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India's Dalit Moment

By Gabe Carroll

As Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi squares off militarily with Pakistan, at home he is facing an older – and perhaps more challenging – threat to his authority. The movement of Dalits – members of India's lowest castes – emerging in his home State of Gujarat is challenging the idea of India as a Hindu nation, a position Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have made their battle cry. In contrast to Modi's Hindu nationalist vision, this new movement posits that it is the "other Indias," made up of the country's most marginalized communities, that are destined to write the nation's next chapter.

On July 11 a [video](#) showing four young men being paraded around a village, tied to a truck, went viral on Indian social media. On the video the men are publicly flogged as a crowd looks on but does nothing. The men were not accused of murder, rape, or theft, but rather of having killed cows.

The spectacle continued for hours, after which the men – two brothers and their cousins – were briefly detained by local police, then released. All four men had multiple lower body injuries from being beaten with sticks, and two of their parents were manhandled when they tried to intervene.

Their assailants were not policemen, but self-appointed vigilantes. To a foreign observer, the difference between victims and assailants would be difficult to discern. But to any Indian watching the subtext of the brutality was clear: caste.

A social hierarchy that is thousands of years old and impacts the lives of more than a billion people, the South Asian caste system is often misunderstood, underestimated or ignored in coverage of the subcontinent. But the stories of India and its people cannot be told – or understood – without it. Possibly the most dramatic of these stories is that of untouchability, a condition of discrimination that affects more than 200 million people.

The history of the “untouchables” is the story of a hidden India. The Indian census refers to them as Scheduled Castes but they refer to themselves as Dalits – “oppressed.” Dalits make up at least a fifth of the country’s population. They did not attain freedom in 1947 when India obtained its independence from British rule. Today this “other India” is struggling to claim its share of India’s expanding role in the global marketplace.

"Dalit for us doesn't mean that we are untouchable...Dalit for us means that we are those who practice equality and fight against inequality"

Manjula Pradeep

Defending Cows, Defending Caste

Una is a coastal municipality in rural Gujarat. It has roughly sixty thousand inhabitants, most of whom are employed in agriculture. The small agricultural villages that surround it are in many ways the image of rural India imagined by Indian independence leader and spiritual reformer Mohandas Gandhi, a native of Gujarat himself, when he said that the future of India lay in its villages, which he hoped would become "village republics."

This summer Una entered Indian history, but not in the way Gandhi would have imagined. Far from the peaceful idyll of Gandhi's vision, Una was the site of a brutal caste-based attack, and ground zero for a revolt of India's most discriminated community. The mass protests provoked by the Una attack damaged the so-called "caste harmony" of Prime Minister Modi's "Gujarat Model" and evoked the unresolved aftermath of the state's brutal 2002 communal violence, which saw more than a thousand killed, most of them Muslims.

The men beaten on July 11 were accused of having killed village cows to skin them. The vigilantes who carried out the attack are known as *gau rakshaks*, "cow protectors" loosely affiliated with Modi's ruling party and with the broader Hindu nationalist movement.

"There were so many people gathered there, nobody tried to save them," says Manjula Pradeep, a Dalit human rights advocate. In the days following the attack she visited Una, taking down statements from victims and witnesses.

Pradeep, a lawyer, has been an activist in the Navsarjan organization since 1992. Born into a Dalit family in nearby Vadodara, she escaped an abusive patriarchal household by going to college, against her father's wishes. While at university she became involved in Dalit and feminist activism, challenging the male-dominated world of Dalit politics. Her first case at Navsarjan was to go to an Ahmedabad police station to see the body of a brutalized Dalit man who had died in custody. It was the first, but not the last atrocity that she was called on to document and denounce.

In 2008 a Dalit girl accused six high school teachers of rape in the Gujarat village of Patan. Pradeep, who in the meantime had become a lawyer, took the case and won a landmark conviction, in which all six men were sentenced to life in prison. Despite

years of cases dealing with the murder, rape and sexual trafficking of Dalits, Pradeep does not seem to have lost any of her passion or outrage, giving in to desperation or pessimism. The atrocities she deals with, though regular occurrences, are not normal, and she refuses to normalize them. She becomes angry, almost furious, when detailing the crimes that she has witnessed and documented, and smiles, her eyes firing up, when she talks about Dalits taking to the streets to demand their rights.

The intensity she embodies reflects the brutal nature of Indian caste and gender relations. They are not mere social constructs, they are matters of life and death.

