

Analytical Study of The Social System of the Jats

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Abstract

The Jats is an important peasant tribe, who hold more than half the cultivated area in seven districts of the Upper Doab,¹ and in the others are an important element in the agricultural population, of which, indeed, White way called them the "backbone",² Renowned historians called them 'almost a nation' which excelled in agriculture and in battle-field alike. Driven to arms in deep discontent, the Jat insurrection, in the beginning, symptomized the general disaffection in the Empire, even though it had then a local application only. Attempts at their ruthless repression, without redressed of their genuine grievances, kindled the native fury of the Jats. Inwardly exasperated, the ferocious Jats and the kindred people rose again ultimately setting at naught the imperial authority.

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An obscure people rising and swaying the destiny of a big region is not an ordinary phenomenon. But it is a pity that they have not received sufficient attention at the hands of scholars for the study of their ethnology. Being primarily agriculturists they had neither the inclination nor opportunities to prove their skills in accessing and consolidating political power in the ancient time. Their self-sufficient economy, largely working under the barter system, was largely responsible for their living a contented and sedentary life. They were hardly concerned or worried about the affairs of the state. It was later, in the medieval times, especially during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that the Jats asserted to carve their position and establish their own political status. The house of Bharatpur was the most prominent to form a state and get recognition from the Mughal emperor in 1742 A.D. under Badan Singh assisted ably by his son Suraj Mal. Earlier the Jats had surprised Chinghese Khan in the fourteenth century and Baber in the sixteenth century.

But essentially pursuing agricultural and pastoral occupations the Jats preferred to remain aloof from the humdrum of urban life and continued to live a sedentary life that was least affected by the shifting sands of time. They stood on the sturdy ground of the most productive tract of land ranging from river Indus to the Ganges. It was this cradle of the ancient Indian civilization where they realized their life in full measure enriching the total social environment. Better known by their various separate clan names before acquiring along with many others the collective nomenclature 'Jat' they scrupulously followed the traditions and customs developed under the commonwealth governing the social and religious life of the people in the region.

The richest portion of the Doab is that to the west, where aided by an abundant water supply, the Jats of Saharanpur, Muzaffarnagar, and Meerut are about the finest yeomen in India. Here will be seen the results of the labor of a most industrious, sturdy peasantry, vast sheets of wheat and barley, sugar cane, cotton, millets, and maize. Here the plow cattle are of the finest breed, and most thriving yeomen own a broodmare or two, the produce of which find a ready sale at the agricultural fairs as remounts for our cavalry or for private use."³ William Crooke waxes almost lyrical describing the rich agricultural land of the Doab and the lifestyle and daily routine of the sturdy Jats of this region."⁴

The Jat peasant works hard in his field. Crooke further says, 'Whatever gained from the annual harvests spent securing the rude comfort hundreds of industrious households. The peasant here has future prosperity before him: petty holding, barren and irresponsive to labor though maybe, is yet own. If he saves he devotes his capital widening the bounds of heritage. He will endure a life of ceaseless labor and the

most grinding economy if can add but one rood to birthright. He will sink the savings years building well which only form stable improvement which has confidence. He learned the tending cattle; loves the great white cow and his pair sleek oxen as they were his children, and will starve himself rather than that they should lack their daily provender. almost every farm the broodmare whose produce he sells year by year at profit. Drought may wither the crops, famine, and disease may savage the household; war may destroy the accumulation of generations, and the fields may lie barren for the season. But when the storm of calamity blows over the yeoman returns to his homestead and starts afresh his meager farm supported by the help and sympathy of brethren. The best example of this recuperative power of the peasant classes is shown by Colonel Baird Smith's celebrated Report on the famine of 1860, where he proves that by that time all trace of the disaster of 1837-38 had quite disappeared in the Western Doab."⁵

