

# Una and After

The first anniversary of the atrocities on a group of Dalits for allegedly killing a cow morphs into massive protest against nationwide lynchings

The Azadi Kooch protest at Mehsana in Gujarat



Jignesh Mevani with Kanhaiya Kumar at the march



## The Year That Was

### July 2016

Seven Dalits were severely assaulted at Mota Samadhiyala village near Una, Gujarat, by a group who claimed they had killed a cow. Four of them were tied to the back of an SUV, stripped to the waist and paraded through Una town, amid more assault

### December 2016

In Ugala village, near Una, a Dalit man and his pregnant wife were assaulted by members of the Bharwad community when they objected to their cattle grazing on the land being tilled by the couple

### July 2017

On the one-year anniversary of the Una assault, a group of Dalits at Mevasa village were shot at by a mob of upper caste men over a land dispute. Four of them were injured.

### :: Indulekha Aravind | Mehsana, Una

After what happened, there is no god for us," says Vasaram Sarvaiya. It has been a year since he and his family were brutally assaulted and paraded through Una town by a group of vigilantes, all in the name of gau raksha. The world bore witness to the assault, thanks to mobile phone cameras. The videos launched uprisings in Gujarat and across the country, for the rights of Dalits to live a life of dignity.

Sitting in the Sarvaiyas' one-room house at Mota Samadhiyala village, about 350 km from Ahmedabad, on the eve of the one-year commemoration of the as-

sault, it becomes evident that much has changed, and hasn't. For one, the attack marked a point of no return for the family and the community, lighting a spark of rebellion that refuses to be extinguished.

"We are not allowed to take part in Navratri festivities. They tell us that if we join in, the devi will become unclean," says Vasaram. But, this time, it will be different. "Around 300 of us will convert to Buddhism this Navratri," he says. Sitting next to him on the charpoy, his brother Ramesh, who was also attacked, nods in agreement. There is a statue of Buddha on a shelf at the far end of the room, while another wall has framed pictures of Buddha, Mayawati and BR Ambedkar.

Vasaram's reasoning for the proposed conversion is clear: "We become Hindus only at the time of elections. The rest of the time, we are not even considered as human." His friend, Ashwin Jairambhai, who has dropped in that Monday evening, details what that translates into, in their everyday life. "We do all the work to build their houses but, once it is completed, we are not allowed to step inside. If we drink water out of the vessel they use or even touch it by accident, they will throw it away. We do the work in their fields but, at lunch, they ask us to sit separately," he

says. The assault by the vigilantes was thus the culmination of a lifetime of cruelty.

Vasaram's mother, Kunvar, had been in the fields three kilometres away when she heard her family members cry out that day last July. They had been skinning a cow that had been killed by a lion (some of the villages in the area fall in a lion corridor) when a mob of around 40 men brutally assaulted them. "Someone had called the gau rakshaks. We still don't know who it was," says Ramesh. Their father, Balu Sarvaiya, was hit on the head with a pipe when he protested while Kunvar was also beaten and her sari pulled. Protests that the cow was already dead did not make a difference. Four of them – Vasaram, Ramesh, their cousin Ashok and another relative Becharbai – were then tied to the back of an SUV, assaulted again and taken through the streets of Una town, as people watched. Vasaram puts forward one possible reason for the spectators remaining mute. "The gau rakshaks told everyone the cow was alive and we had killed it, so people didn't stop them."

An Una resident, Manoj, confirms this and then adds, "Gau rakshaks shouldn't have dragged them here and beat them, that was wrong. They could have just beat them up there itself and left them."



The rally begins in Mehsana

Vasaram's statement about the value of the Dalit's life, or the lack of it, has never rung truer.

### The More Things Change...

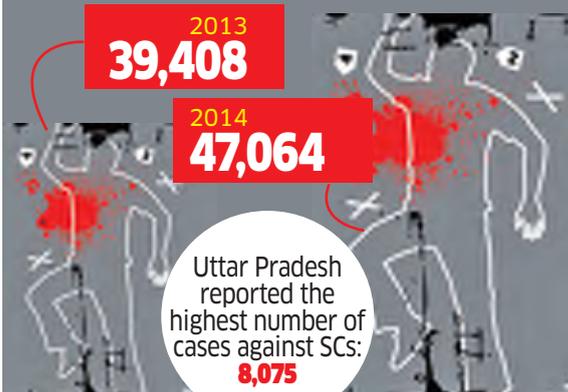
The protests included a call for Dalits to boycott the removal of cattle carcasses, a job they were made to do for generations. Ramesh chuckles when he talks about this. "Earlier, they used to pinch their noses when we passed by because of this. Now they are forced to do the work themselves and they do it in the dead of the night." Even though it means a loss of ₹250 that was important to sustain livelihoods, Dalits here are determined that they will not skin cattle. Ramesh also con-

