INTRODUCTION

Unveiling the process of change among transitional peasant societies is an arduous task that involves both the knowledge of intrinsic unity between the pieces of disjointed evidence, and of linkages between their material life, actual social position and social aspirations. To study mobility and change in a traditional hierarchical society of medieval India may sound a bit paradoxical to those brought up on the notion of changelessness of Indian society. This study draws sustenance from the belief that mobility is characteristic of every human society, and not even the most rigid social systems can escape from economic fluidity and social flux. In view of this conviction, this study aims at the dynamics of change in medieval India and seeks to examine how the process of ‘change’ occurs in peasant communities and eventually leads to their social transformation.

The choice of case studies was determined by the usefulness of presenting regional and cultural variations on the theme of social change. As a result, three peasant communities were chosen, namely the Jāts of upper Jamunā Gāngā Doāb, the Meos of Mewāt (Rājasthān), and the Veḷḷālas of the Tamil country. The idea was that such a scheme would provide basis to study the pattern of mobility and change in different ecological zones. The study also attempts a comparative regional history by examining the patterns of change in the two key regions of this country—the Gāngetic valley and the Kāvēri valley—with a view to compare and contrast the social dynamics of the peasant groups. All the three farming communities are said to have played an important role in
Map 1: Region of Study—Spatial Distribution of the Jats, Meos and Vellalas during Medieval Period
the evolution of the agrarian orders of their respective regions although no such historical analysis of their social dynamics within a comparative framework have been undertaken so far.

In modern times, the Jāts are found in almost entire northern India but during the heyday of Mughal Empire, the main concentration of Jāt strength was in upper Jamunā-Gangā Doāb which corresponds to the fertile plains of present-day western Uttar Pradesh and adjoining portions of Uttarākhand. The Meos were originally identified with the Arāvalli hills of Eastern Rājasthān but gradually they spread out and occupied the entire Mewāt region. Currently, Mewāt corresponds to the modern Alwar and Bharatpur districts of Rājasthān, and Nuh district of Haryāna. In South India, the Tamil Veḻḷāḷas are sub-divided into four culturally distinct categories according to ancient geographical terms, namely Chōliya, Toṇḍaimanḍala, Pāṇḍya, and Koṅgu.¹ Initially, the work began exclusively on the Koṅgu Veḻḷāḷas but in due course of time it was realized that the inscriptive evidence from Chōla-manḍalam or the Kāvēri region needed to be integrated with that of Koṅgu for a scientific study of the Veḻḷāḷas. Therefore, Chōliya Veḻḷāḷas were also brought within the purview of our inquiry. However, it is important to note that valuable inscriptive information from other regions of Tamilnādu have also been utilized to enhance our understanding of the Veḻḷāṇa community.

From a socialistic point of view, the Indian sub-continent appears to be a conglomeration of tribal and peasant communities. Indian historical studies on social stratification at the level of peasant communities have not been seriously attempted so far. This is mainly because the medieval historians had accepted the notion of village

¹ Burton Stein, Peasant State and Society, New Delhi, 1985, pp. 448-49.
community but mistakenly overlooked the differentiation within it.² Such an inattentive approach towards the existence of various agricultural groups is likely to blur our vision about the nature of stratification and actual process of change. The fact that medieval peasant society is a conglomerate consisting of diverse social components in form of various peasant groups is yet to receive genuine appreciation from the historians. Another anomalous feature of so-called regional studies is the tendency to focus on conventional core regions which are mostly some famous river valleys such as the Gangetic or Kaveri valley, or modern linguistic provinces. However, this is not to under-estimate the value of regional studies. What is implied here is the need to handle the results of such studies with caution because the emerging trends of a particular region may not be adequately applicable to each of its constituent unit. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the significance of micro-study in medieval history wherein the minute characteristics of a sub-region or subtle changes in individual social group can be justifiably analyzed.

