



# A Research Review of the Middle Class in the Context of the Mediaeval Indian Economy

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## Abstract

Social stratification gained significant momentum in mediaeval India by the 15th century. However, its origins can be identified in history. From the eighth to the eighteenth century CE, India experienced a period of profound cultural and social transformation. A fundamental aspect of Indian culture at the time, the caste system played a crucial role in establishing social and economic connections. In mediaeval India, the caste system functioned as a social stratification mechanism. Groups are created under the caste system according to birth or occupation. Indian civilization is divided into four varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Collectively, they constitute the caste system. The Dalits, who were positioned below the Shudras and were occasionally labelled the "untouchables," encountered prejudice and social exclusion on account of their perceived lack of affiliation with the caste system. The mediaeval period witnessed the implementation of jatis, which were sub-castes distinguished by geographical and occupational factors; these divisions served to reinforce the caste system. The Jatis maintained their social and cultural identity through rituals, marriage, and other social practices; they were endogamous communities.

**Keywords:** Jati, Jat, Middle Class, Mansabdar, Iqtidar, Qazi, Brahman, Sawar, Zat, Jabit.

## Content

The issue of "uprisings of the middle class" has received little consideration from historians. According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith, there was a lower-class rebellion in Mughal India. However, this research has shown that the insurrection was mostly organised by the middle-class, rather than the lower-class. The provided cases pertain to the middle class, aligning with the criteria outlined by the historians referenced in this study. Villagers cannot be exclusively characterised as peasants or living in poverty. The Rawshani Movement includes notable individuals such as Khusraw, Qtub, Subhan Quli, zamindar of Kishtwar, Jats of Mathura (located in present-day Uttar Pradesh), Satnamis of Narnaul, and Pathans. The Mahrattas and the Sikh revolt mostly consisted of local zamindars or rural individuals with significant influence. Finally, the current research aims to investigate the existence of a "middle class" in Mughal India. It may be reasonably inferred that there were distinct social groupings in both rural and urban regions that comprised a "middle class," but not in a contemporary context.

The investigation of the "middle class" in India during the Mughal era has been largely overlooked by scholars in the past. Conversely, several historians have conducted concise but commendable research on the presence of the middle class in Mughal India. Lewis and Maude assert that the notion of a 'middle-class' originated in 14th-century England. This arose as a result of the emergence of a trading community, which gained control over certain areas of commerce and progressively formed alliances and clubs. The former regime was represented by an urban-based class. The previous system included of fiefs and ranks of personal service. The emergence of the middle classes included a diverse range of persons, extending beyond merchants to include professions such as attorneys, surgeons, printers, master-artisans, and others. These individuals, as distinct entities, seemed to possess a sense of autonomy from the feudal nobles.

Regarding India, the prevailing viewpoint among historians is that the emergence of the middle class occurred only in contemporary India and is solely a recent occurrence. Hence, it may be argued that the middle class in Mughal India is a product of colonialism, since it has been refuted by several contemporary researchers. The absence of an intermediate state in Delhi may be attributed mostly to a comment made by Francois Bernier, a French explorer who arrived in India in the seventeenth century. A guy must possess either a position of great social status or endure a life of extreme hardship. This assertion has sparked fervent debate among scholars in the field of history. Several contemporary historians, including Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Iqtidar Alam Khan, Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, Irfan Habib, Satish Chandra, Tapan Raychaudhuri, J.N. Sarkar, and others, thoroughly examined the Francis Bernier assertion. The researchers in question have identified a significant presence of medium-income groups. According to S. W.C. Smith, the middle class in the Mughal a was comprised of merchants and other officials who owned small-scale land. According to Iqtidar Alam Khan, a significant number of groups in Mughal India may be classified as belonging to the middle class. a. Irfan Habib also emphasised the need of considering the size and socio-economic status of professional classes, as well as the wide market they served, which included doctors, teachers, vairs, mulla, mutatabb, and others. Nevertheless, these historians exhibit little attention towards the middle class. With the exception of Rezavi and I.A. Khan, the majority of historians have only briefly mentioned the middle class. The social, economic, and intellectual aspects of the middle class were disregarded by both Rezavi and I.A. Khan.

