

The inside story of Bhima Koregaon

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Pune Police is diverting the Bhima Koregaon investigation, protecting Bhide, Ekbote: Deputy mayor Siddharth Dhende

On 1 January 2018, Dalits (lower castes) from across India gathered in Bhima Koregaon, a village 30 kilometers from Pune, to commemorate the bicentennial anniversary of a historic battle that took place in the village in 1818. The battle had culminated in the victory of a small British battalion, largely comprising soldiers from the oppressed Mahar caste, over an army of dominant-caste Peshwas. On the 200th anniversary, as thousands marched towards the memorial pillar (“Vijay Stambh”) erected by the British to commemorate the battle mobs of people carrying saffron flags (of the nationalist organisation associated with the ruling party) attacked the predominantly Dalit gathering.

In the days that followed, the police registered multiple complaints and first information reports, each with competing narratives about the origins of the violence. In early January, the Pune Rural Police appointed a ten-member fact-finding committee, headed by the city’s deputy mayor (at that time), Siddharth Dhende, to inquire into the violence and the events leading up to it. Over a span of ten days, the committee visited Bhima Koregaon and nearby villages, interviewing eyewitnesses, victims, journalists who were present in the area, and local residents. They collected evidence such as individual testimonies, audio-visual proof, including recordings of phone calls and videos from the day of the violence, and messages circulated on Facebook and Whatsapp. The committee submitted a detailed report to the police on 20 January.

The report identifies two Pune-based Hindutva leaders, Milind Ekbote and Manohar Bhide, as the ‘main conspirators’ behind the violence, supported by other local leaders across party affiliations. These findings corroborate an earlier complaint filed by Anita Sawale, a resident of Pune and an eyewitness to the violence. Sawale’s complaint, on the basis of which the police registered an FIR on 2 January, stated that Ekbote and Bhide were responsible for the violence.

The contents of the fact-finding committee’s report assume significance in the wake of recent arrests of prominent civil-rights activists, lawyers and writers, allegedly in connection to the violence on 1 January, which has brought Bhima Koregaon back into the spotlight. The police have claimed that the arrested individuals are Maoists responsible for funding and instigating the violence that took place on 1 January. However, the fact-finding committee’s report contradicts the police narrative about the events leading up to the violence at Bhima Koregaon.

The report is a scathing indictment of both Bhide and Ekbote, of local Hindutva groups, and of the Pune Police. Based on eyewitness accounts that speak of kerosene filled in water tractors and ‘sticks and swords hidden’ in a tea stall the night before, the report explicitly describes what took place in Bhima Koregaon as a ‘pre-planned attack’. The report explains the day-to-day incidents in the build-up to the 1 January violence, identifies specific individuals involved in it, and describes how pleas for help by local residents, including the minister of state for social justice Dilip Kamble, were ignored by the police and by state ministers.

Soon after the report was submitted, the Pune Rural Police denied the committee's findings. They have also since made little progress in the investigation of Sawale's complaint, despite supporting evidence submitted by the police-commissioned fact-finding committee. Instead, the police has been acting on another FIR, registered following a complaint by Tushar Damgude, a businessman in Pune, on 9 January, eight days after the violence broke out. Damgude, who is a follower of Sambhaji Bhide, claimed that the Bhima Koregaon violence was a result of provocative speeches delivered at the Elgar Parishad, a mass public meeting conducted on 31 December 2017, organised primarily by two retired judges of the higher judiciary.

Though the recent wave of arrests are in relation to Damgude's FIR, only one of the ten people arrested so far is even named in the FIR, Sudhir Dhawale, another of the organisers of the Elgar Parishad. Meanwhile, the investigation into the role of the Hindutva leaders in provoking the violence appears to be sluggish. Milind Ekbote is out on bail and the police have said they will not press charges against Bhide. An answer to the sluggish investigation into their role in the Bhima Koregaon violence perhaps lies in their backgrounds. Ekbote is a former BJP corporator who founded the Shiv Jagar Pratishtan, while Bhide is a former RSS worker and founder of the Hindu Janajagan Samiti, with a large following in Maharashtra and across the country, including the prime minister Narendra Modi who has publicly referred to him as 'Guruji' (a great spiritual leader).

The committee's report states that the police 'deliberately failed' to curb the violence, and that that some policemen in civil clothes marched alongside the mobs that carried saffron flags. It further notes that as 'Hindutvawadi crowds' approached the Vijay Stambh, a few people shouted, 'Don't worry, the police is on our side'. In view of this, the committee recommended that the police should not conduct the investigation, and that it should be carried out by a Special Investigation Team. The Pune Rural Police did not respond to several requests for a comment on the committee's report. Both the Pune Inspector General of Police, Vishwas Nangre-Patil, and the Superintendent of Police, Sandeep Patil, did not return calls or respond to messages.

Siddharth Dhende, who headed the fact-finding committee, is a member of the Republican Party of India (Athawale), which is in coalition with the BJP in Maharashtra. He became the deputy mayor of Pune elected on a BJP ticket in November 2017). Dhende rejected the Maharashtra police's claims of Naxal involvement in the Bhima Koregaon violence, and stated that Hindutva groups had instigated caste tensions in the area ahead of the 1 January event. When asked about the police response to the report, 'There is pressure from the government, because this report totally goes against saffron groups and the people with a Hindutva agenda', he said.

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