Studying Ethno-Religious Political Movements in India

Why does ethno-religious violence emerge when and where it does? How does it connect to larger ecosystems and structures of change? And how might insights from sociology and transformative justice guide approaches to prevention and reconciliation?

My research program investigates ethno-religious violence in India across three levels: micro (emotional dynamics of confrontation), meso (movement ecology), and macro (media, religious fields, and postcolonial state structures). Using computational text analysis, GIS, and ethnographic video analysis, I examine how violence emerges, diffuses, and can be transformed. At Bryn Mawr, I have begun to build a research team, the Dynamics of Aggression and Nonviolent Group Action (DANGA - Hindi for "Riot") Lab. Figure 1 summarizes the trajectory of these three strands of my research.

India's pluralism and long history of ethno-religious unrest make it an ideal site for theorizing contentious politics in contexts more reflective of the global population than Western Europe or the United States. My multi-level agenda combines methodological range with theoretical depth to explain how violence is produced, prevented, and reshaped.

Micro-Strand: Emotions, Violence, and Contentious Performances

This strand examines the situational and emotional dynamics of violent confrontation. My case study of an Atlanta school clerk who de-escalated a gunman (R&R at Social Psychology Quarterly) demonstrates how internalized interaction rituals can shift emotional trajectories and interrupt violence. Building on Collins' theories, I extend this framework to riots: from ethnographic and historical accounts, I identified recurrent "scenes" such as slogan-shouting and standoffs, showing how they generate or drain emotional energy. Using computational text analysis of Times of India riot reports, I demonstrated that the repertoire of collective violence has been remarkably stable across several decades (under review at American Journal of Sociology).

Current work with the DANGA Lab scales this research: we are developing computational models of riot action sequences and multi-modal analyses of escalation and de-escalation using news, photos, and video. The goal is to identify situational conditions and emotional stances associated with escalation and de-escalation—advancing theory while working toward tools for community protection without reliance on militarized policing.

Meso-Strand: Ethno-Religious Politics in Movement Ecology

At the meso level, I reintegrate riots into the broader study of social movements. While existing work links riots to Hindu nationalist movements, it often isolates them from the larger movement ecology. My agenda reframes unrest as one modality of collective action by organizations that affect and

are affected by the movements around them, and by the expansion and contraction of the social movement sector.

With my research team, I am adapting "human-in-the-loop" computational methods to develop an all-India protest event dataset from the Times of India. Early work is supported by NSF ACCESS resources, with plans to scale to larger allocations and external funding. This dataset will anchor a book-length project on India's protest ecology and cross-national comparative analyses of coalition-building and tactical diffusion.

Macro-Strand: Postcolonial State, Media, and Inter-Religious Contact Zones

At the macro level, I bring society back into the study of ethno-religious violence, moving beyond electoral and economic explanations to foreground cultural and institutional dynamics. My theoretical work traces how morally charged rumors escalate violence while ambiguity enables de-escalation. An event-history analysis shows diffusion of riots through vernacular-language media networks, supporting arguments that state-level communication infrastructures drive patterns of unrest (under review at Journal of Peace Research).

Future work will extend beyond violence to the broader spectrum of inter-religious encounters—conversion, coexistence, syncretism, and dialogue. I am framing a grant proposal to the Templeton Foundation for a multi-sited ethnography of these encounters, mapping the conditions under which contact turns toward conflict or coexistence.

Contributions and Future Directions

Taken together, these three strands form an integrated research program at the intersection of social movements, violence, and religion.

- Violence, Emotion, and Contentious Performances: Demonstrating how situational and emotional dynamics constrain violent repertoires and create openings for de-escalation.
- Movement Ecology: Embedding riots within broader fields of collective action through innovative data collection and comparative analysis.
- Multi-Institutional Politics: Re-centering culture, morality, media, religion, and colonial legacies in the study of contentious politics.

In my next role, I will expand the DANGA Lab, training students in both qualitative and computational methods, generating unique datasets, and producing collaborative scholarship. Ultimately, this agenda advances sociology's understanding of how violence is generated and transformed, while contributing insights to broader interdisciplinary and public debates on conflict and coexistence.

A more detailed version of this research statement is available upon request.

Research Program

Micro

Past Work
- Case study of Atlanta school de-escalation (R&R at SPQ)
- Identified recurring "scenes" in riots
- Text analysis of *Times of India* riot reports demonstrating stability of violence repertoires (Under review at AJS)

Current Projects
- Expanding analysis from verbs to action sequences using riot-related articles qualitatively and computationally
- Developing multi-modal (text + photo/video) analyses of escalation/de-escalation

3-5 Years
- Publish computational work on typical action sequences in ethno-religious riots
- Publish qualitative work identifying situational and emotional patterns leading to escalation vs. de-escalation

5+ Years
- Develop tools for community protection not reliant on militarized policing

Meso

Past Work
- Designed Machine-learning-enhanced "human-in-the-loop" methods for detecting riots from the *Times of India* archive.

