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AGENCY AND GOVERNANCE IN THE CONTEXT OF CIVIL CONFLICT

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HOW DO ENDEMIC RIOTS AFFECT POOR URBAN HOUSEHOLDS? NEW DATA FROM INDIA

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Summary

Through a study of 45 neighbourhoods, spread across nine districts in the Indian state of Maharashtra, we find that households that live in the vicinity of a crime-prone area and are not able to rely on community support are considerably more prone to suffer from riots than other households. Nevertheless, holding all else equal, victimisation *increases* with income per capita. We also find evidence of targeting even in 'unplanned' riots. This suggests that bouts of civil violence previously thought of as 'monotone' occurrences of violence, are more complex events where violence is perpetrated at multiple levels. Victimisation is more common in neighbourhoods with weaker social interactions, but some evidence suggests that weak social interactions may also be a consequence of rioting.

Introduction

Urban settings are the centres of economic growth, while urban riots and disorder are believed to reduce this potential. Endemic forms of social unrest result in considerable economic, social and political costs, sometimes more so than larger-scale armed conflicts. Yet, existing research offers limited understanding of the precise economic consequences and the channels through which riots affects those living in areas of recurrent violence. Much of the literature on riots in India analyses different factors (at the national, state and city levels) that may account for the emergence of riots in some locations and at some points in time. The literature fails, however, to explain how different people experience riots in different ways, even those within the same communities. What remain largely unexplained are the determinants of riot victimisation at the household level.

Summary Box

India currently experiences approximately 60,000 riots annually. In Maharashtra, riots were initially infrequent, increasing drastically during the late 1970s to early 1980s, and have since remained at a high level of approximately 6000 riots per year. A nuanced and multi-dimensional assessment of rioting is needed to explain why riots occur endemically in some neighbourhoods, occasionally in others, while most urban areas do not experience such violence. This study is based on an original and innovative household survey of riot-prone neighbourhoods. We document the extent to which household are victimised, the profile of households that are victimised, the consequences of rioting on those households, and the spatial characteristics of the neighbourhoods that the violence is perpetrated in.

Developing the arguments

We understand 'rioting' as endemic episodes of violence directed towards the state by civilian groups, or inter-group violence wherein the state often is an active participant. There has been much academic speculation as to the changing nature of rioting in India. In pre-independence India, rioting and public disorder were mostly about groups trying to make assertions for their economic rights and space. Since the 1950s however, there has been recognition of the divisive character of riots, which were increasingly being used to drive a belligerent political ideology.

Political understandings of rioting in contemporary India are threefold: (1) that riots are instrumentalised through hierarchical socio-political structures deep rooted within society. The triggering of riots is therefore not as spontaneous a phenomenon as it might seem, and 'riot captains' direct teams of people specifically positioned within an Institutionalised Riot Production System to instigate public fights (as argued by Paul

Brass); (2) that it is closely related with electoral dynamics, in such a way that when the incumbent government relies on votes from the 'grievance group', it is seen to prevent civil violence (as argued by Steven Wilkinson); and (3) there is a strong correlation between low levels of institutionalised civic engagement in cities and civil violence (as argued by Ashutosh Varshney). Where civic life is inclusive, attempts to mobilise around religious affiliations will tend to fail. Because people from different groups live together, know each other and share common interests, information flows smoothly across communities leaving no room for inflammatory rumours. Riots are more likely to take hold in towns where religious groups live far apart in homogenous neighbourhoods, and where people from these groups do not mix in inter-groups associations.

Economic understandings of these riots point towards resource scarcity, resulting out of mismanagement as well as population pressure, which has been found to have a significant impact on various group-based forms of violence in India at the state-level. In a similar vein, studies argue that competition (both economic and political) between Hindu and Muslim groups constitute the root cause of inter-group riots. Conversely, there is a negative impact of economic growth on Hindu-Muslim riots. There is a powerful case for the role of institutions and social networks. Theoretically, two groups will peacefully coexist if (i) they are complementary in production, (ii) each group's specificity cannot be acquired by the other one, and (iii) there is a mechanism of profit sharing, which maintains at a low level the inter-groups inequalities. Studies have shown that in former medieval trading ports relationships between Hindu and Muslim were characterised by all three aforementioned conditions of ethnic peace. Ensuing ethnic peace translated into a strong inter-group associational life that remained intact after the Muslim oceanic trade ended and still persists nowadays.

