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RIOTPOLITICS

ON 27TH FEBRUARY 2002 58 PEOPLE DIED WHEN A TRAIN COACH CAUGHT FIRE JUST OUTSIDE A SMALL-TOWN RAILWAY STATION IN GUJARAT, INDIA. THIS INCIDENT MARKED THE BEGINNING OF ONE OF THE WORST OUTBURSTS OF HINDU-MUSLIM VIOLENCE SINCE INDIA'S INDEPENDENCE.

After leading politicians propagated the rumour that Muslims had burned the train coach, large mobs took to the streets. For over three months these mobs pillaged, looted, raped and butchered throughout Gujarat, killing at least 1000 people. Local as well as state-level politicians played a pivotal role, as they were not only seen leading violent mobs, but they were also involved in mobilising rioters, restraining the police from taking action, and arranging the distribution of weapons.

This book discusses why and how these political actors were capable of instigating and organizing mass violence. On the basis of a detailed ethnographic study of local politics in Gujarat's main city Ahmedabad, this book argues that the difficulties that especially poorer citizens face when dealing with state institutions underlie the capacity and interests of political actors to instigate and organize communal rioting. Because of these difficulties, citizens have come to rely on complex networks of various intermediaries. The daily functioning of these intermediary networks shapes the mobilisation and instigation that take place during communal riots. The capacity of various types of rioters – from politicians, local criminals, Hindu-nationalist activists to neighbourhood leaders and police officials – to organize and perpetrate violence is closely related to the different positions these actors hold in the patronage networks that provide access to state resources.



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WARD BERENSCHOT

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