

Politics of Contested Caste Identities and Reservation: A Study of Gujjars of Rajasthan

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Abstract

The demands for reservation by different communities in India is not a new phenomenon. However, after the Mandal commission we witness a surge in such demands where different caste communities are even willing to go downhill in terms of their status to have access to state resources. This paper, therefore, takes the case of the Gujjar community (who, at present come under the Most Backward Classes category (MBCs) of Rajasthan that has been demanding for reservation in the Scheduled Tribe category in the state since 2007 and following changes after that. This paper seeks to analyse the nature of Gujjars' demand for reservation in the present along with their historical trajectory of Identity formation to understand the complex layers of their collective anxieties in the context of liberalized Indian economy in which only those who have better education and skills bear the fruits.

Keywords: Caste, Identity, Politics, Reservation.

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I. Introduction

Caste is a distinctive feature of India's social stratification. The nature of caste, however has changed from an order/system of hierarchy to more focus on caste identities. As Dipankar Gupta (2019, p.24) also asserts, "caste system is dead but long live caste identity", so is politics based on these caste identities. In other words, the caste system from a system of 'vertical hierarchy' based on the *Varna division* of the society has transformed into 'horizontal consolidation' of caste identities, where various caste groups are competing at the political and economic levels in contemporary Indian society. As a consequence of which, we witness the process of 'ethnicisation of caste,' where rather than seeing caste as an order of hierarchically arranged ascribed ranking, it is viewed as a system of benign differences of culture. (Natrajan, 2022, p.309) The conventional idea of the caste system as a closed system with little status mobility through 'sanskritisation', is replaced by the increase in mobilisation of caste groups in post-independence India. And therefore, we need to look into these changes that have taken place in the traditional caste system and the role it plays in the formation of identity of the people. The perspective of viewing caste as a form of ethnicity helps understand this fluidity aspect of it. Radhika Kumar (2021) makes use of the idea of caste as a form of ethnicity that also includes the strategic manner in which it seeks to restore dignity to re-claimed caste identities. And also, caste, with its ever-changing nature still holds importance because communities continue to relate with politics through its caste networks. (Gurjar, 2019)

It is in this context of caste identity and caste-based politics, and mobilisation of collective identities- this work takes up the case of Rajasthan's Gujjar community and their agitation form Scheduled Tribe reservation. The objective of this paper is to reflect upon the idea of caste/community identity that different communities intend to leverage in the liberal and competitive economy to procure benefits from the State's policies such as affirmative action. Moreover, this work endeavours to reassess the historical trajectory of identity formation among the Gujjar community. As the Gujjar protest in Rajasthan for reservation under the ST category had brought the issues of politics of identity and reservation to the fore, understanding their demand as 'identity' and the politics around that identity becomes imperative.

II. Caste: From a Social Identity to a Political Identity

For any political system to function, the relationship between that political system and the existing social structure is a fundamental condition. (Shrader, 1968) And as caste is one of the peculiar features of the social structure of majority of the Indian states, it influences the type of political leadership as well as the style of political system. It becomes more significant in states like Rajasthan where little modernisation has taken

place. Its influence has been on rise in the state over the years and no political party is remained unaffected from it.

The role of the colonial government has often been referred to in the construction of caste and caste identities in India. (Cohn, 1968) The British government constructed official social categories and people were required to register themselves accordingly to them. These identities were then accompanied by preferential treatment policies in the domain of employment and education and political representation. This policy was initially meant for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) - the ex-untouchable and Tribal groups. Later on, following the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, reservation was also given to the 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs) -consisting of the lower caste-Hindu and similar non-Hindu groups. (Bajpai, 2010) In a hierarchical and unequal society like ours, reservation was viewed as a way to help the marginalised sections gain upward mobility. And hence, group rights were given preference over individual citizen's rights. Invocation of caste identity to garner votes became the guiding light of Indian politics since it is also based on community vote-banks. (Kumar, 2022)

The phenomenon of identity and caste-based politics became popular in the 1990s. And its rise during this period was encouraged by different interconnected social processes. (ibid) And consequently, the relationship between caste (identities) and politics weakened the vertical unity of caste.

