

Riots and Rapid Action

The Special Wing of the Central Reserve Police

Nirvikar Jassal and Hanif Qureshi

A number of nations have established security institutions to quell internal riots or riot-like situations. France's Mobile Gendarmerie, Japan's Kidō-tai, Germany's Bereitschaftspolizei, and Israel's Yasam are such "rapid" units whose goal is to, among others, support the civilian police in quelling civil disorders and unrest. India established its own anti-riot body in 1991: the Rapid Action Force. The assumption underpinning the body's creation was that existing institutions designed to tackle internal violence or insurgency were becoming increasingly overstretched. In the mid-twentieth century, after India gained independence, the government decided to retain and rename what was called the Crown Representative's Police (1939–1949). This centralized police force, now known as the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), would allow the federal government to play a coordinating and counseling role in matters concerning law enforcement, including the ability to establish secondary police organizations that could intervene within states to ensure public order. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel argued in Parliament that India needed such a centralized force, especially since the nation was retaining a system in which law and order would otherwise be a state subject.¹ Patel argued that, in a period of transition and political upheaval, a centralized force would serve to lower cross-border tension as well as militate against local actors creating "unrest" to "better their own prospects."²

By the 1980s, Patel's point was as valid as in 1949; India remained in a "period of transition," and inter-group conflict, insurgency, and secessionism had, if anything, intensified.³ Local actors, including political elites, used communal violence as a means to advance their own interests.⁴ The CRPF, the only Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) with a mandate to assist states (and union territories) in policing operations, was (1) overstretched in tackling the Khalistan movement as well as the violence in Jammu and Kashmir; and (2) had suffered a crisis of legitimacy in its perceived heavy-handedness in those settings.⁵ Consequently, the Congress Party deliberated over a new, more agile force, that would tackle a very specific variety of conflict, that is, riots and mob violence in the heartland (rather than at the borders). When Narasimha Rao first publicly announced the creation of a new anti-riot body, he did so on the same day that the Congress would offer support for a Ram temple in Ayodhya—a site that would, ironically, later become a major test for his new anti-riot body.⁶

This descriptive chapter attempts to highlight the organization and functioning of the Rapid Action Force or RAF. Broadly, we argue that the RAF faces several challenges—potentially applicable to other Indian security agencies—that may moderate its agility. These challenges include logistical hurdles, a lack of coordination between the Center and states, and political considerations that make governments hesitant about seeking assistance from the RAF. The essay is structured as follows: the section "Organization and Autonomy" describes the organization and hierarchy within which the Force operates, while in "Agility"

we use data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database to gain a measure of the distance personnel must travel to address a riot. In “Deployments and Constraints,” we use the *Times of India* archive to shed light on where the Force has been deployed. In the section on the “Rapid Action Force,” we present a brief case study of the Force’s deployment during the 2016 Haryana reservation agitation. In the “Discussion” section, we offer concluding remarks while simultaneously highlighting avenues for future research.

Organization and Autonomy

Though law and order is a state subject, the procedure to disperse an unlawful assembly by a civil force is outlined in Section 129 of the Criminal Procedure Code (Cr.P.C.). Under this section, an executive magistrate or officer-in-charge of a police station (e.g., station house officer) may command any unlawful assembly to disperse, and even use force if the command is not obeyed. While the term “civil force” refers to the police, “armed force” falls in the same category.⁷ In *Akhilesh Prasad v. Union Territory of Mizoram* (1981), the Supreme Court ruled that the CRPF and other paramilitary forces are indeed “armed forces.”

One of these “armed forces,” a subsidiary of the CRPF, is the Rapid Action Force or RAF. Data from government reports and answers to parliamentary questions reveal that the Rapid Action Force represents just 1.6 percent of the total paramilitary forces, and 5 percent of the CRPF.⁸ While the CRPF is deployed to counteract cross-border terrorism and insurgency in the Red Corridor, North East, and Jammu and Kashmir, the Rapid Action Force is supposed to be deployed largely *outside* those three contexts. Yet, the boundaries between the RAF and the CRPF are highly fluid. The RAF was created after ten CRPF battalions (approximately 1,000 personnel) were simply repurposed and called Rapid Action Force in 1992; this trend continued in 2018 when Battalion Number 114 of the CRPF based at Jalandhar, Punjab, was converted to RAF whereby CRPF personnel simply started wearing blue uniforms.

Organizationally, the RAF is run by one of the CRPF’s several inspector generals. Each of the Rapid Action Force’s three ranges (Delhi, Mumbai, and Dehradun) houses five battalions (Figure 11.1). One battalion of RAF consists of four companies and has an authorized strength of a little over 1,000 personnel. (A battalion in the CRPF consists of 1,141 personnel, while this number is 1,229 for the RAF.) An RAF battalion is run by a commandant. Each company is commanded by a deputy commandant, has four gazetted officers (GOs),⁹ and has an authorized strength of 222 personnel organized into two platoons. Each platoon is commanded by an assistant commandant, has an authorized strength of 97 personnel, and is organized into two teams. Each team is headed by an inspector and consists of an authorized strength of twenty-four. The operational strength of a company, platoon, and team is approximately 120, 60, and 15 respectively. The remaining personnel are required for administrative work, communications, and other duties (Table 11.1). The usual deployment orders from the Ministry of Home Affairs refer to the number of “companies” to be dispatched to a riot-like situation. Once a company reaches a location, the company commander may use his two platoons as per the need of the situation. One platoon consists of four teams, which is the smallest operational unit in the RAF. A team’s operational strength comprises three elements: riot control, tear gas, and fire. In other words, in each team, one unit has a *lathi*/cane shield, a second operates with shells/gas, and another with guns.

Every year, 25 percent of the RAF personnel are rotated to the CRPF, drawing an equivalent number of officers from the CRPF to the RAF. The tenure of a CRPF officer in the RAF is usually four years, which, under very special circumstances, can be extended by two years. The ranks in the RAF are like those in the Central Armed Police Forces. The ranks begin from constable and ascend to head constable, assistant sub-inspector, sub-inspector, inspector, assistant commandant, deputy commandant, commandant, deputy inspector general, and inspector general.¹⁰ The junior ranks (up to sub-inspector) are recruited through the Staff Selection Commission (a statutory body created specifically for the purpose).¹¹ The assistant commandants are recruited by the Union Public Service Commission (and through promotion from junior ranks),¹² whereas the senior ranks of deputy inspector-general and above are promoted from within the CRPF or are drawn from the Indian Police Service.¹³ Some argue that multiple levels of recruitment and the tenure of four years does not allow for institutional loyalty to emerge. Indeed, the Rapid Action Force is *not* an autonomous institution; it is a brief posting for CRPF officials. In other words, by the time culture of the RAF is imbibed by personnel, their tenure in the institution may already be coming to an end. This situation is distinct from other organizations like the Rashtriya Rifles and Assam Rifles, whose troops are drawn from the