It is necessary at this point to touch briefly on the theoretical and historical problematic of peasant studies. In the beginning, historical scholarship was besieged with the stereotyped notions of 'stagnation' and changelessness' of Indian society. Among these, the prominent ones were the theories of Oriental Despotism and the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP). The notion of Despotism³ first occurred in Greek writings but it was later revived in the 19th century in light of the reports of European travellers, particularly François Bernier,⁴ that there was no private property in land in India. Taking cue from Bernier, Karl Marx (1853) restructured the concept of Oriental Despotism into a

² BD Chattopadhyaya, The Making of Early Medieval India, New Delhi, 2005, p. 27 n66.
system of political economy by his theory of Asiatic Mode of Production. Being one of the earliest advocates of these theories, Karl Marx believed that pre-colonial Indian society was an unchanging society characterized by self-sufficient village communities and caste system, absence of private property in land, lack of surplus in production, state control over irrigation works, and the use of town as military camp instead of commercial centre. The writings of Henry Maine (1861) also reflected these notions, and further tried to reconcile them with the evidence of early Indian history. Though Marx’s views on pre-colonial India were far from being true, he left strong impression on the minds of Indian historians who interpreted his observations accordingly. In South Indian context, the influence of AMP was apparent in the study of Kathleen Gough (1980) who tried to explain that the Chōla state was despotic in nature and consisted of all the important features of AMP, viz. absence of privately owned land, existence of slavery, and state control over irrigation works. However, Irfan Habib (1980) questioned the historicity of AMP and concluded that “Marx’s description contains grave errors of fact.” Romila Thapar (1975) evaluated the notions of Oriental Despotism and AMP in light of Indian historical evidence and western prejudices on Indian past.

---

4 Irfan Habib, ‘Forms of Class Struggle in Mughal India,’ in Irfan Habib, ed., *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception*, New Delhi, 1995, pp. 233-258; Also read at the Indian History Congress, Bombay, 1980; Also see Idem, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707*, New Delhi, 2006.
Another descriptive notion of change that was hotly debated by Indian historians was 'Indian feudalism.' Derived from socio-political formations of Western Europe, it sought to explain the emergence of new socio-political formations in medieval times, and changes in economy and society. Among the Indian Marxist historians, DD Kosambi (1956) was the earliest who visualized the rise of Indian feudalism as a twin process, i.e. feudalism from above, and feudalism from below. RS Sharma (1958) tried to trace the origin of Indian feudalism to the proliferation of land grants with administrative rights in the Gupta period. Hermann Kulke (1982) has tried to build a new formulation on feudalism in light of his understanding of integration at the regional level. RN Nandi (1984) pointed out that fief-holders and free-holders in rural society emerged as agents of social change in the later phase of early medieval society. The scope of the debate over the nature and existence of Indian feudalism widened as scholars holding different opinions joined the fray. Besides, the problem of transition from antiquity to middle ages also received adequate attention.


14 RN Nandi, 'Growth of Rural Economy in Early Feudal India,' Presidential Address, Ancient India Section, *PIHC, 45th session* (Annamalai, 1984).

Sociological theories of the caste system also exercised considerable influence on historical writings pertaining to social change and transition in historical periods. Louis Dumont (1970) in his *Homo Hierarchicus* discusses the theoretical and comparative aspects of the notions of hierarchy in the caste system within the framework of purity and pollution. The concept of Sanskritization, postulated by MN Srinivasa (1952) in his pioneering work, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, is a brilliant sociological tool to study the linkage between religion and social structure, and to understand the process of social transition of lower classes through the mechanism of imitation of upper castes' social norms and patterns of behaviour. Such theoretical perspectives on caste structure and social change generated a great deal of interest in social history of early and medieval India, resulting in substantial historical writings on the subject.

