

Jat community's Appropriation of Social Mores against the Imperial Mughals in the Braj Region during the 18th Century

Pritam Kumar Gupta

Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Received: January 17, 2019

Accepted: February 27, 2019

ABSTRACT: *The paper is an attempt to seek the socio-cultural rationale behind the popular mass support that the Jat community sustained throughout the 18th century in their struggle against the Mughal-Rajput dual onslaught to not only managing to stay intact but also prospering by acquiring new zamindaris in the area called Braj region. Attention has been paid to show how the Jat community projected themselves in relation to peasant dominated local society to establish the social mores, forming gradually, their social-cultural identity in relation to Braj-mandal becoming explicitly more manifest and defined with simultaneous growth in power, utilizing the tenets of Krishna bhakti.*

Key Words: *Jat, Mughal, Braj, Zamindar, Rajput, Mewat, Krishna.*

It was during 18th century that politically the Jats came into contact with almost all north Indian powers, the Mughals, Afghans, Sikhs, Rajputs, Marathas and Europeans. The process of the Jats consolidation in general and Bharatpur state formation in particular beginning with Churaman's establishments of a de facto independent embryonic vision of kingdom in connection to the Braj region, Badan Singh's establishment of a Jat kingdom of Bharatpur in defiance of both Rajputs and the mighty Mughal Empire culminating in the conquest of large parts of Agra, parts of Delhi, eastern parts of the Jaipur *watan jagirs* by the Jat *sardars* is one of the most fascinating phenomenon in late medieval India history.

The Kachhwahas of Amber were the first to accept the sovereignty in Rajasthan. Their alliance with the Mughals helped them to continue their dominance in the area. Apart from it, the Kachhwahas left no opportunity to expand their share in land. This brought the Kachhwahas and other Zamindars especially the Jats in direct conflict with each other. Kachhwahas tried to expand their rights over land in several ways. They began to claim bhom rights on large number of parganas outside their hereditary watan. Many soldiers, (particularly the Narukas) of the Amber rulers turned themselves as bhomias. These Narukas converted the villages of their chakari (sub-assignment) into their bhom. Such instances brought the chakar turned bhomias in direct conflict with the traditional zamindars.¹ The attempts of the Amber House of the Rajputs (imperial agents) tried to take undue advantage of the power at his discretion legitimized by the Mughals, by capturing the zamindaris of not only non-Rajput clans but Rajput clans also. This became the chief reason inciting many zamindars to rise up in arms. The economic prosperity of the Jat zamindars, their warfare methods (guerilla strategy, increasing importance of foot soldiers, inclusion and easy availability of matchlocks and gunpowder etc.), and the crumbling administrative apparatus of the Mughals especially the corruption among the officials and problems in the jagirdari system proved of significance. But it was only the Jats who succeeded in availing themselves a niche place in the prevailing political scenario, leading to the culmination of their political ascendancy.

During the 17th century we can see that the landscape of the Jat Zamindari undergoes a massive transformation and expansion. At the beginning of the 17th century, for instance six out of 32 parganas in sarkar Agra, two out of 16 in Narnaul and five out of 7 in Saher have entered Jats as zamindars.² But by late 17th century, Jats emerged and replaced prominent Rajput zamindars.³ It was Raja Ram who initially succeeded in forging a joint front of the Jats. He allied with the Sogariyas and Bayan-Roopbasias. He also befriended the Jats of Ranthambhor. Raja ram built garhis and naglas (fortified block houses) which were scattered in the sarkars of Agra and Mathura e.g., the forts of Sinsini, Sogar, Sonkh, Abair, Kher, Jawar, Dig, Hathras and Musran.⁴ After the death of Raja Ram on July 4th 1688 up to taking over the leadership by Churaman in 1695, there is a time gap of seven years. During this period the Jat revolt engulfed the whole of Agra region where strongholds of many Jat zamindars played a crucial role. During this period Hari Singh (general of Bishan Singh the Raja of Amber), captured 52 strongholds of the Jats and drove away thousands of Jats from them. But general massacre by him could not extirpate the whole body of the Jats, but succeeded in only making them retreat to the south of Chambal River.⁵ When Hari Singh was asked to suppress the Jats

of Doab, they came out from the hiding and started attacking the Mughal officials again in Hindon-Bayana region. Hari Singh himself was killed at the siege of Jawar Fort in Doab and the Kachwahs retreated to Amber.⁶

