

Sacred cows and thumping drums: claiming territory as 'zones of tradition' in British India

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Theories that explain the origins of communal violence in South Asia often point to the discursive creation of the perception of distinct and adversarial Hindu and Muslim identity categories at the beginning of the twentieth century. This paper argues that these theories overemphasize imagined social differences without adequately considering how these boundaries were territorialized in everyday life through performative place-making practices. In order to fill this gap, 'zones of tradition', areas where religious or cultural practices are reified into official tradition, are suggested as one way of conceptualizing how group-making discourses are linked to places. As examples, the cow protection movement that campaigned to institute local bans on the slaughter of cattle and conflicts over Hindu processions playing music as they passed in front of mosques are considered. As these practices were contested, it is argued that zones of tradition were established across British India symbolically and tangibly dividing the territory before it was officially partitioned.

Key words: boundaries, communalism, discourses, identities, South Asia, territoriality

Introduction

In the spring of 2002 in the Indian state of Gujarat there was another round of the violent clashes that have come to symbolize the widely held perception that Hindu and Muslim communities are unable to reside peacefully together in South Asia.¹ The incident that set off the violence was the burning alive of 59 Hindu activists at the Godhra train station as they were returning from a trip to Ayodhya, the disputed site of the Babri Mosque. The mosque was destroyed in 1992 by Hindu activists who claim it was constructed on the site of an ancient temple commemorating the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram. After the deaths at the train station, which initial reports attributed to 'Muslim miscreants' or 'mobs' that set fire to the train cars, there was a month of violent clashes that reportedly left over 2000 people dead, the vast majority of whom were Muslim.² At the time, many news reports presented the attacks as just another example of communalism,

as a primordial conflict between Hindus and Muslims that has always existed throughout history.³ It seems almost inconsequential that the official investigation into the incident determined, three years after the fact, that the fire was probably an accident and that there was not a Muslim mob at all.⁴

The violence in Gujarat, and the way it was represented in the media, highlights the tendency to treat conflict as if it is occurring between monolithic social groups that are, and always have been, the fundamental organizing units of society. Poststructuralist scholars have argued, however, that all 'groups' are social constructions and that the primordial roots they base their legitimacy on are often invented traditions (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Brubaker 2002). This is not to say that group identity categories such as ethnicity, race and nation are not important, or that they do not play real roles in shaping peoples' lives, but rather that they are not what they purport to be – ancient and essential. This paper explores how these discourses about invented traditions

become rooted in the fabric of places and how the boundaries between socially constructed categories are established and maintained in everyday life by investigating the ways that discourses about religious identity categories were spatialized and territorialized at the beginning of the twentieth century in South Asia.

The rise of communalism in South Asia has provided scholars with one of the most vexing problems in recent history. Why, over a few decades at the beginning of the twentieth century, did people all over the region come to agree that Hindus and Muslims could no longer get along when, by most accounts, they had done just that for many hundreds of years? Many theories have attempted to explain the origins of communal violence by suggesting that discourses, which emphasized the differences between 'Hindus' and 'Muslims', played an important role in the crystallization of these two categories as the preeminent forms of political identification in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Chatterjee 1986 1993; Freitag 1989; Pandey 1991; Brass 1997; Gossman 1999). These theories variously point to media depictions of violence, political manoeuvring by independence leaders, and divide and rule tactics by the British. This paper argues that all of these theories focus exclusively on discursively constructed identity categories while overlooking how these boundaries are materialized and territorialized in everyday life through performative place-making practices (Butler 1990 1993). What were the mechanisms that linked broad narratives about differences between Hindus and Muslims to the everyday lives of people in their local areas? In order to fill this gap, the concept of *zones of tradition*, areas where religious or cultural practices are reified into official tradition, are suggested as one way of conceptualizing how abstract discourses about ethnic, national or religious group identity categories become spatialized and linked to particular places.

