Research Proposal: Political Violence and Election in India

1. Topic and data sources

Haunting India even before its independence, political violence, from both the left and the right of the political spectrum, still poses a serious threat to Indian democracy today. Moreover, new technological and economic situations are re-shaping the nature of political violence and thus require new solutions. On the one hand, social media and instant communication platforms, in particular WhatsApp, have been spreading false information and agitate anti-Muslim violence in recent years.[[1]](#footnote-1) On the other hand, Naxalite activities have also been on the rise, in many cases due to excessive resource extraction and environmental degradation.[[2]](#footnote-2) This study will focus on one of these two issues, depending on sample size and data quality.

Evolving with political violence is electoral politics. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), currently in power at the center and facing an upcoming election scheduled for April and May, has its cadres and key support base from Hindu nationalist forces.[[3]](#footnote-3) Moreover, communal incidents are sometimes manipulated to support Hindu nationalist rhetoric to the advantage of BJP candidates, which has already been verified by quantitative studies.[[4]](#footnote-4) However, data used for existing studies have been relatively old, and thus not able to take into account many new factors that could have impacted the interplay between elections and communal violence, e.g. ascendance of ultra-nationalist politicians,[[5]](#footnote-5) increasing nationalist tendencies of the Indian National Congress,[[6]](#footnote-6) and social media platforms. A novel dataset of cow lynching, i.e. violence triggered by alleged cow slaughter, usually initiated by Hindus and targeted at Muslims, dating back to 2012 would be of interest.[[7]](#footnote-7) The time, location and casualty of cow lynching incidents are reported, which enables the construction of panel datasets. Federal and state level legislature election data is also available.

By contrast, violence of Naxalites, who claim the heritage of Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) is more geographically concentrated. Forested and under-developed tribal areas in Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Jharkhand are most heavily impacted by Naxalite violence. It is widely acknowledged that local support for Naxalite activities usually originate from environmental destruction, irresponsible mining and dislocation of tribal people. Government actions to combat poverty and improve the provision of public goods have been proved to significantly reduce the intensity of Naxalite violence.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, there is still little empirical work on the relationship between Naxalite violence and electoral politics. Data on Naxalite activities is available from South Asian Terrorism Portal, and state and national level election data is also publicly available.[[9]](#footnote-9)

1. Likely finding

This study expects to discover that political violence resonant with electoral cycles. In the case of cow lynching, states ruled by the BJP are more likely to have such violence, and in constituencies where BJP are in tight run-up to elections, cow-related violence is also more likely to happen. Regression discontinuity design exploiting particularly close elections would be the main identification strategy of the causal impact of election result on cow lynching. In the case of Naxalite violence, the election of candidates with pro-poor and pro-environment policies would mitigate violence. Similarly, regression discontinuity design would help to identify causal relationship.

1. Logistics

Professor Khanna expertises in both topics and can provide essential help for me in terms of data gathering and analysis. I will be in Washington, DC next quarter so we will be communicating through Skype. Communication hours will be one hour per week.

1. Bibliography

I have already finished reading the following:

Iyer, Sriya, and Anand Shrivastava. "Religious riots and electoral politics in India." Journal of Development Economics 131 (2018): 104-122.

Khanna, Gaurav, and Laura Zimmermann. "Guns and butter? Fighting violence with the promise of development." *Journal of Development Economics* 124 (2017): 120-141.

I will continue to read the following:

Brass, Paul R. *The production of Hindu-Muslim violence in contemporary India*. University of Washington Press, 2011.

Mehrotra, Santosh, ed. *Countering Naxalism with Development: challenges of social justice and state security*. SAGE Publications India, 2014.

Nellis, Gareth, Michael Weaver, and Steven Rosenzweig. "Do parties matter for ethnic violence? Evidence from India." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 11, no. 3 (2016): 249-277

Samaddar, Ranabir, ed. *From Popular Movements to Rebellion: The Naxalite Decade*. Routledge, 2018.

Wilkinson, Steven I. *Votes and violence: Electoral competition and ethnic riots in India*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.

1. Relevant courses

GPCO 400 Policy Making Processes

GPCO 410 International Politics and Security

GPCO 412 Globalization, the World System & the Pacific

GPCO 454 “QM II” - Introduction to Regression Analysis

GPEC 446 “QM III” - Applied Data Analysis & Statistical Decision Making

GPEC 443 GIS and Spatial Data Analysis

GPCO 468 Evaluating Technological Innovation

1. France-Presse, Agence, “Police arrest 25 people in India after latest WhatsApp lynching” *The Guardian*, last modified July 15, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/15/india-police-arrest-25-people-after-latest-whatsapp-mob-lynching-child-kidnapping-rumours>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Chowdhury, Swaptik, “A Blueprint for Ending India's Naxal Rebellion” *The Diplomat*, last modified January 9, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/a-blueprint-for-ending-indias-naxal-rebellion/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jaffrelot, Christophe. "India's Democracy at 70: Toward a Hindu State?" *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 3 (2017): 52-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wilkinson, Steven I. *Votes and violence: Electoral competition and ethnic riots in India*. Cambridge University Press, 2006. For quantitative studies, see Nellis, Gareth, Michael Weaver, and Steven Rosenzweig. "Do parties matter for ethnic violence? Evidence from India." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 11, no. 3 (2016): 249-277; Iyer, Sriya, and Anand Shrivastava. "Religious riots and electoral politics in India." *Journal of Development Economics* 131 (2018): 104-122. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gupta, Swati and Annie Gowen, “Modi's party picks Yogi Adityanath, strident Hindu nationalist priest, as leader of India’s biggest state” *The Washington Post*, last modified March 19, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/19/for-state-leader-modi-taps-firebrand-politician-who-once-advocated-killing-muslims/?utm_term=.f589d2934cc7>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Anuja, “Is Congress playing the soft Hindutva card in Uttar Pradesh?” *Livemint*, last modified October 11, 2016, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/NifKag6dBilD19yLhGav2I/Is-Congress-playing-the-soft-Hindutva-card-in-Uttar-Pradesh.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Fact Check, “Hate Crime: Cow-related Violence in India.” Accessed March 12, 2019, [https://lynch.factchecker.in/#](https://lynch.factchecker.in/). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Khanna, Gaurav, and Laura Zimmermann. "Guns and butter? Fighting violence with the promise of development." *Journal of Development Economics* 124 (2017): 120-141. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. South Asian Terrorism Portal, “Datasheet: India.” Accessed March 12, 2019, <https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/india>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)