It is clear that the joint front of the Jat clans and other non-Jat rebel clans on both sides of Yamuna proved a powerful resistance to the Mughal might. In the Jat clans, there were ties of kinship by matrimonial alliances. For example, Chandra Sen Bisayati of Chiksana and Bagha Ram Chahar of Akola were maternal grandfathers of Bhav Singh and Churaman while Achala Sogaria was brother-in-law of Bhav Singh (father of Badan Singh).⁷ The main clans mentioned are Sinsinwar of Sinsini, Sogaria of Sogar, Khuntela of Sonkh, Rauriya of Rarah, Chahar of Chaikora. On the other side of Yamuna were a Thenua of Jowar, Thukrela of Besma and Nohbar of Noh in Aligarh District. Besides, there involved Meos, Gujars, Ahirs and Rajput clans such as Naruka, Panwar, Chauhan of Hindaun-Bayana and Jadon of Ratanpur.

The widening social base of the uprising and its composite character appear to be the marked features of the Jat uprising during this period as the rebels were also receiving active support from large number of discontented Kachhwaha Rajput Zamindars belonging to the Naruka Kilanots subclans; and till now dominant Chauhans, Pawar and Solanki Rajput Zamindars and peasants belonging to other caste groups such as Ahirs, Gujars, Meenas and Meos.⁸ Bhomias Badgujar, Mev, Jadam Jat and Chauhans were involved in the disturbance. The condition of the pargana was disturbed as expressed by one of the administrative documents. These Badgujars fought with Man Singh, Bhav Singh and Madho Singhji and created problem. We have to take care of these political disturbances and try to make an effort to restore peace in the pargana, so that the *jama of khalisa* in the pargana be increased.⁹

About this period, Wendel gives his observation about this period: "For, while one had indeed cut one of two branches from this wild stem, born to cast shadow and obscurity on the monarchy, the root had been unscathed, to, as it were, grow stronger and higher shortly thereafter, as we will see, Churaman, with other lesser known of the same race, clearly showed the inhabitants of Agra and its surrounding territory that this hydra had more than one head to be severed, and this infamous species was already too extended and rooted to hope that it would fall because of a single branch which had been cut away".¹⁰ One of the important features of this period is that the repression of the Jats and their lawlessness continued side by side. When the imperial arms turned towards one direction, they created turbulence in the other. At the time of siege of Sonkh, the Jats of Mahaban created chaos near Gokul to reduce imperial pressure on Sonkh. Even after the fall of Sinsini, the situation did not improve. The new center of the movement was Hindaun-Bayana region where Kanha Naruka, Ran Singh, Sheo Singh, Panwars and Har Kishan cooperated with the Jats.¹¹

In the *zortalab* parganas of Agra, Kol, Sahar, Khohri Rana and Kama, the Jat rebel zamindars were actively supported by their peasants. There were traditional linkage between the zamindars and the peasants. In the Mewat region of *Sarkar* Alwar, the revolt was led by Naruka, Kilanot and some Meo zamindars. Knowing the caste affinity of the peasants of Mewat with the Jats and Meo zamindars, the Naruka and Kilanot peasants also preferred to identify themselves with the Jat and other rebel zamindars.¹² It is the answer to Wendel's observation that these zamindars are much more loved and even respected by their peasants than ever had been the prince.¹³ The local people are found to be actively supportive for the rebels cause against the imperial jagirdars and officials.¹⁴ In certain cases the raiyat and Patel did not cooperate and pay revenue to the jagirdar. On the interference of state, it was properly executed.¹⁵ The question that arises is why the masses supported the Jats as against the more resourceful imperial agent Rajputs? In this regard attempt has been made to seek the answer through the socio-cultural dealings of the Jat community.

