

Book Reviews

Communities in Opposition

Lobo, Lancy and Das Biswaroop (Eds). Communal Violence and Minorities: Gujarat Society in Ferment. Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2006. 228 pp.

This book, a collection of ten articles written over a span of time after the ill-famed Gujarat Carnage of 2002 in India, offers a set of reflections by scholars on a variety of issues that emerged in the years following that particular horrendous event. These include not only the causes and consequences of the 2002 carnage, but also the testimonies of victims of violence and the politics of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)¹. The RSS has been busy communalising² indigenous people and Dalits (ex-untouchables) and harassing Christians in the name of conversions. This brand of politics goes some way in determining relations among various religious communities and establishing a cultural and ideological hegemony antithetical to the secular fabric on India.

The editors use the term 'riots' to cover all the incidents of 2002. Riots occur when crowds, or even small groups of people gather to commit acts of violence and cause damage to property, usually in reaction to a perceived grievance or out of dissent. Those of us who were in the thick of what happened in 2002 would use the words 'pogrom'³ or 'carnage' rather than riots.

The myth of the non-violent Gujarati now stands exposed; it is clear that Hindu Nationalism, nascent in the era before Independence, has taken root in Gujarat through Hindu right-wing organisations both social and political in nature. The silent consent of many in this state during and after the carnage, including some corporate houses, civil society organisations and so-called 'saints', 'Bapus' and 'Swamis' or religious leaders, is eloquent testimony to this fact.

Lancy Lobo and Biswaroop Das may prefer to call the incidents of 2002 riots but their analysis indicates that the incidents went far beyond that description. The article *The Changing Trajectory of Gains and Losses* highlights the spread pattern of relevant variables related to the violent events that affected Gujarat for the period 1995 to 2004, when state assembly elections were held after the carnage. Keeping in mind that the two leading national political parties operating in the state of Gujarat were the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) and the Congress Party, their mapping clearly suggests that the high incidence of violence in the state actually helped the BJP in terms of assembly seats.

In another paper - *Hindus and Muslims after the 2002 Gujarat Riots: 'Imaging' as; Binary Opposites*, Lobo and Das capture the perceptions that Gujaratis have about Muslims in Gujarat and elsewhere. The article vividly presents the images / cognitive social constructs of one community vis-

a-vis the other, and shows how these have been sustained and spread, more so among the 'educated', or perhaps I should say literate, middle class, middle-caste Gujaratis. The images and meanings of 'Hindutva'⁴ that emerge from the respondents are mirror images to the images they have of Muslims and have obviously been constructed for them by various socio-religious and political leaders and agencies.

Hindutva and Muslims in Gujarat by university Professor J.S. Bandukwala describes his own experience in Vadodara (one of the larger cities of Gujarat), which, together with neighbouring towns and villages, saw some of the worst violence of the carnage. In contrast to Lobo and Das, Bandukwala identifies the 2002 violence as carnage and as a state-sponsored pogrom. Bandukwala, a Muslim, is one of the many secular citizens in the state whose views on secularism offend both upholders of Hindu Nationalism as well as conservative Muslims. The author, himself a victim at the hands of Hindutva right wing forces, during the 2002 outbreak, explains how selected Dalits and Adivasis were mobilised to be at the forefront of the violent frenzy to terrorise Muslims. The article also highlights how the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) was politically used against Muslims by the Police under the state's political "patronage. The author sees Gujarat as a breeding ground and laboratory of Hindutva. He attributes it to the conjunction of patriarchy, gender injustice and 'religious intolerance, all cultivated by the Sangh Parivar⁵ over the years in this region -the land of Gandhi.

