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### "Why the Dalits alone should take the entire burden and responsibility in fighting against caste system?"

An Interview with Manjula Pradeep

By Gomathi Kumar & Sanjay Kabir



Manjula Pradeep is the Executive Director of Gujarat-based Dalit organisation Navsarjan. After receiving her Masters in Social Work (MSW) she joined the organisation in 1992 and has been working on different issues since then. Apart from leading organisation's legal cell on Dalit atrocities, she has been in forefront of the movements for agricultural labourers, bonded labourers and developing women cooperatives in the rural areas of Gujarat. In 1997, she completed her law degree to be able to take up cases related with caste and gender atrocities. Leading Navsarjan since 2004, Manjula Pradeep has trained hundreds of grassroots activists and has represented Dalit and Dalit women's issues at various national and

international fora.

Recently, your organisation has been in news for the study on practices of untouchability in Gujarat? What are the findings of this study?



Illustraion by Rajesh Kumar, JNU, New Delhi

Our study on the practices of untouchability covered 1655 villages in Gujarat and took three years to complete. We have <u>shared some of its findings with the media</u> to create awareness. In the study, we found 99 different practices of untouchability and have tried to identify the specific regions where these are practiced. Most prevalent practices are related to right to equality in religion and religious affairs. In more than 90 % of the villages, Dalits are not allowed to enter the temples or to touch the idols and worship articles. They are not allowed to participate in the religious processions and other rituals.

In addition to that, Dalits are not allowed to sit on the chair or cot before any non-Dalit. They necessarily have to sit on the ground. The other practice that comes out very prominently is on food. Dalits are generally not invited in the community meals, if invited they are seated separately and have to carry their own vessels. They are served tea in cups ironically called *Ram patras* that are kept separately in non-Dalit households. Then we find untouchability being practiced against Dalits in providing basic amenities like drinking water, use of ration shops, postmen not providing their services, not allowed to touch the vegetables in shops etc.

Every one knows that there is untouchability in our country but somewhere this whole issue is being put aside and portrayed as a thing of the past. So we carried this study to give authenticity to our claim that untouchability practices are not only alive and kicking in this country but also present everywhere and in every sphere of our social life. We cannot just wish away from the reality.

### What was the methodology used for this study?

While initiating the study we were clear that it should be done scientifically, without any bias. A thorough training was provided to 200 field workers of Navsarjan for the survey and to collect information. We prepared a detailed questionnaire of 6 pages and whatever information that was collected was then scanned and fed into the computer and statistics prepared.

Also the study was carried by a mixed group (of men and women) of Navsarjan activists because we knew that if the team consisted only of men then the women in the village would not talk and if the research team had only women, the village men usually would not respond. So we had teams of two activists, a

man and woman, going to each village and collecting the information through community based interviews and household surveys. Within the community, the study stratification was based on sub-castes, age and gender and within household surveys it was on age and gender. So it took 4-5 days for our colleagues to complete the survey in one village.

The study was carried through the support of <u>Prof C. Davenport</u> (Professor of Peace Studies & Political Science at the Kroc Institute of International Peace Studies, University of Notre Dame, USA). He has already done a marvelous study on ethnic cleansing in Rwanda and has authored numerous well-researched documents on Afro-Americans and their struggles.

### The practices of untouchability are found in almost every part of the country. Did you find any peculiar form of untouchability being practiced in Gujarat?

One peculiar form of untouchability we have come across is that, in many villages, milk sellers from the shepherd community do not sell milk to Dalits during the navratri festival. Navratri is celebrated for nine days across the state with great fervour and for all these nine days the milk sellers believe that they would get polluted if they sell milk to Dalits. Then there are some villages where when a rajput dies, Dalit men have to shave their heads to mourn the death. I don't know whether this is practiced anywhere else in the country.

### Apart from the untouchability practices against Dalits, did you focus on any other issues in your study?

We also focused on untouchability practices within Dalits. Though we knew about the prevalence of untouchability among different Dalit sub-castes but still it was shocking for us to know the extent of the practice. Within the Dalits also there is a hierarchy, for example, the vankar caste practices untouchability against balmikis in Gujarat. This gives us the challenge of how do we address the issue of sub-caste divisions within the Dalits while fighting for overall Dalit rights.

