Riot Imaginaries and Anticipatory Infrastructures of Violence

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Abstract

Communal violence in India has mostly been framed and governed as a discrete event to be investigated and contained after the event. However, in Northeast Delhi, the violence of February 2020 continues to shape everyday life beyond its immediate duration and into the interval between episodes of violence. Drawing on sensory ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2023, this article traces how rumours, speculations, images, and messages circulate across digital and face-to-face contexts, making violence plausible and actionable. It develops the concepts of *riot imaginaries* and *anticipatory infrastructures of violence* to account for how past events and anticipated futures are drawn into the present. The article examines how this condition is sustained through three interrelated infrastructures: digital, sensory and spatial, and social, which operate together as a single environment. These processes produce uneven effects across communities, enabling readiness for some while structuring vulnerability for others. The article shows how violence comes to be organised as an enduring condition, with anticipation operating as a form of governance rather than a response to discrete events.

Keywords: Riot imaginaries, digital violence, Hindu nationalism, misinformation and rumor, sensory ethnography

Imaginarios de disturbios e infraestructuras anticipatorias de violencia

Resumen

La violencia intercomunitaria en la India se ha concebido y gestionado tradicionalmente como un evento aislado que debe investigarse y controlarse posteriormente. Sin embargo, en el noreste de

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Delhi, la violencia de febrero de 2020 sigue influyendo en la vida cotidiana más allá de su duración inmediata, extendiéndose al periodo entre episodios violentos. A partir de un trabajo de campo etnográfico sensorial realizado entre 2020 y 2023, este artículo analiza cómo circulan rumores, especulaciones, imágenes y mensajes en contextos digitales y presenciales, haciendo que la violencia parezca plausible y susceptible de ser ejercida. Desarrolla los conceptos de imaginarios de disturbios e infraestructuras anticipatorias de violencia para explicar cómo los eventos pasados y los futuros previstos se proyectan en el presente. El artículo examina cómo esta situación se mantiene mediante tres infraestructuras interrelacionadas: digital, sensorial y espacial, y social, que operan conjuntamente como un único entorno. Estos procesos generan efectos desiguales en las distintas comunidades, propiciando la preparación para algunas y, al mismo tiempo, la vulnerabilidad para otras. El artículo muestra cómo la violencia se organiza como una condición permanente, donde la anticipación funciona como una forma de gobernanza más que como una respuesta a eventos puntuales.

Palabras clave: Imaginarios de disturbios, violencia digital, nacionalismo hindú, desinformación y rumores, etnografía sensorial

暴乱想象与暴力预见性基础设施

摘要

在印度，社区暴力事件大多被视为孤立事件，事后才进行调查和控制。然而，在德里东北部，2020年2月的暴力事件的影响远不止于其直接持续时间，甚至延续到暴力事件之间的间隔期，持续影响着人们的日常生活。本文基于2020年至2023年间开展的感官民族志田野调查，追踪了谣言、猜测、图像和信息如何在数字和面对面的环境中传播，使暴力行为变得可信且可操作。本文提出了“骚乱想象”和“暴力预期基础设施”的概念，以解释过去的事件和对未来的预期如何融入当下。本文探讨了这种状况如何通过三种相互关联的基础设施得以维持：数字基础设施、感官和空间基础设施以及社会基础设施，它们共同构成了一个单一的环境。这些过程对不同社区的影响不均衡，使一些社区做好了应对准备，而另一些社区则因此变得更加脆弱。本文揭示了暴力如何演变为一种持久的状态，其中预期不再是对特定事件的被动反应，而成为一种治理手段。

关键词：暴乱想象，网络暴力，印度教民族主义，虚假信息与谣言，感官民族志

Introduction

The pogrom that tore through Northeast Delhi in February 2020 left 53 people dead, the majority of them Muslim, and several localities burnt beyond recognition. They unfolded over three days, but their conditions had been building for months. Since December 2019, protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) had spread across India, with Northeast Delhi emerging as one of their most sustained sites. The CAA, widely understood as discriminating against Muslims in its citizenship criteria, had provoked an unprecedented convergence of students, activists, and ordinary residents at sit-in protests modelled on those that took place in Delhi's Shaheen Bagh. Members of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) delivered speeches naming the protesters as threats to the nation. Anurag Thakur, then Minister of State for Finance, led crowds in a call-and-response chant demanding that "traitors be shot." Kapil Mishra issued what amounted to an ultimatum to the Delhi Police to clear protest sites, warning of consequences if they did not (Basu 2020a). Right-wing influencers and partisan media amplified these speeches, clipping and recirculating them across platforms. During his visit to India in February 2020, Donald Trump publicly praised Narendra Modi for "religious tolerance" even as attacks on Muslims in Delhi unfolded. Partisan mainstream and digital media networks reframed the violence as anti-Hindu riots, spreading claims that cast Hindus as victims and turning disinformation into a tool that justified retaliation and obscured responsibility.

