

Northeast Delhi Riots of 2020: Contesting and (Re)claiming the Western Media Narrative

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The New Delhi Riots of 2020 dominated the news cycle for days, even as U.S. President Trump visited India. This article is based on news coverage of these riots during and immediately following their occurrence between February 23 and March 10, 2020. Taking a multidisciplinary approach, this article investigates the discourse on India and its minorities that frames the understanding of these riots to argue that Western media coverage betrays biases and contradictions. This article analyzes the varied alternative narratives of these riots in the Indian media, including secular and Hindu nationalist media, to critique the Western media narrative. This article studies the narratives of the Hindu right and its grievances with Western and secularist narratives. It is found that the overt reliance of the Western media on religious identity-based aggressor/victim binary leads to the miscategorization of these riots, mischaracterizes the Indian polity, and reinforces partisan identity politics in contemporary India.

Keywords: Hindu Nationalism, Hinduphobia, Indian riots, propaganda, Western media

The outbreak of rioting in Northeast Delhi coincided with President Trump's visit to India on February 24 and 25, 2020, prompting scrutiny of the Prime Minister Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's policies towards religious minorities. U.S. presidential visits, marketed as media spectacles in India, have often been used by extremists to incite violence. In 2002, on the eve of Clinton's visit to India, a massacre of 35 Sikhs effected by a Pakistan-based terror outfit in Jammu Kashmir (Hillary Clinton had once, in 2006, casually held "Hindu Militants" responsible for it) and debates on attacks on churches in Delhi marred Obama's second visit to India in 2015. Such coverage casts doubt on peace and security in India while also embarrassing the BJP, which was in power during these visits.

The rioting between February 23 and 26 led to 53 deaths, renewing anxieties about the human rights of Muslims in India, particularly in the context of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019. Anti-CAA protests were widely reported in the global media and polarized political opinions on partisan lines. Within the international and secular Indian media, the Act was seen as evidence of the BJP's anti-Muslim policies. In contrast, the pro-BJP media argued that it was designed to help religious minorities fleeing Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh due to persecution.

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Following the 2002 Gujarat riots, the BJP, under Modi's Chief Ministership, turned adverse media coverage to its advantage in the elections, prompting research into the BJP's election narrative (Mehta, 2006). This article, drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives that see the Indian riots as a case of transient conflict, argues that the media narratives of the Delhi riots betray inherent biases and contradictions. Here, the focus is on Western media propaganda and cultural biases that are generally ignored in scholarly inquiries into riots in India and their coverage.

News media coverage of wars and other violent conflicts functions as a magnifying glass, unmasking certain media practices and representations that are discursively normalized otherwise (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2006). Conflict reporting reveals "cracks, fissures, and internal contradiction," especially as the much-cherished mainstream news media's notions of "objectivity, balance, and truthfulness lose much of their taken-for-grantedness" (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2006, pp. 159-160).

News reports are constructed rather than discovered through journalistic practice (Tuchman, 1978). Both structural and ideological factors, including the decisions made at various levels of newsgathering and cultural biases within and outside news organizations, influence the production of news reports (Kester, 2010; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). In their discursive function, news reports emphasize truthfulness through narrative techniques, such as first-person accounts, interviews, direct quotations, and numbers (Frampton & Boyd-Barrett, 2012).

A dominant narrative is produced and instilled in the public mind through repetition, selection of facts to fit the frame, ignoring of alternative frames, exclusion of sources that do not support dominant interpretation, privileging of sources and voices that suit the dominant agenda, and the use of verbal and visual signs to enhance these effects (Boyd-Barrett, 2015, 2017; Entman, 1993; Herman & Chomsky, 2008; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2015). Media embody multiple power struggles to arrive at the truth; what is unreported is just as important as what is being reported (Goldman & Rajagopal, 1991).

Mis-Categorization of Indian Riots

The press in post-partition India avoided identifying rioters and victims by their religious or ethnic identities to prevent rumors or inflaming sectarian passions. This convention started to change in the 1990s. With the advent of 24/7 TV news, riots began to be politicized beyond the immediate localities of occurrence. The Hindu-Muslim riots have since been met with moral anxiety and outrage in scholarly and journalistic writings, often leading to Orientalist pessimism about India's future as a multireligious and multiethnic society. What follows are sermons by South Asianists prophesizing the end of secular democracy in India, or worse. The 1992 riots prompted Madan (1993) to ask, "Whither Indian Secularism?" The 2002 Gujarat riots led to Khuswant Singh's (2003) book *The End of India*, declaring, "Far from becoming *mahaan* (great), India is going to the dogs, and unless a miracle saves us, the country will break up" (p. 34).

In riot studies, we find two conflicting perspectives on India. In the dominant discourse discussed above, riots are seen as a turning point toward a dystopian future, reflecting a deep malaise in India. Alternatively, some argue that they disrupt the largely peaceful, uniquely Indian way of coexistence and signify practical difficulties in creating an inclusive society based on religious equality in a postcolonial society

(Mitra, 2003). Empirical studies on riots also need to be aware of presumptions of the dominant perspective while being alert to evolving Hindu nationalist politics. A critique of the contours of the dominant narrative based on methodological blind spots and ideological biases is discussed below.

