

Exploring the Role of Banjaras in the Economy of Amber State

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Abstract: *A wide range of mercantile communities was operative in various spheres related to trade and commerce; dealing in grain, cloth, leather, salt, and groceries. Among these mercantile communities, the relevance of banjaras in the salt trade and transportation system demonstrates their significance in the economy of eighteenth-century Amber State. Banjaras, a class of bulk traders, transported commodities from the market or one place to another and acted as merchants; particularly accompanying the body of troops to supply them with grains. The present paper attempts to explore the trading activities of the banjaras and their role in the state economy. Banjaras, known as a nomadic community who had their bullocks for trading activities, started a business and moved from one place to another in a kâfilâ (caravan).*

Keywords: Banjara, Amber State, Salt trade, Caravan, Transport

The operation of local commerce necessitated effective market organisation whose existence is inconceivable without the presence of mercantile communities. A diverse range of merchant communities operated in various facets of business, dealing in commodities like grain, textiles, leather, salt, and foodstuffs. These merchant communities included *bajâj* (textile merchants), *bichhâyat* (pedlars), *banjara*, *kâcchî* (vegetable merchants), etc. Among these communities, the banjaras assumed an essential part in both rural and urban areas, particularly in the salt trade and transportation system. Banjaras, a class of bulk traders, travelled in large groups i.e. *kâfilâ* (caravan) for safety reasons. They transported a variety of commodities from one place to another while also acting as merchants. The term "banjara" specifically denotes grain and cattle traders who travel to different markets and often accompany troops to supply them with grain.¹

What was the impact of banjaras on the economy of eighteenth-century Amber State later known as Jaipur State? Primarily based on the archival sources preserved in the Jaipur Records Section such as *arzdâshts* (petition), *khatût ahalkaran* (official correspondence), *Dastûr Komwâr* (caste and community wise records of honours and gifts), and *kharâtâ* (royal letter), the

present paper aims to examine the significance of banjaras in state's economy, focussing on their role in transportation and agrarian commerce. In addition to archival sources, travelogues are used to supplement the information regarding banjaras.

The name banjara derives from the Sanskrit word *vanij* or *vanijyaka*, which means "a merchant."² According to H. M. Elliot, the name banjara dates back to ancient times and is mentioned in Dandi's *Dasa Kumâra Charita*. However, this viewpoint was refuted by Cowell, who later established that the term banjara did not appear in the original text of this work.³ The name Banjara was first recorded in 1504 during Sikandar Lodi's attack on Dholpur.⁴

Banjaras, a nomadic community, served as carriers for commodities. They had their bullocks for transportation and moved from place to place in a *kâfilâ* (caravan);⁵ led by a headman variously termed as a *muqaddam*⁶ and *nâyak*.⁷ The Mughal Emperor Jahangir mentioned in his memoirs that the banjaras possessed around a thousand oxen. They frequently accompanied troops and took responsibility for transporting grain from the countryside to the towns.⁸

European traveller Peter Mundy noticed that although banjaras were hired by merchants, they often acted as merchants themselves. They travelled from one place to another along with their family members.⁹ On August 23, 1632, Peter Mundy met a *tândâ*¹⁰ or camp, of banjaras accompanied by 14,000 oxen laden with grain including wheat and rice.

...Theis Banjares carrie all their howsehold alonge with them, as wives and children, one Tanda consisting of many families. Their course of life is somewhat like to Carriers, continually driveinge from place to place. Their Oxen are their owne. They are sometymes hired by Marchants, but most commonly they are the Marchants themselves, buyinge of graine where it is Cheape to be had, and carryeinge it to places where it is dearer, and from thence againe relade themselves with any thinge that will yeild benefitt in other places, as Salt, Sugar, Butter, etts. There may bee in such a Tanda 6 or 700 persons, men, weomen and Children. There Men are very lustie, there weomen hardie, whoe in occasion of fight, lay about them like men. Theis people goe dispersedly, driving their Laden Oxen before them, their Journey not above 6 or 7 miles a daye att most, and that in the Coole. When they have unladen their Oxen, they turne them a graizeinge, heere being ground enough, and noe man to forbidd them.¹¹

On August 25, 1632, just two days later, he met another *tândâ*. This time consisting of 20,000 oxen carrying sugar.

