
From the SelectedWorks of Arjun Guneratne

February 1998

"Review of Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence."

Contact
Author

Start Your Own
SelectedWorks

Notify Me
of New Work



Available at: http://works.bepress.com/arjun_guneratne/16

this nationalism, there were any number of early colonial images to be found but they were not its primary determinant or substance.

MAJID H. SIDDIQI
Jawaharlal Nebru University

Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence. By PAUL R. BRASS. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. xvi, 298 pp. \$55.00 (cloth); \$17.95 (paper).

In *Theft of an Idol*, Paul Brass constructs an explanation for political violence in modern India that challenges essentialist notions of the inevitability of Hindu-Muslim (and other communally-based) conflict. Drawing on Foucauldian approaches to the analysis of rhetoric, Brass investigates five separate incidents of violence in North India to argue that while a violent event is open to a multiplicity of interpretations, those which define it to the outside world are not the accounts of the local people involved in it but those of politicians and others for whom the violence furnishes a convenient array of symbols to be used for their own purposes. Riots in India “cannot be separated from the representations of them once the media and external, (i.e., nonlocal) persons, agencies and institutions become involved in them” (p. 245). The public rhetoric that defines these events serves to communalize—deliberately, in Brass’s estimation—what are very often local disputes, to represent them as instances of Hindu-Muslim confrontation.

The ethnographic core of the book consists of five chapters that describe five separate incidents of violence, ranging from the small scale (the theft of an idol, the alleged rape of a girl) to the large scale loss of life that occurred in the Kanpur riot of 1992. The ethnographic chapters read like detective stories, with Brass (as sleuth) documenting and evaluating the evidence, based mostly on his personal interviews with the various townspeople, police officers, and politicians involved. Some of the events he describes achieved national prominence; others did not, even when the circumstances were indistinguishable from those that did. The question at the heart of Brass’s discussion of these events is why. His answer in short is that violent events which serve a political purpose (in one case, to give Mrs. Gandhi a pretext to remove a state government) achieve prominence; they are “magnified, distorted, and manipulated for external use in wider political arenas” (p. 178).

One of the important implications of Brass’s analysis is that violence of this nature is not inevitable in India. In cities such as Kanpur, relatively minor incidents with no communal connotations may be represented as being communal by political leaders, and used to mobilize their followers. “Institutionalized riot systems” comprising networks of individuals and groups, usually linked to political organizations such as the BJP, work “to keep a town or city in a permanent state of awareness of Hindu-Muslim relationships” (p. 284). When an incident occurs involving people from different communities, these networks may be deployed to engender large-scale rioting. Such networks and their ways of operating are well known to local authorities; thus, Brass concludes that communal violence in India can be prevented, or be quickly brought under control; when it is not, it is because those in authority see their political purposes served by allowing the violence to flare. Brass discusses instances where decisive action was, on occasion, taken by those in power to prevent minor incidents of violence from escalating into full-scale rioting,

by sending for example administrators with well-proven reputations for controlling riots to riot-prone areas. He places the blame for communal violence in India where it belongs: not on primordial hatreds, but on the failures of the Indian state.

This book can be read at a number of levels. It is an excellent ethnography of violence, laying bare the network of power relations in the Indian countryside that produces it. More importantly, it is a critique of narrowly empiricist approaches in the social sciences. Brass argues that with reference to the events he describes, it is not possible to discover a final truth (although he occasionally succumbs to the temptation to try to determine what really happened). This may be true of some of the events in his narrative, but there are certain other truths that emerge from his account: for example, the culpability of the police in many incidents of violence, and the existence of organized networks of activists in the service of certain political parties who act to promote rioting aimed at ethnic or religious minorities. Departing from most other studies of riots, Brass argues that “generalizations derive from the dynamics of particular riot events, rather than from systematic cross-site comparisons” (p. 284). Finally, this book is an incisive rejoinder to primordialist explanations of political violence that attribute it to immemorial enmities between the ethnic groups involved. As such, this excellent book deserves to be read not only for its innovative, ethnographically-based political science, but also for its critique of those theorists who seek to account for nationalist and ethnic violence by leaving human actors no choice but to act out the imperatives of a narrowly conceived history and culture. The author’s lucidity, coupled with his engaging ethnography, make this book eminently suitable for undergraduate teaching.

ARJUN GUNERATNE
Macalester College

Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834–1874. By MARINA CARTER. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995. xvii, 343 pp. \$29.95 (cloth).

Indian indentured labor migration has remained a subject at once of endless fascination and of enduring controversy. The rapidly growing demand for sugar in Britain, a product of the consumer revolution of the Victorian era, kept up a steady flow of these laborers to colonies from Fiji to the West Indies, and made the empire a palpable reality for the British at home. At the same time, coming on the heels of the hard-fought campaign for the abolition of slavery, indentured labor recruitment raised troubling questions of morality and equity. From the 1830s to the present, publicists and scholars alike have asked whether indentured labor was not somehow just a “new system of slavery,” while officials at the time, with revisionist historians today, have contended that such migration offered Indians an escape from poverty and exploitation. Marina Carter’s study offers a thoughtful and richly detailed account of the process of recruiting in India as well as of life on the colonial plantations of Mauritius—the site of the earliest experiment with this form of labor mobilization, which brought some 450,000 laborers to the island, where by the 1870s they already comprised a majority of the population.

Determined to escape the pervasive “colonial discourse” of the official correspondence collected in the India and Colonial Office records, Carter has turned instead to the Mauritius archives, where she has utilized correspondence between the