CHAPTER I

Introduction

In August 1795, Surat, the premier port city of the Mughal Empire on the west coast of India, saw a violent Hindu-Muslim riot. The thesis attempts a detailed reconstruction of the riot, along with studies of some other riots in Surat and other cities, to understand the long-term processes of religious conflict and collective violence in India.

The larger problematic

A striking feature of modern South Asian history and politics is the extent of their preoccupation with the question of religious identities, communities, and their inter-relationships in social, and public spaces. Largely focused on Hindus and Muslims, but not confined to them, this has always been one of the core issues and point of contestation of nationalist discourses, framed in terms of the binary ideologies of 'secularism' and 'communalism'. As a reflection of this, and in particular of the provenance acquired of late by religious nationalism attended by large scale collective violence in public and political arenas, there is a spurt of historical and other studies seeking to reconstruct the history of religious communities, identities, and the conflicts.

Historiography and the “constructionist” argument

In the old established historiography, the aggressive build up of religious identities was depicted, overwhelmingly, as a legacy of British rule in India. The policy of 'divide and rule' pursued by the colonial masters, combined with competition for jobs and public positions among the educated elites belonging to different religious communities and the
struggle to find representation within local and provincial governments, as also revivalist movements, led to cleavages between religious communities. This view has now found more sophisticated elaboration. Articulated with the help of newer concepts and insights coming from postmodernism, discourse analysis, and the anthropological turn of history, it talks in terms of the "construction" of communalism, religious identities, and religion itself by colonial agencies. The writings of the influential Subaltern School, are an apt illustration of this 'constructionist' argument. Here the extensive religious identities and communal/sectarian violence are seen to be almost wholly products of colonial technologies of power and knowledge. In another variant of the argument, they are a by-product of modernity itself and arise ineluctably in its interstices. In this perspective a crucial distinction is made between religion as 'faith' and religion as 'ideology'. While the former typifies pre-modern India, the latter is seen to be a pervasive feature of the 'modern' and the source of the communal malaise, its political pathology.

Written with postmodern intents and conceptual commitments, these constructionist arguments constitute a formidable critique of the misleading notion of communities as 'natural entities' invested with an a priori existence, and reveal the workings of a complex array of processes and historical shifts that were involved in their making.

However, it is no less significant, that these conceptually rich histories (written largely by historians working in the field of modern/colonial history) have come to rest on a basic denial of the existence of any supra-local identities, whether linguistic, regional, or religious, prior to colonialism. Given this, religious communities on the large scale in India/South Asia, and the aggression and violence which they

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1 See Gyanendra Pandey, The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India, OUP, Delhi, 1990.
have been the sites of, would appear to have emerged ab initio from the colonial encounter. Seen together these particular takes, coming independently from Subalterns and several other historians, represent, as the thesis would argue, a certain imagination of the medieval which is frozen in its contours and which defies re-conceptualization despite the availability of historical materials laden with contrary implications. In substance, this is also a measure of the binaries controlling 'secular' and 'communal' depictions of India's pasts, a hybrid contest of knowledge and power in which inquiry receives a short shrift while the Present continues to weigh heavily on the Past. As a result, notwithstanding the growing body of evidence indicating a perceptible spurt in instances of collective violence around religious issues, symbols, and rituals in the 18th century/ pre-colonial India, the phenomenon of the “religious riot,” in the terms outlined by C.A. Bayly for India2 and by Natalie Zemon Davis for sixteenth century Europe,3 has not received the critical attention which it deserves. This is inescapable if one is to a) uncover for examination the deep structures of collective violence in Indian society, and b) to develop a more rigorous understanding of the internal dynamics of this society without being unduly restrained by either secularist pieties or the fear of diluting the critique of colonialism by admitting the pre-colonial as a possible threshold in the development of social and discursive forms that could brace elements of the 'communal'.

More recent trends of inquiry
This lacunae, however, is being overcome by a slow but steady stream of historical research of a different persuasion which has been pushing the frontiers of this inquiry in two complementary directions: one, across the temporal divide between the colonial – precolonial into the extended medieval centuries in a search for notions of self and other and the contexts

and conditions in which they come to be articulated; and two, in developing conceptual vocabularies which are both flexible and incisive to render intelligible the complex empirical record of the pre-colonial period without casting it in the frame of a telos provided by “communalism.” Examining the problem from different perspectives the studies have brought to bear on the subject a conceptual reflexivity absent from it before.4

Although distinct and varied in their approaches these studies seem to be moving towards overlapping areas of concern and critical vocabulary. The ideas so generated seem to embrace the following patterns of interpretation, of which the following appear to be distinctive features:

1. Notwithstanding the extraordinarily critical shift that colonialism engendered, the primacy of periodization needs to be toned down in studying a tenacious and long lasting phenomenon like communalism (or nationalism), informed by deep anterior processes and structures. A notion of periodization packaged rather tightly within the categories of ‘modern’ and ‘colonial’ detracts from the business of serious historical analysis.5

2. The domain of symbols and rituals, as also discourses of ‘self’ and ‘other,’ are powerful elements in the formation of identities and inter-community relationships. Characteristically, these represent the more persistent social parts of historical processes that transgress the reified boundaries in which time is packaged in models of periodization. In different ways the more recent studies suggest a persuasive case for a conjunctural model in the study of religious formations informed by a longue duree perspective.


3. The cyclical inflow of symbols, ritual spaces, and collective violence dynamically and simultaneously determine religious boundaries and the nature of public arenas. It is these that in-form and structure the intimate constitution of identities. One could possibly see in them elements of the 'primordial', co-existing in a dialectical relationship with the new and the contingent thrown up by historical change. It is therefore incumbent to locate and describe them in the first place.

