

# Scars of memory

The book brings out the horrifying stories of the women victims of the 2002 Gujarat pogrom, opening old wounds that leave one hurt, angry and ashamed all over again. BY ZIYA US SALAM

SHORTLY after the Gujarat pogrom in 2002, Narendra Modi, then the Chief Minister of the State, launched a Gujarat Gaurav Yatra (*Frontline*, October 25, 2002). Speaking at the yatra rally at Becharaji in Mehsana district in northern Gujarat, he is reported to have said, “Hum paanch, hamare pachees” (we five, ours 25), alluding to the imagined explosion of the Muslim population. He mocked the members of the Muslim community who found themselves in relief camps and temporary dwellings as the state failed to protect their life, limb and property. Yet Modi could not help saying: “What should we do? Run relief camps for them? Do we want to open baby-producing centres? But for certain people that means

society, trying to help Muslims find their feet again, were shell-shocked at the gross insensitivity of the Chief Minister mocking his own people, who had seen their houses burned down before their eyes, their life’s savings looted and their lives turned upside down. Worse still, their girls and women were raped and elderly members of the community hacked to death. Yet, the Chief Minister could only think of them as baby-producing factories and not about rebuilding their homes or providing justice.

Modi’s remarks provoked a wave of anger and protests. Members of civil

man being lost badly. More than 15 years later, the insults he heaped on the beleaguered Muslim community came back to mind as I read *Rupture, Loss and Living: Minority Women Speak about Post-conflict Life*. The book brings out the horrifying stories of the women victims of mass violence, of women longing to belong, of displacement and yearning to return to the place they called their home. In story after story, sentence after sentence and word after word, the authors K. Lalita and Deepa Dhanraj touch upon old wounds and leave you feeling hurt, angry and ashamed all over again.

These women deserve better. This is a book that is not to be read in a hurry. It is a book that essentially says something that has not been said earlier. Yet, it says something that deserves and needs to be said all over again in 2017 as fury manifests on roadsides in the form of lynching of innocent cattle owners. Lalita and Deepa Dhanraj open a review window; the look is still ugly and despicable. For the media, every riot begins as breaking news and is soon consigned to the dustbin of history. For politicians, it is an opportunity. For the victims of communal violence, the passage of years does little to heal their wounds. Distance in time does not diminish the trauma. All that they want is to go back to the time when life was peaceful and neighbours cutting across religions shared a camaraderie.

As Salmaben of Sabarkantha says: “We shall get killed but we shall go back to our place.” She had 52 bighas (8.3 hectares) of land in Sabarkantha. When the hate violence gripped the State, several families of the village were killed. Salmaben escaped in a Tempo Traveller along with 83 others. Only 17 survived and Salmaben was one of them. She was a midwife and had even worked with the government’s Adult Education Department. All she longed for after escaping was to go back to her fields where she grew lentils, groundnut, chillies and wheat.

Salmaben continues to



OCTOBER 2002: Chief Minister Narendra Modi during the Gujarat Gaurav Yatra at Ambaji town, 190 kilometres north of Ahmedabad.

live in hope, her displacement still palpable. The only consolation is that she is not alone in her predicament. There is Sajidaben, too. Her house was reduced to cinders by hooligans. When she went back to survey the wreckage, she found that the walls were broken and the house was burnt. She found water flowing out of a broken tap and set about plugging the leak with rolled rag. Although she lost everything, Sajidaben still felt it was her place. The authors write: “It is poignant that Sajidaben makes an effort to seal the broken water tap in a house that no longer really existed. Why does she even remember the water gushing out? Did the gesture simply indicate a claiming of what was once hers, or does it perhaps also point to the very deep connection she has with the physical and emotional space that represents ‘home’?”

## LOST CHILDHOOD

The Gujarat pogrom and, for that matter, all conflicts leave families dispossessed, deprived and even divided. Take, for instance, the children of Naroda Patiya, who were sent away as “orphans” to places such as Kolkata, Mumbai and Bengaluru so that they could get education. Or even the son of Ayeshaben, a single wo-

man with two sons. Following the riots, she had to relocate to a relief camp at Idar. The incidents had disturbed her son so much that he failed in the examinations held after the mob violence. The failure even threatened his life. Some children had seen their mothers criminally assaulted and killed, their fathers hacked to death. Many of them were brought to Delhi by civil society members and provided psychological help to restart their lives. It was a tall order. Some scars refuse to go away.

