, later revolting to form the modern state of Bangladesh in 1971.
- 5 It had been Pakistan at the time of melec. I explore the meaning of era ellipses like this one in "Troubles with Cows and Changes of State: the Ideology of Community Conflict" [*Interdisciplinary Peace Research* 4(1) (1992)].
- 6 "There is a relation between angles and attitudes. Where I look from is tied up with how I see." Katharine Galloway Young, *Taleworlds and Storyrealms* (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers: Dordrecht, 1987, p. viii).
- 7 This contention is well debated in contemporary literature. See for instance, C. A. Bayly, "The Pre-History of 'Communalism'? Religious Conflict in India, 1700-1860" in *Modern Asian Studies* (1985) and Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Oxford University Press: Bombay, 1990).
- 8 Sandra Freitag, *Collective Action and Community* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1989).
- 9 This idea about neutrality has been well illustrated in a study of mediation by Sara Cobb and Janet Rifkin, "Practice and Paradox: Deconstructing Neutrality in Mediation" in *Law and Social Inquiry* 116(1) (1991).