The term Braj does not refer to an area with clearly defined boundaries. It is used to refer to the countryside where Krishna grazed his cattle and where all the sacred places associated with his childhood are located. Braj or Brajbhoomi, is a region mainly in Uttar Pradesh of India, around Mathura-Vrindavan. Brij, though never a clearly defined political region in India, is very well demarcated culturally. The area stretches from Mathura, Jalesar, Agra, Hathras and Aligarh right up to Etahwa, Mainpuri and Farrukhabad districts.¹⁶ Its western borders blur into a less famous cultural-geographical region: the Ahirwal (the Land of the Ahirs) which includes parts of the district of Alwar, Bharatpur in Rajasthan and Mahendragarh, Gurgaon in the state of Haryana.¹⁷

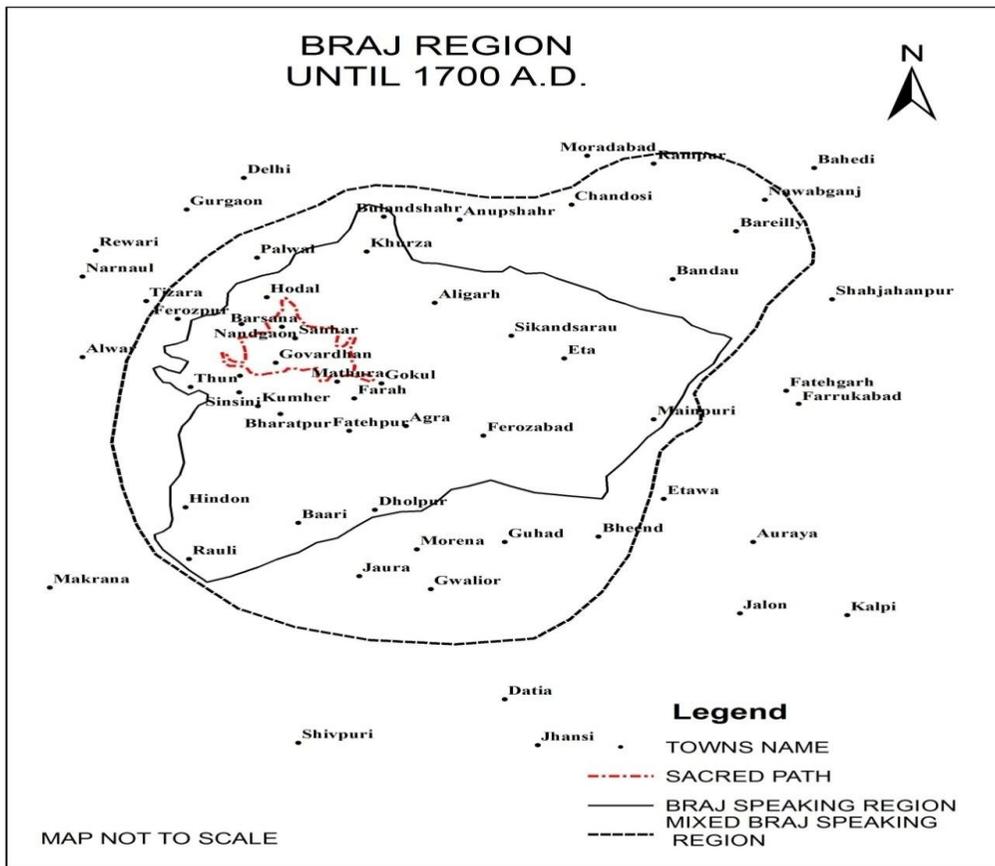
Ramphal Rana's argument about the religiosity of the Jats is that the most notable feature of the popular religion in Brajbhoomi was the ubiquitous presence of lok-devis (folk goddesses). The most widely venerated among the lok-devis is Nari-Semri, known as the protectress of the Braj. An equally important devi is Sayal-Mata, worshipped by women at the Ahoi festival.¹⁸ In an important contemporary document it is mentioned that Churaman Jat, with a large entourage undertook a yatra (pilgrimage) to a popular devi in a village called Vaharkoh in parganas Bahatri. On the way Churaman was given a tumultuous welcome by the villagers. Hearing this uproar, the faujdar of Bahatri was enraged and had the devi uprooted from its place before the

arrival of Churaman. The importance of this event lays in the fact that the said devi was becoming a rallying point for the rebels and a matter of grave concern for the administration.¹⁹

