

Gonds wield textbook sli

Attack BJP Govt For Offensive Remarks About Community

Akshaya Mukul | TNN

Palitanalhar (Korba): Election is hardly the occasion to correct stereotypes and set history right but Gonds, the dominating tribe in Chhattisgarh, have decided to turn it into a political advantage. Hira Singh Markam, who founded Gondwana Gantantra Party in 1991 to fight for a separate Gondwana state, is contesting from here even as Congress and BJP have also fielded Gond candidates.

Amidst desertion from the Gond rank and file, Markam's supporters, who see him as a social reformer, discovered late on Saturday night that BA first year geography text, approved by the Chhattisgarh government, makes offensive remarks about their history and culture. By Sunday morning, thousands of copies had been made and circulated in all villages, and if Narendra Singh Jagat is to be believed, all Gond voters would have a copy of the objectionable portion before polling day.

Gondwana Gantantra Party (GGP) also wants to use this book to attack fellow-Gond candidates Shiv Mohan Singh Ulke of BJP and sitting MLA Ram Dayal Ulke of Congress. "This book was brought to their notice also but they did nothing. Instead, they want the community to look forward and not get enmeshed in these irrelevant issues. We will expose them," said Jagat, adding that it would be done in Madhya Pradesh also. His claim might have a basis. In the last assembly election, though GGP did not win any seat it garnered 1.5 lakh votes. In MP, it had three MLAs and the party got more than 5 lakh votes.

What has offended Gonds most is a claim in the book that the tribe eats cow meat. "The meaning of the word Gond in Gondi language is those who kill cow or eat cow meat. Therefore, Gonds do not like to be

called Gonds but prefer the other name of Kol or Koitur," the book says. Jagat explained that even when his tribe was not in touch with the outside world, cow meat was forbidden. "It shows the sick mind of BJP government to have approved such a book," he said. As for Kol, it is a term used by the mid-19th century zamindars in the Bastar belt for all those who came under them.

Another offensive remark relates to Gond marriage system. The book says that "like Muslims", Gonds marry anyone except blood brother and sister. On the pre-nuptial Ghotul system, in which boy and girl mix freely and if found compatible marry each other, the book's tone is derogatory.

Jagat said Gonds had moved from the days of Ghotul. He claimed that marriages now took place as per gotra system and Ghotul halls in villages had turned into study halls.

While facts of Ghotul system could not be verified, the big halls do exist in villages. Be it Gurslyan, Pauri Uppora or Barodkhar villages, women said it had been 10 years since Ghotul system was practised. They ascribed the change to Markam, who encouraged Gonds to give up alcohol, the sole cause of falling

into moneylender's trap and eventually losing control over land. Thanks to Markam, Gonds have their own bank — Gondwana Bank — with more than Rs 12 crore in deposits. Running in profit, the bank provides loan at 1% less than the market rate and is open to all communities. The community has also stopped being ostentatious in marriage, birth and other rituals. An interesting facet is that in times of marriage, the groom's family instead of giving expensive gifts to the bride's family, plants 25 mango trees in her house. "Will anyone with 25 mango trees be poor?" Jagat asked.

Satnamis hold key in 2

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Bilaspur: Courted in equal measure by both Congress and BJP, the Satnamis, a 35-lakh-strong anti-Brahmanical order going back to the early 19th century, hold the key to the second phase of the Chhattisgarh election to be held on November 20.

But the competitive allurements offered by the two big parties has turned the Satnampanth, a known votary of Congress — Ajit Jogi to be precise — into a divided house.

As is the story of all sects, the division in the Satnampanth has resulted in both Congress and BJP claiming that each has the support of the real sect leader.

While Guru Baldas, who descended from Ghasidas, initiator of Satnampanth, is with the Congress, what has angered him is that the son of his adversary Vijay Guru has got the Congress ticket. Vijay Guru himself is with the BJP. On record, both parties have fielded 10 Satnami candidates each.

