

# Book review: On Their Watch: Mass Violence and State Apathy in India

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*On Their Watch: Mass Violence and State Apathy in India* examines official records and shows how state apathy in the wake of violence thwarted attempts to rehabilitate survivors and punish perpetrators. Using the Right to Information Act, the editors set out to address the lack of knowledge and transparent reporting around recent tragedies and in doing so provide a sobering account of the frustration in accounting for state violence, writes **Maya Schmitt**.



**On Their Watch: Mass violence and State apathy in India, Examining the record. Surabhi Chopra & Prita Jha (eds.). Three Essays Collective. 2014**

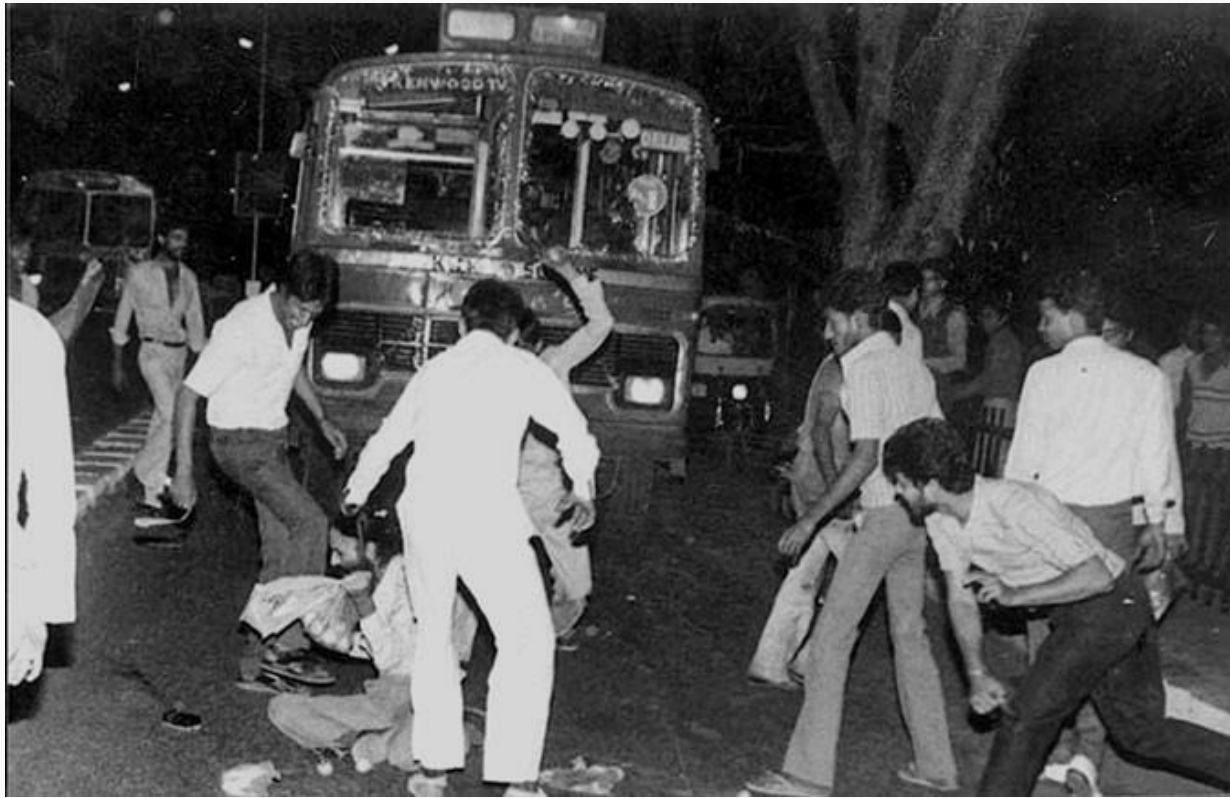
Episodes of mass violence are often dealt with in gruesome detail, their shocking nature accentuated and the irreversibility of human fates documented. The frustrating part in all of this tends to be the lack of knowledge and transparent reporting around the handling of these tragedies. *On Their Watch* sets out to fill this knowledge gap while offering an insight into why this is not always a straightforward process. It provides a sobering account of the frustration in accounting for state violence.