The state plays a very crucial role in identifying collectives on fixed parameters, however, these (collective) identities are not always in accord with their identification by the state, and it is when the contested nature of these identities unravel. The point of categorisation is at the core of the issue. In other words, the state bestows particular identity in certain categories to certain groups of people. However, it's recognition of a community as a tribe has always remained much contested in the post-colonial state response. The distinction between caste and tribe is difficult to make in many cases simply because some were of the opinion that there are specific groups in which signs of caste formation were already present and on the contrary some believed them to be having tribal traits who continued having a nomadic lifestyle until recently, but later on settled in small groups at a place. These tribal identities, in a way, were very much influenced by caste characteristics and vice versa because of their settlement in the villages. Aparna Rao and Michael J. Casimir (2003) elaborates on the process through which this caste/ tribe overlap came into being. Concerning tribe and caste dichotomy they, in the context of nomadic and denotified tribes, argue that it is problematic because of their trespassing of the two geographical zones i.e., caste villages and forest tribal dwelling and dependence on both caste and forest society for survival. And since historically the identity of nomadic communities in India is the part of the process of making and unmaking of identities relying on these different terrains of identification, it is imperative to examine the process by which these identities came into being. They further argue, nomadism is not a social and political organisation or world view, but it was a strategy adopted by people and communities to overcome challenges posed by historical conditions. In this sense, "nomadism is a response to socio-economic, political and ecological circumstances." (Rao, 2003, p.3)

Maya Unnithan, on the other hand, argues that it seems unreasonable and impossible to categorise some communities as 'caste' and others as 'tribe' given the complex nature of identity politics in Rajasthan. The question of how these identities have been infused with meanings, and how these meaning are used in economic, social and political strategies of concerned communities and individuals, are more worth explorable. (Unnithan, 1997)

Moreover, this identity is outlined sometimes by the state and the power elite and at other times it is used as a mechanism for upward mobility and acquisition of rights and entitlements by the people of the community in an unequal society. And the narrative of their own identity in the past and their self-identification juxtapose the state made official categorisation. These categories of identity to be officialised, hence become contested and lead to politics of identity and caste. An effectively fluid politics gets enabled by the tendency of groups to emphasize on their ahistoricity (historical transcendence) and judiciously using rigid ideas about their collective self. This is true in the context of the present form of caste, where the administrative establishment of caste types based on "backwardness" does not help in the consolidation of ideas about these types in terms of their backwardness. (Reddy, 2005) This seems true as the policy of reservation has taken over by the politics of reservation. (Kumar, 2021) Where dissatisfied groups' claims for recognition in categories they self-identify with, presides over the state's official categorisation.

The contested reality of caste and reservation politics pits different groups against each other. Different caste groups strive for recognition in certain categories whereas other groups already included in those categories resist their claims for inclusion (eg.Meenas in the case of Gujjars' agitation for ST reservation and Gujjars in the case of Jats' inclusion into the OBCs category in Rajasthan). It is how these categories of identification become a matter of contestation. The caste-based identity politics and reservation politics are leading towards caste/community conflicts in the long run.

III. Forming a Gujjar Identity: Their Invocation of the Past and Consolidation of a Collective Self

The Gujjar population is spread across different states in India, Pakistan and to some extent Afghanistan. In India, they mainly reside in states of Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, western part of UP in north-western India and the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Delhi. (Balgir, 2003) Although, the population of the Gujjar community in Rajasthan is not very large and they are concentrated only in the eastern part of the state, their oral traditions, however, resemble anything close to recorded history.