Riots are often defined as violence *primarily* perpetrated by civilian members of an ethnic or religious community against civilians of another, with possible connivance of state actors in such violence (Frøystad, 2009). However, not all rioting is of an ethnic or sectarian character; social classes or political parties also indulge in rioting, either directly or through the mobilization of ethno-sectarian divisions. A more inclusive definition of rioting should include these dimensions.

The exclusive focus on victims or brutality toward the victims skews the representation of riots in most academic studies (Frøystad, 2009). The critical question, then, is how riots start and develop—with empirical observations limited to the period of the riot (Appadurai, 1996; Brass, 1997, 2003). Driven by concerns centered on giving voice to victims, academic studies have focused mainly on victims (Das, 2003). Some studies have looked into perpetrators (Brass, 1997; Kakar, 1995), and very few have explored police as a category of suppressors (Hansen, 2001).

Frøystad (2009) argues that the pessimistic narrative about India that follows communal riots is because riot studies draw frameworks from studies on other more lasting kinds of political violence, like civil wars or state terror, in other parts of the world, emphasizing similarities while ignoring differences. If we focus on the differences, first, we will find that riots in India, despite their brutality, are “a remarkably short lived though recurring form of political violence compared to civil wars and state terror” (Frøystad, 2009, p. 454). Even with the Gujarat riots that lasted months, the constitutive riots did not last more than five to six days. Once the brevity of rioting is considered, the focus shifts to how riots end and how religious communities in India come to terms with their coexistence in riot-affected parts of the country.

A typical pattern observed in a communal riot is that it only escalates to a certain level before triggering its own negotiation soon after the rioting ends. This points to the less understood role of understanding, courage, and compassion between Hindu and Muslim communities in healing after rioting. Hindus, who constitute a majority in India, rapidly change their attitudes toward Muslims, as xenophobia gives way to empathy—this shift might have to do with psychological factors associated with internal dynamics characterizing Hindu thought and notions of identity (Ramanujan, 1989; Singer, 1972).

Finally, state institutions, including the police, play a vital role in quelling communal riots. Nonetheless, academic studies mainly focus on police failures as riot suppressors or the underrepresentation of Muslims in the police, paramilitary forces, and army (Khalidi, 2003). These lines of inquiry should not entirely overshadow the police’s role as riot suppressors, as it is in this role that they help distinguish communal riots from other lasting forms of political violence (Frøystad, 2009).

Rioting and Representing Hindu-Muslim Relations in India

Another lacuna in riot studies is the failure to explain why ordinary men get ready to die or kill during a riot. The rioters are seen as irrational actors acting under Hindu nationalist impulses: “faith of Hindus of India has become simplified . . . the ultimate value standing above the faiths of others” (Brass,

2003, p. 262). Mitra (2003) argues that while rioters in 16th-century France are seen by historians as rational political actors acting in extreme circumstances, nonengagement with discourses of contemporary Indian rioters steals the agency of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and others, revealing the grip of orientalism over the well-meaning intelligentsia.

Edward Said (1978) stated that the role of Orientalist scholars is to reduce the obscurity of the Orient by translating while always remaining outside the Orient. The pessimistic narrative about India shows the hold of Orientalism on how Hindus and Muslims are constructed and placed against each other for the Western gaze. The Riots—led by Hindu nationalists—becomes a metaphor for Hindu-Muslim relations in India.

The dominant academic narratives' textual reading of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the parent body of the BJP, is that of a fascist force akin to "the Hitler's youth" that threatens Indian secular democracy (Banaji, 2018, p. 335). The studies under this paradigm concern Hindu majoritarian "ideology," BJP's rise, concomitant contradictions, noncommitment to the rule of law, and the damage it entails to India's religious minorities (Basu, 2020; Brass, 2003; Ludden, 1996). Generally, it is not just Hindu nationalism but also caste and regional movements that represent an illiberal and violent side of the Indian polity (Hansen, 2021). The study of orientalism is limited to the exoticization of Hindu culture by Hindu nationalists and others for neoliberal consumption (Edwards & Ramamurty, 2017).

Alternatively, though sometimes violent, caste-based and regional mobilizations embody democratic aspirations and historic grievances (Inukonda, 2019). The revisionist perspectives on Hindu nationalism and Muslim separatism argue that under colonialism, traditional Hindu and Muslim communitarian relations of cooperation and conflict transformed into communal politics of competition and conflict (Ahmed, 2020). Hindu nationalism emerged as a democratic response to the introduction of elections in India and the creation of extra-proportional separate electorates for Muslims by the British, not as a movement for a theocratic state (Sitapati, 2020). The British colonizers often used the "Muslim Card" to exert leverage over Hindu nationalists to realize the geostrategic goals of the empire through partition and beyond (Curtis, 2018).

While there should be no excuses for violating human rights, imposing Western parameters of modernization ignores "tremendous differences in context, trends, or national histories" (Mitra, 2003, p. 28). The postcolonial Indian state attempted to accommodate religious minorities by including freedom of religion (including practice and proselytization) and certain group rights to religious communities in its constitution to assuage their apprehensions of Hindu majoritarianism (Mitra, 2003). Constant negotiations characterize the political environment in Indian democracy, where various religious, caste, and regional groups exercise their power as "vote banks" during elections.

