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JĀT

JĀT, a contested and ambiguous label for several non-food-producing, peripatetic, itinerant communities in Afghanistan (Rao, 1982; idem, 2004; Olesen) and the surrounding region (Akiner; Arnold; Berland; Berland and Rao; Ivanow; Pischel; Sykes). The Jāts are occasionally dubbed gypsy in ethnographic, historic, and travel accounts. In early post-Islamic Arabic historical records the Jāt are called Zoṭṭ and in the Persian and Arab worlds Jāt and Zoṭṭ are referred to as non-food-producing semi-nomadic people with Indian origins (Westphal-Hellbusch, 1984, p. 356), irrespective of their own claims for ethnic or linguistic identity. There are sizeable communities of settled and nomadic Jāts numbering several millions in India and Pakistan, about which we have a limited ethnographic and historical record (Berland; Bingley; Dahiya; Pande; Pradhan; Qanungo). The present article deals with the Jāts of Afghanistan, a heterogeneous ethnic group that consists of several non-food-producing nomadic and semi-nomadic communities, each calling itself by a distinct descent and/or occupational autonym.

The label Qaw(w)āl is occasionally used interchangeably with the exonym Jāt in Afghanistan. The overlapping social categories Jāt and Qawāl in Afghanistan carry pejorative connotations. No one wants to be identified as Jāt or Qawāl. As such, these two labels do not analytically qualify as ethnonyms but are references to ethnic or social categories to which no one wants to belong. In Afghan popular culture, argumentative and quarrelsome behavior, including careless and carefree speech and dress, especially among young women, is characterized as Jāt behavior. All peripatetic communities reject the label Jāt

but apply it to other communities in the larger Jāt ethnic universe. For example, a sub-group of the Jāt called Pikrāj will reject being called Jāt but will assign the label to other sub-groups of the larger Jāt category.

Widely known to the people of Afghanistan, the Jāts in that country have received sparse ethnographic attention from scholars. The descriptive accounts of Asta Olesen (especially 1994) and Aparna Rao (especially 1982) are our only sources for academic information about the Jāt peripatetic communities of Afghanistan. Ethnographic research for these studies was conducted during early 1970s.

The major Jāt communities in Afghanistan are identified as Baluch, Ḡorbat, Jalāli, Šādibāz, Pikrāj, Vangāwālā, Jōgi, Šayḵ Moḥammadi, and Mussali. Most of these communities were segmented into smaller descent units usually identified with the suffix *ḵēl*. The exception was the Ḡorbat, in which segments were named Faray, Kayāni, and Syawun. Smaller and less known Jāt segments referred to in the literature are Čangar, Jolā, Sadu, Čalu, Kowli, Kutana, Luli, and Mogat. Aparna Rao (2004) lists four general features of the Jāt noted by outsiders to differentiate them from other nomadic and semi-nomadic communities in Afghanistan: (1) They lived in houses in urban areas and in white tents when they lived in rural areas and, in contrast to the black goat's hair tents of the pastoral nomads, in white tents when they lived in rural areas; (2) they were collectively known as outsiders with Indian origins even though a Jāt community itself, as in the case of the Ḡorbat, would claim Iranian roots; (3) they were considered both physically and ritually unclean and associated with undesirable and polluting occupations of feeding on carrion and corpses, bloodletting, prostitution, pimping, and child-abduction; (4) their small and dark physical features validated their Indian, non-Afghan, origins.

Most Jāts in Afghanistan claim to be Sunni Muslims. The Ḡorbat, one of the largest and most dispersed Jāts, are mostly Shiʿite. Jāt communities in Afghanistan were organized around common patrilineal descent. Each community consisted of a minimal lineage, a cluster of a few patrilineally linked nuclear families that consider themselves descendents of a known male ancestor. Some lineages are labeled with a proper name as a prefix to *ḵēl*, for instance, Zaku-ḵēl among the Šayḵ Moḥammadi; others are identified by occupation such as Naddāf-ḵēl (lineage of cotton carders) or by place such as Čahārbāḡi (from Ča-hārbāḡ), or by objects such as Koluḵi (of lumps of dried mud or mud brick). Most Jāt myths of origin locate them in early Islamic

history and link them to putative ancestors with special spiritual powers. The Jāts speak the Persian or Paxtu (Pashtu, Pukhtu) language of the local Afghan communities where they work and engage in trade. Every Jāt community claims to have a secret language (Quzulagi among the Ḡorbat, Adurgari among the Šayḵ Moḥammadi), which outsiders are supposed not to understand (Rao, 1982; idem, 2004; Olson, 1987; idem, 1994).

