The Jats of Northern India
Their Traditional Political System

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This article describes the traditional political system of the Jats of Northern India based on the khap and the sarv-khap Panchayat system.

An attempt is also made to examine the impact on this traditional system of the social and political changes brought about by the new agencies of development and the new political set-up of Gram and Adalat Panchayats.

[For reasons of space this article is printed in two parts. Part one, below, discusses kinship structure and the bhaichara system of land tenure and the traditional law of inheritance of the Jats and describes the history and structure of khap Baliayan. Part two will examine the functions of the different agencies of the traditional political system and the impact on them of contemporary social and political change. Ed.]

THE Jats are an ethnic group. They are at present divided into three sections, namely, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh. The Hindu section does not have sub-castes but only clans. In northern India, particularly in the districts of Meerut, Muzaffarnagar, Saharanpur and Bijnor, which come under the revenue division of Meerut, each clan has a compact geographical area of its own. The villages inhabited by a clan are organized into a clan council, and the area under its jurisdiction is called the khap. Each clan has a headman who is called Chaudhry, and a Wazir who is called minister or secretary. Both the offices are hereditary. The clan Chaudhry is also the head of the khap Panchayat. The Wazir looks after the affairs of the Panchayat and keeps minutes of the cases decided by the chayat. The Wazir looks after the affairs of the Panchayat and keeps minutes of the cases decided by the khap council. Most of these khaps belong to the Hindu Jats. But some of them also belong to other castes like the Gujars, Rajputs, Tagas or Tiyagi Brahmins, and one to Muslim Pathans. Some clan areas (khaps) of the Jats contain the Muslim section of the Jat population, which embraced Islam in the latter part of the 18th century. There are no Sikh Jats in Meerut Division.

Khap Baliayan

The various khaps of the Jats, as well as of other castes, are organized into a council of all the khaps of Meerut Division, called the sarv-khap Panchayat. This article describes the traditional political organization based on the khap and the sarv-khap Panchayat system of Meerut Division, and the effects of the social and political changes brought about by agencies of planned change and of the introduction by the government of a new political set-up of Gram and Adalat Panchayats (village committee and justice committee) upon the traditional political system.

For the purpose of analysis I have taken one of the clan areas of the Jats, namely, the khap Baliayan of the Jats of Kashyap gotra in Muzaffarnagar district, as a local point of study. The Kashyap clan inhabits a tract of 84 square miles. In all these villages the Jats are numerically important. They are in possession of most of the agricultural land, having driven out other castes from the land when they first came from Punjab late in the 12th century and conquered the present area. The villages of the khap Baliayan are multi-caste and multi-communal in composition, and are situated near one another which gives geographical compactness to the clan area.

Other castes like the Water-carrier, Carpenter, Black-smith, Chamar. Sweeper, Weaver, and some Muslim castes living in khap Baliayan have also organized their caste councils on the same lines and have the same villages as those of the khap under their jurisdiction (cf Oscar Lewis. "Village Life in Northern India", University of Illinois, 1958; pp 26-31). Formerly, these caste councils came under the jurisdiction of the khap Panchayat of Baliayan, but now they function, more or less, independently of the khap Panchayat. The decisions or resolutions of the khap council now no longer become automatically binding upon the other castes of the khap area unless they are also adopted by the respective caste councils. But inter-caste disputes are still referred to and decided by the khap council, which will be discussed in detail later.

The history of the khap Balkan, and indeed of the sarv-khap Panchayat forms a notable part of the Jat culture of Meerut Division. Various khaps and the sarv-khap Panchayat have written historical records going back several centuries. The chief historical sources are: (1) the chronicles of khap and the sarv-khap genealogists or bards giving detailed account of important historical events in which these organizations took part; (2) royal mandates of Mughal emperors issued to various khaps from Akbar's time (1556-1605) to that of Muhammad Shah (1719-1748); (3) personal accounts left by Wazirs and Chaudhries of various khaps; (4) recorded minutes of khap and the sarv-khap Panchayat meetings from 12th century onwards; (5) letters of historical figures like Sada Shiv Bhau, the Maratha general and the hero of the third battle of Panipat against Ahmad Shah Abdaii (1761), Nana Sahib Dhondu Pant, and so forth, written to these organizations for military help to light the invaders and the British respectively; (6) and, finally, the sakha or oral account in verse of the settlement of a clan in its present place of habitations and the foundation of a khap. These historical records are available with the Wazir and the Chaudhry of the khap Baliayan, and the hereditary leaders of other khaps or clan areas of Meerut Division.-