While Muslims face prejudice, state policies, affirmative actions, and governmental committees have historically worked to integrate Hindu and Muslim communities. Stereotyping Muslims as victims of unabated violence overlooks the agency of 200 million Indians and their success in contemporary India's business, cinema, arts, sports, and other fields. Muslims have been active agents in shaping the Indian state and nation since its inception, so "(m)uslims are not led like lambs to slaughter but come out in large numbers to defend their rights" (Mitra, 2003, p. 27). Hansen (2001) examines Muslim politics in riot-affected

localities, where Muslim politicians work with local police to build trust, help prevent future rioting, and facilitate police assistance in day-to-day issues.

Narayan's (2021) ethnographic study argues contrary to the widespread assumption that cadres of RSS do not want to create sectarian tensions, as such claims damage their credibility and reputation, acquired through years of work on the ground. While the frequency and intensity of rioting have reduced, constant religious mobilization, which favors the BJP, has come to characterize mediated politics in India. This increases religious polarization, where fringe groups and criminals associated with certain parties mobilize Hindus and Muslims, leading to smaller clashes.

India is characterized by its religious tolerance, with its basis in a syncretic "Hindu" culture that sees other systems of belief as paths to liberation, avoiding complete otherness (Sen, 2019; Van der Veer, 1994). With the rise of Hindu nationalist political assertions, there has been a concomitant rise in arguments against the perceived misrepresentation of Hindus. Cultural bias against Hindus in the media and politics is being challenged as part of a Hinduphobic discourse (Juluri, 2015).

Methodology

Western propaganda relies on "experts," media personnel, and other elites who share the taken-for-granted biases and agendas of newsworthiness, often contested by the wider public (Herman & Chomsky, 2008). The contestations surrounding such reporting can best be understood in specific constructions of Weberian ideal-type characterizations of conflicting narratives (Boyd-Barrett, 2017; Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2006). The ideal types constructed in this article through the mixed-method triangulation of grounded theory and discourse analysis allow for corroborating facts from different sources and examining discursive methods that lead to framing news (Denzin, 1978; Inukonda, 2019). In this article, using a range of news texts, an inductive approach is used first to delineate the clash of discourses between Western and Indian narratives and second to segregate competing accounts within Indian media, focusing on secularist and Hindu right-wing perspectives. These clashes destabilize Western hegemonic discourses pervading various media by primarily detecting contradictions, hypocrisy, and cultural bias.

The news coverage of the Delhi riots during and in the immediate aftermath of their occurrence between February 23 and March 10, 2020 is assessed. News media sources were selected to represent the dominance and diversity of views in establishing and contesting the dominant narrative of the Delhi riots. Boyd-Barrett (2015, 2017) argues that reducing news dependency on for-profit Western corporate and state media and increasing the influence of noncommercial alternative news sources with a good track record in news and analysis can counteract Western propaganda. This study includes mainstream and alternative news sources: international, national, and local. These are categorized under two broad categories: Western and Indian media. Furthermore, the political polarization within Indian narratives in the context of liberal and pro-BJP media is distinguished. The names of the specific outlets examined can be found in the relevant sections below. In all, 70 different print, online, and audio-visual news items and influential social media posts and YouTube videos by local residents were examined. The methodological approach applied involved analyzing the story's political perspective, setting up a background or context for the story, and portraying key actors and the role of numerical data.

Narratives in Western Media

An examination of the narrative in International Mainstream Media, such as *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)*, *National Public Radio (NPR)*, *Cable News Network (CNN)*, *Guardian*, and *Al Jazeera*, and Western alternative media outlets, such as *Democracy Now!*, including their news reports, editorial and opinion pieces, relying on “privileged” sources, provides the following picture (see for example Biswas, 2020; Mallik, 2020):

- A. Hindu aggressor vs. Muslim victim: For instance, Violence by “Hindu lynch mobs” shouting “Jai Sri Ram” (*Hail Lord Ram* characterized as “Hindu nationalist slogan”) targeting Muslim homes, shops, and places of worship.
- B. The binary led to simplified media and social media claims that widespread anti-Muslim rioting/Muslims face an existential threat in India, which could be the beginning of a pogrom, religious cleansing, or genocide.
- C. The brutality of anti-Muslim violence depicted in words and pictures.
- D. Police inaction/complicity while noting that the Delhi police are under a BJP-led national government.
- E. Triggering event: Rioting was triggered by BJP leader Kapil Mishra’s provocative speech.
- F. Vilification of Modi: The context of the CAA or Citizenship Amendment Act as background for rioting and attributed to “Islamophobic” Indian PM Modi, with frequent references to Gujarat 2002 riots.
- G. Naming and shaming India: Calls for the international community to intervene and prevent “Fascism” from taking over India.

Delhi riots have primarily been seen as “Hindu Mobs Rampaging Through the Streets Attacking Muslims in Their Homes” (Ellis-Petersen, 2020b). The linear framing of riots follows through visually with photographs of Hindu aggressors and Muslim victims and mobs pelting stones at each other, the Hindu (pro-CAA) mob in sharp focus and the Muslim (anti-CAA) mob in soft focus (Scroll.in, 2020).

