

Violent protests in Ahmedabad over deaths in Asaram Bapu school

A protest over the mysterious death of two boys studying in a school of popular spiritual guru Asaram Bapu turned violent Friday with angry people attacking media persons and setting fire to vehicles and even homes. Bapu, who has a huge global following, himself faced irate crowds and barely managed to flee as a mob surrounded his car.

Several parts of Ahmedabad, especially the western area, witnessed violence as people protested the deaths of the two children, Dipesh Praful Vaghela, of Class 5, and Abhishek Shantilal Vaghela, of Class 6.

The two boys were studying in Asaram Bapu's school and went missing on July 4. Their bodies were recovered from Sabarmati river bed on July 5 morning.

The father of Dipesh, Praful Vaghela, has alleged that the two boys were killed and thrown into the river after some ritual at the ashram. The police have not searched a cellar in the ashram which is studiously guarded by white-robed men, he alleged, adding that the police were trying to hush up the case with its shoddy investigation.

Protesters attacked buses in many parts of the city and set fire to houses in Shiv Shaktinagar near Motera area of the ashram. Some vehicles were also torched.

The situation turned out of control when members of the ashram came in busloads challenging the protesters. The sporadic violence then turned ugly when they attacked media persons. Many scribes were hurt.

The inmates did not spare a woman TV scribe of Aaj Tak news channel. She was allegedly beaten and her camera and that of some other photographers broken.

Police had to fire four rounds after some houses were set on fire at Shiv Shaktinagar. Most of those indulging in arson were from the ashram.

The trouble began in the morning when protesters started stopping people from going to the ashram on the occasion of Guru Purnima. Many devotees were forced to get down from the city buses and walk 2 km to the ashram. By afternoon, the ashram members decided to react following the insult to their guru. The men were armed with canes and went about attacking protesters and did not spare journalists.

Maninagar, the constituency of Chief Minister Narendra Modi, was also affected as roads were blocked by the protesters.

Nirnaynagar, where Dipesh's home is located, was the epicentre of the violence. Police had to use canes on protesters to disperse them, leaving many injured, some seriously.

Agitators threw stones at the car of top police officials in Nirnaynagar. The police rushed in reinforcements after teargas and cane charge failed to control the mob.

In the morning, Asaram Bapu faced one of the most embarrassing moments of his life when he went

to the house of Dipesh's father Praful Vaghela. He had to flee within a few minutes after protesters booed him away and a menacing mob began surrounding his car, threatening his safety.

Vaghela, who has been observing a 'maun vrat', or vow of silence, for the last four days ordered all the things that Asaram Bapu had touched in the house to be burnt. Even the wooden mat on which the godman sat was set ablaze.

The other dead boy is the son of his brother Shantilal Vaghela.

Asaram Bapu has denied the accusations against his ashram and said he would cooperate with the police.

The condition of Praful Vaghela is said to be deteriorating as he continues with his fast. The parents of the two boys have approached Chief Minister Narendra Modi and Governor Nawal Kishore Sharma, demanding a probe by an independent agency.

The Gujarat Congress, supporting the bandh, has charged the police with high-handedness that led to worsening of the situation. Siddharth Patel, the newly appointed Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee president, visited the home of the family of deceased.

The Asaram Bapu ashram located near the banks of river Sabarmati is visited by his devotees for prayers, yoga and meditation. The Bapu, fondly called by his devotees as Sant Sri Asaramji, had set up the first of his many ashrams, numbering more than 200 worldwide, here in 1971. There is a special centre for women too at the place.

He has set up many ashrams the world over and also over 1,500 meditation centres. He is reported to wield strong political clout and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) is one of his prime supporters.

The ashram also is involved in many philanthropic activities all over the country as it provides financial aid to poor people including food, shelter, education. It therefore has a mass appeal.

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