The first section of the paper will investigate the origins of communalism in South Asia and will present contemporary theories on the role of discourses in constructing group identity categories. The gap present in these theories between abstract discourses and everyday lived experiences will be noted and the concept of the zone of tradition will be suggested as one way of understanding how discourses of difference are spatialized and linked to places. Then two widely cited examples of early twentieth-century communal violence in South Asia will be reinterpreted using the concept of a zone of

tradition.⁵ First the cow protection movement that campaigned to institute local bans on the slaughter of cattle, a practice disallowed in Hindu custom, will be considered. Then conflicts over religious processions playing music as they passed in front of mosques will be investigated. It is argued that in both cases the spatial nature of the events is equally as important as discourses about violence and difference in the process of establishing boundaries between social groups. Finally, in the conclusion, the contemporary violence in Gujarat is revisited and other applications of the concept of a zone of tradition are suggested.

Communalism and 'group making' discourses

Many contemporary scholars of communal violence in South Asia have concluded that the categories of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' became the preeminent markers of social distinction only in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century (Chatterjee 1986 1993; Freitag 1989; Pandey 1991). Several historians have even suggested that as recently as the beginning of the twentieth century in the region there were many commonalities in the practice of what we imagine today to be the discrete religions of Hinduism and Islam (Freitag 1980; Ahmed 1981 2001; Roy 1983; Eaton 1993). Richard Eaton (1993), for example, describes the spread of Islam in Bengal not as a separate religion but as an addition to the beliefs already present. Rather than imagining Islam supplanting Hinduism, he suggests it was incorporated into it (Eaton 1993, 310). In the 1901 census of India, an official wrote that the populations that considered themselves to be Muslim were

deeply infected with Hindu superstitions and their knowledge of the faith [Islam] seldom extends beyond the three cardinal doctrines of the unity of God, the mission of Muhammad, and the truth of the Koran. (Quoted in O'Malley 1917, 212)⁶

Rafiuddin Ahmed writes that,

[a]t the level of the masses, the social difference between the two communities was not so obvious; they were both part of the same agricultural community and generally followed the same professions. They both shared a common pattern of rural life, spoke the same language (perhaps with minor variations in vocabulary) and even participated in the same rituals. (Ahmed 1981, 4; see also Mann 1992)

Ahmed also points out that upper class urban Muslims in Bengal did not even consider their rural counterparts to be Muslims at all due to their syncretistic beliefs (Ahmed 2001, 13). These scholars are not suggesting that nineteenth-century populations were lacking cultures or identities, or that social structures were not present, but simply that society was not divided based on religion in the way we imagine it to be today.

In recent years, postmodernist and poststructuralist scholars in a range of disciplines have problematized the notion that monolithic national, ethnic and racial identities are fundamental aspects of selfhood and instead suggest understanding identities as categories of practice that are fragmented, multiple, hybrid and diffuse (Bourdieu 1991; Brubaker 1996 2002; Hage 1996; Paasi 1996; Calhoun 1997). These scholars describe ethnicities, races and nations not as things-in-the-world but as perspectives-on-the-world, as the result of discourses that emphasize group boundaries (Abbott 1995; Jones 2006 forthcoming).

Pierre Bourdieu (1991), among many others, has effectively argued for the importance of discourses in the development of the perception of group boundaries. He suggests that describing a social category as a monolithic group can have the effect of making it seem to be one. He also points out that struggles over regional and ethnic identities are often fundamentally about the power to 'impose the legitimate definition of the divisions of the social world and, thereby, to make and unmake groups' (Bourdieu 1991, 221, emphasis in original). He suggests the *habitus* as one way of conceptualizing how an individual's identity is sedimented over time as particular cultural practices are enacted and performed, which reifies social boundaries (Bourdieu 1977).