The region concerned to the study was dominated by the GaudiyaVaishnavite tradition and Nathpanthis or the monotheists. In northern India it was Ramananda (1299-1410) who initiated the Vaishnavamovement. Although Vaishnavism in this region started before him but the credit goes to him for popularizing Vaishnavism. Ramananda and his guru Raghavananda were influenced by Ramanuja's philosophy of bhakti and it is also said that they were influenced by the Natha-pantha, non-Vaishnava movement in northern India. In much of north India a vibrant sant-inspired anti-Brahmanical culture was pervasive during the seventeenth century. Lal Das was very famous among the peasants especially the Jats and the Meos.²⁰ In the realm of the common man's devotion, woods, cows, pature and mountains are the main objects of adoration; images and shrines are secondary. Similarly, the Govardhan Mountain occupies the central place in the mythical landscape of Braj. In fact, Govardhan-puja (worship), the cult of mountain and cattle is widespread and popular among the Brajvasis. This worship is done without the assistance of the Brahman.

According to F.S. Growse till the end of sixteenth century, Vaishnavism had a nominal presence in the area but under the influence of Rupa and Sanatana the celebrated Bengali Gosains, Vaishnavism became extremely influential in this area. Their disciple Narayana Bhatt established for the first time established the practices of Banjatra and Raslila which later on became the part of everyday life of the Braj people. A series of melas (fairs) took place in Bhadon (month of lord Krishna's birth) where Raslila is performed.²¹ Wendel says that it is true that from Deccan, Gujarat, Bengal and other more distant places, throngs of pilgrims come to Mathura to worship. Jat people take no little pride in being the guardians of this (Mathura), in their view an earthly paradise.²² So we can see that Mathura had gained enough popularity as a place of pilgrimage in the 17th and 18th century.

Western side of Mathura is known as the Braj-Mandal or the country of lord Krishna.²³ The number of sacred places, woods, groves, ponds, wells, hills and temples, all to be visited in fixed order is considerable. Among these are generally five hills, eleven rocks, four lakes, eighty-four ponds, and twelve wells; but the twelve *banas*²⁴ (forests) and twenty-four *upvanas*²⁵ (sacred groves) are special feature of pilgrimage which is therefore called the 'Banjatra'.²⁶ The whole area of the Brajbhum as conceived in the popular imagination was heavily laden with the mythological stories of the Krishna. Almost every spot is traditionally connected with some event in the life of Krishna or of his mythical mistress Radha, Sometimes to the prejudice of an earlier divinity. Thus, two prominent peaks in the Bharatpur range are crowned with the villages of Nand-gaon and Barsana: of which the former is venerated as the home of Krishna's foster father Nanda, and the latter as the residence of Radha' parents, Vrisha-bhanu and Kirat. Both Legends are now as implicitly credited as the fact that Krishna was born at Mathura; while in reality, the name Nand-ganw, the sole foundation for the belief, is an ingenious substitution for Nandisvar, a title of Maha-deva, and Barsana is accorruption of Brahma-sanu, the hill of Brahma.²⁷



Map 1. A Broad Conception of the Braj Region

Sources available other than Kulapanji records reveals the fact that they there exists ample evidences to reveal that though following pluralistic approach, they fully capitalized on the prevailing religious milieu of Vaishnavism and the idea of Guru by showing their allegiance to Nathpanthis.²⁸ Not only they traced their descent from Krishna²⁹ and projecting themselves as the protector of the Braj Bhumi but also assuming titles of religious underpinnings such as Braj Raj (king of Braj). The cultural identity of Braj-Mandal seems to be playing an extremely important role in the formation of the identity of the Jats. Both, in the social as well as political spheres, they seems to be following the 'Yadavas' model of Sanskritization (the caste, in which Lord Krishna took birth, a somewhat middle ranking agro-pastoralist class of people). The cultural capital of the Yadava model of sanskritization becomes very much pronounced from the three very important documents of the time. First, to take into account is Somnath (the court poet of Surajmal and Jawahar Singh), who wholeheartedly traces the lineage of the Jats to god Krishna,³⁰ which is quite visible through the following passages:

