

## PATTERNS OF CHANGE AMONG THE JATS AS GLEANED FROM ARABIC AND PERSIAN SOURCES

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### ABSTRACT

*The Jats belong to a peasant community widely distributed in fertile regions of northern and north-west India. They underwent a prolonged process of change and social transformation over a period of eight centuries. Their journey from pastoralism to cultivation had been attentively observed by a series of travellers and court historians of medieval period. This paper aims to study the patterns of change among the Jats in light of pertinent information supplied by the Arabic and Persian sources of the Middle Ages.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Pastoralism, Peasant, Jat, Mobility, Ain-i-Akbari*

### INTRODUCTION

The Jats are considered as a peasant community inhabiting fertile regions of modern Panjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and western Uttar Pradesh. In Pakistan, they are found in Sindh and further as far as Peshawar. The historical origin of this community can be traced from Sindh, from where they first moved to Panjab, expanded south-eastwards, and by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, occupied the fertile tracts of upper Gangetic doab. The evolution of the Jats from pastoralists to cultivators and peasant proprietors was a result of a prolonged process of economic change and social transformation during medieval period. From time to time scholarly attempts have been made to reconstruct a history of the Jats, but many of them are unable to ensure the validity of the evidence. In this context, authentic evidence about the Jats can be gleaned from the Arabic and Persian sources which did not fail to notice contemporary life, occupations, castes and communities. This study aims to examine some of the Arabic and Persian writings of medieval period in order to shed light on patterns of change among the Jats.

During the medieval period, the earliest account of the Jats is provided by an eighth century Arabic chronicle, Chachnama. Written by an anonymous author, Chachnama narrates the history of Sindh particularly from the reign of its ruler, Chach. It is considered as a comprehensive account of the invasion of Sindh by the Arabs, but it is the main source of information regarding the social and economic conditions of the Jats of Sindh in the eighth century. According to Chachnama, Chach, the ruler of Sindh imposed social and economic restrictions on the Jats and Luhanas owing to some previous prejudices. As a result, when the Arabs invaded the kingdom of Sindh in 712 CE, there was a division among the ranks of the Jats inhabiting both banks of river Indus, with western Jats (Jattan-i-gharhi) joining the army of Mohammad bin Qasim, while the eastern Jats (Jattan-i-Sharqi) supporting Dahir, the son of Chach.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mirza Kalichbeg Fredunbeg., The Chachnamah—An Ancient History of Sind. Delhi, 1979, p 137.

The Jats had now settled in the core areas of Sindh, particularly Lohana,<sup>2</sup> Brahmanabad,<sup>3</sup> Samma,<sup>4</sup> Siwistan, Bodhiya<sup>5</sup> and the port of Debal.<sup>6</sup> Some of the references to the Jat chiefs,<sup>7</sup> and headmen<sup>8</sup> indicate the existence of some kind of egalitarianism and chieftdom among the Jat tribes. Their occupations include cattle-herding, royal bodyguards,<sup>9</sup> spies,<sup>10</sup> caravan guides,<sup>11</sup> boatmen<sup>12</sup> and firewood suppliers.<sup>13</sup> The pattern of social prohibition on the Jatts was allowed to be continued by the new Arab rulers of Sindh.

The pastoral communities of Sindh were inclined to Buddhism. The religious inclination of the Jats to Buddhism might have antagonized the Brahman rulers of Sindh and consequently led to the religious intolerance and victimization of the Jats.<sup>14</sup> But it is matter of speculation as to why Mohammad bin Qasim sanctioned the continuation of the policy of social prohibitions against the Jatts. Feasibly, as a matter of political pragmatism, the Arabs desisted to intervene in the social and sacred affairs of the newly conquered people.

During the ninth century, the main source of information about the Jats is *Futuhu-l-Buldan*, an Arabic text authored by Al Biladuri. It is a graphic account of the military expeditions of the Arabs in India and West Asia, but incidentally sheds valuable light on the social position of the Jats of Sind:

He (Arab governor) encamped on the river at Alrur. There he summoned the Jats, who came to his presence, when he took from them the jizya.

This evidence clearly indicates the territorial shift of the Jats from Central Sindh to Upper Sindh, particularly at Kikan and Alrur in Multan region.<sup>15</sup> This is also the first evidence of the Jats subjected to imposition of Jizya tax by the Arab governor of Sindh in ninth century CE. It may be surmised that by the ninth century, the Jats had obtained substantial resources that qualified them to pay Jizya, and earn the status of Zimmis. The utilization of the military services of the Jat chief<sup>16</sup> by the Arab governor against the Meds shows some kind of mitigation of social prohibitions against the Jats.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the employment of the Jats in digging a canal<sup>18</sup> also reflects the growing contribution of the Jats in contemporary conditions.

A turning point in the Jat history has been reported by an eleventh century Persian chronicle, *Zain-al-Akhbar*, written by Gardizi. It throws a good deal of light on Jat settlements in Punjab for the first time, and massive growth of their manpower and resources. *Zain-al-Akhbar* provides a vivid account of the 17<sup>th</sup> expedition of Mahmud Ghazni against the

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 36, 170, 171

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 36-37.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 173

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 36, 170.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 37,

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 37, 170.

