

Curfew Politics and Role of Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) in Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract: Curfew is one of the strongest and most unusual tools a government can use to control public order. Although it is officially described as a measure to prevent violence and protect people during communal tensions, in reality it is often influenced by political motives and used to send certain messages. In Uttar Pradesh, a state with a long history of communal clashes, the decision to impose curfew and the way the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) is deployed have often been shaped by political interests and majority-community pressures. This paper studies how curfew is used in Uttar Pradesh and how the PAC behaves during such situations, looking at how the force has developed over time, how it acted during major riots, and what various inquiry committees, journalists, human rights groups and scholars have said about its conduct. The review of events from independence to the present, shows that curfew in UP is not just an administrative step but often a political tool that affects different communities in unequal ways. The PAC has repeatedly faced accusations of being biased, using too much force, and targeting specific groups, which highlights how policing, politics and social prejudice are closely connected.

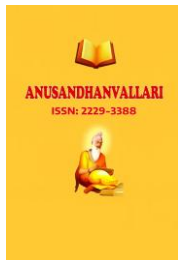
Keywords: Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC), Curfew, accusations, prejudice.

Introduction

Curfew is one of the most powerful and least-studied tools used by governments to control violence and restore order during times of unrest. Like martial law or emergency powers, a curfew suspends normal freedoms and deeply affects the daily lives of citizens. “During strict curfews especially those with “shoot-at-sight” orders simply stepping outside can lead to arrest, beating, or even death. Although curfews are officially meant to bring “peace” and “calm,” the lived experiences of people show that they often create hardship, fear, and unequal treatment, particularly in multi-religious societies like India.”¹

Curfew is one of the strongest instruments a government can use when violence or large-scale unrest breaks out. Like emergency powers or restrictions on civil liberties, a curfew immediately limits the normal rights of people. In theory, curfews are announced to prevent riots, protect lives, stop crowds from gathering, and help the police restore order. If we look into the History, “The British used two methods to prevent the gathering of potentially violent crowds, namely, the imposition of Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code banning the assembly of five or more persons on any public thoroughfare and/or curfew.”² But in contemporary times, in practice, the way curfews are declared, enforced, and experienced can differ widely from one place to another. People may be given only a few minutes to reach home, streets may be emptied by force, and violations can lead to beatings, arrests, or even “shoot-at-sight” actions. For those living in crowded neighborhoods without basic facilities, especially the poor, curfew often becomes a period of intense hardship and fear rather than safety.

In India, and particularly in Uttar Pradesh, curfews have been imposed frequently during Hindu–Muslim tensions and episodes of communal violence. Historical records from the British period to the present show that curfews have sometimes helped prevent riots, but at other times they have failed to stop violence or have even allowed attacks to continue behind closed streets. The experience on the ground often varies between communities. Many researchers and survivors of riots in cities such as Meerut, Aligarh, and Kanpur have pointed out that curfew



enforcement can be discriminatory, with some neighborhoods receiving harsher treatment, slower relief, or biased policing.

The Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC), established in 1948 by Uttar Pradesh act number XI., plays the most important role during curfews in Uttar Pradesh. As an armed police force, the PAC is called in whenever local police cannot control a disturbance. Their presence on the streets during curfew, patrolling lanes, guarding shops, or dispersing crowds, can determine whether peace is truly restored or whether new tensions arise. Yet the PAC's record, especially during communal riots, is mixed. While they are meant to protect all citizens, several investigations and testimonies have accused PAC units of acting with bias, using excessive force, or failing to stop attacks on vulnerable communities.

Because of these patterns, curfew in Uttar Pradesh is not just a technical law-and-order measure. It is deeply political. Governments are judged by when they impose curfew, how quickly they act, which areas they target, and how fairly the police and PAC behave. A curfew imposed too late becomes a symbol of administrative failure, a curfew imposed selectively becomes a sign of discrimination. At the same time, political parties often use curfews either to blame opponents for past lawlessness or to claim credit for "strong governance."

