

## IMPERIAL DECLINE AND THE RISE OF KHATRIS IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY EASTERN RAJASTHAN

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### **Abstract:**

*This article focuses on exploring some of the important developments in the agrarian society of eastern Rajasthan during the eighteenth century. Shifting the emphasis from existing historiographical preoccupation with the state and peasantry, it attempts to delineate the process of the rise of intermediate group of Khatri, who were consolidating themselves between state and peasantry. It further seeks to emphasise the ability of this social group to chart out their own history in accordance with their own internal dynamics rather than in response to outside pressures. Their growth may be explained in terms of their ability to switch proficiently from one occupation to another with desire to secure greater power and economic resources.*

**Keywords:** Eighteenth century, amils, amins, political eminence, economic diversity

The economic functions and roles of some social groups were becoming extremely versatile and diverse in eighteenth century Eastern Rajasthan. Opportunities for service in the Jaipur state brought some of the families into prominence. Strikingly their ability to marginalize less enterprising members of their own community and establish themselves as a closely connected group of families proved instrumental in acquiring hereditary positions and social eminence in Jaipur region. For instance ,in eighteenth-century a family of Punjab rai Khatri, who along with many of his descendants saw himself rise higher in administration in post 1700 period. Aayamal Khatri, one of his sons gained distinction by securing for himself the *faujdari* of Narnaul in 1718 which then helped him in carving out a niche for himself as he continued in service for as long as 29 years.<sup>1</sup> This development assumes significance not because of his eminence alone but also on account of the fact that hitherto the *faujdar*s were usually Rajputs. But, now entering into such eminent positions was not a prerogative of established castes alone. Rapid change in politico-economic conditions during the eighteenth century made appointment of members of new castes and

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<sup>1</sup> Dastur Komvar, Khatri, p.489.

groups like *Sahukars, Mahajans, and Khatri* to high official positions possible. Focus here would be on the rise and growth of Khatri community who on account of their specialized skill and knowledge entered state administration and sailed through turbulent times of Mararatha incursions which were weakening the state of Jaipur and the Mughal empire was also fast declining.

Significantly enough military service became more rewarding than being associated with revenue service as there were wars and skirmishes on all sides which offered immense opportunities to win booty and honours. Further, members of this community could see rapid rise if they served a powerful patron efficiently. For instance, in 1721 Ayamal Khatri joined the army, with an assured prospect of acquiring social eminence. Later, he was offered financial assistance of Rs.100 every month in return for physical injury of his son, which may be attributed solely to specialized service to the state. Subsequently, a special 'robe of honour' worth Rs. 2000 was ordered and given to him, which indicates his having joined the ranks of distinguished personalities.<sup>2</sup> In addition, personal favors from the ruler for performing distinct services ranging from getting the fort of Amber repaired to serving as emissary of the state were conferred upon him. Subsequently, he shot to name and fame when he was made the Senapati (commander-in -chief) in 1744.<sup>3</sup> It is no surprise that he also maintained close relationship with the ruler, as he was called upon more often than not, by the latter.

Of no less significance is the case of his brother, Narayandas Khatri who had to his credit a long pollical career of 28 years. He began as an agent or *vakil* in the Jaipur *darbar* , which was essentially an important functionary of the state. To begin with, he was sent to Mathura in 1717 and subsequently to Ujjain in 1720 as state emissary.<sup>4</sup> Members of the nobility seldom met the ruler or each another directly rather they sent their *vakils* at the court to negotiate their affairs with other nobles and the rulers. This practice, therefore, left sufficient scope for Narayandas to acquire considerable clout in his capacity as *a vakil*. A continuous ceremonial exchange of greetings and gifts through these agents helped to maintain friendly and diplomatic relations between the ruler and the leading nobles. Thus, a *Vakil's* diplomatic ability to negotiate between high-ranking individuals or powerful

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid,p.490-491.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid,p.490-500.

