

Contesting and negotiating power: the multi-faceted dynamics of the Jat uprising during late 17th and early 18th century

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During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the Jat revolts in Mughal suba of Agra left a lasting impact on the polity, society and economy of the region and played a decisive role in limiting fortunes of the mother empire. As Jats were the principal leaders and provided major support of these revolts, their multi-faceted strategies need to be highlighted. Nearly 200 years ago a French Jesuit F.X.Wendel said “...the jats havehurt so many people that no one can be persuaded that they are capable of doing good or even worth being praised.”¹ This popular conception persisted and for a long time the Jat history was ignored by historians. The role of Jats is not only limited to regional histories. Their activities affected Mughals, kachhwaha and the various invaders time and again. Jats presented themselves as the warriors who fought to save honor and respect of their lands. Many narratives in the Persian sources like *Roznamcha* present a judicious picture of Jats. They have transformed from nomadic pastoralists to settled agriculturalists. Their transformation from a pastoral to an agricultural economy was also occurring, parallel to their sedentation between eleventh and the sixteenth century and it continued even after that.² Sir Willian Irvine while writing about the later Mughals made occasional significant references about Jats whereas focus of his work was Maratha history.³ Jadunath Sarkar highlighted the Sikh, Jat and Maratha revolts of the late seventeenth century as “the Hindu-Reaction” against Aurangzeb.⁴ The pioneer and extensive work on the jats was done by Prof. K.R. Qanungo, whose scholarship drew attention of scholars to the history of Jats which was ignored for long. Qanungo, followed the same theme of historiography and tried to re-in force that the Jat revolts in medieval India were part of “Hindu-Reaction”.⁵ Prof. R. P. Rana, challenges the existing historiographical notion associated with work of Jadunath Sarkar. He argues that “jats did not belong to any particular religious tradition, they could not be freely clubbed with high caste hindus. Infact from the seventh to the seventeenth century they were at the receiving end of the Brahmanical social order”.⁶ During late seventeenth century the Mughal authority was limited to a restricted area around Delhi. Over that the fierce factionalism at court, the foreign invasion, self-aggrandizement of officials and rise of indigenou powers further complicated the situation.

In post-Aurangzeb period the powerful elements at the court found it expedient to conciliate the jats in order to retain power and rejuvenate the declining empire.⁷ The later readily accepted their role. They no longer remained plebian rebels perpetually fighting against the imperialists but became allies of one or the other court faction. Being conscious of their strength Jats availed the opportunities for expansion also. With stabilization of Jat power and position the dependence of Mughal grandees increased on them. So much so, that the imperial wazir Safdar Jung, went more than half way to seek their ready cooperation in the imperial affairs.⁸ This dependence of imperial forces on Jats clearly indicates to the power and prestige jats enjoyed at this time. Earlier the Jats were “not remarkable in Hindustan” and by seventeen sixties they earned for themselves “a reputation never seen outside”.⁹ As Jats were Marshall by character, their ability to fight and warrior ship

¹ F.X.Wendel, *Memoires de l'origine accroissement etat present de puissance des jats dans l' Indostan II de Partie, suite des Memoires des Pattans*, cited from Girish Chandra Dwivedi, *The Jats Their role in the Mughal Empire*, Arnold Publisher, 1989, p. 9.

² R.P.Rana, ‘CHANGE, PROTEST and POLITICS Situating the Jat Revolts of the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Century’ *Social Science Probings*, December 2004, 53-73, p.57.

³ William Irvin, *The later Mughals*, cf. Girish Chandra Dwivedi, *The Jats their role in the Mughal Empire*, Arnold Publishers, New Delhi, 1989, p.9.

⁴ Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Aurangzeb*, vol. iii, 3rd edition, Calcutta, 1996, chapter xxxv.

⁵ K.R.Qanungo, *History of Jats*, reprint, 1987, p. 19.

⁶ R.P.Rana, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁷ Girish Chandra Dwivedi, *The Jats their role in the Mughal Empire*, Arnold Publishers, New Delhi, 1989, p. 10.

⁸ *ibid.*, p.10.

⁹ *Memoires des Jats, op.cit.*, p.29

increased their involvement in the imperial affairs. This contributed for steady growth of Jats and placed them in hostility with Marathas and the invaders. When the imperial wars were fought outside the regions of Jat villages Jats played the role of faithful feudatories to Mughals.