Rogers Brubaker (1996 2002) has extended the work of Bourdieu to argue that violent clashes, which are often initiated by a few individuals or organizations, can be orchestrated and presented in ways that solidify group boundaries. Brubaker notes that

[b]y *invoking* groups, they [ethno-political entrepreneurs] seek to *evoke* them, summon them, call them into being. Their categories are *for doing* – designed to stir, summon, justify, mobilize, kindle and energize. (Brubaker 2002, 166, emphasis in original)

He continues

[c]ertain dramatic events, in particular, can serve to galvanize and crystallize a potential group, or to

ratchet up pre-existing levels of groupness [feelings of group membership]. This is why deliberate violence, undertaken as a strategy of provocation, often by a very small number of persons, can sometimes be an exceptionally effective strategy of group making. (Brubaker 2002, 171)

Building off of this work, several scholars of communalism in South Asia have also highlighted the role played by discourses of difference in the development of communal identities (Freitag 1989; Pandey 1991; Brass 1997; Gossman 1999; Jones 2006). Patricia Gossman (1999), for example, in her analysis of Muslim politics in Bengal, has argued that violence in the pre-partition years was often initiated by a few political activists attempting to discredit an opponent. However, media reports and colonial documents represented the violence as unpredictable 'riots' between Hindus and Muslims, which spread fear throughout the population (Gossman 1999). Gossman shows that instead of being intrinsically irrational in nature, riots and communal violence were politically motivated, deliberate and planned (Brass 1997). The violence was then used as a symbol in popular identity construction as the events were mythologized. She argues that

for Muslim leaders the symbols increasingly evoked the suffering of Muslims, their victimization at the hands of Hindu militants, and the failure of both the government and the unscrupulous Muslim leaders to protect them. (Gossman 1999, 103)

In Gossman's analysis, the actual events on the ground are treated as secondary to the way they are represented and the discourses that emerged about them.

The same cycle appears to be playing out in the Gujarat example – reports (possibly false) about marauding Muslim mobs fuelled reprisals from Hindu activists. Then the violence that ensued, and the media depictions of it, spread more fear throughout India, which provides a cache of collective memories to be called upon the next round of conflict.

Territorializing identity categories

In general, these theories that emphasize the role of discourses in the construction of social boundaries are extremely compelling, with a single caveat. Invariably they describe imagined social boundaries while often overlooking how these discourses are manifested and experienced in everyday life. Of

course, I am not alone in calling for geography and territory to play a more prominent role in theories of nationalism and identity (Agnew 1987; Lefebvre 1991; Kaiser 1994; Paasi 1996; Newman and Paasi 1998). Winichakal (1994), for example, critiques Anderson's (1991) *Imagined communities* specifically for ignoring territoriality. Winichakal writes,

[i]t sounds as if a nation is produced out of one's head and is sustained only as long as the reproduction remains in one's head – hence the imagined community. One may still wonder how such a mediator formulates the social institutions and practices which perpetuate the operation and reproduction of the imagined communities in actual human relations. (Winichakal 1994, 15)

The role of territoriality as a way of developing social boundaries and displaying power relations has been most clearly described by Robert Sack (1986). Sack defines territoriality as

a primary geographical expression of power . . . the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships by delimiting and asserting control over a geographical area. (Sack 1986, 3, 19)

The advantages of a territorial strategy in human affairs is that it is an efficient way of communicating the authority of the controller of a territory over people and things, it simplifies the task of enforcing control by easily communicating the power relationship through boundaries, and it reifies power (Sack 1986).

Sack emphasizes that territoriality is a human strategy used to control events and populations, not an animal instinct. Humans are not born territorial but utilize the strategy because it is an efficient way of displaying power. This understanding of territoriality can be extended to argue that different cultures have probably utilized territoriality to different extents throughout history. Patricia Seed (1995), in a study of the different ways imperial powers claimed places they encountered, has argued that the method of possessing territory employed by ships commissioned by the English government during the colonial period differed not only from the indigenous populations they came in contact with, but also from the other European powers. Seed argues that the 'French' concept of possession relied on ceremonies and the participation of local populations, the 'Spanish' gave speeches and recounted the *Requirement* (a text that ordered the indigenous populations

to accept Christianity), the 'Portuguese' relied on the concept of discovery and based their claims on precise astronomical measurements to prove they were the first there, while the 'English' built houses, grew hedges and erected walls (Seed 1995).⁷ In this form of territoriality, claiming a space required physically occupying it in some way rather than simply describing it as your own.