Scholarship on communal violence in South Asia has long recognised the centrality of rumour to the outbreak and perpetuation of riots (Tambiah 1996; Pandey 2005; Subramaniam 1999). Rumours travel across neighbourhoods, generate anticipatory fear, assign collective guilt, and compress the time between suspicion and action in ways that official accounts and journalistic corrections rarely reverse (Brass 2003; Hansen 2018). They require only circulation and the social conditions that make them plausible, conditions that Hindu majoritarian politics had been carefully cultivating for years (Jaffrelot 2021). However, digital infrastructures have radically changed the life and movement of rumours. A claim that might once have travelled across a neighbourhood over days now reaches thousands within minutes, accumulates the weight of apparent documentation through screenshots and video clips, and resurfaces across platforms in altered form long after the original event has passed (Basu 2019; Sundaram 2020).

I use the term rumour deliberately, dropping the qualifier "digital," because a rumour may begin in digital spaces but does not remain there over its life course, as my fieldwork in Northeast Delhi shows. Disinformation and misinformation have become the dominant categories through which circulating falsehoods are named and contested; both categories have come to assume that false content is bounded, separable

from social life, and correctable through better information. Fragments that circulated before, during, and after the pogrom moved between messaging platforms and face-to-face conversation, gathering texture and urgency through retelling and returning to digital circulation in altered form. They attached themselves to local fears, neighbourhood histories, and embodied memories of previous violence. Calling them rumours restores what these categories flatten, the way they move, change, and come to shape conduct.

This article asks how circulating fragments of rumour, image, and message come to organise conduct in the absence of immediate violence; how they move across digital and face-to-face registers without stabilising; and how this movement produces an anticipatory condition in which violence is already being prepared for. To address these questions, the article develops two concepts. First, *riot imaginaries* describe how violence is carried forward as a condition inhabiting the present, through repeated encounters with circulating fragments that draw past events and possible futures into how situations are perceived. While riot imaginaries operate across religious lines, they do so asymmetrically, with Hindu interlocutors often oriented toward action and Muslim interlocutors toward survival and vulnerability. Second, *anticipatory infrastructures of violence* name the arrangements of platforms, devices, neighbourhood networks, and everyday communicative habits through which such orientations cohere and endure.

Existing work has examined how violence is imagined, including Arjun Appadurai's (2006) account of how majoritarian anxieties cast minorities as threats, alongside the affective circulation of suspicion in the Bombay riots (Subramaniam 1999) and the embedding of violence in the ordinary and the unsaid (Das 1987). This article departs from these approaches by tracing how circulating fragments are sustained through digital and spatial arrangements that keep violence in readiness without requiring its continuous enactment. Riot imaginaries are affective orientations toward violence as something that could happen, is being prepared for, and may require a response. These imaginaries are stabilised through anticipatory infrastructures of violence, the arrangements through which such orientations are produced, reinforced, and held available for activation. This article theorises the *interval*—the sustained, infrastructured anticipation between riots in which violence remains as a condition, reshaping movement, trust, and readiness without declaring itself.

This bears directly on the argument of this special issue. Where communal violence is typically governed as a discrete event, something to be investigated, contained, and remediated after the fact, this article argues that such frameworks systematically misrecognise what violence is doing under the current political order. Anticipation is not the residue of governance's failure. It is governance's instrument. The environments through which violence is made persistently imaginable, digital, spatial, and social, are the everyday mecha-

nisms through which the political order reproduces itself, distributing readiness across ordinary life without requiring the state's direct presence or constant enactment (Hansen and Stepputat 2005; Berenschot 2011). To govern communal violence is therefore to reckon with the infrastructures that produce it as a condition rather than an event. The article shows how state actors, partisan media, platform systems, neighbourhood committees, vigilante groups, and everyday communicative practices help sustain environments that align with and extend state logics, even when they are not centrally coordinated.

Notes on Methodology

The fieldwork on which this article draws was conducted in Northeast Delhi between 2020 and 2023, in localities that witnessed the violence of February 2020. Research combined extended presence in the area with 56 interviews, informal conversations, and sensory walks across markets, residential lanes, and neighbourhood boundaries that had, in many cases, become fault lines. The fieldwork attended to how violence continued to shape everyday life through images, rumours, and routine adjustments rather than through discrete episodes alone.

The approach is grounded in sensory ethnography (Pink 2015), attending to how violence is encountered through sound, gesture, movement, and silence as much as through speech. Following Howes (2019), sensing is treated as a process through which perception and meaning are made together rather than sequentially. Encounters in the field frequently unfolded through what participants described as instinct or unease, anticipation taking shape without explicit articulation. Memory surfaced as fragments, hesitations, and repetitions in conversation rather than as stable accounts of past events, in ways that resemble what Bryant and Bryant (2019) describe as memory work which includes the active, often incomplete, labour of holding together an experience that resists coherent narration.