References are made within news stories to Gujarat (2002) and Delhi (1984), suggesting it is an orchestrated pogrom—state-sponsored and one-sided. News stories include accounts of attacks on Muslims by Hindu mobs, with blame attributed to Modi and BJP (Gettleman, Raj, & Yasir, 2020). For instance, news reports in the *Guardian* argue:

When the BJP was elected to government in 2014, led by prime minister Narendra Modi, divisions (between Hindus and Muslims) widened. . . . The BJP, which believes that India should be a Hindu, not a secular nation, has fostered an environment of hate in India. (Ellis-Petersen, 2020a, para. 15)

The Hindu vs secular binary ignores the complex political realities of a multi-ethnic society that pulls political parties away from ideological rigidities and toward the political center to expand their support base. The RSS has, in the past, shown the amorphous capability of supporting Congress, Socialists, and others at various points in history. The Janata Government, in the late 1970s, during which RSS was a major component, gained north Indian Muslim support. Andersen and Damle (2018) argue that RSS is redefining core Hindu nationalism, in terms of civilizational values rather than religious identity, and is reaching out to

religious minorities. BJP has engaged in minority outreach programs and sought to develop Muslim or Christian leadership, especially in regions where religious minorities constitute a majority. In preparation for the 2024 elections, in early 2023, BJP and RSS initiated new Muslim and Christian outreach programs. With an eye on Dalit voters, BJP has attempted to appropriate the legacy of Ambedkar—the architect of India’s constitution. In 1973, the Supreme Court, in a landmark judgment, ruled that parliament could not change the secular character of the Constitution.

Nevertheless, a linear narrative of riots informing influential observers finds its logical end in claims of pogroms, or worse. Bernie Sanders, the then frontrunner for Democratic Presidential nomination, citing a *Washington Post* story, called it “Widespread anti-Muslim mob violence” (Sanders, 2020). Congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, citing a *Guardian* report, tweeted that the Indian administration was “ethnically cleansing the country’s religious minorities” (Ocasio-Cortez, 2020). Varshney (2022) feared that “(i)n case Delhi 2020 is a pogrom, and it reappears elsewhere, let us be clear that the future victims will be abjectly helpless. Those committed to a pluralistic India must be ready for an eventuality of the worst kind” (para. 6). A diasporic academic expert in an interview with *Democracy Now!* argued:

any press outfit that refers to this as clashes, as clashes between Hindus and Muslims or even as kind of riots is actually culpable of dereliction of duty and certainly of critical analysis . . . it’s not even a civil war. . . . What we have is a very dangerous supremacist ideology that is now out on the streets and I am afraid that parallels with 1930s Germany are extremely clear . . . the world really needs to wake up to the gravity of the situation in India because we are in a situation not unlike what was happening in the Germany in (sic) the 1930s. (*Democracy Now!*, 2020, 11:41)

The comments based on a textual reading of Hindu nationalism as a fascist movement disregard epistemological distinctions between riots, civil war, and genocide, allowing Orientalist reading to make a case for foreign intervention. The influential diasporic intelligentsia regurgitates the discourse of Orientalism about brutal natives who need to be disciplined. This discourse also underlines the ungovernability of the postcolonial Orient, emphasizing the incontrovertible truth of Western moral superiority. These narratives ignore the complex realities of Indian politics or the Indian cultural outlook toward life and morality that inform people’s political participation.

One of the themes in the media is exposing the sham democracy in India, exposing India to the world and even urging Trump to oppose Modi (Singh, 2020). To the more informed interventionist conversant with Trump’s Muslim ban, the U.S. president’s politics must be accounted for: “Trump is an apprentice to Modi rather than the other way around” (*Democracy Now!*, 2020, 13:09).

Kapil Mishra, a Delhi-based BJP leader, is widely held responsible for triggering rioting. Several locals, including the families of victims (both Muslim and Hindu), blame Mishra for the riots. On February 23, Kapil Mishra issued an ultimatum to the police to remove the anti-CAA protestors from the site before Trump left India on February 25. This speech triggered violence “when groups of Hindus attacked peaceful sit-ins of Muslims protesting” the CAA (*Democracy Now!*, 2020, 0:14). While Hindus are primarily depicted

as aggressors in Western media, a few references are made within the stories of brave Hindus and Sikhs who protected Muslims during the rioting.

Narratives in the Indian Media

The Indian coverage of rioting in Northeast Delhi is diverse, with some critiquing and others corroborating various aspects of the Western media narrative. The perspectives of pro-BJP channels like *Zee News* (Hindi), *Republic TV* (English), and *Times Now* (English), as well as liberal media, such as *NDTV* (Hindi and English) and *India Today* (English), are divergent with regard to the cause and nature of rioting. The Indian liberal media blames BJP, like the Western media, particularly for causing unrest by introducing CAA and pro-BJP media claims that “anti-nationals” are taking advantage of anti-CAA protests. Among the YouTube channels, this article analyses news reports and editorials of the subscription-driven *ThePrint*, an English (occasionally Hindi) language “liberal and factual” outlet led by former investigative journalist Shekhar Gupta. This article also examined ground reports from *Capital TV*—a Hindi language pro-BJP YouTube channel that covered the riots extensively. The Indian media stayed with the topic for several days, often questioning claims made by Western media, while Western media understandably moved on to other stories. The picture of riots emerging from the Indian media is as follows:

- A. Riots were localized, occurring in Northeast Delhi.
- B. Rioting included aggressors and victims from both communities. Liberal media focused on Muslim victims, and pro-BJP media focused on Hindu victims.
- C. Police were themselves victims, especially on day one. Depending on the political inclination of the channels, some sympathize actively with the police, while others blame the police for cumulative inaction.
- D. The Indian media was divided over the ultimate attribution of blame on expected lines with pro- and anti-BJP stances.
- E. Were the riots preplanned? Media with right-wing sympathies further assert that the riots were preplanned to be timed with Trump’s visit; the key question for them is who started the riots.
- F. The right-leaning channels highlighted the hate speeches by anti-Modi politicians being ignored by “left-liberal” media in India and the Western media as part of anti-CAA agitations. For instance, they focused on a speech by Muslim politician Waris Pathan who said on February 19, in the context of anti-CAA agitations, that 15 crore Muslims could overpower 100 crore Hindus when they come out on the streets.

First, the riot was presented as localized. There was shock and disbelief at the unfolding violence on Indian TV networks, though exaggerated claims of genocide are absent. Shekhar Gupta, citing Varshney and Wilkinson’s data, states that religious violence in India is decreasing over time. The anti-Sikh violence in 1984 after Indira Gandhi’s assassination was a pogrom, as cops abdicated their responsibilities, and only Sikhs among them were killed (ThePrint, 2020b). However, the current Delhi and even the infamous 2002 Gujarat violence are communal riots with Hindu and Muslim victims. The social reality of India’s caste ethnicities disrupts the homogenized Hindu identity; some riots are between caste groups, such as the Muzaffarnagar riots between Jats and Muslims. Moreover, there have been Shia-Sunni riots, particularly in Lucknow. The international media narrative is challenged by focusing on Hindu and police victims.

Pogrom, like genocide, means “an organised massacre of a particular ethnic group.” The truth—as is evident from the list of the dead so far—is that the Delhi riots are far from a genocide or pogrom. Of the 28 names confirmed among 39 killed till now, 9 to 10 or 35 percent are of Hindus. This, in a city with just about 13 percent Muslim population. Which genocide or pogrom has so many of so-called “perpetrators” killed by supposed “victims”? How many Nazis did Jews kill during Holocaust? How many Hutus were killed in retaliation of the rape and massacre of nearly a million Tutsis in the 1994 Rwandan genocide? How many Muslims like (sic) Kashmiri Pandits kill while being murdered and driven away from their home during the 1990s ethnic cleansing? The answer is: None, or almost none. (Majumdar, 2020, para. 5)

Claims of genocide or pogrom are seen as an example of hypocrisy. We are reminded of the religious cleansing in Kashmir Valley, where an estimated hundred thousand Hindus were driven out in 1990. Hindu rights’ grievances about Hindus being victims of religious violence in Muslim majority regions/nations within the “sacred geography” of the Indian subcontinent remain a crucial element of the Hindu nationalist psyche. The CAA also appeals to this psyche—Hindus are victims of genocide—“Hinducide.” The Orientalist narratives that dehumanize natives are, to the Hindu right, discourses that obfuscate centuries of suffering inflicted on them by foreign invaders hostile to their independent religious existence.

Muslim Settlements in Delhi

Varshney (2002) correctly warns against attributing riot-proneness to the composition of the population. Frøystad (2009) argues that the riot-susceptibility of Uttar Pradesh, the largest state in India, must be understood in light of its enormous population. However, religious demography and the role of class, geography, and history of Northeast Delhi need to be understood to contextualize rioting.

Central Delhi and East Delhi have pockets of significant Muslim populations. Muslims constitute 13% of Delhi’s population, 30% of the Northeast district, 34% of Central Delhi, and 16% of the relatively posh South Delhi, where Shaheen Bagh, the nerve center of anti-CAA protests, is located within its northeastern quarter. Muslim populations are concentrated along the banks of Yamuna, which flows through the eastern areas of Delhi and runs from north to south. It is a 4-km long stretch of the Northeast district that turned into a zone of rioting.

The Old Delhi area within the central district is the traditional home of Muslims. After partition, most Muslim elites left Central Delhi (ThePrint, 2020a). Muslim properties labeled “Evacuee properties” were assigned to new migrants (Hindu and Sikh) from recently created Pakistan, creating a mixed neighborhood. At the same time, Muslims from the Mewat Region adjoining Delhi, fearing hostility in the wake of partition, moved into the city in large numbers. These Muslims settled in Northeast Delhi. PM Nehru preferred exclusive Muslim settlements to enhance their sense of security; his Deputy Patel preferred mixed neighborhoods to encourage understanding among communities and reduce hostilities. In the mid-1970s, a Muslim ghetto in Central Delhi near Turkman Gate was demolished as part of Sanjay Gandhi’s (Indira Gandhi’s younger son) “beautification” drive. These Muslims then migrated to Northeast Delhi. The Muslim ghettos in Northeast Delhi were cultivated into “vote banks” by the Congress Party. New Muslim migrants from other parts of the

country joined Northeast Delhi with the community voting en bloc for Congress and later for the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

Following anti-CAA agitations in the 2019 Delhi state elections, Northeast District witnessed a polarizing campaign by the BJP. While the polarizing campaign did not help BJP across Delhi, where it lost badly to AAP, it won the Northeast Delhi districts, prompting associations between its win and rioting. Skirmishes between police and protesters have occurred since December after police baton-charged Jamia Millia students. In mid-December, Seelampur in Northeast Delhi witnessed stone-pelting mobs overwhelming the police.

