CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

State, Community, and Society

The attempt in the thesis at a reconstruction in detail of the Surat riot of 1795, as an event in its own rights, serves to bring into view the multiple registers in which it was played out. Compacted in this single event was the terminal crisis of the ancien regime in Surat under the Nawabs. Within five years of the riot, the regime working in a progressively unequal partnership with the English East India Company, and already whittled down by almost half-a-century of civil and political turmoil, was stripped of its powers. Speedily assuming control of the city, the English overhauled the civil and police administration of Surat city, altered the system of privileges and access to revenues generated within and beyond the city, and struck new alliances with old and new notables, and made strenuous efforts to reduce the Nawab to a ceremonial presence during festivities and Idd celebration. The raison d'être of embarking on such a course was predicated by English on the 1795 riot.

In the temporal passage of the riot as an event at least three clear stages are discernible, culminating in the fourth, the eruption of collective violence on a scale not witnessed in any of the several riots the city had seen in the second-half of the eighteenth century. As in the case of the conflict over the Kabiseh, these are intelligible in terms of the model used by Victor Turner. However, since we have already made a reference to this aspect of his work earlier we will not repeat it here.
What nevertheless calls for attention is the significance of this level of the 'social' as a perennial modality of social conflict in societies caught in a process of accelerated change in their basic structures. The former is accessible through methods and insights developed in social anthropology, while the latter has been traditionally the concern of historians. In the writings of Turner, as in those of Clifford Geertz, and Levy-Strauss - which dovetail with each other in critical ways, and are also marked by proximity to history as a discipline — there has been a significant advance in integrating the two levels of the social into a single field of analysis.\footnote{For a synthesis of these insights, see Appadurai Arjun, *Worship and Conflict under the colonial rule-A South Indian Case*, Orient Longman, 1981, pp. 1-6.}

This has opened up possibilities of examining the regulating mechanisms of the social order through lenses provided by the study of social conflict. Moments of breakdown, or ruptures, in Turner’s perspective “bring fundamental aspects of society, normally overlaid by the customs and habits of daily intercourse, into frightening prominence...” In Turner’s perspective, moments when “the normal and regular [are disturbed] often give us greater insight into the normal than does direct study.”\footnote{Turner Victor, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, Cornell University Press, London, 1978, pp.} The thesis is an attempt, in a preliminary way, is to move the discussion towards a line of similar convergence.

Looking at the riot retrospectively, stage one approximates to a local conflict between the supporters of the alleged thief, the Muezzin (or the Bengali *faqir*, as he is often referred to) and his detractors. Stage two, includes enmeshing of two processes: the conundrums of evidence gathering regarding the claims advanced by the two parties over the question of theft; and the negotiation of this relatively innocuous issue in the conditions of the ancien regime, characterized by the fuzzy and conflicted jurisdictions in the civic arena between opposite, and ill-adjusted poles of the dual government - the Nawab and the English - that ruled the

city from 1759 A.D. The latter constituted a conflicted zone of rival allegiances of the people, particularly during times of overriding crises and civil strife. Significantly for us, this was announced through a peculiar mode of invocation called the ‘Dohai. The first evidence available with us goes back to 1768 A.D. and figures in the Surat Factory Records dealing with the Parsi conflict. As a working notion, Dohai had struck roots in the civic life of the city, parcelled out between multiple competing centres of power. It covered the entire political spectrum and was acknowledged as a force to reckon with by the establishment – of course, with ambivalence and consternation depending on how its deployment tilted the balance of civic control in favour of one or the other power with stakes in the city. It was in this respect both consensual and contestatory and resorted to as a necessity in volatile situations. Dissatisfied with the pusillanimity of the Nawab’s administration, the ‘beleaguered’ party of the Muezzin called out the Dohai of the Char Yar. To use a term from Habermas, this call acted like a “gestalt switch” that transformed the entire range of communicative actions so far, changing the registers of the conflict dramatically and resulting in extensive mobilization of Muslims across the boundaries of caste and ethnicity. In the final stage, just as a party of officials and notables were deputed by the Nawab to carry out an inspection of the site of burglary to clear the haze surrounding the theft, and the party returned incredulous about the actual commission of the theft, the build up of tensions exploded into a riot.