Much of the rioting in India takes place in urban areas arguably because such riots share a close interface with three dimension specific to the urban context – firstly, a high degree of commoditisation, which means that labour is the urban poor's single most valuable asset. They are therefore highly vulnerable to income shocks. Second, a grossly inadequate provision of housing, water, sanitation and solid waste disposal in urban centres compounds the already magnified environmental hazards such as water, air and industrial pollution. Third, the heterogeneity of the urban condition, where the concentration of migrant labour and other mobile populations is much higher than in non-urbanised contexts, can leave urban residents vulnerable to social fragmentation – they can be cut off from community safety nets that they might have had access to in a rural or even semi-urban setting. These three dimensions of vulnerability imply that during an episode of rioting, not only do the urban poor experience a direct risk of injury, but they are also less likely to recover quickly from wounds sustained, more likely to lose all income from regular day-wage labour, more likely to be left homeless, and less likely to have the resources to get access to fair justice.

While there are a large number of incidents, riots in India rarely engulf entire cities and often occur in concentrated pockets. Explanations based on polarisation and politicisation of ethnic identity alone therefore are insufficient in explaining variation in the incidence of rioting evidenced at the neighbourhood level. A more nuanced and multi-dimensional assessment of civil violence is needed to explain the non-uniform occurrence of riots within cities. We approach the problem in two ways – first we take a look at the household level, in order to get an understanding of the extent and patterns of victimisation. Expressly, we are interested in finding out *who* is a victim of riots. Second, we take a spatial approach by using *within* neighbourhood distances (which we term as 'micro-distances'), composition and layout, as proxies for the level of ghettoisation and gentrification of neighbourhoods. To this end, we ask whether certain spatial characteristics predispose neighbourhoods to the outbreak of riots.

We surveyed over 1000 households in forty-five riot-prone neighbourhoods in fourteen cities in Maharashtra. In order to determine levels of victimisation, we asked respondents the following question: *In the past 24 months, did you or any member of your household experience a riot?* The question was asked after similar questions probing whether the household experienced negative events such as illness, flood or lost employment. In so doing, our variable reflects *actual impact* on the household, as opposed to signaling the simple presence of violence or public disorder in the neighbourhood.

Overall, 12.5 per cent of the samples were victims of riots. We also found that people reported different levels of victimisation. Approximately 2.4 per cent of the sample, or 1/5th of all victims of rioting, suffered

'directly' as they needed extra money to cope after experiencing the riot, either because of damages done to their house or shops or because of medical treatment to injuries, or associated loss of wages. The rest did not sustain direct physical injury or costs. On average, the losses reported were sizable: an affected household suffered a loss of 10,000 Rupees (≈ £110), which was substantial in comparison with the mean sample income of 8,080 Rupees (≈ £88). The highest loss reported was 50,000 Rupees (≈ £545), an amount more than ten times the monthly income of the concerned household.

To get a nuanced picture of who the victims of riots are, we ask a series of probing questions:

Are victims of riots less likely to trust their neighbours or the police?

Households that reported being affected by a riot *do* trust their local police significantly more and exhibit a *higher* rate of civic engagement than non-victims. Interestingly however, we also find that trust toward neighbours reduces the odds of victimisation by 44 per cent. Conversely however, the further a household is from a police station the *less* likely that it is victimised in a riot.

Are victims less connected to local networks?

We find that households that can rely on the assistance of the community in case of need are 75 per cent less likely to be victims. Interestingly, a household with a member engaged in a civil society organisation, political party, trade union or other group is far more likely to also report being a victim of riots, than a household that is not engaged in such activities.

Are victims of riots economically vulnerable?

The answer is less clear, but we find that victims tend to resort less to community help in case of need, their income per capita is 400 *higher* and they enjoy an *extra* 1.5 hours of running water per day when compared with non-victims. The only contrast is the average access to electricity, which is *lower* by one hour per day for victims.