In South Asia, the British colonial officials often relied on the same set of understandings about how power is exercised in a territory when mediating disputes between populations over the legitimacy of indigenous claims to spaces. Clearly, people already had ways of claiming territory or possessing spaces, however the prevailing norms may have differed from the territoriality of the colonial officials. Consequently, when activists and organizations embarked on group-making activities in the early twentieth century in South Asia, they did so in profoundly territorial ways that incorporated these new understandings of how power was exercised in places.

Zones of tradition

Undoubtedly discourses about markers of social distinction play an important role in developing boundaries of group identity categories. Equally important in the process of group-making, however, is the construction of territorial boundaries, both symbolic and physical, between populations. Territorializing and spatializing the group identity category bridges the gap between a disembodied discourse of difference and the lived experience of everyday life. This process is often assumed in theories that rely on Anderson's (1991) imagined community concept, however the precise manner that the imagined community becomes associated with a piece of land is often left undeveloped. In order to fill this gap, this paper proposes the 'zone of tradition' as a mechanism for conceptualizing how this materialization occurs.

Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have noted the invented nature of many traditions that appear to be quite old. They define 'invented traditions' as 'a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, 1). These traditions are rarely invented out of thin air; instead old customs are reinterpreted or given a new meaning that supports a particular

vision of history and power. The concept of a zone of tradition extends this to argue these 'invented traditions' often need to be fixed to a particular place and given a territorial aspect as well.

In many conflicts that are framed in group terms, there are disputes over who has the legitimate right to live in or govern a particular place. Although the link between a people and the territory is presented as primordial, traditions often have to be invented to authenticate these claims. At a large scale, the 'homeland' serves this purpose by providing a symbolic connection between the current population, their ancestors and the territory (Kaiser 2002; Jones 2006). The homeland is mythologized as the place where the 'history of the nation' was lived, the soil was worked to provide sustenance and where earlier generations were laid to rest in the ground (Williams and Smith 1983). People, however, do not live their lives at the scale of the homeland. Consequently, these same sorts of territorial claims need to be made in every community, in every village and town, to prove the connection a particular group has with the land. A zone of tradition provides one way of making this link between the piece of territory and the history of the group-in-the-making.

A zone of tradition is an area that has been designated or marked in some way as the place where a particular cultural or religious practice is legitimately performed. The precise boundaries of a zone of tradition are often fuzzy and can be contested, disputed and redefined. The boundaries of the zone can be institutionalized through laws that protect a practice or symbolically enforced if there is only a general understanding of the practice's legitimacy in a particular place. They can also simply fade away as the need to invoke the particular practice becomes less important over time. Zones of tradition are unique in that they are concomitantly modern and traditional. On the one hand, they are modern because they are newly instituted ways of claiming and marking space. On the other hand, they are traditional because they are based in cultural or religious practices that may have existed before but had not been explicitly territorialized.

In South Asia, as discourses about communal difference emerged, there was a need to map out areas where Hindu-ness and Muslim-ness were traditional, because in many areas the boundaries between the communities were not clear. The following sections will trace two different social movements in the pre-partition years in Bengal that began to establish territorial boundaries that reified perceived

social differences between the categories of Hindu and Muslim. As the practices were contested, zones where Hindu and Muslim customs were reified into official tradition – zones of tradition – were established across Bengal, symbolically and tangibly dividing the territory before it was officially partitioned.

Sacred cows

In the late nineteenth century many movements emerged that began efforts to purify and standardize the practice of the vast array of beliefs grouped under the rubric of Hinduism across South Asia. The various movements, often termed revivalists, had different priorities and pursued their goals in different ways. However, all sought to purify Hindu rituals and beliefs and 'worked to achieve together that important and new goal: consciousness among Hindus that [they] constituted members of an identifiable community' (Freitag 1980, 605). One of the most successful symbols for revivalist movements was the protection of the sacred cow.⁸

The controversy over the slaughter of cattle in South Asia had been a minor issue for several centuries, but became a major dispute after it was taken up by the revivalist organizations. At the forefront of this movement was the Arya Samaj and its spiritual leader Dayananda Saraswati (Robb 1986). Saraswati organized the first Gaurakshini Sabha [cow protection committee] in 1882 in the Punjab and within a few years the organizations had spread throughout British India. The organizations employed varied tactics from boycotting shops that sold beef, forcing individuals to publicly sign agreements stating they would not eat beef, to trials of those accused of killing cows (Freitag 1980).