About the religion of the Jats of the nineteenth century, one finds them believing in different faiths of Hindu, Muslim, Sikhs, and even Buddhists, but, a Jat is Jat, because, regarding religion, he never being an orthodox. Here we have to think of the Jats of Doab, who were believing in the Hindu faith. With regard to their religion generally, we may quote Miller. The thoughts of the great mass of the people have turned agriculture from their earliest days, and they have little to spare for other pursuits or amusements. Even the children playing in the sand amuse themselves by boundaries of fields with boundaries, (dauls), irrigation channels, and water lifts. This long-lasting devotion to their everyday work probably accounts for a comparatively small extent to which religion seems to affect their daily life. Of superstition there, of course, a good deal a certain attention must be shown to the shrines dental bhumiya deity [deta or devtal, whose statuette is generally installed under big peepal or banyan tree, whom the peasants pay their obeisance for a bumper crop and good health cattle: the small-pox goddess must be propitiated, the regulations of sacred groves: observed, and altars built to appease restless spirits that return to afflict living. the men of better classes appear to regard all this with certain contempt. They have a deeply religious sense of the existence of one omnipotent deity that often finds solemn expression in their conversion, but their religion requires neither creeds ceremonies. Temples are rarely built by the Jats, and the family priest [Pandatji] is not always treated with the reverence he expects. It is possible that the spread of Muhammadanism the conversation of a large number of the leading Hindu castes has led to the discarding of more idolatrous forms of worship, to the weakening of the influence of the and to the spread of a liberal and somewhat agnostic spirit in religious matters. The lower form of fetish worvermilion-colored assent, the vermilion-

coloured stones, so common further south, are hardly ever seen, images of Hanuman and Ganesh are conspicuous by their absence, and in their villages] the builders of temples are usually Jains or Banias, rarely the agriculturists.”⁶ They use sworn God for having just sworn Bhagwan kasam’ or ‘Ramji ki soon and before starting their plow in Bhaiey say to the oxen, ‘Le bhai Ram ka name, where their Ram is that omnipotent deity, and not the Ram of orthodox Hindus.

For Jats, agriculture is not only a means of livelihood, but it is also their culture that enriches the mind, body, and soul of all haves and have-nots who live on agriculture. Cultivation of land and raising of crops is a ritual as well as an economic necessity. This was the condition of the Jats everywhere in the North-Western Provinces, only the difference was in the quality of land they occupied. Till the beginning of the nineteenth century, though the Jat villages were backward economically, yet the fact that individualism had not developed in them to anything like the same extent as in England, and that the fundamental features of the Indian villages cooperation and co-ownership rather than exclusive or individual property-were still there. But the village ‘term does not refer merely to a street or group of buildings-as in England today:’ writes B. H. Baden-Powell, ‘it includes both the cluster of houses and the surrounding land cultivated. Such a group has always a local name and known limits. It is a fact that the level plains of India were originally brought under defined boundaries, and covering from a few hundred to two or three thousand acres, “⁷

He further writes, ‘So much for a village area. But in all cases body of persons. separately circumscribed, must necessarily tend to form, in the first place the inhabitants reside together, very often in one central group of houses or cottages, built on an elevation at some convenient point within the village area..... Besides the dwellings of the principal land-holders are also the cottages of dependants and subordinate tenants, as well as of the farm laborers, village servants, and artificers. The term ‘village servants’ needs a word of elucidation. Every village is obliged to provide for itself the means of supplying the simple wants of life. The people could not go to a perhaps far distant town to buy the shoes or find a carpenter, and hence they attract to themselves, and provide for, a little group of resident artificers and servants a potter, a blacksmith, a cobbler, a carpenter, a washerman, sweeper, weaver, cattlemen to keep watch and ward, a barber to shave them (who also practices a rude kind of surgery and carries messages connected with betrothals), and so on. These servants. live permanently in the village, and become hereditary; they are not paid by the job but work for every village resident for fixed annual (or harvest) allowance of grain, cash, and perquisites.

The internal constitution of the Jat village is truly a bhaiachara’, or method

of equally-valuated holdings principle. It may be conveniently here mentioned, that the tribes are normally Hindu or Mussulman, they have adhered to a customary law of their own. Their rules of inheritance, their customs of adoption, and kindred matters differ from Hindu Law of textbooks; nevertheless, the customs are such as tend to keep up the idea of joint-family property; and hence it is that their forms of joint-village are so similar. In fact, Jat custom recognizes the 'joint family' quite as strongly as Hindu Law does, though in a less elaborate form. There are many great and lesser clans of Jats whose custom is not entirely uniform, but all agree in feeling that ancestral land belongs to the whole family. The idea of joint-right to ancestral land is indicated by the limitation of the housefather's power of defeating the expectation of collateral agnates, in the case of a sonless owner of the land, by making an 'adoption', is much restricted. The succession is strictly agnatic, and females take no share."⁸ The Jat village society had from very early times perfected as an organization for the harmonious adjustment of the interests of the individual and the interests of the community. Individual ownership of land or other means of production was recognized, but the economic and social organization of the villages, khaps and gots, was so strong and perfect that it prevented economic conflicts between individuals or co-sharers. Private property was to be regarded not merely as an opportunity for private profit but also as a service. In the Jats, the efficient cultivation of land was a means of living to the cultivator, but it was also his duty to the community. The abode of these dominated people was the home of the village republics celebrated by C. T. Metcalfe in a memorable passage which caught Marx's imagination that it formed the basis of his theory of the unchanging basis of Indian agrarian society: The Village Communities are little Republics, having nearly everything they want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down; revolution succeeds to revolution; Hindu, Pathan, Mughal, Mahratta, Sikh, English, are masters in turn; but the village communities remain the same."⁹