Silence marked many of these fragments. Certain events were referred to indirectly or left incomplete, recalling Das's (1996) argument that the limits of speech are themselves socially organised, how what cannot be said is not merely absent but present in a different register. In these moments the body became central to both experience and interpretation. Participants navigated spaces through avoidance, altered routes, and heightened attention. Card (2019) shows how the body carries violence into the present, shaping how people move and read situations. In Northeast Delhi, movement and perception were shaped by accumulated experience, carried in the body and recalled in everyday navigation. This attention shaped how people managed uncertainty and carried a cost (Kaviraj 1997).

Mobile phones formed a central part of this field. Conversations moved between physical and digital spaces, with participants referring to images, videos, and messages stored on their devices. Access to these materials emerged through everyday interac-

tions, in moments where interlocutors passed their phones across to show an image or recount an event through footage they had saved. These exchanges revealed how digital traces, rumour, and affect remained entangled in ordinary life, sustaining the riot imaginaries and anticipatory orientations that this article traces. The phone was not a research instrument I brought to the field. It was already there, already central, already doing work that the fieldwork had to learn to follow (Nikunen 2023; Hjorth and Lim 2012).

My position in the field shaped these interactions. My Hindu name often affected what interlocutors chose to disclose and how they narrated events. It also gave me access to Hindu interlocutors who spoke more openly about how Hindu mobs targeted Muslims during the pogrom. Accounts shifted across a conversation and across repeated meetings. These shifts showed how people read the person in front of them for signs of safety or threat, and how that reading shaped what was said and what remained unsaid. The fieldwork unfolded within the same conditions it set out to trace. All names and identifying details have been anonymized.

The Digital Life of Rumour

Rumour has long been recognised as one of the primary vehicles through which communal violence is prepared, sustained, and remembered in South Asia. Rumours assign guilt collectively, compress the distance between suspicion and action, and remain long after official accounts have attempted to settle what happened. They require plausibility, and plausibility is a social achievement, produced through repetition, through the credibility of the person who passes the rumour on, and through the conditions of fear and uncertainty in which it arrives (Kakar 2005). Scholars have also shown how rumours resist factual correction because it is felt before it is assessed, and by the time it is assessed, it has already done its work (Punwani 2017; Verkaaik 2004).

Digital infrastructure has changed this process. A claim that might once have moved through a neighbourhood over several days, changing shape as it passed from mouth to mouth, now reaches thousands within minutes, arrives packaged with apparent documentation, a screenshot, a video clip, a voice note, and resurfaces weeks or months later in altered form, often in a different city or attached to a different event (Parmar 2020; Basu 2021). The algorithmic amplification of affectively charged content means that material carrying fear or threat travels further and faster than factchecks (Badrinathan 2021; Saha et al. 2021). WhatsApp's architecture of closed groups produces an environment of apparent intimacy, where forwarded content arrives with the endorsement of a known contact and hidden from public scrutiny. The rumour that once circulated through a neighbourhood now circulates through a network, and networks have neither the memory nor the accountability of a community.

This digital environment does not exist independently of political organi-

sation. Since 2014, India has made digital infrastructure central to governance, presenting platforms such as Aadhaar, UPI, and India Stack as models for the Global South, a form of technopolitical power in which digital systems consolidate authority domestically while projecting modernity abroad (Sajjanhar 2026). Within this transformation, the BJP's statecraft relies on an organised network of platforms, volunteers, and messaging systems that enable the production and circulation of content at scale and party leaders have treated virality as a political instrument, with large WhatsApp networks distributing messages to millions of users daily (Amarasingam, Umar, and Desai 2022; Basu 2023). Within these arrangements, rumours function as actionable cues that orient perception, bypass formal validation, and sustain an environment in which violence comes to seem both imminent and justified.

Many of the claims that spread widely are not framed in ways that invite verification. They travel as fragments, suggestive and partial, yet still shape how situations are understood. They endure as reference points that keep an interpretive environment unsettled even when no single statement can be checked. Material circulating before, during, and after the Delhi pogrom of 2020 shows this process clearly (Basu 2026). These fragments moved across settings, passing from messaging platforms into everyday conversation and back again in altered form. With each retelling, they picked up more textures and emotional weight, becoming entangled with old trauma and difficult to counter through any kind of correction. Referring to them as rumours helps capture this movement. I retain the term rumour rather than digital rumour to foreground its movement across digital and offline contexts. The term points to their instability, their capacity to shift form, and their role in shaping rituals and habits over time, even when their point of origin is no longer traceable. Each message, after all, comes with a call for action, which could be something as ordinary as a sharing forward, a like, an imploration of a religious or nationalistic chant, and transform into an involuntary scroll of screen, algorithmic engagement with certain kind of content, donation drive for a cause or a boycott of a religious community.

To account for how this process operates under conditions of Hindu majoritarian consolidation, this article develops two related concepts. The first, riot imaginaries, draws on structures of feeling to describe how violence is carried forward as a condition inhabiting the present (Strauss 2006; Appadurai 1996). Riot imaginaries refer specifically to the affective and perceptual frameworks through which situations are read as potentially violent. These are affective orientations toward violence as something that could happen and may require a response, formed through repeated encounters with circulating fragments, images saved in galleries, videos refused deletion, voice notes passed between neighbours, that draw past events and anticipated futures into how situations are perceived (Ahmed 2004; Castoriadis 1987). Following Tay-

lor's (2002) account of social imaginaries as background expectation, I use riot imaginary to describe how familiar streets, gates, and messages acquire the charge of possible violence.