As with many effective group-making symbols, the historical legitimacy of the sacredness of the cow is often disputed (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992; Jha 2002). Some authors have even shown that earlier in history cows were consumed on a regular basis by many segments of the population (Robbins 1999; Jha 2002). Despite questions about its authenticity, the sacred cow was a potent symbol because cattle were ubiquitous in British India, dairy products played an important role in Hindu rituals, and the symbol resonated with reformist, traditionalist, as well as orthodox Hindus in ways that others did not (Freitag 1980).

The cow protection movements were not necessarily anti-Muslim, but rather were attempting to purify Hindu rituals and standardize religious practice.

Individuals who practised Islam, however, are not bound by the same religious proscriptions against beef consumption. They are permitted to kill and eat beef, although it was not necessarily a common practice in Bengal. However, once a year during the Bakr-Eid (Eid-ul-Zuha) celebration, all Muslims are expected to make a sacrifice in honour of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his own son to God (Simoons and Lodrick 1981). Many animals are acceptable for the sacrifice, but if the animal is larger it is more meaningful. Therefore it is more desirable for several people to come together and sacrifice a larger animal, such as a cow, rather than each individually sacrificing a smaller one. As Hindu activists sought to establish bans on the slaughter of cattle, disputes often emerged during these festivals. The first upswing in violence occurred in 1893, when there were riots in several parts of British India (Yang 1980). The movement lost momentum, but there was a resurgence at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century from 1908 until 1917 (Robb 1986; Jha 2002).

In Bengal the cow protection movement was carried out in a profoundly territorial way that had the effect of establishing zones of tradition in areas where they had not existed before. The cow protection committees sought to enlist *Zamindars* [large landowners] to ban cow slaughter on their plantations (Ahmed 1981). The *Zamindars* owned large estates throughout Bengal, and through the Permanent Settlement had extensive rights over their land in exchange for paying taxes to the colonial government. The majority of the *Zamindars* practised some form of Hinduism, while most of the labourers considered themselves to be Muslim. The landowners often controlled the schools, markets and residences of the workers employed on their estates (Guha 1963). It appears that before the movement to ban the slaughter of cattle, there were some areas where cows were killed, and others where they were not, but in most cases it did not cause disputes (Ahmed 1981). However, once the revivalists made it an issue and the symbol resonated with many practitioners of Hinduism, all populations were obligated to either be for or against cow slaughter. This put pressure on many landowners who practised Hinduism to prove their faith by banning the killing of cows on their estates, even if in the past they may have respected the customs of their tenants.

The colonial officials attempted to avoid getting involved in the controversy by establishing a policy based on British customary law that allowed the traditional custom of a particular area to continue.

Therefore, if cows had been killed in the past, they could continue to be. If there was no history of cow slaughter, then the government suggested it should not begin. In many areas, however, there were mixed practices without a clear precedent either way. Consequently, the use of customary law gave activists who had an interest in dividing the population a method of establishing precedents by creating a tradition that supported their cause (Freitag 1980; Robb 1986).

Because the *Zamindars* had almost total control over their land, they could enforce whichever rules they wished. When their Hindu faith was questioned by the revivalist organizations many responded by banning the slaughter of cattle on their estates (Ahmed 1981). This resulted in large tracts of land in Bengal becoming zones of tradition where Hindu customs were made official. Some of the *Zamindars* even required tenants to sign agreements before being hired, vowing not to kill cows. Tenants who practised Islam, feeling that their religious rights were being restricted, responded by increasing the numbers of cows slaughtered in order to assert the legitimacy of their religious customs in the area. Many newspapers wrote articles describing the provocative behaviour of 'Muslims' in rural areas. The articles claimed cows were being herded down public roads on their way to slaughter, in full view of 'Hindus', in order to inflame the tensions between the communities (Ahmed 1981).