FIG 11.1

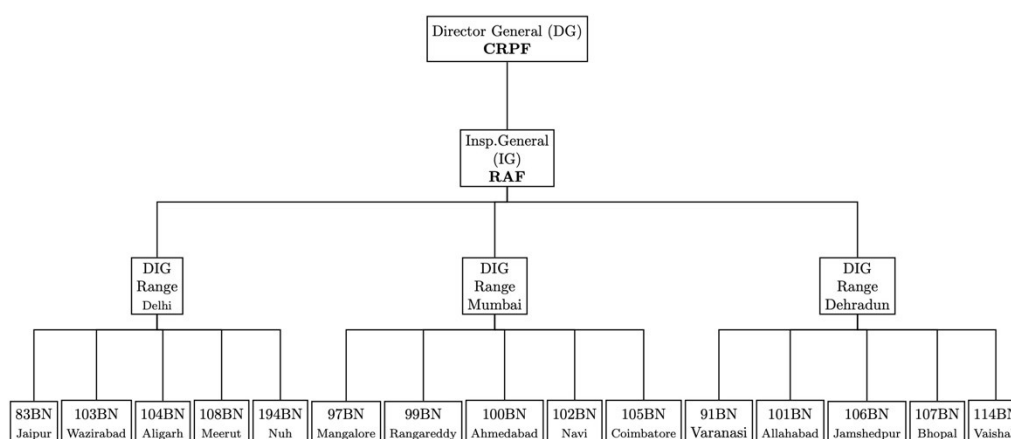


Table 11.1 RAF vs. CRPF: Ranks and command structure

RAF					
Unit	Rank of commander	Auth strength	Op strength GOs		% GOs
Battalion	Commandant	1229	–	22	1.79
Company	Deputy Commandant	222	120	4	1.80
Platoon	Assistant Commandant	97	60	1	1.03
Team	Inspector	24	15	0	0.00
CRPF					
Unit	Rank of commander	Auth strength	Op strength GOs		% GOs
Battalion	Commandant	1141		12	1.05
Company	Assistant Commandant	135		1	0.74
Platoon	Inspector/Sub Inspector	38		0	0.00
Section	Head Constable/ ASI	9		0	0.00

Army and are run by Army officers, or even the Border Security Force, which has personnel with lifelong careers within one organization. What are the benefits of being posted to the RAF? In general, anecdotal evidence suggests that CRPF personnel prefer to be posted in the RAF because it is seen as a “soft” posting. The CRPF is an organization known to be always on the move; personnel are typically deployed from one internal security situation to another, which is why the body is nicknamed the *Chalte Raho Pyare Force* (“keep moving”). Unlike CRPF personnel, who may be deployed in inhospitable conditions, battalions of the RAF are usually posted in urban settings across the country, away from disturbed areas. Because riots are not common—at least not the ones that governments choose to deploy the RAF for—there is a long queue to be requisitioned into the RAF.

There are other differences between RAF and CRPF officials. The Rapid Action Force has a high “tooth-to-tail ratio.” This ratio expresses the relationship between the forces deployed to perform missions, and the resources used to manage and support those forces. A higher proportion of officers ensures that there is adequate supervision even at the lowest levels of the force. Table 11.1 illustrates the hierarchy as well as the number of officers per unit of the RAF versus the CRPF. Considering the battalion as a whole, the RAF has 22 gazetted officers (GOs) (1.79 percent) for 1,229 personnel, whereas the CRPF has 12 GOs (1.05 percent) for 1,141 personnel. Similarly, at the company level, the RAF has 4 GOs (1.8 percent), while the CRPF has only 1 GO (0.74 percent). Finally, a platoon is commanded by an officer (assistant commandant) in the RAF, unlike the CRPF where an inspector or sub-inspector (not a GO) commands a platoon.

Another distinction is that RAF officials, compared to the CRPF, get an extra forty-five days of “conversion” training. In order to avail of an extra 15 percent allowance for being deputed to the RAF, officials have to pass an exam that tests them on operating non-lethal weapons (e.g., rubber bullets, stun grenades, armored vehicle carriers, specialized water cannons) and legal provisions of the Cr.P.C.¹⁴ When created, an explicit goal of the Rapid Action Force was that it be representative of the broader population, and therefore less likely to be seen as partisan.¹⁵ Yet, data on the representation of minorities in the RAF is scarce. Based on formal answers to questions posed by ministers in Parliament, the representation of minorities (Muslims), Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes was 17.79 percent, 13.64 percent, and 4.76 percent in 1995–1996.¹⁶ Yet, subsequent answers reveal that the representation of Muslims in the Rapid Action Force declined to 10.93 percent in 1999 to just 5.08 percent in 2004.¹⁷ In 2014, data were provided that outlined the percentage of *incoming* minorities among the cohort of CRPF recruits, but not the total percentage in the organization. Nevertheless, the Rapid Action Force is unique in the context of representation for women. The CRPF began a women’s battalion in 1986, and six such battalions exist today. Yet, the total representation for women in the CRPF remains less than 2 percent; instead, the presence of women in the Rapid Action Force is—because of a rule mandating that each RAF battalion have at least 96 female officers—close to 10 percent.¹⁸ And so, while the CRPF has separate women battalions, each RAF *company* has at least twenty-four women. However, more research needs to be undertaken as to whether women perform the same roles as men, or whether they face constraints by supervisors and peers when implementing riot control.¹⁹

Agility

One point made repeatedly in journalistic accounts is the extended period that paramilitary forces—including the Rapid Action Force—take to arrive at a hotspot. Some suggest that the Rapid Action Force may not be as agile as was initially intended because battalions are based in only fifteen locations of the country. During the Mumbai terror attacks, for instance, critics questioned whether the Rapid Action Force was truly “rapid” if it took seven hours for personnel to arrive, or forty hours after the demolition of the Babri Masjid.²⁰ For precisely this reason, Bihar was (in October 2018) permitted a permanent base for RAF troops in Vaishali. Prior to the Vaishali base, the closest RAF battalion that could be deployed to Bihar was based in Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, or Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.²¹

The organization ACLED has, since 2016, been recording cases of protests and riots across India based on a variety of (English-language) newspapers. ACLED defines riots as “violent events where demonstrators of mobs engage in disruptive acts.”²² Using these data, we attempted to gain a measure for “distance,” that is, on average, how far each riot or communal clash takes place from a Rapid Action Force headquarter. We geocode all the instances of rioting in the ACLED database as well as the RAF headquarters. As the left panel in Figure 11.2 reveals, most disturbances took place in Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab in the north, Assam and West Bengal in the east, and Kerala in the south. Of course, there are challenges with giving equal weightage to every instance of rioting mentioned in the ACLED database. The RAF is *not* the first responder for riots and mob violence, and it would likely be called out in the more dangerous or high-sensitive areas. Therefore, in the right panel of Figure 11.2, we subset the data by looking at only those areas that had one casualty or more from 2016 to 2019. Using the longitude/latitude of

the approximately 3,000 unique locations in India where riots took place, as well as the location of the fifteen headquarters, we can calculate the distance a battalion or company must travel. A Rapid Action Force company must travel, on average, roughly 250 km to reach a hotspot from its closest base.

