

THE BLUES



By noon, close to 10,000 people from Dalit and workers' organisations had gathered. PHOTOS: ROHINI MOHAN

In the line of fury

The echoes of Una were heard in Karnataka last week when thousands of Dalit activists marched to Udupi

ROHINI MOHAN



fter a thundering morning shower washed the streets of Karnataka's Udupi clean, a group of people began to trickle into the Ajjarkad ground. Placards and banners were extracted from plastic bags, umbrellas jerked dry, a drenched small stage with the banner 'Chalo Udupi' was wiped clean. By noon, close to 10,000 people from over 170 Dalit and workers' organisations from across the State had gathered, lining up slowly till Court Road was a swathe of blues — the royal blue of B.R. Ambedkar's suit, the cobalt blue of his often stout statues (small in size but iconic as symbol), and, as Gowri, one of the organisers said, the free blue that "liberates us from political party affiliations".

An elderly bystander, Laxminarayana G.K., having had his brunch of idlis and coffee at Diana restaurant, tapped the shoulder of a young man in a blue kurta. Jabbing his index finger towards the crowd, Laxminarayana raised his eyebrows in a curious 'what is this?'

On July 11, 2016, since self-appointed *gau rakshaks* (cow vigilantes) publicly flogged seven Dalit men for skinning a dead cow in Una, Gujarat, several Dalits and Muslims have been beaten and humiliated on suspicion of storing beef, being seen tending to or transporting cattle. It has triggered protests across India like never before. In August, a young lawyer, Jignesh Mewani, led thousands of Dalits in a massive 'Chalo Una' march from Ahmedabad to Una village. Unprecedented numbers of people took oaths not to clean sewage drains and toilets, not to dispose of carcasses, and to protest till they were treated with dignity.

The growing movement even led Prime Minister Narendra Modi to condemn the vigilantism. "It makes me angry that people are running shops in the name of cow protection," Modi said. "Some people indulge in anti-social activities at night, and in the day masquerade as cow protectors."

But as protesters from Una were returning home on Independence Day, vigilantes beat them up, humiliated them, and forced many to abuse Ambedkar. A few days later, on August 19, in a small village in Udupi, 29-year-old Praveen Poojary, a BJP worker, was bludgeoned to death by activists from the Hindu Jagrana Vedike, for transporting three calves in his tempo. The 18 attackers had bought chicken from Poojary's shop and shared meals in his home. Before they thrashed him with sharp iron rods and grills, Poojary had screamed that he was only using his tempo to transport calves for a friend. The attackers did not listen.

It was an echo of Una that was heard in Udupi on October 9. Dalit activists started marching from Bengaluru through Hasan to Belur and finally, to Udupi, gathering strength on the way through street plays, folk music and the stunning rhythm of local drums like nagari and thamake. Ending the march in Udupi was significant. The Krishna temple and its eight Brahmin-led mutts (ashrams) form the core of the temple town, home to century-old practices of segregation and untouchability. The district, along with Mangalore, has also seen mercenary right-wing vigilante groups attack inter-religious couples and Dalits, churches and mosques.

As the rally snaked through K.M. Road and upper-caste neighbourhoods, Raghavendra, 29, an accountant who works in a refinery, joined in. "The old caste system humiliated our community, reduced us to insects. That Brahminism is here," he said. "And the new violence in the name of aggressive Hindu nationalism and corporate land acquisition, which threatens our very

existence, that is also here."

A week earlier, a known upper-caste rabble rouser had posted on Facebook that if Dalits were going to march through Udupi, others would have to 'clean Udupi'. "We knew it was a caste slur, that we would pollute the town," said Venkatesh, a poet and farmer from Karkala. "But we decided to take it literally." As a group of boys distributed water, another group followed with cartons, picking up the discarded plastic.

Gowri, one of the organisers, said the movement was led by educated and aware Dalit youth. "In the earlier phase of Dalit assertion, a few voices emerged against feudalism and Brahminism," she said. But the leaders broke away, people supported different political parties. In the last decade, with the deepening of right-wing politics, Dalits have become more vulnerable. "This is a new reaction. It has a new clarity, no political affiliation, and it is gender conscious."

