



POWER AND POLITICS OF MAHAJANS IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY EASTERN RAJASTHAN

Prerna Gautam, Assistant Professor

Department of History

Delhi College of Arts and Commerce, University of Delhi

New Delhi (India)

Abstract

This article focuses on intermediate groups of *Mahajans* who formed an integral part of the rural society on the strength of their specialized skill and wealth. They managed to successfully exploit various avenues of growth that came their way and retain their past glory and social eminence. Therefore, an attempt will be made to examine their socio-economic potential which helped them make serious inroads into the contemporary politics and economics of eighteenth century and look at how even the fast-changing political scenario did not dissuade them from expanding their power and influence.

Keywords: Mahajans, revenue officials, moneylenders, Marwar, specialized service

The state of Jaipur¹ derived many of its administrative practices from the Mughal Empire. Akin to Mughal revenue administration, Jaipur state also followed the practice of regular transfer of its land revenue officials. Therefore, the latter came to rely heavily on the specialized services of permanent local village officials, who owed their position to birth and their appointment by the state. They came to assume a position of considerable significance since they provided valuable information and specialized service to the state and also because they were unaffected by the transfer of the assignees. One such group was that of the *Mahajans*. They were considered a high caste; therefore, they were given the name *Mahajan*. The *Mahajans* were always economically and socially dominant group of people of the rural society. Many of them were engaged in usury and thus, formed an integral part of village economy of medieval India. B.L. Bhadani's work, 'Moneylending and Exchange in seventeenth and eighteenth Century Marwar', reveals some interesting facts about the moneylending business in this region. specialized commercial class in Marwar practicing Professional usurers were styled as *Mahajans* and *bohras*. According to B.L. Bhadani, the significance of this profession grew manifold times as the

¹ The Kachhwaha rulers of Amber later comprised the bulk of Eastern Rajasthan as the Kachhwaha principality rose to a premier position among the principalities of the region.



means of communication and transport were still in a primitive stage.² However, the author admits that the information gathered above relates to a small region and is by no means comprehensive. The author hopes that the evidence from other regions is likely to enrich our understanding of the credit system of this period.³

Further, I.A. Khan also states that *Mahajans* challenged the authority of both jagirdars and zamindars as former exercised effective socio-economic control over the peasant communities. His study helps us identify them as crucial players in the society wielding considerable economic and political influence within the rural society. Nonetheless, the extent to which they were capable of controlling the production process and transforming the social relations, is yet to be ascertained, therefore, he believes that their role and position as a politico-economic entity needs to be further investigated.⁴

Most enlightening is the work of Dilbagh Singh, who describes them as an integral part of the administrative machinery and the rural world as the state often borrowed money from them for advancing agricultural loans to the ryots. Also, he finds instances of the *Mahajans* acquiring the hereditary offices of the village officials through purchase. In many cases, they directly secured the offices, which were vacant due to absence of incumbents by offering a substantial amount as *nazrana* to the state.⁵

Since the *Mahajans* were also associated with trading activities, it becomes imperative to scrutinize the relationship between the mercantile world and political power. In this context reference to C.A. Bayly and Sanjay Subrahmanyam's work becomes important.⁶ They argue that on most occasions these mercantile groups came to exercise number of political functions.⁷ C.A. Bayly locates different avenues of social mobility for the *Mahajan* families in colonial period and explores the process of their association with the British treasures and investors, which helped them undergo some degree of

² B.L.Bhadani, *Moneylending and Exchange in the 17th and 18th Century Marwar*, PIHC,1977. P.266.

³ Ibid., p.273.

⁴ I.A.Khan, *The Role of Middle Classes*, PIHC,p.117.

⁵ Ibid.,p.26

⁶ C.A. Bayly and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Portfolio Capitalists and the Political Economy of Early Modern India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol.XXX, No. 4,1988. p.401-402

⁷ Ibid., p.417.



social transformation during a period of political crisis.⁸It emerges that the group of *Mahajans* indeed formed an influential social group of the rural society. Therefore, an attempt shall be made to analyze the manner in which the *Mahajans* increasingly transcended their customary occupational base and how they made serious inroads in politics and economics of eighteenth century.⁹

Dastur Komvar sheds extensive light on role and functions of the *Mahajans* in the eighteenth-century Eastern Rajasthan. It not only reinforces their hold over the state revenue administration but also shows extension of their authority over various other influential administrative positions. It shows that how unlike earlier centuries, several *Mahajan* families had begun to secure offices of *diwan*, *amil*, *daroga*, *faujdar* etc.