### Crimes Against Scheduled Castes

2013  
**39,408**

2014  
**47,064**

Uttar Pradesh reported the highest number of cases against SCs:  
**8,075**



# “Annihilating Caste is Part of Nation-Building”

Earlier this week, **Jignesh Mevani**, convener of Rashtriya Dalit Adhikar Manch, said he was prepared to face arrest. Three hours later, he was detained by the police. Excerpts from an interview in the initial hours of the Azadi Kooch march:

## You decided to go ahead with the march though permission was withdrawn. Why was it denied?

As per various apex court judgments, the police have no right to deny permission right at the outset. At the most, they can put reasonable restrictions unless there are issues related to national security or national integrity. There are no such issues here. What we are doing is in national interest, in fact. As Babasaheb Ambedkar beautifully articulated, we are not a nation, we are a nation in the making. We are a compilation of castes. Unless caste is annihilated and thrown into the dustbin, we can't become a proper nation. So this is part of that process of nation-building. The grounds the police gave were rubbish – they said they were denying permission in the light of information they were gathering on the law and order situation. But permission was withdrawn without giving us an opportunity to present our case, which is against the principle of natural justice.

## After the Dalit Asmita Yatra that you led post-Una, has anything changed?

I don't see any sincerity on the part of the state of Gujarat or the BJP government to ensure any kind of justice to any of the weaker sections of society, and not just Dalits. That's why this time we are not emphasising on Una alone. When

Anandiben Patel was chief minister, she had promised the Una victims that land would be allotted but they still haven't received it – not an inch for Balubhai Sarvaiya and his family or for the other landless, though there is a categorical provision in the law. The government is following an anti-Dalit, anti-people model.

## Who all have come together for this Azadi Kooch coalition?

The BJP government is targeting the youth, the Patidars, the Dalits. College campuses are under attack, be it IIT-Madras or JNU. When Kanhaiya Kumar or Hardik Patel became the face of exposing the 'Gujarat model', they were dubbed anti-nationals. Bullets are being rained on farmers. People are being lynched in the name of cow. All sections of people are victims of this so-called Gujarat model. It's only a democratic force that can defeat the casteist, communal, fascist forces that exist in the name of the Sangh Parivar.

## Elections are coming up in Gujarat. How do you plan to take your protest forward?

My agitation can't be interpreted and seen with regard to electoral politics. However, that doesn't mean we will not intervene in electoral politics. As of today, this means struggling against the BJP and exposing it. We can't say, vote for X or Y but we are definitely against the BJP. They are the most dangerous force on Indian soil.

## Are you ready to face arrest?

Yes. They can go to any extent.



tributed to the 125 kg soap that Dalits in Gujarat had sent Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, to protest his officials' distribution of soap bars to Dalit families a day before he visited them.

The attack also fuelled the rise of lawyer and activist Jignesh Mevani, who led the Dalit Asmita Yatra from Ahmedabad to Una last year, culminating in a massive rally on August 15. This year, Mevani has organised the Azadi Kooch, or freedom march, which began from Mehsana, 75 km from Ahmedabad, on July 12 and will culminate at Dhanera in Banaskantha district on July 18. On July 11, a seminar was organised by Mevani's Rashtriya Dalit Adhikar Manch in Ahmedabad to mark a year of the flogging at Una and the beginning of the march the next day. The Sarvaiyas had said they would give the march a miss due to various reasons, including Mevani not having kept in touch since the incident. "Only Mayawati and Jayanti bai (Gujarat Dalit Sangathan head Jayanti Makadia) have done something for us," says Balu. Vasaram said if Mevani met them and speaks to them in Ahmedabad they might join the Azadi Kooch in Mehsana.

## Freedom Struggle

That meeting does not seem to have happened because the Sarvaiyas are not to be seen on Wednesday at Somnath Chowk in Mehsana, from where the march is flagged off. The permission given for the march was withdrawn on Sunday, citing concerns over law and order, but from the looks of it, that has not dampened the spirits of over 1,000 people who have gathered around a makeshift stage. Just beyond the stage is a line of khaki stretching into the distance. The police are not taking any chances and several vans and jeeps are stationed close by. Blue flags are waved and slogans of "Awaaz do, hum ek hai" and "Jai Bhim" ring out in a crowd that cuts across age and gender.