The Case of a Murdered Intelligence Official

On February 26, 2020, the body of intelligence operative Ankit Sharma was recovered from a drain. The drain was situated near AAP city counselor Tahir Hussain's home. The AAP is the ruling party of Delhi state. The next day, a *Wall Street Journal* report (mis)quoted Sharma's brother, Ankur Sharma, to claim he was killed by a mob shouting "Jai Shri Ram," implying that the killers were Hindu; "They came armed with stones, rods, knives, and even swords; they shouted, 'Jai Shri Ram'; some even wore helmets" (Pokharel, Agarwal, & Roy, 2020, para. 18). Ankur Sharma contradicted the report: "They are lying. I've always said that my brother was attacked by Aam Aadmi Party Councilor (from Nehru Vihar) Tahir Hussain's men. They attacked Ankit and dragged him inside Hussain's house" (The Times of India, 2020, para. 7). The following day, sticking with its version, *Wall Street Journal* reported that Ankit's brother was retracting his earlier statement.

On Thursday, Mr. Sharma's brother repeated the story but said he and his family believed Mr. Sharma was killed by supporters of a local municipal politician, Tahir Hussain, who is Muslim and a member of the Aam Aadmi Party, the local political party that controls the government of Delhi. He offered no evidence for the claim. Police said the father had filed a complaint alleging Mr. Hussain was involved in the killing. (Agarwal & Spindle, 2020, para. 14)

The report placed the onus of evidence on Sharma's brother to substantiate his claims, as this story challenged the Hindu aggressor-Muslim victim binary. In a TV debate, a panelist claimed Sharma's brother was lying, "this is a false statement . . . I have got a *Wall Street Journal* Report which says he first blamed Hindu mobs for that . . . he later changed his stand" (Republic World, 2020b, 34:10). The *Wall Street Journal* report is cited as canonical authority to debunk Ankit Sharma's brother's account.

Those watching local channels got a contrasting picture of the developments in the Ankit Sharma case. The case began on February 25 with eyewitness accounts of the kidnapping of Ankit Sharma. The intelligence operative was snooping on Tahir Hussain's house when he was dragged into it by some men who had come out of the same house. As Sharma was kidnapped and his body found later in a drain nearby, the family and their neighbors blamed Hussain and his men for both.

Ankit's association with the intelligence agency and Tahir Hussain's innocence formed the basis of contestation for the opposing narratives. As the autopsy of Ankit Sharma's body revealed multiple injuries and gruesome torture, some news channels on the right saw a message to the Indian intelligence community from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Opposing views sought to downplay Ankit's association with the Indian Intelligence Bureau (IB). Some called him a private security guard at IB, initially implying that he was not associated with intelligence gatherings. As facts emerged, these descriptions changed, and some online news stories edited previous versions, questioning Sharma's intelligence association and Hussain's complicity.

Even as news media contested Ankit Sharma's brutal murder, the focus shifted to Tahir Hussain's involvement as social media videos of his "riot factory" went viral. In these videos, Hussain appeared to be directing a group of people on the terrace of his house with a stick in hand; other videos showed a mob on the same balcony throwing petrol bombs. The entire building was teeming with riotous mobs. On February 27, Sanjay Singh, AAP member of parliament and its national spokesperson, defended Hussain, claiming that the mob forcibly entered his house. Local news channels reported that Hussain brought people from Aligarh to the riot, thus pushing the theory that the riots were preplanned. As supporting Hussain became increasingly untenable, he was suspended from AAP. Soon, Hussain went missing, only to be apprehended by the police on March 5, 2020.

A report titled "Indian Media Has Made Tahir Hussain Face of Delhi Riots. What's the Evidence?" listed testimonies on Ankit Sharma and Tahir Hussain from the neighborhood (Sharma, 2020a). The story has been edited over time as facts emerge, moving from a strong to a much-watered-down defense of Hussain. Testimonies of neighbors vary on religious lines, with Hindu eyewitnesses backing Ankit Sharma's family version and Muslims uncertain about who the mob was. The report finds fault with media narratives portraying Hussain as the mastermind, asserting instead that the key question should be "when the video was shot and who shot it" (Sharma, 2020a, para. 57). The report also falsely claimed that Hussain was suspended from AAP immediately after the accusations were leveled at him.

