



Role of Castes in Politics of Rajasthan

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ABSTRACT: In India, across states, caste plays an important role in elections. Rajasthan is not untouched by this phenomenon. In 2003 and 2013 elections, Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje played the caste card to the hilt calling herself daughter-in-law of Jats, daughter of Rajputs and samdhan of Gujjar. These three groups play an important role in state politics with intense rivalry witnessed between Rajputs and Jats for dominance of power. Vasundhara Raje's son Dushyant has also learnt the mantra of social engineering from his mother. That's why we have seen him sending his wife Niharika to campaign in Gujjar dominated seats as she hails from that community. The state has witnessed violent protests in the past from the Jats for inclusion in Other Backward Class (OBC), and from Gujjars demanding 5 per cent reservation in government jobs.

KEYWORDS: castes, politics, Rajasthan, elections, Chief Minister, community, OBC, government jobs, reservation

I.INTRODUCTION

To a lesser or greater degree as compared to other states, the caste factor in Rajasthan will be an important determinant in the forthcoming Assembly election. Every major leader, be it Vasundhara Raje or Sachin Pilot or Ashok Gehlot, is aware of the possibilities that a proper combination can result in, and is straining every nerve to get it right. The caste issue has gained further dominance in recent months with the traditionally well-off castes upping the ante and demanding attention as well as benefits. The Gujjars, the Jat and the Meena communities — they all have grievances. And so have the Rajputs.

The Gujjars have been granted the Other Backward Classes (OBC) status in the state, but now its powerful leaders have been demanding a Scheduled Tribe categorisation because they feel short-changed in the OBC pie which is shared by many, including the Jats.

They are also cut up because they believe that their political representation is low as compared to their numbers. Besides, the Gujjars are politically hostile to the Meena community because the latter enjoys a Scheduled Tribe status and avails of the benefits that come as a result.

The Rajputs, on the other hand, are upset by all the attention that the Jats, the Meenas and the Gujjars have gained over the years. Historically, the Rajputs were landowners and the Jats their tenants, particularly in the then Rajputana region. In 1946, a charismatic Jat leader, Baldev Ram Mirdha, mobilised farmers and led a 'revolt' against the landed aristocracy which comprised the Rajputs.

His Marwar Kisan Sabha demanded land reforms and declaration of tenancy rights. Once his party merged with the Congress, the latter stridently undertook some of the changes that the Sabha had sought and brought in land reforms. The Rajputs believed that they were unfairly dealt with, painted as villains and wrongly projected. But the community — like the others — had few political options and continued to support the Congress.

After the Congress's landslide win in the 1998 Assembly election, the Jats expected one of their prominent leaders to become the Chief Minister, but Ashok Gehlot considered an outsider, got the honour. That is when the Jats began to move away from the Congress, and in the next Assembly poll, they backed the Bharatiya Janata Party, which got nearly three times more seats than it had in 1998. The Congress was reduced to less than half the number it had.

The Rajputs, who had been sulking, also seized the opportunity and went over to the BJP fold. Others followed suit. The 2013 result, which was overwhelmingly in the BJP's favour, indicated that the party had cracked the caste code.

Things are different now, though it's still not clear if indeed the carefully crafted caste alignment of the BJP has fallen apart to the party's detriment. But there are problems, The Karni Sena, a group that claims to represent the interests of the upper castes, had recently shot into the limelight with their street protests against the release of the film, Padmavat.



Given that the Raje Government is in power, it had to bear the brunt of the opposition, although it had taken the safe way out by supporting a conditional ban on the film's release in Rajasthan and favouring dialogue with stakeholders. The Jats, Gujjars and Meenas are being assiduously wooed by the Congress, which hopes to repeat its 1998 performance in the State.

Mindful of the challenge, the BJP has roped in two of its prominent Rajput leaders from Rajasthan, Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore and Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, to project a Rajput-friendly image. It does seem to have, for the moment, cut the Karni Sena to size — a recent rally organised in Jaipur by the outfit managed to draw just a few hundred people. The Congress, on the other hand, is playing other cards, perhaps uncertain of the Rajput community's support.

It is tapping on the discontent among the Meena, Jat and Gujjar communities, combining their caste pride with rural distress. Sachin Pilot is a Gujjar, and he had lost out on a ministerial berth in a Union Cabinet reshuffle in the UPA rule, reportedly because of fear within the Congress that the powerful Meena community would be angered. On the other hand, Gehlot can claim association with both the Jat and the Rajput communities in a historical sense, though his gotra is seen to be part of the Jats. Given that multiple identifications can work, chief minister Vasundhara Raje is also not averse to flaunting it, even if she underplays it at times. She was born into a Rajput family and married a Jat; her daughter-in-law is a Gujjar.

