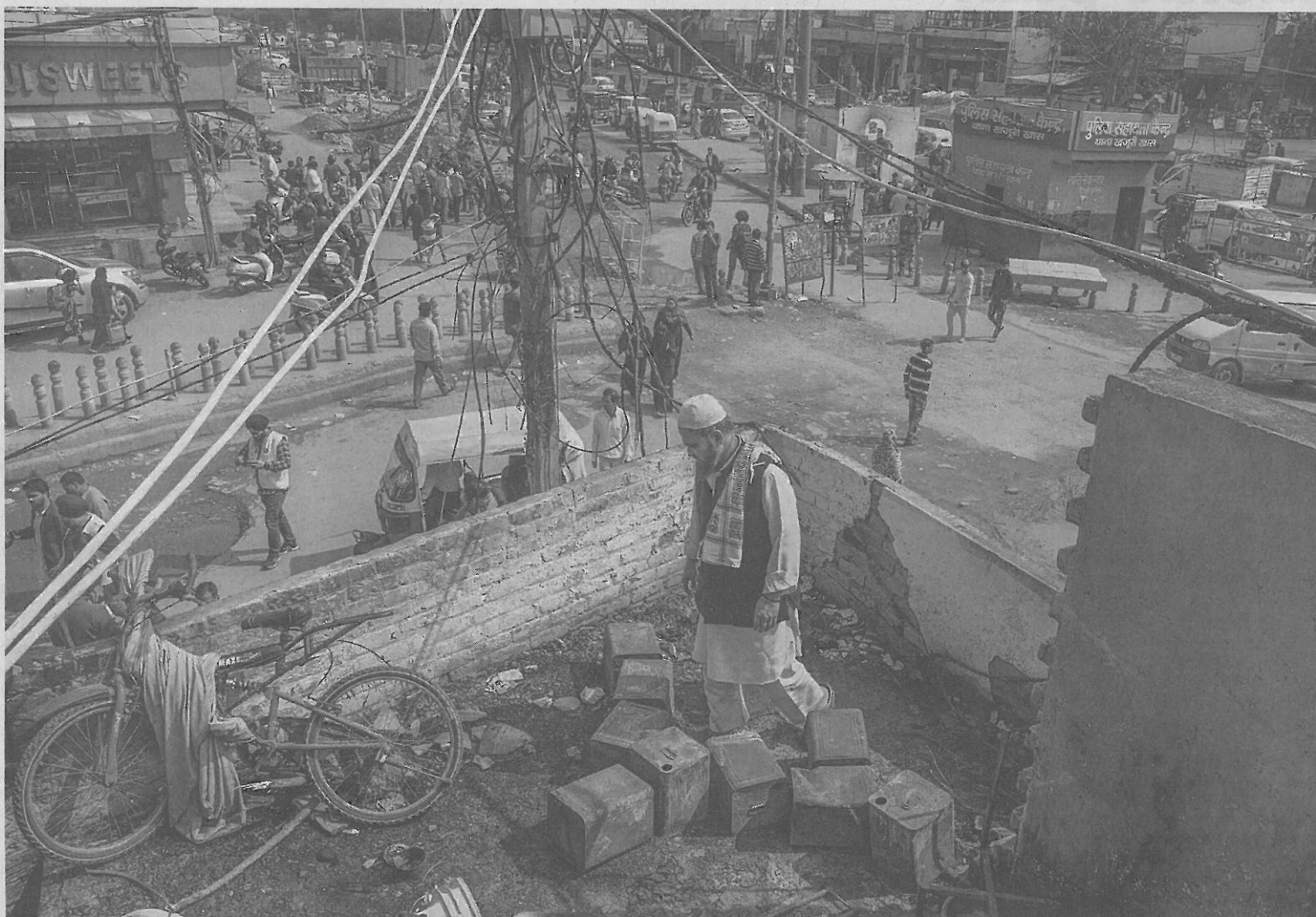


# World



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ATUL LOKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A shop owner whose business was destroyed when street battles erupted in New Delhi. The battles started after a politician threatened to remove a peaceful Muslim protest.

## Reaping a whirlwind in India

NEWS ANALYSIS  
NEW DELHI

### Critics say Modi's policies have lit a powder keg of religious 'hate and bigotry'

BY JEFFREY GETTLEMAN  
AND MARIA ABI-HABIB

As neighborhoods in New Delhi, India's capital, burned and religiously driven bloodletting consumed more than 40 lives, most of them Muslim, last week, India's government was quick to say that the violence was spontaneous.

But as reality has settled in, critics say the killings were neither spontaneous nor without warning: They were inevitable.

Step by step, they argue, policies enacted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi have entrenched impunity, captured institutions and fanned religious hatred — methodically building a dangerous Hindu-nationalist ecosystem. It was only a matter of time until something blew up.

“Supporters of the government feel enabled to commit all kinds of crimes, because they feel they have political protection,” said Meenakshi Ganguly, the South Asia director for Human Rights Watch.

Mr. Modi and his party, she said, “have allowed a culture of hate and bigotry to prevail.”

