

Gujjars and the Electoral Politics in Rajasthan

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***Abstract:** The politics of the BJP has so far been a politics of mobilization whether at the state or at the central level in the truest sense, and one can realize that most often than not the basis of this mobilization is religious sentiments that appeal to the minds of the majority. The issues of the dalits or the so called “picchre barg” also come to agenda as a part of this mobilization politics if it is Uttar Pradesh or Bihar. The Gujjar movement in Rajasthan had brought to the fore an electoral promise of the BJP to include the Gujjars in the list of the ST of the state that helped the BJP to corner the Congress in order to get the support of the Gujjars as such. The issue was apparently simple. The Gujjar community of the Rajasthan wants ST status to have the benefit of the policy of what is sometimes called as affirmative action. But the move of the Gujjars has been opposed by the Meenas. The Gujjars and the Meenas are the two antagonistic groups in Rajasthan. The Meenas are also numerically significant in Rajasthan and play a deciding role in electoral politics. The movement of the Gujjars for the ST status has become a matter of concern for the Meenas as they are worried of losing their near-monopoly over the reserved seats for government jobs. Thus the demand for compensatory justice has led to a fear competitive claim that compels the Meenas to oppose it by all possible ways. The present paper examines how this has made the whole issue more complicated for all the political parties in that state and focuses on the nature of caste politics in Rajasthan that revolved around the demands of the Gujjars. At last under tremendous pressure government has been forced to make reservations for them as Special Backward Class.*

Keywords: Gujjars, Jats, Meenas, ST, OBC, equality, justice, reservation.

The issue

What may be called a critical political impasse has not only paralysed time and again the state of Rajasthan but has raised an important question regarding the ethics of politics. Andre Beteille (2000: 275) in a different context wrote that in modern democratic societies ‘government and opposition speak in radically different voices but are seen, when the turn comes for exercising power, to be acting in remarkably same ways.’

The issue is apparently simple. The Gujjar community of Rajasthan wanted ST (Scheduled Tribe) status to have the benefit of the policy of affirmative action. This was not new, the Gujjars first made this demand in mid-1980s. The then Congress-led state government did not give much importance to it. The demand was again placed before the Asoke Gehlot-led Congress (I) ministry. The Congress turned down the demand once more. It is also true that the Gujjar movement, at that time, could not take a shape to create sufficient pressure on the government. One reason may be the fact that this movement suffered from the absence of an effective leader from that community (Rajalakshmi 2007).

In May 2007 the Gujjars emerged as a significant force under Kirori Singh Bainsla, the leader of Gujjar Arakshan Sangharsh Samiti, to press for the demand of their ST status in a very organized way, and their movement not only shuddered the BJP-led government of Rajasthan but also spread over Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi. The internal organization of this movement, during this time, got consolidated and its leaders tried to percolate the simple and one-point agenda of the movement among the members of their community. Even the women of remote villages of Gujjar dominated districts of Rajasthan started believing that their condition would not improve unless they are granted the benefits meant for the scheduled tribes of the state. The example of the Meenas, a scheduled tribe, was also ready at their hands to make their demand credible and convince the fellow members of the community and others. The Gujjars believe that the Meenas have really been benefited from reservation policy. A true feeling of deprivation spilled over as the BJP government did not take any concrete measure, administrative or political, except forming Chopra committee¹ (even the report of this committee has gone against the Gujjars) to look after the validity of the demand. Moreover it tried to suppress the movement by police force that caused the death of a large number of movement supporters².