The “stages,” of course, are a guide into what one might call the substratum of social conflict, applicable to it universally in widely divergent societies. It is an archetype. To be relevant in an ethno-historical sense, one needs to look into the other layers of the event formed historically over the short and the long terms. These represent significant

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aspects of life in the city. In this chapter we will pick up leads coming from our study of the Surat riot of 1795 A.D. to reflect upon the nature of 'state,' 'community,' and 'society' in pre-colonial India. All three themes are interwoven into its structure. Furthermore, we will also be making connections with the detailed study of the Parsi conflict (Chapter III) and the smaller studies, vignettes, of outbreaks of religious violence in the cities of Ahmedabad, Surat, and other North Indian cities (Chapter IV) to reflect on the three themes. The study of the Parsi conflict over the Kabiseh, and the short riot narratives relating to Surat, Ahmedabad and other cities, serve the purpose of analogues, opening up other frames connecting the urban riots in pre-colonial India with the large themes broached in this chapter.

At the most manifest level the riots in eighteenth Surat reveal a crisis of the socio-political order: their event-structures show an inter-weaving of pervasive political, social, and religious strands that are difficult to separate from each other. The assertions of values, religious doctrines, normative codes, and rituals in public determine the nature of the events which are shaped in both dialogic and confrontational engagements with power. The neat polarisation of the categories 'state' and 'society,' such as they are commonly in use, collapse in the face of the empirical record, calling for a dynamic field of analysis which identifies the grids through which power traverses back and forth between the poles of the state and society. What comes to view most vividly is the interplay of power between the hakim, social elites, and popular leaders allied with religious communities. Political or public actions emanate from interactions around this grid, which propels developments erupting as riots. Furthermore, down to the close of eighteenth century the realm of the hakim may have been splintered and chipped off owing to a variety of reasons, including the decline of the regulating mechanisms of the imperial centre and the growing clout of patronage-clientage relationships of the
East India Companies, but it continued to have entrenchments in the scheme of the collective, and is a source of normative ambivalence among such prominent actors as Aditram Bhat as in the case of the 1795 Riot as of Dashtur Kamdin in the Parsi affair.

The state: the ancien regime in Surat

The term 'state,' which generally evokes ideas of a unitary, centralized apparatus of control and decision-making, perched atop and dominating the social order, has undergone considerable change over the years, giving way to conceptions about it that are at once more flexible, penetrating, and rigorous. In the case of medieval/precolonial India there have been several attempts to redefine the 'state' in keeping with the emerging areas of historical inquiry into the nature of Indian society. Among these one may count the following as notable: Drawing heavily upon Max Weber, Stephen Blake has proposed the idea of the 'patrimonial-bureaucratic state' where the ruler "governs on the basis of a personal, traditional authority whose model is the patriarchal family..." This version also seems to conform to Andre Wink's characterization of the medieval Indian state as a 'highly monetised polity' based on prebends (property in office), and hence driven by a logic entirely different from that of western-European feudalism. Still other conceptions have been advanced: the segmentary state' model of Burton Stein, derived from Aidan Southall's work on East Africa, and applied with great insight to

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247 Fore a competent review of some of these models the various models of the state in medieval India, see Hasan Farhat, *State and Locality in Mughal India, Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572-1730*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2006, pp. 31-51. The discussion here is in relation Surat and is particularly relevant.

248 As Blake explains, "Patrimonial states arise... when lords and princes extend their sway over the extrahousehold subjects (patrimonial masters themselves) in areas beyond their patriarchal domain. The extension involves a change of authority: from the patrimonial, which is domestic and personal, to the purely political, which is military and judicial and which must be administered by extrahousehold officials." See Stephen Blake 'The Patrimonial-Bureaucratic State of the Mughals,' *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. xxxix, No. 1, November, 1979, pp.77-94.