It's difficult for either the BJP or the Congress to annoy any of the castes in the state because they have all become dominant in recent decades. The question now is: Which caste will triumph in the chief ministerial race: The Meena, the Gujjar, the Jat, or the Rajput?

II.DISCUSSION

Girdhari Lal Bhargav's untimely death after announcement of his candidature as BJP candidate from Jaipur for Lok Sabha ended a winning streak of six victories in a row that is rarely matched in these times. However, immediately, the question arose, who would replace him.

After long parleys, BJP finally decided for Ghanshyam Tiwari with Vasundhara Raje finally backing him. Why Tiwari? No doubt that he is a real, hardcore politician but more than that, he is a Brahmin. And Jaipur seat is traditionally considered as a Brahmin one, even though once upon a time Rajmata Gayatri Devi, a Rajput had been on a winning spree here. Congress also went in for a Brahmin candidate in Mahesh Joshi.

Jaipur is a typical case study of the way political parties these days are chalking about their election strategies. It is caste and caste only that is the deciding factor. Ask any of the top leaders about why a particular candidate was preferred, and the reply one would get is "because his or her caste has so many voters in that particular constituency". And if the candidate has his caste dominance spreading to neighbour constituencies too, he then has a better chance. For example, if Sona Ram is unhappy in Barmer, so conjuncture is that some Jats may vote for BJP Rajput candidate Manvendra Singh. All caste needs to be looked into, major ones need be given tickets. Gone are the days when Vasundhara Raje built her constituency in Jhalawar. Or even Ashok Gehlot, despite his Mali community dominated Jodhpur, who kept winning on his capabilities then caste. Caste calculations are forcing parties to field even reserved categories candidates from general seats. Meenas are one good example, who have emerged as single largest influential community in politics, beating even Jats in the recent assembly elections. Congress adjusted Namonarain Meena in Swai Madhopur, a seat that was kept as an option for fielding Kirori Lal Meena or someone else. This situation has been so tremendous that it could not afford to launch Vaibhav Gehlot, son of the chief minister from Swai Madhopur. It must though goes to credit of Gehlot that he sacrificed personal interest, which is rare to find someone of his stature to not launch one's sibling in politics despite opportunity.

Caste considerations have actually forced parties to repeat even those who lost in assembly polls or bank upon family members. Like BJP could find Kiran Yadav, wife of its MLA Jaswant Yadav as candidate from Yadav dominated Alwar, Congress Dr Karan Yadav has been since upset of being denied a ticket in favour of Jitendra Singh. In Jaipur rural, Congress has picked up Lalchand Kataria, a Jat and BJP is also debating whether to go for a Jat or of some other prominent caste.



Needless to say, all this makes the concept of issues just irrelevant. In this situation, if someone appeals for picking up candidates on merit and image, there is just one option left and that is to vote for someone who has been picked up on the basis of his or her caste. Even to eat into rival's vote bank, a number of dummy candidates are being fielded, that again on caste basis.

III.RESULTS

It's a known fact that elections in the state are fought on caste and community lines and not on issues. Though issues like inflation, corruption and governance are raised by political parties, ultimately it's the caste factor that comes to the mind eventually. In Rajasthan, close competition between castes or caste clusters result in conflict sometimes. The competition between Jats and Rajputs has been transformed into a bipolar party situation. In 1952, when the first elections were held, the state has come out from the influence of princes following the merger of states in Indian Union. But in 1952 vidhan sabha elections, the princes fielded a large number of their nominees. The praja or the electorate was under the hangover of the feudal era and they voted in large number in their favour. As a result, 54 Rajputs were elected in a house of 160 in 1952. In this election, the share of Jats was 12, Brahmins 22, Muslims two and the SC,10.

But after the 1952 elections, because of greater awareness, the Rajputs started losing their grip and in 1957 only 26 could win. In fact, the Jats started showing their power and in 1957 the number snowballed from 12 to 23. The Rajputs started getting marginalized after the emergence of Jats and Bishnois. But Rajputs once out of their palaces and with clear political options regained their lost pride when they won 26 seats as compared to the Jat-Bishnoi combo of 30. But out of the 26 Rajput winners, 16 were BJP and eight Congress. This shows the leaning of the Rajputs towards the BJP. In case of the Jats, the number was reversed ie, 16 Congress and eight BJP with one CPM and four Independents.

Even main political parties like Congress and BJP always provides benefits for the different castes and communities through their manifestos. Both the parties have asked the ticket aspirants to mention their caste as this would be the main consideration for nominations.

