

Gujarat Dalits thumb nose at upper castes



WHEELS OF PROGRESS: Narayan Chavda drives a tempo that runs exclusively for the Dalits of the village.

By **D.P. Bhattacharya**
in Rampar village (Surendranagar)

Mahatma Gandhi had used the boycott mantra to great advantage against the British. Over 60 years after Babu passed away, upper castes in the state he was born used it against the Dalits. But they did not anticipate that the Dalits would counter this move with another of the Mahatma's teachings — self-reliance. Meet the people who started their own economy in under three months

SHOWING courage and aptitude in the face of adversity, 15 Dalit families in Rampar village have set a shining example by setting up their own economy against all odds.

When the dominant castes, angry over the “untouchables” entering the village temple for the first time in their lives, ordered boycott of the 15 families on January 22, little did they realise that the Dalits would close ranks and fight back unitedly. In the process, the latter proved that they were not dependent on the higher castes and could easily survive the pariah handicap.

Less than three months later, the Dalits in Rampar village of Muli block in Surendranagar have created their own, independent economy and are marching on in their journey towards self-reliance. The village, 220 km from Ahmedabad and 65 km from Surendranagar district headquarters, is home to 750 people belonging to 75 families of the Chualia Koli community, three of the Bharvad community and 14 of the Devipujak community, all of whom are OBCs. Besides, 15 families of Kadva Patels also live in the village.

“Caste discrimination and untouchability have been major

issues here,” social worker Romila Parmar said. “The upper caste grocers would hand us things from a distance and sprinkle water on our cash before accepting it,” Ratan Chavda said. “They never treated us like humans, but we put up with it,” she added.

But things changed this January when Navsarjan, a pan-Gujarat NGO working for Dalits, organised a rally in Rampar village. “On January 22, we symbolically burnt untouchability outside the village and entered the temple for the first time in our

lives. Earlier, even the thought was taboo,” Parshottam Chavda said.

“Though the headman had allowed us permission for entering the temple, the entire village ganged up to boycott us. They swore in the name of goddess Meldi (the village deity) that those crossing the line would be slapped with a ₹5,000-fine,” he said, adding, “They wouldn’t let us travel in their tempos, have flour from the village mills or buy groceries.”

The 15 Dalit families were faced with a hard time, not



FOOD FOR THOUGHT: Kala Chavda grinds flour at his mill, which the boycotted Dalits set up in Gujarat’s Rampar.

PHOTOS: HANIF SINDHI



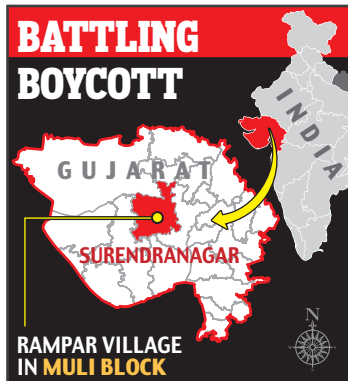
“We don’t need the upper castes anymore,”

Parshottam Chavda



“They never treated us like humans,”

Ratan Chavda



don’t need the upper castes anymore,” says Parshottam.

But it’s not all hunky-dory. “We are not making any profits yet and, yes, we have to pay monthly loan instalments. I am barely making ₹1,000 though I have to pay around ₹1,800 a month to the bank. So I work as a farm hand too. But our satisfaction is that we don’t depend on them,” said Kala Chavda. Parshottam and Narayan are also in the same boat.

Though the police filed an FIR and arrested 18 people, all of them have been released on bail. The matter has also been reported to the National Human Rights Commission, which has issued a notice to the state government. But Gujarat social welfare board director P.K. Gadvi and Surendranagar district collector Anupam Kumar denied reports of the boycott.

The village elders also pleaded ignorance on the boycott issue. “They (the Dalits) came, entered the temple and went away. We didn’t say anything,” said Pitambar Kavar. “They don’t come to our shops, is that our fault? We can’t go to their houses and give them what they need,” he added angrily.

knowing how to lead a normal daily life. But rather than capitulating, they decided to make redundant the existing system and put into its place an alternative supply mechanism.

“So we sat down together and decided to have our own shops and flour mill,” Parshottam said. “We approached the State Bank of India and got two loans worth ₹50,000 each,” he added.

Fast forward to today: Parshottam sits in his grocery shop, his friend Kala Chavda operates a flour mill and Narayan Chavda has bought a rural tempo. “We