Gujjar historians present their version of history about their community's origin, their rich kshatriya past, their contribution in the national history, valour of their community heroes. For instance, on their claim of kshatriya identity in the past, they write that after the breakdown of the GurjarPratihara Kingdom and the arrival of the Turks, many Hindu families including some dynasties settled in the territory of Gurjaradesa (that consisted of present day eastern and southern Rajasthan and norther Gujarat). These dynasties formed small kingdoms in Jaipur, Jodhpur and Bikaner. Further, by establishing marital relations with different Gurjar/ Gujjar clans such as Chauhan, Parmar, Tanwar, Bhati, and Gehlot- these kingdoms gave birth to a new community called Rajput (son of the king). This group however, consisted various other groups such as tribes, Gauds, Bhars, Shekhawats etc. Over a period of time, many of these Rajputs accepted the benevolence of the Mughal rulers and received favours in return whereas others who did not give up on their Gujjar identity were seen as rebellious and insurgent. They also formed their own settlements and would have frequent fights with Mughal soldiers. As the Rajputs became a separate community, they gradually began to be considered as Kshatriyas. (Kasana, 2017)

Christie and Cole (2012), in addition, underline that the difference between the early Rajputs, Gujjars and Jats was probably social in nature than ethnic and the Gujjars came down from the high social level on accounts of their pastoral occupation and that high level was then occupied by the Rajputs. They further write, 'those families of Aryo-Scythian stock whom the tide of fortune raised to political importance became Rajputs, almost by mere virtue of their rise, and their descendants have retained the title with its privileges by observing the rules by which the higher are distinguished from the lower castes in the Hindu scale of precedence.' (ibid, p.40) And those who did not abide these rules came down to the grade of a Jat or cultivator, others to that of a Gujjar or herdsman from their high estate.(ibid)

Moreover, the process of collective consciousness among the Gujjar community goes back to the mid 19th century during the rebellion of 1857. It was the first instance when the Gujjars got united. They would derive much of their livelihood from cattle-keeping and cattle trading. It is also noted that the trading and stealing cattle remained an important activity for the Gujjars of Upper Doab until the 1857, the first war of Independence. (Kumar, 2022) The British policies of land revenue and settlement caused the political and subsequently economic decline of pastoral Gujjars in this region. Gradually, the Gujjars developed huge resentment against the British. The Gujjars in Bharatpur and Alwar also showed sympathy for revolutionaries. The resentment against their policies of land settlement played important role in mobilising the Gujjars on open rebellion in the 1857. Former Gujjar Rajas and Zamindars along with ordinary Gujjars led the war against the British.

However, throughout Upper Doab, the Gujjar rebellion was crushed mercilessly and consequently, they were declared 'criminal tribes' under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 in 1924 by the British. Also, a vast body of majorly peripatetic groups was declared criminal as the act passed. However, groups that settled and adapted to a sedentary lifestyle were able to emerge as land owners, who were viewed by the state as 'industrious' peasants, whereas other groups such as Gujjars who shared cultural similarities with the Jats but were located within a more agro-pastoral environment, they were seen against the sedenatrising model of the state. And hence, were declared as Criminal tribes. (Deo, 2018)

The consolidation of their collective identity took place in 1908 in the form of Akhil Bhartiya Gujjar Mahasabha (ABGM) and with its all-India annual conferences began the all-India Gujjar solidarity. This is how the collective action of Gujjar caste association for upliftment and social respect for the community began in the early twentieth century. For organisation of a group its organisation as a unit is a prerequisite. Associations based on their shared identity and experiences lead to the formation of caste and community associations. The Gujjars before 1908 shared a common caste association with the Jats, until their persuasion that the Gujjars should form a separate caste association of their own. Which resulted in the formation of the Akhil Bhartiya Gurjar Mahasabha (ABGM) in the same year. In 1908, under the leadership of Chaudhary Maharaj Singh Mundlana and Shri Hari Singh Sisona- Shrimati Dharma RakshaniGurjar Mahasabha Bharatvarsha was set up. (Kasana, 2017) It was later renamed as Akhil Bhartiya Gurjar Mahasabha, which, at present, has various state and district level units running across states.