In general, male members of Jāt communities in Afghanistan engage in barter exchanges mostly in the lower class neighborhoods of urban areas like Kabul and in rural areas of Afghanistan. They make and peddle bird cages (*qafas*) and flat circular drums (*dāyera*, see DAF(F) AND DĀYERA). Cloth, haberdashery, perfumes, and trinkets (*sawdā*) are purchased in urban markets and peddled for a profit. As traders in trinket the Jāts are known as *sawdāgar*, trinket peddler. Some Jāts work as snake charmers, sellers of charms (*taʿwiḏ*) against snake and scorpion bites, monkey handlers (*šādibāz*), jugglers and conjurers (*madari*), chinaware repairer (*patragar*), and cotton carders (*naddāf*). The Šayḵ Moḥammadi and Mussali Jāts of Eastern Afghanistan make and peddle grain sieves (*ḡarbayl* [*ḡalbayl*], *čiḡil* or *maydabiz*) and winnowing trays (*čaj*, *čač*). They work as grain cleaners and threshers, rice millers (*pāykub*), and winnowers of grain in addition to peddling trinkets and other commodities bought in urban markets and sold in rural areas during their summer and fall migrations around Kabul and in Kōhdāman, especially in the area south of Čarikār (q.v.). Jāt women peddle a variety of goods including cloth, haberdashery; bangles (*čoriwāla* or *čoriforuš* in Persian, *bangriwāl* in Paxtu) and other jewelry; thread and needle (*tār o suzan*); comb (*šāna*); hairpins (*siḵak*); make-up for women (*sorḵi o safaydā*, red and white powder); *sorma o sala-yi*, powdered antimony [*kohl*]— used to color eyelashes and the area around the eyes and eyebrows—and a small wooden bodkin for application (in Paxtu these two items are called *ranza aw sala-yi*); tools for personal hygiene (*gel-e saršoi*, a pinkish soft rock that, when soaked in water, produces a paste that was used for cleaning the skull skin; *ḵešt*, a soft rock for removing grime; *sang-e pāy*, a round pumice for cleaning foot soles; *kisa*, a glove made of coarse cloth for removing grime; *lif*, a soft woven glove for lathering soap; *pāki*, blade for removing hair). Some Jāt women engaged in fortune-telling (*fāll-bini*), drawing blood by cupping (*ḵoon-kaši*), and leeching (*jok zadan*). In urban areas Jāt women had a reputation for performing abortions. Drawing blood and abortion are explicitly prohibited in Islam. All these occupations are ranked low in Afghanistan and stereotyped with negative attributes. The Jāts exchanged their services and commodities mainly

through barter, receiving used clothes, old shoes, and worn out household goods. General purpose money was rarely involved in these transactions. In the context of these exchanges the Jāts, especially Jāt women, were an important source of information about the outside world for their women customers.

Major communities. During the 1970s the Baluch Jāts in Afghanistan estimated their own numbers at about 2,500 individuals. They were concentrated in northern and northwestern Afghanistan with the largest numbers in the city of Herat. They were locally known as Čalu, Herati, and Jāt-Baluč and were distinguished from the tribal Baluch. The Jāt-Baluč claimed Baluchistan as their ancestral home and were traditionally hosted by the Jam-šidi communities, among whom they worked as blacksmiths, coppersmiths, and jewelers. As a result of the 1970s drought in northern Afghanistan, the Baluch Jāts moved out of Jamšidi settlements and adopted music, dance, and female prostitution as their primary economic strategy (Rao, 1986).

The Ḡorbat Jāts were the most widely distributed itinerant peripatitics of about 1,000 nuclear families in Afghanistan. They could be found in all large cities and rural areas of the country. Ḡorbat men peddled cloth and haberdashery and made and peddled sieves and round flat drums. Blood-letting is the most common occupation among the itinerant Ḡorbat. In the 1970s some segments of the Ḡorbat community had become sedentary. The Ḡorbat claim Iranian origin despite outsiders' insistence that they are originally from India. Most Ḡorbat are Shiʿite; only those in Kandahar claim to be Sunni. Their language is generally called Ḡorbati, Magadi in Herat, and Quzulagi in Kabul and Kandahar. It is alleged that the name Ḡorbat and its phonetic variations are used by some itinerant gypsy communities in Central Asia, Western Iran, Europe, North Africa, and even in North America (Rao, 1982).