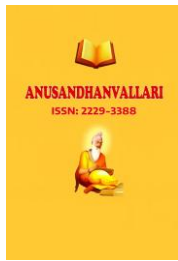
Literature Review

scholars who study communal violence and state responses agree that curfew is one of the most powerful, yet least researched, tools used by governments during public disorder. While martial law, emergency declarations, and suspension of civil liberties have received significant academic attention, curfews are rarely examined in a systematic way. Paul Brass's work on the "institutionalized riot system" suggests that "riots in places like Meerut and Aligarh follow predictable patterns involving political actors, local strongmen and segments of the police."³ Paul R. Brass points out that although curfews are used frequently across the world during riots, protests, and colonial unrest but very few studies have evaluated how they are actually enforced or what impact they have on different communities. Most of what we know comes from official statements that simply claim a curfew "restored calm," without offering evidence of effectiveness or fairness.

The scholarly literature on communal violence in India shows a similar pattern. Many studies examine the causes of riots, the role of political parties, or the behavior of crowds, but very few focus on curfews as a specific administrative tool. Paul R. Brass is the only author who wrote extensively on Communal Violence and also on politics of curfew. Brass's work highlights that curfews in India, especially in riot-prone regions like Uttar Pradesh, are not neutral measures. Instead, they can reflect deeper social and political biases. For example, during Hindu-Muslim riots in cities such as Meerut, Aligarh, and Kanpur, curfews were often imposed more quickly and more strictly on Muslim-majority neighborhoods, while Hindu-majority areas sometimes experienced lighter restrictions or slower police response. This selective approach raises questions about how impartial the state machinery truly is.

Steven Wilkinson's electoral-incentive model posits that "governments are more likely to intervene impartially in communal violence when minority groups are electorally significant."⁴ Vibhuti Narain Rai, an IPS officer who documented police bias in riots, argued that the "communalization of police forces, has deep institutional roots."⁵ Reports by the National Human Rights Commission, the People's Union for Civil Liberties, the People's Union for Democratic Rights, and state-appointed commissions such as the Madan Commission, the Rehman Commission and the Justice Srikrishna Commission (though primarily focused on Mumbai) also document "instances of discriminatory policing across India."⁶

The literature also notes that the effectiveness of curfew depends heavily on how it is enforced. A curfew that is declared too late, or without sufficient manpower to patrol the streets, often fails to prevent killings, arson, or looting. In fact, several documented cases from Uttar Pradesh show that much of the violence happened after



curfew was imposed, when deserted streets gave attackers freedom to move without witnesses. Brass and other scholars argue that such failures reflect administrative weaknesses, political interference, or, in some cases, deliberate inaction by sections of the police.

It is very important to study on Uttar Pradesh is the role of the Provincial Armed Constabulary. Studies, reports, and investigative accounts frequently mention the PAC during communal riots. Actually, the PAC is meant to support the civil police and restore order, its actions have sometimes been highly controversial. The most well-known example is the Hashimpura massacre of 1987, where PAC personnel killed 42 Muslim men during a curfew period. The court verdict came recently in this brutal killing. “On November 29, 2021, Delhi High Court sentences 16 ex-PAC personal to life.”⁷

The broader literature on colonial and postcolonial India also shows that curfews have long been used as both preventive and punitive tools. Under British rule, curfews were common in Uttar Pradesh’s towns during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, often accompanied by Section 144. These methods were carried forward into post-independence administrative practice. Scholars note that the social and political context changed sharply after independence: Muslim representation in the police declined, and many riots shifted from two-sided Hindu–Muslim confrontations to one-sided violence where Muslims were disproportionately killed, arrested, or subjected to police action. It is very important to note that “The representation of Muslims is barely three per cent in the PAC (Muslims constitute 15 percent of the population in UP).”⁸

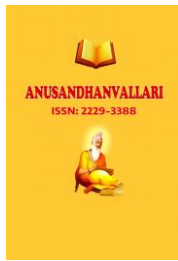
The literature suggests three major gaps. First, there is little empirical research on whether curfews actually prevent violence. Second, few studies analyze how curfews affect different communities in multi-religious societies. Third, there is limited academic work on the police forces, especially the PAC, that enforce curfews and shape the outcomes of riots. This article aims to address these gaps by using historical examples, contemporary case studies, and detailed descriptions of PAC deployment patterns to understand the politics behind curfews in Uttar Pradesh.

