

# RISE OF LOCAL POWER: THE JATS IN THE SUBAH OF DELHI (1707-1757)

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**Abstract:** The period following the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 marked a critical transition in the Indian subcontinent, witnessing the decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of regional powers. Among these, the Jats emerged as a significant force in northern India, particularly between Delhi and Agra. Originally an agrarian community, the Jats evolved into powerful political actors through strategic mobilization, opportunistic raids, and military consolidation. Under leaders like Gokula, Churaman, Badan Singh, and Surajmal, they challenged imperial authority, established autonomous centers of power such as Bharatpur and Ballabgarh, and capitalized on the weakening Mughal administration. This paper examines the rise of the Jats in the context of political fragmentation, with a focus on their conflicts with Mughal officers, their alliances with Marathas and local rulers, and their gradual transformation from plunderers to state-builders. It also highlights the localized resistance and assertion of power in regions such as Faridabad and Ballabgarh, demonstrating how subaltern groups leveraged imperial decay to reshape the political landscape of northern India.

**Keywords:** Aurangzeb's death, Mughal decline, Jat uprising, Bharatpur, Ballabgarh, Surajmal, Badan Singh, Safdar Jang, regional powers, Delhi Subah, political fragmentation, 18th-century India, highway raids, Maratha alliance, imperial decay.

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## 1.0 Introduction

The death of Aurangzeb in 1707 marked the onset of the Mughal Empire's decline, characterized by internal conflicts and the ascent of regional powers. Amid this fragmentation, the Jats—originally an agricultural community located between Delhi and Agra—emerged as a formidable force. During the first half of the 18th century (1707–1757), they actively challenged Mughal authority. Under the leadership of prominent figures such as Gokula, Churaman, and Suraj Mal, the Jats skillfully navigated the era's political instability, leveraging the weakening of central control to consolidate power. Their strategic mobilization and military organization eventually led to the founding of the Jat kingdom of Bharatpur, which played a significant role in reshaping the political dynamics of northern India. Delhi Subah comprised almost the entire territory of present day Haryana. In addition to this, some territory of the Uttar Pradesh, i.e., Saharanpur, Badaon, Bulandshahar, Moradabad, Bareilly, Bijnore etc., and that of Punjab Sarhind, Patiala, Ludhiana, etc., also fell under this subah. The Subah was subdivided into eight sarkars, i.e., Delhi, Badaun, Kumaon, Sambhal, Saharanpur, Rewari, Hissar and Sarhind. "These were subdivided into 232 parganas" Fazl (111-113).

"Apart from the other developments, the period of chaos and confusions marked the rise of some local powers" (Sarkar 26) i.e., Rewari and Ballabgarh. Ballabgarh came into prominence after the death of Aurangzeb. Inhabitedly mostly by Jats, it was then ruled by Gopal Singh, a local chief, settled in sihi a village three miles north of Ballabgarh, became wealth and powerful by highway robbery on Mathura Delhi road in 1705. He allied himself with the Gujjars of Tiajaon, eight mile east of Ballabgarh and with their help killed the rajput chauthary of neighbouring villages. "The emperor Farukhsiar was unable to check Gopal Singh recognized him, so Murtaza Khan, the local Mughal officer of Faridabad instead of punishing him, made peace and appointed him as a Chauthary of Faridabad pargana entitled to a cess of one anna in the rupee on the revenue in 1710"

(Qanungo 45). His successor, Charan Das, a man of independent disposition, refused to pay the tax and to submit to the authority. Consequently, he was arrested and imprisoned by Murtza Khan. Charan Das's successor, Ballabha Singh, popularly known as Ballu, who was a wise ruler and with the help of Bharatpur ruler succeeded in effecting the release of his father. By his ability, Ballabha Singh, soon became the master of entire territory, between Delhi and Faridabad. "And then built a fort of Ballabhgarh to serve his headquarter" (Qanungo 46).

The Jats took to predatory raids in the villages and small towns. "Jat villages headman Raja Ram, Bhazza and Churaman led predatory of their clansmen to robe the royal highway from Delhi to the South" (Sarkar 305). Sanjar Khan and Shamshir Khan, who were engaged in protecting the high roads, used to escort the carvans (Qafilas) from Hodal, their own boundary to Faridabad and Palwal. A carvan of merchants with 1600 carts laden with boiled and clarified butter and other articles were looted by Mewatis and there after Jats and robbers plundered the carvan and took the carts alongwith merchandise into one of the neighbouring villages and divided the spoils among themselves. Goods and property worth twenty lacs rupees were plundered in this venture.