examine the structure of the locality in medieval Chola times; Douglas Haynes, on the other hand, in his depiction of Surat in the seventeenth-eighteenth century, describes the Mughal state a “conquest state,” both as it obtained in the imperial capital and in distant territories over which it exercised its control. It was “characterized by a wide number of competing centres,” formed around the *mansabdars*, shaped by competition and resistance, as formulated by Michael Adas with reference to South Asia. He goes on to observe that the features of the “conquest state” may have applied more acutely to Surat “because of the tremendous resources that poured through the city.” Haynes has also found it appropriate to characterize the ruling dispensation of Surat in the seventeenth century a ‘Mughal-Bania order’ given the salience of merchants in decision-making and participation in the governance of the city. Going by Lakshmi Subramanian’s work, the dissolution of this political order was complete by mid-eighteenth century, giving way to an Anglo-Bania order as the effective core of the regime in control of Surat, and which in her analysis is given the status of the principal cause of the 1795 Riot. In the light of evidence from early eighteenth century, Hasan suggests a “downward shift of political gravity” and also the incorporation of merchants in imperial sovereignty. With the general line of advance in the conception of the state in pre-colonial India tending to reconstitute the conventional polarities of ‘state’ and ‘society’ so as to bring them into dynamic contact with each other, many of these models tend to overlap.

At any rate what is relevant for us is that each of these models answers to some feature of the *ancien regime* in Surat. Thus, for instance, even as one accords salience to locality over empire-centric views,
important elements of the patrimonial-bureaucratic state present in the “little kingdom” of Surat (that included within its shifting domains the adjoining hinterland of the “Surat attavisi”), would be hard to ignore. These coexisted with elements from the other models.

Important offices were concentrated in the hands of the Nawab and his extended family that retained many of the core features of the patrimonial-household of the Mughals. One can see this in the distribution of judicial and administrative offices within the family of the Nawab as stated in an official letter from him answering queries by the Surat Council in early 1998: the principal Adalat (the Adalat Huzoor) was under the Nawab himself and it dealt with what seems to be matters relating to substantial property, as well those entailing rules of caste which he adjudicated in his presence by appointing “a trustworthy man to make enquiries of men of the Cast agreeable to its rules.” The Adalat for petty disputes was under the Nawab’s brother who also held the faujdari of thana Chouarasi and settled disputes and quarrels among people of the suburb, keeping a check on robbers and other seditious folks. The sons of Masum Ali Khan, a friend of the Nawab’s father had the charge of the Amini and Kotwali; and an old servant of the family, Zafaryab Khan, with four generations of service with the Nawab’s family, held the office of the Amil. Furthermore, the Nawab had a large retinue of Abyssinians (designated as hapshis, coffris, and at times as chelas), some of them heading contingents of sepoys manning the city and others as his personal bodyguard. An official paper in the Surat Factory Diary details the areas placed in their charge and an inventory of cesses (mauqats) levied on a

large number of items of production and trade, perhaps as perquisites or payment of salaries. As the erstwhile high officials (mutasaddis) of the Mughals in Surat, the Nawabs continued to be a part of a warrior aristocracy ruling over territories they did not have roots in. This necessitated dependence upon local elites as well as leaders of communities of caste, ethnicity, and status. All these come into play at the time of the Riot determining the predisposition of the Nawab, and the processes of communications over which he presided as the hakim of the city. This communication was not direct but deeply mediated by representatives and leaders of segments – occupation and kinship castes, status groups, religious specialists and “knowledge communities.” – in a heterogeneous urban society. The dependence of the Nawab on the Sayeds, for instance, to establish links with the populace is borne out vividly in the transactions we have recorded in our reconstruction of 1795. A person like Namdar Khan, who was not a part of the formal administration of the Nawab, but commanded influence by virtue of being the vaiz of an important mosque in Surat, nonetheless formed part of the official team sent by the Nawab to inspect the site of burglary in Surat 1795. These examples can be multiplied from some of the other accounts of religious conflicts put together in Chapter IV relating to Ahmedabad and other north India cities.