Historical Background

According to the sakha of the Jats of khap Baliayan, a branch of the Kashyap clan gotra) migrated from an ancestral village of Mehlana, Gurgaon district in the Punjab, to the present area sometime in the second half of the 12th century. Territorial expansion, colonization or conquest of the villages which now comprise the khap Baliayan continued till the first quarter of the 16th century. It stopped at the establishment of Mughal rule in northern India, when law and order were established for a long time to come.

For defence, internal administration, and conquest, each khap had a militia. The leader villages of khap Baliayan, namely, Sisauli, Shoron, Pur-Baliayan, Harsauli etc, were the military strongholds. Several other villages of khap Baliayan were conquered by the khap militia at the beginning of 14th century.
The sarv-khup Panchayat, according to local belief, was organized in 7th century by emperor Harsha in his last quinquennial assembly at Prayag (modern Allahabad.). But from the written historical records it is evident that the various khups of Meerut Division were organized into the sarv-khup Panchayat as early as 13th century.

Besides functioning as adjudicative bodies and institutions of social control, the functions of the khup and sure-khup council during the medieaval period were to defend the sarv-khum area from foreign invasions and to preserve internal co-operation between different clan areas so as to maintain military solidarity. For example, at the time of the invasions of Timur (1398), Babur (1526), Ahmad Shah Abdali (1761) and so forth, the armies of various khups fought against these invaders. Each time the decision to defend the sarv-khum area was taken in a Panchayat meeting in the interests of common defence and freedom.

From Akbar's time (1336) various khups were granted autonomy in judicial matters, and their hereditary leaders were recognized by the Delhi Court as the leaders of the respective khups. This recognition came from a mandate of emperor Akbar issued on the 8th Ramzan, 987 Hiji or in 1578. The mandate was issued to Chaudhry Pacchumal of Shoron village and Chaudhry Ladsingh of Sisauli, the Wazir and the headman of Khup Baliai respectively. Other khups, namely, Khup Salaklaim (jats of Tomar clan), Khup Kalasudin (Cujars of Bhati clan), Khup Daiya (also Jats), and Khup Gathwana (Jats of Lal clan), are also mentioned in the mandate.

Impact of British Rule
Sometimes dazing periods of political unrest or revolt, certain Delhi kings such as Ibrahim Lodi (1517-1526), Muhammad Shah (1719-1748), and a few others, asked the Wazir of Khup Baliai and also of other khups to provide military help to crush a revolt or to expel the rebels from the kingdom, or to keep peace within the khups. Such help was provided by the khups but only after it was decided in the meetings of the sarv-khup Panchayat; and the conditions on which the proposed help was to be given were discussed and agreed upon by the representatives of the various khups. The political and military weakness of these rulers was exploited by the Readers of the sarv-khup panchayat to their own advantage. Thus, though the khups and the saro-khup Panchayat could not always succeed completely in defending the freedom of the area, they did succeed in getting some concessions in the field of internal autonomy, religious freedom, and freedom from various kinds of taxes levied on the Hindu population by the Delhi kings. The success of these efforts can-be seen from a mandate of emperor Akbar. The text of the mandate is as follows:

"By the present firman [mandate] certain community Panchayats in India who during the reign of the Sultans [of Delhi] were charged certain taxes before my reign, are now being exempted from such taxes. Every community Panchayat has my permission and is free to carry out its traditional functions in my reign. Both Hindus and Muslims are equal in my eyes. So I give freedom [of action] to these Panchayats. The jazia [religious tax levied on the Hindus] and other royal taxes are waived.

"Issued in the reign of emperor of India, emperor Akbar, 11th Ramzan, 989 Hiji (1580). Firman issued by the grand Wazirs Abul-Fazal and Raja Todar Mal".

