

THE DALIT YOUNG TURK

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Features & Significant Provisions related to Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles and Fundamental Duties

The 41-year-old Jignesh Mevani dons many hats: prominent Dalit activist, outspoken lawmaker, former journalist and lawyer, to just name a few. Often in the headlines, Mr. Mevani was recently arrested by the Assam Police that came all the way from Kokrajhar to Palampur in north Gujarat over a tweet he posted criticising Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

As soon as he was granted bail, he was rearrested in a case of misbehaving with a policewoman. The local court in Assam, while granting him bail in the second case, has come down heavily on the police for foisting the false case against him. At the time of his arrest from Gujarat, Mr. Mevani said: "I will fight this. I will not relent or bow down."

That's Mr. Mevani for beginners — a relentless fighter. In 2016, he hogged headlines when he spearheaded a movement in support of the rights of the Scheduled Castes in Gujarat following the public torture and flogging of Dalits in Una by self-proclaimed cow vigilantes for allegedly skinning a dead cow in the Saurashtra region.

As a founder member of the Una Dalit Atyachar Ladat Samiti (Committee to fight atrocities against Una Dalits) and the Rashtriya Dalit Adhikar Manch, Mr. Mevani took out a Dalit Asmita Yatra from Ahmedabad to Una, in which more than 15,000 people participated. Taking a pledge to give up their traditional caste-based occupation of removing cow carcasses, thousands of Dalits from across the State came together and demanded justice for the Una victims.

The 370-km protest march culminated on August 15, 2016, in a massive convention in Una where Mr. Mevani gave a fiery speech, asking the community members to unite and fight for their rights, a path shown by Dr. Ambedkar.

Land for Dalits

During the campaign, he demanded that every landless Dalit in the State be given five acres of land, which, according to him, is rightfully theirs. Since 2015, knocking on the door of courts to protesting on the streets in the name of 'rasta roko' and 'rail roko', Mr. Mevani has pursued cases of Dalits who have been allotted land on paper but not given physical possession of the same.

To continue his activism, Mr. Mevani quit his job as a journalist in a weekly and joined hands with the Jan Sangharsh Manch founded by the late Mukul Sinha. Sinha, a human rights activist and lawyer, asked him to get a law degree to be better equipped to fight for the rights of marginalised sections. In Gujarat, a State with around 7% Dalit population, Mr. Mevani has emerged as the leader of the Ambedkarite movement.

The success of Una protest march catapulted him onto the national stage, and he soon emerged as a powerful voice of Dalits and other marginalised communities. In 2017, he announced that he would contest the Assembly elections from Vadgam in north Gujarat, which is reserved for the SCs, as an Independent candidate.

"Friends, I m contesting from Vadgam-11 seat of Banaskantha district of Gujarat as an Independent candidate. We shall fight, we shall win," he tweeted on November 27, 2017 announcing his entry into electoral politics. To pave the way for his victory, the Opposition

Congress decided to shift its sitting MLA from Vadgam, which has a sizeable population of Dalits and minorities, besides OBCs. Mr. Mevani defeated the BJP's Vijay Chakravarti by 19,696 votes.

Born to a middle-class family with both parents working in clerical jobs in government, he grew up in the Dalit-populated Meghaninagar area of Ahmedabad and studied in Gujarati-medium schools. He later joined HK Arts college in Ahmedabad, where he got attracted to drama and theatre, thanks to Saumya Joshi, a poet and playwright, who was a faculty member in the college.

In 2021, he joined the Congress. Before joining the Congress, he had said he had respect for its ideology and joining the party “will give more strength in fighting against the BJP in the coming Assembly election and the 2024 Lok Sabha election.” Before the Una agitation, Mr. Mevani had flirted with the Aam Aadmi Party. He was a spokesman of the party in Gujarat for a short stint. But irrespective of his political party affiliation, Mr. Mevani has been consistent on two fronts — his opposition to the BJP and his activism for the rights of the Dalits and other marginalised communities.

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