The Jalāli and Pikrāj (northeast Afghanistan) and Šādibāz and Vangāwālā (eastern Afghanistan) Jāts claim their origin in Dera Esmāʿil Khan and Dera Ḡāzi Khan (west of the Indus River) in what is now Pakistan. Famine and feuds are given as reasons for moving out of the Indus valley into Afghanistan. Among the about 500 Jalāli Jāts, some men are known as professional beggars, musicians, and peddlers of haberdashery. A few Jalāli Jāt men trained monkeys to dance and engage in acrobatics. Jalāli women were known as fruit peddlers. In the 1970s, approximately 2,000 Pikrāj were scattered in small concentrations around the cities of Balkh, Mazār-e Šarif, Maymana, Qondoz,

and Ṭālaqān. Pikrāj Jāt men were engaged mostly in buying and selling donkeys and horses and in the repair of cracked or broken china ware. Pikrāj women were known for selling bangles.

The Šādibāz or Šādiwan were estimated at 1,500 strong in the 1970s. They peddled their occupation in and around the cities of Kabul and Jalālābād and throughout the provinces of Lōgar and Parwān. Šādibāz men trained and peddled exhibitions of performing monkeys. The animals were imported from Pakistan. In the 1970s the Šādibāzi trade declined and men of this community started peddling cloth and labor for the production of agricultural harvests. Šādibāz women peddled bangles imported from Pakistan (Rao, 1986).

The Vangāwālā (bangle seller) Jāt numbered about 3,000 individuals (Rao, 1986). Their women peddled bracelets, cloth, and haberdashery in the area south of the Hindu Kush mountains (q.v.) and east of Qalāt and Orozgān plus the Bāmiān Valley and the major cities of northeast Afghanistan. Some Vangāwālā men were jugglers, conjurers, and snake charmers and peddled spells against snake bites and scorpion stings. A few Vangāwālā men had settled in Kabul as shopkeepers selling cloth; others were engaged in peddling used shoes, religious posters, and perfumes on Kabul streets. Some Vangāwālā families were engaged in picking fruit and a few others had become full-time farmers. The Jōgi Jāts claim to have their origin in Bengal and were scattered throughout northern Afghanistan. They were engaged in begging, fortune telling, blood letting and leeching, and selling herbal medicines. Jōgi men were working in the harvesting of cotton and cereals. Some consider them a branch of the Jalāli Jāts (Rao, 1986).

The itinerant Šayḵ Moḥammadi Jāts lived in and around the village of Maskura in the Ališang valley, Lāgmān Province. In the 1970s they numbered about 150 related families. They made winnowing trays which their men and women peddled together with thread and needles, hairpins, and trinkets in exchange mainly for wheat. They peddled cloth during market days. A few Šayḵ Moḥammadi owned shops in Jalālābād and in Mehtarlam, the provincial capital of Lāgmān. A nearby community of Šayḵ Moḥammadis outside of Maskura specialized in cotton carding (*naddāfi*) and repairing damaged chinaware (*patragari*). After the spring wheat harvest in Lāgmān, throughout the summer months and early autumn the Šayḵ Moḥammadi camped in tents in the area surrounding Kabul and in Kōhdāman around Sarā-ye Ḵoja. By exploiting price differences in Lāgmān, Kabul, and Kōhdāman, they peddle cloth, bangles, hairpins, balloons, and other trinkets in exchange mainly for

grapes and raisins. They returned to Lagmān after the fruit harvest season (Rao, 1986).

The Mussali Jāts lived in units of 1-3 families per village throughout the densely populated Ališang and Alingar valleys of Lagmān Province. Unlike other Jāts, they lived in permanent dwellings and were integrated into the local political economy in a relatively fixed landowner-laborer relationship. They produced labor for threshing, winnowing and cleaning during the late spring harvest season in Lagmān. Following the agricultural cycle, during mid to late summer they peddled these services in the heavily populated Kabul and Kōhdāman regions in exchange for grain and other agricultural products.

Although quite limited in scope, the introduction of modern roads and means of transportation and communication, together with industrial agricultural technologies and expansion of urban environments, had a far-reaching transforming impact on Jāt society and culture in Afghanistan. In addition, the collapse of the state structure of Afghanistan and the political and social changes in the surrounding region over the last three decades have produced profound changes in all ethnic communities of Afghanistan. In all likelihood not many Jāts survived these transformations and those that did survive have probably moved to the relative safety and stability of the surrounding countries. No reliable information is available about the Jāt communities currently residing inside Afghanistan.

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