The controversy over cow slaughter is an example of attempts by activists from both communities to claim territory in Bengal and define it as a zone of tradition where Hindu-ness or Muslim-ness dominated. The struggle played out at the local scale as territories were claimed as areas where the traditions of a particular religion were historically dominant and should continue to be. The zones of tradition where bans on the slaughter of cows were established became areas where Hindu-ness was preeminent and Islamic customs were subordinate. Although the tenants who practised Islam on the estates where cow slaughter was banned did not have a religious prohibition against the slaughter of cattle, they were forced to abide by the traditions of Hinduism that restricted their ability to worship. In other areas, where Muslims activists established that cow slaughter was traditional, populations that practised Hinduism were forced to witness a ritual that they believed violated the tenets of their faith. As different cow protection rules were established in different places, dominance in the territory was contested,

disputed and redefined, marking out zones where contemporary customs were established in the name of ancient traditions. In these newly established zones of tradition, the subordinate communities were often left with three choices. They could accept the hegemony of the dominant group by submitting to their customs, they could dispute the newly imposed traditions or they could simply move to a different area where their own traditions were dominant, which further reinforces the significance of each zone.

Thumping drums

Disputes over religious processions playing music as they passed in front of mosques are often cited as another source of communal conflict in the early twentieth century in Bengal (Ahmed 1981; Freitag 1989; Datta 1999; Gossman 1999). While complaints over slaughtering cattle had been around for several centuries, the issue of music in front of mosques did not arise until the late 1890s. Over the following decades it evolved into a major point of contention across Bengal, as new mosques were built and populations became more aware of religious issues (Ahmed 1981). The most serious conflicts erupted in the 1920s, and in April and May of 1926 Calcutta saw some of the largest riots that had ever occurred in South Asia, which were initiated by a dispute over a procession in front of a mosque.

Just as Hindu revivalist movements emerged in the late nineteenth century to standardize and purify Hindu practice in South Asia, Islamic revivalist movements also began to campaign to remove what they perceived to be syncretistic beliefs from Islamic rituals. One tangible result of the Islamic movements was a sharp increase in the numbers of people attending prayer services at mosques in rural areas (Ahmed 1981). As the number of people attending prayers increased, many new mosques were built to accommodate the larger crowds.

In addition to encouraging people to perform the five daily prayers expected of all Muslims, revivalist leaders also sought to remove non-Islamic practices in the region. Music, particularly, was singled out. Just as the sacredness of the cow is questioned by some scholars of Hinduism, the role of music in Islam is often debated. In the Koran there are conflicting views on music, and some scholars argue that all music should be banned. Following these interpretations, Islamic revivalist movements in South Asia began to discourage Muslims from musical

activities that were deemed 'Hindu' in nature. At the same time, several Fatwas [religious edicts] were issued that described prayer as a silent activity and suggested that noise, particularly music, de-sanctified it (Datta 1999, 245). Activists began to argue that music should not be played near mosques at any time, not merely the five traditional daily prayer times, because an individual could be attempting to pray.

Hindu festivals are often celebrated by people parading through the streets carrying torches and symbols of gods and goddesses. An integral part of the processions is music, and disputes would arise as processions playing music would pass by mosques. An exasperated colonial official explained the problem:

The question only having arisen during the last two years or so, there are no records, and the witnesses available are prejudiced . . . In some places the Muhammadans [Muslims] have recently erected new mosques by the roads and the Hindus immediately wish to take processions by them with music though probably they never did so in the past. In others, mosques have been stuck down beside a road where processions have passed and I think it perfectly clear that any Muhammadan objection to music must be ruled out in such cases as the mosque did not previously exist . . . and it cannot be said that there was no practice of stopping music before the mosque, when there was no mosque before which to stop it. (Quoted in Gossman 1999, 75)

