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Communal violence between Hindus and Muslims erupted in the western Indian state of Gujarat in 2002. Political leaders and the police were widely seen as actors in the violence, which lasted for three months. The official figures put the death toll at over 1000, with many more injured and displaced. *In Riot Politics: Hindu-Muslim Violence and the Indian State*, Ward Berenschot provides a historical and ethnographic account of the political structures that allowed this violence to occur.

Berenschot reviews the extensive literature on communal violence in India, identifying six distinct explanatory approaches. These approaches understand the outbreak of collective violence through primordial attachments, communal ideologies, instrumental political strategy, the social construction of identity, social psychological explanations of the motives of participants, and established interactions and relations between different groups (22-38). The author draws upon all of these approaches in developing his account, which highlights the historical transformations that have weakened the state while embedding the state in society, leading to the increasingly important role of mediators between citizens and the state, which politicizes access to state resources. Communal violence becomes a strategy for mobilizing communities for political campaigns; successful campaigns result in access to state resources.

Berenschot is not forging new ground by locating inter-communal violence within the political process. Where he does break new ground is in his approach. He provides a richly detailed ethnographic account of three neighborhoods of varying religious and socio-economic profiles in the city of Ahmedabad, showing clearly how, in each neighborhood studied, the breakdown of the state creates the conditions for the politicization of everyday interactions with the state. Berenschot argues that the state is “mediated” by a range of political actors who stand between citizens and the state. These actors build up patronage networks that can be mobilized in cases of communal animosity and violence.

According to Berenschot, based on his examination of all three neighborhoods within Ahmedabad, new patterns of authority emerge in the urban setting of that city as its development is increasingly shaped by its integration into the global economy. The municipality took on a greater role in providing services to residents, but this led to the eclipse of traditional civic institutions, including occupational guilds and neighborhood housing committees, which had traditionally fulfilled functions of social development and social control (44-54). Identity politics came to fill the void created by the undermining of traditional authority structures. Berenschot states this clearly: “As people could no longer use their work-related networks to defend their interests, they became more dependent on their caste networks based in and around their place of residence” (66). Since urban settlement patterns were historically shaped by regional background, caste, and religion, localities tended to be segregated. Additionally, the decline in Gujarat of manufacturing and other formal sectors of the economy fueled the increasing significance of political mobilization based upon shared features of social identity. As the state increasingly took over functions traditionally met by civil society organizations, a growing class of political mediators took on increasing importance. Berenschot understands this “mediated state” as “embedded in society in such a way that its interaction with citizens is, to a large extent, monopolized by political networks whose political (and also often financial) success depends on their capacity to manipulate the implementation of the state’s policies and legislation” (80).

Across all neighborhoods, Berenschot finds that politicians use strategies of “brokerage,” “patronage,” and “particularization” to mediate on behalf of their constituents (83-96). The importance of mediators is all the more important in light of the inability of the state to meet all of the needs of its citizens. Through detailed ethnographic description, Berenschot shows how political actors are able to get nearly anything done for constituents, from installing street lights to settling commercial disputes to reducing hospital bills. One result of this is that politicians are able to take credit for things which are, in principle, the expectations of state policy. The state is, thus, increasingly politicized, and “in practice, the control of politicians over the bureaucracy fragments the authority of the state” (80). However, as the author also shows, politicians normally get these things done only for *some* of their current or potential constituents. In so doing, they come to be seen as protectors or representatives of particular communities based upon religion, caste, or regional background.

While politicians are central mediators, the networks that develop between citizens and the state consist of many different figures. Politicians are part of networks composed also of political party workers, social workers, and *goondas* (criminals), as well as state officials. All of these mediators play a vital role in interactions between citizens and the state. In identifying these five mediators and detailing how they do their work by building up networks of supporters and activists, Berenschot shows how society becomes fragmented for political ends. Since politics are rooted in different social identities, the effect is a communalized society. The patronage networks developed and fostered by politicians and other political mediators can be mobilized. In Berenschot’s reading, social divisions are mobilized for pragmatic reasons. He states, “Identity politics represents a powerful strategy for politicians to do what is essential to win elections in the context of a mediated state: convey a credible promise to the electorate that they will be more helpful to the voter than the opposing political party” (141). In the context of limited and insufficient state resources, voters are pragmatic as well. By supporting a particular candidate or party, they hope to be the beneficiaries of a candidate’s success, primarily because they believe “a candidate from the same caste or region, once elected, will be more accessible” (152). This is again compounded by the urban settlement patterns that have led to neighborhood segregation based upon social divisions. Rioting is one way in which politicians can rally their supporters; indeed, says Berenschot, “Communal violence is a powerful tool to weaken the mobilization capacity of social divisions that competing politicians are targeting” (157).

Despite the similarities in the functioning of political mediators within all three neighborhoods studied, not all neighborhoods are equally susceptible to flare-ups of communal violence, says Berenschot. By basing his ethnographic fieldwork in three distinct neighborhoods in the city of Ahmedabad, Berenschot is able to illuminate the particular dynamics that lead to collective violence. A key determinant of whether a neighborhood will experience communal violence is the economic standing of the residents. In poorer neighborhoods, where there is more of a need for state resources, the competition for these resources heightens the political mobilization of different social groups. However, economic status alone does not explain the likelihood of violence. Berenschot shows how access to state resources also determines whether promoters of violence or promoters of peace will prevail. In this way, he is able to show how influence can be used to promote violence, for example, by gaining the release of rioters in custody or obtaining curfew passes allowing relief workers to move about freely.

The greatest strength of this book is its richly detailed ethnographic description. Berenschot draws out the everyday ways in which political mediators work to marshal state resources for their supporters. The book will be of interest not only to scholars of South Asia but

also to those interested in explaining how collective violence erupts between communities that usually share a peaceful co-existence. More broadly, scholars interested in the ways in which political actors develop networks of supporters through the use of their position to distribute state resources will find this work informative.

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