What about caste or religion?

We found this particularly difficult to disentangle. While on the one hand, the results indicate that neighbourhoods characterised by large caste fragmentation are *more likely* to experience riots, neither the caste nor the religion of households seem to display a significant relationship with victimisation. We do however find that households which speak the local language, Marathi, are almost three times more likely than non-Marathi speaking households to report being affected by a riot.

Further to building a profile of victim-households, we also looked at the neighbourhoods themselves, and asked:

Are there discernible spatial patterns among neighbourhoods where victims live?

We find that riots are episodes in which violence is perpetrated at multiple levels: most households are in fact not affected – even in neighbourhoods that experience high intensity riots. Furthermore, most of the households that are affected, do not report injuries, deaths, destruction of assets or loss of money. These households are spread out (dispersed) within their neighbourhoods, which seem to suggest that rioting might be 'unplanned'. However, analysis of a sub-set of 'acute' victims, those that have sustained physical injuries, loss of life in the household, loss of money or assets, reveals an alternate autonomy of the riots in which premeditated violence is perpetrated. Using 'micro-distances' to look at the immediate vicinity of *acute victim* households we find that while there are very few acute victims in the sample, *it is overwhelmingly likely that acute victims live within 5 minutes of one another*, and furthermore, that an acute victim has mostly non-victims in their immediate vicinity. This is a significant finding particularly in the context of dispersion amongst non-victims.

Policy Implications and recommendations

Our research seeks to gain a better understanding of the consequences of rioting in India for those living in areas where violence is endemic and persistent. We do this by identifying and analysing important micro-foundations of processes of violence victimisation that continue to rise and persist across many communities, cities and states in India. The results provide ample evidence for the destructive effects of

riots and persistent forms of violence across many households in Maharashtra, emphasising the need for the Government of India to focus more attention on the rise and persistence of communal violence in India. India's economic, social and political landscape has been changing dramatically since the early 1990s, when a large program of economic liberalisation and de-regularisation resulted in impressive increases in economic growth across the country. However, India's track record in terms of economic growth and economic internationalisation has been accompanied by the persistence of pockets of poverty, rising inequalities in terms of political representation, income opportunities and social mobility and increased social and political tensions. In particular, increased civil conflict, the rise of identity-based politics and inter-communal tensions pose a considerable challenge to India's future economic development processes and the survival of its long-held values of pluralism and social justice.

Our findings also seem to suggest a non-linear correlation between non-elected state institutions (i.e. the administrative and punitive or correctional arms of the state) and the occurrence of riots. Acute victims or high intensity riots rarely occur in neighbourhoods where the non-elected state is heavily present (in the forms of official buildings, kiosks, and booths). However, it is not clear that increased state presence reduces all types of victimisation, since the punitive arms of the state are found most predominantly in neighbourhoods in which non-acute victims and medium intensity riots occur. These preliminary findings relating to the non-elected state are significant for three reasons – first, even if they are not directly mandated by an electorate, non-elected state institutions represent state authority in a visible manner in that, for example, the police wear uniforms and posses a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and violence. Second, the punitive and correctional arms of the state are directly mandated to confront public disorder. Moreover, the state's redistributive functions, which are deeply connected with social outcomes, are mainly administered by the non-elected state. And third, non-elected state institutions, like urban planning departments, significantly alter the spaces in which riots unfold.

How neighbourhoods are organised, whether they contain certain elements like police stations, bridges, roads or markets, where poor households are located (on the periphery or at the centre, densely packed or spread out), as well as where the neighbourhood itself is located (in a small town or a mega-city), can potentially impact the nature of public order. A clear consensus on the direction of these impacts does not however exist: while on the one hand, police absence can have an immediate and adverse impact on crime levels, on the other, research shows that prolonged ex-post policing (measures which increase police activity after the act of violence) can be linked in the long-run to an increase in social unrest. In a similar vein, markets for example, can be spaces for social co-operation as much as points of friction. Nevertheless, we know that some form of positive connection or attachment between individuals or a group and their neighbourhood can have important influences on responses to disorder.

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