

'Pink' justice: Uttar Pradesh's Gulabi Gang

Interview by Prashant Singh

Little is considered remarkable about the Banda district of Uttar Pradesh, India. The district is a dacoit prone area located in the eastern-most part of the Bundelkhand region bordering the state of Madhya Pradesh. Geographically, the district largely consists of irregular uplands with outcrops of rocks, together with lowlands frequently under water during the rainy season. Banda's economy is based mainly on agriculture.

From 2002, the entire Bundelkhand region suffered from drought, made worse by the absence of irrigation canals due to irregular uplands. The situation was such that there was a wave of farmers committing suicide, with more than 200 farmers dying in this manner. The numerous welfare schemes available for farmers, including crop insurance and credit, as well as subsidized rations through the Public Distribution Scheme, were all rendered futile, due to a corrupt district administration.

One group of women struggling against injustice under these circumstances have become infamous. For identification and the maintenance of discipline, the women adopted a uniform of pink saris, earning them the name of Gulabi Gang (Pink Gang). The group's main activities are to check domestic violence, gender discrimination and corrupt government machinery. In the words of the group's leader Sampat Pal, "We are not claiming that we are revolutionaries, but we are trying to make a corruption-free Banda, where nobody dies from hunger and starvation." Towards this end, the group once recovered tons of grain stolen from the Public Distribution System and sold on the black market. Unfortunately, since the Banda police are also corrupt, they released the grain after the recovery.

When the Gulabi Gang are on a mission, they will be seen carrying sticks, axes and sickles. Government officers are aware that if found guilty, no one can save them from the attack of these women. When police officers at the Atarra police station refused to lodge a Dalit's complaint, the group stormed the police station with dogs.

Banda women are proud to be part of the Gulabi Gang. They claim they are not political--they do not belong to any party, nor are they partial to any party--but have their own politics, their own vision. Upon receiving information of domestic violence, the group march to the relevant house, where they first try to solve the problem politely and peacefully. If this doesn't work, they use their sandals and sticks. Men with feudal and patriarchal attitudes are particularly wary of them.

The group justifies its use of violence by a common proverb: "Bhaya bin hot na preet" ('without fear no love'). Says Ms Pal, "Here in Banda, people understand only the words of power, whether these words are by dacoit or policemen. Nobody wants our words in their ear, that's why sometimes we are violent. For self defense we organize workshop on how to use sticks."

Ms Pal is also an advocate of education, particularly for girls. She envisions a Banda where girls are not victims of child marriages. "I know the pain of child marriage because I was married at the age of 12 years. I lost one son of 16 days due to immaturity," she said. Today she has five children; one son and four daughters, three of whom are married.

"My son is pursuing a Bachelor of Science-Agriculture and my daughter is also pursuing a bachelor degree. Although I am only class 8 passed, I know the value of education and time,

that's why I opened a school in the village and I started teaching children, and I also promote unemployed youth to teach children.”

While the Gulabi Gang may not have started out with any political aims, they are slowly being pushed into mainstream politics, resulting in Sampat Pal standing for the Uttar Pradesh legislative assembly elections in 2007, where she mustered only 2800 votes. In her words, “Joining politics is not my chosen way to help people. We will keep up our good work, so the state does not take us for granted.”

In the badlands of Uttar Pradesh where nothing seems to work for the poor, this is a laudable aim. The group's support among the poor and marginalized of Banda has extended to support from various sectors throughout the country, including state officials pleased with their attempts to improve administrative accountability. The use of violence however, can never be justified, no matter the aims. By ignoring the inherent destructiveness of a group using ‘sandals and sticks’ to achieve their aims, the Indian society is encouraging the inculcation of a culture of violence. It is also promoting the idea of alternative justice, which will inevitably erode rule of law principles.