The second concept, anticipatory infrastructures of violence, adapts Pink's (2023; 2025) framework, developed to examine how digital arrangements make future technologies imaginable, and applies it to communal violence. Platforms, devices, messaging networks, neighbourhood alert systems and housing society WhatsApp groups, iron gates, and Ram Navami procession routes, advertisements for Jagratas (overnight devotional vigils) and Sundarkand (recitations of the Sundar Kand from the Ramayana) with certain symbolisms such as carrying saffron flags and images of an angry Hanuman[1] or emojis of fire or trident constitute an infrastructure through which violence is made imaginable and actionable. By infrastructure, I refer not only to material systems but to the patterned arrangements of communication, space, and social coordination that stabilise these orientations over time. This infrastructure requires only maintenance, the kept video, the locked gate, the forwarded warning, to hold violence available as a condition of everyday life. Star and Larkin treat infrastructures as arrangements that organise everyday practice and perception (Star 1999; Larkin 2018). Building from this, I argue that the riot goes on as an anticipatory structure, embedded in the environments through which people move and make sense of what surrounds them.

Digital Infrastructures

Northeast Delhi in February 2023 was three years past the pogrom and still inside them. The roads between Seelampur and Shiv Vihar carried the ordinary traffic of a working day with autorickshaws, cycle carts, pedestrians moving through narrow streets thick with diesel and dust. But the 8 km distance between the two localities had acquired a different quality of attention. An autorickshaw driver ferrying me from Seelampur Market to Shiv Vihar asked me to move away from the edge of the seat and sit in the middle. I assumed it was to balance the rickety vehicle. He shook his head. "The area is not good at all. Anything can happen anytime." The journey, which should have taken 20 minutes, stretched to over 40 minutes as we moved through congested lanes. His body knew the route differently than a map would describe it, as I traced my journey on Google too. He slowed at certain junctions, took small detours without explanation, kept his eyes moving.

As we neared my destination, he asked if I could help him change his Instagram profile picture. The account was not his. A friend had shared it with him so he could learn how to create content and eventually earn money online. His friend had moved to Instagram from TikTok but found the platform too complicated and was still testing other apps. He handed me his phone without hesitation. Passwords, gallery, images. Everything was open. Scrolling through his gallery was like moving through an unsorted archive of a life: a woman, chil-

dren, relatives both elderly and young, mechanical spare parts, temples, food, pornography, and more. Many of his selfies were poorly composed, blurred, out of focus, but they were not without order. They followed a loose internal logic that he navigated through memory rather than sequence. He eventually chose a photograph of himself standing in front of a temple, holding a saffron *gamchha* (cotton towel), smiling into the camera. The image seemed to hold together his self-presentation, his religious identity, and his aspiration in a single frame.

As we sifted through the archive, I asked how long he worked in a day, whether reel-making was as lucrative as people claimed, whether he lived nearby, and why he did not like the area. He spoke briefly about the neighbourhood, increasing fuel prices and pollution, my new lung infection and his bronchitis, and the 2020 violence. What the exchange itself made available was a form of sensory participation in the archive such as the warmth of the handed device, the physical intimacy of scrolling through images that were not mine to see, the slight weight of his expectancy as I moved through material that was simultaneously ordinary and charged. He handled the phone as an extension of himself, passing across passwords, gallery, and saved images in the autorickshaw. His account moved between fragments of memory and references drawn from "media," a word he used to describe an undifferentiated flow of WhatsApp forwards, YouTube videos, and television news that had shaped his understanding of what had happened and what might happen again. When he spoke about the violence, he said, "If it happens again, I am ready." The sentence placed February 2020 in the future as much as in the past.

This anticipation was a form of navigation learned through a sustained environment of viral messages, videos, speeches, and warnings that had settled into the body as a kind of readiness. He was also an outsider, like me, in the area. He lived in Kondli, 15 km away from Seelampur, and had come to drop off a regular customer, whom he would pick up again after an hour, so he was ferrying stray short-distance commuters as he waited. The riot had not ended for him. It had become a condition of movement. The anticipation he described was the product of an infrastructure, not only of platforms and devices but of the affective habit of maintaining them, of keeping certain images, of forwarding certain messages, of belonging to certain groups, which gave him a sense of safety and control in a chaotic world of social and economic precarity. These social relations were also transactional. You had to keep turning the wheels that run the machine; you had to keep sharing messages to keep the algorithm running. You did not have the option of switching off, when message sharing and everyday micro-aggressions seemed like a small trade-off against the social validity these groups bestowed (Basu 2020).