#### What are the major Dalit sub-castes in Gujarat?

Major sub-castes are Weavers (*Vankar*), Leather Tanners (*Chamar* or *Rohit*), *Senwa*, *Nadia* and *Balmiki*. There are various other Dalit sub-castes but these are the major ones.

### What have been the responses on the findings of this study in Gujarat?

The study is yet to be published. But we have shared some of its major findings with the press. In response to that we have been getting some media attention. Apart from that, I have received letters from the State Social Welfare Board and Director General of Police asking for a copy of the study so that they could take action. I am waiting for the study to get translated in Gujarati and then share it with media, to the community, to people from across castes.

The findings of this study must reach to common man in Gujarat. Then, probably, there will be some challenges before us as the study not only highlights the private practices of untouchability but also that in public sphere – panchayats, schools, temples etc. I know it will create some tension.

## The widespread prevalence of untouchability is one issue on which the government and so called Indian civil society has always been in the denial mode. And they have been quite successful too in doing so since independence. In such scenario what are your expectations from this study?

Coming to state's response, I would like to quote one incident. Recently, The Times of India carried a news item on our study and had mentioned the name of one village - Lodariyal. Immediately government officials came to that village and started threatening people of Balmiki community for their talking about the untouchability practices. The officials claimed that whatever they shared was not true and forced them to give that in writing by taking their thumb impressions on blank papers. As soon as the officials left, our local activist was informed about this incident and all of us immediately rushed to the village. Now the

counter affidavit has been filed by the Dalits that they were being threatened by government officials. We are also taking legal actions against the concerned government officials.

All this is going to happen, we are very well aware. It would be interesting to watch how a study that has been conducted across 1,655 villages out of 12,500 total villages in Gujarat, representing 98,000 Dalits (almost 11 % of total Dalit population in the state) can be ignored. It will be quite a challenge to do so.

### When will this study be published?

We are thinking of publishing it on 14th April, 2010 on the Birth Anniversary of Babasaheb Ambedkar.

While interviewing Dalit activists and scholars, we are increasingly getting aware of rich traditions of Dalit assertions and struggles in pre-independent India. Almost every region had a well-organised Dalit movement that fought against untouchability and social exclusion, simultaneously claiming an independent identity for all untouchables. How was the movement in Gujarat?

Gujarat, definitely, has a history of Dalit assertion but then it is a little different from other regions. With only 7 percent of its population as SC, Gujarat has the lowest concentration of Dalits in the country. Then Gujarat being the birth place of Gandhiji and one of the main centres of anti-colonial struggle, the autonomous Dalit movement against social exclusion and untouchability could never assume prominence, especially during British times.

Later every one believed that because of Gandhiji untouchability has been abolished, at least in this state. Though there had been many Dalits across Gujarat who fought against caste discrimination but their struggle was never recognised.

Even prior to colonial period there were many Dalits who sacrificed their lives for the cause. However, with the passage of time, these martyrs got religious colours. One such example is of Veer Megh Mahya, a Dalit hero, who sacrificed his life to win some freedoms for the community during the reign of King Siddhrajsinh Solanki (with his capital at Patan) in medieval period.

### Who was Veer Megh Mahya?

It is said that once there was a severe drought during Siddhrajsinh Solanki's reign and people were dying without water. The court astrologer advised the king to find a man with 32 good qualities and sacrifice him to end the drought. The hunt for the perfect man ended with Mahya, an untouchable, who hailed from Ranoda village (in present Dholka taluka, Ahmedabad).

Mahya agreed to sacrifice himself but with three conditions - the untouchables from then onwards would not carry brooms tied behind their backs, they would not tie pot around their necks for spitting and would not carry extra pocket or third sleeves on their upper garments. These were the markers of being an untouchable during those times and were strictly enforced by dominant castes. The king had to agree to these conditions and then Mahya was killed.

It is unfortunate that modern historians have never recognised him and his struggle but his memories are being kept alive by the Dalits in Gujarat. In the rural areas, they keep a copper pot in the foundation while constructing their houses and tie a green festoon (chundadi) at their doors in memory of Veer Megh Mahya. I feel it is very important for all of us who are engaged in fighting against caste discrimination to remember the lives and struggles of our forefathers.