“I can’t tolerate this, it’s inhuman, totally inhuman,” she says.

The victims of the Una attack were tanners. For centuries, their caste has collected the bodies of dead animals, harvested the meat and tanned the skins for a meager profit. The perceived impurity of their profession is an extension of their caste: tanners are “untouchable” in the eyes of traditional caste Hindus, like the men who make up the *gau rakshaks* or “cow protector” militias.

Local media later reported that the cows had been killed by lions, per villager testimony. To the vigilantes that may not have mattered. These groups emerged over the last decade ostensibly to combat animal trafficking and protect the tens of thousands of cows that roam the streets of India’s villages and cities. The largest organization of *gau rakshaks*, the *Bhartiya Gau Raksha Dal*, has an overtly Hindu nationalist, or *Hindutva* (“Hindu-ness”), ideology, the same of Modi’s BJP party, and its members have been accused of lynching cattle-traders, who are often Muslim. As the *gau rakshak* groups have multiplied so have accusations of violence, first against Muslims, and now against Dalits as well. While Dalits are not normally involved in the

cattle trade, they often consume beef. This is especially true of tanners, who harvest beef from the already-dead cows they collect.

Tanners are one of hundreds of Dalit castes in South Asian society, collectively accounting for at least 200 million of India's 1.25 billion people. They have traditionally been excluded from social life and forced to live on the outskirts of villages and cities. They are confined to jobs that are considered unclean, like tanning, waste removal and managing cremation sites. Per the 2011 Indian census there are approximately 201 million Dalits in India distributed over 31 states, referred to as members of “Scheduled Castes” by the census itself. Dalits make up nearly 17 percent of India’s population, comprising 1241 individual ethnic groups and castes. Some observers, including the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), believe the overall Dalit population may be much higher, because the census does not count Christians and Muslims as Dalit, even though many – as many as 100 million in the IDSN estimate – belong to Dalit communities.

A 2006 study found that discrimination against Dalits was persistent in rural India, including forms of exclusion and segregation in village schools, marketplaces. Dalit children faced segregation in government schools in nearly 40 percent of villages surveyed, 35 percent of villages barred Dalits from selling produce in local markets, and in 25 percent of villages Dalits were paid lower wages than non-Dalit workers.

“The community which I come from were seen as defiled, impure, polluting people...that was and that is the mindset,” says Pradeep.

Dalits are often the targets of violence, especially in rural settings, and attacks often go unpunished, drawing no response.

Not this time.

The Una attack – recorded and put online by an onlooker – set off a powder keg of Dalit anger. Tens of thousands of Dalits took to the streets across Gujarat, with protests spreading to other Indian states. BJP State Chief Minister Anandiben Patel resigned. A ten-day march left state capital Ahmedabad on August 5, arriving in Una on August 15, India's Independence Day. A new movement emerged, under the fiery leadership of lawyer Jignesh Mevani. As protests continued throughout September, Mevani threatened mass civil disobedience if the state government didn't negotiate. On October 3 the authorities agreed to talks, and Mevani cancelled a scheduled rail blockage. So far, according to Mevani, 200 families have been assigned plots of land through the negotiations.

Since the summer Mevani has continued to wage his struggle, facing state surveillance and pressure. He has been detained by local police twice, once shortly before Modi was scheduled to visit Ahmedabad.

“Modi was afraid,” Pradeep says, smiling.

Mevani seems to have taken it all in stride. He believes the mobilization has been a success.

“The outcome of the post-Una agitation is that we could capture people's imagination all over the country and the world,” he says.

Mevani believes that the protests succeeded in targeting Modi's model of governance, and wants to expand its platform to the broader non-Dalit population.

“We could bring into focus the Gujarat model, which is not just anti-Dalit and anti-Muslim, but completely anti-people,” he says.

The movement in Gujarat echoed a nationwide protest that followed the January 2016 suicide of Rohith Vemula, a 26-year-old Dalit PhD student who lost his scholarship in the wake of campus confrontations between Dalit activists and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the BJP's student wing.

The new movement that has emerged in the wake of the Vemula suicide and the Una attack has younger members and is more leftist than the old guard of Dalit activists formed in the 1950s and 1960s. While Dalit movements have traditionally focused on constitutional reform and affirmative action programs, Mevani and his supporters want land redistribution, to enable Dalit families to abandon their traditional tasks, forever.