The auto-driver's gallery was doing more than storing. Saffron filters, BJP symbols, the lotus, the trident, Hanuman stickers, and self-portraits ap-

peared alongside one another without hierarchy. These functioned as what Ahmed (2014) described "sticky" emotions, with fear, pride, resentment, and belonging attaching to images and symbols that gained intensity through repetition and circulation. Each time the driver scrolled past these images, and each time he sent or received content that reinforced them, the gallery operated as what Sundaram (2020) called a "crisis machine," a personalised apparatus through which violence is kept present, organised, and readily available. The phone was not separable from the political but worked as the very medium through which a particular orientation toward the world was sustained, one in which Muslims were cast as a threat, Hindus as endangered, and conflict as perpetually imminent, reproduced as an everyday practice. On another day, several lanes away, in Mustafabad, a tea shop owner showed me a low-resolution video he had saved in his gallery for three years. It was a grainy recording of a young Muslim man bleeding from the head as police officers stood by. "It was forwarded by someone," he told me, "I can't make myself to delete it." He did not watch it daily, but he also refused to delete it.

The driver's gallery formed a charged repertoire of assertion and impending action, while the tea shop owner's saved video carried a dense sediment of trauma and unresolved witnessing. The two galleries were separated by religion, political alignment, and by everything the pogrom had come to mean in their lives. These two orientations emerge from the same infrastructural environment but diverge in their relation to action. Where the driver's archive sustains readiness and majoritarian confidence, the tea shop owner's archive sustains witnessing and unresolved loss. The infrastructure is shared, but its affective and political effects are uneven. What they shared, however, was the phone as a device through which violence was kept present as an ongoing condition rather than a finished event. This is what makes the concept of riot imaginaries necessary. The pogrom of February 2020 had produced, in both men, an affective orientation toward violence as something that could happen again, was already being prepared for, and might demand a response. This orientation took shape through the daily habit of curating a digital environment, keeping certain images, affiliating with certain groups, and forwarding particular kinds of content until it became ordinary and unremarkable.

For many others I spoke with during the fieldwork, digital artefacts of the pogrom functioned like personal shrines, in which violence and segregation were preserved within "pocket archives" (Leurs 2017). The tea shop owner had received the video viral at the time. He had not recorded it. It was shared late at night, he recalled, in WhatsApp groups and passed quietly from phone to phone during moments of collective memorialization. It was not mobilised for justice in any formal sense but held as a rehearsal of grief, a warning, and a thread linking individual experience to a wider atmosphere of anticipation and speculation. This is how the digital life of rumour operates.

It moves between the intimate and the networked, between what is kept and what is circulated, between personal memory and collective mood. It gathers texture as it moves through repetition and returns in altered form, each iteration adding to the plausibility of what it describes. The riot imaginary lives here in the kept video and the refusal to delete, in the handheld device that carries the political and the personal together without separating them.

Spatial and Sensory Infrastructures

Digital circulation of rumours extends the anticipatory condition beyond screens into built environments, arrangement of streets and sounds that travel through them, and into bodies navigating neighbourhoods reorganised around the possibility of violence. In Northeast Delhi, this city has been materially and sensorially reconfigured since February 2020. The network of drains running through the affected neighbourhoods had long been part of the ordinary municipal system, associated with neglect, waste, and caste-based labour. It was an unremarkable infrastructure that became visible only in moments of overflow or stench. After the pogrom, however, it acquired a different density. It became what I describe, in another article, as a "trauma trove," a socio-spatial archive where stories of bodies, escape, and disappearance gathered alongside rumour and digital circulation, giving the drain a spectral presence that exceeded what was known (Basu 2026). Its opacity invited speculation about what it might still contain, allowing imagination to attach itself to the infrastructure and sustain the sense that violence had not fully passed.

The drain became a carrier of speculation. Residents of the area believed that not all bodies dumped into the drain during the violence were recovered from it. Questions about what it contained, and what official investigations had chosen not to find, circulated in WhatsApp groups, neighbourhood conversations, and recollections long after the drain had been cleared. The drain is not a solid wall or a gate but a form of concealment whose force derives from what is believed to remain hidden. This uncertainity and speculation shaped habits. The drain was crossed quickly, avoided after dark, or approached with hesitation, its surface read for signs that might confirm or unsettle circulating accounts. The possibility that something remained concealed under its murky waters shaped movement as effectively as any visible barrier, folding imagination into everyday spatial practice.

Soon after the riots, residents began installing iron gates segregating Hindu lanes from Muslims. Alongside the drain, these barriers acquired a new function. Three years later, during my fieldwork, residents described how the gates were locked unpredictably, mostly at night, but also during processions, political rallies, or after flares of rumours later found untrue. While on the surface it appears that people have become used to these gates, it took time for my interlocutors to open up about how they have come to serve as

banal memorial of the 2020 violence, changing routes and reorganising daily habits. A resident told me, "We used to go to the other side for groceries or to visit friends. Now I just don't feel like it. I take a different route now because crossing the gate feels heavy." The gates then appear to work through the body creating geography of suspicion, coded by religion and bordered by metal. The gates are managed by informal groups and local committees, where the authority to open or close rests with those willing to assert it, often coordinated through local WhatsApp groups where circulating messages and speculation shape decisions about when a boundary should harden.