Initially, Baldas is not forthcoming about the Satnamis' support to Jogi. He maintains that Satnamis



VOTE-BANK: The Satnamis

are "neutral" in this election.

A strong reason for Baldas' neutral stance is Jogi's failure to get a Congress ticket for his son. What has added to his misery is that BJP has given the ticket to Vijay Guru's son. It is only after much prodding that Baldas admits the sect is too closely connected with Congress to snap ties.

The Satnami Mahasabha was set

Congress wary of Jogi

Nitin Sethi | TNN

Raipur: Ajit Jogi's ambition could make him. But, it could just as well undo him in Chhattisgarh. There are apprehensions within the Congress whether the shrewd tactician would let his chief ministerial aspiration overcome his instinct to ruin the prospects of his detractors within the party during the second phase of assembly elections.

With the violence-marred first phase in the tribal dominated southern constituencies over, the 'Satnami factor' in the plains of the otherwise heavily forested state, and Jogi's use of Guru Ghasidas' disciples could now become one critical element in Congress's possible ascent to power. Recognized on both sides of the fence as an aggressive and leading force in the state, the controversial Congress leader seems to have instilled as much fear in his own party as in the opposition about how he would be able to wield his community which stands stoutly behind him.

With some predicting an election that could run down to the wire, state Congress leaders have become wary of a repeat of 2003 elections, where



OVER-AMBITIOUS? Ajit Jogi

an over-confident Jogi was accused of having undercut candidates of other factions within his party setting up the drubbing it faced at the polls. A repeat could imply the Jogi faction ruining chances of at least four to five candidates in the fray, including state Congress chief Dharendra Sahoo contesting from Abhanpur seat falling within Raipur.

Jogi, who belongs to the Satnampanth, was 'bestowed' with the backing of his community — according to observers — through a tactical error by the BJP earlier when it harped too strongly on the fact that

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Satnamis hold key in 2nd phase

Akshaya Mukul | TNN

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But the competitive allurements offered by the two big parties has turned the Satnampanth, a known votary of Congress — Ajit Jogi to be precise — into a divided house.

As is the story of all sects, the division in the Satnampanth has resulted in both Congress and BJP claiming that each has the support of the real sect leader.

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The Satnami Mahasabha was set

up in the early 1920s by Congress and the Satnampanth was set up to carry out further reforms in the sect. Much later, Satnami leaders Naidass and Anjordass participated in the 1925 Kanpur session of the Congress where an encounter with Baba Ramchandra, leader of radical peasant movement in Awadh, resulted in the creation of Guru Ghasidas K1 Vanshavali, the only written text of the sect, otherwise dominated by mythic tales.

Another interesting facet to Satnami influence is the attempt by Congress to use them in negating the positive feedback that BJP is getting due to the success of Rs 3/kg rice. Baldas says: "Giving rice at cheap price is not hitting at the bottom of the problem of poverty. What is needed is education and employment rather than subsidy." In his speeches, he has been consistently criticizing the rice scheme.

On the sidelines is BSP, waiting for its own share of the Satnampanth cake. Since Chamars form the core of Satnampanth, BSP has been working on them for long but with little success.

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since he was a Satnami, he could not call himself a tribal.

This firmly pitched a substantial percentage of the SC community in the state behind him, which he could now use against his opponents in either party. The little gains that BJP had made among the Satnamis around the last assembly elections, observers feel, were dented when the state government arrested its leader in a battle over establishing a memorial in Bilaspur leading to state wide agitation, which could only strengthen Jogi's hand this time around. He could influence the community to smash prospects on either side of the fence.

With BSP remaining the only unexpected factor in how the Satnami vote breaks, leaders on either side have rivetted their eyes on Jogi to see how he mobilizes his forces to mar the chances of his opponents within Congress. "Jogi made the same mistake last time, he believed he was on such a strong wicket that he didn't think too much of ruining the chances of a few Congress candidates. He could be committing the same mistake again if the results are close and each seat counts," a local observer pointed out.