"The outcome of the post-Una agitation is that we could capture people's imagination all over the country and the world"
Jignesh Mevani

Ghosts of Gujarat

The Una mobilization has shaken, but not dislodged, the BJP's control of Gujarat, the home state of Prime Minister Modi. Modi was Chief Minister of Gujarat between 2001 and 2014. It was under Modi that Gujarat experienced in 2002 the worst communal violence in recent Indian history.

During the 2002 riots, as many as 1000 Muslims and 300 Hindus lost their lives, with entire neighborhoods and towns ethnically cleansed. Hindu nationalist organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) – the BJP's parent organization – were accused of arming Hindu mobs with sticks, knives and machetes and orchestrating attacks on Muslim areas.

The wounds of the 2002 violence are still very fresh, and on the streets of Ahmedabad's largely Muslim old city tension is still palpable. As I drive through on a Friday the streets are filled with Muslim men leaving the Mosques after *jumu'ah* prayer. My Uber driver, a Hindu with two made-in-China plastic statuettes of Hindu Gods on his dashboard, signals for my attention. He points to an innocuous looking, somewhat portly Muslim man on a bicycle.

"That man...he is dangerous," he says, a somewhat repulsed look on his face.

"He doesn't look dangerous," I reply.

A suspicious look on his face, the driver asks "You, in your country, what caste are you?"

The unresolved legacy of that violence still hangs over the streets of Ahmedabad also hangs over Modi's political career, and plays an important part in the Dalit narratives that have emerged after the Una attack.

Human rights advocates have repeatedly accused Modi of negligence, if not complicity, for inflaming Hindu mobs and for doing little to halt the massacres. The riots also underscored the identification of Dalits with Hindu nationalism, with Dalits making up a major component of the Hindu mobs committing atrocities.

"In the 2002 riots they [the Dalits] were the foot soldiers," says Pratik Sinha, a leftist activist in the Jan Sangharsh Manch (JSM), which provides legal aid to victims of the riots.

The JSM was founded by Sinha's parents, who for decades were the faces of the Gujarati radical left. They also ran campaigns with Mevani's father. The JSM runs the Gujarat Federation of

Trade Unions, which mainly works with urban Dalits, who often work in sanitation.

“They [the BJP] have been trying to create an unnatural unity between Dalits and the upper castes,” Sinha says.

As foot soldiers the Dalit rioters, along with many others, committed rape, murder, theft and forced displacement. But it didn't bring them greater acceptance among the upper castes.

Mevani agrees with Sinha.

“Dalits also got *saffronized*,” he says, referring the traditional color of Hindu nationalism.

“They also participated in 2002 riots, of which I, as a Dalit, held my head in shame.”

The post-Una Dalit movement has made a successful effort to heal relations between Dalits and Muslims. The Dalit movement condemns anti-Muslim discrimination and invites Muslim groups to participate in its marches, under the slogan of “Dalit-Muslim, Brother-Brother.”

While not necessarily an electoral threat to the BJP in Gujarat's upcoming 2017 state elections, this is cause for concern. An alliance between Muslims, who make up 11 percent of the state's population, and Dalits, who make up 7 percent, represents a powerful challenge to the Hindu nationalist narrative of caste unity in a Hindu nation.

India's Other Father

Another ghost-like presence in the Gujarat protests is that of the founder of the modern-day Dalit movement, who coined the phrase Dalit itself, Bhimrao Ambedkar. Ambedkar's image, a

clean cut, robust man invariably wearing a three-piece suit, is everywhere at Dalit protests, held up in posters and little icons, as a backdrop on cell phones and as a sticker on motorbikes.

Ambedkar led the Dalit movement from the 1920s until his death in 1956. He kept the Dalits largely separate from the independence movement, clashing harshly at times with Gandhi. Gandhi accused him of collaboration with the British, to which Ambedkar responded that without an end to caste discrimination, independence would be meaningless for the Dalits.

In a show of respect as well as political tacticism, Gandhi pushed for Ambedkar to be chosen to frame the Indian constitution, which he did, without ever abandoning his critique of Gandhi and what he felt was the caste framework of the new Indian state. Ambedkar fought for and achieved a quota system that guaranteed Dalits work in civil service, a system that has led to the creation of a Dalit middle class in urban areas.