As I ran up to a balcony to photograph the march, a young man looked up. His placard said, "It's high time the oppressed ruled the world." Behind him, a group of 20-year-old women formed a circle. It was a scorching 1.30 pm, and rally-goers were fading. The women wore blue kurtas, white duppattas crossed from the shoulder to a knot at the hip, a heavy nagari drum hanging at their legs. One of them spun her stick in the air and brought it down with great flourish in a loud thud.

Ten women nagaris from Mandya followed in an energetic, thrilling crescendo that in a few minutes had invigorated protesters. Jai Bhim slogans were raised, more songs sung. "We are the heartbeat," said Kamala, 26, a school teacher and lead drummer. "When our people get tired by the long fight, our job is to lift their spirits." She laughed and added, "To be able to perform well, I ate five big idlis today!"

As the protesters walked into the Beedingudde ground, they spontaneously stuck their blue flags and placards into the rain-

'This is a new reaction. It has clarity, no political affiliation, and it is gender conscious.'



A team of women nagaris came from Mandya to cheer the marchers.

soaked ground. Around it, the Revolutionary Cultural Forum from Raichur danced to a folk song about the struggle of a village against a land-grabbing owner. "We are telling the downtrodden to laugh at the source of fear so that we can break its hold on us," the Forum's state convenor Gangadhara said.

As tired protesters found chairs under the shamianas to sit, some of them spotted Jignesh Mewani in the front row. For at least an hour, a smiling Mewani had to oblige a string of selfies. Bhaskar Prasad, who conceptualised the 'Chalo Udupi' march, said it had been inspired by Mewani's in Una. The motto 'Food is our choice, land is our right' was "Not just because we want to be able to eat beef. It is to show how hegemonic groups use their culture to attack those of others."

Mewani's Hindi speech detailed how Dalits and OBCs were the largest group to be jailed for the 2002 riots. "The Gujarat model is moving to Karnataka, too, and I hope our Dalit youth will not let themselves be used by the right-wing groups," he said. It was clear the movement had not limited itself to justice for anti-Dalit atrocities, but was consciously evoking complex ideas of dignity, systemic discrimination and denial of land rights. Mewani promised to return to Udupi for a three-point agenda: to ban all *gau rakshak* groups, to urge the Karnataka government to reveal the percentage of revenue land they have given to Dalits and tribes according to the state land grant rules of 1969, and to enter the mutts in Udupi that segregate Dalits.

Five minutes from the congregation, the Pejewara Mutt's 86-year-old seer, Vishweshwa Theertha, who was part of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, wanted to know if the Dalit meeting had criticised him. "They always do that," he said, insisting that neither he nor his temple segregated against Dalits during temple meals. "Some Brahmins may want to sit by themselves, but we don't ask them to." He "condemned violence against humans in response to violence against cows," but called cow protection "important".

That discomfiting grasping for an illusory balance was rife on the sidelines of the march too. "We are all human," said Diwakar Prabhu, a restaurant owner, to Manjunath, a rally participant in a striped T-shirt. "There should be no caste, correct. But a cow is..."

Manjunath handed him a brochure and walked away. "It's not our job any more to explain to the privileged about how any of this is wrong," he told me. "Our focus now is to mobilise ourselves. Those confused must reflect on what they are allowing in the name of their religion."

Rohini Mohan is a Bengaluru-based writer.

DRUMBEAT

In goddess country

Meeting Bengal's dhaakis in fashionable Mumbai during Durga Puja this year



Poresh Das plays the dhaak at the pandal in Tulip Star Hotel in Juhu, as dancers with dhuna join in. PHOTO: PRIYANKA BORPUJARI

PRIYANKA BORPUJARI

Poresh Das has been making this annual trip to Mumbai for three decades now. He is 75, looks utterly frail, and has lost all his teeth. But give him his *dhaak* and he is a transformed man. He can carry the large and heavy drum on his shoulders, sometimes for an hour at a stretch, beating on it with an energy that matches his younger colleagues.