This morninge wee past by another Tanda of Oxen, in number 20,000 (as themselves said), laden with Sugar, of which there could not bee lesse then 50,000 English hundred weight, att 2 ½

cwt. to each Oxe. The Goods lay piled on heapes, by reason of Rayne, covered with great redd palles (*pâl*, a low tent), of the which in my Judgment, there could not bee lesse then 150, which resembled a reasonable Laskarr or Campe. They were bringinge their Oxen together to Lade and away, whoe lay grazeinge all over the plaine by the river side, by which wee also went this day. By reason of some broken ground in this our waie, wee went a litle about...¹²

Likewise, Tavernier, a French merchant and traveller, mentioned a caravan of 10,000 or 12,000 oxen transporting commodities such as corn, rice and salt. He further noted that it was so inconvenient for the travellers when they met the caravan on narrow roads. Sometimes they had to wait for two or three days to cross the road until the caravan had passed.¹³

Apart from travelogues, archival sources offer valuable insights into the trade activities of the Banjaras. In Amber State, *arzdâshts* suggest that they were primarily engaged in the salt trade,¹⁴ while *kharîtâ* indicate that they were also involved in transporting *rasad* (stored grain).¹⁵

Banjaras and salt trade

Arzdâshts provide useful information on the banjaras' contribution to the salt trade. Sambhar was the primary source of salt in Rajasthan. Salt, mainly procured from the Sambhar Lake, was transported to other places for sale. We have evidence of the state's instructions to the banjaras regarding the collection and transportation of salt.¹⁶ *Arhsattâ râhdâri*, another archival source, mentioned Nayak Santokhi Banjara was carrying 2603 oxen laden with salt for sale from Sambhar to Jhansi.¹⁷ In addition to this evidence, Nayak Sambhu, Manji and Bakhta were accompanied by 1860 oxen loaded with salt from Sambhar to Kota.¹⁸ However, problems occurred due to thefts, robberies, and clashes which led banjaras to migrate to their places.

Nanhu Ram, an official, informed Raja Sawai Jai Singh about the devastated condition of *qasbâ* Didwana and assurance given to the residents of the *qasbâ* for the resettlement. Due to turbulences caused by *muhsidis* (miscreants), banjaras, including other business communities such as *sâhûkârs* (moneylenders) and *vyopâris* (traders), vacated the area. As a result, the state faced a reduction in revenue collection from the *bichotî*¹⁹ of salt. Officials were asked to make arrangements for increasing profit from the *bichotî* of salt.²⁰ Later, officials planned to find the banjaras²¹ and requested Raja to provide safety to the banjaras to ensure the smooth conduct of trade activities in the region.²²

Problems occurred when new salt in Sambhar was not being produced, which led merchants to return to their respective areas.²³ A shortage of salt was recorded in an *arzdâsht* where Nainsukh, an official, reported to Raja Sawai Jai Singh that many banjaras were carrying salt from Sanganer and Phagui for the *tankhwâdârs* (salaried). So, he requested Raja to issue a

parwânâ (a letter from a man in power to a dependant, an order), directing it to the *âmils* of the *parganâ* Mauzabad, Sanganer, and Phagui, regarding not allowing banjaras to carry salt due to the shortage.²⁴ However, officials always encouraged merchants whenever there was sufficient salt.²⁵

The state levied different types of taxes on trading activities and it has been pointed out that *râhdâri* (toll tax) was an important source of income for the state. However, *arzdâshts* do not indicate that banjaras were exempted from *hâsil râhdâri* (toll tax). *Parganâ* officials collected *hâsil râhdâri* based on the *dastûr* (customary revenue rate),²⁶ and the tax collected from banjaras was either sent to *hazûri* or distributed among the *tankhwâdârs*.²⁷

Ensuring the smooth conduct of business activities and the safety of banjaras while travelling were major concerns for the state. *Bhomiâs* (a local term for landlords) not only exacted a tax termed as *korî-bhomî-kî*, using coercive methods for the collection, from the banjaras and traders but also oppressed them while passing through the areas under their control.²⁸

In addition to illegal extortions, the banjaras were annoyed by disruptions during their trade activities, leading them to migrate to their places. *Arzdâsht* revealed that officials made efforts to persuade the banjaras to continue their trade activities.²⁹ *Arzdâsht* further suggests that an inquiry was set up to investigate the miscreant activities and arrangements were also made to resolve the issues. For instance, an official named Ramchand apprised Raja Ram Singh about the dispute with banjaras at *qasbâ* Bahatri and action taken to address the situation.³⁰

The state had the challenge of ensuring the smooth operation of trade and commerce if unlawful activities like thefts, disputes, clashes, and robberies disrupted the flow of revenue.³¹ Due to such miscreant activities committed on the roads, banjaras stopped their trade activities. For instance, *arzdâsht* highlighted the banjaras' resistance due to the fear of Hidayatullah, the *faujdâr* of *parganâ* Serpur, who had settled a *chawkî* (outpost) on the way and extorted illegal demands from the merchants. This situation not only impeded trading activities but also affected the revenue collection.³² A *parganâ* official (Nainsukh) requested Raja to send a *parwânâ* through the *diwân* Ram Chand, followed by another *parwânâ* through the *faujdâr* of Baswa to encourage the banjaras for their business activities.³³