सकलजगतसुबहकरणकोहरणअखिलदुःखदं

जदुवंशीनृपनंदकेप्रगटेगोकुलचन्द॥ भावसिंघभूपतिभएतिन्हीकन्हारकेबंस।

तेगबहादुरजगतसेजदुकूलकेअवतंस॥तीनकेभयोप्रसिद्धअतिबदनसिंघसौलाल।

दियोरजबराजकोहरषिजिनकेश्रीनन्दलाल॥अमरनगरसैमसिंघमेलसतपुरंदररूप।

बखतबिल्लांदआनंदनिधिबदनमहीपअनूप॥³¹

)To redeem the world from suffering, Lord Krishna was born in Yadu clan. King Bhao Singh belong to that clan to whom born the son called Badan Singh who became the great overlord of the earth(

कंसादिकरिपुखण्डीकेसंतनदियोअनंद।गोपिनसेगबिहरेअजोबृजमैगोकुलचन्द॥

भावसिंघतिहिबंसमैप्रागट्चोसिनिसिनिवार।जेकपगपरसतरहेअनगनभूमिभतार॥³²

(Speaks of the birth of Badan Singh to the place where Lord Krishna was born)

योजनइकीसकेप्रमाणब्रजमंडलमेंछहरीतीमहकेसुधंदमकरंदकी।

नरपसुपुंछीसिद्धरूपकहीसोमनाथसबकेहियेमैसदाउमगअनंदकी।

परमप्रकासवेदव्याशश्रीबिरिञ्चिहुनैबरनीकछुकरीतीसमताबिलंडकी।

टूलसुरपुरकेकाबुलअनुकूलहैसमूलतरुबुनंदमेंकलानन्दनन्दकी।³³

)An Eulogy to the birth place of Krishna, expresses the significance that this place (popularly called Brajmandal) carries by being the birth place of lord Krishna(

The attempts of the Jat rajas to relate themselves with the Lord Krishna and appropriate his ideals reflected through their architectural creations. The act of patronage meant a form of transaction that defined hierarchies, established patronage ties between a patron and his artist client, and generated ideological modes of authority wherein the patron was exalted as the upholder of the civilization itself. Patronage relationships were therefore interwoven within intricate patterns of authority- political power, ceremonial status and norms of etiquette. Factors of economic, religious political and aesthetic nature affected architectural production for it required a large scale mobilization of resources and labour as it was enmeshed in processes of defining imperial authority in relation to regional cultures as well as a symbolic manifestation of opposition to the other political entities. The link between the Jat rajas and the *Gaudiya Vaishnava* architects can very well be established as the *Bengali roof* (*Ekchala* or *chhatra* as called in native language) forms an integral part of their architectural creations. Most of the architectural productions by the Jats be it Gopal Bhavan Hardev Bhavan, Purana Mahal, Rani Kishori's Palace, Rani Laxmi's Palace are all adorned with *Ekchala* or *Bengali roof*. Names of the buildings (bhavans) at Dig such as Nand Bhavan, Gopal Bhavan, Hardev Bhavan, Keshav Bhavan, Kishan Bhavan are all sub names of Krishan of Braj. The deployment of Bengali roofs (*Ekchala*) upon the palace reveals the fact of the Jat rulers not only patronizing the Vaishnava architects in the earlier face of their struggle against the Mughals but also an expression of explicit manifestation of their ideological inclinations towards the sect which had become a powerful force in the whole Braj region.

In the light of the above discussion, one can safely assume that despite the odds stacked against them (i.e. facing the duo of Mughal Rajput), it was finding the common ground with the masses in the larger backdrop of the Vaishnavism (bhakti movement) as against the more orthodox Brahmanical higher religion exercised by the Rajputs that proved itself extremely instrumental in sustaining such a long standing bondage that was one of the deciding factor behind the rise of the Jat phenomenon. It was the conscious projection of the Jat rulers to associate themselves with Lord Krishna by birth, professing to be the proud protector of the Braj-Mandal and actively participating in proliferation of the same through subscribing popular practices associated with Gaudiya Vaishnavas in the region (i.e. Banjatra, Raslila, Yatra) architectural creations and donations for temple and so on that established the bond of common identity and thereby garnering the support of the masses at large.

Notes &References:

¹Singh, Niti., Social and Political Dimension of the Jat Insurgency, in Vir Singh (ed.), The Jats: Their Role and Contribution to the Socio-Economic Life and Polity of North and North West India, (vol. 4), Originals, Delhi, 2011.

