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Understanding the Gujjar-Pahri Faultline in J&K

A Gujjar Perspective

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Amongst the contemporary internal conflicts in Jammu and Kashmir, the political and social clashes between the Gujjar tribe and the Pahari speaking people are perhaps one of most serious challenges to internal peace at the micro level, and an emerging impediment to handling the Kashmir issue at large. This conflict between the Gujjars and Paharis, who are themselves a heterogeneous community, transcends all regional boundaries and religious divides within J&K (Jammu and Kashmir) and beyond. Historical literature traces the faultline between the Gujjars and other communities in present day J&K to several decades ago but the differences have sharpened following the inclusion of the former into Scheduled Tribes list under the constitution of India. The situation has worsened with a similar demand being made from a large number of ethnic identities and castes drawn from Muslim, Hindu and Sikh groups which congregate under an identity of a Pahari speaking community. However, the clash between the two communities is based around concessions and privileges guaranteed under the provisions of the Scheduled Tribes Act and not necessarily about everything.

Battle lines between the two communities are becoming prominent on a large scale, given the fact that the political parties extend selective patronage to certain communities against each other for securing easy vote banks. In fact, the political parties and the government of the state have helped, overtly or covertly, in escalation of conflict from time to time. There is a hidden tension between the Gujjars and the Paharis who nurse huge contempt for each other. In Rajouri and Poonch districts of the Jammu province and some parts of Baramulla, Kupwara, Bandipore and Badgam districts of the Kashmir province where these communities are predominant, the Gujjar-Pahari divide is a major political and social discourse in everyday life and their divide becomes a dominant factor in all decisions – political and administrative. From selection of candidates for assembly elections, appointment of Ministers in the cabinet, nominating office bearers of political parties to posting of government officers at different levels in the districts, even identifying government projects like schools, dispensaries and road or bridges, it is a major determining factor.

Instead of trying to resolve this divide by placing things in a correct perspective the political parties and the government are playing the Gujjar and Pahari cards which further hardens their stand and sharpens the conflict. Nevertheless, barring few cases in Poonch and Rajouri, there is no major evidence of armed violence between the two identities only psychological irritations due to social differences, wilful tendencies of getting at odds with each other leading to land disputes and long drawn police and court cases are common in sight. These are all dangerous signals of an impending conflict in J&K which already witnesses a high level of armed conflicts and where arms licences are issued on a daily basis to an average of average of 100 civilians. While the Gujjar-Pahari divide offers a huge vote bank dividend to the political parties but further deepening of this divide will become unmanageable for the future incumbents. To prevent further escalation one needs to understand who exactly these people are, what are the stakes involved, where can one place them in the larger conflict zone of J&K, what has gone wrong so far and how can these things be corrected.

Who are the Gujjars?

There are varying versions on the origin and history of Gujjars but most historians agree on their Central Asian origin. While some others believe that the Gujjars are of Indian origin and inhabited the regions around Mount Abu in western Rajasthan, Malwa and Gujarat. In J&K, all Gujjars are Muslim and except for a few hundred families, they are nomads, semi-nomads, pastoralists and agro-pastoralists. Again, with the exception of few hundred families there are no settled agriculturist Gujjars in J&K unlike their counterparts in other states like Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. Gujjars constitute 88 per cent of the total tribal population in J&K and their projected population for 2011 is around one million which is eight per cent of total population of the state. In terms of ethnic, cultural and linguistic classification Gujjars are the third largest identity in the state, after

Kashmiri Muslims and Dogra Hindus. Their population is scattered and they move all across the state except Leh district and their largest concentration is in Poonch district at 40 per cent succeeded by 33.1 per cent in Rajouri.

Next in terms of population concentration are the undivided districts of Anantnag in south Kashmir and Doda and Udhampur districts in Jammu province. Interestingly, the Gujjar-Pahari faultline is more evident in the districts of Rajouri and Poonch and parts of Baramulla, Kupwara and Badgam. This is due to their historical differences with the Rajputs who are present in large numbers in this region. Gujjars are economically perhaps the most disadvantaged section of society in J&K. Their main activity is buffalo, sheep and goat rearing while some of them are engaged as agricultural workers. Education and employment amongst Gujjars is also in a dismal state. Lack of education is clearly reflected in their representation in the government services and despite the provision of reservations under the Scheduled Tribe Act, Gujjars have not been able to secure jobs proportionate to their population.

From a larger perspective, the inclusion of Gujjars in the list of Scheduled Tribes seems to be more of a political statement than a real measure in improving the lot of this community. Incidentally, the Gujjars were declared as STs in April 1991 after a prolonged struggle of the community which began in 1960s and when militancy was at its peak in J&K. Those were the years when administrative machinery had completely collapsed in the Kashmir Valley and it was getting more and more difficult to govern the state. After the decline of militancy in 2002 the benefits under provisions of Scheduled Tribe proved ineffective in alleviating social and economic profiles of the Gujjars as the specific schemes complimenting the nomadic lifestyle are yet to be made. However, to some extent the benefits of reservation in jobs and selections for medical and engineering colleges have percolated to these communities though a lot still remains to be done to actually alleviate their socio-economic profile.