Historical patterns

The history of the Provincial Armed Constabulary in Uttar Pradesh shows that its role in riot control and curfew enforcement has evolved alongside political change, administrative practices, and patterns of communal tension. From its creation in the late 1940s, the PAC was meant to serve as a disciplined force to assist the civil police during emergencies. Over time, however, it became one of the most visible instruments of the state during periods of unrest, especially when curfew was imposed. A clear historical pattern emerges, whenever the civilian police appeared unable to control a situation, the PAC was deployed immediately, often in large numbers, and curfew followed as the next step in restoring order.

During the decades after independence, the PAC was often deployed in situations where Hindu–Muslim tensions were rising. In the 1950s and 1960s, curfew was used as a preventive measure in cities like Aligarh, Kanpur, and Allahabad, and PAC platoons were stationed around religious sites, marketplaces, and sensitive neighborhoods. As political competition increased in the 1970s and 1980s, the PAC’s role became even more crucial. Many major riots during this period including the 1978 Aligarh riots and the 1987 Meerut violence saw the same sequence, rising tensions, late administrative response, imposition of curfew, and mass deployment of PAC units. The PAC gradually became the main strength of the state, especially in urban centers.

A striking historical trend is the shift from crowd-versus-crowd riots to police-versus-community confrontations. Earlier riots often involved clashes between groups, but from the 1980s onward, several inquiries and media reports documented situations where violence continued during curfew hours in areas heavily patrolled by PAC personnel. This created a perception among many communities particularly Muslims that the PAC was not only



enforcing curfew but also influencing the direction and outcome of the violence. Events such as the Hashimpura killings in 1987 further strengthened these concerns and shaped the public image of the PAC.

During the Ayodhya-related violence of 1992–93, “curfew was lifted on crucial days to facilitate mobilization. Reports in *The Telegraph* indicated that minority localities in Faizabad remained under curfew while majority areas were exempted.”⁹

The 1990s and early 2000s saw repeated cycles of curfew and PAC deployment in riot-prone cities like Meerut, Kanpur, Aligarh, and Bareilly. These cycles showed that while the PAC could restore surface-level calm, deeper mistrust between communities and security forces persisted. Over the years, the force expanded its size and equipment, but complaints about bias and excessive force remained consistent. The period after 2013, including the Muzaffarnagar riots and later cases such as Kasganj (2018) and Kanpur (2022), again demonstrated how quickly PAC units are mobilized when curfew is declared and how political leaders rely on such deployments to demonstrate control. Historical and contemporary evidence from Uttar Pradesh reveals that curfews have sometimes been used not only to prevent riots but also to target specific communities, especially Muslims, during Hindu–Muslim violence. “Muslims suffer more physical harm and property damage in Aligarh riots than do Hindu, curfew is a disaster for both Hindu and Muslims alike.”¹⁰

Administrative Practices

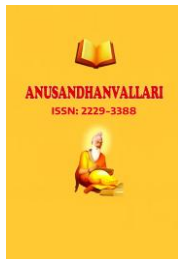
When violence breaks out or when tension in a city reaches a dangerous level, the responsibility for maintaining peace falls first on the civil administration. In Uttar Pradesh, this usually means the District Magistrate (DM), the Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP), and their teams. Their decisions in the initial hours of a conflict often determine whether the situation will be controlled quickly or whether it will spread into a full-scale riot. Over the years, a distinct pattern of administrative practices has emerged in how local authorities respond to conflicts, impose curfews, and coordinate with forces like the Provincial Armed Constabulary.