Thanks so much for elaborating on the study undertaken by your organisation and narrating the story of Veer Megh Mahya. We are sure that this would benefit our readers and help them to make their resolve to fight against caste-discrimination much stronger. How did you get exposed to the Dalit struggle and what motivated you to become part of it?

I belong to a family that like many other literate, urban-based Dalit families suffer from insecurities about

revealing their caste identities and suffer the indignities silently. This insecurity makes children and youth of such families more vulnerable to caste-ridicule and prejudices that are prevalent in urban public spaces. My motivation came from having such a family background. I was ridiculed in school and then in college due to my caste background. I was amazed to witness how people view you differently just because of your birth in 'low' caste.

Then I had also gone through much gender discrimination in my own family. So there was lot of anger in me and that made me very vocal and I was always seen as a rebel child. I had to go through lot of struggles while opposing the conservatism prevalent within my family itself. I think, all this made me want to do something in the society and so I did my Masters in Social Work (MSW) from MS University Baroda and joined the organisation - Navsarjan, which is working on caste issues, in 1992.

I was the first woman to join the organisation and started working in the villages. I realised that the world I have understood through books and cities is completely different from the reality and that made me more focussed, committed and passionate about our cause – both caste and gender.

#### How do you define a Dalit organization?

Dalit organization should be an organization working with a particular ideology – the ideology that liberates the entire community from the shackles of caste-based discrimination and exclusion. It should be an organisation promoting Dalits as leaders and pioneers ensuring equality in the society. It should not be an organization where you are excluded, you are isolated yourself. Dalit organisation aims towards making Dalit a powerful socio-political identity rather than making it merely an oppressed community. Anger of the Dalit community must come out and these organisations have to channelise that anger towards making it a strong community.

### There are a lot of issues that are significant for any Dalit organisation. What according to you are the most important ones?

The major Dalit issue for me is constant exposing of the exploitative mechanism of caste system in our society. In a way it is not just a Dalit issue rather I would say it is a societal issue. Why only the Dalits should take the entire burden in fighting against caste system? The burden lies with the entire society. However, it is also true that this issue is not going to become the national issue till the Dalits raise their voice, assert themselves and lead the movement against caste discrimination as they are the ones who bear the maximum brunt of caste-based discrimination. So the primary responsibility, as far as I feel, lies with the Dalit organisations and by far this is the major issue they need to deal with.

Navsarjan is one of the largest Dalit organisations of the country that has led successful movements for Dalit land rights, against caste-atrocities, against manual scavenging apart from creating institutions like Dalit Shakti Kendra (DSK) and opening residential schools for Dalit children. How do you mobilise the local Dalit community and activists around common issues?

Navsarjan is basically a grass-roots movement, a network of people who are politically and socially conscious and want to contribute towards fighting against caste-based discrimination. Started in 1989 as a small group of people, Navsarjan, after two decades of its involvement, has become an organisation of different Dalit groups. Within the organization, almost 95% of people are from Dalit community itself and work with the local groups. In that way, the mobilization of the community happens. There are various small groups in Gujarat and in other states too who need support from organizations like Navsarjan and so we provide them support in terms of trainings, capacity building skills etc.

### How do you mobilize financial resources for the organisational activities?

Navsarjan started very modestly with almost no financial resources and when I joined it just had a small office at Rs 25 as monthly rent. But with time we were able to get right donors to carry forward our organisation's activities. Having right donors is very important for any organisation. It is not that you only need funds for the growth of organisation but also the right kind of partnerships. Navsarjan does not

believe in project-based organisations that are driven by funding agencies.

We also believe in common people's participation and contribution in raising resources for our activities. For running our schools, we raised Rs 12 lakh from the community by taking individual contributions from different villages in Gujarat. For all our local programmes and activities, almost half of the financial resources come from the community directly.

### Being engaged primarily with the issues of rural Dalits, what have been your experiences dealing with local administration?

Navsarjan has to confront the local administration and the state very often as we believe in rule of law and work for ensuring the constitutional rights for not only Dalits but for others too. We put pressure on the state to perform its responsibilities with our legal-based approach and use all the laws and provisions available. Being a grass-root organisation, the state is also very well aware of our capacity for mobilising the community. We also realise that we do work that carries some weight and therefore feel confident while dealing with the local administration on the issues that we feel are genuine and have impact on the larger society.