A more cohesive and penetrating blueprint, one that takes into consideration the articulation of urban society in its totality in an Indo-Islamic environment, is available in the writings of Ira Lapidus, in

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255 These features are delineated by Ira Lapidus in his outline of the *The Mamluk City*. Also see Karen Leonard "The “Great Firm” Theory of the Decline of the Mughal Empire," in Muzaaffar Alam & Sanjay Subramanyam (ed.), *The Mughal State 1526-1750*, OUP, 2003, 400-01.
particular her work on *The Mamluk City*. Lapidus marks out for such cities a pattern of interactive behaviour through a triangular grid of military elite, local notables, and urban commoners, and underlines its significance in understanding the specifics of urban societies in the world of Islam:

[1]In Islamic society the problems of urban social and political organization were complicated by the ascendancy of an alien military elite, and the partial insulation of local urban society from the interventions of the rulers. The classic question of the relations between notables and masses must be rephrased in terms of triple interaction between alien military elites, local notables, and urban commoners. In Muslim cities both state or bureaucratic and local communal elements shaped a more complex urban configuration than historians have hitherto imagined.256

Lapidus goes on to argue the sources of cohesiveness: the social accessibility of the *alims*, drawn from a diversity of backgrounds, "overlapping other classes and social divisions, and the “deep penetration of all levels of society [by the Sufis] made [them] a potent organizing force in Mamluk cities.”

This is however, not to imply that the involvement of large crowds and mobs, as we find in the cases recorded here, were a specificity of Muslims groups per se. Bayly records a few instances of comparable scale of mobilization by sections of Hindus in conflicts with sections of Muslims - the riot of Jaunpur in 1773 being an example of that - but to highlight the endemic problem in historiography of conceiving the pre-colonial city on the assumptions of the segmentary order; as little more than an amalgam of *mohallas* based on *jatis*, and where the segments are inter-linked not by any organic sense of civic community but functional-structural arrangements produced by the imperatives of survival. And secondly to bring out the salience of religious riots in the pre-colonial period as an important moment, not in the formation of ‘communalism’ but of a ‘social

form’ of conflict attended by rituals and discourses of ‘self’ and ‘other’ informed by religious doctrines. These had found elaboration during the long medieval centuries, but came to the fore with the decline of the Mughal Empire followed by the steady erosion of the inclusive, multi-religious ecumene that it had forged and accorded primacy to.

To conclude the discussion one would affirm Bayly’s position:

“If ‘communalism’ was constructed during the colonial period, as Gyanendra Pandey and most Indian academic opinion have it, then it was certainly constructed in part from materials already at hand: from memories, antagonisms and aspirations which already existed, albeit set amongst competing and antithetical sentiments. Yet, antagonisms had not yet gelled into communities. It is notable, again that the Muslim chronicler of this riot [Jaunpur Hindu-Muslim riots of 1773] selected for particular abuse, not Hindus in general, but barbarous Pathan Muslims in particular. What we have to reiterate, are some ‘preconditions’ for communalism not a foundational pre-history.”

In its origins the ideology that had successfully mobilized such a large and diverse section of Muslims in Surat was concerned with defining boundaries, in the first instance, vis-a-vis the Shias. And though 1795 did not throw up any specifically Shia-Sunni issues, the basic fact of the Char Yari as a concrete manifestation of historic attempts to define the boundaries between these emergent communities of Islam is brought home to us by the exclusion of the large and prosperous community of Bohras from the major event of that year. A note in the Surat Factory Diary records that they are “numerous and rich and carried on Trade to the Gulph of Mocha”, and that they are threatened by Muslims as much as are Hindus. In fact, in other wake of the riot, the Mullah of the Bohras asked the English for a guard of 10 sarkar sepoys for the protection of his life and property. The record goes on to say: “The Bohras are Rafzees, [i.e., Shias, vide Campbell, p.] and, therefore, received by the Mahometans of the City with as much detestation as the Hindus themselves”. Surat hence provided
a different social mix -- compared with Ahmedabad in the riots of 1714 and 1716 in both of which the Bohras were major players. But, as the Mirati-Ahmadi makes it explicit, these were all Sunnis, qaum-i bawaheer ahl-i sunnat jama’at. What we have here is an instance of the two-way incorporation of an ‘ethnic’ community, such as the Bohras are widely thought to be, into two distinct and hostile communities of Islam.