Most of our information about the activities of Jats is collected from Persian sources such as the Mughal official documents, the court histories, general and provincial histories, biographical sketches written by Mughal private servants. Of these sources *Roznamcha*, *Iqbalnama* take a judicious view of the Jats. Till date the historians have looked on to Jat history as the rebellious history. Here an attempt has been made to look into Jat history from a different perspective. The sources provide an insight into a different state of affairs wherein the Jats were not only revolting against the state but they were constantly contesting and negotiating power. The aim of this paper is to bring in light that the Jats were not only rebellions to state they were also negotiating power and this negotiation of power was very much present in the post Aurangzeb times. In July, 1780, Jai Singh has occupied Amber and expelled the local *faujdar*, Sayyid Hussain Khan. The Mughal Emperor Bhadur Shah sent re-inforcement to him for recovering the place. To recover the same Hussain Khan sought help from Churaman and sent him money to recruit troops. In response the Jat leader collected a big force and reached Narnaul where Khan was living ever since his expulsion. Jai Singh also approached Churaman with an appeal that he (Churaman) should detach himself from Sayyid Hussain Khan and co-operate with him against the Mughals. Jai Singh assured Churaman that in response to it he will expel Churaman's opponent (Jaitar Singh) from *pargana* of Kaithwada. This made Churaman to desert Sayyid. As Churaman was able to carve out a big force from the Mughal resources he also decided to stay away from both the powers and later took service under Jai Singh to do needful in Mathura region.¹⁰ There are many such incidents which depict the strong say of Jat leaders. The Jat leaders not only enjoyed support of their community but other deprived communities also took their side to fight against the exploitative state. The skills to negotiate power helped Jat leader Churaman to gain support from *Sanyasis* and many other fighter professionals. In 1716, when Jai Singh decided to destroy fort of Thune and suppress Jat revolt, Churaman had nearly 12,000 professional *sanyasis* fighters in his stronghold. He also employed Afghans from Shahjahanpur and Bareilly on a payment of three rupees per day and had support of *Mewatis*.¹¹ The expedition of Jai Singh brought Churaman closer to Saiyyed brothers. Later this hostility of Amber Raja made Churaman to develop close relations with Raja Ajit Singh, who assured him security.

The consistent negotiation and contestation of power with the Imperial and Rajput authorities by powerful Jat leaders made the presence of Jat visible. The authority of Raja Ram raised so much around Agra that "no one could pass without paying a fee to Raja Ram, who was bent upon avenging the execution of Gokula."¹² If the fluctuating balance of power inclined too sharply to one or few groups, others who lacked access to power turned political challengers. The Jats of braj who were at sharp end of politics organized a series of revolts against the Mughal-kachhwaha alliance.

The Jats created a rebellious dynamic by constructing alliances with other challengers. The first recorded description of the Jats with considerable detail is in the *Chachnama* (an account of Arab conquest of Sindh A.D 710-14). Besides teaming cattle they were soldiers, sailors and guides. In *Al-Hind*, Alberuni described the Jats as 'cattle owners and low shudra people'.¹³ They transformed from pastoral to an agrarian economy in between eleven to sixteenth century.

This paper seeks to explore the rebels' attitudes and conduct in the course of their struggle against the Mughals and its agents. Moreover, in this article we will consider the role of alliances and leadership, mobilization and rebellious 'repertoires' in medieval countryside. The peasantry constituted by far the most numerous classes in 17th century India. However, the material position of peasantry was under increasing threat. So far most of the studies about Jat revolts have suggested that the Jat rebels from Gokula to Surajmal were mere zamindars challenging the power of the Mughal state. However, there is one important source, which reveals diverse strategies adopted by the Jats such as negotiating with rulers to share political power both at local level and imperial level. This source is known as *Dastur Komwar* Jat preserved in the Jaipur Historical Section of the Rajasthan State Archives at Bikaner. This paper is largely based on the information recorded in the *Dastur Komwar Jat*.

The aim of this paper is to relook at the relations of Jat leaders with the Jaipur state. The source (*Dastur komwar*) throws light on the cordial relations of Jaipur State with the Jat leaders like Surajmal, Badansingh, Partap Singh, KhemaJat etc. The exchange of various objects, gifts, nazars and ceremonial receptions with elaborate rituals and gestures of respect depicts the elite noble treatment meted out to the Jat elites. Naval Singh

¹⁰ Girish Chandra Dwivedi, *op.cit.*, p-56.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63 refer foot note 57.

¹² K.Natwar Singh, *Maharaja Surajmal 1707-1763*, Rupa & co., New Delhi, 2001, pp.9-10.