### What kind of strategies you use to mobilize rural Dalit community on the particular issue of caste-based atrocities?

To fight caste-based atrocities and violence was the very first programme of Navsarjan and the basic issue around which its foundation was laid in 1989. In the same year, the central government came out with the Prevention of Atrocities (SC/ST) Act. Our organisation not only highlights atrocities but also fights the legal battles by using the above-mentioned Act. Navsarjan uses this Act in two ways - one is using the law effectively to get justice to the victims and then mobilising the community to condemn that particular atrocity as it is never one person or family that is affected by that incident but it is always the community that is the target.

### How far the laws like Prevention of Atrocities (SC/ST) Act, 1989, are effective? How do we ensure that such laws are implemented properly?

Many laws are there to provide justice to Dalits but if we keep waiting for the state to implement them, then it is never going to happen. Such laws can be effective only when we, ourselves, learn how to use them. We conduct a lot of legal awareness campaigns within the community on POA (SC/ST) Act. It is very important that our people should know about such laws.

But more importantly the local administration including the police department must be made aware about such laws because most of the time authorities themselves are unaware of the laws and have no inclination to become aware and implement these laws.

The laws are the potent tools for the liberation of Dalits but the system itself is much prejudiced against Dalits. In context of Gujarat, I would say that Navsarjan has been able to get lot of convictions and judgements including life imprisonments for the people who were guilty of caste based violence like murders and rapes but for all this we have to push and go after the system each time.

## In the last 20-30 years there has been sudden upsurge in the Dalit movement. A number of Dalit led organisations have come up working at different levels. What are the reasons behind this phenomenon?

I feel, one of the strongest reasons is growing awareness in the community and I think the legal awareness among the Dalits has increased manifold compared to other communities. You take any other minority or marginalised community of this country and compare. And because of this awareness the Dalits are trying to organise themselves. They have also realised that they need to fight for their rights on their own. In the period of 80s and 90s, many Dalits started their organisations in different spheres of social life and that also set models for other assertive Dalits to follow.

### What are your expectations from the contemporary Dalit movement?

There are a lot of expectations. First, it should come out of identity politics and if the movement has to become truly a national one then it also needs to create a new definition of the word 'Dalit'. In Navsarjan, we have tried to do it. For us, 'Dalit is a moral position, where a person believes and practices equality and fight against the inequality across caste, gender and religion'. I think the Dalit movement has to work on that. We also need to introspect that within the movement where the spaces for other sub-castes are and how to take up systemic issues like manual scavenging, devdasi practices more effectively. Then there are issues of Dalit women and children that need to be highlighted and to be brought in forefront of the Dalit movement.

You have been leading one of the major civil society organisations of this country for almost five years now. Being a woman, what are the challenges you have faced while heading the organisation?

This is the question everyone has for me (laughs). It was very clear from the beginning that I have to prove doubly than any man while heading the organisation. Although I could say that I am as efficient and capable as anyone else but the thing is your identity as a woman makes people perceive you through gender lens - how could a woman lead the organisation? The society also believes that the leadership is masculine quality. I have gone through all that and it was a bit painful but if you keep on working hard and are able to articulate your concerns, people at some point of time would start acknowledging your leadership.

Apart from having Dalit woman as head of the organisation, how far has Navsarjan provided space for other Dalit women at different levels?

Navsarjan is one organisation that is treated as a model within the Dalit movement in the sense that we are able to address the issue of caste together with talking about the role of Dalit women in the movement. It is very important as the Dalit movement is often seen as being led by Dalit men and talking only about caste as major form of discrimination by not looking at intersectionalities with different issues.

Within the organization, we have made lots of structural changes and women are occupying many important positions. If a woman is heading some organisation, it does not necessarily mean that automatically space will be created for other women. You need to create some space. But ultimately we need to make gender issues as our core agenda within the Dalit movement to bring more Dalit women leaders.