The editors, Surabhi Chopra and Prita Jha, have compiled a comprehensive study of wrong-doings exercised both actively and candidly by state authorities and government. Part I of the book outlines how they used the 2005 Right to Information (RTI) Act to gather evidence. In theory, RTI has made it compulsory for public officials at every level to share most official information and documents with any citizen who seeks them. However, although the book was published in 2014, nine years after RTI was introduced, it was clearly a challenging process for Chopra and Jha to extract the evidence for the book.

The immense detailing of how the data was collected and the hurdles that were encountered instills a sense of frustration in the reader. With the seemingly vast possibilities that the RTI Act presents, one hopes for clarity as to the causes and chain of events, as well as the possibility of justice or compensation for the victims of the incidents. In reality, the experience proved mixed. Destruction of significant information, coupled with authorities ignoring applications, showing a poor understanding of the RTI procedure or even refusing requests, made the exercise an uphill struggle. Nonetheless, the information that was gathered highlighted that RTI can a valuable resource for researchers.

In Part II, *On Their Watch* focuses on four major incidents of sectarian violence: Nellie (1983), Dehli (1984), Bhagalpur (1989) and Gujarat (2002) and the multitude of injustices still lingering in the areas years later. This section initially felt like a relentless list of the violence and fallout but it did effectively highlight how the security and justice failings that existed in 1983 persisted in 2002. Furthermore, the concise context of each incident facilitated understanding of the events which preceded and fuelled the violence. In each instance the material gathered shows that the violence was aided and abetted by politically powerful individuals and the police. Reports relating to the violence in Gujarat, for example, even show that 'police officers who took a neutral stand during riots and prevented massacres were transferred by the Gujarat government to insignificant postings' (p. 214).





A mob attacks a Sikh man. Delhi, October 1984. Photo by Ashok Vahie, originally published in Caravan magazine (Bal, 'Sins of Commission'), 1 October 2014.

For the more recent violent incidents there have been procedures in place to deal with the aftermath, but they have been undermined in practice. For example, [First Information Reports](#) (FIRs) are always filed after a crime has occurred and detail the key facts reported in relation to a given incident. They form the basis of further investigation and cannot be changed except by ruling of the High Court. And yet, in all four cases of mass violence explored in the book, the FIRs were flawed or missing crucial information. In Nellie, records of criminal charge sheets were destroyed, even though they had not been dealt with properly. The destruction of this crucial information was allegedly standard procedure after a fixed number of years, apparently despite the fact the cases were still open. So even when there are procedures in place the police (whether deliberately or not) conduct them wrongly, poorly, or not at all, thereby denying victims of violence access to justice. Part III deals specifically with the access to criminal justice and offers further evidence that the Indian State's response has been 'highly variable and ad hoc' (p. 331). For example, the authors point to evidence that High Courts such as Bombay and Delhi have not followed the same reasoning as other high courts and 'have allowed appeals by victims regardless of whether the State has filed an appeal or not' (p. 281).

Another disturbing insight in the book related to the issue of compensation for those who either lost their sole breadwinner or were struggling to survive following the atrocities in Gujarat. The relief scheme was set up in such a way that families could only receive the highest financial compensation if they could prove their family member(s) had died. This has proved highly problematic because in many cases bodies were burnt or never found (there are no documented figures of this). Moreover, the complexity 'accessing information on relief camps is indicative of the lack of government engagement in relief provision' (p. 223) which reinforces how poor information channels have been in every case.

Exercises such as the one conducted for *On Their Watch* have the potential to be immensely valuable in preventing future incidents and improving responses to incidents in the future. By bringing an academic lens to realities that had not been confirmed or documented previously, the hope is to break India's shameful tradition of impunity for such violence. The book serves as both a horrific recollection of some of India's most painful events in recent years, while

also giving a constructive insight into where improvements need to be made and how the state can be held accountable. As Chopra and Jha write in the conclusion, 'Denial and impunity become harder to sustain in the face of information about the State's actions' (p. 334).

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

### **About the Author**

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