

Review of Rana Ayyub's Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Cover up

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First, a word about Rana Ayyub. She is a journalist who used to work for Indian media outfit called Tehelka. She left Tehelka few years ago when they refused to publish what was essentially the content of Gujarat Files. Not only were her ex-employers not willing to publish the recordings and findings of Rana's investigative journalism but most publishers declined to print the book, prompting her to self-publish this in April 2016. The book turned out to be such a sensation that within six months, a second edition had to be printed with demand still soaring high. But the interesting aspect of this very popular book, which one Indian magazine quoted as 'one of the most important pieces of investigative journalism in Indian history', is that the launch of the book and its existence as well as reviews have almost been blanked out by mainstream media (barring a couple of exceptions).

This brings us to the explosive subject of this book. Gujarat Files presents in-depth interviews with those responsible for maintaining law and order in the State of Gujarat during the pogrom of 2002 when about a thousand Muslims were killed. Rana went as an undercover journalist to Gujarat in 2010 and stayed there for eight months. What she has unearthed is not surprising as hearsay from the State of Gujarat always pointed to the complicity of the then State Government and senior officials in the organising and spreading of riots in the state but what she presents very succinctly is irrefutable evidence of this compliance.

The transcripts presented in the book give a detailed account of provocation of violence that led to the pogrom in 2002. It chronicles the control of state mechanisms (police, civil service and state government) by the top two (Narendra Modi – current Prime Minister and Amit Shah –



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President of the ruling BJP) political leaders of the country. The instigation of violence, the fake encounters and tacit complicity amongst all sectors of governance that led to the pogrom are well-documented in the book and make a very sorry reading.

The other significant aspect that Rana uncovers is the caste conflict within the police force. She presents interviews with Dalit police officers, who candidly disclose how they had been entrusted with extra-judicial murders in the form of fake encounters as they can be dispensed with but the upper caste officers are never asked to do such encounters. This is an ancillary finding of this investigative journalism – the caste-based discrimination that takes place and how it works in the uppermost echelons of society and positions of power. Lower caste senior police officers describe how they are discriminated and not allowed to build homes in their native villages despite being holders of power.

One big lacuna of Gujarat Files is that it lacks analysis. Rana is a journalist and she presents facts as they are. All the transcripts are given in crude form as might be presented to a court as evidence. One can argue that a smart reader can infer and analyse on her own but building of context and analysing the information received would have made more in-depth reading of the subject. Sometimes this looks like a piece of work done in a hurry, almost like she had to get it all out in the public arena before she lost it. There are many typos and editorial errors, which, in a book of this nature are not significant. But it must be stated that this is a huge drawback of this book. If one does not know the context of the pogrom of 2002, then reading this book will be difficult.

What Rana lacks in analysis and depth, she fulfils with her inimitable flair for mundane detail. She adds small detail like being called to join a skype session with a friend's family as she was stepping out for an important interview, or the colour of her shirt as she goes out for a meeting, or the cost of her meal after a long day's work. This really does break the monotony of the transcripts one reads in the book and you

cannot but feel in awe of this very brave and committed journalist who took all the risks to go undercover and unearth what none of the official agencies was able to bring about.

Overall, Gujarat Files is a must read for all those concerned with politics in South Asia and interested in human rights and law and order in the sub-continent. The fact that those placated in the book are holders of power in the country is very scary and despite various smear campaigns on social media, the fact that she is still working as an independent journalist is nothing short of a miracle. In just over 200 pages, Rana has confirmed that characterising the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat as anarchy of mob is incorrect. Her investigation describes how regimes of impunity have been put in place by the State for its use and it leaves us with the need to understand how this could happen and what can be done to ensure there is no repeat of such a horror in a country still governed by the Hindu right BJP. What the book needs is further analysis and building of a narrative of all the transcripts provided, so it can be lucid for a reader new to this subject.

References

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