Neighborhoods in the capital that for generations had been integrated between Hindus, who make up the vast majority of India's population, and Muslims, who compose less than 15 percent, are tearing apart along religious lines.

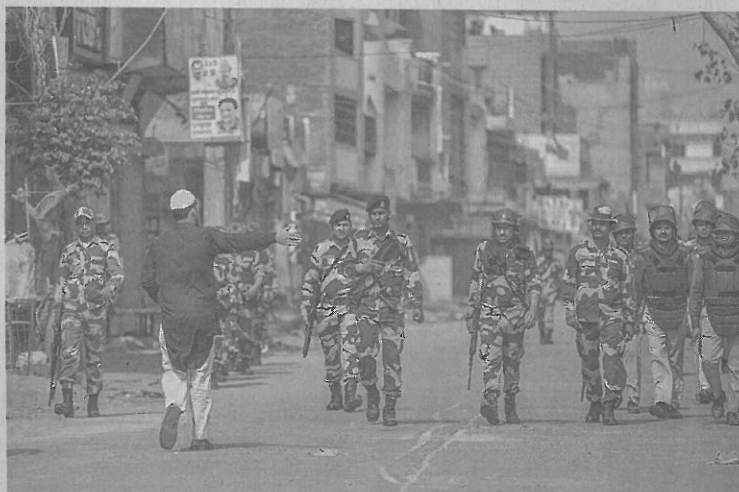
Many Muslims are now leaving, hoisting their unburned things on their heads and trudging away from streets that still smell of smoke.

The question before the nation is whether the bloodshed will change the direction of Mr. Modi — who first ran for prime minister in 2014 under the slogan “Together for all, development for all.” In that campaign, Mr. Modi presented himself as a strong nationalist leader and economic reformer, playing down his Bharatiya Janata Party's history of Hindu-nationalist aims and vilification of Muslims.

Some doubt clung to him personally as well. Despite his having been cleared by a court, accusations remained that he was complicit in the massacre of hundreds of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, when he was the state's chief minister.



Families displaced by the violence took shelter in makeshift camps. Many Muslims are now leaving neighborhoods that have been integrated with Hindus for generations.



Witnesses to the riots said the police often stepped back from Hindu crowds, but could be vicious with Muslims: One Muslim man died after being beaten by the police.

textbooks — to de-emphasize Muslims' contribution to India and play up Hindu teachings. Many Muslim Indians, who make up one of the world's largest Muslim populations, at 200 million, said they had never felt so marginalized.

And impunity flourished. Members of mobs who had been caught on video in broad daylight beating the life out of someone went unpunished, or, if they were caught, they were often hailed by party leaders as heroes.

It could invigorate Narendra

a special path to Indian citizenship for migrants of nearly every prominent South Asian faith, bar one: Islam.

Protests flared, and Muslims weren't the only ones marching. Many progressive Indians saw this as Mr. Modi's most blatantly anti-Muslim initiative yet and a grave threat to India's founding as a secular and inclusive nation.

This wasn't a crisis Mr. Modi inherited — he had created it — and the citizenship law was widely seen as part of his far-reaching agenda to turn India into a Hindu heartland, come what may.

to rejuvenate his career, threatened to clear out a group of peaceful Muslim protesters, mostly women, who had been blocking a road. Hindus and Muslims then started throwing rocks at each other; and the unruly crowd grew.

Police intelligence agents called for reinforcements. But Mr. Modi's government failed to react quickly. Some speculated that was because the Modi administration, which controls New Delhi's police force, was preoccupied with a whirlwind visit to India by President Trump.

But witnesses to the violence saw something different. As mobs swept through neighborhoods, burning homes and killing people, the police often stepped back if the crowd was Hindu. But when it was Muslim, witnesses said, the police could be vicious.

In one especially disturbing incident filmed on video, police officers beat a group of badly wounded Muslim men and ordered them to sing the national anthem as they begged for mercy. One man later died.

“This is not a couple of bad apples,” said Saket Gokhale, a civil rights activist in Mumbai. Instead, he said, the abuse was “institutionalized.”

Hindu nationalist leaders deny accusations that their policies fueled the violence.

“The government was too lenient with these protesters earlier, and that is why the anger built up over the last week and exploded, unfortunately. But you can't blame the government,” said Raghav Awasthi, a lawyer and member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the ideological parent of the B.J.P. “In fact, it is a testament to the ‘Together for all, development for all,’ slogan that the protests were allowed to continue.”

On the fourth day of the violence, Feb. 26, after more than 20 people had been killed, Mr. Modi broke his silence and urged “my sisters and brothers of Delhi to maintain peace.”

But many observers said all that Mr. Modi has done in recent years made that peace difficult to deliver. And it is unclear whether there will be enough of a backlash, either domestically or internationally, to make the prime minister change course significantly. While moderates may be disturbed, his Hindu nationalist base could be invigorated.