This was what may be called the first phase of the Gujjar movement. It had visibly four important aspects. Firstly, the caste sentiments of the Gujjars, who were previously a dispersed community, had been percolated in such a way that helped increase their in-group solidarity to a significant level. Secondly, as the Gujjars labeled the inaction of the government as a political perfidy, their strategic support to the BJP government had drastically eroded. Thirdly, the inter-caste rivalry between the Gujjars and the Meenas was transformed into a virtual caste war. And lastly, the brutal suppression of the movement by the “trigger-happy” police force of the state not only took the life of many but also created an instance of bad governance that has been condemned by all sections of the society. However what makes the comment of Beteille mentioned at the beginning of this article relevant is that in 2003 assembly election this BJP leadership criticized the earlier government for neglecting the long-standing demand of the Gujjars and promised to take action to include the name of the Gujjars in the list of ST had they come to power.

If this was the first phase of the movement, the second phase started in the last week of May 2008, just one year after its first phase, with the same demand and in same way of creating pressure on the government. To describe the severity of the movement *The Times of India*³ writes ‘[w]ith the toll crossing 38 in two days and scores of people in hospitals, the Army was called out.’ In several places the supporters blocked the railways and National Highways with the dead bodies of their comrades. Rajasthan, thus, was in serious political crisis and there was no sign of immediate way out.

The politics and the blunder

The alleged electoral promise of the present BJP leaders to include the name of the Gujjar, who are at present recognised as OBC in the state, before the assembly election of 2003, was a part of its electoral politics. The Gujjars originally backed the Congress (I) in the state; but the chemistry changed as soon as they felt betrayed by the Congress leadership. And the BJP played the right (?) card (Rajalakshmi 2007). Initially this support of the Gujjars not only helped the party come to the power but also created a pro-dalit image of the party. It was too transient however. To point out how the promise of the BJP has become a fishbone, we should look at a statement of a leader of the Gujjars:

If the BJP government does not do justice, the Gujjar vote will definitely not go to them. The Congress betrayed us; they paid the price. If we so decide, we can influence the electoral outcome of any political outfit in at least 42 constituencies. If political parties think our votes are no good, we will at least play a role in defeating such parties (Rajalakshmi 2007).

This statement was made just one year before the Gujjars started the second phase of their movement with new vigor almost paralyzing the normal life of the state. The initial reaction of the state administration was also feudal - use of force and other undemocratic methods to label the insurgency as the conspiracy of the criminals. Even the supply of drinking water and food was stopped or curtailed in some Gujjar dominated areas to upset the spirit of the movement. Report says that the death toll, mostly in police firing, in the first few days of this second phase of the movement, reached 38⁴.

Two important consequences of this brutal repression were clearly evident. Firstly, it indirectly contributed to the in-group solidarity of the Gujjars. Noticeably a large number of Gujjar women came out in the street. The participation of women in such a movement added a new dimension. Secondly, the Gujjars lost faith on the state government. So the face-saving announcement of a package of 282 crores for their development by the state government could do nothing to stop the movement⁵. Even the letter of the chief minister of Rajasthan, to the prime minister requesting him to explore the possibility of giving ST status to the Gujjars with 4 to 6 per cent reservation, was interpreted as “passing the buck” game.

The populist strategy of the BJP in 2003 election was a mistake. The demand of the Gujjars for ST status had been vehemently opposed by the Meenas, another powerful tribal community in the state. And the census data show that their population is the highest among all the scheduled tribes of the state, whose support was instrumental for the ruling party to retain power in the state. So the Meenas were considered as more important in electoral politics compared to the Gujjars. The movement of the Gujjars for the ST status had become a matter of concern for the Meenas as well since they were worried about losing their near-monopoly over the reserved seats in government jobs. Thus the demand for compensatory justice had made the Meenas apprehensive and they decided to oppose the movement of the Gujjars. The dynamics of inter-community rivalry shows that in the future the Gujjar-Meena antagonism may take the form of what Giri (2001: 267) calls ‘the annihilation of the other’ that, according to him, is the common trend of contemporary identitarian movements.

However the dilemma among the ranks of the BJP was clear: if they became sympathetic to the demands of the Gujjars they would surely face the threat from the Meenas. More important is the fact that this crisis made public the dissension even among the prominent BJP leaders regarding the way in which the Gujjar issue was dealt with, which had far reaching implications for the party in the state.