Up to the middle of the eighteenth century the Jats in the vicinity Agra and Mathura region had not emerged as a well defined political system. No Jat state, no politically united Jat nation, no Jat king above the village headman was recognized as the first among the equals. They were robber leaders however; the repeated success of the leading zamindars of the area had began to attract to their banners many of their peers in social status as partners in their adventures and plunders. "In November 1720 in a battle which was fought between Sayyid Abdullah and Muhammad Shah in the neighbourhood of Hodal, Churaman with other Jats companions attacked on the emperor's camp and carried many oxen and horses" (Qanungo 46-47). "The small beginning of this tribal organization and foundation as an emerging power, was severely, destroyed in 1721 by Sawai Jai Singh. Hence, the work of Raja Ram and Churaman, the early Jat leaders, left no trace behind them and their success had to begin from the very foundation" (Sarkar 305). From a zamindar, Badan Singh became shortly a petty raja, strong enough to be obeyed at home and feared abroad. During administrative disorders, caused by the Sayyid brothers in the usurpation of power at Delhi, the Jats continued their predatory raids and rebellion in a more intense form than before. Because Badan Singh was powerful, his band more numerous, more hardy, more sustained, doing more wide spread and irremediable harm than the Jats under Churaman or Rajaram, Besides a large force of infantry, whom he had engaged little by little, Badan Singh employed a considerable corps of cavalry also. "He used this cavalry in plundering the adjoining areas, the royal roads to Delhi and the environs of Agra, the remainder in extending the territory under his control. In proportion to the gained the territory he also increased his army" (Sarkar 308). Jai Singh's officials entrusted to the Jat chiefs, the patrolling of the royal highway leading to Agra, Delhi, Jaipur, etc. They also put the collection of transit duties on Jats, in the hope of turning them back from rapine. "But the Jats, in bands of two or three hundred men each armed with swords and musket, contributed their occasional predatory raids" (Sarkar 309).

"The invasion of Nadir Shah led to a sudden and vast expansion of the Jat power and dominions" (Sarkar 309). Unlike their parallel case of the Sikhs in the Punjab, the Jats expansion was made easier and more rapid by the fact of their being always on the side of the emperor and his ministers, also sharing in their campaigns. Hence their territorial gains were legalized by Delhi Government. Hemmed in by difficult neighbours on all sides, it was a tough job for the Jats to preserve their independence. "Surajmal, however was clever enough to steer clearly of all these tangles" (Gupta 44). During his father's lifetime Surajmal had participated in some important campaign and came in contact with the neighbouring powers. "He assisted Sawai Ishwari Singh, against Malaharrao Holkar at the battle of Bagru, 18 miles south west of Jaipur in 1748" (Qanungo 39). "After that Surajmal was enlisted by the Mughal Wazir Safdar Jang, to assist him in suppressing the rebellious Bangash Afghans of Farukhabad and their Rohilla allies beyond the Ganga. Wazir then induced the emperor to accept Badan Singh as a Raja and Surajmal a Kumar Bahadur" (Sarkar 312).

Among the numerous followers of Surajmal, Balram Jat came to prominence in the fifties of the eighteenth century in the territory of Delhi Subah. Ballu was a son of a petty revenue collector of Faridabad, 26 Kilometers south of Delhi supported by his family connection with Badan Singh, the Jat raja of Bharatpur. He seized a large number of villages in the close proximity of the capital. Wazir wrote repeatedly to Surajmal and Balram to give up the pargana of Faridabad but they put off with false pretences and evasive replies. In the meantime Ballu expelled the imperial out post at Samsapur in 1748. So wazir Safdar Jang took the field against them in January 1749 and captured Faridabad. Surajmal prepared to back the jats of Sihi with all their resources and putting of the forts of Deeg and Kumbher in a state of defence and marched against Wazir in June 1749. Fortune befriended Surajmal, the wazir on receiving the news on the Rohilla rebellion in the neighbourhood of Subah Awadh, had to

put off the settlement of his score with the jats, returned to Delhi. Wazir Safdar Jang sent an army against the jats and himself got ready, advanced as far as Khizrabad. About this time the news of a great disaster and defeat of his deputy Nawal rai at the hands of Ahmad Khan Bangush, induced the wazir to make up his engagements with Surajmal. "A compromise was affected through the mediation of Babu Mahadev Hingne" (Gupta 145). Ballu Jat won over the Maratha wakil and Safdar Jang. Raja Surajmal joined the wazir in an expedition at Pathri in Bangush territory against Ahmad Khan Bangush and the Rohillas. Wazir Safdar jang was wounded and returned to Delhi. He then summoned Raja Surajmal, Raja Nagarmal, Raja Lakhmi Narayan, Ismail Khan, etc. to discuss the plan of a campaign against the Rohillas. He also took into his pay the Maratha army of Malhar Rao for Rs. 25,000 per day and the jats of Surajmal on daily allowance of Rs. 15,000 on Jan. 22, 1751. He advanced against the Ahmad Khan Bangush about a month later. At the same time Ahmad Shah Abdali entered Punjab and threatened to march towards Delhi.

