

**Choosing your fighter:  
Variation in identities of contentious violence**

Doctoral research fieldwork

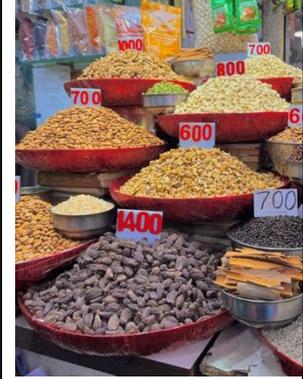
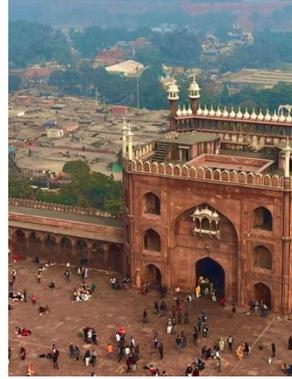
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Why do individuals within the same ethnic group choose to participate in contrasting identities of contentious violence i.e., the left-wing Naxalite (Maoist) movement and the right-wing Hindutva movement in India? Based on this overarching research question, I carried out fieldwork across six different regions in India during the month of January 2023 – Delhi, Varanasi, Kolkata, Siliguri, Digha and Contai. The aim of the fieldwork itself was threefold: 1) to test the validity of the treatments in a survey experiment to be conducted in 2023; 2) to conduct elite interviews and 3) to carry out brief ethnographic studies of three major regions: Delhi, which experiences the largest internal migration flow in the country; Varanasi, which is the electoral seat of Narendra Modi; and Kolkata, which is located in the state of West Bengal, a traditional bastion of left-wing politics in India. In addition, I sought to confirm the relevance and importance of this research within Indian academia, and create an academic network for the purposes of future fieldwork.

**Delhi**

Apart from elite interviews, I carried out field visits to major chowks in the city which drew individuals from all over the country – Janpath, Chandni Chowk, Chauri Chowk and Palika Bazaar. Chandni Chowk, translated as Moonlight Square, is one of the oldest markets in India. Established under the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan for his daughter, Jahanara Begum, the chowk was designed in a half-moon-shaped square in Shahjahanbad (present-day Old Delhi), bordered by 8 major gates. Originally spatially differentiated by the settlement of different *katras* (guilds), the market today continues to be divided into different sections that trade in specific goods – e.g. Khari Baoli trades in spices and Nai Sarak specializes in books. While the chowk has traditionally been a site of intercommunal ties, different sections of the chowk appear dominated by different religious groups based on visible ethnic cues, including attire, facial hair, and religious shop decorations – Balli Maran, near the Fatehpuri Mosque, is dominated by Muslims while Moti Bazaar is dominated by Hindus. Recent intercommunal tensions in the chowk highlight both the spatial division and closeness of the communities, and the importance of visual cues in identifying outgroups. Katra Neel, the market for wedding festivities in India, witnesses a nationally representative distribution of visitors each day and while vendors are open to ethnographic interviews, they are generally hesitant to answer surveys, making bazaars a poor site to sample survey respondents.

			
Khari Baoli	Katra Neel	Morning at Chandi Chowk	View of the Chowk from Jama Masjid

## Varanasi

Banares silk sarees are renowned and have traditionally been handcrafted by the weavers of the Ansari community in the markets of **Nati Imli**. However, unlike the Mallah boatmen community, the weavers have an acute paucity of sustainable associations to protect their interests. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, **Nati Imli** has seen a significant decline in the number of handlooms as more weavers opt into adopting electric-powered looms. However, as the elite interviews illuminate, the weavers of **Nati Imli** have been displaced by government-sponsored Hindu majority weaver communities in Ramnagar, heavily comprised of migrants from other parts of the country. With the absence of intercommunal civic associations, rapidly shifting structures of traditional industries that are dominated by a single ethnic group, as well as being Narendra Modi's electoral district and the origin of electoral Rath Yatras, Varanasi continues to be a salient case study for communal strife. Additionally, ethnographic observations and interviews reflect both the static and malleable contours of ethnic identities and identification behaviours – vendors working by the Ghats were exposed to religious symbols, repertoires and performances constantly, and yet in private transgressed religious norms – neither was perceived as a contradiction to the self.

			
View of Manikarnika Ghat, also known as the burning Ghat –	The vendor at the shop by Scindhia	The morning Ganga Aarhi at Assi Ghat is just one example of	Banarès Hindu University, the site of

the smoke from the funeral pyres is visible.	Ghat is an interview subject.	daily religious symbols and performances one is exposed to by the Ghats.	multiple elite interviews.
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### **Kolkata, Siliguri, Contai and Digha**

Siliguri, which lies nestled in the district of Darjeeling, is merely thirty-five minutes away from Naxalbari. In 1967, a peasant uprising in Naxalbari gave birth to a splinter from the Communist Party of India – the Naxalite movement, which subsequently fragmented and morphed into the contemporary Maoist insurgency across the Red Corridor in the eastern part of the country. At Siliguri, I was able to conduct elite interviews with the son of the charismatic leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – the organizational front of the Naxalite movement. Currently, as a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, he stands for electoral competition – a departure from the original Naxalite movement. The party today focuses on organizing the ‘petty bourgeoisie,’ namely the workers who wake up at four in the morning, pack a meagre lunch for the day and travel for hours on their bicycles from their village to work in construction sites in the rapidly urbanizing region of Siliguri. Siliguri and Naxalbari are visible examples of a sudden shift in contemporary electoral politics in India – bastions of radical left-wing politics that have swung hard in the opposite direction and elected BJP assembly members. Contai, which was once decorated in the colours of CPI or AITC (All India Trinamool Congress) is now similarly draped in saffron. Based on ethnographic interviews and elite interviews across the different field sites in West Bengal, this swing can be attributed to socioeconomic dynamics and the past performance of CPI assembly members. Beyond electoral trends, ethnographic interviews echo emerging literature which highlights that the desire to join in a specific identity of contentious violence was often associated with feelings of heroism and adventure – interviews with ex-members who engaged in violence describe feelings of ‘being on the right side of history.’



CPI (M-L)'s campaign posters in Siliguri.	A seasonal migrant worker in the fishing industry in the village of Digha.	BJP's campaign posters in rural Contai.	BJP symbolism in Contai
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I am deeply grateful for the fieldwork grant from Seoul National University Asia Center has enabled this research. The field visit has not only helped me to construct context-specific questionnaires for a survey experiment, but it has also provided invaluable qualitative material across regions which have witnessed recent rapid changes in traditional intercommunal links.