Let us first discuss the office of *Diwan* who was state's chief revenue official and was appointed directly by the ruler.¹⁰ In the later years of the Mughal rule, this office no longer remained the prerogative of Rajputs and other elite groups. It was opened up for various mercantile castes such as Sanghi, Natani, Chhabra, Aggarwal, etc. who formed the *Mahajan* communities. Now, those individuals who held the office of *Diwan* began to receive additional functions and rights. Motiram although a *Diwan* was vested with the function of *Daroga-i-Topkhana* in 1763 and later in 1767, he was made *Daroga-i-Kachhari*.¹¹Therefore, the induction of *Mahajans* as *Diwans* makes them a very power group during this period.

Evidently, the office of *Diwan* had acquired certain hereditary character also. For instance, Mohan Ram succeeded his father Jeevan Raj Sanghi as *Diwan* in 1782.¹² However, this nature of succession had not become a widespread feature. For instance, in 1768, when *Diwan* Nandlal died, it was Radhakisan Natani and not his son Moti Ram who took over as *Diwan*. In fact, he began his career as *Daroga-i-Topkhana* in 1763 and two years down the line he saw himself rise to the position of *Daroga-i-Kachhari*. It was only subsequently in 1768 that he managed to become the *Diwan* replacing Radhakisan.¹³ To this may be added the case of *Diwan* Kanhya Ram whose son, Manoth Ram, did not

⁸ C.A. Bayly., *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, p.240

⁹ Andrea Hintze, *The Mughal State and its Decline: An interpretation of the Sources of Political Power*, 1997, pp.16-17.

¹⁰ For further details refer to S.P.Gupta, *The Agrarian System of Eastern Rajasthan*, Manohar Publication, 1986.p.164

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.84-85.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.128

¹³ *Dastur Komvar, Mahajan*, p.128.



inherit this office, rather he served as a *vakil* of the Jaipur state in the Deccan. However, the office of *Diwan* was not the stronghold of the *Mahajans* alone. Many of the Khatri families also managed to secure this office. Aftaab Rai Khatri managed to occupy this post of *Diwan* at Ajmer in 1719.¹⁴ Some of the other high-ranking Khatri families also attained high positions including that of *Diwan*.

Besides the office of *Diwan*, *Mahajans* also started purchasing the hereditary offices of *faujdar*, *daroga*, *amil*, and *amin* in the rural administration. Dilbagh Singh in his work '*The Role of the Mahajans*' demonstrates as to how these *Mahajans* were made *Patel*, *Patwari*, and *Chaudhary* and illustrates that how Moti Ram Mahajan obtained the office of *Patwari* of qasba Chatsu after paying Rs.1,500 as *nazrana*.¹⁵ Acquisition of these offices by the *Mahajans* had deep social and political ramifications and therefore can provide a deep insight into economic and social developments of the eighteenth century. From a perusal of *Dastur Komvar*, it is clear that the *Mahajans* held such offices in a number of parganas. For example, *Mahajan* Mansaram belonging to Koolwal community was appointed as *amil* of qasba *Sawai Jaipur* in 1784.¹⁶ Similarly, *Mahajans* can be seen capturing the post of *amin* as well. Interestingly, *Mahajans* as *amils* outnumber themselves as *amins*. However, since the two offices gradually came to be combined in the same person, there came to be concentration of power in one person, which eventually eroded authority of the state over local elements at village and regional level.¹⁷ Further, the practice of taking certain amount of money as *qabz* and *taahhud* as advance from appointees also indicates relative affluence of these incumbents. Though this practice of displacement of *amils* of *jagirdar* was disapproved of by the state, it could not be wiped out completely and the *Mahajans* came to constitute an essential segment of lower bureaucracy.¹⁸

There are various other important administrative positions which the *Mahajans* held during this period, of which there are several instances in *Dastur Komvar*. In 1761 Mahajan Ratan Chand was made *Darogi-i-Topkhana* and in 1766 Ram Rikh Chand Sanghi became *Daroga-i- Okhadkhana*.¹⁹ Likewise,

¹⁴ Dastur Komvar, Khatri, p.506

¹⁵ Dilbagh Singh, 'The Role of Mahajans in the Rural Economy in Eastern Rajasthan during the Eighteenth Century' *Social Scientist* Vol.2, 1974. pp.20-31.