Previous work on the Jāts was mainly the byproduct of researches on some other areas of history and any information on the Jāts therein was incidental. Some European scholars, namely James Tod, Denzil Ibbetson and HA Rose provided valuable information of ethnological interest about the Jāts of northern and north-western India.
First exclusive study on the Jāts was *History of the Jāts: Contribution to the History of Northern India* (1925) by Kalika-Ranjan Qanungo.21 Thereafter, Jāt history once again went into a state of limbo with only few exceptions in form of some vernacular attempts on Jāt origins or their accomplishments.22 The major concern of the early scholarship on the Jāts had been centred on the history of Bharatpur, and no meaningful study on social or economic change was attempted during this period. However, from 1960 onwards a new trend was noticed in the writings of MC Pradhan (1966) and Irfan Habib (1970) who gave due importance to the political system and socio-economic changes among the Jāts of northern India.23 Nevertheless, Girish Chandra Dwivedi’s *The Jāts: Their Role in the Mughal Empire* (1989) can be considered as the first scientific study of the Jāts during medieval period.24 The comprehensive study of the origins and antiquities of the Jāts by Hukum Singh Pawar (1993) also needs to be mentioned here.25 Dwelling on the problems of gender and identity, Prem Chowdhry (1994) and Nonica Datta (1999) presented new perspectives on the Jāts of Haryāna during colonial period.26 Recently, some studies pertaining to Jāt migrations, settlements, militarism and their linkages with local agrarian

---

Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province. 3 vols., New Delhi, 1990.

24 Girish Chandra Dwivedi, *The Jats: Their Role in the Mughal Empire*, New Delhi, 1989.
situation during the medieval period have been attempted by S Jabir Raza (2004), Dilbagh Singh (2006), IH Siddiqui (2006) and others.\footnote{S Jabir Raza, ‘The Jatts of Panjab and Sind: Their Settlement and Migrations (c.5th –12th)’ in Vir Singh ed., The Jats: Their Role and Contribution to the Socio-Economic Life and Polity of North and North-West India, vol. i., Delhi, 2004, pp. 54-64; Dilbagh Singh, ‘Migration and Movement: The Role of Jats in Rural Settlements in Rajastan during the Medieval Period’ in Vir Singh ed., The Jats: Their Role and Contribution to the Socio-economic Life and Polity of North and North-West India, vol. ii, Delhi, 2006, pp. 213-220; Idem, The State, Landlords and Peasants: Rajasthan in the 18th Century, New Delhi, 1990; Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui, ‘The Life and Conditions of the Jats in the Region of Sind through the Eighth to the Eleventh Century A.D.’ in Vir Singh ed., The Jats: Their Role and Contribution to the Socio-economic Life and Polity of North and North-West India. vol. ii, Delhi, 2006, pp. 31-36.}

Historical writings on the Meos are very few though some works of anthropological interest do provide a general impression of the life and conditions of this community. Alexander Cunningham’s report of Eastern Rājpūtānā in 1882-83 is an earliest authentic account of the Meos and Khānzdās of Mewāt region.\footnote{Alexander Cunningham, Archaeological Survey of India, vol. xx, Varanasi, 1969.} Among anthropological works, Caste, Religion and Power by Partap C Aggarwal (1971) is of special significance as apart from being a case study of a representative Meo village, it examines various changes in contemporary Meo life.\footnote{Partap C Aggarwal, Caste, Religion and Power – An Indian Case Study, New Delhi, 1971. Also see: Idem, ‘Islamic Revival in Modern India—The Case of the Meos.’ EWP, vol. iv (1969), pp. 1677-81.} Another monograph on the Meos by Shamsuddin Shamsh (1983) throws considerable light on their belief systems and social profile.\footnote{Shams Shamsuddin, Meos of India, Their Customs and Laws, New Delhi, 1983.} The unpublished doctoral thesis of Suraj Bhan Bhardwaj, ‘Socio-economic Conditions in the Mewāt Region, 1650-1750’ (1990) provide a good deal of historical information pertaining to social and economic changes among the Meos.\footnote{Suraj Bhan Bhardwaj, ‘Socio-economic Conditions in the Mewat Region, 1650-1750 AD,’ Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1990; Also see: Idem, ‘Migration, mobility and memories of the Meos in the processes of peasantification and Islamization in Medieval Period,’ (forthcoming), Proceedings of International Association of Historians of Asia. 20th Conference, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2008. pp. 1-44.} Two major anthropological works by Shail Mayaram, Resisting Regimes (1997) and Against
History, Against State (2004) underscores the significance of oral traditions and memories in the retrieval and reconstruction of community study.32