Mevani makes his entrance close to noon, to loud cheers. Dressed in a full-sleeve, dark blue T-shirt and jeans, the bespectacled lawyer cannily begins with a condemnation of the attack on the pilgrims in Amarnath and a moment's silence for the victims, with lit candles. In his speech, Mevani issues a call for Dalits, Muslims, Patels and OBCs to unite against the Sangh Parivar and the BJP. Off stage, he says Una was the starting point and

**“We are not allowed to take part in Navratri festivities. They tell us that if we join in, the devi will become unclean. This Navratri around 300 of us will be converting to Buddhism”**

**Vasaram Sarvaiya,**

victim of Una assault in 2016



Ramesh (left) and his brother Vasaram were assaulted in Una last year

he wanted to broaden this year's march beyond Dalit issues to other marginalised communities, which is why it has been named Azadi Kooch. "I don't see any sincerity on the part of the state of Gujarat or the BJP government to ensure any kind of justice to any of the weaker sections of society, and not just Dalits. That's why this time we are not emphasising on Una alone," he says.

As symbols of this, former JNUSU president Kanhaiya Kumar and Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti (PAAS) convener Reshma Patel join Mevani on stage. Patel delivers a fiery speech, thumbing her nose at the revoking of permission, declaring that Hindustan is not anybody's *baap* (father). Other speakers get their turn but the crowd becomes restive and wants Kanhaiya to take the mike, applauding loudly when he does. His speech turns out to be the longest and

like that of a seasoned politician, with potshots at the BJP ("Stop this farce of sweeping in the name of Swachh Bharat and get down into the gutter with us" evokes cheers). But what the crowd wants is his iconic "azadi" slogans and he obliges, with people joining in vociferously.

Permission for the march has still not been given but the plan is to go ahead anyway. Kanchan Solanki, 34, an ASHA (accredited social health activist) worker in Mehsana, says she will be part of the march till it leaves the city. Solanki says she is protesting the lack of jobs for Dalits. Her friend, Niru Ben, 50, had seen the video of the Una flogging and wanted to protest against untouchability. The two have come with 10 other women. "This government is all talk and no action. We need a government free from corruption and casteism," says Niru Ben. She also says more women

must become leaders. In the meantime, Swaraj Abhiyan leader Yogendra Yadav, who is leading a Kisan Mukti Yatra that was passing through Gujarat then, takes the stage and calls for a kisan-Dalit-Adivasi union.

The speeches end with Mevani's declaration that on July 18, two marches, the Azadi Kooch in Gujarat and the Kisan Mukti Yatra in Delhi, will "lift the purdah from the Gujarat model". The march finally sets off, banner in front and a loudspeaker in an auto amplifying the slogans, while the police keep a watch. The crowd of a thousand has thinned considerably as it makes its way through narrow roads, attracting a few onlookers. Around 3.30 pm, Kanhaiya Kumar and Reshma Patel depart in an SUV.

Among those marching on is Lakshmi Ben, who has been struggling for land that is hers only on paper. She is sceptical about the media reporting on the Azadi Kooch and Dalit struggles in general. "Nobody will write about it. There are no journalists of our caste. What does the Brahmin know about our pain?" She adds, "Narendra Modi ji speaks about the Gujarat model but that is not our model – we suffer hunger and poverty. And neither the BJP nor the Congress has done anything for us."

The dark clouds that had gathered overhead yield to a steady drizzle and the march is about to leave Mehsana when the police move in and detain Mevani and a dozen others under Section 143 (illegal assembly) and whisk them away to the police station. Kumar and Patel, too, have been detained en route and brought to the station. "The programme was peaceful, so on what grounds did they cancel the permission or detain us?" Kumar asks. The yatras will continue till land is given to the landless, he says. "Detaining leaders is a strategy to end the movement but people will see through this," says Patel. Asked about the upcoming Gujarat assembly elections, she says they would take the support of anyone who is against the BJP. Mevani is more circumspect and says his agitation shouldn't be viewed only in the light of electoral politics.

A group of women who had been part of the march arrive at the station, raising slogans and demanding that Mevani be released, which happens at around 7 pm. Kumar and Patel set off for Ahmedabad while the Azadi Kooch leaves for Unjha, the halt for that night. Mevani is emphatic that he will continue with the yatra, come what may.

## Prisoners Since Independence

The Sarvaiyas may not have come for the Azadi Kooch but they are fighting for the same cause – land, and a life of dignity. And that has not changed, even after a year in which many grand promises were made. The Gujarat government is yet to give the family land or transfer their case to a special court, both of which were promised by then CM Anandiben Patel. Unable to work because of the injuries and living so far on the compensation money given by some leaders, their future looks precarious. Add to this the constant fear of retaliation from the other castes, exacerbated by the release of several of the accused on bail.

"We can no longer work in the fields because of our injuries. We won't clean carcasses anymore. We want to ask Modi how Gujarat is vibrant when none of us has any land," asks Vasaram. His friend, Jairambhai, says Dalits continue to remain prisoners 70 years after Independence. "If we protest too much, other castes will boycott us."

Who will they vote for in the coming polls? "I will press the NOTA button," says Ramesh Sarvaiya. ■