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Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Violence in India
Parvis Ghassem-Fachandi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

Any attempt to study collective violence is inherently rife with methodological, ethical, and pragmatic challenges. While more quantitative disciplines are arguably less vulnerable to the immediacy of these issues, the very nature of ethnography makes confronting the difficult and uncomfortable questions around the nature of extreme violence – and the academic study of this phenomenon – inescapable. In this respect, Ghassem-Fachandi's account of the 2002 anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat, India marks an important contribution to the existing literature on the anthropology of violence as well as to regional studies of South Asia. Ghassem-Fachandi offers a unique perspective of the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, since he was been present at the outbreak of violence (in comparison to most accounts based on recollections after-the-fact). In addition, Ghassem-Fachandi's focus on the perpetrators of the violence also sets the book apart from many anthropological studies of violence, which have traditionally taken the perspective of victims as the primary angle of enquiry.

Gujarat, and in particular the city of Ahmedabad on which much of Ghassem-Fachandi's findings focus, has a long history of Hindu-Muslim violence and religiously-motivated riots are hardly a novelty. Yet the extreme scale of death and destruction that took place in 2002 (which was almost exclusively borne by the minority Muslim community) came as a shock throughout India as well as for the rest of the world. While academics and journalists alike have spilled much ink trying to account for the violence, such analyses have largely focused on how the state and state machinery have been co-opted by Hindu nationalist groups to further their own ideological goals. Although certainly a worthwhile task, such explanations can only tell part of the story. These analyses ultimately cannot account for the fact that many Gujarati Hindus either actively abetted or passively allowed killings, lootings, and destruction at the expense of local Muslims.

At its core, *Pogrom in Gujarat* attempts to understand the wider cultural context underlying the anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence perpetrated by such Gujarati Hindus, many of which the author held longstanding relationships with. Over the course of eight chapters, Ghassem-Fachandi draws upon

ethnographic data and a wide array of written and visual material such as newspaper articles and editorials, public advert campaigns, popular Gujarati films and political pamphlets. He argues that a wider cultural logic centring around themes of sacrifice and expiation underpins different levels of Gujarati society. Hindu nationalist ideology, according to the author, has achieved particular success in Gujarat not because of inherent fascist tendencies of the people of that region (as some might claim) but because of its ability to resonate with these underlying cultural logics, and the processes through which these logics will manifest and are enacted.

Central to Ghassem-Fachandi's analysis is the way in which everyday practices of consumption, specifically around meat-eating and vegetarianism, are intimately linked with larger processes of individual and collective identification, social marginalisation, and expiation in wider Gujarati society. While vegetarianism is a central tenet for Hindus more generally, in contemporary Gujarat the consumption of meat or its abstention has come to denote much wider considerations than individual dietary, nutritional or religious preferences. There, meat eating is intimately connected with one's orientation to the social and serves to locate the individual within wider religious, class and gendered matrixes. Arguably the most powerful of these forms of collectivization is that to do with religion, and the binary of the vegetarian Hindu and meat-eating Muslim remains a central trope through which religious identification is understood and experienced.

The author interprets the 2002 pogrom as a sacrificial ritual whereby a part of the whole (in this case the Muslim minority) is expiated from the body politic by the Hindu majority community. Presiding over this psychosocial process are two archetypal figures: the 'angry Hindu' and the 'phantasmagoric Muslim'. Neither of these figures in any way adheres to the realities of lived experience, or actual people, but that, arguably, is the very source of their power. In the minds of his Hindu informants, the larger-than-life figure of the meat-eating (and therefore violent) Muslim stands as a constant threat to the Hindu majority community, despite Muslims' minority status in the region. The angry Hindu, in turn, represents the justified reaction to this threat and a departure (albeit one which remains closely linked with) the weak and cowardly Hindu associated with Gandhi's policy of nonviolence (*ahimsa*).

While the dual figures of the cowardly Hindu and the violent Muslim are well-known in many academic analyses of religious identity and violence in India, Ghassem-Fachandi convincingly locates these within specific cultural paradigms of vegetarianism and meat consumption, as well as larger processes taking place in the region of religious transformation, caste mobility, and political mobilisation. His book in this sense is profoundly anthropological in nature: the motivation and experience of collective violence is presented from the perspective of the people outside of the economic and political elite. His ethnography focuses on ordinary figures: a Jain teacher working in a Muslim

secondary school, a low-caste sympathizer with the Hindutva movement, an unemployed and unmarried Muslim man in his late twenties.

A few cautions: the logic behind the structuring of the chapters is not always clear and the book as a whole does not seem to be organised according to the progressive development of the wider argument or a temporal logic. This said, however, *Pogrom in Gujarat* has much to recommend it. In addition to the unique ethnographic position that Ghassem-Fachandi inhabited vis-à-vis the events of 2002, this book is eloquent, engaging, and reflects a knowledge of the region that can only be acquired through extensive contact and a longstanding relationship with the city and its people. It is also a refreshing contribution to the existing literature on ethnic and religious violence since it refuses to treat the perpetrators of violence as mindless tools of top-down political and economic interests or to dismiss them as two-dimensional agents of the Hindutva politics of hate. Ghassem-Fachandi does not excuse the brutality of the 2002 violence or the people who enabled it to take place either through their active engagement or their passive abeyance. *Pogrom in Gujarat* is an ambitious work and represents an important new turn in the anthropology of violence and South Asian studies.