In his essay *Communalisation and participation of Dalits in Gujarat 2002 riots*, Ghanshyam Shah, a sociologist from Gujarat, explains how 3,5 million Dalits in the state have been misguided by the caste leaders of Hindutva forces. He argues that Dalits, who did not participate in Hindu-Muslim violence in the past, were instigated by the BJP and Sangh Parivar and mobilised against the Muslims. This was done to a large extent by creating a common enemy - 'the Muslims' - and a false unity of all 'Hindus' to counter 'the enemy.' In the process, hierarchical caste divisions and social discrimination were cleverly underplayed. Hindu "fundamentalists used religious and cultural symbols such as swords and tridents, songs, slogans, pamphlets, videocassettes of hymns and prayer meetings to create a "sense of 'our culture' vis-a-vis 'their barbarism' (Muslim barbarism). By painting Muslims as "anti-nationals," as terrorists with dangerous weapons and as parts of an international network, the BJP and its associates succeeded in creating a feeling that Hindus were in danger. I would like to remind readers that a large number of Gujarati non-resident Indians in the USA and UK support both Bush's anti-Muslim policies and the 'Hindutva' agenda in India.

The Adivasi population of Gujarat is nearly 15%, which is much higher than the national average of 8.2%. In *Adivasis, Hindutva and Post-Godhra Riots in Gujarat*, Lancy Lobo suggests that the role played by Adivasis in the 2002 violence is very different from anything in the past. He highlights the fact that the physical and social geography of Adivasis was destroyed when states were formed on a linguistic basis, and maintains that they have been 'Hinduised' by the state over a period of time through official registration of their Hindu identities. The process of Sanskritisation⁶ and communalisation of Adivasis has further eroded their Adivasi identity and culture. He argues that the Hindutvavadis have distorted the aspirations, and social, economic and political concerns of the Adivasis. They have also diverted their attention to the pseudo-concern of 'purification' through re-conversion from the so-called 'alien' religion of Christianity and stressed the importance of protecting Hinduism and 'Hindu culture' from Muslims.

Ram Puniyani in *Hindutva's Foot Soldiers - Dalits, Adivasis?* describes the post-Godhra violence against Muslims as genocide. He explains the modus operandi by which Hindutva forces mobilised a section of Dalits and Adivasis to think and behave in a way that suited the political agenda of the BJP. The failure of the Congress Party to keep its promises, the subsequent anti-reservation agitation fuelled and supported by Hindutva institutions, and the lack of any robust and long-drawn-out liberating social movement in Gujarat have all led to the success of the BJP. Allurement, threat and payment for violence against Muslims were the means used by the Sangh Parivar. The victims - the Muslims - do not hold Adivasis responsible for the attacks on them. The article also highlights how right wing political forces used religion and culture to organise heinous violence and killings for political gains. He places the stance of Hindutva forces in sharp contrast with the Indian constitution, noting that Ambedkar⁷ burned the *Manusmriti* (Hindu scriptural commentary which promotes discrimination against Dalits and women) and presided over the drafting of the Indian Constitution, while the RSS upheld the *Manusmriti* and appealed for a rejection of the Indian Constitution.

Asghar Ali in *The Gujarat Carnage: Causes and Consequences* gives a historical perspective with statistical evidence of communal violence in independent India, estimating that nearly 13,952 riots have been recorded, 14,686 people killed and 68,182 people injured. He distinguishes the Gujarat 2002 violence from others as unprecedented in terms of brutality and, above all, direct support from the state machinery. He also offers various causes of violence, such as spontaneous expression of animosity of one community against the other, vote bank violence with the support of political parties, the hate campaign let loose by Hindu nationalists using religious nationalism to exclude and eliminate

Muslims, and the usage of violence as a strategy to divert people's minds from such real concerns as unemployment, poverty, corruption, injustice, inequality, discrimination and effects of globalisation.

Religious Cover for Political Power by Lancy Lobo and Biswaroop Das describes the Gujarat carnage of 2002 as portrayed by two vernacular newspapers -*Gujarat Samachar* and *Gujarat Today*. Lobo and Das analyse the newspaper articles and views, as expressed in these two publications, of prominent citizens from academia and civic organizations regarding the causes of the violence in Gujarat, the role of the police, the state, the media, as well as the overall implications of the eruption. The views are not only different but almost diametrically opposed. The *Gujarat Samachar* is supportive of the state, the ruling party (BJP), and in many ways justifies the violence against Muslims, while *Gujarat Today* presents an entirely different view. It is clear that the role of different newspapers in such gruesome violence often depends on the class and caste of the owners of the newspapers, their political affiliation and patronage enjoyed.