Quota panacea

In an article entitled 'Managing Multiplicity: The Insider-Outsider Duality' Yogesh Atal (2001) has raised a very important issue which bears relevance to our basic question regarding the effectiveness of quota to supplement the "policy of inclusion" as a part of compensatory justice. Atal says: '[t]he success of the programme of "positive discrimination" should be measured in terms of an increasingly decreasing list of those who are its beneficiaries. But if the opposite is the case, which is inherent in the negatively oriented policy of positive discrimination, then it must be changed' (ibid: 3464). And this negative orientation is evident not only in the demands and charters of the communities fighting for the inclusion of their names in the Schedule for some special privileges, but also in some contemporary social science discourses that want to show protectionism as the antidote to backwardness.

However the basic argument against any kind of reservation or what is called preferential treatment is related to the notion of "equality" itself on which our Constitution rests. If some persons, belonging to some so-called higher castes are debarred from certain positions, only for their caste affiliation and for no fault of theirs, it not only goes against the principle of equality but also may be treated as the violation of their rights in a secular and democratic country. Beteille (2000: 285), who never supports the policy of reservation, says '[t]he distribution of benefits and burdens according to community, caste and gender is fundamentally at odds with the idea of citizenship'. Unfortunately there is a kind of feeling even among some social scientists who believe that '[T]he aim of compensatory justice is to provide counter balancing benefits to those individuals who have been wrongfully injured in the past' (Rai 2002: 4309) and try to justify this policy. Nothing can be better if the leaders of such movements understand that mere reservation is not the solution to their problem of backwardness. Chandra Bhan Prasad (2007) has made a very interesting comment: 'the Rajasthan Gujjars are already in the Other Backward Classes list, yet they have not been able to benefit from the OBC quota'. And he raises the ultimate question 'Can the Adivasi status take the Gujjars forward?' The

Jats of Haryana, who are also moving in the same line as the Gujjars, should ask the same question to themselves.

Where is the end?

The Gujjar movement became extremely violent and the Gujjars compelled the state to remain cut off from the rest of the country for a long spell. The central leadership of the BJP had some talks with the movement leaders without involving the state BJP leaders but could not produce any positive outcome. The bemused state government tried to play a very common game of putting the ball in the central government's court, but it also failed to satisfy the aggressive Gujjars. And the ultimate result was a spell of political stalemate for which only the state BJP leaders were responsible.

The third phase of the movement started in December 2010, two year and six month after its second phase. The Gujjars placed the same demand in same way, creating pressure on the government. To describe the severity of the movement *The Indian Express*⁶ wrote, 'They jammed trains on Jaipur-Delhi and Mumbai – Delhi route. Unlike 2008 unrest, there was no violence in 2010'.

The fourth phase started in May 2015. A similar protest was organized and thousands of Gujjars blocked railways. After 10 days standoff, the Rajasthan government ultimately agreed to bring a new law to grant 5 percent reservation to the Gujjars.

Although after a long battle, pressure and counter pressure, the government has succumbed to the demand of the Gujjars, the problem of inter-community rivalry remains. Granting reservations may please the Gujjars but it would result an increasing sense of deprivation among the Meenas. Politics of mobilization, appeasing one group against the other may give electoral mileage but takes its tolls in the long run. In taking final decision to handle the recent on-going agitations of the Jats in Haryana with the similar demands, the government should take this into account.

Notes

1. The Chopra Committee simply recommended an "area approach" for their development but remained silent about the demand of the Gujjars for ST status. For obvious reasons the Gujjar leaders opposed it.

2. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) has already demanded the resignation of Rajasthan chief minister for this.
3. See *The Times of India* 25 May 2008.
4. The actual number of deaths in this movement is not very clear till now. This is an approximate figure. And the number is increasing everyday.
5. *Ananda Bazar Patrika* 25 May 2008.
6. *The Indian Express* 29 December 2010.

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