Again the government attempted to avoid choosing sides by refusing to establish an overarching policy and instead allowed local officials to decide disputes (Datta 1999; Gossman 1999). In order to solve the problems, these officials relied on the precedent of previous practice in different areas. But as the quote from the official above makes clear, it was often impossible to establish the traditional practice when mosques were being built in new areas and processions were becoming more frequent. Additionally, activists would be reticent to admit their community did not have the precedent even if it was the case. In response to complaints about processions beating drums or playing other instruments in front of mosques, Hindu activists would argue that the streets were public spaces that did not exclusively belong to one community or the other. Muslim leaders, on the other hand, would suggest that the processions could proceed along a different route or at a different time so that it did not disrupt the prayers.

By building new mosques throughout the area, Muslim activists were establishing zones of influence

and nodes of power that helped to claim the space and define the traditional practice in the area as Islamic. The presence of the mosque, and the daily religious performances that surround it, provided a clear indicator of which religion was legitimately practised in that area. Hindu activists would send processions down streets in order to mark particular roads as the domain of Hinduism. The right to take a noisy procession down a road signalled that the space was for Hindu practices. It can almost be seen as a race to either build a mosque or hold a procession in order to claim for posterity that the particular area was traditionally the domain of either Hinduism or Islam. Once a particular religious custom was determined to be legitimate in that area, a zone of tradition emerged marking all other practices as subordinate in what had been a shared space.

Conclusion

The conflicts that arose over the killing of sacred cows and over processions playing music in front of mosques in the early twentieth century have been widely understood as two early causes of what is now termed 'communal violence' in South Asia. Scholars of communalism have rightly emphasized the importance of how the violence was portrayed in the media and in government documents, how these particular symbols resonated with many sectors of the population and how the violence was often instigated by a small number of activists in intra-religious disputes. This paper has argued that there is one important aspect of these two conflicts that has previously been overlooked – the spatial and territorial nature of both processes.

Through the public performance of religious rituals in British India, enactments of cultural and religious identity categories were expressed in a distinctly territorial manner, which resulted in the creation of what this paper has termed 'zones of tradition'. In these zones, the group identity categories of Hindu and Muslim were spatialized in a way that empowered and disempowered particular sectors of the population. These zones of tradition increasingly became marked as areas of either Hindu-ness or Muslim-ness, where the traditions of the other populations were no longer completely accommodated. These spatial performances of religious rituals were disruptive to other populations and often resulted in conflict over who had the legitimate right to reside in that place. Consequently, it is argued that the territory

of Bengal can be understood as symbolically and tangibly divided into zones of tradition before it was officially partitioned in 1947 as the British left South Asia.

A significant consequence of these zones of tradition was an increase in population segregation along religious lines. As many scholars have argued, the first half of the twentieth century was a period in which many sectors of the population became increasingly aware of religious issues. However, it is not clear from these theories why Muslim labourers on a large plantation in rural Bengal would be stirred to action simply by a political argument about a conflict occurring outside of their lived experience in a distant city like Calcutta. By emphasizing the spatial strategies employed by activists and the boundary effects produced by the practices described above, the consequences for everyday life become more evident. When these same labourers are told that they can no longer sacrifice a cow in their village on Eid, these distant conflicts are suddenly affecting their daily lives by limiting their ability to adequately perform a significant religious requirement. By concretizing the larger conflicts in particular places, zones of tradition force those who had not participated in the debate before to become involved because some aspect of their way of life is threatened.

In Bengal, as these zones of tradition become established, subordinate populations began to feel vulnerable in particular places, either because they could no longer practice their religion without interference or due to the threat of physical violence during riots. In order to regain their sense of security, they would move, sometimes temporarily, sometimes permanently, to places that were dominated by their co-religionists (Datta 1999). As they moved to areas where their traditions were dominant, the heterogeneous social structure was eroded, which resulted in a clearer separation between religious populations. The massive population movements across the new borders of India and Pakistan at the time of the 1947 partition were the culmination of this segregation of populations into zones where their own religious practices were deemed traditional, a process that had begun decades earlier.