On the other hand Ballu jat set himself up as a collector in his area and was confirmed in his position by Safdar Jang. Gradually he extended his depredations farther. In 1752 he ravaged the imperial camp at Sikandrabad, 50 Kilometers south of Delhi. He amassed wealth by his plundering foreys. He also seized local tradesmen, hung them up and flogged them to extort money. "Ballu accompanied Surajmal to Delhi when the later was called for counsel and assistance by Safdar Jang during civil war against the wishes of Imad" (Husain 83). Imad invited the Marathas to help him against Surajmal and Safdar Jang during the civil war. Raghunath Rao started his expedition in north India in October, 1753 and entered the territory of Bharatpur. The Jat raja sent his purohit, Rupa Ram Katari as an envoy to negotiate with the Marathas for terms. Raghunath Rao demanded the extravagant ransom of one Crore of rupees, Ruparam agreed to forty lakhs, then the Marathas resumed their advance and the envoy came back promising to procure a reply from the Jat raja Surajmal. Surajmal wrote to Raghunath either to accept 40,00000 or to take war.

In November 1753, Delhi government took notice of the lawless activities of Ballu Jat. An expedition under Aqibat Muhammad assisted by 2000 Marathans under Gangadhar Tatya and further enforced by a strong force dispatched by Imad-ul-Mulk, a rival and opponent of Safdar Jang was sent against Ballu. They besieged Ballabgarh and forced Ballu to sue for peace. Meanwhile, a civil war began at Delhi, Safdar Jang was removed and Intizam-ud-Daulah was appointed new Wazir. Safdar Jang moved towards Ballabgarh and encamped at Sikri, 5 Kilometer south of Ballabgarh. From here with the help of his Jat allies he put up a stout resistance. The city of Delhi, its environs and the regions of Faridabad and Ballabgarh were the scenes of fighting. Surajmal and Rajendra Giri plundered the old Delhi especially grain market and houses of Shahjahanabad. "As this quarter contained no noble or rich man's mansion only the houses of middle class and poor men were plundered and maltreated" (Sarkar 301).

Next day on May 10, 1753 the Jats spread their devastation to other suburbs like Sayyidwara, Bijal Masjid, Tarkaganj and Abdullahnagar. The residents could put up only a feeble resistance and the Jats plundered up to the gate of the city. The ravage was long remembered by Delhi populace under the name of 'Jat Gardi' on a par with the raids of Marathas and Afghans. Only those places were saved where imperial detachment could arrive in time. Subsequently, when Ballu met Aqibat Muhammad on November 29, 1753 and happened to use some hot words in the course of a discussion. "This resulted in a scuffle in which Ballu and a number of his soldier were killed while other fled away" (Qanungo 47).

Safdarjang was being watched by Najib-ud-daullah, who was in league with Imad. Before Abdali's arrival Surajmal wanted to crush Najib-ud-daullah and other Rohilla Afghans and to make Suja-ud-daullah, the wazir in the place of Imad. In 1757 Abdali reached Delhi to help Najib-ud-daullah who was in league with Imad, Raja Surajmal being the nearest among the refractory chiefs, the wrath of the Shah turned upon him. His son Jawahar Singh with 5000 troops at Ballabgarh was watching the movement of the Afghan army. He cut off a foraging party of the Afghan who had gone to Faridabad. Raghunath and Dattaji were also of the same view. In this way the alliance between Marathas and Jats was purely defensive. On the other hand, Shah and other afghans defeated the Marathas in several engagements. Dattaji raised the seize sukartal, reached Delhi and sent his baggage and families in the protection of Surajmal. Abdali after capturing Delhi demanded one crore of rupees from Surajmal as a fine for his disloyal conduct. The raja refused to pay so Abdali marched against Surajmal, who wanted to gain higher political ends.

The rise of the Jats in the Subah of Delhi between 1707 and 1757 reflects a larger pattern of regional assertion amid the Mughal Empire's fragmentation. Originally agrarian, the Jats transformed into a formidable military and political force, capitalizing on the weakening imperial structure and constant warfare. Leaders like Churaman, Badan Singh, and Surajmal not only challenged Mughal authority but also established a semi-

autonomous polity centered around the

Subah of Delhi. Their territorial ambitions were aided by strategic alliances, notably with Safdar Jang and the Marathas, and sustained through plunder, local revenue collection, and military expansion. The case of Ballu Jat in Ballabgarh exemplifies how local power holders rose to prominence through a mix of defiance, opportunism, and diplomacy. Despite repeated Mughal and Afghan efforts to subdue them, the Jats proved resilient and adaptive. The political chaos in Delhi, internal imperial rivalries, and the inability of the central government to enforce authority allowed the Jats to emerge as one of the most influential regional powers of the time. Their legacy lies in reshaping the power dynamics of northern India and laying the groundwork for further decentralization of authority in the late Mughal period. The Jats' story is a compelling testament to the potency of local agency in shaping early modern Indian politics.

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