²Fazl, Abul., Ain-i-Akbari, Low Price Publications, Vols. II-III, pp. 193-194, 197, 205-206.

³Rana, R. P., Rebels to Rulers, p. 113.

⁴Singh, Vir., The Intensity of the Peasant, p. 100, in Vir Singh (ed.), The Jats: Their Role and Contribution to the Socio-Economic Life and Polity of North and North West India, (vol. 2), Originals, Delhi, 2006.

⁵Qanungo, History of the House of Diggi, p. 109.

⁶Singh, Vir., p. 104, Vir Singh (ed.), The Jats: Their Role and Contribution to the Socio-Economic Life and Polity of North and North West India, (vol. 2), Originals, Delhi, 2006.

⁷Ibid., p. 110.

⁸Rana, R. P., pp. 288-321.

⁹Chitthi No. 45 VS 1744/ 1687A.D.

¹⁰Wendel's Memoirs, pp. 15-16.

¹¹Singh, Vir., p.111, Vir Singh (ed.), The Jats: Their Role and Contribution to the Socio-Economic Life and Polity of North and North West India, (vol. 2), Originals, Delhi, 2006.

¹²Rana, R.P., Agrarian Revolts in Northern India during the late 17th and early 18th Century, The Economic and Social History Review, Vol. XVIII, No. 3 and 4, pp. 298-320.

¹³Wendel's Memoir, p. 11.

¹⁴Chitthi No. 126VS 1781/ 1724A.D.

¹⁵Chitthi No. 90 Chitthi No. VS 1753/ 1696A.D.

-
- ¹⁶Michelutti, Lucia.,Sons of Krishna: the politics of Yadav community formation in a North Indian town, 2002, PhD Thesis Social Anthropology. London School of Economics and Political Science University ofLondon,p. 46.
- ¹⁷Ibid., p. 46.
- ¹⁸Rana, R. P., Rebels to Rulers: The Rise of Jat's Power in Medieval India c.1665-1735, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 2006, p. 130.
- ¹⁹Ibid, p. 131.
- ²⁰Rana, R. P., Rebels to Rulers: Rise of The Jat Power in Medieval India c. 1665-1735, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 2006, p. 134.
- ²¹Growse, F.S.,Mathura: A District Memoir, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1993, pp. 75-79.
- ²²Ibid, p. 105.
- ²³Gazzeteer of India, Rajasthan, Bharatpur by K.K. Sehgal, Bharat Printers, Jaipur, 1971, p. 89.
- ²⁴The 12 banas (forest) were; Madhuban, Talban, Kumud-ban, Bahula-ban, Kamban, Khadira-ban, Brindaban, Bhadraban, Bhandirban, Bel ban, Lohban,and Mahaban, Gazzeteer of India, Rajasthan, Bharatpur.
- ²⁵The 24 upvans (sacred grove) were; Gokul, Govardhan, Barsana, Nandgaon, Saket Pamadra, Arin, Kokila-ban, Sri-kund, Kotban etc., Gazzeteer of India, Rajasthan, Bharatpur.
- ²⁶Gazzeteer of India, Rajasthan, Bharatpur by K.K. Sehgal, Bharat Printers, Jaipur, 1971, p. 89.
- ²⁷Growse, F.S., Mathura: A District Memoir, p. 74.
- ²⁸Nathpanthis proved themselves extremely instrumental to Jats against foreign aggressors. In an example, in March 1757, 4000 Naga Sanyasis of Gokul in alliance with the Jat rebellion in order to save their religious places, entered into direct confrontation with the troops of Abdali s, leading to a blood bath between both of them.
- ²⁹Wendels Memoirs, p. 32. In order to heighten his image, he (Thakur Badan Singh) sought his descent from God Krishna, p. 103.
- ³⁰Somnath; Somnath Granthavali, pp. 3, 6, 821, and 882. See also, Sujan Charitra, by Sudan ed. Radhakrishan Das, published at Kashi Nagiri Pracharini Sabha, Allahabad, 1902, p. 3.
- ³¹Ibid., p. 3.
- ³²Ibid., p. 882.
- ³³Ibid., p. 6.