

Maharashtra bandh over Bhima-Koregaon clashes: How Dalit angst triggered state-wide protests, v

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Dalit protesters take part in a bike rally on the Eastern Express Highway in Thane on Wednesday after Bhima Koregaon violence

Mumbai: It was on a chilly afternoon on December 29, 2017 at the sleepy hamlet of Vadhu Budruk, some three km away from Koregaon-Bhima in Pune district.

Some unidentified miscreants had gathered at the tomb of a local hero, Govind Gopal Mahar (Gaikwad), and defiled a worn nameplate at the site.

A wrestler by profession, Gaikwad had performed the last rites of the 31-year old Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, who was assassinated in 1689 and his body severely mutilated by Emperor Aurangzeb's soldiers.

The Mughals had warned that anybody who dared to perform the last rites of the slain Maratha warrior king would be punished with death.

However, defying the orders, Gaikwad managed to stitch together the pieces of the king's body and later helped perform the last rites. Though he was later killed by the British, he has remained a symbol of 'Dalit Pride and Courage' since centuries.

For his courageous services, Gaikwad was honoured with a memorial opposite the tomb of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj, the eldest son of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj.

Cut to December 31, 2017:

A 'Yalgar Parishad' was held in the historic Shaniwarvada area of Pune to commemorate the eve of the 200th anniversary of the historic Koregaon-Bhima war between the vanquished army of Peshwar Bajirao II, and a small force of victorious East India Company that comprised a large number of Mahar Dalits.

The conference saw power-packed speeches by several prominent personalities, including newly-elected Gujarat MLA Jignesh Mevani, Umar Khalid, Radhika Vemula, Soni Sori, Vinay Ratan Singh, Prashant Dontha and others.

Dalit groups protesting at Thane railway station during the Maharashtra Bandh on Wednesday following clashes between two groups in Bhima Koregaon near Pune

The 200th anniversary of the Koregaon-Bhima battle of January 1, 1818 was celebrated as usual on Monday by the Koregaon-Bhima Shaurya Din Prerana Abhiyan, participated in by an estimated 400,000 people from all over Maharashtra.

Despite tight security, some groups waving saffron flags allegedly pelted stones at the gathering and this soon degenerated into violent riots, leading to the death of a 28-year old youth from Nanded, Rahul Fatangale, with more than two scores of vehicles damaged.

Early on Tuesday (Jan 1) morning, Nationalist Congress Party President Sharad Pawar and Congress Leader of Opposition Radhakrishna Vikhe-Patil squarely blamed the state government for lapses resulting in the previous day's violence and appealed for peace and calm among all communities.

Dalit protesters burn a bike at Vikroli in Mumbai on Wednesday during a protest over Bhima Koregaon violence

A grim Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis hurriedly announced a judicial probe by a "sitting judge" of Bombay High Court, a CID investigation into the violence and compensation of Rs 1 million for the victim's family.

Moving swiftly amidst rising Dalit furore, the police in Pune's Pimpri suburb lodged a complaint against Shivjagar Pratisthan President Sambhaji Bhide Guruji and Hindu Janjagruti Samiti President Milind Ekbote.

Two activists -- Akshay Bikkad and Anand Dhond -- lodged complaints with the Pune police on Wednesday (Jan 3) terming the December 31 speeches of Mevani and Khalid as being provocative and inciting the people "to come out on the roads and retaliate".

Police personnel arrive to control the situation after an incident of violent clash at Ambedkar Nagar in Aurangabad on Wednesday

However, seething Dalit groups were unconvinced by the government assurances and Bharipa Bahujan Mahasangh, a Dalit party headed by Prakash Ambedkar -- the grandson of Dalit icon B.R. Ambedkar, called for a "peaceful Maharashtra shutdown" on Wednesday to express anger over the Pune incidents of January 1.

Meanwhile, a surging tide of Dalit anger engulfed large parts of Maharashtra with 187 buses of Maharashtra State Road Transport Corporation (MSRTC) damaged in 31 districts, besides scores of private buses, trucks, vehicles and two-wheelers.

The country's commercial capital Mumbai was partially paralysed and millions were stranded on roads and railway stations as Dalit groups indulged in road and rail blockages, processions and protest demonstrations on Tuesday.

A street wears a deserted look following Dalit protests over Bhima Koregaon violence in Pune on Wednesday

The Dalit parties' sponsored 'Maharashtra Shutdown' on Wednesday (Jan 3) evokes huge response in Mumbai and other parts of the state due to rail and road blockages and protest marches, with the impact severe in the rural areas and Dalit strongholds in the state.

The shutdown and its background echoes in parliament with the Opposition parties like the Congress and others attacking the BJP-led government and demanding a statement from Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

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