This research encompasses an analysis of many classifications of the middle class in Mughal India. Firstly, it is possible to classify lower-category mansabdars as belonging to the middle class. The present argument is grounded on the classification of mansabdars as proposed by Abul Fazl, Khwaja Nizamuddin Ahmad, Abdul Hamid Lahori, Manucci, and Bernier. The study of the middle class in mediaeval India is also classified by contemporary historians such as Ali Nadeem Rezavi, M. Athar Ali, W.H. Moreland, J. F. Richards, Abraham Early, and M.A. Nayeem. This research has classified manasbdars with less than 500 zat mansab as middle-class manasbdars. The aforementioned group exhibited enhanced upward and downward mobility. The case of Shaikh Farid Bhakkari serves as an illustrative example. He held the position of a provincial-level official. In addition, he provided service to several aristocrats in various roles. Under Akabr, he was employed by the imperial administration. Akbar bestowed upon him a modest mansab, which he declined. Subsequently, he was designated as the successor, or naib, to Abul Fath Dakkhani. Shortly after, he resigned from his position and assumed the role of diwan at Suba Bir in Deccan. Once again, he departed from his previous position and

assumed the role of diwan of Suba in Gujarat. In 1605, Shaikh Farid Bhakkari relocated to the Deccan region once again. He held the position of faujdar of Lucknow in the years 1606-7. He enlisted in the military under the command of Khan-i Dauran Khwaja Sabir Ali Nasri Khan, the subadar of Deccan, during the period of 1608–9. He promptly appointed him as a revenue assessor for 32 parganas in Bijagarh to oversee tax collection. In 1614, the individual in question became a member of the imperial service, whereby Jahangir designated him as the diwan of the Jagir of Nurjahan Begum. He stayed here for an extended duration, namely fourteen years. In 1628, he was designated as Bakshi-ikul (paymaster general) in the service of Khan Jahan Lodi. Once again, he transitioned to the administrative role of Mahabat Khan. The original mansab of 100 zat/30 sawar was granted by Mahabt Khan, and subsequently increased to 300 zat/100 sawar. He held many positions under Mahabt Khan, including diwan, bakshi, amin, and waqi'anawis (news reporter). He maintained his positions till the year 1642. He enlisted in the military under the command of Sarandaz Khan Qalmaq, who held the position of jagirdar in Dalmau. He served as the wakil-imutlaq al-in'na, which means he had complete power as an agent for this nobility. He did not get a mansab at this location. As compensation for his efforts, he was remunerated with a monthly wage of 1000 rupees, without any deductions. In addition, he was remunerated with 2 rupees per day for sustenance. Subsequently, he was bestowed with a mansab of amounting to 100 zat or 30 sawar. He was appointed as the amin and waqi'anawais in the year 1649.

The scribes constituted an additional cohort that belonged to the middle-class stratum. The Mughal Empire diligently preserved comprehensive records pertaining to accounting, revenue, audits, and other related matters. These records were maintained by skilled individuals, sometimes referred to as scribes. They acquired their expertise via formalised education and provided their skills to the customer in exchange for compensation. These groups had higher levels of mobility. There are notable individuals such as Chandra Bhan Brahman, Harkaran Das, Kamboh, Udai Raj, Sheikh Abdus Salam, and Paramanada Sen, among others.

The middle class gave rise to a third category known as "learned groups." According to Rajat Kant Ray, the qazis and adhyapaks emerged as the most knowledgeable factions inside the Mughal India. Consequently, they were highly esteemed. These organisations also include astrologers, pandits, gurus, mullas, doctors, and medical practitioners. The third group that fell inside this category consisted of zamindars belonging to the lower category and principal zamindars. Nurul Hasan emphasised the presence of a multifaceted stratum of rural middling entities, referred to as 'primary' and 'intermediary' zamindars, as opposed to a straightforward dichotomy between an incubus state and a destitute peasants. Nurul Hasan characterised the main zamindars as being positioned between the superior zamindars and the state. Nevertheless, there exists evidence indicating that the principal zamindars consistently faced challenges in their efforts to enhance their position and social standing. In an attempt to identify the lower-class zamindars, he employs the following methodology: During the seventeenth century, during the rule of Aurangzeb, the chieftains of Maharashtra, Bundelkhand, Mewat, and Rajputana joined forces against the Mughal Empire. They received assistance from the lower classes of the zamindars in their fight.

