

Battle for the Tribal Identity

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The struggle of Gujjars of Rajasthan for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status is going on for the last several decades and Gujjars have adopted and availed every possible peaceful means to put forth their genuine demands before the appropriate quarters. But it was being sabotaged under one pretext or the other. Observing this hopeless state of affairs, the Gujjars intensified their struggle during the last 2 years. In the previous year when Gujjars announced agitation for their genuine constitutional right that was responded with bullets by the State of Rajasthan and 26 innocent Gujjars were killed. Despite this the Gujjars of Rajasthan on the assurance on State government suspended their agitation and gave the State ample time to settle their rightful issues which the government was bound to settle within a given time. Gujjars waited for one year but the Govt. seemed to be in no mood to have any logical conclusion to the dialogue process and they try to grab the issue by inciting certain elements and creating misunderstanding among various communities vis a vis the ST status of Gujjars. Seeing this hopeless status of affairs, the Gujjars this year also came down to streets to agitate their genuine issues which is lingering on for the past 2 decades. This time too the frustrated state of Rajasthan came heavily on peaceful agitators, showered bullets on them resulting in 46 deaths, thousands injured and the movement saw a new turn and it spread in the entire northern and western region of India including Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Delhi, Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir. But this could not deter the Gujjars of Rajasthan to come on backfoot rather they have positioned themselves firmly on railway tracks and highways with the single aim and programme "Do or Die". The entire government machinery used against Gujjars have failed to send Gujjars back to their villages. Gujjars have been demonstrating with the bullet-ridden bodies of their nears and dear ones. Now the agitation of Gujjars seems to be on a logical conclusion.

It is more than urgent to examine whether the ST demand of Gujjars of Rajasthan is a genuine one and is it falling within the criteria of ST status as provided by Scheduled Tribes Act. The following main points which Gujjars have submitted in support of their demand before Chopra Committee framed by Vasundra Raje Scindia government in June 2007 merit attention.

In Indian subcontinent the Gujjars are considered an important and historical tribe. This tribe has ruled over many princely states in northern India for hundreds of years and left their imprints in the Himalayan ranges and inscribed them in such a way that they could not be destroyed even after thousands of years. The legacy of Gujjars is as old as their identity.

When their rules ended many kings in India had enlisted Gujjars as "Criminal Tribes", so that they can snatch power from them to prevent them from being autonomous. Different kings used to keep an eye over Gujjars who were there in their army.

To prove that the Gujjars of Rajasthan are a tribe, the research works of various anthropologists and Historians are enough as an evidence, includes the

work of Russell and Hiralal, James Tod, William Crooke, and William Dalrymple; Confirmation is also made in various references in Imperial Gazetteer of India (and the Rajputana Gazetteer Census of 1931 is to be also quoted as an evidence and the book authored by the Census Commissioner of this Census—titled : *Caste in India*—has also been referred in support of Gujjars' claim as a Primitive Tribe. In these books the words "tribe" not "caste" is used for identification of GUJJARS in the state.

History states that tribal Gujjar kings have ruled from Gujarat, Jodhpur, and Kathiawad to Baliya 641 century AD and during this time it was known as Gujjar Desh. Chawada and Solanki Gujjars have ruled over Deccan Gujarat from 610 AD–942 AD, while Gujjars ruled over here from 700 AD–1573AD.

Rajputana Gazetteer published in 1879 called Gujjars as "cultivating Tribe", "As sole inhabitants of the Dang", they live by "keeping" animals more than by agriculture. They live in "semi-barbarous state" (p.163). In the 1891 Census, all forest tribes were categorized as "agricultural and pastoral castes"—thus using tribe and caste as synonyms. Census of India 1901 described them as "animists"; Imperial Gazetteer of India (1904), Volume I, used the word "tribe" for them. Gait (1911) called them "tribal animists" and Hutton (1931 Census) described them as "herdsmen". Dalrymple's book *The Last Mughal* made a reference to the Gujjars in relation to 1857 Mutiny that occurred in Meerut (U.P.) and called them as "Hindu herders and pastoralists", who "for centuries had roamed with their cattle and horses throughout North-West India, and especially in Rajasthan".

Historians also make references to the Pratihara kingdoms that were ruled by the Gujjars during the eighth century AD. These kingdoms were disintegrated by the attacks of Mehmood Ghaznabi in the eleventh Century. Gujjars, traced their links with Lord Ram of the Treta Yug, by mentioning that they were the progeny of Ram's two sons—Luv and Kush, and the two endogamous *moieties* of Laur and Khari among them relate to these heroes respectively.

As per the criteria of the Government of India any group claiming a tribal status ought to have the following five criteria :

1. Primitive Traits
2. Distinctive Culture
3. Geographical Isolation
4. Shyness of Contact
5. Backwardness

PRIMITIVE TRAITS

- a. Maximum Gujjars of Rajasthan are living in Forests/ far-flung areas of deserts.
- b. Gujjars of Rajasthan are generally get their diseases as well as diseases of their animals treated through village experts and priests who use traditional and indigenous medicine and also through propitiation of local deities and magic and witchcraft.
- c. During famines Gujjars pray the gods to atone their wrath. Gujjars also make animal sacrifices to please the gods.
- d. Gujjars use family muscle power to settle their disputes between families.
- e. Most of the disputes are settled by the Panchayet, and make little use of the courts and judicial system.
- f. Gujjars men and women tattoo their bodies with motifs of trees and animals.