All the Jats are an egalitarian society. Irrespective of their financial or official position in life, they have equal social status. The only criterion of superiority is age. If two Jats sit on a bed, the elder, even if he is a poor farmer, will sit towards the head (sirahna) of the bed, and the younger, even if he is very well to do, or is a senior civil or military officer, sits towards the foot (patina) of the bed. If a number of Jats are sharing a 'hookah (hubble-bubble), it is the duty of the youngest to hold the hookka and pass it to the eldest and around in turn to the others.¹⁰

The Jats, as we have already mentioned, have always organized themselves according to blood relations and kinship into parental got (gotra, i.e., clan), took, and

kutumb. Among the elements of the social organization, the got came to acquire an important place in very early times. In the case of the Jats, this system has continued to guide their lives in a crucial manner. The republican-minded Jats settled their social and political affairs through the Panchayat system. At micro level, the Khap Panchayats were constituted of the representatives from villages of the same got. At macro level, the Sarvakhap Panchayat was formed by the representatives of all the Khap Panchayats. The feeling of kinship being quite strong in a got it has been found to be an important element. in forging brotherhood among its constituents. Got is a significant factor in regulating matrimony among the Jats in accordance with the well-thought-out parameters of prohibitions and eligibilities relating to them would be coupled. The working of the got system among the Jats for contracting marriages before the beginning of the last century was marked by four-fold prohibitions of got of the contracting parties, viz., i. the got. of the groom's father (pita); ii. that of the mother's father (mata); iii. that of the father's mother's father (dadi); and that of the mother's mother's father (Nani). None of these four should tally with any of the similar four in case of the bride, as boy and girl of these got were considered brother and sister.

The social and political system of the Jats is based on this got (clan) organization. Usually, the villages of the same got are inhabited nearby, but it is not always so. Each got has a leader, called Chaudhary or baba. Got is divided into major and minor divisions, took, upthok or some primary divisions of it much larger than ordinary villages. It may be connected with normal village area, and is observed in that large class of cases where the village body is a group of descendants from an individual founder, or have clung to a village here, and two or three villages there, and have then become peasants landlords (not zamindars). The joint ancestral sharing in the land of a village is called pattidari and a large village can have more than one Patti, though the got may be the same or different. In Mathura, a village is divided into tarf. In Jats primogeniture is never observed in village estates, the shares are the fractions of the whole, which naturally follow from the principle of equal right in the same grade of descent or agnate male relationship, and are therefore fractions of the whole. Suppose, for example, that the original overlord leaves three sons. whether divided or not, there are three (major) shares (Patti). If one of those sons dies leaving two grandsons, the third share will be subdivided into two sub-shares (thok); and if a grandson's share comes to be divided between, say for great-grandsons (counting back to the founder), then we have for sub-sub-shares (behri, Tula or upthok), each consisting of one-fourth of one-half of one-third of the whole, and paying the

corresponding fraction of the charges.¹¹ These patties, thanks, and authors are named after the ancestors. After the Chaudhary of the got, the took Chaudhary is prestigious and influential and he is not only listened to attentively, but his words also given importance. Each thok, village and got has its own Panchayat..