The fourth category under consideration consisted of the underprivileged zamindars. The zamindars may be classified into two main categories: primary and secondary. The aforementioned categories are categorised by Nurul Hasan. The subsequent group to enter the middle class consisted of affluent peasants. Prominent

historians like as Satish Chandra, Irfan Habib, B.R. Grover, A.I. Chicherov, S.P. Gupta, and Dilbagh Singh have contributed to the scholarly literature on the khud-kasht peasants, a group of affluent individuals. Satish Chandra has identified khud-kasht peasants as resident farmers based on Rajasthani, Marathi, and early British documentation. In addition, they had land, livestock, and various methods of farming. The cultivators may be classified into two primary categories: khud-kasht and pahi-kasht. The terms used in Maharashtra to denote these two classifications were thalwahik, also known as mirasi, and upari, gutkuli, or kulwari. In the region of Rajasthan, many terms were used, like gaveti, gharuhala, and pahi. Khud-Kasht refers to the practice of peasants engaging in farming themselves, using family labour. They had their own territory. The rural nobility, as described by Dilbagh Singh, consisted of gaveti, whilst the farmers originating from outside the hamlet were referred to as pahi. The gavetis were then categorised into two distinct groups: riyayatis, who were concessionaries, and raiyatis, who were common farmers. The riyayatis were individuals who had a position of privilege within the village community, whilst the raiyatis were those who held a less privileged position within the village society. The raiyatis were sometimes referred to as paltis. According to Dilbagh Singh, these paltis were associated with the middle and lower social strata. Jat, Mali, Ahir, Gujar, Meena, and others were part of the paltis.

The subsequent classifications consisted of the village and revenue officers, as well as low-income groups employed as administrative officials. They are classified as middle-class. The Ain-i Akbari delineates the responsibilities of village authorities, revenue officials, and revenue administration officials as the only document of its kind. According to Ain-i Akbari, some officers are designated as aml-guzar/amil, which refers to the collector of revenue. These officials include karkun (clerk), muqaddam (head village revenue officer), patwari (land steward), bitikchi (writer), munsif (the superintendent), zabit (land surveyor), thanadar (police officer), and khazanadar (treasurer). The document known as Mirat-i Ahmadi has significant importance since it provides insights into the financial status of lower-class officials. Both English documentation and accounts from tourists provide insights into the lower-class officials. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the significance of these records in understanding the middle class. It seems that the majority of individuals in this class were crooked. They achieved higher social status by engaging in corrupt practices.

A subset of the middle class consists of individuals who are affiliated with non-official organisations. In this context, the term "non-official" refers to individuals or entities that lack direct affiliation with the state or are not affiliated with the state itself. These individuals or entities are classified as non-official groupings. The individuals included under this category consist of traders, merchants, sarraf, mahajans, guilds, Nagarseth, brokers, private doctors, independent artists, and so on. These social and economic categories exhibited significant levels of mobility. They often engaged in acts of corruption.

Additionally, women were granted property rights pertaining to land and several other types of wealth. Various documents, including as nikahnamas (marriage contracts), bainama (sale deeds), and paperwork pertaining to properties owned by women, provide valuable information on their ownership. The aforementioned materials provide evidence indicating that women possess a heightened awareness of their legal entitlements. There is a significant number of farmers that support religious women instructors, indicating the high level of respect, wealth, and influence that these women possess. While marriages within the Muslim community are legally

binding, it was middle-class women who voiced their apprehensions with the prejudiced customs and presented their complaints to the qazis.

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