Like the drains, the gates also function as anticipatory infrastructures, activated through rumours that maintain suspicion of the other and the imagination of violence. Rumours allow precaution against future violence to settle into permanence and separation to take hold as lived geography. Gayer and Jaffrelot (2012) describe Muslim urban marginalisation in India through histories of violence, constrained residential choice, weak state presence, disconnection from the wider city, and a subjective sense of closure. Susewind (2017) cautions that the "ghetto" should not be treated as a fixed category, showing that segregation varies and must be empirically traced. The gates in Northeast Delhi do not mark a completed ghetto but point to ghettoisation as an ongoing process in which boundaries are produced through speculation, anticipation and imagination that coerce bodily adjustments.

The sonic environment operated in similar ways. Scholars have shown that such practices function as spatial claims, affective performances, and political technologies, from preventing namaz (Acharya and Jha 2025) to staging charged Ram Navami processions (Allie 2023), reinforced further by songs from propaganda films (Sharma 2026) and Hindu Popular Songs (Purohit 2023). In Northeast Delhi, even the banality of everyday spaces condensed into a volatile sensory field. Songs and dialogues from propaganda films circulated as ringtones and reels, their volume rising as a person wearing a burkha or skull cap passed. They blared through mikes before and after Sundarkand*s* and jagrata*s*, folding into otherwise non-threatening events. Posters of these gatherings carried an angry Hanuman rather than a pious or peaceful one, while gates appeared saffron from a distance, covered with flags and such images. Sound asserted presence, marked territory, and imposed what residents described as forced listening, registering less as music than as warning. As one Muslim interlocutor put it, "It's not music. It's a warning." Saturated with memories of February 2020, these sonic cues abetted speculation and anticipation, operationalising riot imageries into anticipatory infrastructures of violence. Circulated and amplified through WhatsApp and YouTube, processions extended beyond the street, where videos of slogans, marches, and confrontations were repeatedly shared and recaptioned, generating rumours and intensifying anticipation, so that violence was not only remembered but continually expected.

Social Infrastructures

A Muslim interlocutor took me to a small dental clinic tucked along a narrow commercial lane near an important Metro Station in Northeast Delhi. The practitioner who ran it was Hindu and had chosen to remain in the area after the violence, even as several Hindu and Muslim families had left and properties in the vicinity quietly changed hands. Despite being exposed, his photograph published in several mainstream dailies as a figure leading a mob pelting stones at Muslim establishments, he continued to live and work in the area that was understood to be Muslim populated. My Muslim interlocutor who walked me to his clinic said he had been working in the area for over a decade and after the pogrom, he apologized to all the Muslim elders in the locality with folded hands. He had even bought a new apartment in the same locality, a decision that stood in contrast to the outward movement of people seeking more secure areas after the February 2020 violence.

His photograph in the mainstream dailies itself had taken on a life beyond its initial publication. In it, he appeared almost possessed with his body suspended mid-motion, one arm flung forward as he hurled half a brick, the other gripping a stick, his limbs extended with a force that seemed to exceed the frame. A scarf, loosely wrapped, partially concealed his face, though it had slipped enough to make him identifiable. The image circulated widely, not only in mainstream newspapers but also on right-wing digital portals and social media, where it was at times repurposed and misrepresented as depicting a Muslim mob. This misidentification became possible because the man next to him wore a cap turned backwards, which from a distance could be mistaken for a skullcap.

My Hindu name perhaps had given him the confidence to open up somewhat more freely. He described having apologised to residents in the locality and, in the months after, continuing his practice there. In recounting the events of February 2020, he did not initially narrate his actions as premeditated or ideologically driven. Instead, he located them within a dense and rapidly unfolding communicative environment. He spoke of a steady stream of messages, videos, and speeches circulating in the weeks preceding and the days during the pogrom: clips forwarded across WhatsApp groups, fragments of speeches, and short videos that appeared to offer real-time evidence of threat and retaliation by Hindu influencers who he had followed for a very long time. He described being "carried away" by what he saw and heard. At one point, in an almost off-hand manner, and encouraged perhaps by my Hindu name, he quipped that "Muslims are dirty." This contradicted his account of being merely swept up by circulating messages. The ease with which he said this pointed to a deeper, long-standing hostility. In his analysis of the events leading up to the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, Ghassem-Fachandi (2012) shows how Muslims were positioned as a repulsive and abject other. Digital infrastructures did not create this kind of othering and

dehumanization, but they intensified it manifold. He also spoke of rumours of violence in Shiv Vihar, of Hindus being killed and dumped in the drains, accounts he had received and believed at the time, and which he described as a decisive trigger for his participation. These rumours, later shown to be false or significantly distorted, circulated alongside the videos and messages, giving shape to a sense of imminent threat and necessary retaliation. While his participation was not entirely spontaneous, it emerged at the intersection of longer-standing animus and a rapidly intensifying environment of mediated cues and rumours that made violence both thinkable and urgent.