Lalita and Deepa Dhanraj write: “Witnessing extreme forms of violence against family members, friends and strangers results in feelings of impotence and varying degrees of fear and trauma. The violences—often sexualised and of exhibitionist brutality—perpetrated against men, women and children, by people known to them, sometimes aided and abetted by police and mob militias, cause severe trauma. Both victims and witnesses suffer from recognised symptoms of trauma and immense levels of insecurity and betrayal.”

It manifested itself in the case of young men and women, who years after the 2002 violence, found themselves waking up in the middle of the night, screaming, shrieking. Some mouthed expletives on seeing Modi on television, others were kept away from such exposure by friends and relatives, as the documentary filmmaker Rakesh Sharma once recalled. Some boys quit their studies and went away unannounced, un-

seen. Violence affects everybody, not just the direct victims. Nobody is safe from the poison. The authors bring to light the experience of Sophia Khan, a lawyer and social activist in Ahmedabad. Like many in that stratum of society, she imagined herself to be above cases of hate violence on the basis of religion. She lived in a social vacuum, she assumed, before reality knocked hard. She was a Muslim after all. Or is it first of all? Yes, communal riots make people aware of their roots, of where they come from. Sophia Khan recalls: “I did not observe rituals; I did not offer namaaz five times a day. I had full faith in Islam but I am not able to observe it diligently. Hence, people may have doubts about my allegiance to my Muslim identity. After 2002, such questioning became milder. There was once change there. In NGOs and women’s groups, I was now majorly seen as a Muslim. Some people wanted to call me to their meeting because I am a Muslim; and some did not want to because I am a Muslim! ...I felt that, though I had become a feminist, in the end I was only a Muslim. I mean, I was being reminded I am a Muslim; I am a Muslim and that’s why I had to change my house, I am a Muslim and that is why I had to change my office... I am a Muslim, and that is why after 2002 I took a conscious decision that I should work with Muslim women.”

Paradoxically, the riots that deprived millions of their identities reimposed it on others. The victims of



Naroda Patiya and Sabarkantha found mirror reflections of their suffering in the widows and orphans of Hyderabad and Mumbai, Vadodara and Panchmahal. Not everybody took the suffering quietly. Some wept or wailed, others decided to fight back, inch by inch. Like Sajidaben, who now lives in a makeshift hut in Himmatnagar. Before the 2002 pogrom, she was a cattle breeder in Sabarkantha. Although not very rich, she enjoyed social and business ties with both Hindus and Muslims. Life was built on limited means and plenty of shared joys. It changed after 2002 when her house was destroyed and her cattle were stolen. She recalls: “It is the women of the village who first looted our house. Whatever they could lay their hands on, they took away on tractors.” She decided to try for

legal redress, and lodged a complaint with the police, but the police registered her complaint on a wrong date. In this tale of gloom, there was a ray of hope. It came from a Hindu acquaintance, who pleaded with her neighbours that Sajidaben and her mother had done no wrong. She took them to a relief camp and gave them Rs.500 each. Soon, Sajidaben set up a tent on a parcel of land she mistook for wasteland. The owner, however, allowed her to stay. Sajidaben picked up the pieces of her life. She started working in a hospital and as a maid, too. Along the way came other challenges: being a single woman is never easy. Sajida was accosted by a hotel owner who urged her to give in to his demands. She decided to fight against those who wrecked her house and looted her belongings.

MARCH 3, 2002: Muslims, whose houses had been set ablaze during the riots, gather for a meal at the Shah Alam dargah in Ahmedabad.

She registered a complaint with the names of the accused. The case is pending in the Sessions Court. Her case gives a ray of hope to those in a similar situation. Her Hindu acquaintance, her magnanimous landlord, who allowed her to dig a tent on his ground, and, above all, her own will to live and fight back are balm for wounded spirits. In lesser measure though, the hope comes from the words of Aminaben. For 35 years, she lived in her village house, which she called the Tajmahal. Her house was looted by her neighbours, who had been guests at her daughter’s wedding which had taken place a few days before the violence. She yearns to go back to her *watan* (homeland), even if it means putting her life at

risk. After all, life is not merely about who you are. It is also about where you come from. In the case of Aminaben, Salmaben, and Sajidaben, it means the world. Lalita and Deepa Dhanraj deserve credit for stating things as they are. They avoid hyperbole. They refuse to sink into sorrow. With the eye of a hawk and the precision of a geometer, they have given us a book that tells us just how irresponsible Modi was when he made that inflammatory and communal remark at Becharaji and how we have failed as a society to lend a helping hand to the needy women. Every conflict takes its toll. It is the peacetime numbers that need to be attended to urgently. □