

## **Marginalized Voters and Supporters: Biradari System, Caste Hierarchy and Rights to Political Participation in Rural Punjab**

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### **Abstract**

*In rural Punjab, biradari system and caste hierarchy are the decisive factors that determine individuals' rights to political participation. This study examines the political marginalization of members of service-providing caste groups residing in villages due to their subordinate position in caste hierarchy. Primary data was collected by interviewing the members of service-providing and landowning caste groups during Local Bodies' Election, 2015 and General Election, 2013. The study found that the inferior caste status of service-providers restricts their rights to political participation including rights to vote, contest election, participate in election campaign, and opportunities to acquire leadership roles. Consequently, they are excluded from the system of political patronage that connects villagers with politicians through their biradari representatives. This system of patronage serves the interests of villagers by providing them access to state institutions, especially police and courts, welfare funds and job opportunities. It is found that with decline in caste system, members of service-providing caste groups have started to exercise their rights to vote in elections.*

**Key Words:** Biradari System, Caste Hierarchy, Political Participation, Political Marginalization, Rural Punjab

### **Introduction**

Caste system in Punjab represents hierarchical grouping of various quoms or zats on the basis of their birth-ascribed standings (Lyon, 2004). The primary caste based divisions are between the land owners and the service providers (Eglar, 1960; Usman, 2011). Members of landowning zats connected with agriculture as their parentage occupation, such as jats, rajputs and awans, are locally known as zamindars (Chaudhry & Ahmed, 2014), whereas the members of service-providing zats are kammis including weavers, barbers, cobblers, blacksmiths, carpenters and potters. They serve the villagers with their occupational crafts that they inherit from their ancestors along with providing labour to zamindars in managing agricultural activities (Ahmad, 1970; Eglar, 1960). With time, the members of kammi zats are leaving their caste-based occupational crafts and opting for other professions. However, they are recognized in the village setting and differentiated from zamindar and other kammi zats through their ancestral occupations (Usman & Amjad, 2013). Biradari is another important component of caste system practiced in rural

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Punjab, which divides zamindar and kammi zats in distinct status categories (Alavi, 1972). In literature, biradari is a contested term conceptually that has been used differently in different contexts. Some studies suggest that the terms biradari, zat and quom can be used interchangeably (Ahmed, 2007; Chaudhary, 1999), while others have strictly differentiated biradari from zat and quom (Usman, 2011). Latter emphasize that zat or quom (caste) is a border category than biradari (kinship). All those members of rajput or barber zat, who are relatives, blood relatives or relatives through marriage, form a biradari (Usman & Amjad, 2013). There can be more than one biradaris within a quom residing in a Punjabi village. Subsequently, it is argued that biradari is more significant principle than zat in village life, which determines group loyalties of individuals in election and in other socio-political affairs. Conversely, while looking at the role of biradarism in electoral politics of Punjab, Ahmed (2007) ignored the factor of being relatives as a criterion to constitute a biradari and suggested that all members of a zat or quom are a biradari e.g. a rajput biradari or a barber biradari. Most of the academic studies conducted on the involvement of biradarism in determining the voting behaviour of individuals and groups in Punjab have used the term "biradari" as such.

Dynamics of biradarism and caste hierarchy are the decisive factors in rural Punjab that shape electoral politics and determine voting behaviour of the villagers (Ahmed, 2012; Ahmed and Naseem, 2011). Substantial academic evidence is available on how the biradari-based factional politics influences the entire process of elections from the declaration of candidature, formation of panels, campaigning to voting preferences (Ahmed, 2009; Wilder, 1999). Many studies have examined the role played by traditional landowning biradaris in the formation of political alliances to shape constituency politics in Punjab (Ahmed, 2007; Usman, Munawar & Amjad, 2013). Control of zamindar biradaris over local politics and leadership roles connects them with political influential contesting elections (Usman, 2011). Networking between politicians and biradari-based factional leaders developed during elections gives rise to the system of political patronage. It constitutes the bases of power structures at local level and serves the reciprocal interests of local biradari members and politicians. Voting behaviour of individual biradari members is associated with their group decisions and their dependence on their biradari representatives, who help them to acquire patronage of politicians for accessing state institutions, especially police, courts and job opportunities (Tariq, Usman and Sajjad, 2015; Wilder, 1999). On the other side, kammi biradaris are excluded from these power structures as a result of their restricted rights to political participation in elections and lack of their connectivity with political influential (Hooper & Hamid, 2003; Usman, 2011). Almost entire focus of these scholarly studies has been on zamindar biradaris, placed higher in caste hierarchy.

