

Pre-publication version of Staples, J. 2022. "Unpacking communal tensions in Leicester: South Asia Studies Research Group roundtable, Brunel University, 1 November 2022." Anthropology Today 38(6):27.

Unpacking communal tension, inequality, and media in Leicester

Hindu-Muslim tensions hit UK national headlines at the end of August after an India-Pakistan cricket match reportedly sparked communal violence in Leicester, a city often heralded as a beacon of diversity and integration amongst its South Asian diasporas. As the skirmishes continued, however – against a backdrop of fevered social media attention – it became clear that this was about more than winning or losing a cricket match.

The question of what was going on, as well as the broader conundrum of what academic scholarship rooted in the kind of slow, long term fieldwork typically conducted by anthropologists, can offer to the immediate analysis of contemporary events, was the focus of a recent roundtable hosted by Brunel University London's new South Asia Research Group. The event brought into discussion Peggy Froerer (Brunel), Ashraf Hoque (UCL), Amogh Sharma (Oxford), and Kalpana Wilson (Birkbeck): scholars whose work touches in different ways on communal relations, and who were invited to add nuance to existing news reports and social media commentary.

First to speak was Peggy Froerer, who has worked for two decades on Hindu nationalism in central India (2007). Froerer explored the parallels that could be drawn between the violent encounters she witnessed between Hindu and Christian communities in a village in central India at a time when Hindutva (Hindu nationalism) was becoming the dominant narrative, and reports of current tensions in Leicester.

Three key connections emerged. First, the apparent involvement of people, and ideologies, identified as "outsiders" in fomenting conflict, in both cases offered a useful explanation to the question of why places hitherto celebrated as peaceful can suddenly become sites of violence. In the village of Froerer's fieldwork, multiple "outsiders" were identified: Hindu nationalist activists; migrant *adivasis* described by the former as anti-Hindu; and the Church

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itself, an international outsider there to spread Christianity. In Leicester, these outsiders reportedly came in from Birmingham, Luton, and London, while the ideology of Hindu supremacy that motivated some of them was traced back to India. The second connection – one the other speakers expanded upon – was the cultivation of a “threatening other” in both locales. Hindutva ideology identifies the Muslim community as a key external threat: a stance which increases division and polarizes local tensions. The third connection, which resonates with the claims of Leicester councillors, was socio-economic deprivation. In both places, a sense of disenfranchisement among young people rendered them vulnerable to a variety of extremist ideologies.

Anthropologist Ashraf Hoque, up next, drew on his ethnographic research into the everyday lives of young Muslim men in Luton (2019) to trace the possible sources of tensions in Leicester. His interlocutors identified themselves as British, but defined that Britishness in complex ways. They were committed both to Britain – the country in which most had been born and where they saw their futures – *and* to the community of global Islam (*Ummah*). It was those global connections which made them acutely aware that successive governments in India had marginalised Muslims. And as his recent conversations with contacts in Leicester attested, this marginalization was not lost on Muslims there either. This global context played negatively into current tensions, with the added frustration that while Islamic terrorism has received wide coverage, Hindutva-inspired violence has not been identified in the same way. The failure of the UK establishment to acknowledge the latter, Hoque suggested, has hindered understanding what unfolded in Leicester, which clearly cannot be explained by the outcome of a cricket match. “India and Pakistan have played cricket for decades without their being any fighting. This is something else,” as one Leicester man told him.

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Kalpana Wilson, a member of the South Asia Solidarity Group (SASG), continued the discussion by recalling SASG's years of experience working alongside both Muslims and Hindus, including striking workers in Leicester, as they fought to improve their working conditions. It was not, she stressed, just a matter of different communities previously living together harmoniously – the "Leicester-as-beacon-of-diversity-and-integration" narrative that Froerer discussed in her earlier presentation – but of people being unified around shared struggles that were more important than their religious identities. According to Wilson, it was only in the late 1990s, under New Labour's version of multi-culturalism, that British ethnic minorities came to be demarcated more explicitly as separate "faith communities": discrete groups through which claims to resources could be made. This shift collided not only with the West's "War on Terror" and the rise in Islamophobia that followed it, but, in India, with the growth of a specifically *Hindu* nationalism (Hindutva) that overseas Hindu diasporas were encouraged to support, and which culminated in the election of the BJP, a Hindu nationalist political party. Within this nexus of events – themselves rooted in British colonial divide and rule policies that followed the Indian 1857 rebellion against the rule of the East India Company – British Hindus and Muslims were not only identified as separate groups; Muslims were also framed as a "threatening other".

The confluence of multiple conditions that make certain events possible might look, from a distance, like chance. But as our final speaker, Amogh Sharma, reinforced, what happened in Leicester was not a spontaneous uprising. Social media, Sharma's research on technology and politics demonstrates, has actively been weaponised by political parties of all persuasions in India to recruit people to their cause. And over the last five years, there have been concerted efforts to create links between what happens in India and its British diasporas. Sharma's fieldwork on the 2019 Indian election campaigns, for example, identified scores of British

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Indians returning to work for both parties on their social media: more than 50 percent of tweets with hashtags claiming Hindus were subjects of hatred in the UK (such as #hinduphobia or #hinduhate) could be traced back to India, and have been used to reinforce the idea of Muslims as the enemy.

Would the skirmishes in Leicester still have occurred had Pakistan rather than India won that cricket match on 28th August, as one audience member asked? We will, of course, never know for sure. But as Hoque pointed out, a lot of his Muslim interlocutors traced their families back to India, and supported India, not Pakistan, at cricket. The kneejerk association of Pakistan with Islam and India with Hinduism over-simplifies complex identities. Indeed, if one had to offer one takeaway point from the discussion, it was that a history of actively separating people into discrete communities – whether as a technocratic measure to distribute resources or to identify an enemy – enhances the likelihood of those communities being pitted against one another. Changing the narrative to one that encourages people to focus on shared aspects of identities rather than differences (many of which are fictions spread via social media and propaganda), alongside practical measures to address socio-economic deprivation experienced in such communities, seems essential. A recognition that Islamic terrorism is not the only threat, and to allow discussion of Hindu violence or critique of the Indian state without facing accusations of “Hinduphobia” – an anti-discriminatory term being weaponised to further the cause of a highly discriminatory agenda – is also vital.

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