Gujjars in the Kashmir conflict

Gujjars are one of the most prominent stakeholders in the Kashmir conflict. They are perhaps the only identity among Muslims of J&K whose patriotic and nationalistic credentials towards India have never come under doubt. There has never been even a single Gujjar associated with any of the separatist organisation and very rare cases of any Gujjar participating in militancy have ever come to the fore. Complete abnegation is however also faulty as probes reveal that they have either worked as couriers, under pressure/threat or some kind of allurements. Gujjars have in fact always offered early warning signals to the security forces in taking on militants and have suffered on this accord enormously. There have been cases where entire families have been wiped or burnt alive by militants.

Operation Sarpvinash, the largest operation against militants in the militancy history of J&K was also based on the help received by the Indian military from the Gujjars. Recently a Gujjar girl from Rajouri district was awarded Kirti Chakra for killing a dreaded LeT militant. These supportive endeavours from the Gujjar community are based on the fact that there is hardly any Gujjar family in the Jammu province or north of Kashmir Valley which didn't suffer from the division and wars in 1947 or 1965. Therefore, Gujjars have a major stake in Cross-LoC confidence building measures including travel and trade.

The Gujjar-Pahari divide

While the focus in the recent reports and observations have been on the Gujjar-Pahari divide based on their demand for Scheduled Tribe status, another reason for this is also the emergent Pahari identity among upper clan Hindus and Muslims. There are also several historical facts behind the Gujjar-Pahari divide. In the early years of their arrival the Gujjars in J&K, they had entered into direct confrontation with the Rajput clans for political and strategic reasons. There are evidences of Gujjars having been declared as criminals by the local rulers and the Rajput communities using their influence on these settlements. This tussle seems to have carried on for centuries and become a major divide between the two in contemporary times. Gujjars have traditionally been tillers at the lands of Rajput Zamindars and have worked as their domestic helps and casual labourers.

Even today the social differentiation continues to be a major factor for the divide across all Gujjar-Pahari



inhabited areas. Gujjars make the largest proportion of domestic help in the households of Rajputs while no Rajput, even the poorest of them, could be found as domestic help even with richest of the Gujjars. There are still many areas where Gujjars do not dare to sit equal to the Rajputs or Brahmins. Gujjars have been further stigmatized after being declared as Scheduled Tribes.

This social divide has aggravated into bitter psychological conflict with some Gujjars becoming Tehsildars or Deputy Superintendents of Police and getting posted in areas predominantly inhabited by the Rajputs and Brahmins etc. There have been cases of Gujjars becoming the Revenue officers in areas where their families worked as tillers at the lands of Rajput Zamindars. These were the pressing social turnarounds which compelled the upper castes and clans primarily in districts of Rajouri and Poonch to counter the growing clout of Gujjars. Since inclusion of Gujjars in ST could not have been reversed, they launched a movement for their own inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe. For this purpose all non-Gujjar ethnic identities including Rajputs, Syeds and Brahmins grouped under a single umbrella identity of Pahari speaking people and thus forming an identity based on language. Fifteen years of the movement for inclusion in the ST list among Paharis and a corresponding growth of consciousness among Gujjars have made these differences deeper and bitter. Thus there is a huge potential for social unrest in areas inhabited by Gujjars and Paharis which is being proliferated by the overall political structure.

The Road Ahead: Exploring the Alternatives

Key to resolving the historical divide between the Gujjars and the Paharis lies in the capability of the government to alleviate the socio-economic profile of the two communities and lessening the social stigma associated with the former. Inclusion of Paharis in STs would clearly further cause an imbalance and unrest among Gujjars who are already voicing their concerns and questioning the government on what they have received as a community for standing with the nation against the outsiders. Giving the ST status to the Paharis also portends the dangers of opening a Pandora's box of similar demands from all and sundry across J&K. For example, if a Khan or Sharma from Poonch is declared ST, how will the government prevent a similar demand from other sections of Khan and Sharma living in Jammu or Kathua.

However, at the same time it needs to be taken into cognizance that the Rajput and Brahmin ego clashes are damaging the cause of the lower castes inhabiting these areas. There are some communities and groups like weavers, ironsmiths etc in Rajouri and Poonch who pass through almost same circumstances, except the nomadic lifestyle, as Gujjars do. These communities also need some special provisions for improvement of their lifestyles. A survey of the socio-economic profile of all communities in the Gujjar-Pahari heartland can be another approach to reach an understanding on the needs and problems of the people residing within J&K.

Gujjars harbour a genuine fear of regression to a pre-ST plight at a time when they are yet to avail the full benefits of socio-economic development provisioned for them. It needs to be understood here that besides the ST quota, there are other reservation categories like Residents of Backward Areas (RBA), residents of Actual Line of Control (ALC) and the major beneficiaries of these categories should not be allowed to demand inclusion in the ST category.

While only 10 per cent reservation is available under the ST status which the Gujjars share with 11 other tribes, the RBA quota is 20 per cent and ALC quota is three percent. An alienation factor is already palpable amongst the Gujjars and any arbitrary decision on including others in the ST list will further alienate these last of the patriotic Muslim identities in J&K. to solve these problems the central and state governments should act in a pragmatic way instead of succumbing to a policy of appeasement.