
Magawathi's electoral victory in Uttar Pradesh and agitation for tribal status by Rajasthan's Gujjar community has brought to Indian politics the issue of caste in new and interesting ways. Shail Mayaram, a noted Indian anthropologist, provides some valuable insights.

CASTE, TRIBE, AND THE POLITICS OF RESERVATION

Shail Mayaram

At the heart of the Gujjar protests is a critique of a model of economic growth that has not trickled down.

The struggle by the Gujjar community in Rajasthan for Scheduled Tribe status has now become one supported by community leaders affiliated to both the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress. They now need to do a Chauri Chaura to rein in violence by sections of the community.

In effect, the government of Rajasthan has effectively converted a legitimate democratic protest, articulating a claim to representation and reservation, into an angry mob. State failure lay in the excessive use of force. Were intelligence reports not forthcoming or were they ignored? The movement focussing on the demand to include Gujjars in the Scheduled Tribe category had clearly been building up over the last year, indeed ever since the Jats were declared an Other Backward Classes group by the Vajpayee-led government at the centre. The Rajasthan BJP's election manifesto had itself promised the Gujjars an "upgradation" from their current OBC status.

Lesson

The Gujjar protest has many lessons. There is, first, the question of backwardness. The Gujjars, estimated to number 1.6 crore nationwide, are internally differentiated in terms of religion, occupation, and socio-economic status. Historically, they have comprised a hugely heterogeneous group ranging from the Gujjar-Pratihara rulers of north India to the Gujjar and Bakarwal nomads of Jammu and the Kashmir valley who are today mostly Sunni Muslim. There is said to have been a migration from Gujarat, Kathiawad, and Rajasthan to Kashmir in the 6th-7th centuries and an earlier one from Georgia via Central Asia, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. In Uttarakhand, they comprise forest communities called Van Gujjars, and in Rajasthan Gujjar

villages in the Aravalli forests and there have been attempts to "rehabilitate" (read displace) them from the national parks of Sariska and Ranthambhor.

The Gujjar protest raises the larger question of the categories espoused by government mentality, colonial and post-colonial. Do groups such as these constitute a tribe or caste? In both Kashmir and Rajasthan, Gujjars are cattle-rearers, but have also become sedentary over time. Should they be incorporated into the OBC or the Scheduled Tribe category? Under the 18th century revenue administration of eastern Rajasthan, the Gujjars were considered a peasant group with a shudra status similar to the Meenas, Meos, Jats, and Ahirs. Nonetheless, folkloric sources indicate a more ambivalent pastoral status, in a Mewati folk-epic, a poor Gujjar woman whose only cow is killed by a tiger weeps in the mountains until she is helped by Meo bandit-rebels!

Another issue is the politics of inclusion into statist categories. In the aftermath of the formation of the State of Rajasthan, the Meenas were declared a Scheduled Tribe but not the Gujjars. The Meenas had been an erstwhile ruling group of the Amber kingdom who were dispossessed by Rajputs much like the Bhil rajas elsewhere in Rajasthan and Gujarat. The Meenas' own internal categories of difference—the zamindari and chowkidari Meenas—suggest their presence in the middle peasantry. The Amber/Jaipur kingdom gave the Meenas a special status; their vermilion mark anointed the king and they guarded the treasury. The Gujjars were treated as a shudra group in the Mughal period and subject to a differential system of revenue assessment by the much-expanded Jaipur kingdom. In eastern Rajasthan, Brahmins paid 12 per cent, Rajputs 33 per cent, and raiyati groups such as Meenas, Gujjars, Jats, and others up to 76 per cent of the produce.

Upward Mobility

During the colonial period, upward mobility characterised a small section of the north Indian peasantry, including Jats who benefited from the East Yamuna canal, but most peasant castes and western Jat factions faced an increasingly desperate situation under pressure of high revenue assessment, famines, and growing indebtedness. Gangs of Gujjar, Meena and Mewati raiders had come into being in the late 18th century and become active in the early 19th century, feeding into a colonial discourse of paracriminality that led to the making of the infamous Criminal Tribes Act of 1870-71. The unrest among peasant-pastoral groups such as the Gujjars and Mewatis fed into the making of the Revolt of 1857, William Dalrymple's contention of this being the first jihad, notwithstanding!

The Gujjar mobilisation then is multi-faceted. It is about legitimate democratic aspirations and citizenship. Like African-American leaders of the Harlem Renaissance in the United States, who were disheartened when their participation in the First World War only brought them more lynchings, Gujjars contend that they have contributed significantly to the anti-colonial struggle and to the Indian state. In the districts of Meerut, Bijnor, Alwar, and Bharatpur they mobilised against the 'firangi' (foreigner) in 1857, a contribution that they claim has not even been recognized.

The current protest is about entitlements in jobs and educational institutions, and the perception that in the last 50 years Meenas who had a comparable socio-economic status have forged way ahead of the Gujjars by being declared a Scheduled Tribe. While the former acquired a high representation in the state and all-India services, the latter have to resort to mining and construction labour and, at best, minor clerical jobs. At its heart, it is also a critique of a model of economic growth that has not trickled down and the failure of the neo-liberal model of development that seeks to

establish glitzy SEZs (special economic zones), filmcities, and emerald, gold, and diamond souks but ignores the rural hinterland's predicament of receding groundwater resources, low crop yields, and livelihood crises.

'Homo Aequalis'

The Gujjar protest represents another moment in the transformation of caste politics. Louis Dumont's description of the Indian as 'homo hierarchus' in contrast to the Western man as 'homo aequalis' clearly needs revisiting. Surely, caste is about unequal ritual and social statuses and untouchability, but contemporary caste claims are also about 'homo aequalis' and represent visions of justice and equality. Thus, while the earlier phase of lower caste assertion had been about displacing upper castes, a good deal of the caste discourse now is about challenging "creamy layers." Gujjar anxieties are shared by Ahirs, Malis, and others about the Jats cornering all the privileges for OBCs and everyone else losing out.

Gujjars must, nonetheless, also undertake a self-introspection into why a non-violent 'chakka jam' took a violent course and into the larger problem of the politics of quotas. If the creamy layer bedevils Rajasthan's over-inflated OBC category, it is even more the bane of the Scheduled Tribe category where the marginality of the truly backward Bhils and Garasias has only intensified under the welfare state. A pan-Indian debate particularly on alternatives such as the Yogendra Yadav and Satish Deshpande model of merit-handicap points, ensuring that advantaged offspring will not benefit from caste-tribe quotas, might be a better guarantor of social justice. Further, will merely being listed as a Scheduled Tribe ensure quality school education, better quality teaching, and jobs? Finally, what are the gender imbalances that reservation often entails, especially given the experience of certain upwardly mobile individuals who keep their caste wife for the village and undertake inter-caste marriages in the city? ■

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Correction

With regard to our last issue's article entitled "The November 2006 Midterm Elections in the United States," the table on household income (by each fifth of households, and for the top 15% and 5%) was incorrectly reproduced. It should read as follows:

	lowest 20%	next 20%	middle 20%	bottom 60%	next 20%	top 20%	top 15%	top 5%
1979	5.4	11.6	17.5	34.5	24.1	41.4	26.1	15.3
2000	4.3	9.8	15.5	29.6	22.8	47.4	26.6	20.8
2003	4.1	9.6	15.5	29.2	23.3	47.6	27.1	20.5