In a country the size of India, it is likely that fifteen battalions cannot cover large distances on road. According to the Rapid Action Force standard operating procedure, the area of responsibility for a battalion stretches to a radius of 400 km. Yet, because the RAF personnel may often have to travel to a hotspot by road, challenges emerge when agitators block highways (as was the case in the 2016 Haryana reservation agitation; see section below). One solution to this problem could be the one used by the National Security Guards—the anti-terror specialized agency of the Government of India—which has access to transport aircraft of the Indian Air Force. Our qualitative interviews suggest that the RAF do not have designated choppers at strategic locations to support personnel deployment.

The ACLED data also reveal other aspects about riots in India. First, as illustrated in Figure 11.3, most *fatalities* related to riots from 2016 to 2019 took place in Jammu and Kashmir, West Bengal, and Haryana. West Bengal and Punjab were also the states that were among the most likely to see riots. Then again, in Figure 11.4—which highlights *where* the Rapid Action Force has been deployed based on information from the *Times of India* rather than ACLED—we find that West Bengal and Punjab are *not* the top five states that the RAF was most frequently deployed to. While Jammu and Kashmir violence is largely the CRPF's domain, the data raise a puzzle as to why West Bengal, for instance, is not the site for more frequent RAF deployments.

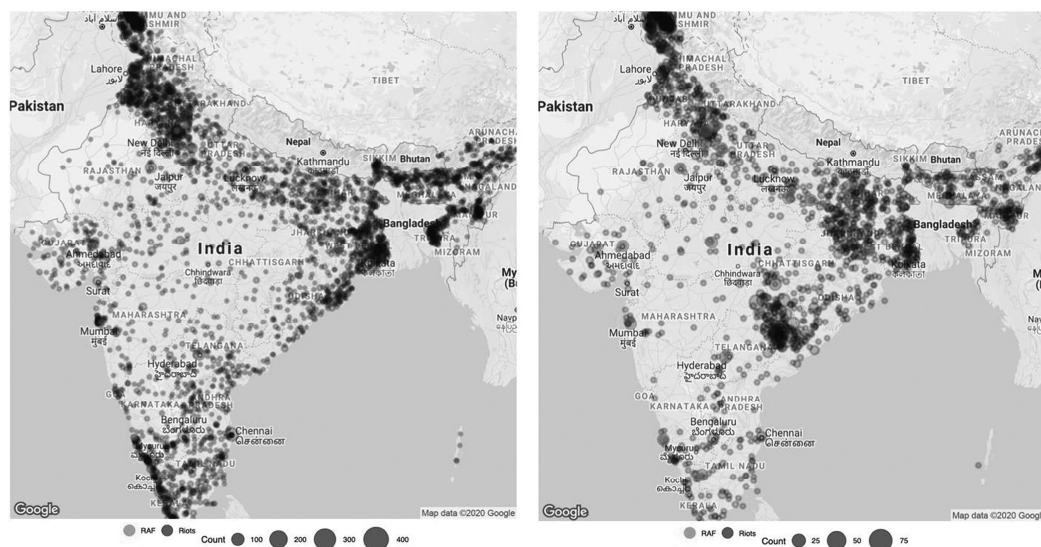
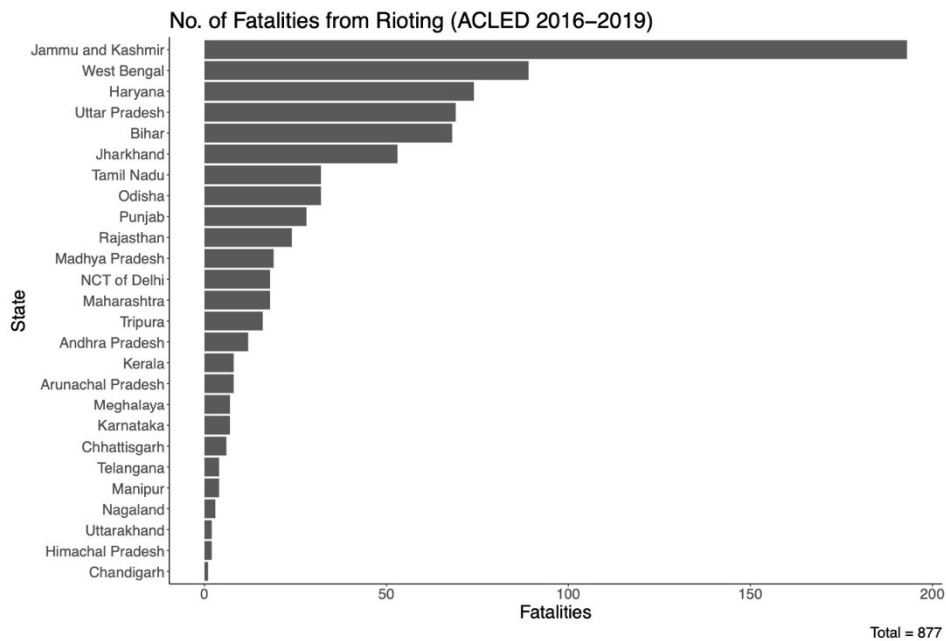


Figure 11.2 The locations and count of riots, 2016–2019

Left: The location and count of riots (and riot-like events) recorded in the ACLED database from 2016–2019. *Right:* The location and count of riots recorded in the ACLED database with 1 casualty or more (N=3,896).