¹⁶ Dastur Komvar, *Mahajan*, p.64.

¹⁷ Dilbagh Singh, *The State, Landlord and Peasants*, p.205.

¹⁸ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, p.327.

¹⁹ Dastur Komvar, *Mahajan*, p.326 and 232.



Mansaram managed to secure an powerful post of Na'ab of qasba Sawai Jaipur in 1770.²⁰ Again in 1777 Manikchand was also given the office of Daroga-i-Filkhana.²¹ Unlike the earlier period, *Mahajans* were also forcing their way into military services during this period. For instance, Maluk Chand Mehta who was absorbed in military service, the exact nature of which is not specified in the document, but was given valuable gifts in 1796 for his extraordinary services.²² Another person Mayachand had secured for himself a military designation of *mussaraf of Slhaposa*.²³ Moreover, some of the revenue officials were also engaged in some military functions. Mayaram, an amil of pargana Toda Bhim can be seen serving in the army who was sent to the Deccan for defending state's political rights in the region. And such instances in *Dastur Komvar* are innumerable.

Thus, the services of the *Mahajans* on account of their surplus wealth and political pragmatism of the Jaipur state, became indispensable for the state authorities. *Mahajans and Baniyas* now saw fresh opportunities for social advancement on account of deteriorating economic condition of the Jaipur state and Maratha raids and incursions. *Dastur Komvar* states that in 1756 Motiram Maheshwari; a *Mahajan* had helped the state to earn huge profits in a commercial venture in the city of Pali.²⁴ Such dependence of the state on this community is again exemplified by an incident in which a trader called Mauji Ram was given royal favours in 1766, for performance of some service of commercial nature for the state.²⁵

Further, Maratha incursions and famines did not leave the agrarian economy untouched. As there was a decline in cultivation, which is indicated both by shrinkage in the area under cultivation as well as fall in agricultural output. These phenomena, especially were further aggravated by large scale migration of cultivators, especially the *raiya*s to the more prosperous areas of Malwa and Harauti, leading to an increase in the number of villages classified as *ujar* (deserted).²⁶ Such a state of affairs resulted in dislocation of inter-pargana trade, which induced the state to undertake some affirmative actions to overcome this crisis. Therefore, the document shows how the state tried to revive the economy by inviting some leading traders from outside the region. For instance, in 1729 Ram Kisan, a

²⁰ Ibid,p.169

²¹ Ibid,p.173-174.

²² Ibid,p.133.

²³ Ibid,p.169

²⁴ *Dastur Komvar*,p.135.

²⁵ Ibid,p.138

²⁶ Dilbagh Singh, *State, landlords and peasants*,p.199.



Mahajan from Delhi was encouraged to invest capital in trade and commerce in the region of Amber.²⁷

Thus, by the close of the eighteenth century, when the Mughal empire was completely weakened, the members of Khatri community, had come to control the sinews of political power. Apart from acquiring hereditary village offices of *patel*, *patwari* and *chaudhari* many of them had begun to attain commanding positions like those of *diwan*, *amil*, *amin*, *daroga*, *faujdar* etc in the Jaipur state. Their influence and financial strength were instrumental in enabling them to acquire a leading role in the contemporary political system.

Bibliography

1. Leonard, Karen, *Social History of an Indian Caste; The Kayasthas of Hyderabad*, Oriental Longman Limited, first edition in India, 1994
2. Gupta, S.P., *The Agrarian System of Eastern Rajasthan, (c.1650-1750)*, Delhi, Manohar, 1986.
3. Singh, Dilbagh, *The State, Landlords and Peasants; Rajasthan in the eighteenth century*, Manohar publications, 1990.
4. Bhadani, B.L., 'Moneylending and Exchange in the seventeenth and eighteenth century Marwar', *PIHC*, 1977.
5. Singh Dilbagh, 'The Role of Mahajans in the Rural Economy of Eastern Rajasthan during the Eighteenth Century', *Social Scientist*, May 1974, Vol.2, No.10, pp.20-31.
6. Habib, Irfan and Raychaudhari, Tapan, (ed.) *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol.I c.1200-1750, Cambridge University Press, First Edition, 1982
7. *Dastur Komvar*, Mahajan, preserved in Rajasthan State archives, Bikaner.
8. *Dastur Komvar*, Khatri, preserved in Rajasthan State archives, Bikaner.

²⁷ *Dastur Komvar, Mahajans.p.215.*