A clan organization (Panchayat) was based on one large got or a number of closely related got's under the same territory (Khap) under one elected leader (Chaudhary) whose words were considered the law. Mutual differences and quarrels of any intensity could be settled under his orders. In time of danger, the whole Khap rallied under the banner of the leader. Khap and collective union, Sarvakhap was a system of social administration. and organization in the republics of North-Western states like Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh since ancient times. Khap is a term for a social-political grouping and is used in a geographical sense. Other parallel terms were Pal and Gansangh or republics, The republican form of society existed from the most ancient times known to us. The mode of governing was that of a council of five which in time was called a Panchayat. In various times the society coalesced around monarchial forms, but the republican societies did not die out, but maintained their existence with remarkable resilience. Sanskrit scholar Pandit Krishna Kumar Shastri explained the origin of the word Khap from the combination of Sanskrit words Kham and apnoti which means so much crowd of people which fill the sky.¹² For political purposes a Khap was divided into various units, which were called thamba. Each thamba consisted of several villages of the same get. The leadership of the Chamba was hereditary, and called thamba Chaudhary. The residents village of that thamba Chaudhary was considered the headquarter of the thamba and the thamba was named after that village. The village Panchayats were formed by various Jat thoks and representatives. of other communities of the village. The pursuation of bhaiachara generally emphasized the equality of thoks. Generally, they did not have any village Chaudhary, instead, there had been a Chaudhary of the Panchayat of the village. The thanks were not only important for the village stage, but they also played important role in the thamba and Khap Working procedure of the Chamba Panchayats are the same as of the Khap Panchayats. The Khap: meetings were chaired by the Chaudhary of Khap, and in his absence, the vizir of the Khap chaired the meeting. Generally, the Khap consisted of a unit of 84 villages, but we also find Khapsof fifty-four or even twelve villages. The Sarvakhap Panchayat of Uttar Pradesh consisted of all Khaps of Meerut Division. It had more than 18 Khaps and some of them were of different communities. All these Khaps were represented through their Chaudhary, vizir, and other influential persons of the Khap area. Exceeding emergencies like an invasion, the meeting of Sarvakhap was held once in five years, but the Khap meetings

were held at any time with the consent of their Chaudhary or representatives. The chaudharyship of a Khap is a hereditary position. The Chaudhary enjoys administrative, adjudicative, and executive powers over the Khap villages. The Chaudhary is held in high esteem and his decisions are binding on his people. The Khap Chaudhary does not possess any kind of personal property-landed or otherwise-by virtue of his post as the hereditary headman of the clan.

These Khaps and Sarvakhap Panchayats had a little administrative, legislature, and judicial powers technically, but for special purposes, the Jat community and other communities confer the Panchayat special powers. Contrary to this the Chamba Panchayats had administrative, judicial, and executive powers of their own. Giving due regards to their traditional customs and laws Akbar issued two firmans, the first one dated 8th Ramzan, 987 A.H. addressed to Chaudhary Pachchu Mal of Shoram and Chaudhary Lal Singh of Sisauli, granting internal freedom to the Khaps of the Jats of the Upper Doab region in religious matters and ‘to carry out their functions according to their ancient customs and laws. The second firman of 11 Ramzan 989 A.H. by order of Emperor Akbar was issued under seal and signature of Prime Minister Abul Fazl and Minister Todar Mal, says-Some of the taxes, which were levied by Muslim Sultans from the Sarvakhap Panchayat areas are exempted. Each Khap and community Panchayat are allowed to be independent in observing their traditions and customs. These Panchayats are exempted from Jizya and other taxes.’” In another firman, the Badshah of Delhi conferred the chaudharahat of Sarvakhap at Shoram.¹³

The Jat Panchayat system is territorial and highly democratic. Every villager or community person has a right to attend the Panchayat and express his views on any matter and vote for or against a proposal. There are no elected or nominated officials. Nevertheless, some persons, by virtue of their wisdom, experience, and eloquence, are automatically accepted as panchs (one of five judges) and their views are heard and respected. While elders discuss a problem it is customary for younger people not to speak but sit and listen to them. All decisions are taken after open-hearing, full and voluntary expression of views, and consensus vote. Even if one of the contending parties considers the Panchayat’s decision unfair, it is accepted and complied with without question. “Writing about the Panchayats of the Jats of Muzaffarnagar, Nevill says, The customs of the people in this district call for no special comment. The Panchayat system is still in full force, and especially among..... Jats. The parties usually take an oath on a lota filled with salt [lota-namak] to abide by any decision that may be arrived at. The culprit is always fined, and the fine generally takes the shape of a feast to the assembled brethren who have been

summoned to hear his defense. Chaudhary is usually elected by a vote of trade or guild and performs the same duties as in other districts.

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