[Gomathi Kumar and Sanjay Kabir did their Masters of Social Work (MSW) from Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai in the session 2007-09]

December 23rd, 2009 in <u>Assertion, Gender, History, Identity, Interview, Law, State, magazine</u> | tags: <u>balmikis, Baroda, Dalit Shakti Kendra, Gujarat, King Siddhrajsinh Solanki, Lodariyal, Mahya, MS</u> <u>University, navratri, Navsarjan, Patan, Prevention of Atrocities (SC/ST) Act, Prof C. Davenport, sub-caste divisions, Times of India, University of Notre Dame, Untouchability, vankar</u>

### 13 Comments

kantaDecember 23rd, 2009 at 9:13 am

Inspiring.. its heartening to see an educated urban dalit woman working for dalit cause at grass roots level.. 100-1 forms of discrimination!!! its a shame on part of those who practice it...im curious to know the different form of discrimination. where can i get the list? how many might be there in urban areas? i feel,not renting homes to dalits will be one among them.. any other form in urban settings?if it is less can we say that there is no caste descrimination in urban india? or is it that the educated people practice

discrimination slyly/cunningly..

thanks Gomathi Kumar & Sanjay Kabir for a good interview

sachinDecember 23rd, 2009 at 11:32 am

I congratulate to Gomati & Kabir for doing this fantastic work and exposing the reality. This is vary valuable report which will expose Mr.Gandhi as well who was against dalit movement. Thanks

With revolutionary Jai Bheem, Sachin Gholap

GyanDecember 23rd, 2009 at 5:11 pm

Another interesting interview! It was good to read about the Dalit movement in Gujarat, and the important work being carried out by Navsarjan under the able guidance of Manjula Pradeep ji. I look forward to the publishing of the survey results compiled by Navsarjan. And thanks to Gomathi and Sanjay for sharing with us all the important work being done by Navsarjan and introducing us with a committed Dalit leader.

### Dr.Laxmi N.Berwa, M.D.F.A.C.P., U.S.ADecember 23rd, 2009 at 9:09 pm

I was delighted to read "The First Lady CEO-Chief Executive Officer" Ms. Manjula Pradeep's inspiring leadership position of Navsarjan, I have know Navsarjan's activity for many years, its former Director (Martin McWan)was present at the Durban Conference as NGO, World Conference on Racism and Xenophobia, also he got Robert Kennedy Award on Human Rights in Washington D.C, America, I was one of the invitees at Award Ceremony and at the Kennedy'd house for the reception in honor of Martin Mcwan in Mclean, Virginia. It is not unusaual for a Dalit girl like Manjula to encounter resistance even among the family memebers to be activist, for many reason, some time very silly ones. I can sympathisize with her with all the hurdles and resistance encounteres by her on acount of her caste by the racist/ casteist Indians. Story of Veer Megh Mahya was similar to "Punj Pyare of Guru Govind Singhji". who were willing to sacrifice for the sikh Guru. I am sure if you dig into oral history of dalits, there were and even today, many many brave dalits who fought to liberate their community from the gas chamber of horrors of Hinduism, like what Nazi's did to Jews.Legal power is great to fight for our liberation but the damn enforcing of the laws is vested in the hand of our enemies, it is like fox made incharge of the henhouse.WE need to push our dalit politicians to demand more recruitment of dalits in police and judiciary. It appears that Navsarjan is in good hand with Ms. Majula Pradeep. I wish her all the best and hope that she continue to serve Navsarjan with the same zeal and zest for many years to come and produce new young and dynamic, and brave leaders like Mahay. in the furure. The core practices of untouchabilty is pretty much the same throughout India with little variation i.e social exclusion leads to financial deprivation, political deprivation, leads to total emasculation and total loss of human personality. Again as usual, Gomathi and Sanjay have done a wonderful job of interviewing Ms. Manjula Pradeep.

I have suggestion to the Collective Editoirals of Insight to compile all these interviews in a book formet which also can generat revenue for INSIGHT Foundation.

ashok yadavDecember 27th, 2009 at 8:15 am

The interview enlightens. She is somewhat correct when she says why should dalits alone take all the burden and responsibility in fighting the caste system. In a capitalist system it is the working class who have to take the entire responsibility and burden in fighting the class exploitation, though the working class does not do it alone because it cannot do it alone, it takes the support and makes an alliance with other exploited classes of the society like peasantry, petty bourgeoisie, agricultural labourers etc. The working class does not fight against class system as a whole out of some moral obligation but because it is the necessity of his life. Without putting an end to the class system as a whole the working class cannot

liberate itself in a piecemeal manner. In the same manner as the dalits suffer most from the caste system it is the dalit who will have to take the historic responsibility in waging a struggle for annihilation of caste system though in association with the OBCs, the women, the adivasis and other oppressed groups. The moral of the story is that the dalits cannot liberate itself in a piecemeal manner. The liberation will be total. This is not without precedence. Kanshi Ram went ahead to organise eighty five percent as against fifteen percent. Kanshi Ram widened the horizon for dalits which Mayawati reduced to dalits only. Kanshi Ram exemplified that dalits can give leadership to all .