The religious idiom of protest, at times seemingly rooted in a Shia-Sunni divide, can be gleaned in some of the civil disturbances that occurred in Surat during the 1730s (see Ashin Das Gupta, Indian Merchants and the Decline of Surat, pp. 107-13, 228, 231-32, passim). If the one clear episode of that conflict that we have come by in Gujarat is any indication, the enunciation and expression of this divide must have been a violent process and did not remain merely dormant in pre-colonial times. The Mirat-i Ahmadi records the following event for the year 1708-09:

A royal order was issued to all the provinces that the word wasi (guardian, tutor) should be added to the name of the fourth Khalifa (Ali) in Khutbas [religious sermon before a congregation] on Fridays and the Ids. A party of Turanis, companions of Khan Firoz Jung attended the Friday prayer for the first time when the priest recited the Khutba; they forbade him on threat to recite the above word in future. As a royal order was issued, he recited the same word next Friday considering the Mughals as ignorant fellows. As soon as this was heard by one of the fearless fellows, he pulled the priest by leg from the pulpit and stabbed him to death by a knife. Others dragged him and threw him on the road of bazar outside the masjid. He remained there till evening. He was buried after permission of the Nazim”.

The event occurred in Ahmedabad in the year following the death of Aurangzeb. In the Ismail conception of spiritual hierarchy (hudud al din), the wasi occupied a central position. He was deemed the executor and successor of the Natiq, i.e. the Prophet, and it is to him that the latter unravelled the esoteric aspects of the faith. The royal order accorded a

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I am thankful to my friend, Dr. Hasan Mahmud, for bringing this reference to my notice.
place to Shia doctrines and hence came up against Sunni orthodoxy. The Turanis, as opposed to the Iranis, were largely, Sunnis. It is important that the event occurred in the year following Aurangzeb's death.

The second-half of the seventeenth century appears to be a seminal period in the crystallization of religious identities when a state-sponsored project to reorder the long-standing relationship between the medieval-imperial state and its constituent communities came to the fore under Aurangzeb's leadership. It may be argued that this in itself was the effect of the consolidation of an equally long-standing reaction to the syncretistic basis of the medieval/Mughal polity as it had matured under Akbar. The history of this period is strewn with scores of examples of this 'revanchist' phase of the Mughal Empire. In a single chapter of the *Mirat-i Ahmadi*, compiled by the last imperial Diwan of Gujarat, we come across examples, referring to A.D. 1691, that are simultaneously assertions of the primacy of Sunni orthodoxy in the public sphere and 'intolerance' of other forms of belief:

- Rs.27, 050 granted by his Majesty for repair of Masjids in the city of Ahmedabad.
- Orders for the demolition of a temple at Vadnagar.
- Repair of canal supplying water to the Jama Masjid. Estimated cost: Rs.1200/- submitted to his Majesty.
- Repair of Masjid at Dohad. Estimated cost: Rs. 1434/-.
- Shuja'at Khan, the Nazim of suba Gujarat, ordered two hundred carts of marble stone from Pattan for building a madarsah, and a mausoleum.
- Orders for ensuring demolition of Somnath.
- A royal order was received for "emphatic collection of jizya from zimmis of the pargana of Palanpur".


In effect the thrust of these moves was at least as much against the pluralistic communities of Islam as against the Kafir, the archetypal Muslim Other.

The eventual construction, or rather consolidation, of 'communalism' is a multi layered phenomenon - formed in different historical and social settings. The idea of 'thresholds' in its formation, argued for by Bigrami in his persuasive critique of the prevalent 'constructionist' thesis developed by a host of post-modernist writers, notably in the Indian context by Gyanendra Pandey and the Subaltern School to which he belongs, seem relevant here and stand corroborated in the light of the empirical findings of this thesis. In this perspective, the house of communalism, if one may call it so, is constructed not in one fell swoop, but in stages spanning the high walls of periodization in vogue. Bilgrami, now supported by the works of C.A. Bayly, argues for lowering these discursive thresholds of Indian history if the historian is to make sense of the immensity that religious conflict confronts India with.