The thesis engages with the conceptual trajectories stated above through an analysis which is briefly outlined in the section that follows.

The thesis: focus and areas of concern

The thesis is an attempt to document and examine the several instances of inter- as well as intra-community conflicts in Surat during the second half of the 18th century. In doing so it adopts c.1795 as a crucial vantage point for entering the life of the city and taking a close look into these conflicts, recorded in our primary sources overtly as forms of religious riot, by reading back into them what the evidence reveals of the three basic themes in the title of the thesis, namely, the nature of political power ('state'), forms of social organization in an urban space, and the thresholds or registers in which religious and other forms of communities find expression. The central axis of the thesis revolves around a microscopic analysis of c. 1795 and the major event that presided over it. From this vantage point the thesis moves back and forth to examine the larger currents of history in which the event was located and which in turn it encapsulated and encoded. Adopting this conceptual and methodological device the thesis attempts to grasp simultaneously events as well as processes through which the social history of the city was expressed.

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In August 1795 Surat, which had enjoyed the status of being the premier port city of Mughal India, saw a short, but violent, riot between Muslims and Hindus. It proved to be a turning point in the history of city.

Albeit an 'event', the Riot contained something epochal. It stood at the intersection of an inexorable train of events and processes - of which it was both the expression and the catalyst - that saw the final eclipse of the ancien regime which had governed Surat for more than 200 years and its replacement by the rule of the English East India Company. For the English as well as for influential sections of the 'public' the riot of 1795 provided the raison d'être for clipping, and eventually sweeping aside, the old Mughal regime under the Nawabs and placing in its stead different modes of authority and civic institutions. With the progressive unfolding of 'colonial' rule the break with the past proved to be definitive and comprehensive. The Riot, hence, was laden with the significance and depth of a "rupture" that cast a long shadow on the city and its future.

Marked by growing urban disorders from the 1720s and 1730s Surat was witness to a wide repertoire of conflicts throughout the 18th century which, apart from religion, included violent clashes between a variety of ethnic, professional, status, and commercial groups, as well as intense disputes between contesting, unsettled domains of civic jurisdiction which the rival East India Companies had marked out for themselves, in the course of several decades of aggressive self-assertion of commercial interests and privileges (and the patrimonies which structured them) against each other and also the Nawab and his officers.

No less significantly, a more populist zone of activities, attended by preachers and stump orators, can also be discerned from the sources. What we have here are indications of a deeply fissured but indigenous arena of 'public' activities which see their culmination in c.1795 and the radical
changes that followed rapidly thereafter. The thesis draws upon this extended phase of civic life to lend temporal depth to the events it seeks to reconstruct. It also incorporates primary source materials in Persian relating to riots in Ahmedabad in the early 18th century as well as civil/‘communal’ disturbances reported for some other cities of northern India in secondary works to explore the possibility of developing analogues and areas of concordance between spatially dispersed urban spaces. The thesis pays special attention to the use of descriptive categories in the original sources, analyzing them for what they might reveal of the workings of textual imagination and its mediation in the act of recording socially meaningful events and processes.

Methodology and Organization
For methodological purposes the thesis develops detailed narratives of three major religious riots in the city: in 1759, 1768, and 1795 based on primary sources in Persian, English and Gujarati (in the Modi script). The narratives embody processual analyses that deconstruct the supposedly single-unitarian Event into a series of micro-events so as to lay bare the social dynamics at work and the phased sequences in which it erupts. Interwoven with textual exegesis as well as other interdisciplinary insights, mainly from historical anthropology and historical sociology, the thesis seeks to create a language in which the conflicts can be deciphered, examined and situated in the currents of a conscious social history.

The scheme of chapters is as follows:

Chapter II, ‘The Surat Riot of 1795: A Second Look’ is a detailed narrative of the Surat Riot of 1795 taking its clue from what in social anthropology has come to be termed as “thick description.” The chapter attempts a microscopic reconstruction of a series of very different events that
comprised the riot. Based on the depositions of more than 70 witnesses who deposed before a Committee of Inquiry instituted by the officials of the English East India Company, the reconstruction allows us an inside view of the riot. Significantly this is perhaps the first riot in the history of India which was investigated by a Commission on the basis of eye witness account. The narrative that emerges from these accounts helps us in deconstructing the riot, analyze the different moments and social conditions involved in its articulation and bring to view a live field of force out of which it crystallized. The chapter provides us leads that are investigated in the chapters that follow.

Chapter III, 'Ahriman and the 'Path of the Kabiseh' is intended to lend temporal depth to the Hindu-Muslim conflict of 1795 by recounting a controversy and wide-ranging dispute, marked by instances of violence, between two 'sects' of Parsis clashing over rival versions of their sacred calendar. The account is based on a contemporary account in Parsi-Gujarati (in the Modi script) which has been translated to accompany the thesis.

Chapter IV, 'Surat and Beyond' extends and deepens the analysis by taking into account community conflicts in Ahmedabad in the early decades of the eighteenth century, and another riot in Surat. A close reading of the Persian sources in which they are recorded help us to make an assessment of the motivating symbols of crowds, forms of group cohesion, and the role of business rivalries in such conflicts. The chapter further draws upon episodes of religious riots from some other cities of northern India which echo the nature of contestation in Surat.

Chapter V, 'Conclusion; State, Community, and Society' draws inferences regarding the three themes identified by state, community, and society and interprets their significance in the context of precolonial India. It concludes by underlining the structure and social form of public arenas formed
around rituals and collective violence and indicates the direction in which the relative parts played by indigenous and colonial agency needs to be assessed.

This thesis carries a bibliography of the primary sources and secondary works on which it is based.