The first administrative task during a conflict is assessment of threat. District officials monitor crowd movements, religious processions, local disputes, circulation of rumors, and social media messages. When early signs of trouble appear, preventive actions such as enforcing Section 144, holding peace committee meetings, or conducting police flag marches, are commonly used. These measures are intended to reassure the public and discourage groups from mobilizing. However, in many historical cases in UP, administrative inaction or delayed assessment allowed tensions to rise until violence became too difficult to stop.

Once violence begins, the administration moves into a crisis-response mode. The DM and SSP decide whether to impose a curfew, which areas need to be sealed off, and how many police or PAC units must be sent to patrol affected areas. In theory, curfew should be imposed early enough to prevent violence from spreading. But in several past incidents, such as Meerut (1987), Bijnor (1990), and Muzaffarnagar (2013), curfew was imposed only after significant damage had already occurred. Late curfews often result in chaos and people trapped outside their homes, unattended casualties, and streets left empty for attackers to move freely.

A second key administrative responsibility is coordination of security forces. In Uttar Pradesh, the PAC becomes central when curfew is imposed. Administrators must decide how many PAC platoons are needed, which routes they should patrol, and how to divide responsibility between local police, PAC units, RAF teams, and sometimes even the Army. Effective coordination can bring quick calm. Poor coordination, on the other hand, can lead to gaps in patrolling, miscommunication, and inconsistent enforcement of curfew rules.

Another essential administrative duty during conflict is public communication. Announcing curfew timings, informing residents about relaxation hours, and countering rumors are crucial steps. In many riot-prone cities, rumors have historically escalated violence faster than physical attacks. Administrators often use loudspeakers, local media, and public notices to keep people informed. Yet, community accounts from several Uttar Pradesh



cities show that communication is not always timely. “Many families have recalled not knowing when curfew began or ended, which exposed them to danger or police action unintentionally.”¹¹

Providing relief and essential services during curfew is another major administrative practice, though often overlooked. “Families living in congested areas, especially daily wage workers, face immediate hardship when curfew lasts for more than a day. Administrations are expected to ensure drinking water, milk supply, access to medicine, and emergency medical transport.”¹²

Historically, Uttar Pradesh has struggled in this area. Several inquiry reports have noted that cases of wrongful police action or excessive force were poorly investigated or remained unresolved for years. This gap between administrative promise and administrative practice weakens public trust and shapes how communities view both curfews and the PAC.

Prejudiced role of PAC during Curfew

The Provincial Armed Constabulary has historically occupied a central position in the administration of curfews during communal disturbances in Uttar Pradesh. While the PAC is formally mandated to function as a neutral law-and-order force, scholarly research, judicial inquiries, and numerous media investigations have repeatedly highlighted patterns of prejudiced behavior, particularly against minority communities. This prejudice becomes most visible during curfew operations, when the PAC enjoys extraordinary discretionary powers and control over mobility, enforcement of prohibitory orders, house searches, selective arrests, and even the use of lethal force.

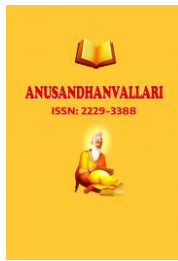
A recurring pattern identified in riot commissions and academic literature is the selective enforcement of curfew rules. Curfew restrictions were reported to have been applied more stringently in Muslim neighborhoods, often accompanied by harassment, arbitrary detention, and disproportionate firing. At the same time, Hindu localities were frequently allowed greater freedom of movement, or were monitored with comparatively less coercive presence. “More Muslims are killed because the PAC sides with the Hindu community. When the Hindus come out during curfew times, they are told they can quietly go and buy vegetables, but when the Muslims come out of their home, then they are forcibly and sternly asked to reenter the house again. So, the PAC, because it supports the Hindu cause, therefore, more Muslims are killed.”¹³ This unequal application of curfew not only deepened communal polarization but also created a perception that the state security apparatus itself was aligned with majoritarian interests.