Historical writings on South Indian history had begun long ago during 1930s. Though most of these were mainly conventional historians, yet some of them were exceptional, namely Krishna Swami Aiyangar (1930), KA Nilkanta Sastri (1935-37), A Appadorai (1936), and C Minakshi (1938) who shed valuable light on the social and economic conditions of Pallava, Cola and Vijaynagar periods.33 From 1970 onwards, the writings of Y Subbarayalu (1973), MGS Narayanan (1977), Burton Stein (1980), KR Hall (1980), Noboru Karashima (1984) and R Champakalakshmi (1987)34 marked a new trend in terms of specialization and changes in South Indian society and history. But the turning point in South Indian historiography was the appearance of Burton Stein’s Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India (1980) in which he presented a rather speculative theory of ‘segmentary’ state, wherein political integration of segments as a state is not actual but only ritualistic.35 Borrowed from AW Southall’s Alur Society (1956)36 this theory dispensed with the concept of centralized unitary state supported by

32 Shail Mayaram, Resisting Regimes–Myth, Memory and the shaping of a Muslim Identity, New Delhi, 1997; Idem, Against History, Against State: Counterperspectives from the Margins, New Delhi, 2004; Also see: Idem, ‘Mughal State Formation: The Mewati counter-perspective.’ JESHR, vol. xxxiv, no. 2 (1997), pp. 169–197.
35 Stein, Peasant State, pp. 254-365.
36 AW Southall, Alur Society; Cambridge, 1956.
powerful bureaucracy, and instead visualized Chōla state as a 'segmentary' state, comprising of a number of independent segments, i.e. nāḍus, in which political authority and control was neatly localized. However, the formulations of Burton Stein and the application of 'segmentary state' system to the Chōla period was strongly contested and criticized by South Indian medievalists.37

Quite a few works on social history of South India are pertinent to this study.38 Of particular significance is Noboru Karashima’s study (1984) of different types of landholdings in different villages which is helpful in ascertaining changes in Kāvērī valley.39 Kathleen Gough’s argument (1980) that AMP in Tañjāvūr yielded greater social change than allowed by Marx’s model is quite informative for study of change in Peninsular India.40 Rajan Gurukkal’s formulations (1989) on forms of production and forces of change added to our knowledge on changes in Tamil society.41 Studies on valangai and idānōrai divisions conducted by Arjun Appadurai (1974), KR Hanumanthan (1976), and N Karashima & Y Subbarayalu (1983) helped us to understand the process of social bifurcation of Tamil society.42 Studies on Chittirameli-Periyaradu also provided the

38 See KK Pillay, A Social History of the Tamils, University of Madras, 1975.
basis for interpretation of social transition of the Veḷḷāḷa agriculturists. Until 1980s, scarcely any study had been attempted on community history of South India, and the only work that stands apart in this regard is Vijaya Ramaswamy’s *Textiles and Weavers in Medieval South India* (1985). The choice of Veḷḷāḷa community as one of the case studies owes much to this endeavour. A general idea of the agrarian situation of medieval South India was obtained from the writings of Burton Stein (1980), Rajan Gurukkal (1981), David Ludden (1989), N Karashima & Y Subbarayalu (2007) and many others. Some regional and micro studies on the Koṅgu region undertaken by M Arokiaswami (1956), V Ramamurthy (1986), Brenda EF Beck (1972), and S Gunasekharan (2008) were found useful to draw some linkages between the region and social change among the Koṅgu Veḷḷāḷas.