Hussain claimed the mob attacked his house on Monday, February 24, and he called the cops to rescue him. Hussain left home Monday evening to return to the building on February 25. According to local people, attacks from his house began around 9:30 pm on February 23 and continued for 3 hours. On February 24 at 2 pm, attacks resumed and continued for 9 to 10 hours. Hussain was at home as 150–200 people were on the terrace throwing stones and Molotov bombs. Zee News's report showed crates of Molotov cocktails found on Hussain's terrace and neighbors accusing Hussain of planning the riots well in advance (Zee News, 2020). Hussain mobilized men from Aligarh, and acid, stones, and other materials were recovered from his home. These materials required time to be mobilized.

The Delhi riots spotlighted two Northeast Delhi politicians—once close associates in AAP—Kapil Mishra and Tahir Hussain. International and national liberal media portrayed BJP's Mishra as having triggered riots with his speech. Mishra's former AAP associate Tahir Hussain dominated news narratives as riots progressed. Tahir Hussain's probable complicity in the Delhi riots and Ankit Sharma's killing challenged the simplistic Hindu aggressor-Muslim victim binary. In the liberal national and international media, it was initially conjectured that Tahir Hussain was being framed for Ankit Sharma's killing. Political parties, both

the AAP and the BJP, have sought to distance themselves from being seen as supporting anyone involved in rioting. Thus, the AAP distanced itself from Hussain, suspending him.

Reports From the Pro-BJP Media

In the initial days of rioting, Wikipedia emerged as a site of contestations surrounding the framing of riots. Ankit Sharma's killing was described in a brief paragraph on February 26, 2020; by 28th, this was removed. Soon, Wikipedia editor DBigXRay locked the article, so the changes had to pass through him. For example, he refused to identify Jaffrabad's gunman (another subject of considerable controversy) by name, arguing that such shootings often happened in riots and that Shahrukh was being singled out and named because he was a Muslim (Sharma, 2020c). When questioned about the addition of Kapil Mishra as the sole "Lead Figure" of the Delhi riots, the editor refused to recognize Waris Pathan's speech as an instigation of the riots, asserting there was nothing provocative in that speech. The editor also asserted that Tahir Hussain was innocent (Sharma, 2020c).

The Shiv Vihar area was a site of major rioting, with most stories focusing on Muslim victims. There were two adjacent schools, one Hindu owned and the other Muslim owned. Capital TV story narrated how mothers had taken their children home from local schools that afternoon and rioting had started that night. A Muslim mob ransacked Hindu-owned schools and shops (Capital TV, 2020c). The Muslim-owned shops in the area were marked "no CAA" and "no NRC," marking their opposition to the controversial law; these shops were spared while others were ransacked (Capital TV, 2020a). The Muslim-owned school was used as a launchpad for attacks, and a huge catapult was built to throw homemade bombs. The access road was barricaded to prevent cops from entering. The Capital TV report claims that for three days, forces could not enter Shiv Vihar as petrol bombs and acid were thrown at them; local Hindus claim that Muslims from adjoining Mustafabad carried on rioting for three days, damaging schools and parking lots owned by Hindus (Capital TV, 2020b).

Another local channel that reached the school rooftop pointed to a charred house in the vicinity, claiming that a Hindu resident of the house was killed that night. *ThePrint* (ThePrint, 2020c) reporters met with the locals; the traumatized Hindu watchman of the Hindu-owned school broke down, narrating the incident of that night. Hindu locals complained that their version was not being reported in the media. They were living in fear as mobs chanting "*Haye Haye Modi*" (Down, Down Modi) continued to harass them in the days following the attacks. The Hindus in the area also complained that their legislator Haji Yunus (AAP) did not come to their aid.

Capital TV reported the gory killing of Dilber Negi (A Hindu) in the Shiv Vihar area. Negi's hands and legs were chopped off, and then he was burnt alive by a mob. The summary lead of the article in *ThePrint* "The Body had been Allegedly Burnt by a Mob After Cutting off the Limbs" (ThePrint, 2020e). "Alleged" is also added as a qualifier in *Al Jazeera* report (Kuchay, 2020). The dominant narrative also informed the political visits, with opposition leaders reaching out to assuage affected Muslim communities in the area. A local woman identifying as a Congress voter asked why Mr. Rahul Gandhi visited only Muslim victims, not Hindus (TIMES NOW, 2020).

A Note on Muslim Media

The Muslim daily *Siasat* launched its intervention to help victims, terming the February 2020 riots an anti-Muslim pogrom. *Siasat* published a story about a Hindu man who sustained severe injuries, saving six Muslims during the riots (Sikander, 2020). The Muslim perspective demonstrates ideological opposition to the BJP and the CAA while focusing on mobilizing help to the victims and remembering the courage of Hindus who helped Muslim victims. A kind of cross-border solidarity is also noticed, which focuses on reports of Hindus in Pakistan protesting the Delhi riots.

Anti-CAA Agitations

The controversial CAA led to widespread protests. Comedian John Oliver claimed in his weekly broadcast that the CAA could strip millions of Muslims of citizenship. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USICRF), which categorized India as a country of particular concern for tolerating religious freedom violations, stated that the CAA would render Muslims stateless in India. It has also been viewed as a law "which widely restricts Muslim immigration to India" (Democracy Now!, 2020, 0:22).