The dentist's account makes visible a social infrastructure of anticipation which worked through forwarded clips, speech fragments, rumoured killings, trusted (or idolized) senders, and the quick movement of alarm across neighbourhoods. Other Hindu interlocutors in Shiv Vihar, Babu Nagar, Gokulpuri, Mustafabad, Ganga Vihar, and Jamuna Vihar described a similar communicative landscape during the violence. Several said that the internet was not uniformly restricted during the curfew. In some Hindu-majority and comparatively more secure areas, including Ganga Vihar and Jamuna Vihar, connectivity remained available, even if patchy. Residents of these areas kept receiving rumours of unimaginable gore against Hindus in Jaffrabad and in their closer vicinities.

One Hindu interlocutor recalled that her father hid her and her sister under the bed and taught them how to use a knife to kill a person. "I will never forget this. I still have nightmares," she said. Among the rumours she remembered most vividly was that of a Hindu man fried in hot oil by Muslims, which she later realized was untrue, but the frission that the falsehood brought with it, have stuck on to the memories of the violence three years ago and revisited in nightmares. Interlocutors in areas 5 to 10 km apart, from Jaffrabad where the violence began as clashes between two groups, to Gokulpuri and Karawal Nagar where it became targeted attacks on Muslims who were easily identifiable in traditional attire after attending the *Ijtema ki dua* in Nizamuddin, said they first learned about the violence through their mobile phones. These messages created an alternate, shadow city during those days, one filled with imagined gore, hidden bodies, approaching mobs, attacked temples and mosques, and the expectation of retaliation. The real city was being navigated through this other shadow one. Streets were avoided because of what was said to be happening nearby. Homes were sealed because of what might arrive. Neighbours were read through stories already in circulation.

The pogrom lasted three days in 2020 but this shadow city remained when I visited the area again for my fieldwork. Residents maintained informal systems of alert through WhatsApp and Telegram groups and these networks ran the shadow city where imagined and speculated otherness was replicated or implemented in real life. And so, the narrow lanes and alleys, where

houses stood so close that people could smell food cooking in each other's kitchens, remained tense with anticipation, still embedded in violence of 2020 waiting to happen in the future.

Anticipation as Governance

The ethnographic data in this article move across religious lines, across different kinds of space, across digital and physical registers. What they share is an orientation toward violence as something that has not ended, is being prepared for, and may require a response. This perspective appears in varied forms. An autorickshaw driver reflects it in the images he keeps and in the way he navigates the city. A tea shop owner preserves it in a video he feels unable to delete. It is embedded in the iron gates of a neighborhood and expressed through the sounds of a procession. For a dentist, this orientation takes a different form. Rather than fear, it shapes his sense of obligation, an understanding, influenced by pervasive signals, that action in a moment of tension can feel less like a choice and more like a necessary response. The three infrastructure types examined here, digital, spatial and sensory, and social, are better understood as a single environment or sensorium. Their interaction sustains the anticipatory condition. The gallery feeds the whisper network. The network gives the gate its meaning. The gate makes religious processions readable as territorial claim. The procession returns to digital form and circulates again. No single element produces this condition and each is held in place by the others. Anticipatory infrastructure of violence is an environment through which ordinary situations are read as potentially violent. Koivunen and colleagues (2024) describe anticipation as a temporal and affective structure of platformed everyday life, through which users prepare for what others may do next.

The drain operates across all three infrastructure types, digital, spatial and sensory, and social. As traced in an earlier account of the drains of Northeast Delhi (Basu 2026), it functions simultaneously as a digital archive, with images resurfacing on phones long after the pogrom, algorithmically hauled back into view; as a spatial boundary that reorganises movement and attention in the lanes around it; and as a social script that circulates through whisper networks, women's conciliation meetings, a father's deflection, a wife's closed window. As a trauma trove, it is an opaque substrate whose concealment intensifies and recirculates trauma rather than settling it. Its haunting power emerges not only from what it contains but from what is believed to remain concealed. Constant speculation and rumour turn this trauma trove into an anticipatory infrastructure of violence, where the imagined dead outnumber the known and uncertainty itself acquires a form that organises both present and future.

Castoriadis (1987) shows how imaginaries are constitutive rather than reflective, generating the categories through which social reality is apprehended rather than merely describing

it. Appadurai (1998) draws attention to how circulation gives such imaginaries affective force, shaping how they are encountered and repeated. Taylor (2002) helps account for how these orientations settle as background expectation, the taken-for-granted through which ordinary situations come to be read. This article builds on these insights to show how such sedimented orientations do not remain at the level of perception alone but organise conduct in advance of violence. The anticipatory condition documented here is not experienced as fear. It is experienced as the way things are, structuring how situations are read, how movement is calibrated, and how response is prepared before violence takes place.