“It may not work in Delhi, but incidents like this do work in some places in Uttar Pradesh or Bihar,” said Mr. Gokhale, the Mumbai activist, mentioning two other states. “Tomorrow Modi might reap political dividends, but people are going to be dead.”

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Some doubt clung to him personally as well. Despite his having been cleared by a court, accusations remained that he was complicit in the massacre of hundreds of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002, when he was the state's chief minister.

But many moderate Indians were so sick of the corruption of previous governments, led by the rival Congress party, that they voted Mr. Modi in, hoping that he had changed. And in public, Mr. Modi's language was mostly free of the Hindu nationalist rhetoric that would have set off more worry.

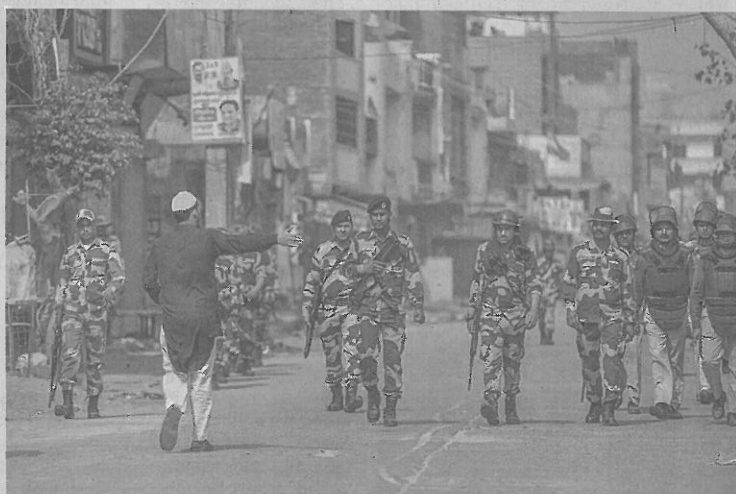
Then things started changing. Lynch mobs who said they were protecting cows, a holy animal in Hinduism, popped up across the landscape. They have gone on to kill scores of people, mostly Muslims and lower-caste Dalits.

Mr. Modi tapped Hindu extremists for top government posts, including Yogi Adityanath, the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, who has called Muslims a "crop of two-legged animals" and promised to wage a "religious war."

Mr. Modi placed other Hindu nationalist allies at the heads of important universities and cultural institutions. Place names were changed — so, too, were



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### It could invigorate Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist base.

That violence did not appear to hurt Mr. Modi with his most ardent supporters in a country that is 80 percent Hindu. And he was given a boost before elections last year by a wave of nationalist sentiment over clashes between India and Pakistan.

He and his party won resoundingly, and the pace of his Hindu nationalist policies accelerated.

In August, the Modi administration unilaterally scrapped the statehood of what had been India's only Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir, and locked up virtually its entire political class.

But the move that really put India on edge, and cleaved it even more deeply between Hindus and Muslims, came in December when Mr. Modi's government passed a new citizenship law that paves

a special path to Indian citizenship for migrants of nearly every prominent South Asian faith, bar one: Islam.

Protests flared, and Muslims weren't the only ones marching. Many progressive Indians saw this as Mr. Modi's most blatantly anti-Muslim initiative yet and a grave threat to India's founding as a secular and inclusive nation.

This wasn't a crisis Mr. Modi inherited — he had created it — and the citizenship law was widely seen as part of his far-reaching agenda to turn India into a Hindu heartland, come what may.

The protests provoked a brutal crackdown, especially in areas where security forces were controlled by his political party, commonly known as the B.J.P.

In Uttar Pradesh, witnesses said that police officers tortured Muslim boys and shot Muslim men. At a predominantly Muslim university in New Delhi, the police beat unarmed students. Much of this was caught on video and shared.

But few have been punished. The message that many people took away, just as they had from the impunity enjoyed by the lynch mobs, was that when it came to targeting Muslims, the state would look the other way or maybe even join in.

In the working-class, religiously mixed neighborhoods of northeastern Delhi, the tensions became combustible. On Feb. 23, a member of Mr. Modi's party lit the spark.

That afternoon, Kapil Mishra, a B.J.P. politician who had just lost a state Assembly election and seemed to be trying

to rejuvenate his career, threatened to clear out a group of peaceful Muslim protesters, mostly women, who had been blocking a road. Hindus and Muslims then started throwing rocks at each other; and the unruly crowd grew.

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There could be other costs, as well. These days, Mr. Modi speaks less about the development and reforms he once promised. The economy is reeling, with unemployment at a 45-year high and growth slowing to the lowest rate seen in nearly a decade.

Privately, some officials say that Mr. Modi's government is so focused on its ideological aspirations that it is losing sight of the economy. And as the country's economic malaise deepens, there is worry that Mr. Modi and his allies will again look to Hindu nationalist sentiment for a boost, and a distraction.

"To build that Hindu nation, control is everything," said Shivshankar Menon, a former national security adviser.

"We may see them continue to inflame tensions domestically," he said. "They need the violence as a distraction from those failures."

Kai Schultz, Suhasini Raj and Sameer Yasir contributed reporting.