A complete and comprehensive discussion of CAA is not within the scope of this article. The focus here is on certain aspects discussed in Indian media, such as *ThePrint*, but ignored by international media. The influx of outsiders into the indigenous tribal lands of Assam in northeast India has long been a political issue. The Indian government signed the Assam Accord with leaders of the Assam Movement, committing to send back all refugees and migrants who entered Assam after March 25, 1971, to their country of origin. The Supreme Court has mandated the National Register for Citizens (NRC) exercise to weed out the "foreigners," in this case, Bangladeshis. Two-thirds of those who could not prove Indian citizenship under the NRC process were Hindus. India's failure to politicize the religious cleansing of Hindus in Muslim-dominated Pakistan has been a grievance for the RSS since partition. The Hindu right laments the decline in Hindu influence in South Asia, particularly since the partition both territorially and demographically. For instance, the population of religious minorities in East Pakistan/Bangladesh decreased from 23% in 1951 to 9.6% in 2011, owing to religious cleansing and exodus. The Bangla genocide by pro-Pakistan forces before the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 claimed between 200,000 and 3 million lives. No Indian government could force Hindus to return to Bangladesh, where they experienced religious persecution (ThePrint, 2020d). Various governments have settled these Hindus quietly in different parts of India. However, BJP, with its brand of religious partisanship, brought out the CAA—an Act that identified beneficiaries of expedited citizenship by religion, excluding Muslims—raising questions on the CAA's constitutionality. This identification of refugees by religion in law was not made even during the partition when the country experienced a massive influx of refugees. In his parliamentary speech and subsequent TV interviews, Home Minister Amit Shah asserted that nationwide citizenship determination would follow the CAA to identify non-Indians, further triggering insecurities among Muslims.

Following typical social movement mobilization techniques, anti-CAA protestors organized sit-ins, with protesting women blocking roads initially in the Shaheen Bagh area of Delhi. BJP's moves in Kashmir, Triple Talak law, and the Supreme Court verdict on Ayodhya Temple were already seen among sections of Muslims as undermining their interests or privileges. Protesters at Shaheen Bagh took care

to garner international media attention, effectively internationalizing the issue (Republic World, 2020a). Various opposition leaders whose parties depended on Muslim voters also supported anti-CAA agitations. Soon, a diverse coalition of concerned citizens, human rights activists, and student activists was built around the issue.

The CAA protest sites also witnessed instances of hate speech. In the age of social media, such instances were actively shared, raising suspicions about the nature of the movement itself. Some locals were annoyed by the inconvenience caused by extended mobilization. Some local Muslims objected to what they saw as the instrumentalization of Muslim women by anti-CAA activists (Sharma, 2020b).

Conclusion

The news reports “framed” the victims, brutality, perpetrators, human rights, criminal and policing responsibility, and the underlying political responsibility in a symbiotic relationship within the discourse that informed their understanding of the contemporary Indian polity. Examining narratives on the Delhi riots reveals many hegemonies, not just the Hindu nationalist, representing violence in the media. Misrepresentations can be inflammatory, generating risks to marginal individuals or populations. This article argued that Northeast Delhi riots present a lens to the media’s biases that inform discourses that construct India, its religious majorities, minorities, and the relations therein. The riot coverage in Western media, while purportedly opposed to BJP’s “Hindu-nationalism,” due to its overt reliance on the Hindu aggressor-Muslim victim binary as a meta explanation for Hindu-Muslim relations in India, misrepresents Indian society, culture, and polity. Several academics and politicians sharing and citing Western media reports claimed that BJP was undertaking a religious cleansing project exhibiting a limited understanding of India’s realpolitik. This concern for the well-being of minorities in India is channeled to seek imperialist calls for Western intervention, even from people professing an anticolonial stance. While overtly propagandist in nature, subliminally, it demonstrates a general distrust of the Global South and its ability to govern itself. Various incidents during the Northeast Delhi riots, their coverage in the media, miscategorizations, and binary accounts of brutality indicate the immutable propagandist nature of discourses that seek to shape reality.

A parallel narrative of Hindu victimhood is found in pro-BJP media reversing the Western media’s aggressor/victim binary, also not devoid of inaccuracies. The linear narratives that politicize the attacks on one community and ignore the suffering caused to the victims of the other constitute the global anti-Hindu narrative, which erases Hindu victimhood. In this narrative, “deracinated” Indian experts’ persistent pessimism about India is an exercise of neo-colonialist elite privilege. These anxieties are renewed with every report of anti-Hindu violence in India, its neighborhood, and elsewhere.

At the time of going to press, the government has not yet notified rules under the CAA, perhaps fearing further backlash. Some anti-CAA activists arrested under anti-terror laws are starting to receive relief from the courts. In addition to constitutional mechanisms, there are limits to the rigid colonial categorization of Indians based on religious identity or its inversion by the Hindu right in a nation where tradition, caste, gender, and class also shape politics. Polarized politics restricts a constitutive understanding of Hindu-Muslim relations. In several areas of Northeast Delhi, local communities of Hindus, Muslims, and

Sikhs came together to prevent the spread of rioting in their neighborhoods, opening shops, and restoring normalcy. India's heterogeneity in social practice, with the agency of local communities that conduct their everyday lives by counteracting divisive constructs, needs consideration.

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