

# “Caste Panchayats provoked clashes in Rajasthan”

Mohammed Iqbal

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In the murky Gujjar-Meena caste cauldron of Rajasthan, caste Panchayats have played a major role in provoking both the sides into pressuring the State Government and taking the law into their own hands. These community councils have succeeded in mobilizing the people over the week and aggravated the situation.

Friday's direct clash between the two communities at Lalsot, that left four persons dead, was the outcome of a series of caste Panchayats held in different parts of the State issuing a call to fight it out on the streets. Ironically, the caste Panchayats have manifested political aspect of castes even though they were never established with this aim.

Both Gujjars and Meenas have been using these traditional institutions as an instrument to establish solidarity.

The violent confrontation at Lalsot in Dausa district took place when Meenas were going to attend a Maha Panchayat at Nangla-Raota village. The two communities clashed over a road blockade put up by Gujjars.

The well-entrenched concept of caste hierarchy in the feudal society of Rajasthan finds expression in caste Panchayats that often deliberate on social disputes and settle them using the opinion of community elders. With the caste Panchayats holding sway on the lives of respective communities, the role of Government initiated village

Panchayats is restricted to perfunctory official work.

- **“Open interference” of caste Panchayats in the reservation debate.**

- **Poverty alleviation schemes have not ‘led to any improvement’ in rural economy**

## “Worrisome aspect”

“A worrisome aspect of caste Panchayats during the ongoing Gujjars agitation is the dominance of aggressive youths who have weakened the decision – making power of community elders”, said sociologist Rajiv Gupta here on Sunday. As elders were on the backfoot, youngsters gave provocative calls and aggravated the crisis.

Dr. Gupta, who teaches sociology in Rajasthan University, said the “negative role” of caste Panchayat had complicated the situation through the moves such as keeping bodies of six Gujjars killed in police firing on the National highway for five days, invoking religious icons for an agitation which was essentially for material benefits and asking the ruling party's leaders to lend open support to the community.

Despite the absence of any legal validity, caste Panchayats in the interior areas of the desert State have been dealing with the matters such as violation of caste rules, financial transactions, intercaste marriages, elopement of boys and girls, cases of cursing, stealing, fighting, illicit

sexual conduct, false accusation, wife battering, etc.

Caste Panchayats usually meet near a temple of the community deity to provide sanctity to their decisions. Though the Panchayat discussions are often loud, tense and factional and are driven by status and power contests, they are finally accepted by the parties concerned with full social endorsement.

Dealing with the wide-spread Nata (man-women relation) practice in Rajasthan, the caste Panchayats have frequently given complex and confusing decisions aimed at creating a balance between the community's belief and the hierarchical social order.

## Panchayati Raj Act to have more teeth

N.J.Nair

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### Amendments to include punitive provisions for polluting environment.

In a bid to check pollution of water resources and dumping of refuse in public places, the Local Self-Government Department has decided to amend the Panchayati Raj and Municipal Acts and arm them with stringent punitive provisions.

Department sources told *The Hindu* that the amendments would add provisions to the acts for awarding a minimum of six months rigorous imprisonment and a fine depending on the gravity of the offences.

The amendments would empower the local self-government institutions to play a pivotal role in preventing the outbreak of communicable diseases, encroachment on river banks, illegal sand mining and also in complementing the sanitation drive being launched by the Government.

The secretaries of Panchayats, municipalities and corporations would have to take the lead to file police complaints against those violating the rules so that the offenders could be brought to book without delay. The increasing incidence of epidemics prompted the department to take effective measures to prevent the dumping of waste in both urban and rural areas.

### **Coordinated work**

The department would also seek the cooperation of the Police, Revenue and Health departments to maintain a strict vigil against unloading refuse in open places, lakes and rivers and other public places at night.

Civic chiefs had brought to notice of the department instances of institutions and individuals routing sewerage connections to rivers and lakes.

### **Stern action**

The amendments were expected to give powers to the civic bodies to initiate stern action against factories, private hospitals and hotels that use the water bodies to dispose of their waste, the sources said.

Considering the outbreak of diseases like chikungunya, the department also decided to streamline the cleaning and refuse management mechanisms in the rural and urban areas. As a preliminary step, it was decided that the Health Sanitation Mission be merged with the Clean Kerala Mission.

## **Refuse management**

This would help to improve refuse management, create an awareness among the public about sanitation and facilitate better coordination of the activities being taken up by various branches of the department as

well as the civic bodies. The merger was also expected to ensure optimum utilization of funds allotted for such purposes.

## **A panchayat's clean sweep: Toilets in all homes**

**Samudra Gupta Kashyap**

**The Indian Express, 21th June, 2007**

### **Earlier half the homes did not have toilets; Kamarbandha Gram Panchayat gets Nirmal Gram Puraskar**

Nizara Bora distinctly remembers the day several villagers came to see a latrine that her husband had installed – the first in the entire area – and also how several of them thought it was meaningless to have spent Rs 14,000 to construct it. That was way back in 1982.

A quarter of a century later, every home in the cluster of six villages that comprise the Kamarbandha Gaon Panchayat is proud to have a toilet. It boasts of being one of the three villages in Assam that has won a Nirmal Gram Puraskar from the Central Government for its achievement.

“It was a difficult task, because we had a large number of BPL families”, said gaon Panchayat president Haraprasad Rajkhowa. “But we did it, and I must particularly appreciate the role of the women in motivating every household to own a latrine,” added Rajkhowa, who went to New Delhi earlier this month to collect the Rs 4-lakh award.

Of the 1,263 houses under the gaon Panchayat there were as many as 533 which did not have a toilet, he said. “most of these families were below poverty line and are not fully literate.” Even among the 602 APL families, 22 did not have a toilet. Kamarbandha began the scheme in 2005.

“Kamarbandha is a flood –prone area, and malaria, diarrhoea and other water-borne diseases were common. But with total sanitation campaign becoming a success here, these health problems are gradually fading out,” said Manjana Saikia, a women member of the gaon Panchayat.

While the state as a whole is yet to bring down its percentage of people without access to sanitary facilities from an embarrassing 74 per cent, in Golaghat, the figure stood at above 82 till three years ago.

“One thing that was encouraging was that the people readily accepted the idea when we approached them with the total sanitation concept,” pointed out Paban Kumar Dutta, assistant executive engineer of the Golaghat public health engineering (PHE) sub-division. Dutta is also the member-secretary of the Village Water & Sanitation Committee, headed by the Panchayat president.

“My husband was not sure what we would do with a sanitary latrine when the open field was free for use,” said Arati Tanti of Raidongiya-Gandhibaris village, whose husband is a daily-wage labourer. “It took a lot of pestering on my part to take the scheme by contributing Rs 125 from our side,” she added.

But having achieved this, what is worrying the people here is the three-km railway track that passes through this gaon Panchayat area. “I think we must write to Railway Minister Lalu rasad to do something about the rubbish that the railway trains leave behind. otherwise this Nirmal Gram Puraskar will become meaningless,” said Manbar Tanti, a mason.