A study of *arzdâshts* and *khatût ahalkaran* reveals that banjaras were often victimized. The incidents were reported near *qasbâ* Sambhar³⁴ and Bahatri.³⁵ Moreover, evidence from the *arzdâsht* indicates the murder of Bhimsen Banjara, a resident of *mauza* Kalwada. The writer of the *arzdâsht* further stated that Banjaras filed a complaint in court to seek justice for his (Bhimsen Banjara) murder. Anwar Beg, a *gurazbardâr* (mace carrier), intervened in the matter and held a meeting with the banjaras. Finally, the banjaras secured a *muchalkâ* (bond, promise) of *râzînâmâ* (deed of agreement) sealed by the *qâzî* (judge).³⁶

Roadside turbulences impacted several *parganas* including Dausa, Amber, Mauzabad, Phagui, and Sanganer. In response, the state instructed

âmil and *faujdâr* to maintain peace and security and extend encouragement to the banjaras.³⁷ To encourage banjaras for their contribution, the state honoured them with *siropâo* (robe of honour), clothes, and *muhr* (gold coin). *Dastûr Komwâr* documents suggest that banjaras namely Motiram Godani Nayak received a *siropâo* worth Rs. 20 *ânnâ* 2 on dated *Mângsir Sudi* 1, Vikram Samvat (V.S.) 1813. He again honoured by the state with a *siropâo* worth of Rs. 33 *ânnâ* 8 on dated *Chaitr Sudi* 9, V.S. 1819;³⁸ other banjaras like Moti Nayak,³⁹ Mohanmoti Nayak,⁴⁰ Lalji Mahtabat,⁴¹ and Sahajram⁴² were suitably gifted and honoured with *siropâo*, *thirmâ pashmînâ bûtâdâr* (Woolen cloth with floral motifs) and *muhr* (gold coin).

The present study highlights the crucial role played by the banjaras in the state economy, particularly their indispensable contribution to transporting goods and salt trade. Their business activities significantly boosted the state's revenue collection, thus cementing their position as an integral part of the state economy. However, their business activities were always not without challenges and were often disrupted due to miscreant activities and turbulences on their trading routes. These incidents not only frustrated and discouraged the banjaras from carrying out trade activities but also affected the state's revenue flow. To counter these challenges, the state adopted measures and instructed *parganâ* officials to provide safety and protection for the banjaras to ensure that they could carry out their trade activities in a safe and secure environment. In addition, the state honoured them with robes of honour, gifts and gold coins. Through such arrangements, the state acknowledged the significance of banjaras in the state's economy and exhibited its commitment to protect their essential economic contributions.

Notes and References (End Notes)

- 1 H.H. Wilson, *A Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms*, ed. A.C. Ganguli and N.D. Basu (Calcutta: Eastern Law House, 1940), 93. It is particularly relevant to the many tribes that are dispersed from Haridwar and Gorakhpur along the foot of the mountains, establishing different subdivisions, the majority of which are stationary and engage in agriculture. Banjaras, who recognize a shared ancestry and affinity, include both Muslims and Hindus.
- 2 Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and philologically arranged with special reference to cognate Indo-European languages* (1899; repr., New Delhi: Manohar, 2006), p. 939; see also, Wilson, *A Glossary*, p. 93
- 3 H.M. Elliot, *Memoirs on the History, Folk-lore, and Distribution of the Races of the North Western Provinces of India*, ed. J. Beames (London: Trubner & Co., 1869), I: p. 52; William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (1896: repr., New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1999), I: pp. 149-50; R.V. Russell and R.B. Hira Lal, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1916), II: p. 163.
- 4 H.M. Elliot and John Dowson, *The History of India, as told by its own Historians*