No Durga Puja is complete without the quintessential *dhaak* or drum that accompanies the worship and is as much a part of the Puja experience as the fragrance of frankincense. So, when large numbers of Bengalis settled down in various parts of the country and started off Durga Puja committees, of course they arranged for the *dhaakis* to arrive each year from Bengal to their adopted cities. And Mumbai is a favourite, with its promise of grand pandals, large remunerations and glamorous audiences. "I have played the *dhaak* all through my childhood and youth in Kolkata, so I am happy to come here every year. The money we get is better," says Das. He is prepping for an evening performance at the North Bombay Sarbojanin Durga Puja that takes place on the grounds of Tulip Star Hotel in tony Juhu.

Across the pandals of Mumbai, the thundering sound of this traditional drum, made of mango wood and leather skin, along with the clanging of bronze cymbals and plates, begins to reverberate from Mahalaya day, observed a week before Durga Puja, and goes on until *bisarjan*, when the goddess is submerged in water and bidden adieu. The slow, rhythmic beating of the *dhaaks* begins at morning prayers or *prabhati*, followed by at least two other times during the day. Often, the drummers are accompanied by dancers — men who serenade the goddess with an acrobatic and skilful lifting and offering of the *dhuna* or clay bowl of simmering frankincense. There is a frenzy to the rhythm as the *dhunas* are transferred intricately from hand to hand and often even held by the mouth as the dancers bend over backwards. This tumult of sound, sight and smell is what makes Durga Puja complete.

Das is in Mumbai with his son-in-law Babloo, 50, his son Mahadev, 35, and 14 others. The organising committee or host of the Durga Puja takes care of the troupe's travel and food expenses, and the men often sleep in the *pandal* itself. A lucky few take the chance to tour Mumbai after their tiring five days of performance. Then, they are sent by train back to Kolkata one day after Dussehra.

The *dhaakis* claim to receive meagre payments for their work in West Bengal, but in Mumbai, they average Rs. 25,000 per person. The accompanists playing the cymbals usually receive lesser money. "The trains coming to Mumbai from Kolkata are full of us *dhaakis* so it

'The trains coming to Mumbai from Kolkata are full of us *dhaakis* and it feels like a community trip.'

feels like a community trip. It's the same when we return home," says Babloo.

That this art is passed on from father to son is evident when you see several male members of a family performing together. However, many of them learn from a guru. Prafulla Ghodoi, 40, and Khudiram Raj, 35, from Purba Medinipur, learnt to play from the same guru. They have been coming to the Banga Maitri Sansad Durga Puja at the railway colony of Santacruz station for five years now. The committee's puja turned 69 this year. "Our teacher showed us how the sound of the drum with leather skin is sweeter than that with any other material. But leather is expensive, and we have to handle the drums carefully while travelling by train," says Ghodoi. Both their drums are decorated with colourful feathers and a bright cloth covering.

Back home, the *dhaakis* perform at other festivals at different times of the year. The rest of the time, they work on other people's farms. It's no wonder that the younger generation wants to study and get jobs to escape the poverty.

Astha Rai, 60, has been performing at one of Mumbai's oldest Durga Pujas — the one at Bengal Club Shivaji Park — for 35 years now. He says his son travelled with him twice to play the cymbals. "But he is studying Science in college now. He wants a job and I cannot force him to become a *dhaaki*."

Bipul Hazra, 56, a cymbalist who plays in Santacruz, says, "People consider orchestras more fashionable than *dhaakis*." That *dhaakis* have traditionally been people from the Scheduled Castes is another reason why the younger generation wants to move up the social and economic ladder.

Despite the possibility that their art might die out, the *dhaakis* haven't lost hope. Panchu Rai, 65, is at the Shivaji Park pandal. He says, "My elder son manages our farm, while my second son travels across Bengal as a *dhaaki*. If we all are able to get one son educated so that he can get a job, then the other son can definitely continue to keep our art alive. This is, after all, our legacy."

Priyanka Borpujari is an independent journalist.

slice of life