In the pre-colonial/late medieval period there is a great deal of evidence for the emergence of some vital layers of what eventually came to be constituted as 'communalism,' without the larger entailments evoked by the phenomenon. Speaking more precisely, the process of defining 'self' and 'other' in terms of religion and of mutual hostility imbibed therein had assumed a distinct social form: it commanded a répertoire of doctrines of belief, symbols, principles of exclusion and inclusion with reference to religious doctrines validated from textual/scriptural resources. Furthermore, these trends had also acquired the capacity to stage public events with the help of such resources. It was no longer an elite preoccupation.
Recent attempt to rethink the history of community relationships have questioned restrictive models of periodization & argued a cogent case for a longue durée perspective. Certain basic historiographic concerns are underlined in this project. While locating historical developments in a time matrix is a central objective of historical research, it is no less important to recognize the varying timescales within which the different levels of social phenomena evolve and unfold. In keeping with this it is necessary to have greater flexibility in the construction of periodizational models as well as to induce greater complexities within the ones given to us. For the history of religious communities, identities and conflicts in India we yet need to think in terms of conjunctures as well. Thus it makes sense to locate colonialism itself within the long range currents and rhythms of Indian history in order to study the development of colonialism itself not as a completely external agency but as growing in part atleast within the existing cleavages of society.

Studies of community relationships and especially studies of communalism as a feature of colonial and postcolonial Indian society are premised on the absence of the public sphere in pre-colonial India or recognized it as of little consequence in determining historical dynamics. Concomitantly pre-colonial community conflicts are read as ‘sectarian strikes’ of some what innocuous lineage which are sufficiently described with reference to civic disturbances within ‘local communities’ and form a case apart from the large-scale conflicts that emerged under the colonialism. In this scheme of things which truly assured in the era politicized religious/communal identities along with the collateral creation of a public sphere. Sandria Frietages important study is a good example of this kind of scholarship. It argues in detail ... Gyanendra Pandey’s equally significant study of the ‘construction of communalism’shares the same premises. It locates such conflicts
As a by product of British colonial institutions and regards communalism, finally as a form of “colonial knowledge”. The mode of explanation adopted by Dougals Haynes in recent study of the shaping of public culture in the Surat city, 1852 – 1928’ rest on similar foundation.

Note:

‘Secular cycle’ as the principal referent of community disturbances or relationships.

In Subramanian’s account the role of religious and cultural processes in group dynamics and conflict configuration only operate from the margins of historical explanation. So is the entire realm of social consciousness which is by passed silently. In general this is a feature of ‘secularist-Marxist historiography in which social phenomena are subsumed by political economy and where the possibilities of social history have remained stymied within the framework of reductionist materialistic history.

The riot is pre-scribed in a maze of political and economic changes and dislocations and the impressions one is left with after all the evidence is gone over, is that it signaled little more than a ‘natural’ release of frustrations by an aggrieved social stratum reacting to their changed fortunes in the presence of the colonizers and their indigenous agents, even as she takes into the account ‘interstitial emergence’ of friction between communities with reference to shifts in the structure of material interests and well-being.

While there is no denying that these factors were crucial to the eruption of the riot, in the sense that they laid down the conditions necessary for the open expression of a wide spread social cleavage and, hence cannot be left out from an analysis of its causes. The fact remains that confining the narrative largely to a secular cycle does rob the populace and crowds particularly in riots of agency. There seems to be some merit in
the charge of Subramanian’s critic, Torri, that these analytical reflexes are “trapped in the colonial order,” although to carry the point through one needs to state some specifics of the levels of discursivity in the mode of recall.

To restore agency to the actors in this drama, one has to decipher, to whatever extent it may be possible, the consciousness informing the field of social action: the question to ask precisely is how and by what devices a stratagems is the very experience of dislocation within a ‘new order’ translated into meaningful behavior by social groups. It is in that sense that the social field itself is constituted by social consciousness even as the latter is shaped by it. A grounding of the ‘softer issues’ is therefore necessary to deepen Subramanian’s account.

One line of approach that is available to us is to detail the ensemble of actions that went into the staging of conflict and try to construct a ‘behavioral text’. Along the lines of Victor Turner and following him Sandria Frietag. Such a text then supplies the basis for investigating “the relationship between symbols and the concepts, feelings, values, notions, etc., associated with them” (Victor Turner, Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbology, New Delhi 979, pp. 12-1; S. Frietag, Collective Action and Community, p.17)

Crowd behavior is now becoming the focus of a growing body of research (Veena Das, Natalie Zemon, Davis, Rude) in the context of 19th-20th century India. Its dynamics has been underlined by Freitag’s study of communalism and community relationship. In the introduction of her work she suggests the importance of the subject thus:

“the study is meant to suggest new historical interpretations made possible through an analysis of collective activities, including collective violence. It is based on premise that such
actions are not 'insensate' but quite rational: that they can be subjected to careful scrutiny to yield evidence about the values and motivating forces of the crowd: and that, moreover crowd behavior should not be seen as peripheral to the dynamics of historical change but is, in fact, at its very heart. In this respect the events of history may be seen as emerging from the interplay between the collective acts of individuals and the larger economic and political forces of a world organized around in imperial order.”

