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## A Research Agenda in India for Political Psychologists: Fanning the Flames of Political Violence or Dousing Them?

IBPP Editor  
bloomr@erau.edu

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**Abstract.** This article describes psychological Issues about the incitement of political violence in India that merits further attention by political psychologists.

Hindu violence against Christians continues to be a significant political Issue both within India and throughout the international mass media. Some diplomats, analysts, and journalists have ascribed part of the blame for the violence to commissions and omission of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP governs India as part of a coalition and governs several states outright. However, BJP representatives have denied any role in the violence or being a party to inciting the attacks. As support for their contention, some BJP representatives cite their call for a national debate about religious conversion from Hinduism to Christianity--such conversion being an Issue that has been alluded to by some supporters of Hindu on Christian violence. If a debate is being called for, violence cannot be--so the public rationale seems to go.

Long-term observers of political power throughout the globe might counter that advocacy for debate may serve as a cover for violent machination that are occurring concurrently. Beyond this, however, calling for debate may elicit psychological mechanisms that incite violence or impede violence.

In the former case, calling for debate may (1) bring a conflictual Issue to the fore that harbors within itself significant potential for incitement of violence; (2) encourage people to take sides in as manner that generalizes to taking sides in additional areas of daily life including some with higher potential for violent conflict management; and (3) activate ongoing discriminatory processes based on constructions of self and other, ingroup and outgroup that can precipitate violence. Hence the flames of political violence may well be fanned.

In the latter case, calling for debate may (1) serve as a safety valve that defuses preexisting conflict and lowers the probability that a threshold for violence will be reached; (2) function as a long-term distractor from other conflict management techniques that lead towards incitement including outright incitement; and (3) elicit peaceful conflict resolution--conflict in general or conflict on particular Issues dissipate. Here the flames of political violence may be doused.

So what will a call to debate--almost always promulgated via mass media-- sow and what will it reap? Many United States legal jurisdictions have seemed loath or ambivalent to hold mass media organizations liable for inciting violence. Yet terrorist organizations and terrorist fronts continue to employ mass media in attempts to incite supporters to violence or even to incite violence against their supporters that will precipitate a violent counter-reaction by their supporters. Moreover, inciting political violence seems to have several possible goals--e.g., to produce obedience and compliance, to restore justice through retribution, and to assert and protect social identities --all of which may be differentially linked in potential for violence in different societies, cultures, situations, and historical moments.

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Perhaps only one conclusion is merited: the debate about the call to debate as potentially inciting or impeding political violence needs to be undergirded by political psychological research. (See Dee, J.L. (1987). Media accountability for real-life violence: A case of negligence or free speech? *Journal of Communication*, 37, 106-138; Dugger, C. (January 23, 1999). Attacks on Christians are increasing in India. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Felson, R.B., & Tedeschi, J.T. (1995). A social interactionist approach to violence: Cross-cultural applications. In R. B. Ruback & N.A. Weiner (Eds.). *Interpersonal violent behaviors: Social and cultural aspects*. NY: Springer Publishing Co., Inc.; Kingston, S. (1995). Terrorism, the media, and the Northern Ireland conflict. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 18, 203-231.) (Keywords: Christianity, Hinduism, Incitement, India, Violence.)