Ram Puniyani traces the emergence and growth of the RSS and its activities in an essay entitled *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh: Politics as Culture*. He explains the circumstances of the birth in colonial India of the RSS (the social backbone of the BJP) and its subtle and bloody attacks on Muslims and Christians from that time to this. The article highlights the organisational structure of the RSS and its ideological underpinning (propounded by Savarkar and Golwalkar), and identifies its inherent characteristics of regression as opposed to the progressive tenets of a modern, democratic and secular nation. The article suggests that the inspirational roots of the concept of a Hindu Rashtra or Hindu Nation (the goal of both the RSS and the BJP) lie in Hitler's fascism as opposed to the Indian Nation as embodied in the Constitution written by Ambedkar.

Surat, a leading city in Gujarat, did not witness the fury of the Sangh Parivar- led violence as it had in 1992. Kiran Desai, in *On Determinants of Communal Relations: Some Observations from a Case Study of Sural*, examines the nature of the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in that city and shows the historical interdependence of the two communities to be embedded in economic networks and transactions. She describes the divisive role played by Hindutva forces among the rising middle class and migrant population. She also says that despite the fast changing political discourse and dynamics, this interdependent economic base has gone a long way towards shaping a pluralist social fabric, a fact that inhibited extremes of viciousness during the 2002 riots in the city of Surat.

Overall, the book reminds us of the violence against Christians, the killing of 2000 Muslims and loss of property and livelihoods of thousands of families in Gujarat. The essays, taken together,

enable an analytical understanding of the horrifying events of 2002. The reader is given an opportunity to understand better history, politics, the market, and civil society; we learn how these forces operate individually and in coalition, with and without human concern for human wellbeing. I believe that power is meant for empowerment but there are those who use power to manipulate, control and annihilate others -physically and culturally. Religion, culture and politics are social constructs and human beings are capable of using them to enhance or destroy.

Four years after the carnage, the underlying causes of the carnage and hate propaganda against Muslims continue to remain embedded in various forms and erupt at the slightest trigger. The situation of the Muslims has hardly improved despite the nation's forward march. "The nation indeed appears to be shining in parts of its metros, large cities and their select classy streets. It is shining for the owners of large commercially productive farms and farm houses, for the contractors, builders and agencies associated with executing large-scale urban, rural and national projects, for the traders who are able to hook on to larger nets of the global market and for a section of the urban middle classes able to appropriate fast changing market situations in their favour." Things have improved, in other words, for the elite and high caste Gujaratis but not for Dalits, indigenous people and Muslims. The Gujarati Muslims continue to live under terror as second-class citizens.

Notes:

1. The literal translation would be "National Group of Volunteers" (Editor's Note).
2. The terms 'communalising' and 'communalisation' refer to a process of indoctrination that aims to convert a social group (or community) into a faithful follower of the Hindu nationalist ideology.
3. The word 'pogrom' is a Russian word meaning an attack or a riot. The historical connotations of the word include violent attacks against local Jewish populations in the Russian empire and all over the world. In modern times, political and economic resentment against Jews and the traditional religious anti-Semitism have been used as a pretext to organize pogroms. (Editor's Note, see <http://www.usmmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=sp&ModuleId=10005757>).
4. The ideology or the movement advocating Hindu nationalism (Editor's note).

5. The name, meaning “family of the collective,” refers to the collection of organizations ideologically in sympathy with the RSS. Sangh Parivar operates as an umbrella of many organization. (Editor’s note).
6. ‘Sanskritisation’ is the term used by sociologists to refer to the emulation of upper-caste practices by those low down in the caste ladder. (Editor’s note)
7. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, Dalit leader and chief architect of the Indian constitution. (Editor’s note)

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