FIGURE 11.3

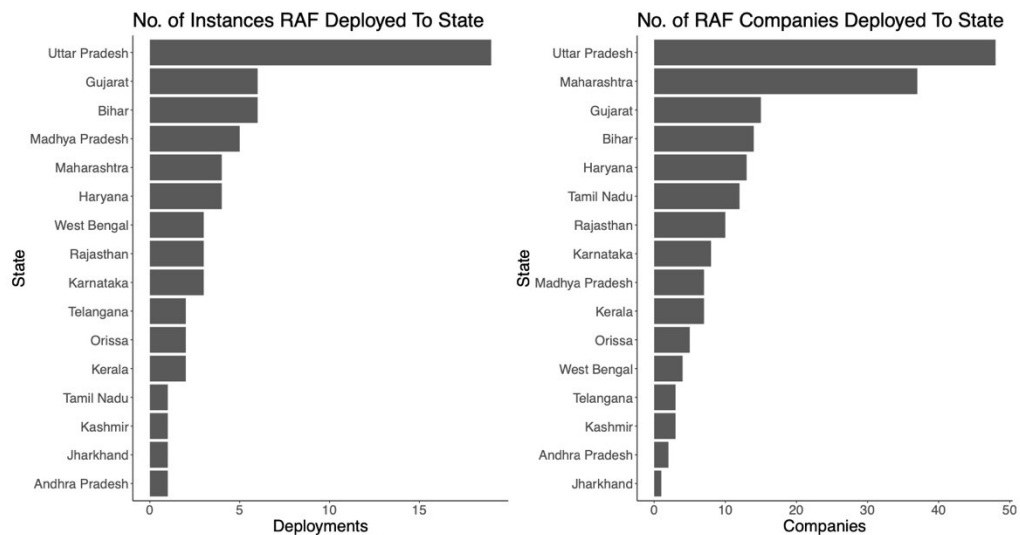


One possibility is that regional parties—which must request RAF deployment— may be reticent about doing so for political reasons, or simply in effort to demonstrate that law and order is a state issue. It is also possible that state governments refuse to request the Rapid Action Force when groups allied with their own political party are involved in clashes.²³ The federal government may also be anxious about sending RAF forces when non-allied regional parties are in power in states. Interestingly, when using the ACLED database to understand which groups/actors most are involved in riots, we find that political parties are particularly likely to be involved; and so, the fact that political parties or their breakaway groups are invariably associated with clashes echoes social science research about how communal conflicts could be perpetuated or supported by political actors for strategic gains.²⁴

Deployments and Constraints

While researchers have collected data on riots in India, there is no available source that outlines where, when, and how many Rapid Action Force personnel have been deployed. For this reason, we construct a dataset using ProQuest Historical and LexisNexis to find all mentions of the “Rapid Action Force” from 1992 to present in the *Times of India*. Using this approach, we find that of the roughly 800 mentions of the institution in articles, most describe the RAF engaged in VIP or *bandobast* duties (e.g., deployed annually to Ayodhya during the anniversary of the Babri Masjid

FIGURE 11.4



Note: This figure, based on Tables 1 and 2, is an approximation of the number of times (left) as well as the number of companies (right) that have been deployed in the state (based on *Times of India* articles from 1992-2018) for riots, mob violence, or ethnic tension.

destruction or during religious celebrations), a point that Mangla in this volume echoes through his fieldwork in Bhimsen, Madhya Pradesh. We subset the data by all the articles that mention the institution being deployed to specifically address a riot or clash.²⁵ Using these mentions, we find that, on average, three companies are deployed to address a riot or clash. The exercise reveals other insights. For many of the entries listed, the number of casualties from rioting by the time the Rapid Action Force is deployed to a riot are roughly the total number of deaths from the entire incident. Consider, for example, the first riot that the Rapid Action Force was deployed to: Sitamarhi Bihar, in October 1992.²⁶ The Sitamarhi riot is an example of why the Rapid Action Force was created in the first place; Engineer notes that the police were biased and invested in the communal tension of the areas that they supervised, while a new centrally run unit was seen as more legitimate.²⁷ Then again, based on newspaper accounts, the total number of deaths from the riot that began on October 6 was approximately thirty-nine, yet the number of deaths reported by the time Rapid Action Force deployed (October 9) was thirty-six. One way to interpret this is that the Rapid Action Force is highly effective at quelling violence; yet, another interpretation is that much of the violence related to the incident had already transpired, and that the Rapid Action Force was deployed too late. In fact, the federal government ended up blaming the Bihar government for not asking for the RAF sooner.²⁸

One interesting observation that our descriptive exercise reveals is that the nature of riots and communal conflict that the Rapid Action Force has witnessed has undergone change. For example, a riot occurred following telecast of Urdu news on Doordarshan in Bangalore in 1994; this incident, prior to the liberalization of state media when television and the state were more closely linked, resulted in at least eighteen deaths.²⁹ Today, India hosts among the largest number of news channels in the world.³⁰ The speed with which violence can flare, and the consequent agility required by the organizations like the RAF, has only intensified. Indeed, communal clashes may occur because of circulation of hate messages or videos on social

media in a way that was unforeseen in the 1990s.³¹ While the RAF was originally intended to be used for the sole purpose of tacking communal riots, it has now come to be used in various kinds of law-and-order situations from ensuring that a tussle between political parties residing in hotels in Maharashtra in 2019 does not turn violent, to being deployed to supervise the Maha Kumbh in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh. Figure 11.4 reveals that the Force is deployed with the most frequency and with the largest total number of companies in Uttar Pradesh.³² Still, the *Times of India* accounts reveal nothing about the efficacy of the Rapid Action Force; in some of the newspaper articles, the Force is criticized for not successfully quelling violence, as in the case of the Indo-Bangla border clashes that led to the deployment of the Indian Army in 2010.³³ However, it is plausible that personnel are not trained for tension in border areas, which may be why, for several of the instances mentioned, the RAF is deployed *simultaneously* with other paramilitary forces, as was the case with the Jat agitation in Haryana (see below).

One hypothesis for why some accounts highlight the inability of the Rapid Action Force to quell large-scale riots, or those that have already started, is that organizations like the RAF have to be (1) called by the state; and (2) operate under certain constraints when on the ground. Officials from the Rapid Action Force fall under the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) Act, 1949 rather than the 1861 Police Act.³⁴ Because the mandate of the RAF is to assist the state police force, the federal government cannot send the RAF on its own.³⁵ Ordinarily, the states send a request to the central government, the federal government then assesses the situation, and if satisfied on the grounds of the request, sends in the nearest RAF unit(s) to the affected area. However, to deter moral hazard or local governments' dependency on central forces, the federal government now asks states to assess the requirement of CAPFs by constituting a local committee with representatives of the state police.³⁶ This is obviously a lengthy bureaucratic process; delays may be caused due to the clearances required throughout this chain of command. Recently, a process to shorten the time required for deployment was put in place whereby district magistrates can directly contact the nearest RAF unit and request deployment. The Inspector-General (RAF) can agree to such a request and send the force for a maximum period of seven days before which the regular permission from the Ministry of Home Affairs arrives.

