

TREMORS OF VIOLENCE: Muslim Survivors of Ethnic Strife in Western India.

By Rowena Robinson. New Delhi. Thousand Oaks. London: Sage Publications.

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This ethnographic study of Muslim survivors of recent ethnic strife in Mumbai and two major cities of Gujarat – Baroda and Ahmedabad – is notable for the extent to which it allows those involved in it – the study as much as the ethnic strife – to talk for themselves. Not only does Robinson go to great lengths to create the framework in which these survivors can make their voices heard, she also engages directly with her readers by grappling from the outset the dilemmas posed by such a piece of research. In her introductory chapter, ‘Inaugurating responsibility’ (pp. 13-37), she underlines the extent of the challenges facing ethnographers in relation to how far they are, or they allow themselves, to become personally involved in their work, and she reflects on what being an Indian researcher may have meant as far as her responsibilities as a researcher were concerned.

The next five chapters – the bulk of the study – are constructed around the themes of the narratives that Robinson has collected. By means of the interviews that she has conducted with Muslim women and men, she allows readers to share in first-hand experiences of this collective ethnic violence. Her aim is to provide answers to questions about the ways in which memories of violence, in particular, affect everyday lives and lived behaviour – survival strategies – and to create better understanding about what it means to be a Muslim in India at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Among these chapters, the second, Space, time and the stigma of identity (pp. 38-77), offers interesting reflections on the physical reorganisation of urban spaces

that has altered Mumbai since the early 1990s, with similar processes of reconfiguration taking place in the cities in Gujarat. It also explores how the survivors of violence remember and recollect their experiences. Interesting insights are provided about the demarcation of space in cities such as Mumbai, with green and saffron flags increasingly used to mark and inscribe Muslim and Hindu residential as well as religious space. From her interviewees, it would seem as if urban public space has become Hindu space, something recognised by NGOs who have called for the process of the recovery of [Muslim] rights to use urban public spaces, whether for entertainment, work or even for protest (p. 56)

Chapter four, 'I can harden my heart to bear this': women's words and women's worlds (pp. 113-153), contains particularly revealing insights. In it Robinson explores the extent to which women and men speak differently about the violence that they have experienced. It is widely accepted that communal violence is gendered, but Robinson helps us to understand more clearly how and why this is the case. Women's narratives, she concludes, are tinged with personal sadness, while those of men are couched in more abstract terms. However, what adds extra value to this chapter is the way in which it demonstrates 'differences' between women themselves. Hence, there are variations between the narratives of women interviewed in Mumbai and in Gujarat, with the voices of Gujarati women seem 'splintered and caught up in images of distress', while 'those from Mumbai showed a greater tendency to mould themselves into fuller and more complete narratives' (p. 140).

Finally, Chapter five, Fissures in a time of crisis (pp. 154-193) takes the discussion outside the home into the world of community members and leaders working with the survivors of communal violence, and there seeks to explore the 'negotiated intricacies of the "real"' (p. 157). Here we learn about the ways in which

the pain of these events has not necessarily brought Muslim communities together, as might be expected, but has led to processes of community fragmentation and increased sectarian antagonisms.

There is considerable academic as well as general interest in the reasons why western India has been gripped by extreme bouts of communal violence in recent decades. Robinson's study highlights how important it is also to make sense of the 'after-shocks' of this violence, and hence it represents a welcome, and necessary, addition to our understanding of this subject.

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