From Different Theoretical Perspectives

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GUJARAT BEYOND GANDHI: IDENTITY, CONFLICT AND SOCIETY
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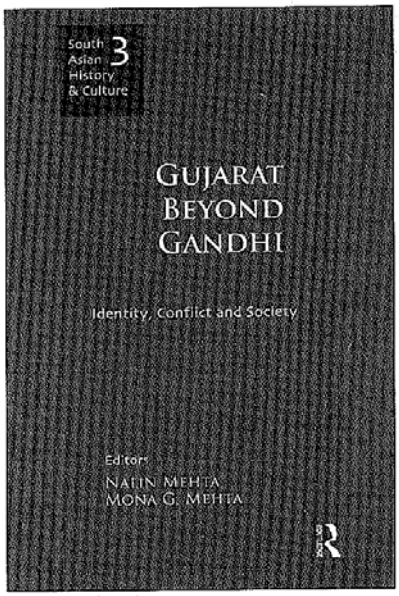

More so than most other Indian states, Gujarat appears enigmatic to many observers. Its most famous son is Mohandas Gandhi, but he is also a uniquely despised figure in much of middle class Gujarati society at home and abroad. Gandhi, officially revered as the 'Father of the Nation', has had more than his fair share of critics. In his lifetime, another Gujarati, the Karachi-born Mohammad Ali Jinnah, similarly trained in law but wholly indisposed towards the Mahatma's lifestyle or worldview, turned into Gandhi's most formidable adversary and eventually became enshrined in Pakistan as the Quaid-e-Azam ('Great Leader'); in our times, a third son of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, has played a key role in effectively banishing Gandhi from his native state.

These might well be the clichés that abound in common understandings of Gujarat, yet nothing is as it seems. Modi's strategic claims to allegiance to the ideals of 'Bapu' signify his mastery of politics, besides suggesting that every attempt to exorcise Gandhi has had the effect of enlarging his spectral presence in Indian politics. Many contemporaries who were not entirely taken in by Gandhi habitually characterized him as a 'shrewd bania', and one might say that Gujaratis, for instance those settled in the United States, display a similar astuteness in their recognition that the invocation of Gandhi's name is calculated to earn unrivalled goodwill among those who only associate the Mahatma with peace, nonviolence, and brotherhood. Though Gujaratis in private may deplore the man who, as they imagine, emasculated them and would have condemned India to obscurity with his vision of a non-industrial society and heady embrace of village life, they are only too willing to partake in public felicitations of Gandhi as the icon most likely to earn them some cultural capital.

The essays collected in *Gujarat Beyond Gandhi: Identity, Conflict and Society* are written from varying theoretical perspectives but have in common a critical outlook on some of the most disturbing features of contemporary Gujarati society. The rather anodyne subtitle offers little hint of the often penetrating analytical insights found in many of the essays or of the deep fissures in Gujarati society that have led to profoundly segregated patterns of thought, experience, and conduct. The editors, in their concise introduction, argue that the region of Gujarat 'has always been a crucible for ideas of India': Gujarat was the scene of the first encounter with the British, and similarly the birthplace of some of the 'earliest torch bearers' of Indian nationalism, among them Dadabhai Naoroji, Badruddin Tyabji, and Dinshaw Wacha. They suggest in what manner debates about 'Mahagujarat' (pp. 3-9), dating to the mid-19th century, and revived by Sardar Patel and K. M. Munshi in the mid-20th century, remain central to Gujarati identity and invocations of Gujarati *asmita* (pride).

One wishes, however, that the editors had been prepared to unsettle the evidence and ask more probing questions about the singularity or otherwise of Gujarati identity. What might, for example, distinguish the idea of Mahagujarat from the idea of a greater Maratha nation, and is there anything substantive that makes the chauvinism of the Shiv Sena unlike the murderous xenophobia of those Gujaratis who went on a rampage in 2002? The editors acknowledge the importance of the Gujarati diaspora, and Goolam Vahed's essay allows us a peep into the Gujarati communities that have inhabited South Africa for 150 years, but the much longer history of the Gujarati diaspora, extending at least as far back as the beginning of the second millennium CE, is not deployed to put into question the received narrative, still commonly encountered in Indian school texts, that posits Bengal as the fount of Indian modernity. If Gujaratis have for centuries been an eminently diasporic people, open to the world, just what is it that accounts for their extraordinary insularity today? What is that lack of confidence, and sense of wounded pride, that led the state of Gujarat to sanction the persecution of Ashis Nandy, 'arguably India's best known social psychologist' (p. 156), only because he had the temerity to state, not incorrectly, that 'recovering Gujarat from its urban middle class will not be easy. The class has found in militant religious nationalism a new self-respect and a new virtual identity as a martial community... In Gujarat this class has smelt blood, for it does not have to do the killings but can plan, finance and coordinate them with impunity' (p. 161)? If Gujaratis are 'a people of movements' (p. 74), what are the lessons to be drawn by those who believe that popular mobilization is the key to social transformation and political reform?