The question of governance then becomes unavoidable. Kaiser (2026, 2024) shows that anti-Muslim violence under the BJP is not episodic communal conflict but a systemic feature of a religious ethnocracy, in which violence operates as an instrument of rule rather than a breakdown of it, including through processes that recast Muslim victims as perpetrators within legal and bureaucratic frameworks. Violence serves this order not by constant enactment but by remaining possible, routinely signalled and unevenly enforced through arrangements such as the police-vigilante continuum. The gates of Northeast Delhi, maintained by informal committees and left in place through the state's inaction, are a local instance of this logic. This article shifts the analysis by showing how such a political order is sustained not only through law, policing, and bureaucratic procedure, but through the environments in which people move, communicate, and make sense of what surrounds them. The anticipatory condition traced here is not a side effect of the 2020 pogrom but a feature of this order, reproduced through everyday infrastructures that organise perception and conduct in advance of violence. The auto driver's gallery is one node. The iron gate is another. None of these are formally administered by the state, yet they operate in ways that align with and extend the logics of governance under the current political order. They distribute the anticipatory condition across digital platforms, built space, and social interaction in ways that formal governance neither produces directly nor needs to.

What Sundaram (2020) calls the crisis machine, the mobile phone as a personalised apparatus through which violence is kept present and available, is also a distributed instrument through which anticipatory infrastructures of violence are maintained, producing readiness rather than requiring the constant enactment of violence. The dentist's account is the clearest evidence of how this works. He moved through an environment saturated with circulating signals, clipped speeches, forwarded videos, widely shared clips framing the situation as imminent confrontation, that had already decided what the moment required and what his participation meant.

Brass (2003) argues that communal violence in India requires prior preparation, the construction of an atmosphere in which violence feels not

only possible but necessary. What the dentist's account reveals is how that atmosphere is not produced by a central organising force but by the cumulative effect of an anticipatory infrastructure functioning across platforms, spaces, and social networks simultaneously. By the pogrom the riots began, the infrastructure had already done its work. The violence was, in a specific sense, an enactment of what had already been made imaginable, then plausible, then possible. This is also what the shadow city of Northeast Delhi reveals. It is a city of alerts, of ghostly presences, of coded signals and imagined mobs that powerfully determines how space is lived and feared while remaining invisible to official records, police maps, and governmental conversations about rehabilitation. The shadow city is the spatial form that the anticipatory condition takes, an undocumented infrastructure of fear that exceeds the event and evades official reckoning. Its evasion of official reckoning is not incidental. It is part of how governance operates under these conditions. Law and enforcement govern violence through records, cases, arrests, and omissions. Anticipation governs it through signals and circulation, keeping violence available without producing an administrative trace. It therefore cannot be investigated, addressed, or remediated through the frameworks by which communal violence is conventionally managed, as a discrete event, a law-and-order problem, or a failure to be corrected after the fact.

The iron gates offer a final illustration of this logic. As von Schnitzler (2016) shows, infrastructures become political through the administration of everyday life, where questions of access and maintenance become sites of authority and obligation. In Northeast Delhi, the gates operate in the register of communal division which is maintained by informal vigilante groups and local committees, they derive authority from the police-vigilante continuum. They do not require the state's presence to function, only its absence, its failure to remove or account for them. That failure is a form of governance. The gate that remains is the state's answer to the question of whether communal division is official policy. It is not yes. It is simply not no.

As Larkin (2008) argues, infrastructures are not only technical systems but also aesthetic and affective formations that shape sensibilities and exclusions. The anticipatory infrastructures of violence documented here produce anticipation in which violence is always near and always possible, reorganising how people move, communicate, trust, and perceive. This imaginaries of violence is sustained through their interaction across digital, spatial, and social registers, reproduced daily in the gallery scroll, the saved video and locked gates. The riot does not end. It is maintained, at low cost, across distributed arrangements, through the ordinary habits of everyday life, as a condition that serves the political order which produced it. That is anticipation as governance.

Conclusion

This article has argued that communal violence in Northeast Delhi cannot be understood as a discrete event. The pogrom of February 2020 remain as a condition sustained through the circulation of rumours, images, and messages across digital and face-to-face contexts. Through the concepts of riot imaginaries and anticipatory infrastructures of violence, the article has shown how violence is carried forward into the present as an orientation that shapes perception, movement, and readiness. The ethnographic material reveals that anticipation is actively produced through everyday arrangements, platforms, neighbourhood networks, and sensory environments that keep violence imaginable and actionable without requiring its constant enactment. The future of violence is already organised in the present, through the habits, routes, warnings, and stored images that make another episode feel expected before it occurs. These infrastructures distribute the work of maintaining this condition across ordinary life, where individuals participate through routine practices of communication and attention. Understanding violence in these terms has implications for governance. Ordinary habits sustain the infrastructure of anticipation. People keep videos, forward warnings, alter routes, and read neighbourhood signs with the next episode in mind. These practices have become part of everyday life in Northeast Delhi, where preparation often feels like common sense. That is the condition this article has tried to make visible, and one that accounts of governance in contemporary India need to reckon with, as anticipation comes to shape how governance operates.

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Note

1 The shift from a devotional Hanuman to an angry, hypermasculine figure reflects how Hindu iconography has been reworked to embody and legitimise a militant, protective masculinity within Hindutva politics (Chakraborty 2025).

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