Aside from the process of being "called-in," RAF officials remain under the supervision of the state government when they are being "hosted." Specifically, operational command always lies with the local district magistrate or superintendent of police. What happens when a *jawan* (who is, let us assume, a member of one of the team elements that carries a gun) perceives the need to use armed force to quell a riot? It is in this context where RAF officials have the most maneuverability. If, for instance, an RAF official has operational instructions by superiors (e.g., the director general of the state police) *not* to open fire, the official may still use force if he or she decides that circumstances on the ground dictate violence. Unlike other paramilitaries, the CRPF/Rapid Action Force have the power to arrest.³⁷ On July 27, 1976, the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India issued Gazette Notification No. J. II-9/74-Adm-(Pers-II/GPA-I), which conferred upon every member of the CRPF of and above the rank of sub-inspector various powers including those under Section 129 Cr.P.C., that is, one of the rights that a police officer holds. Unlike the local police, the RAF are not "socially embedded."³⁸ Consequently, policymakers assume that if such officials do have to resort to force, and along with the fact that the RAF is theoretically more representative of diverse communities, personnel wearing the blue uniforms will be seen as more legitimate if they must resort to force. Nevertheless, these assumptions have not been systemically tested and thus

warrant empirical scrutiny.

Rapid Action Force and the 2016 Reservation Agitation in Haryana

What set of challenges are most important in determining the Rapid Action Force's efficacy? Structural conditions (e.g., lack of equipment or distance from riot), or lengthy bureaucratic processes of requesting assistance? In the following section, based on interviews with serving RAF officers as well as analyses of government reports, we attempt to tackle this question by using as a case study the Force's deployment during the Haryana reservation agitation in 2016. The Jat agitation represents the kind of incident that the Rapid Action Force was, in theory, explicitly designed to tackle, that is, a multi-day riot based on identity politics within the heartland of the country. Our analyses suggest that not only was the RAF constrained by structural factors, but also that the Force played a largely *supportive* rather than lead role, potentially out of skepticism among state administrators about the RAF's efficacy. Indeed, by most accounts, the reservation agitation was seen as a failure of India's internal security apparatus, especially since ultimately it was the Army that had to be deployed to quell violence.³⁹

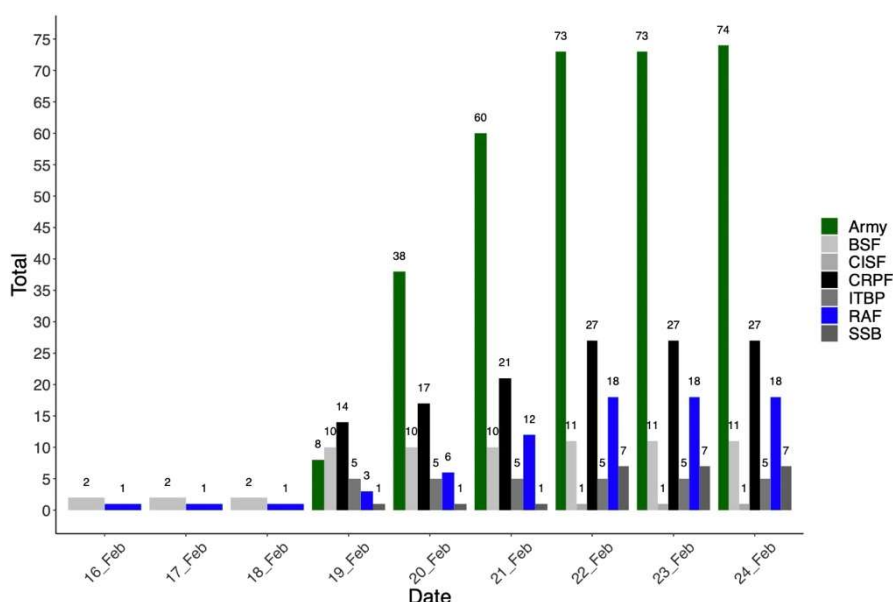
Between February 7 and 22, 2016, the reservation agitation spilled on to the streets of Haryana, resulting in the blockading of roads and highways, as well as damage to public property. The event that precipitated the state government to call for the Rapid Action Force took place on February 14, 2016, when a Jat Swabhimaan Rally was held in the Sampla village of Rohtak. Between 200 and 250 persons blocked National Highway 10, after which prohibitory orders under Section 144 Code of Criminal Procedure were initiated. The state government, at the request of the police chief of Haryana, requested five companies of the RAF. However, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) allotted only three: one RAF and two BSF (Border Security Force). These units were sent to Sonipat and one company each to Rohtak and Jhajjar, respectively. Between February 17 and 19,⁴⁰ a back-and-forth continued between the state government and the MHA about exactly how many companies were to be deployed,⁴¹ as well as where to deploy them. For instance, some CRPF companies allocated to Jind on February 19 were then suddenly relocated to Rohtak the same day. The changing numbers of companies allotted, and the fact that state government had to keep making requests, is emblematic of the bureaucratic process involved in calling in the Central Armed Police Forces, even in the context of fast-moving crises.

According to some of our interviews, the major structural challenge faced by paramilitary personnel were (1) distance to the riot;⁴² and (2) blocked highways. One RAF officer informed us that he arrived in Sonipat on February 16, 2016, but was largely immobile simply because agitators had blocked roadways. He also informed us that a major component of RAF activity included setting perimeters and ensuring spaces *not already infiltrated* were protected. For instance, when a collecting mob was moving toward the OP Jindal Global University at Jagdishpur, Sonipat—in which about 3,000 Indian/foreign students reside and study—the RAF unit reached the university before a large crowd could form, and dispersed rioters with tear gas.

Yet, by other accounts, tear gas and anti-riot equipment utilized by the RAF may not have been adequate to quell agitations. For instance, on February 21, 2016, RAF officials were informed about an attempt being planned by rioters to damage Munak Canal. In this instance, tear gas not only proved insufficient, but also RAF officers were overwhelmed by agitators

who tried to forcibly acquire their weapons. The RAF ended up opening fire and some individuals were killed.⁴³ Figure 11.5 illustrates exactly when the Army was called in. Interestingly, the Army faced some of same challenges as the Central Armed Police Forces; it was delayed by almost a day by fallen trees on the roads, and several columns had to be airlifted with helicopters.⁴⁴ Eventually, seventy-four columns of the Army were deployed,

FIGURE 11.5



Note: Shades of gray/black reflect the CAPFs. The Rapid Action Force is depicted in blue, and the army in green. The number of CAPFs and RAF are reflected in “companies.” The number of army personnel are displayed in columns (each column has approximately 75 personnel).

which overwhelmed the manpower of the Central Armed Police Forces, including the RAF. Some officials that we interviewed did indeed highlight the importance of the Rapid Action Force in quelling violence in Haryana. For instance, an official we interviewed noted that he was posted in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, and was informed at 7 p.m. to move to Sonipat on February 23, 2016. (Interestingly, Bhopal is more than 800 km from Sonipat, and so further than the 400 km radius that personnel should theoretically be from a scene.) He reached Delhi airport by plane at 2 a.m., and at 5 a.m. he was on the ground. The official described how he employed some of his training in psychological warfare with the mob. For instance, he highlighted how he used food to sow division between agitators. He said:

I saw that there were 5,000 persons sitting on the canal and blocking the water passage. The brigadier informed me that by 10 a.m. these people should be vacated. I responded that this was not feasible because of the sheer number of people, and if I fire a single shot there will be hundreds of drowning cases and chaos. We were given training in psychological warfare. I had *khichdi* [local rice and pulses dish] made in several pots, and I sent them to the agitators and let them know it is for the women and children only. A rift began to emerge among some of the lead agitators who demanded that the food be given to everyone. And they started arguing with each other as to who exactly will get the *khichdi*.