Long before the pogrom of 2002, middle class sentiment in Gujarat had begun to coalesce decisively around the question of development. Mona Mehta, in her piece on the 'Narmada Movement and Coercive Gujarati Nativism', argues that a Gujarati's position on the Sardar Sarovar came to be viewed as the litmus test for whether one was a loyal Gujarati or traitor, not only to one's society, but also to what might be described as a fundamentalist conception of developmental modernity (pp. 61-73). Those who were opposed to the dam were cast, in Tridip Suhrud's language, as the 'development other', and the nativist consensus—revolving around a host of phenomena, from the dam to films such as *Fanaa* and *Parzania* which were seen as hostile to Gujarat—that developed could later be mobilized in widespread support of militant, even annihilatory, Hindu nationalism (cf. pp. 73-77). One has similarly heard of the extreme spatial segregation that today characterizes cities such as Ahmedabad, but Arvind Rajagopal painstakingly shows that distinctions of caste, community, and religion have been at work for decades to splinter Ahmedabad into exclusionary spatial zones. The walled city had long been associated with Muslims, but since at least the riots of 1969 it was marked as ungovernable and dysfunctional (pp. 95-110). With each iteration of communal violence, the ghettoization of Muslims sharpened: the 'built space of Ahmedabad', Rajagopal argues, shows how 'structural, that is invisible, and overt forms of violence could combine to create the sense of mass Hindu consent to the violence in Gujarat' (p. 91). Of a piece with these two essays is Ornit Shani's exploration of the 'routine practices of public power' in Gujarat in the two decades preceding the killings of 2002. Bootleggers flourished in the officially dry state of Gujarat, relying upon a system of bribes to politicians and policemen to peddle their wares and receive protection. These practices of 'normal politics', Shani argues, were readily available to those who were bent upon a political vendetta in the wake of Godhra: 'The practice of politicians bending the police to their will during ordinary times was readily employed [in 2002] to ensure that attacks on Muslims were not interrupted' (p. 49).

What Shani, and many of the other contributors, seek to do apropos of the 2002 killings is to reflect upon the terrifying implications of the ordinariness of what was deemed to be extraordinary. Gujarat is a city that prides itself on its essentially mercantile history, and in the last analysis the Gujaratis' holy book is none other than the cheque book. The Modi Government was keen to impress upon businessmen, investors, and indeed ordinary citizens the fact that the killings had not made a dent in the state's commercial activities, and the Gujarat Chambers of Commerce declared with evident satisfaction that it cleared more cheques from March

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1 to April 15, 2002, during the height of the pogrom, than it did in previous months (p. 175). Why should, after all, the killings of Muslims put a stop to business, when, to paraphrase Calvin Coolidge's famous pronouncement about America, the business of Gujarat is business? One suspects, however, that the Gujarat Government's insistence that commercial activities had not been seriously disrupted is far from being the whole truth. When the killings did stop, it was not only because the goons had quenched their thirst, or because exhaustion set in; nor was it merely because the Modi Government was under considerable pressure from the Central Government to restore 'law and order'. The Gujarat Government, one can be certain, had made a determination that the continuing climate of violence was becoming inimical to foreign investment, and even to the kind of business arrangements that have characterized relations between the Modi Government and such Indian corporate houses as the Tatas.

If authoritarianism and development have been part of the creed of Modi and the very large camp of his cheerleaders, we should not underestimate the place of vegetarianism in Gujarati self-definition. Ghassem-Fachandi, in his intriguing essay 'On the Political Uses of D in Gujarat', calls to mind a speech made by Modi at Porbandar o occasion of Gandhi's birth centenary, where the audience was infc that 'Gujarat's main strength lies in its vegetarianism. Most Gujara strict vegetarians. . . . The beauty of the Gujarat palate lies variegatedness [sic!]. Vegetarianism is the first step for a healthy sc (p. 134). Ghassem-Fachandi is interested in far more than the argument which would compel us to ask how vegetarians balk at the l of animals but might not have any difficulty in putting people to and that too in the horrendous, even cleverly inventive ways, catal by human rights researchers. Part of Hindu commonsense, w reminded, is to suppose that the Muslim is more prone to predator violent behaviour because he revels in the slaughter of animals and inveterate meat-eater. Ghassem-Fachandi invites us, moreover, to co how the affect of disgust for meat becomes intrinsic to the qual nonviolence itself; such 'non-violent renunciation whose essence is dis he adds, 'becomes implicated in the legitimization of violence a Muslims' (p. 130). The center-piece of his essay is an extraordi surreal text encountered in a widely sold booklet in Gujarat on the v of vegetarianism, where a goat narrates his 'autobiography', takin reader from the time of his birth to his slaughter and eventual consum as sumptuous morsels of meat, by his own children from a previous We can be certain that Mohandas Gandhi, who once ate a goat and it bleating within him, would at least have commiserated with the g whatever he may thought of his fellow Gujaratis.

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