By thinking about the development of boundaries between group identity categories in this way, the critical role of territoriality and performativity becomes evident. In many cases simply describing a group identity category in a particular way, and establishing a set of characteristics that differentiate the group-

in-the-making from others, is not in itself sufficient to develop the perception within the population that the group exists. Linking the category to a particular territory, on the other hand, reifies abstract notions of difference by delimiting the boundaries of where a set of particular practices are legitimately performed or where the 'group' legitimately lives. The zone of tradition serves this legitimizing role by establishing on the ground boundaries that divide us from them, making clear the line between the members of the group and the other. In Bengal, mosques were built on roads, processions passed through the streets, and prohibitions on killing cows were enforced or defied in order to demonstrate whose traditions marked that place, both at the present moment and for future disputes. The spatial nature of these activities, specifically, is what makes them effective.

Although the concept of a zone of tradition was developed to explain the situation in a very particular time and place, British India at the beginning of the twentieth century, this way of conceptualizing the territorialization of group-making discourses could be applied to other situations. The examples used here are about territorializing religious practices, but a zone of tradition could be based on many other forms of distinction such as race, ethnicity, language or nation. One possible application might be post-American invasion Iraq, where the political debate is often framed in terms of overlapping populations of Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites with competing claims to legitimacy in particular places. Another might be in Northern Ireland, where places, and parade routes, are marked as being traditionally Catholic or Protestant.

These same territorial processes can also be observed in the Gujarati violence of 2002 that was described at the beginning of this paper.⁹ In retaliation for the deaths on the train, activists sought out practitioners of Islam in order to demonstrate whose traditions were legitimate in that place. The people who survived the initial violence live in fear that it will occur again and feel, as one survivor put it, '[t]oday there's no place for Muslims' (BBC 2002). Instead, they are forced to leave the area in search of places where their religious practices are respected and they can once again feel secure in their own homes. As a resident of another area noted, '[t]his was traditionally a mixed area, with both Hindus and Muslims. But after the riots, it's become completely polarized as Hindus have moved out' (BBC 2004). This contemporary violence in Gujarat and the segregation based on religious identity categories that followed it cannot be viewed as a contingent event,

as a random happening. Instead it must be grounded in the historical and geographical context of how group-making discourses have been territorialized into zones of tradition in South Asia over the past century.

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Notes

- 1 In this paper South Asia will be used to refer to the countries of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Bengal will be used to denote a large region in the northeast of South Asia that is now politically organized as the independent state of Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal.
- 2 For example, in a BBC news article from 12 January 2004, the sequence of events is presented as fact. It reads in part, 'That February, a Muslim mob attacked a train carrying Hindu pilgrims near the town of Godhra in Gujarat state. Nearly 60 Hindus were burnt alive. In retaliation, mobs of Hindus attacked members of the Muslim minority across Gujarat state in the weeks that followed.'
- 3 This is evident in many writings that often place this new violence in the context of other riots in the past, which has the effect of almost justifying the current situation. In the *Guardian* (2002), 'It might be concluded that such violence in the sub-continent arises from the incompatibility of Hinduism, Islam, and other faiths, or at least their incompatibility as interpreted by some followers of those religions.'
- 4 The conclusion and timing of the report were questioned by many because it was released days before an important regional election. See BBC (2005).
- 5 I am in no way arguing that I am the first to describe either of these processes. Indeed, they are chosen specifically because many other scholars have pointed to them as the types of disputes that initiated violence and riots in the early twentieth century. See Freitag (1980 1989), Ahmed (1981) and Pandey (1991).
- 6 Of course, in the light of Edward Said's critique of Orientalism (1979), we should be careful about accepting these sorts of descriptions without careful consideration.
- 7 I use quotes here because Seed tends to use contemporary categories, such as nations, to describe processes that were occurring well before most scholars of nationalism date the advent of that particular category. See Gellner (1983) and Brubaker (1996).
- 8 For a detailed account of a cow causing a riot in Bengal, but for a different reason, see Roy (1996).
- 9 See BBC (2004) for a view on the aftermath of the violence.

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