Anoop KumarDecember 27th, 2009 at 8:45 am

#### @ Ashok

I agree that there is a need of borad alliance of Dalits, OBCs, STs, women, minorities to fight against caste system. Nobody denies that.

But the question is how many OBCs, STs, women, Minorities are willing to, or even bother thinking about this broad alliance apart from very few. Every one talks abt this broad alliance and about the weakness/failure of dalit movement to forge one.

kanshiram saheb tried but failed, BAMCEF is still trying but i dont see many OBCs, STs, Women, minorities joining the anti-caste struggle.

Where lies the problem?

Merely criticising Dalit leaders or movement wont help at all. The need is to introspect whether OBCs, STs, women, minorities are willing to join the struggle or they also treat the whole movement as 'untouchable'?

Liz RoyDecember 27th, 2009 at 11:47 am

Thank you for this great interview. I was privileged to be involved with one of Navsarjan's initiatives to end manual scavenging in a village in Gujarat, and learn about the Dalit rights movement from Manjula and her team. I remain especially respectful of her commitment to end caste-based and gender-based oppression.

I look forward to the full release of the report and hope that will elicit some broad dialogue both among Dalit communities for whom it confirms the reality of their experience and for those who deny continuing caste-based discrimination.

RajDecember 29th, 2009 at 11:58 am

तुम सोचते हो कि, हमारी यह हालत किसने कर दी है मैं कहता हूँ, क्या तुम स्वयमं इसके लिए जिम्मेदार नहीं हो, क्योंकि तुमने कभी शोषण का विरोध ही नहीं किया। विचारों या अहिंसा से इसका जवाब ही नहीं दिया, गर तुम खड़े होते संगठित होकर, अन्याय व शोषण के दमन के लिए तो किसकी मजाल होती आज जो तुम्हे अपमानित करता बेखौफ होकर।

उठो अभी भी वक्त है, सुनहरे कल के लिए,

शिक्षित बनो और संगठित रहो, जंग के लिए,

CynthiaDecember 31st, 2009 at 8:17 am

A very good interview, and for a change we have a woman who gives leadership to the cause of the anti-caste struggle! Kudos to Majula and her struggle.

@Anoop: I think there are a few here and there, belonging to the OBCs who are rallying on the anti-caste issue. Kancha Ilaiah and Braj mani are two intellectuals, who take this postition, for instance. In Karnataka there are a number of non-dalits who take an anti-caste stance in public. The entire non-brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu is another example. so yes, there is ome hope, and it is indeed getting stronger.

Pardeep AttriJanuary 3rd, 2010 at 12:14 am

This is really a good interview. Liked it very much. Thanks

bhagya,samaantara,hyderabadJanuary 4th, 2010 at 2:20 am

it is very very inspiring interview. Thank alot to gomathi and sanjay for their good effort. We are bringing dalit magaizne in telugu language since two years in andhra pradesh. i would like to translate and publish it for our telugu readers too. It is a fact that very few women are in the leadership in the struggles that to grassroot level. i hope this interview may inspire some of our fellow dalit women activists.

Anoop KumarJanuary 4th, 2010 at 4:43 am

Dear Bhagya

Thanks so much for your comment. Please go ahead and translate and publish the interview in Telugu. It is indeed quite an inspiring interview.

Anoop

On behalf of Insight Editorial Collective

saraJanuary 4th, 2010 at 9:40 am

what a pity about modern india

i really wish Navsarjan rethinks about their publication date, 14th april is of great worth for dalits and dooms day for hindus, would bringing out the report on 14th april, the most cherished day for dalits a good thing to do, one wonders? of course the findings of the report is blot on india and it deserves to be released on country's independence day.

and one wonders why cant gujrat rebel?come on sista you cant be so meek and weak, your rebel is long due.

in between is this the same study in which S.Thorat, Ghansham Shah and Anupana Rao were involved?

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