Moreover, the ABGM in the early twentieth century started with the collective action of caste organisation to pursue collective self-betterment and social respect. The booklets and magazines about the

historical trajectory of the community such as *Gujjar Swabhimani*, *Veer Gujjar*, *Gujjar Ek VijetaJati* etc. are part of the large-scale Gujjar gatherings, and these writings create an alternative identity and a complex cultural past of the concerned group. (Kumar, 2022) The annual all India conferences of ABGM, thus, have been a source of all India solidarity among Gujjars and has brought Gujjar leadership together across the country. The role of Gujjar caste associations, caste writers and historians have been pivotal in the invocation of a re-imagined past through the stories of caste heroes, their contribution in the Indian freedom struggle to strengthen the collective sense of self-identification among community brethren and to validate their claims on state provided services. This led to the formation of a pan-India *GujjarSamaj* (larger than the idea of Gujjar community and is beyond a particular territory). (ibid)

Besides ABGM, the *Gujjar Arakshan Sangharsh Samiti* (GASS), formed by late Col. Kirori Singh Bainsla, is active particularly among the Gujjars of Rajasthan as it was formed in the context of Gujjar demand for reservation. Bainsla is given the credit for community's awakening. The GASS rather than invoking a glorious past refers to the present of deprivation and backwardness. It stresses on the relative backwardness of the community vis-a-vis other peasant communities in the state and how they have ensured economic well-being of their communities. As Sunil Ray puts it "each social group has an ideal before them," (Ray, 2008, p.19) and for Gujjars that ideal seems to be the upward mobility among communities particularly like Jats and Meenas, both economically as well as politically.

IV. Origin of the Protracted Gujjar Demand for Reservation

Gujjars are not a homogenous entity. They have different religious identities; they are also categorised as STs in some parts and OBCs in other. In Rajasthan, they are mainly rural residents and are engaged in agriculture and cattle rearing. As their traditional occupation has been of agro-pastoral nature, Gujjars could not excel in agriculture as other agricultural caste like Jats did. They constitute around 9 per cent of the state's population and were lately granted the Most Backward Class (MBC) status with four other communities in the state.

The Gujjar demand for ST reservation was raised before the reforms of 1990s. They organised for the first time in May, 1976 at Dholpur, Rajasthan. This conference was held under the leadership of K.L. Verma, where two chief ministers of the state of Madhya Pradesh S.C. Shukla, P.C. Sethi, and the Chief Minister of Rajasthan Haridev Joshi. Joshi was also accompanied by two senior cabinet ministers namely; Jagganath Pahadia and Shiv Charan Mathur. They presented to Brahmnanand Reddy the Union Of India Home Minister the Memo demanding their inclusion in the ST list. (Srivastava, 2008) Home Minister asked Joshi to look into the demand legally and provide the centre with the details. In 1981, Gujjars, along with various other groups, gave their recommendations to be included in the ST list to the S.C. Mathur, the then CM of Rajasthan. However, they were found unfit to be included in the list by the Social Welfare Department. Hence, were not included in the CMs recommendations to the Government of India. They were, however, brought into the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the state in 1993 and in the Central OBC list in 1994. 'The role of Rajesh Pilot was acknowledged for ensuring this'. (ibid)

It was in 2003 when during one of the election rallies Vasundhara Raje committed to the community to give them ST reservation if brought to power. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, in the same year, committed to the Jat Mahasabha for their inclusion in the OBC list. And before the Parliamentary elections in 2004 they were notified in the list of OBCs. The Gujjars did not oppose this. The Jats, however, put a condition of not dividing the OBC quota. Further, having high cultural and political capital Jats could do well in terms of consolidation of their collective identity and their socio-economic conditions as a whole. Given the early social reforms within the community and active political mobilisation under the leadership of top Jat leaders like Sir Chhotu Ram and Baldev Ram Mirdha, the Jat community could excel in the realm of Rajasthan's politics in post-independence period. The Jat reservation created new imbalance in the state, for other competitive exams the better educated and prosperous Jats cornered two third of all the seats, general and OBC. (Mudgal, 2016) And they began cornering a major chunk of jobs meant for the OBC communities, the Gujjars, hence, got angry. They feared that Jats' inclusion into the OBC category would cut on their share in the category.