In the present vidhan sabha, there are 17 Vaishyas,14 Brahmins, 12 Muslims, seven Gurjars, four Malis, four Kulvis (Choudhrys), three Yadavs, three Kumawats, two Punjabis, two Sikhs, two Sindhis, two Rebaris, two Kalals, two Rawats and a Seervi, Dhakar, and Dangi each. The Congress and the BJP are trying to woo the Rajputs and Jats in 60 assembly seats. "The BJP has inducted shooter Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore and princess of Jaipur Diya Kumari and both are Rajputs. The BJP has given a very wrong message as no notable Jat was inducted in the party," said Vishvendra Singh, a scion of the former ruling family of Bharatpur and a former MP. "The caste conflict in the state came into being after 1989 because of the Mandal Commission report. After reaching a high point through 'Mandalization', caste appears to be reaching a dead end. The issue of reservations for OBCs following Mandalisation the claims of the OBC leaders for power sharing cropped up. Acceptance of the OBC reservation became a state policy. During the same period, various parties incorporated OBCs resulting in the changed composition of representatives. These developments have meant that the OBCs within themselves would go for greater share of power," said Vijay Bhandari, a veteran journalist and a subject expert. The caste conflict in the state is happening for two reasons. One is caste-based identity politics and the other is quota reservations. Because of caste politics, people vote en bloc as a community and they benefit as a bloc. This is what happened when Jats were granted OBC status. Since they are powerful and well off they kind of cornered the benefit of reservations. The Gujjars, that has an OBC status now want ST status by way of higher quota. Apart from reservations the Gujjars have another reason to protest. They have had very less political representation and they envy the Meenas who enjoy the ST status with over 500 IAS, IPS and other white-collared job holders. The Gujjars feel that given the benefit of quota they can outclass the Meenas in all walks of life. These events also bring out a big shortcoming of the entire social justice programme based on reservations.

IV.CONCLUSIONS

The parties in Rajasthan have traditionally taken the caste factor into account when distributing tickets, and as the Assembly elections approach, each community begins to demand its fair share. The importance of caste dynamics in the desert state is closely monitored by both the BJP and Congress, as they refine their campaign strategies for the elections. Therefore, not to be left behind various politically dominant communities of Rajasthan have already started mobilising their lot by holding Mahapanchayats in the state Capital Jaipur to assert their dominance and increase their political representation. After the Jat community's Jat Mahakumbh (mass meeting) in Jaipur, the Brahmins held a Mahapanchayat to demonstrate the community's solidarity. Not to be left behind the Rajput community has also announced a Kesariya Mahapanchayat . In Rajasthan's politics, the role of caste is significant as it leads to the division



of caste-based votes. Though the government has not enumerated caste-wise population other than SCs and STs in Census 2011 as per reports, the state has 272 castes and sub-castes and several castes dominate the political landscape in every election.

As per the past Census, the population of Rajasthan comprises 89 per cent Hindus, 9 per cent Muslims, and 2 per cent individuals belonging to other religions. The Scheduled Caste population constitutes 18 per cent, while the Scheduled Tribe population is 13 per cent. As per estimates, the Jat community makes up 12 per cent of the population, with the Gurjar and Rajput communities each accounting for 9 per cent. The Brahmins and Meenas represent 7 per cent of the population each.

The Brahmin community leaders expressed their disappointment with the fact that despite their population in the state is over 85 lakhs, no political party has given them an opportunity for political representation.

They emphasised that in more than 50 Assembly seats, the upper caste vote bank decides the outcome of the election. Out of 200 MLAs in Rajasthan, only 18 are from the Brahmin community. Through this demonstration of power, the community aimed to convey a message to all political parties to realise their potential and provide them with adequate representation in the upcoming Assembly elections.

Representatives of different political parties were also invited to the mahapanchayat, including BJP leaders such as Jat leader Satish Poonia, Rajput leaders Rajendra Rathore and Diya Kumari, and Brahmin Congress leaders like Mahesh Joshi, Raghu Sharma, and Archana Sharma.

However, the event organisers tried to ensure that the platform did not become politically charged by only allowing saints on the dais and focusing on social issues related to the upliftment of society.

Nevertheless, similar to the Jat Mahakumbh, the demand for a Brahmin CM emerged during the Brahmin Mahapanchayat, with surprisingly Congress leader Pushpendra Bhardwaj making the demand. The leaders also demanded that the Congress-BJP provide 30-30 tickets to the Brahmin community, as well as EWS reservations and other benefits available in other reservations. They also called for the return of temples under government control to the community and the formulation of a Hindu Religious Act similar to the Waqf Board.

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