- (London: Trubner and Co., 1873), V: 100; Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes*, I: pp. 150-1; Russell and Hira Lal, *The Tribes and Castes*, II: p. 163.
- 5 Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes*, I: p. 149; see also, K.S. Singh, ed., *People of India: Rajasthan* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1998), 38: pp. 95-98.
 - 6 Irfan Habib, "Merchants Communities in Precolonial India." in *The Rise of Merchant Empires: Long Distance Trade in the Early Modern World 1350-1750*, ed. James D. Tracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 374.
 - 7 Elliot, *Memoirs on the History*, I: p. 56; Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes*, I: pp. 149-51; Russell and Hira Lal, *The Tribes and Castes*, II: pp. 168-79, 188.
 - 8 *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, ed. Syed Ahmad (Ghazipur and Aligarh, 1863-4), p. 345. Cf. Habib, "Merchants Communities," p. 374.
 - 9 *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia 1608- 1667*, ed. Richard Carnac Temple (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1914), II: pp. 95-6.
 - 10 A *tândâ* is a large caravan of laden bullocks. Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes*, I: p. 159.
 - 11 *The Travels of Peter Mundy*, II: pp. 95-6.
 - 12 *Ibid.*, II: p. 98.
 - 13 Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, trns. V. Ball, ed. William Crooke (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), I: pp. 32-3.
 - 14 *Arzdâsht Kârtik Sudi 1*, Vikram Samvat (hereinafter V.S.) 1766/A.D. 1709, Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner (hereinafter R.S.A.B.); *Arzdâsht Mângsir Sudi 2*, V.S. 1766/A.D. 1709. R.S.A.B.
 - 15 *Kharrâtâ* Karauli-Jaipur, dated *Âsoj Vadi 7*, V.S. 1774/A.D. 1717. R.S.A.B.
 - 16 *Arzdâsht* dated *Sâwan Sudi 7*, V.S. 1707/A.D. 1650, R.S.A.B.
 - 17 *Arhsattâ Râhdâri* dated *Âsoj Sudi 14*, V.S. 1820/A.D. 1763. R.S.A.B. Cited in, B.L. Gupta, *Trade and Commerce in Rajasthan during the 18th Century* (Jaipur: Jaipur Publishing House, 1987), p. 33.
 - 18 *Ibid.*
 - 19 *Bichotî* is the collection of something as payment of revenue put on sale. See, S.P. Gupta, *The Agrarian System of Eastern Rajasthan (c. 1650- c.1750)*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1986), p. 93.
 - 20 *Arzdâsht* dated *Mâgh Amâvasya*, V.S. 1765/AD 1708. R.S.A.B.
 - 21 *Arzdâsht* dated *Mâgh Vadi 9*, V.S. 1765/AD 1708. R.S.A.B.
 - 22 *Arzdâsht* dated *Mângsir Vadi 12*, V.S. 1766/AD 1709. R.S.A.B.
 - 23 *Arzdâsht* dated *Kârtik Vadi 9*, V.S. 1766/AD 1709. R.S.A.B.
 - 24 *Arzdâsht* dated *Kârtik Sudi 1*, V.S. 1766/AD 1709. R.S.A.B.
 - 25 *Arzdâsht* dated *Mângsir Vadi 7*, V.S. 1766/AD 1709. R.S.A.B.
 - 26 *Arzdâsht* dated *Chaitr Sudi 2*, V.S. 1767/AD 1710. R.S.A.B.
 - 27 *Arzdâsht* dated *Paush Vadi 7*, V.S. 1766/AD 1709. R.S.A.B.
 - 28 *Chitthî* to the *âmil* of *parganâ* Niwai dated *Baishâkh Sudi 8*, V.S. 1794/A.D. 1737. R.S.A.B.
 - 29 *Arzdâsht Mâgh Vadi 9*, V.S. 1765/AD 1708. R.S.A.B.

- 30 *Arzdâsht Chaitr Sudi 8*, V.S. 1742/AD 1685. R.S.A.B.; *Arzdâsht Mâgh Vadi 5*, V.S. 1701/AD 1645. R.S.A.B.
- 31 *Arzdâsht* dated *Bhâdwa Vadi 5*, V.S. 1742/AD 1685. R.S.A.B; *Arzdâsht* dated *Mâgh Sudi 2*, V.S. 1766/AD 1709. R.S.A.B.
- 32 *Arzdâsht* dated *Mâgh Sudi 2*, V.S. 1766/AD 1709. R.S.A.B.
- 33 *Arzdâsht* dated *Mângsir Sudi 15*, V.S. 1766/AD 1709. R.S.A.B.
- 34 *Khatût Ahalkaran Jyeshth Sudi 13*, V.S. 1751/A.D. 1694. R.S.A.B.
- 35 *Arzdâsht* dated *Chaitr Sudi 8*, V.S. 1742/AD 1685. R.S.A.B.
- 36 *Arzdâsht* dated *Paush Sudi 5*, V.S. 1756/AD 1699. R.S.A.B.
- 37 *Arzdâsht* dated *Mângsir Vadi 12*, V.S. 1766/AD 1709. R.S.A.B.; *Arzdâsht* dated *Mângsir Sudi 15*, V.S. 1766/AD 1709. R.S.A.B.
- 38 *Dastûr Komwâr*, Bundle No. 23, f. 619. R.S.A.B.
- 39 *Dastûr Komwâr*, Bundle No. 23, f. 620-1. R.S.A.B.
- 40 *Dastûr Komwâr*, Bundle No. 23, f. 621. R.S.A.B.
- 41 *Dastûr Komwâr*, Bundle No. 23, f. 682. R.S.A.B.
- 42 *Dastûr Komwâr*, Bundle No. 23, f. 687. R.S.A.B.