Similarly, an RAF official informed us that he, working with others, decided to allow

agitators to write their demands on paper. This would distract some of the protesters while RAF officials could better position themselves for riot control. For instance, one official said:

I thought it would be a good time to begin negotiating with the mob. I said all we must do is take petitions from the citizens and let them know that these written demands will be sent to the highest offices in the state. Some began to write demands on paper while they were waiting and standing in the crowds; we then had someone approach those folks and tell them that the petitions may be challenged by lawyers. And that if you aren't literate or with high levels of education, it might be best to write your petition through a lawyer. In Sonipat, by 5 p.m., a substantial number of citizens had gone elsewhere to try and get some inputs from lawyers.

In this way, some of the RAF officials we interviewed highlighted how their training allowed them to think about ways to disperse mobs *without* resorting to force in Haryana. Then again, the RAF officials that we interviewed were deployed to the state *after* much of the intense clashes and instances of violence had transpired. Consider Figure 11.5. It depicts the CAPF institutions brought in to quell the rioting in Haryana by day. The figure shows how, as violence and looting continued between February 16 and 18, only *one* company of the RAF was posted in Haryana. By February 19, four other CAPF institutions were brought in, as well as 8 columns of the Army. Yet, within the CAPFs, the increase in the number of RAF companies to deal with the rioting was marginal. Instead, aside from the CRPF, it was the Border Security Force—who are *not* trained in riot control—that saw a large increase. From February 20, there was a striking increase in the number of Army columns brought in; yet, once again, the number of RAF companies began to exceed the BSF companies in number only beginning on February 21. Throughout the Jat agitation, the total number of RAF companies never exceeded eighteen. This fact was severely criticized by the Prakash Singh Committee Report, which expressed puzzlement as to why the BSF (and later Indo-Tibetan Border Police or ITBP) were called in before the RAF.⁴⁵

One hypothesis for why Rapid Action Force units were not called in is skepticism on the part of administrators about the ability of the RAF to handle large-scale violence rather than smaller, more concentrated community clashes. One of us (Dr. Hanif Qureshi) was the inspector general of Karnal, Haryana, during the time of the Jat agitation. Based on his experience, much of the violence related to the Jat agitation occurred *prior* to the Rapid Action Force being called in, at a time when a larger number of units were requested but not deployed by the Ministry of Home Affairs. As per the Prakash Singh Committee report, on February 20, there was word that agitators had brought National Highway 1 (Delhi to Chandigarh) to a standstill. On the 21st, agitators had breached Munak Canal, and had stolen a weapon from one of the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) *jawans*. SSB officials then opened fire, and a protestor was killed. On the 22nd, agitators had tried to cut off the water supply to Delhi. At 2 a.m., ADC Sonipat, DC Sonipat, IG Railways, and Commando mandated a *lathi*-charge and deployed tear gas to be used on the mob. Eventually, seventy-four rounds of ammunition were fired, and four persons were killed. *Only after* the deaths of four persons did the level of violence begin to subside; and so, by the time that some of the RAF officials that we interviewed had arrived on the scene, and were able to use psychological warfare, there was *already* a diminution in the intensity of violence. A question that arises is that, if the training of RAF is to deal with clashes like the Jat agitation, why were so few companies sent not only from the very beginning, but also when the violence began to escalate? Why, as the violence intensified on February 19, were the Border Security Force and Sashastra Seema Bal moved into Haryana in larger numbers than the Rapid Action Force? One RAF official informed us:

The government in Haryana likely thought that they could handle the situation without calling in external

agencies, including the Rapid Action Force. But by waiting, the violence intensified, by which time it likely became necessary to present a big show of force. RAF officials are deployed across the country, and I for instance was called in from Bhopal. And so, in the heat of the moment, the MHA sent in other agencies, including the Army. There was no big strategy. It really was a game of numbers, and using whatever forces one could get to intimidate the rioters. It is also important to note that the RAF is still called in very rare cases—there remains this association that the organization does not use lethal force. And, for intense clashes that we saw in Haryana, there was an assumption—even shared by the Prakash Singh Committee report—that you do need to use lethal force. Policymakers think, “why should we call troops that have negotiation skills when there is violence and looting in the streets or those troops for whom only 50 percent carry weapons?” We need “real” armed forces is the thought-process.

The official described a mentality among administrators that RAF can likely not deal with escalating riots. In the case of Haryana, the state government had initially asked for more personnel but were allotted far less by the Ministry of Home Affairs; yet, by the time the violence had escalated, the federal government *overcompensated* by deploying personnel from every agency, including the Army. It is also true that there are bureaucratic challenges with deploying just one kind of force; because CAPFs are spread thin in a variety of settings, the RAF is typically deployed *with other* agencies simultaneously. In general, state leaders prefer the disbursal of a variety of forces; deploying sixty-nine companies of CAPFs is seen as better than eighteen companies of the RAF.⁴⁶ The reservation agitation was spread across nine districts of Haryana, and eighteen companies of the RAF—which would likely have to be called from several RAF battalion headquarters—would translate to just two companies per district. The distribution of day-by-day deployments in Figure 11.5 shows the massive deployments of the Army, suggesting that administrators may still depend on the military for large-scale internal challenges. However, the Army is (1) typically ill-equipped for anti-riot activity because they carry heavy weapons; and (2) military deployment—at the expense of CAPFs or the RAF—may undermine the credibility of the country’s most trusted institution. Indeed, while the Army carried out flag marches during the Jat agitation, it came with significant cost; several videos emerged showing agitators throwing stones at Army trucks, potentially compromising the status of the Army in the eyes of citizens.

Discussion

In this essay, we attempt to shed light on one of India’s Central Armed Police Forces, the Rapid Action Force. The Rapid Action Force was created to address rioting or communal violence in the heartland, which by the 1980s had intensified. The CRPF, which previously had sole responsibility for tackling such forms of violence, became overstretched with large-scale counterinsurgency and cross-border tension. Moreover, state-level police forces, especially after the Emergency, came to be seen as biased. The Rapid Action Force—with their bases across India, specialized training (especially in non-lethal weapons), and emphasis on representation—would theoretically be a boon. The organization has indeed seen a great number of successes since its inception; it was involved in countering the 2001 Indian Parliament attack, rescue operations following the 2004 Tsunami, and saw deployments during the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks.