Believing that caste and Hinduism were inseparable, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism from Hinduism in a mass public ceremony in Nagpur, in neighboring Maharashtra, in 1956, and encouraged his followers to do the same. Millions did, hoping to exit the caste system by abandoning the religion that in their view had birthed it. Ambedkar saw conversion as the beginning of a process of social, political and psychological liberation.

Four mass conversions were held this fall around Gujarat, in which thousands of Dalits abandoned Hinduism forever. These ceremonies, called *dhikshas*, re-evoked Ambedkar's conversion and represent a powerful convergence of religion and politics. One person who converted this fall, but in Nagpur, is Pradeep herself. Although she had identified as a Buddhist for years, she had never taken the step of formally converting. On October 11,

the anniversary of Ambedkar's conversion, she did, along with an entire delegation of Dalit activists from Gujarat.

"Buddha was the only one who wanted to abolish the caste system," she says.

While numerically these conversions do not represent a major shift in the region's religious demographics, and are unlikely to change attitudes towards Dalits in rural areas, they represent a powerful symbolic act.

While Buddhism is now the majority religion of Dalits in neighboring Maharashtra, where Ambedkar converted, it has never taken hold in Gandhi's native Gujarat, where many Hindus still call Dalits *harijan*, "children of God." Gandhi, who hoped to keep the Dalits in the Hindu fold, coined the phrase to substitute derogatory terms that implied untouchability, but Ambedkar rejected it flatly as patronizing.

Ambedkar coined the phrase Dalit, which means something in between oppressed and broken to pieces, as a reminder that the community would always have to struggle.

"Dalit for us doesn't mean that we are untouchable," says Pradeep.

"Dalit for us means that we are those who practice equality and fight against inequality."

Echoes of Ambedkar's life of Dalit advocacy can be heard all over India. Far from Gujarat, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, a large bronze bust of Ambedkar graces the entrance to the Dalit Human Rights Centre, in the simmering, but verdant town of Chengalpattu, two hours from Chennai. The coordinator L. Yesumarian is a Dalit activist whose biography

reflects the ethnic and religious diversity of India's Dalits, but also their shared experience of marginalization.

"Socially segregated, politically as well, even at school," Yesumarian says, reminiscing about his earliest memories of exclusion, by upper-caste boys at his school. Yesumarian grew up in a small Tamil village. His father died when he was a child, and he says his mother, as a Dalit widow, was a victim of "double-powerlessness."

"The caste system isolates us...you build up Dalit people's movement, and this movement can have bargaining power with the political parties"

L. Yesumarian, S.J.

"There was no defense except weeping," he says.

As his name suggests, Yesumarian is a Christian. More specifically he is a Jesuit priest, and the entire Centre he runs, while secular, is supported by the Jesuit Madurai Province Chennai Mission. Like many Jesuits, he does not wear any outward signs of being a priest, resembling more a vociferous union representative than a pious prelate. This is appropriate, seeing how, among other things, Yesumarian heads up a union for Dalit workers.

From a young age Yesumarian faced discrimination, not only from upper-caste Hindus, but also within the Catholic community itself, which is divided along caste lines. After being ordained in 1989 he founded the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement, taking on the bishops of Tamil Nadu, accusing them of complacency with the caste system. He even wrote an open letter to Pope John Paul II, asking the Polish pontiff to intervene.

Pradeep and Yesumarian's offices are similar. While Pradeep – a Buddhist – keeps a large white stone Buddha statue in the corner of her office and Yesumarian has some Christian imagery in his, in both one face is prominent-Ambedkar's. And both see the future of their people as a profoundly political issue, not a religious one.

“The caste system isolates us,” he says.

“You build up Dalit people's movement, and this movement can have bargaining power with the political parties,” he says, echoing Ambedkar's core strategy.

Shashank, a young Dalit photographer and social worker I met in Nagpur described the relationship between Dalits and Ambedkar succinctly.

“We are his legacy,” he says.

A Dalit Moment

The new protagonism of Dalits showcased in the wake of Rohith Vemula's suicide and the Una attack has not been limited to politics. India's highest grossing movie of the summer, the Collywood (Tamil-language) blockbuster Kabali, featured a Dalit lead character, who reads and quotes Ambedkar to his gang.

Posters for the movie, which premiered the same week as the Una attack, showed the main character emerging from a sewer, a powerful image instantly identifiable as a representation of Dalit identity. Continuously held down, whether through subtle discrimination or unimaginable brutality, the Dalit question – just like the Dalit people themselves – cannot be ignored.