<sup>4</sup> Dastur Komvar,Khatri,p.593-604

groups could not only enhance his patron's position but also served as a stepping-stone for his own success. By 1723, Narayandas Khatri grabbed for himself a position of *Diwan* of Ajmer. However, by eighteenth century, a *diwan's* core financial functions became ancillary and were delegated to clerical employees who now handled the *diwan's* correspondence and kept financial and land revenue records. The ruler and the leading officials including the *diwan* now had at their priority the military and diplomatic functions, as the eighteenth century was an age of warfare.<sup>5</sup> Therefore Narayandas led military contingents that helped the Jaipur state to win landslide battles, which earned him enormous rewards by the ruler on various occasions. For example, on his son Harnath Singh's first wedding he was honoured with huge sum of Rs. 5000. On his second marriage he was rewarded Rs. 9000. Thus, it shows that many members of *Khatri* community managed to remain well-entrenched even in a period of economic turmoil and political instability.

Thus, eighteenth century emerges as a period marked by social fluidity and political eminence of certain caste groups and communities. It was period, in which established social and functional rules were being redefined and even members of mercantile and scribal communities could now hope to directly take up influential political positions, which were hitherto the stronghold of the Brahmans and Rajputs. This happened because the Jaipur state was battling for its own survival and looking for its self-preservation. In this attempt, it decided to reach out for services of people from *Khatri* community as well. Further, the political functions of various administrative divisions were also undergoing significant transformation as they were adjusting to new demands of governance. Meemraj Natani although an *amil*, also served in the army, which helped him escalate new heights in the long run. He fought in 1757 in an important battle of Jihlot, which earned him enormous titles and honours. Subsequently, in 1762 and 1764, he was again bestowed with a *sirpav* and 'robe of honour' respectively.

During this period the practice of frequent transfers was also relaxed, which naturally helped these new entrants carve out a niche for themselves. Ramnath Aggarwal, who was appointed as *faujdar* of Mathura in 1731 continued to retain his office for a period of about 12 years.<sup>6</sup> Another official Ramchand who was appointed as *Diwan*

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<sup>5</sup> Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Social History of an Indian Caste*, p.23.

of the state of Amber in 1717, continued to retain this office for a long period of thirty years in lieu of his exemplary military service and unwavering allegiance to the ruler.<sup>7</sup> Yet another official Raichand of Sawai Jaipur managed to be a *Qanungo* for a number of years. This practice of infrequent transfer of officials was a clear deviation from past practice, which again shows dependence of the ruler on the specialized skill and knowledge of local practices of these officials and also use their military expertise in suppressing turbulent elements in the region.

There are numerous instances of utilization of skills of members of *Khatris* community for management of commercial undertakings on behalf of the state during a period marked by political unrest and turbulence. Roopchand Soni, son of a '*gumastha*'; a *Khatris* enjoyed distinction not for occupying any significant administrative position but for acting as state agent in Delhi to administer certain trading functions in this region. Ram Kishan, again a *Khatris* performed similar functions for the state and was rewarded gifts on his arrival from Delhi to Ajmer.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, *Khatris* who were a scribal community in the state of Jaipur rose high up in the administrative bureaucratic structure primarily on account of their specialized knowledge. Changing politico-economic scenario opened up extensive opportunities for growth to many members of this community. At the beginning of the eighteenth-century Mughal land revenue machinery began to show signs of mal-functioning, the collection of revenue became all the more a challenging proposition for the state authorities. Besides this, it was also a period of increasing warfare, which boosted the demand for not only increased number of warfare items but also other consumer goods. Such a state of affairs opened up new prospects of growth in the field of *ijaradari* system, military service, trade-related activities and enormous opportunities in other spheres of civil administration.

Therefore, during the eighteenth-century appointment to high offices no longer remained the prerogative of the few sections of the Rajputs and the Brahmans. The Jaipur state had started favouring the intermediate officials at the expense of traditional sections of the society consequently leading to significant changes in the politico-economic order of the society. The eighteenth. Century, therefore, offered immense opportunities to all those who managed to concentrate power through control of fiscal resources over the years.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.217.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidp.215.

Individuals rose and fell according to their own abilities and those of their patrons. Quite rightly the century was characterized by economic reconfiguration that resulted in the emergence of a new political order. It thus, pieces together a vibrant process of political realignment in the Eastern Rajasthan region.

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