Yet, in describing the organization of the Rapid Action Force, we also attempt to illustrate some of the challenges that the institution has and will likely continue to face. First, we outline the hierarchy within the Rapid Action Force, and note how the institution is not autonomous. The RAF—a four-year deployment for CRPF officials—is typically seen as a “soft” posting. While CRPF officials sent to the RAF undergo a month-long training course, as a subsidiary of the CRPF and as a likely factor of the short postings, officials do not necessarily generate a loyalty

to the institution distinct from the CRPF. Whether the RAF is a more “representative” force is also unclear; still, descriptively, the organization can be said to be more inclusive of women than other paramilitary agencies. Relatedly, hiring more recruits may mitigate against state governments having the need to call-in units from other agencies like the Border Security Force when in crisis.

Second, we point to the fact that, on average, each RAF headquarter is roughly 250 km from a riot-like situation. Combined with the fact that the RAF do not necessarily have equipment like helicopters, there are structural hurdles that constrain personnel from arriving quickly on the ground. Without adequate equipment, RAF personnel can be hindered by simple obstacles such as blocked roadways. Providing adequate equipment to personnel, so that units are not obligated to borrow choppers from the Army or get lifts from other agencies, may improve performance. Third, we show that on average, three companies of the RAF are typically sent to a riot-like situation. Nevertheless, we also suggest that the bureaucratic processes and red tape involved in requesting CAPFs may not have adapted to the changing environment. As hinted by other chapters in this volume, there has been an evolution of riot-like incidents in India, especially with the advent of social media. And so, instituting more bases for RAF deployment, and potentially ensuring that personnel play a more lead rather than supportive role, may begin addressing the mismatch in terms of states that are most likely to have a riot (or most likely to have fatalities from riots), compared to where RAF personnel are deployed. Indeed, the RAF is typically sent in conjunction with other CAPFs, but if the former is seen as a more neutral, impartial force in their blue uniforms, but remain overpowered by other agencies on the ground, then questions are raised as to whether the RAF are being given the opportunity to deliver in the first place.

We use the reservation agitation in Haryana to illustrate several of the challenges faced by the RAF, and areas for performance improvement. We describe how the body was brought in *along* with other forces during the crisis that may not have had training to deal with riot-like situations (such as the Border Security Force and Army). When on the ground, the RAF did not necessarily retain organizational command. And so, playing largely supportive roles, without robust deployment, the RAF’s influence in addressing the agitation may have been overshadowed by its supervising body. In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that state administrators may *prefer* other CAPFs to the RAF; the RAF may be typecast as an agency that is unable to use lethal force to intimidate protesters. This may be one reason why states like Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, and Maharashtra have now created their own state-level Rapid Action Forces. However, further re- search is warranted as to whether these localized RAF institutions are more agile or simply a way to add layers of bureaucracy without initiating corrective measures to existing institutions.

The chapter makes a case for studying the actors who participate in maintaining law and order in India in a more systematic way, especially because previous scholarly analyses of ethnic or communal violence have focused almost entirely on *why* they occur rather than the *role of actors* responsible for quelling them. Subsequent research, with more comprehensive data, may shed light on why attrition and levels of suicide are high in organizations like the CRPF, whether the deployment of forces like the Rapid Action Force perpetuate moral hazard (i.e., create a dependency upon federal resources and breed inefficiency in the police), or even why state governments ask for paramilitary assistance in some instances, but not others.

We hope that policymakers and scholars will work more collaboratively to share data; at present, accessing even demographic information about the CAPFs is a challenge because

such agencies are exempt from the Right to Information Act, as pointed out by Yashovardhan Azad in his chapter in this volume, and the federal government has even stopped providing certain forms of data related to communal conflict, shown by Ahuja and Kapur in their chapter. There may be anxieties among law and order and government officials vis-à-vis researchers potentially exposing structural deficits or painting the security apparatus in a negative light. Nevertheless, greater trust and collaboration between policymakers and researchers may in fact be a win-win situation by not only enabling scholars to carry out research, but also providing government officials a free pool of researchers interested in generating policy recommendations based on data that can increase the agility and efficacy of India's internal security agencies.

Notes

1. Patel's full quote is: "We are passing through a period of transition. In this period we have made so many changes and raised so many forces, upset so many things of the old order—abolition of *zamindari*, amalgamation of States, removal of old institutions and many other similar things. The present situation is such that we have to be very watchful and careful. Then we have on the borders, due to Partition, several raids being committed by dacoits from the other side or by the forces from the other side. In the industrial centers also there are certain forces which believe in creating trouble, for they think the more unrest they create, the better the prospects for their organization. In all these circumstances, a Central, well-organized and disciplined police force is a boon in these areas. Ours is a vast country, where consolidation has taken place with electric rapidity. Therefore, we have taken care to organize our services, our police force and all the requirements that are considered necessary for keeping law and order in the whole land, so that progress may be as effective and rapid as possible." Lok Sabha, "Constituent Assembly of India (Legislative) Debates" (Legislative Debates: Official Report; New Delhi, 1949).
2. For a discussion of this decade marking a deterioration in India's internal security, see the introductory chapter by Ahuja and Kapur in this volume.
3. Steven I. Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
4. Stephen P. Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta, *Arming without Aiming: India's Military Modernization* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013). Each CAPF, established by an act of the Parliament, was created for a specific mandate. The primary goal of the Border Security Force (BSF) is to guard India's border with Pakistan and Bangladesh; the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) provides security to airports and other public sector infrastructure; the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) was raised for guarding duties on the India-China border; while the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) secures the borders with Nepal and Bhutan. The National Security Guard is an anti-terrorism unit, and the Assam Rifles guard the Indo-Myanmar border.
5. "Cong. Favours Ram Temple," *The Times of India*, April 17, 1991.
6. Defined under Sections 130, 131, and 132 of the Cr.P.C.
7. For additional information on the other CAPFs, see chapter by Azad in this volume.
8. GOs are senior government officers appointed by the president of India or governor of states; they have power to verify public documents by affixing their seal. In CRPF, assistant commandants and above are GOs.
9. Deputed from the CRPF.
10. 50 percent are promoted from constables, and 50 percent recruited directly from the CRPF.
11. 50 percent promoted from ranks from inspector, and 50 percent recruited directly from the UPSC.
12. The Indian Police Service (IPS) has a cadre strength that includes 40 percent Central Deputation Reserve. This means that 40 percent of IPS officers are meant to serve on deputation in Government of India forces, chiefly in the CAPFs. Currently, as per the recruitment rules of various CAPFs, 20–25 percent of the posts at deputy inspector general level, 50 percent at inspector general level, and 75 percent at additional director general level are manned by IPS officers. The remaining posts are manned by CAPF officers, both directly recruited, or officers promoted from the ranks. All CAPFs in India including the CRPF are headed by IPS officers; J. Frank, E. G. Lambert, H. Qureshi, and A. J. Myer, "Problems Spilling Over: Work-Family Conflict's and Other Stressor Variables' Relationships with Job Involvement and Satisfaction among Police Officers," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 17, no. 1 (2021): 48–71. For a few years now, there has been some tension between IPS and CAPF officers over service conditions. The genesis of the legal battle is whether IPS officers should be