**The documentary imagination: some features.**

What is the difference in the framing of riots in India’s *Ancien Régime* Chroniclers on the one hand and colonial reportage on the other? Presuming there are differences of a marked nature, it would be worth asking in what way are these implicated one in a different historiographic tradition and two, in different grids of power and knowledge.

On the surface what such a comparison registers is the sheer copiousness of the colonial record. The latter in part is a reflection of a more expansive and deeply entrenched scribal culture with an urge to document more comprehensively that followed in the wake of the formation of centralized state-systems within Western Europe complemented by, in the case of England by features of the Scottish Enlightenment. Consequently, colonial records are empirically richer. David Lelyveld, and more recently Gyanendra Pandey (also Inden and Metcalf) have attempted to show the construction of sociology of India basically represented by a peculiar colonial enmeshing of cognitive and controlling procedures.

This embryonic cultural taxonomy, with roots in Orientalism underlies the investigation of the Surat Riots as a quiet, artefactual, but definitive presumption. Although explicated somewhat sparingly it nonetheless sets the parameters within which the inquiry moves. However, the discourse that ostensibly controls the course of the inquiry is one where
social conflicts are primarily a law order question: So the preamble sets out
the objectives of the investigation as ‘determining the Cause of riots’ and
establishing who its leaders were. In the course of the inquiry the notion of
‘Cause’ turns around establishing the authenticity of the event which
allegedly triggered off the conflict. While the investigation of the question
of leadership does not stray beyond the attempt to identify individuals who
stood at the head of, or carried the Flag for, the ‘riotous assembly’. As one
wades through the voluminous body of depositions, one frequently comes
across leads which if followed would have yielded a mine of information
about the chemistry of the conflict such as for instance the precise social
location of ‘Bengali faqirs’ in pre-colonial Surat and their intriguing ability
to mobilize Muslims in general, or the authoritative testimony / insinuation
of the possible inspiration of Chishti leadership in fomenting trouble. Or,
what stakes could the bunkars (weavers) have in the riots, presuming that
they were as central to the disturbances as the committee of inquiry affirms
in the concluding part of its report. Many more such moments appear in the
course of the investigation, and disappear, without imparting to the
Committee a new threshold of focus and questioning which, throughout,
maintains an even, static register, locked in a mono-tone, as it were.

On the other hand, relative to ‘medieval’ documentation, the very
attempt to establish the ‘facts of the case’ after a detailed scrutiny, allows
us to peer deeper into the social phenomena (sources of conflict and the
discursive levels at which new/ more expansive identities were being
forged); the public act of summoning witnesses and holding an inquest
spread over several weeks would have been a public event of no mean
consequence. The committee’s report calls for a moment of special
celebration by historians: containing the depositions of more than seventy-
five witnesses, we are privy to the thought of participant-observers of the
event.
A major distinction of the English intervention is the presence of a more than latent "essentializing" urge which was to become an integral feature of colonial textual imagination. This is something that appears starkly absent from the indigenous documentation in Persian we have gone over earlier. Compare the remarks of an Ali Muhammad Khan, for instance: Use of *fitna* in the *Mirat-i Ahmadi* and its characterization of unemployed Gujarati soldiers, who had sold their faith/ soul for money. The gaze is focused differently, the texture of observation is of another order. There is an appreciation of the conundrum of choice, compulsion, perhaps even cruel necessity, bearing down upon the actions of a social group. There is also the apprehension of counterfeit faith as a distinct social possibility? The English response, on the other hand is more straitjacketed, for one by its urge to reduce the complexities inherent in alien social phenomena by reaching out to an *essence*. But also - as part and parcel of the same response - by its deployment of a technology of control which was inscribed upon by a homogenizing, ecumenical discourse and which its bureaucracy appears to have internalized over the preceding decades.