Gujarat 2002: This book makes an attempt to understand the mobster, the rioter, the rapist

Revati Laul’s ‘The Anatomy Of Hate’ presents three interlinked narratives to trace the compulsions and motives of those who participated in the massacres.

Revati Laul’s *The Anatomy of Hate* provides a detailed picture of an extremely important but so far under presented view about the Gujarat violence of 2002: that of some of its sympathisers, supporters and perpetrators. In essence, this work of long-form nonfiction digs deep into the lives of Suresh “Langdo” Jadeja, a man convicted of rape and murder; Dungar, a Bhil tribesman who supported the riots and joined the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bharatiya Janata Party and, later, the Indian National Congress to become an influential politician in his area; and Pranav, a one-time VHP sympathiser and non-governmental organisation volunteer and professional whose life and thinking were turned over when he began working with riot-affected Muslims.

There are a number of relevant minor individuals who are part of Laul’s investigation. Suresh Jadeja’s ex-wife, Farzana, is one of them. But her life story is so unsettling that she organically becomes a major part of the book. She is the Hindu Suresh’s Muslim wife.

In interviews, Laul has spoken about not being able to reach out to the other side – to the supporters of the violence in Gujarat society, in a bid to understand where they come from. She has found a type of labelling and pre-judgment in the mainstream discourse on the subject, preventing a fuller conversation from taking place.

So she has written this book with the aim to make sense of the mobster, the rioter, the rapist, the Hindu extremist sympathiser, the silent supporter. Laul has gone into the pasts of these individuals and their ancestries well before 2002 – to the 1990s, 1980s and 1970s, and the colonial era – to provide a context to their behaviours.

**Personal back stories**
An overwhelming amount of the literature on Gujarat 2002 and its long aftermath has focussed on the condition of the Muslim victims and, to some extent, the 57 VHP workers who burned to death on the Sabarmati Express in Godhra. Some landmark sting exposés (like Tehelka’s in 2007) have offered unsettling perspectives on the Hindu supremacist rioter. This book attempts to fill that last gap while mining the social, economic, cultural, caste, psychological, gender, sectarian, and familial dimensions of these individuals – leading to unexpected discoveries.

You find out, for instance, that Suresh grew up with so much violence and abuse meted out to him that these became his general means of communication. (Of course, Laul’s reporting does show his gentler, softer aspects often, thus avoiding a simplistic view.) Farzana’s nightmarish life with Suresh provides a jolting view of lower-middle class, lower-caste, rural Gujarat society.

The fact that Suresh belonged to a criminal tribe and came from an infamous locality named Chharanagar are the subtexts that signal the possible reasons behind his instinct for violence. His “marriage” to Farzana is part of this design. He forces her to marry him as revenge for his sister, who wedded a Muslim.

In the case of Dungar, an unresolved sense of not being able to accept his identity as a Bhil affected him throughout his life. There were times when it was a great advantage, and times when it was not. At one point, the VHP local unit wanted him and the Bhils to embrace their version of Hinduism and give up meat and liquor. Later, government schemes reached them because they were Bhils. But education did not amount to any substantive upward mobility.

And so Dungar edged towards the VHP, and, later on, the Congress. Politics – at its most instrumental – became his aide in either asserting or negating his tribal identity so that he could progress. In all this, the othering of Muslims was a vital part of the work: it enabled Dungar to achieve tangible gains in his society.

The most upwardly mobile person in this book is Pranav, who belongs to an upper caste (though lower class) and is a postgraduate. He was born into an environment already suffused with anti-Muslim prejudice. Observing and participating in the relief work of the VHP volunteers during the Gujarat 2001 earthquake made him warm up to the organisation. It also kindled in him a passion for NGO work.
At the time, he also saw many international and national NGOs using the earthquake for their own benefit, while the VHP workers were exemplary in providing relief. He became a VHP admirer. But the VHP that epitomised humanism in 2001 turned into a rioting demon the very next year.

In 2002, Pranav went to work for an NGO that wanted to rebuild relations between Hindus and Muslims, and his belief system came apart there. His work with the Muslim victims, the destruction of their lives, the mutilations and privations that visit them, bored into his psyche, leading to continuing introspection about his own worldview and the conditioning of his milieu.

**An indictment of the nation-state**

The three stories both intersect and run in parallel, so that the reader is never left too long with an arc of just one character’s story. This gives the narrative a smooth flow. But some political and philosophical questions emerge.

You see an abused and impoverished man go on to become a thief, mobster and abuser. He largely uses the language of violence, and sporadically that of affection. You see a Bhil inserted into situations where he is either derided for his identity or rewarded for it – he doesn’t know what to make of it. You see an upper-caste Hindu shaken out of his erstwhile sympathy for Hindu hardline revivalism. And you see the lifelong devastation of at least two women, if not more.

All these people, be they perpetrators, sympathisers, critics or victims, combine to present a withering indictment of the Indian nation-state, Indian society, the state of Gujarat and organised religion. Laul allows the details of the lives of these people to get the reader to this point without butting in herself. Authorial distance is a key feature of this book.

The investigation into the lives of these individuals shows that politics and society have fashioned them into such behaviour. The absence of genuine social mobility in rural India – especially Gujarat, which, even in the past, was a somewhat more economically “developed” state than several others – seems an obvious cause for the othering of Muslims. It’s also an instance of some marginalised sections subjugating others.

Laul doesn’t make the connection explicitly, but this echoes BR Ambedkar’s succinct definition of caste discrimination as “graded
inequality”. It’s not happenstance that, of the three men Laul writes of, the one to shun violence – or at least to have been kept away from it directly – the most, Pranav, is also the most educated and from the highest of the castes represented. Has Pranav had more means to shun violence than the others?

**Unasked questions**

Although Laul provides some useful historical context to her characters’ lives and to the surge of Hindu extremism in north, central and western India, she could have devoted a little more space to explaining related points. First, how did a region that produced leaders who contributed to the freedom movement through satyagraha and had traditions of syncretism and pluralism lose those influences in a few generations?

Second, Laul mentions the Congress in places, but without examining the role of the party in Gujarat fully. Arguably, the history of communalising Gujarat hasn’t been the VHP’s or Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’s or the BJP’s doing only. The Gujarat Congress had a hand in poisoning the ethos of the state well before the emergence of the BJP as a state power.

Third, while in her interviews Laul exhorts us to engage in a conversation with the “other side”, and be able to see where they’re coming from, what are we to do with some of the people she writes about? How can we suspend the process of judging the individual who acts on his hate through violence and rape, or the one who supports it? Indeed, how are we to assess the forces that manufacture this hate after knowing how they work?

That said, an impressive feature of this book is how Laul attempts to present each of the individuals and organisations in a nuanced light – be it the VHP, the Congress, the RSS, or the BJP. Like all serious books on serious subjects, it doesn’t answer all the questions, but Laul challenges the reader to read more on and around it. The book sets a robust standard for journalistic non-fiction in India.

_Elephant_ is out now.