deputed to CAPFs at the top level (deputy in- spector general and above). The Supreme Court in February 2019 ruled that the “grant of status of Group ‘A’ Central Services to RPF (Railway Police Force) shall not affect (the deputation of) the IPS.” The deputation of IPS officers would therefore continue as before. The RPF is not a CAPF. This caused some confusion as to the deputation of IPS officers in CAPFs, as some CAPF officers wanted their own officers to man the top-level posts in CAPFs and not IPS officers.

13. Every year, RAF officials are sent to refresher courses for four weeks.
14. Vinay Pandey, “Novel Approach to Tackle Riots,” *The Times of India*, October 28, 1992. The idea that greater representation would ensure a less partisan force was shared by several politicians, some of whom even proposed the creation of segregated *minority-only* paramilitary forces; “Special Anti-Riot Force Plan: Lok Sabha,” *The Times of India*, August 2, 1991.
15. Rajya Sabha, “Question No. 217 (Shri Rahman Khan),” Parliament, 1995. In the 1990s, organizations such as the National Commission for Minorities asked that educational and other qualifications be relaxed for minorities entering the CRPF, but this was rejected by the government. Rajya Sabha, “Question No. 412 (Shri Rahman Khan),” Parliament, 2002.
16. Lok Sabha, “Question No. 2056 (Shri Bir Singh Mahato),” Parliament, 1999; Rajya Sabha, “Question No. 122 (Shri Shahid Siddiqui),” Parliament, 2004.
17. Female officers from the Rapid Action Force have also been deployed for international peace- keeping operations, as in Liberia (TOI 2006c).
18. For a discussion of gender in the Border Security Force, see chapter by Ghosh in this volume.
19. Mark Magnier, “India’s Response to Attacks Lays Bare Broader Failures,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 1, 2008; Manju Parikh, “The Debacle at Ayodhya: Why Militant Hinduism Met with a Weak Response,” *Asian Survey* 33, no. 7 (1993): 673–684.
20. Debashish Karmakar, “Permanent Deployment of RAF in State by October,” *The Times of India*, August 8, 2018.
21. “ACLED Introduces New Event Types and Sub-Event Types,” *ACLED*, <https://www.acleddata.com/2019/03/14/acled-introduces-new-event-types-and-sub-event-types/>.
22. Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence*.
23. Sriya Iyer and Anand Shrivastava, “Religious Riots and Electoral Politics in India,” *Journal of Development Economics* 131 (2018): 104–122; Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence*.
24. There are, of course, challenges associated with recording mentions of the institution in one English-language newspaper. However, the goal was not to create a comprehensive database, but to gain some descriptive insights about when and how many companies are sent, as well as how many people died (approximately) by the time the Rapid Action Force was called in.
25. “Bihar Riot Toll Rises to 36,” *The Times of India*, October 10, 1992.
26. Asghar Ali Engineer, “Sitamarhi on Fire,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 14, 1992, 2462–2464.
27. “Centre Blames Bihar Govt,” *The Times of India*, October 12, 1992.
28. “Bangalore Toll Up to 18: Army Stages Nag Marches; DD Reschedules Urdu News,” *The Times of India*, October 9, 1994.
29. Alistair Maclean and Nalin Mehta, *India on Television: How Satellite News Channels Have Changed the Way We Think and Act* (New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2008).
30. Debabrata Mohapatra, “Bhadrak Violence Claims Property Worth Rs. 9 Crore,” *The Times of India*, April 21, 2017; H. K. Verma and Debashish Karmakar, “Communal Clashes in Bihar District over Video on Deities,” *The Times of India*, August 6, 2016.
31. It is also notable that few Rapid Action Force personnel were deployed during the Godhra riots in Gujarat; Kadayam Suryanarayanan Subramanian, *Political Violence and the Police in India* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2007), 184, argues that the Force was prevented from being able to maneuver during the clashes.
32. “Communal Clash Near Bangla Border, Army Deployed,” *The Times of India*, September 8, 2010.
33. CRPF/Rapid Action Force officers, especially under Section 132 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, are immune from most forms of prosecution if a case can be made that officers acted in the interest of the state.
34. The only situation where the federal government may use Central Forces in a state, without the state’s consent, is when it concludes that the governance of a state cannot be carried out under the provisions of the Constitution under Article 356 of the Constitution and imposes President’s Rule.
35. The Government of India laid out detailed guidelines through a circular issued on October 18, 2017, through which it advised the states that CAPFs cannot substitute state police forces for normal policing duties.
36. However, like other CAPFs, the RAF cannot carry out tasks such as investigations or First Information Report registrations.
37. For a discussion of this term, see Mangla in this volume.

38. Prakash Singh, "Prakash Singh Committee Report: Role of Officers of Civil Administration and Police during the Jat Reservation Agitation (Feb 7–22, 2016)" (2018), 176.
39. From February 17 to 19, there was mob violence in a mall where almost a dozen policemen were taken hostage, confrontations between police and agitators where a BSF official fired and killed a protestor, as well as attacks on the residence of the Haryana finance minister.
40. The federal government first allotted thirty additional companies to the existing three, and later increasing it to sixty.
41. Battalions from the BSF had to travel more than twenty-four hours to reach Narwana from Bikaner.
42. Similarly, on February 22, 2016, the RAF was called upon to disperse a mob of roughly 2,000 personnel who were blocking National Highway 1 at Ladsouli. The RAF then opened fire, in which four people died.
43. A substantial contingent of the Army (five columns) was sent to by the federal government to Munak Canal so that the drinking water to Delhi could be protected.
44. Prakash Singh, "Prakash Singh Committee Report."
45. While facing riots, state governments typically want as many companies as they can get. If they ask for only RAF, they may get only get a dozen or more; whereas if they are open to other CAPFs too, they will most likely get a larger total number of companies. The problem arises in the fact that the RAF were specifically designed to address riots, so if other forces are also brought in, then the point of having a separate RAF—or at least one that cannot be brought in with enough manpower or hold operational command—becomes unclear.