DISTINCTIVE CULTURE

- a. The gods of Gujjars of Rajasthan are different from the Hindus. Gujjars worship the God Dev Narain.
- b. Unlike Hindus, the Gujjars observe "Shraddha"—yearly homage to the dead.
- c. In different parts of the State Gujjars have different Kabilas (groups or hordes), and they worship different gods.
- d. The economy of Gujjars is pastoral, forest-based, and agriculture for subsistence.
- e. The Gujjar houses are built with materials obtained from the forest and local resources.
- f. The Gujjars' agricultural tools are also primitive and made out of the forest products.
- g. Irrigation from the wells is done through leather buckets drawn by the bulls. Gujjar villages do not have water pumps or taps.
- h. Gujjars have a distinct language, called Gojri, have their own folk songs (like Rasiya and Kanahiya) and folk dances. The musical instruments are also different.
- i. Gujjars have a distinct religious history.
- j. The culture of Gujjars is pastoral and is reflected in their dress pattern, house type, shoes, and household utensils, most of which are made from the local material obtained from the forests where they reside.

GEOGRAPHICAL ISOLATION

- a. The Gujjar habitations are located on hill slopes, dense forests, barren lands, or on plateaus.
- b. Gujjars rarely visit urban centres because of distance and lack of connectivity.
- c. Gujjars Women are not at all exposed to urban life.

SHYNESS OF CONTACT

- a. The Gujjar people do not interact with outsiders.
- b. Gujjar women are very shy and keep their faces veiled.

BACKWARDNESS : SOCIAL

- a. Gujjars are endogamous; do not marry outside.
- b. Gujjars are required to give a death feast.
- c. People of other castes mostly do not have commensal relationship.
- d. Gujjars' houses are located at a distance from other castes.
- e. Gujjars have the practice of junior levirate and also of Nata whereby a widow begins living with another person—for which the person keeping her as a wife has to pay a sum to the family of her parents which is called *Maais*. Even married women elope with another person. In that case the matter is referred to the community Panchayet which decides the *Jhagda* money (dispute settlement) to be paid by the eloper to the former husband of the woman. This may at times take a violent turn.
- f. There is prevalence of Child marriage.
- g. Gujjars practise Polyandry.
- h. Gujjars have the practice of Bride Price.
- i. Gujjars have very limited political representation as is evidenced by membership in the State Legislature, or national Parliament.

BACKWARDNESS:ECONOMIC

- a. Gujjars' economy is based on cattle breeding and on subsistence agriculture. They are marginal farmers with very limited per capita landholding; and even the land owned is mostly barren and unirrigated.
- b. Many are landless Nomads, labourers working on farms, or on stone mines.
- c. Gujjars' transactions are mostly non-monetary; barter is more common.
- d. Gujjar villages are not linked with roads, they do not have electricity or any other modern amenities.
- e. There is no government help in providing drinking water.
- f. Gujjars do not have educational facilities in the villages.
- g. There are very few persons in government jobs. In Rajasthan there is no IAS or IPS officer from this community. Even in the State Administrative service, there is very poor representation of the members of the community. In the universities of Rajasthan State only 7 Gujjars are in the teaching faculty (5 in General and two in Agricultural universities). No Gurjjar has ever been appointed a member of the Rajasthan Public Service Commission. Also no Gujjar has been appointed as Vice Chancellor. Of the 32 judges in Rajasthan High Court, none is from this community. In one submission, following statistics about Gujjars in various government jobs in Rajasthan was furnished :
 - IAS nil
 - IPS nil
 - RAS 5
 - RPS 2
 - Gazetted Officers 14
 - University Teachers 6
 - College Lecturers 10
 - Doctors 30
 - Engineers 20
 - Other services 2000
- h. There are hardly any Gujjars in Trade or Business.
- i. In Karauli and Sawai Madhopur districts 40.18% and 37.47% families of the Gujjars are classified as BPL families.

POPULATION

The Gujjar community in Rajasthan State constitutes 7-8 percent of Rajasthan's total population, numbering somewhere between 60 to 65 Lakhs. As evidence, they said the voter lists have as many as 27,68,000 names. Considering that an average family of 5 would have at least 2 voters, this figure was multiplied by 2.4 to arrive at the figure of around 65 Lakhs.

Like the Meenas, the Gurjjars are also non-vegetarian, and they drink alcohol. In East and South-Eastern part of Rajasthan, the life style of the Meenas and of the Gurjjars is almost identical and yet one group enjoys the privileges of a ST while the other is denied. The Meenas have nearly 60 percent of the total land. The contention and arguments put forth by Gujjars before Chopra Committee were in turn submitted to Rajasthan government for examining and recording their recommendations, but the Rajasthan government simply forwarded the same to the central government without recording its recommendations as are

mandatory for the process. The contention as put forth by Gujjars to Chopra Committee, fulfilled all the requirements and formalities to declare them Scheduled Tribe as that of Gujjars in HP and J&K, but the negative policy of Rajasthan government is lingering the process and if this state of affairs continues then it seems the Gujjars may come out with a much bigger and uncontrollable agitation which may not be in the interest of Rajasthan or the nation as a whole.□