Current Projects
- Adapting methods to move from riot detection to protest-event detection
- Developing all-India protest dataset

3-5 Years
- Publish articles on tactical diffusion and coalition building in India's Social Movement Sector
- Publish book-length project on India's evolving social movement sector, 1947 - present

5+ Years
- Extend the field history of India's social movement sector incorporating to incorporate colonial and transnational dynamics

Macro

Past Work
- Developed theoretical paper on moral dynamics in riots
- Event-history analysis: diffusion of violence via vernacular-language media networks (Under review at JPR)

Current Projects
- Framing initial theoretical typology of inter-religious encounters (conflict, conversion, syncretism, coexistence)

3-5 Years
- Begin multi-sited ethnography of inter-religious contact zones
- Expand computational work to multi-sectoral analysis of interacting political, religious, and media fields.

5+ Years
- Publish multi-sited ethnography of inter-religious contact zones.
- Publish articles, book project on ethno-religious movements navigating overlapping media, political, and religious fields
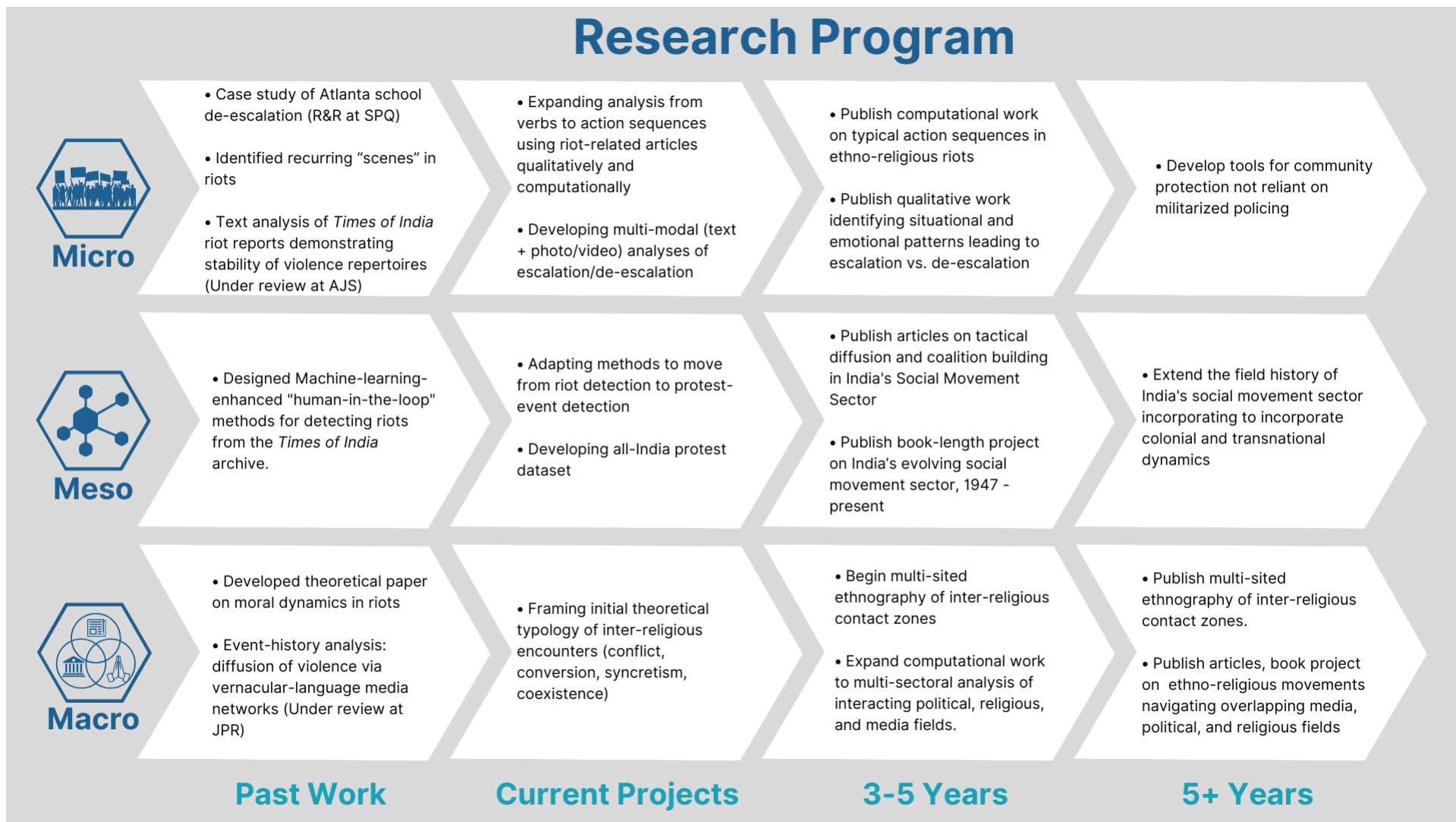
| Past Work | Current Projects | 3-5 Years | 5+ Years |

Figure 1: Research Program Overview