Initially, the chronological span for this study was the 9th to the 14th century. In light of preliminary studies and projections, the time bracket looked quite appropriate.
particularly for the case study of the Veḷḷāḷas, as it synchronized with the Chōla period. However, with the inclusion of the Jāṭs and the Meos as case studies, the approved time frame appeared to be a little unwieldy and particularly, the upper limit, i.e. 14th century began to lose its validity. To set the case studies within the approved and fixed time span, specified in the title, would have diluted the objective of the present research. During the next few years as we aimed for a comparative study of the three medieval peasant communities, we found that comparable time frame of social dynamics of different communities were different, and therefore, it became imperative to take the study of the Jāṭs and Meos up to the 15th and 16th century. Hence, on account of the genuine difficulty in strictly adhering to the previously approved time frame, and to integrate all the three case studies into a meaningful and comparative discussion, it was decided to maintain two independent historical blocks, i.e. from 9th to 14th century (for Veḷḷāḷas), and from 9th to 16th century (for Jāṭs and Meos). Such a chronological demarcation does justice with the nature of this comparative study of peasant communities over a fairly broad span of historical space and time.

Unlike erudite merchants and townsmen, the pastoral and peasant communities do not record their activities nor do they invoke the interest of the contemporary chroniclers, thus confounding the task of the researchers who are compelled to piece together fragments of notes and references, inadvertently made by some traveler or inquisitive scholar. The main sources of information on case studies are the inscriptions, literary texts and their translations. Relevant material was also derived from official publications, reports, and community traditions wherever found necessary. It may be noted that the
study of individual village communities was fraught with difficulties mainly because evidence is elusive and unevenly distributed in time and space. Nevertheless, information about the Veḷḷāḷas was obtained from the inscriptions of Tamilnādu, but the search for direct social evidence on the Jāṭs and Meos turned out to be a far more stupendous task than initially imagined. The lop-sided nature of our evidence, therefore, remains an integral aspect of this study. Most of the inscriptions used to study the Veḷḷāḷas were published in the Annual Report on (South Indian) Epigraphy and South Indian Inscriptions, and District-wise publications of Department of Archaeology, Chennai. On the other hand, the study of the Jāṭs and Meos is mainly based on the contemporary Persian and Arabic sources, ranging from Chachnāma of 8th century to Āʾīn-i-Akbarī of 16th century. Besides, two nail-headed inscriptions mentioned in Tod’s Annals and Khap Panchayat records of the Jāṭs were also used for the Jāṭs. Some categories of the Rājasthāni sources, such as Arsatās, Arzdashts, Khaitūt-ahlakaran, Dastur-al-amal and Jaggā (genealogical) records were also utilized in the study of the Meos. Most of these records are catalogued at Rājasthān State Archives, Bikaner. In addition, the folk tradition including local ballads and narratives belonging to the three communities under review were also taken into consideration.

The scheme of chapterization attempts to situate the three communities in their respective regions leading to a discussion on the process of change and mobility. The first three chapters trace the origins, historical roots, and notions of identity of the Jāṭs, Meos and Veḷḷāḷas respectively. Chapter 4 takes up the dynamics of change among the Jāṭs from the 9th to 16th century. Chapter 5 deals with the patterns of mobility and change.
among the Meos of Mewat till the end of 16th century. Chapter 6 studies the modes of social mobility of the Veḷḷāḷas from the 9th to the 14th century.

This thesis may, therefore, be seen as an attempt to map mobility and change among peasant communities belonging to distinct spatial zones and cultures. What holds these communities together is their gradual transition from being mere peasantry to becoming powerful landlords in the course of the early medieval to the later medieval period.