The khups of Meerut Division, under the banner of the sarv-khup Panchayat, took a notable part in the Indian Mutiny of 1857 against British rule and fought the British armies. The revolt was crushed and important leaders of the various khups who had taken part in the revolt were sentenced to death or imprisonment. They have now become martyrs and their names are still remembered. In 1957 all these khups commemorated these martyrs by holding Panchayat meetings of their respective khups.

With the establishment of British rule in northern India, the saro-khup Panchayat fell into disuse. According to native belief it was discouraged by the British administrators to its part in the revolt of 1857. But the khup and inter-khup Panchayats continued to function, though shorn of their legal privileges or charter grant by the mandates of Mughal emperors. No formal quinquennial meeting of the sarv-khup Panchayat, according to the old tradition, was held during British rule in India. After the independence in 1947 it was again revived in 1950. Since then formal meetings of the sarv-khup Panchayat are held every five years. Its work and resolutions will be discussed later.

The introduction of a new system of administration and the institution of law courts, however, brought another setback to the khup and the sarv-khup Panchayats, and reduced their political effectiveness to some extent.

Jat Kinship Structure
The political system of the Jat khups is based upon segmentary kinship groups, namely, the lineage group structure of varying depth spans, and the clan. Various units such as khadun or minimal lineage, sub-thok or major segment of a maximal lineage, thok or maximal lineage, and clan, have corresponding political councils of their own. Both kinship units and their Panchayats are complementary in that both tend to support each other and thus produce social cohesion within the Jat community. A brief description of the principles underlying this complementary interaction between these two aspects of the Jat social organization will show how such social cohesion is achieved and how the total political structure of the khup is maintained.

The fads of Meerut Division are organized into localized, exogamous, patri-clans. Descent is reckoned from the ancestors who first came from the Punjab and settled in their present clan areas. There are other branches of these clans, with the same gotra or clan names in Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, and other parts of the state of Uttar Pradesh. These branches of a clan do not come under the jurisdiction of the Khap-Panchayats of Meerut Division, but marriage is prohibited between them. The hereditary headman of a khup (Chaudhry) is not considered the descendant of the clan ancestor but only as the descendant of the leader of that branch of clan ancestors who first came and settled in the present khup area.

A clan is segmented into lineage of varying depth spans, namely, thoks, sub-thoks and khaduns. Like the clan each lineage segment has a headman who is also called the Chaudhry. But unlike the clan his office is not always hereditary. However, once a lineage headman is elected or unanimously selected by the lineage Panchayat, the cannot be removed from his office during his lifetime.

The depth span of a thok or maximal lineage varies from ten to fifteen generations; of a sub-thok or major segment from six to ten generations; and of a khadun or minimal lineage
from three to five generations, from the living adults. These lineage segments are named after the founding ancestors. The line of descent from a founding ancestor is generally remembered or in case of doubt, which only happens in case of thoks having many generations, can be ascertained from the genealogical tables of the bard of the khap. The suffix of 'Ke' meaning descendants of such and such person is attached to the name of the founding ancestor of a lineage group; and this gives a clear indication which segment is referred to, or whether segment belongs to another maximal lineage or major segment. After the clan Chaudhry, the headman of thoks wield the greatest amount of prestige and political influence. These are wielded in diminishing order by the headmen of sub-thaks and khan Jans.

A thok is divided into sub-thoks or major segments, and a sub-thok, in turn, comprises various khandana or minimal lineages. A khandan comprises various nuclear or joint families.

Like the localised clan, each thok or maximal lineage has a compact geographical area of its own in a village, including both residential and agricultural lands. Thoks do not extend beyond a village.

The lineage segments are autonomous to a large extent, and freedom in internal matters is jealously guarded by each segment. However, thoks or sub-thoks can interfere in the internal matters of a member lineage if that lineage segment invites the elders of the higher segments to do so, or when the thok leaders feel that they should interfere in the affairs of a member lineage for the sake of preserving the solidarity of the whole maximal lineage.