This is how the Gujjar demand for the ST reservation was raised. They demanded reservation in a separate category of STs through which they would have reservation benefits without compromising on their claim of having a *Kshatriya* lineage. However, when the Gujjars demanded for ST reservation, the Meenas, the largest tribal community in Rajasthan, also saw it as a threat to their share in the category. They were given the ST reservation early after independence. It was due to the efforts of the Meena Mahapanchayat and the visit of Backward Caste Commission's member to the Meena community, the Meenas were included in the list of STs in 1954. Their far sightedness paid them well as they are well represented in the state and central bureaucracy, other civil jobs with now accumulating their political capital. The Gujjar agitation in 2007 was also turned into an inter-community conflict when Meenas opposed their demands vehemently. It is, therefore a cycle where one's claim threatens the position of the other collective. And in an unequal competing society with changing

socio-economic conditions this process will become perpetual because the collective identification and awareness of that collective self will keep emerging. (Singh, 2017)

V. Reservation: An Easy Channel of Upward Mobility?

The Gujjar protests were although about entitlements in educational institutions and employment, they were, however, incited by the feeling of relative backwardness of Gujjars vis-a-vis Meenas. Meenas have become well represented in the state, schedule tribe reservation has helped them attain good representation in the state service jobs while Gujjars could only manage to get jobs into mining and construction or at best minor clerical positions. (Farooqi, 2010)

The Gujjars in Rajasthan would recall how 'a clear case of comparison with Meenas would be made by community people to measure and understand their backwardness.' According to them, it was important to see the situation in relation to the Meenas as both the communities had begun from the same level of development and were having similar ways of life.

The relations between Gujjars and Meenas have always been cordial and intimate. "And it was this intimacy of their cross-caste relations that led to Gujjars asking questions about their own backwardness in contrast to the extraordinary upward mobility of the Minas in the last half century." (Mayaram, 2007, p.17)

The Meenas are the largest community amongst the 13.4 percent Tribal population of Rajasthan. They are also among the politically most influential tribes in the state, with 18 Mina MLA's in the 200-member Rajasthan state assembly. (Shekhawat, 2021) The agitation of the Gujjars was another major event which not only witnessed identity assertion by the Gujjars but also by the Meenas. Their agitation for reservation irked the Minas in Rajasthan and brought them together as they saw the Gujjar protest as a threat to their share in the ST quota. As per Meenas, if Gujjars wanted to come into the ST quota they should bring their OBC share with them. In this sense, they had no issues with Gujjars being categorised as ST.

However, rather than just seeing it as an inter community clash or caste war, it should also be seen in the broader context of the political economy of Rajasthan and therefore, the mobilisation of the Gujjar community for reservation requires to be seen in the context of the economic processes of the state and the changing nature of the caste reality and its impact on the state politics.

The agriculture sector has been taken over by the manufacturing and service sectors. Rajasthan's Directorate of Economics Statistics published a data that revealed the consistent decline of the contribution of agriculture along with livestock to net state domestic product (NSDP). It was 45.07 per cent in 1990-91 and declined to 26.32 per cent in 2004-05, whereas the number of people engaged in agriculture and cultivation is ever-increasing. In Rajasthan's GDP agricultural and allied activities make up for around 24 per cent, and 62 per cent of the state's working population depends on this for living. Whereas in the Gross State Value Added (GSVA) of the state for the year 2021-2022, agriculture and its allied activities made 30.23 per cent. (Rajasthan Foundation)