¹³ Cf., R.P.Rana, *Rebels to Rulers, the rise of Jat power in medieval India c. 1665-1735*, manohar, 2006. P. 123.

son of Surajmal came to Jaipur in V.S.1812/1755 A.D., there he was received extensively by Jaipur Raja and was presented 2 *Siropaos*, 1 *sirpeach* and a string of real pearls.¹⁴ The ceremonial reception was also extended towards the ladies who accompanied the Jat ruler.¹⁵ Many such instances clearly indicate the relations of Jat Rulers with the Raja of Jaipur. Numerous gifts were presented to Jat leaders and their ladies on various festive occasions, state ceremonies and social ceremonies. The Jaipur state invited these rulers to celebrate the festivals like *Dussehra*, *Holi*, *Teej*, *Bhaiduj* etc. and showered on them valuables gifts with respect. For instance in V.S. 1827/1770 A.D, Kesari Singh received a *than* from Jaipur Raja along with a *Sirpeach* (decorative piece for head gear) which amounted Rs. 352 in connection with his coronation.¹⁶ In V.S.1813/1756 A.D, Kishor Singh Jat of Mahawa visited the *Huzuri* (Jaipur Raja) for his welcome he was presented a *Siropao*.¹⁷

Clearly, the cordial relations of the Jat rebel's rulers with the Jaipur rajas were the main arm of the Mughals in the midst of contest indicates Jats' efforts to negotiate political power with their rivals. Sir Jadunath Sarkar has described the Jats as 'the most important racial element in the vast tract of land that stretches from the bank of the Indus, through the Punjab, the northern state of Rajputana and the upper Jamuna Valley, down to Gwalior, beyond the Chambal'¹⁸. Prof. Kanungo singles out the inbred democratic strain in the Jat. 'the Jat community has been within historic times, the great refuge of the victims of Hindu social tyranny, and the uplifter of the depressed and untouchables to a more respectable status, transforming all recruits to a homogenous Aryan mould....in physical features, language, character, sentiments, ideas of government and social institutions, the present day Jat is undeniably a better representative of the ancient Vedic Aryan than any member of the three castes of the Hindus.'¹⁹

The decline of empire became turning point in the fortunes of many nobles, local zamindars and the rural communities.²⁰ Its collapse pushed India into a prolonged period of political turmoil, agrarian dislocation and contraction of commerce.²¹ There are plenty of evidences which depict the chaos and corruption at all levels of Mughal administration. The various military uprisings of Jats, Sikhs and Marathas during seventeenth and eighteenth century clearly indicate to the inability of Mughal warfare. Historians of different persuasions have divided the Jat revolts into two distinct phases. In the first phase we are told, prominent Jat leaders like Gokula, Raja Ram Jat, Ram Chander Sogharia and Churaman Jat expressed their anger through the barrel of the gun. They organized a series of armed revolts against different Mughal generals who were sent against them. These leaders constructed *garhis* (mini-fortresses) and manufactured muskets to fight the Mughals and their allies. This phase of Jat revolts has been characterized as a "large plundering movement" by Irfan Habib.²² K.R. Qanungo characterized ChuramanJatas a "wolf" and later termed him a "poacher".²³ The title of R.p.Rana's book suggests that this phase of the Jat revolts was marked by the presence of 'rebels'.²⁴ Clearly, all these scholars have profiled all the Jat leaders of this phase as uncompromising armed victories over the Mughals, which laid the foundation of the Jat power.

The second phase belonged to Badan Singh and Surajmal who co-operated with the Jaipur Raja and gave proper administration to the Braj region. Writing about Badansingh, Satish Chandra says, "he was a good administrator and under his watchful stewardship the Jat house of Bharatpur gained in power silently and steadily". Badan Singh possessed the qualities which were required to deal with the multifaceted problems. He had uncommon skill, tireless patience, force and power of pursuance. Every method was employed by him to destroy his enemy like rewarding friends, enriching kingdom, bribing freely and marriage alliances. With the immense weakening of the Mughal Empire and the rise of Jaipur state as a powerful entity, these Jat leaders felt it wiser to have cordial relations with the Kachhwaha rulers. Raja Swai Jai Singh of Jaipur showed uncommon foresight when he placed Badan Singh on *Gaddi*, vacated by Churaman. This act kept Jats associated with the Jaipur State and in reward the Jat kingdom enjoyed the authority, influence, prestige, territory and wealth. In response to all these rewards the Jaipur State enjoyed military services of Jats. Though these Jat rulers had many victories to their credit, their emphasis was more on negotiating power.

¹⁴Dastur KomwarJat, pp.399-400. Here after *D.K.*

¹⁵ *D.K.*, In v.s. 1782/ 1725A.D, Fuda ram Jat came to Jaipur with his wife and daughter. Both of them were presented gifts and were received in royal apartments.

¹⁶*D.K. Jat*, Register no-7, p.326.

¹⁷*D. K. Jat*, Register no-7, p.325.

¹⁸ K.Natwar Singh, *op.cit.*, p.1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.2.

²⁰ R.P.Rana, *Rebels to Rulers, the rise of Jat power in medieval India c. 1665-1735*, manohar, 2006. P.11.

²¹ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian system of Mughal India 1556-1707*, 2nd revised edition, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999, p.405.

²² *Ibid.*, p.393.