Another dimension of PAC prejudice involves excessive use of force. Testimonies before commissions such as the Justice Ebenezer Inquiry (Meerut 1987) and findings by human rights groups indicate that PAC personnel often used live ammunition in minority-dominated areas even when the situation did not warrant lethal response. The infamous Hashimpura massacre is the most extreme illustration, where PAC members themselves abducted and executed Muslim men while the curfew remained in force and action that reflected not failure of neutrality but active participation in targeted violence.

Selective house searches and detentions also form part of this prejudiced role. During curfews, PAC squads conducted raids disproportionately in Muslim-dominated mohallas, frequently resulting in mass arrests that later failed to stand legal scrutiny. Such operations, framed as combing exercises, were often conducted without warrants or clear justification, reinforcing the perception of the PAC as an actor driven by communal bias rather than by objective assessment of threat.

Case Studies of Curfew and PAC Deployment in Uttar Pradesh

This section presents key communal-violence incidents in Uttar Pradesh where curfew was imposed and the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) played a major role. The aim is not to repeat official claims but to understand how curfews were imposed, how PAC units acted on the ground, and how ordinary people



experienced these situations. The cases below are based on widely covered events in newspapers, judicial records, and fact-finding reports by credible national agencies.

Moradabad-1980

The Moradabad riot of 1980 started at the Eidgah during Eid prayers when a pig suddenly entered the area, causing fear and confusion among the people gathered there. The situation got worse because the police and local officials did not handle the panic properly. Reports from The Times of India and statements collected by PUCL showed that the Provincial Armed Constabulary (PAC) fired at the Muslim crowd instead of trying to calm them or control the situation. This firing made the violence spread faster and increased distrust between the community and the security forces.

A curfew was declared only after the violence had already grown, showing that the authorities reacted late instead of preventing the situation from worsening. The Rehman Commission later reported that “the curfew was not applied equally in all parts of the city. Muslim-majority areas had to stay under strict and long curfew, which affected their daily life, access to essentials, and work. On the other hand, Hindu-majority areas had restrictions lifted much earlier, which clearly showed unequal treatment by the administration.”¹⁴

Meerut, 1987 (Hashimpura–Maliana Riots)

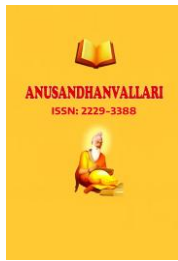
Communal tension in Meerut escalated in April and May 1987 during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. Local newspapers at the time reported several days of violent clashes, arson, and attacks on both homes and shops. As violence spread across different mohallas, the district administration imposed a 24-hour curfew in large parts of the city. Despite these measures, violence continued. On 22 May 1987, PAC personnel allegedly took away a group of Muslim men from the Hashimpura locality during curfew hours. According to later court proceedings and investigative reports, the men were transported outside the city and shot dead near a canal road. “Newspaper investigations by The Indian Express and BBC reports documented PAC involvement in house-to-house raids in Maliana and allegations of killings.”¹⁵ The Hashimpura incident, as reported by The Hindu and later corroborated in court records, “involved PAC personnel picking up over 40 Muslim men, shooting them and dumping their bodies in nearby canals.”¹⁶ The incident became one of the most tragic cases of custodial killings linked to riot policing in India. The Meerut case shows that curfew alone could not stop violence, and that PAC actions faced serious allegations of bias and abuse, which deeply affected trust between communities and the police.

Bijnor, 1990

“In October 1990 the town of Bijnor, in western Uttar Pradesh, experienced a major Hindu-Muslim riot. Official sources estimate that 87 people were killed; unofficial estimates range from 198 to 300. This was along the most serious of the many riots that took place in the wake of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) campaign to build a temple at the Ram's supposed birthplace in Ayodhya.”¹⁷ Local newspapers reported stabbing incidents and clashes between groups in the old city area. The administration imposed an immediate curfew late at night to contain the situation and deployed PAC companies for round-the-clock patrolling.