<sup>14</sup> Irfan Habib, 'Jutts of Punjab and Sind.' Past and Present: Essays in Honour of Dr. Ganda Singh. Eds. Harbans Singh and N. Gerald Barrier. Patiala, 1976., pp. 94-95.

<sup>15</sup> Irfan Habib, op. cit., p. 94.

<sup>16</sup> *Futuhu-l-Buldan* of Al-Biladuri, Trans. P.K. Hitti, Beirut, 1966., p. 128.

<sup>17</sup> *Chachnama*, op. cit., pp. 37, 170.

<sup>18</sup> Al Biladuri, op. cit., p. 128.

Jats of Multan on the banks of river Indus in 1027 CE.<sup>19</sup>The Jats are said to have plundered Ghazni's army during his retreat from Somnath in 1026 CE, and the 17<sup>th</sup> expedition was carried out mainly to punish the prowling Jats of Multan.<sup>20</sup>The Jats made massive preparations, approximately 4000 to 8,000 boats, for this fierce naval war, but they were defeated by Mahmud Ghazni.<sup>21</sup> The naval encounter between the Jats of Multan and Mahmud Ghazni reveals the enlargement of the economic resources and military power of the Jats which encouraged them to confront the imperial army of Sultan Mahmud. It also shows the process of social and economic change in terms of occupational shift towards cultivation and food production.

Another Persian text, *Tarikh i-Baihaqi*, written by Abul Fazl Baihaqi in the eleventh century, gives reference about the development of material and military power of the Jats in Panjab. According to Baihaqi, the Jats had supported Sultan Masud's officers against the rebel Yanaltigin.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most important references about the social status of the Jats can be derived from Alberuni's *Tahqiq-i-Hind*. Alberuni was a great medieval scholar who accompanied his master Mahmud Ghazni during his expeditions, and gathered first-hand information about society, economy, religion and general life of the people of India. *Tahqiq-i-Hindis* considered as a major travel account of a Persian traveller to eleventh century India.

According to Alberuni, "Then there was born a child in the city of Mathura to Vasudeva by the sister of Kamsa, at that time ruler of the town. They were a Jatt family, cattle-owners, low Sudra people."<sup>23</sup>

Alberuni's remarks on the Jats are significant as it is the first reference to the Jats as 'cattle-owners' and 'Sudras.' It reaffirms the pastoral background of the Jats, and further emphasises the linkages of the Jats with agrarian settings and Sudra agriculturists. It also highlights the process of mobility and change among the Jats of northern India, particularly in terms of peasantsation.

By the end of the sixteenth century the process of change reached its culmination when Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* reported the emergence of the Jats as Zamindars. *Ain-i-Akbari* is a sixteenth century Persian account of Akbar's administration by his court historian, Abul Fazl. It provides pargana-wise information and a list of the castes of the zamindars of each pargana. This kind of information is helpful in ascertaining the relative social and economic strength of each referred caste of each pargana. The references to Jat Zamindars help us to delineate the spatial span of the Jat seminars in Delhi, Agra, Multan and Lahore provinces. According to *Ain-i-Akbari*, the Jat zamindars were concentrated in Upper Ganga- Jamuna Doab, Upper Rechna Doab, Upper and Central Bari Doab, Sirhind and Hisar Firoza region.<sup>24</sup> The evidence articulated by *Ain-i-Akbari* clearly shows the social and economic transformation of the Jats as substantial landholders and zamindars.

<sup>19</sup>Gardizi, *KitabZainul-Akhbar*,(Ed). Muhammad Nazim. The Life and Times of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna. New Delhi, 1971., pp. 87-89. Cited by Irfan Habib,op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>20</sup> Muhammad Nazim,op. cit., p.121.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 121-22.

<sup>22</sup> Baihaqi, *Tarikh-i-Baihaqi* of Baihaqi, (Ed.) Q. Ghani and A.A. Fayyaz. Tehran, 1946., pp.. 523-34.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Sachau, (Tr.). *Alberuni's India: An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India about A.D. 1030*. 2 vols. New Delhi, 1964., p. 401.

<sup>24</sup>*Ain-i-Akbari* of AbulFazlAllami, (Trans) H. Blochmann, *Bibl. Ind.* vol. 1. New Delhi, 2006., pp. 190-206, 283-301, 315- 336.

The seventeenth century Persian text, *Dabistan-i-Mazahib* provides reference to the Jats of Panjab as 'Baisas', 'villager' and 'rustic' people.<sup>25</sup> These remarks clearly illustrate the changes that are taking place in the social and economic position of the Jats. The references to the Jats as 'villager' or a 'rustic' indicate their modes of external behaviour, an outcome of their association with agriculture and rural background. The reference to 'Vaishya' status for the Jats is remarkable as it is a clear social advancement over the previous designation as 'Sudras'.<sup>26</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The study of the Jats had often faced constraints and limitations on account of inadequate sources. But the references and observations on the Jats, gleaned from the major Arabic and Persian sources, had helped us to shed light on the process of mobility and change among the Jats of medieval India. An integral study of these comments and statements made by learned travellers and court historians has helped us to remove obscure notions, leading to a scientific understanding of the patterns of change among the Jats during medieval period.

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