

Fraternity or Fracture? National Identity, Religious Minorities, and Communal Violence in India

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Abstract

Nation states offer a cohesive identity to a diverse citizenry, at once minimizing their differences and elevating their commonality. While collective success can strengthen national identity, collective adversity can unravel it. We study the interplay between religious identity and national identity and how it is influenced by a sporting rivalry of unparalleled geopolitical consequence: international cricket matches between India and Pakistan. When India loses to Pakistan, we find a seven-fold increase in religious violence in Indian districts with a significant Muslim minority; both when these matches are played in India and when they are played abroad. In contrast, Indian cricketing losses against other countries do not incite religious violence. Our results underscore the fragility of identity and its importance in influencing social cohesion.

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National identity unites persons of disparate racial, religious, ethnic, and regional loyalties. Shared success and prosperity—scientific breakthroughs, sporting victories, military campaigns—can strengthen national pride and identity, producing a virtuous cycle of social cohesion. However, when the nation-state is challenged and the collective faces adversity, the fragility of national identity may reveal itself. The need for public understanding often gives rise to political opportunism and the scapegoating vulnerable groups: immigrants, religious, and ethnic minorities etc. As tribalism takes hold, the belonging of subgroups, particularly that of minorities, is called into question. The result is a breakdown of the social cohesion offered by national identity and a descent into communal violence.

In this paper, we explore how collective success and adversity affect the cohesiveness of national identity in India. To do so, we leverage a half century’s worth of international cricket matches. International cricket, by definition, sets up adversarial interactions on which contests occur on the basis of a collective national identity. Furthermore, cricket in the subcontinent is often described as a ‘religion’ and perhaps no other contest elicits more nationalist fervor than cricket matches between India and Pakistan. These two nations have long been geopolitical rivals, fighting multiple wars, and engaging in several international skirmishes ([Hashim, 2019](#)).

India is a diverse, secular nation with a majority Hindu population and a significant minority of Muslims; one that would constitute the third largest Muslim country. Pakistan is a majority Muslim nation that is a constitutionally declared Islamic republic. The Partition of India in 1947, makes the religious divide in India especially salient, creating on-going tension between the majority Hindu community in India and its Muslim minority; tensions which continue to shape electoral politics in the present day.

We study the impact of an Indian cricket national team loss to Pakistan on communal violence in Indian districts with a significant Muslim minority. Our dataset combines Indian Census demographic data with documentation of Hindu-Muslim

riots from 1950-1995 and game-level international cricket data from the same period. To identify the causal effect of cricketing losses on communal violence, we first leverage variation across time: we compare outcomes of cricket matches when India plays Pakistan, versus when it is another team. Second, we leverage variation across Indian districts and, in particular, whether districts have a significant Muslim minority population or not. Our key result is that a cricketing loss to Pakistan results in a *seven-fold* increase in religious violence in districts with a significant Muslim minority when India loses to Pakistan. This occurs whether the game is played in India or in a foreign country.

To understand the mechanisms contributing to this increase in violence, we explore variation in: (1) whether the match was played at home or abroad, (2) the outcome of the match, and (3) the identity of the foreign team playing India. First, we compare the estimated effects for matches that take place at home and those that take place elsewhere. We find no differences between these two estimates and find a larger impact for matches that take place outside of India. This indicates that the effect is *not* due to large crowds gathering within India and causing violence surrounding these matches.

On a related note, we include controls for the World Cup and other tournament matches to exclude any additional impact caused by a more situationally important game (i.e. when India loses in the World Cup finals as opposed to a bilateral tour loss within a larger series). Given that our results are robust to these controls, we can rule them out as the driving force behind increased inter-group violence.

Second, we find no evidence to suggest that victories (or draws) against Pakistan result in a symmetric *decrease* in violence. Rather they do not have a significant effect on religious violence. This result suggests that while defeat to Pakistan may result in recrimination and violence, team successes do not appear to build cohesion.

Lastly, we conduct placebo tests in which we estimate the impact of an Indian cricketing loss to other nations. We find no statistical impact on religious riots in

Indian districts with a significant Muslim minority due to a loss to any other major test cricket nation. These findings suggest that the effect we estimate is due primarily to the unique challenge a loss to Pakistan poses to the collective national identity of India.

Collectively, our evidence points to the fragility of national identity; cricket is, after all, a game. Be that as it may, a shared loss to a foe that represents cracks beneath the surface of a shared identity leads to a drastic breakdown in social cohesion. In this case, we see a significant increase in religious tribalism as Indian Muslims' membership in the Indian nationality is called into question.

This paper contributes to two main bodies of work. First, our work adds to the study of ethnic diversity and state formation. Many studies have presented the challenge a diverse body can pose to a national collective ([Ray and Esteban, 2017](#)). More recent research has studied potential solutions to nation-building in a diverse environment. [Bazzi et al. \(2019\)](#) observes positive national identity outcomes from a population resettlement program. [Okunogbe \(2024\)](#) tests more short-term interactions among ethnic groups, finding growth in both ethnic and national identity after participating in one year of youth service. [Lowe \(2021\)](#) uses cricket to show that collaborative contact increases intergroup efficiency though shows a decrease when such interaction is adversarial. A number of other studies have found positive short term effects from inter-regional and inter-group contact ([Bagues and Roth, 2023](#); [Boisjoly et al., 2006](#); [Dahl et al., 2021](#)). This paper analyzes to what extent the strength of these nation building tactics endure by evaluating the impact of an exogenous shock that challenges collective identity.

Second, we contribute to the body of work analyzing identity and sport. [Hirshon \(2020\)](#) outlines the influence sport can have on social identity with fans internalizing victories and externalizing defeat. Such internalization has been shown to boost relaxation and happiness ([Maennig, 2007](#)) while externalization is demonstrated through increased property crime and violence ([Baumann et al., 2012](#); [Rees](#)

and Schnepel, 2009). Some recent case studies have demonstrated a tendency of in-group members to strategically include or exclude athletes possessing multiple social identities based on their success in sport (James, 2013; Bernache-Assollant et al., 2021). We progress this idea beyond just athletes by quasi-experimentally testing the effect of sporting failure on the inclusion or exclusion of other fans with multiple social identities.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 describes the setting of this paper, outlining partition and religious identity between India and Pakistan as well as the cultural and political significance of cricket. Section 3 gives a descriptive view of the data used in our analysis. Section 4 details the empirical strategy used to isolate the causal effect of cricketing losses to Pakistan on communal violence. Section 5 overviews the results of the analysis. Section 6 discusses the robustness of our findings. Section 7 concludes.

2 Context: Religious Identity, Partition, and Cricket

2.1 Religious Conflict in India

The Partition of India in 1947, resulted in the creation of two nation-states, ostensibly split along religious lines. The Partition itself displaced almost 30 million people, while some accounts suggest nearly three million perished Bharadwaj et al. (2008). The two new states which resulted from this fissure, India and Pakistan, have since been marked by conflict. While this includes four inter-state wars since Independence, it also includes constant skirmishes on the border and recriminations about meddling in each other's domestic affairs.

While tracing the roots of this violence is beyond the scope of this article, the proximate roots of religious tensions were fomented under British rule which pitted the two religions—among many other sub-groups— against each other to strengthen British authority (Affairs, Affairs). At the turn of the millennium, tensions have wors-