However, several independent fact-finding teams that visited Bijnor in early November documented disturbing accounts from survivors. Residents, particularly in Muslim-majority areas, reported that violence, looting, burning of homes, and attacks continued after the curfew was in place, and that police patrols did not intervene effectively. The curfew lasted for several days and was relaxed only when the Army was brought in to stabilize the situation.

The Bijnor case reveals a pattern where late imposition of curfew, selective enforcement, and insufficient patrolling allowed violence to continue, suggesting administrative and policing failure.



Muzaffarnagar, 2013

Muzaffarnagar witnessed one of the deadliest riots in post-2000 Uttar Pradesh. Clashes began in late August after a dispute in the Kawal village area. Local newspapers between 30 August and 10 September 2013 documented multiple killings, attacks on houses, and road blockades. When violence spilled into rural and semi-urban parts of the district, the administration imposed an indefinite curfew in Muzaffarnagar city.

The state deployed large numbers of security forces, including several companies of PAC, units of the Rapid Action Force (RAF), and later the Indian Army. Despite heavy deployment, violence continued for nearly a week, particularly in villages. Many former residents testified before media and judicial commissions that attackers moved freely during curfew, while vulnerable families felt unprotected. The role of PAC was even doubtful, when some citizens complaint of PAC. “Authorities are probing whether provincial armed constabulary jawans had actually shot dead three Muslim youths at Hussainpur in Uttar Pradesh’s communal riot-hit Muzaffarnagar district.”¹⁸ Eventually, curfew was relaxed in phases, and relief camps were set up. The Muzaffarnagar case shows how even the presence of a large PAC deployment cannot guarantee control when violence spreads to wide rural areas and political tensions run high.

The Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013 demonstrated once again the strategic use of curfew. Human Rights Watch noted that curfew was imposed late in the day and that PAC personnel failed to protect fleeing families. “NDTV investigations also revealed PAC inaction in certain villages.”¹⁹

Conclusion

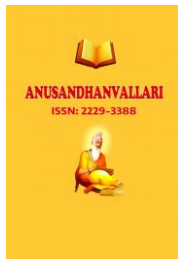
The use of curfews has long been a key state response to communal unrest in Uttar Pradesh. A curfew is a government order limiting movement of people in an area, typically imposed to restore order. In practice, curfews can become highly political: critics note that a riot not controlled within 24 hours often indicates official inaction or complicity in letting it persist. In fact, as the Uttar Pradesh disaster management plan explains, police are the primary agency for riot control, with the PAC and even the army as major support forces. Official guidelines themselves caution that curfews cause “considerable hardship”.

The history of communal violence in Uttar Pradesh shows that curfew and the deployment of the Provincial Armed Constabulary have become deeply interlinked parts of the state’s response to public disorder. While curfews are officially described as necessary measures to restore peace, the real picture on the ground is far more complex. As this study shows, curfews often bring a temporary silence to the streets, but they do not always prevent violence, nor do they guarantee the safety of vulnerable communities

The role of the PAC is similarly complicated. As a specialized armed wing of the state police, the PAC is meant to re-establish stability during crises. In some cases, such as Saharanpur in 2014, strong deployment and clear instructions helped contain violence quickly. But in other cases, such as Meerut in 1987 and Bijnor in 1990, allegations of bias, selective protection, or excessive use of force damaged community trust and left lasting scars. These mixed patterns show that curfews are only as fair and effective as the forces that implement them.

The study also highlights how curfews in Uttar Pradesh are not just at administrative level decisions and looks like they are political acts. Governments use curfews to signal control, opposition parties use them to highlight failure, and communities experience them as either protection or punishment depending on how they are enforced. This makes curfews powerful tools not only for maintaining order but also for shaping political narratives.

In conclusion, curfews and PAC deployments in Uttar Pradesh reveal much about the strengths and weaknesses of state capacity, the challenges of communal harmony, and the political environment in which law-and-order decisions are made. Curfews can help restore calm, but only when they are used responsibly, enforced fairly, and



supported by a policing system that inspires confidence rather than fear. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for building a more just, peaceful, and accountable approach to maintaining public order in the state.

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