Land Tenure and Inheritance

The spatial compactness of thoks or maximal lineage within a certain area of a village is maintained by two factors, namely, the bhai-chara (brotherhood) system of land tenure, and the customary law of inheritance of property of the Jats. Under the bhai-chara system, land is equally divided among thoks which consist of the descendants of the founding ancestors or original conquerors, so that all may share alike. In this system, possession determines the measure of each proprietor's right. Where a village is divided into pattis (divisions of a village for purposes of revenue collection), the land allotted to each may be held within it according to equally divided shares among the descendant thoks of the original conquerors. This differs from the pure pattidari system of land tenure, in which the proprietors hold land severally and fractionally according to known ancestral shares (cf B H Baden-Powell, "Land System of British India", Clarendon Press, 1892: PP 131-132).

According to the customary law of inheritance of the Jats, land — whether ancestral or acquired — cannot he alienated outside the thok or maximal lineage; and the natural course of succession cannot be altered for the benefit of non-agnates (cf C A Roe and H A B Hattigian " Tribal law in Punjab", 1895; p 41). The customary law of the Jats differs from the Mi lak shara law of inheritance of the Hindus which is not applicable in the case of the Jats. Thus the spatial compactness of the thoks within a village is maintained, and the dismemberment of residential or agricultural lands belonging to a thok 'does no' take place. Therefore, like the clan, the ties of kinship reinforce the tier, of local contiguity at the thok level. The nexus between these two aspects enables the Panchayats of various lineage segments, and also the khap Panchayat, to exercise social control within their respective units to a greater degree than would have been possible without the help of the bhai-chara system of land tenure and the customary law of inheritance of the Jats.

The chief function of the bhakhara land tenure is to maintain the egalitarian structure of the Jat society in the economic held. But this concept has also been extended by the Jats to other fields of kinship, social and political relations. For example, the principle of khap bhakhara or brotherhood implies that all the castes and communities living within a khap are like brothers, and this forms a basis of khap exogamy not only for the Jats but also in the case of other castes. Jats of other clans or with other Rotra names living within a khap are also considered as brothers and may not marry within that khap. Any attempt to flout this rule quickly brings the khap Panchayat into action, and an infringement, which is very rare and of which I could find only one example, is seriously dealt with by the khap Panchayat; and the whole family of the defaulter, or even his thok or his whole village, may be ostracised until he has made expiation and has satisfied the Panchayat by giving a fine, a community feast, and a firm promise not to flout this rule in future. As against other chaps, the various castes and communities of a khap are regarded as "brothers" and are allowed to participate in the khap organization as equals. Thus, on the political level the concept of bhai-chara provides a rationale for khap unity and solidarity.

Structure of the Khap

A khap is divided into a number of political units called thamba Panchayats. A thamba comprises a number of neighbouring villages varying, from thamba to thamba, from 3 to 20. For example, khap Balia has seven thambas. Each thamba has a headman whose office is hereditary, and who presides over the "reeplings" of the thamba Panchayat. The headmanship of a thamba has no barring of a kinship unit like that of the lineages of varying depth spans, and that of the clan. This is the main weakness of the thamba as a political unit. When the khap Panchayat lost its legal charter given by Mughal emperors on the advent of British rule in India, the thamba Panchayats lost their political power and effectiveness as institutions of social control, and to some extent fell into disuse. This was due to the lack of specific support from any of the kinship units and the corporate group structure of the Jat society.

A thamba is again divided into a number of informal game end Panchayats. A group of 5 to 8 neighbouring villages is called gana and. The same principles of local conjugality, kinship proximity, and ties of social and economic interaction, which are the basis of clan and lineage organization as political units, also support the granand and the thamba Panchayats. But unlike a granand a thamba for the most part is too big to have close social and economic interaction between its villages in day to day affairs (except where a thamba comprises only a few villages, say four or live, and in such cases the thamba Panchayat still functions effectively and performs most of the functions of the ganaand Panchayat). Otherwise, the sentiment of kinship ties is more fluid at the thamba level as compared to a granand.