The Gujjars have been dependent more on livestock than on farming but they do hold some agricultural land. However, there are also a few who hold a good amount of land. Nonetheless, the status anxieties and developmental concerns of Gujjars made them mobilise and demand for reservation in a separate category. In the past twenty years the economy of Rajasthan has undergone structural transformation, as a result of which shift can be observed in the sector-wise shares in gross state domestic product (GSDP) as well as in the workforce from primary and secondary sectors to tertiary sector. Year 2004-05 onwards the share of tertiary sector in Rajasthan's Net State Domestic Product is double the share of primary sector and secondary sector, these two-sectors combined come equal to the tertiary sector's share in the state economy. The Gujjars, who are primarily engaged in activities of the primary sector like agriculture and livestock, find themselves in a precarious situation. In addition, what is more worrisome is the number of people engaged in cultivation is ever-increasing despite the shrinking contribution of agriculture in the economy. The parallel phenomenon of increasing size of educated unemployed youth in Rajasthan, who do not wish to adhere to their parental traditional occupation such as agriculture and livestock and who are more exposed to the outside world, reflects the development deficit of the state. It seems that the state is unable to generate enough development gains (in the wake of liberalised economy) to which deprived lots from all social groups can have access, in response to which different social groups agitate for 'caste reservation.' (Ray, 2008, p.21)

Their claim of a glorious past and having a kshatriya lineage, and demand for ST and later for Special Backward Class (SBC) reservation was an effort to keep their claim of belonging to a higher caste intact. The two different Gujjar organisations the ABGM AND GASS both have stressed on two different narratives. The ABGM has been working towards the upliftment of the community but has always emphasised on the kshatriya past and valour of the Gujjar community. The GASS rather than invoking a glorious past referred to the present of deprivation and backwardness and a need for reservation for their community. These narratives have been running in parallel unlike the Jats, who were demanding for kshatriya status from the Arya Samaj and also demanding for 'recognition as an agricultural caste entitled to reservation under the colonial government. While

neither demand was then accepted; the Jats buried the former, while raising the pitch on the latter in the wake of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report.’ (Kumar, 2022, p.665) On the other side, in a competitive public domain, access to education and jobs demonstrate their developmental concerns, because in a liberalised economy only those who have better education and skills bear the fruits. Where the Gujjars perceive the unprecedented mobility among the Meenas as a standard to measure their backwardness especially because the two communities began from the same socio-economic level. The parallel growth among the Minas has left them with a feeling of relative deprivation.

VI. Conclusion

The case of the Gujjars of Rajasthan demonstrates a multilayered narrative of their concerns in the form of their agitation following 2007, where they wish to leverage a certain kind of collective identity to have access to state reservation benefits. They see the Jats as political competitors, who through strong political and social leadership could excel in the domain of politics. And now after attaining the OBC reservation, they have become strong competition in the spheres of education and employment as well. The Meenas, on the other side, according to the Gujjars, already dominate these two domains because of their ST reservation. Further, politics plays a significant role in the creation, maintenance, and the reinforcement of identities. The political process in the country determines the distribution of education, wealth and employment. And it is only by increasing the share in political power an ethnic group can best improve its share of education and employment. As K.S. Sangwan asserts, strengthening one’s group identity and improving their socio-economic status are two main objectives of all ethnic groups, and the route to achieve these twin goals is through politics. (Sangwan, 2017)

Moreover, apart from the role of political leadership, the role of the Gujjar (caste) organisations in infusing a sense of collective consciousness among the community members cannot be underestimated, where the constant reference of a kshatriya past have made the Gujjars demand for a certain state recognised identity where their claim of having such an identity in the past remains intact even after seeking reservation in the ST category. Furthermore, along with these concerns the state withdrawal with large scale privatisation in all sectors increased the insecurities of the peasant and nomadic groups. The people of the agitating communities are skeptical of the urban economic power centres, and who also have been abandoned by the political elite of their own caste resulting in growing frustration among the agitating masses. In other words, the unequal access to benefits of economic growth has been the major reason for the discontentment among people leading to such agitations in the state. “It is a sort of competitive social engineering of each social group that visualises a positive instrumental role to be played by reservation in enhancing its own group members’ economic well-being.” (Ray,2008, p.19) The Gujjar agitation unravel all these layers of collective concerns. And as reservation is seen as being one of the easiest ways to secure certain benefits for a community and for socio-economic mobility, the demonstration of community/group identity and its collective strength becomes a channel to make claims on the state.

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