²³ K.Natwar Singh, *op.cit.*, p.16.

²⁴ R.P.Rana, *Rebels to Rulers, the rise of Jat power in medieval India c. 1665-1735*, manohar, 2006.

Churaman died in v.s.1778/1721 A.D., prior this also many of the Jat leaders are negotiating power with the Rajas of Jaipur. Many Jat leaders were associated with Jaipur State and they are important for the Jaipur Rajas to balance their power relations. For instance UdiyaJat came to Jaipur in V.S. 1774/ 1717A.D. In the same year, Chintamani (vakil of churaman), khetaJat, Urd ram, Savant Singh also visited Jaipur Raja.²⁵ In V.S.1775/ 1718 A.D, KhemaJat, Savant Singh (nephew of KhemaJat), Man Ram (son of KhetJat) came to Jaipur and were received with grand welcome.²⁶ Umaid Singh s/o RaoBadan Singh, RoopaJat, Veer Bhan made a visit to Jaipur.²⁷ Various other Jat leaders also had say in the affairs of State but many a times servicemen (*chhakars*) and *vakils* operated on behalf of the Jat leader. These *chhakars* and *vakils* were learned people who had the understanding of power relations. In V.S. 1778/ 1721A.D., MuhkumSinghs' Chhaker and Vakil Brindaban visited Jaipur on their masters behalf and performed the due ceremonies and also received *Siropao* for their master.²⁸ Many a times these visit were under guidance of some favorite or a close confidant of Raja.

However, the evidence available in *DasturKomwarJat* shows that even during the first phase of the Jat revolts, Churaman and other rebels also practiced the art of diplomacy with their rivals. For instance, in V.S.1777/ 1720A.D., Raja Ram came to meet Hazuri (Raja of Jaipur) along with Tularam.²⁹ In the same year many other Jat leaders who are labelled as the rebellions to the State, also visited to the Raja of Jaipur. Such as, Duda Ram, JagramJat, DevkaranJat, Bhaju ram s/o Gokula, Ram das Jat, Khemajat and Bhika Ram b/o Khemajat.³⁰

A deep insight of the document, *DasturKomwar* gives a clear idea that there was no fixed time of the Jat rebellion. During the time of early rebellions also the Jat leaders were in constant association with the Rajas of Jaipur. The diplomacy to balance the power kept them in constant flux. As per the requirement of the State the jat leaders also negotiated power. Various instances prove that there was never a permanency in the relations of Jat leaders with the Rajas of Jaipur. Efforts of Badan Singh acquired authority, title, and territory which no other Jat chief possessed. However, the prosperity came to the Jat Rulers only after efforts of Maharaja Surajmal, who provided proper administration to the Jat kingdom. Surajmal started his carrier by defeating *meos* who lived in the hilly northern parts of Bharatpur. After this particular event Surajmal emerged out as an able general of headed conduct and courage. Peshwa Baji Rao visited Jaipur in 1736, to honour him Jai Singh made arrangements to hold a big Darbar. Badan Sigh was also invited but due to his inability to attend Darbar he asked Surajmal to represent him. He was received well in Darbar by Jai Singh as a prince of humble origin. While introducing Surajmal to Peshwa, Jai Singh made remarks about humble origin of Surajmal. The high virtue of courage, good character and honor added to Surajmal's profile. The sad sunset of Mughal Empire coincided with the dawn of Maratha, Jat and Sikh power. The emerging power holders and game changers were mainly controlling the military power. There Marshall Character kept them in centre of power. There military skills and their ability to fight made them associates of kingdom. The ever changing position of power kept these forces in flex and they associated with whom, they got elevation in their status and position.

The change and elevation in the status of Jat leaders throw light on how the plebian leaders were able to carve out space for themselves? Further, the exchange of gestures associated with respect, symbols of royalty and honor in the court depict the powerful status enjoyed by Jat leaders. The court rituals were markers of respect in Jaipur State and the above discussed cases stress that the Jat leaders were always received in Jaipur court with a grand welcome ceremony and proper Protocol was followed to mark their presence. The reception ceremonies which were attended by king (*Shree jee*) and mother queen (*Majee Sahib*) were of immense importance, as their presence was exclusive for the special guests of state. The presents were made to guest in accordance with his status and power he enjoyed at the Jaipur Court. The narratives related to Jat leaders in *Dastur Komwar* are very elaborate. The extensive reception ceremonies organized to welcome Jat leaders put light on the prestige enjoyed by them at Jaipur Court.

²⁵D.K. *Jat* pp.310-329.

²⁶D.K., *Jat*, pp.315-335.

²⁷D.K., *Jat*, pp.317-385.

²⁸D.K., *Jat*, pp.352-55.

²⁹D.K., *Jat*, pp.333-34.

³⁰D.K., *Jat*, pp.317-34.