The thoks of a gana end and a thamba are related to each other in the sense that some persons from a parent thok of a village say have migrated to a neighbouring village of the khap area and founded a new thok there. This kinship proximity forms
the basis of these two political units. But the *thoks* or maximal lineages of a big *thamba* do not have such close contact and economic and social interaction as is found between the *thoks* of a *ganwand*, which is generally a smaller unit than a *thamba*.

But, the village remains the fulcrum of all the political units of the *khap* Panchayat. The village Panchayat traditionally comprises the heads of the *thoks* and the headmen and lenders of other castes and communities of a village. There was no office of hereditary village headman in the villages of the *khap* Baliyan. Political power lay with an assembly of *thok* and caste leaders. The president of a village Panchayat was chosen at each meeting. Even today the village Panchayats hold their meetings on the same pattern when they function within the traditional framework of the *khap* and the *sarv-khap* organizations.

A village is divided into a number of *thok* Panchayats of the Jats and caste Panchayats of other castes living within the village. The *thok* Panchayats are presided over by *thok* headmen, and the caste Panchayats of other castes by their respective headmen or leaders. Similarly, other kinship segments like *sub-thoks*, *khandans*, and joint families, have their own headmen who preside over their respective Panchayats. Thus there is an elaborate hierarchy of political units from the minimal lineage councils to the *khap* and the *sarv-khap* Panchayats.

These political units belong to two categories, namely, those which are based on the corporate group structure of the *khap* society and are supported by the kinship charter: and those which are primarily based upon territorial grouping, and are supported by such principles as local contiguity, kinship proximity, concept of *bital-chara*, and so forth. Various lineage councils and the clan council belong to the first category: and the *patti*, village, *ganwand*, *thamba*, *khap* (as a general political council of all the castes living within a *khap* area), and the *sarv-khap* Panchayats belong to the second category. On the whole, and particularly since the *khap* lost its legal charter and the change in economic and political conditions in the country, the kinship-based councils tend to be more effective and show more political solidarity than the territorially based Panchayats. But the suggestion is only tentative, for there are important exceptions and it also depends upon the circumstances of a social situation. For example, the *sarv-khap* Panchayat, a Panchayat of neighbouring *khaps*, and also a *khap* Panchayat, may command more influence and political power loan any kinship based councils whether of a clan, *thok*, *sub-thok*, or of a *khandan* or minimal lineage.

(To be Concluded)

Notes

1. The fieldwork was carried out from August 1958 to July 1959 and again in December 1962 in Muzaffarnagar district, in connection with a doctoral dissertation which was submitted in November 1961 to the University of London. I am indebted to the late Robert Redfield for a travel grant of the Ford Foundation given by him to cover my expenses from London to India and back. I am also indebted to the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, for giving me two educational grants during my course of study in London.

2. The collection and translation of the recorded historical materials on *khap* Baliyan and the *sare-khap* Panchayat was mainly done in Shoron and Sisanli villages, where such material is kept by the Chaudhry and the Wazir of *khap* Baliyan. The translation of mandates of Mughal emperors from Persian to English, and of other historical material from Hindi to English, was done by me.

3. A formal meeting of the *sarv-khap* Panchayat is held every five years only, according to tradition. To this meeting the heads and leaders of all the *khans* and of other castes of Meerut Division must be invited. The meetings of this Panchayat are informal when it meets to decide cases or disputes among *khaps* or caste groups. A meeting of four or five *khaps* is also called *sarv-khap* Panchayat.

Satisfactory Progress by Hindustan Construction

A VERY satisfactory growth in turnover and earnings has Seen reported by Hindustan Construction in the year ended August last. The current year's prospects too appear equally pleasing: the company secured new contracts worth Rs 23.68 crores in the year 1964-65 and worth Rs 28.55 crores after the close of the year. It is intended to sell the company's holding in Vikhroli Metal Fabricators to Premier Construction at the break-up value.

The 1964-65 results show increase in work bills from Rs 19.31 crores to Rs 21.09 crores and in gross profit from Rs 5.43 crores to Rs 4.86 crores. Even though the necessary provisions have chopped off bigger slices, equity earnings of Rs 1.19 crores are nearly a half better than the preceding year's Rs 82.95 lakhs. The dividend, stepped up to 60 per cent, therefore, enjoys a thicker cover.