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Political marginalization of kammi zats due to their subordinate position in caste hierarchy has not been given attention. There is hardly any evidence available on the factors that determine the voting behaviours of marginalised caste groups. Ahmed (2009) briefly discussed the voting behaviour of dependent voters and the voters weak in wealth or man power, without mentioning their biradari or caste affiliations. Arguably, the dynamics of being dependent, poor and less in population can help to understand the voting behaviour of lower caste groups, such as service-providing caste groups. The present study attempts to address this gap in literature and investigates how the caste status of kammi zats influences their political behaviours including voting choices, participation in election campaign and rights to contest election.

The present study was conducted in two villages of district Sheikhpura located in close proximity. The selected villages are owned by Virk jats along with all the traditional Kammi zats residing in villages. The villages consist of approximately 1100 households and 8500 individuals. Zamindars comprise around 70% of the total population, compared with 30% of their kammi counterparts. The majority of kammi households are engaged in labour relations with zamindar households of the village. The data was collected in two phases: during Local Bodies' Election, 2015 and General Elections, 2013. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with the men and the women from land owning and service providing zats in both villages. The study participants were selected using purposive sampling technique (Mason, 2002). All of the zamindar and kammi biradaris residing in villages were given representation in selected sample. Informed consent was taken from the villagers for their participation in study (Irvine, 1998). Interviews and FGDs were conducted in Punjabi language. After the fieldwork, the data was transcribed, translated and coded (Have, 1999). Major themes were identified by referring to the initial coding. Thematic analysis technique was used to analyze data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2009). Findings of the study are divided in different themes that include leadership roles and political patronage; rights to contest election; rights to participate in election campaign; voting behaviour of marginalized voters; and decaying hierarchies and change in voting behaviours.

### **Caste, Leadership Roles and Political Patronage**

In rural Punjab, the roles of political leadership and patronage are held by the members of zamindar biradaris. Lyon (2004) argues that in the context of hierarchical societies, opportunities of political leadership are dictated by individuals' standing in hierarchy. In Punjabi villages, landholdings and membership of a zamindar zat are the key prerequisites to acquire political

influence. Land is the major source of income to gain political prestige and respect among villagers, develop political connectivity and extend influence in official circles. However, the members of kammi zats are not given the status of zamindars, even if they acquire land. Political power and roles of leadership in rural Punjab are not associated merely with the ownership of land or economic well-being but should be supported by the membership in a zamindar zat (Eglar, 1960; Planning Commission, 2003).

Eglar (1960) describes that there is always an on-going struggle across different zamindar biradaris of the village to extend their political clout. There is a sense of collective honour among biradari members and protecting this biradari honour, against other zamindar biradaris, is perceived as collective responsibility of a biradari. While there could be conflicting interests among biradari members, they all unite against other biradaris in conflict and struggle for power, and ultimate loyalty belongs to one's own biradari. For example, the members of a zamindar biradari take a collective decision to support a candidate during election. Biradari members would take it as their collective responsibility to strive for the win of that candidate. Their individual voting preferences are determined by their group pride against other biradaris. Kammi also back their biradari members in quarrels, and derive feelings of collective security from biradari unity. However, unlike members of zamindar biradaris, they do not strive to gain political power against other biradaris of village (Eglar, 1960).

There are striking similarities between the nature of political leadership and roles of patronage described by Eglar (1960) in Punjabi villages and Barth (1959) in Swat. Representatives of landowning Pashtun zats serve as political patrons to the members of all other zats in Swat. Pashtuns maintain their exclusive rights to political leadership, even if they lose full economic rights over part of their original Pashtun land called daftar (Barth, 1981). Like in the rural Punjab, the members of service providing zats are prevented by the landowning pakhtun zats to acquire land and feudal power (Barth, 1960; Nadvi & Robinson, 2004). Barth (1965) highlighted that the political rights and caste structures coincide and serve to reinforce each other. The above discussion shows how the rights to political participation and leadership are closely associated with caste and biradari membership in rural Pakistan.

### **Caste Hierarchy and Rights to Contest Election**

Biradarism is the principal factor that shape villagers' rights to contest election and participate in election campaign. Political influence of a biradari is embedded in ability of its representatives to unite biradari members in the events of competition and conflict against rivals (Eglar, 1960). In elections,

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zamindar biradaris show unity by taking a collective decision whether to contest election or support a candidate in local bodies' or general elections. Biradari-based rivalries are important factor that the zamindar biradaris consider while taking a decision to contest election and especially to support a candidate (Nasir, Chaudhry, Khan & Hadi, 2015). If a zamindar biradari decides to support a candidate, their rival zamindar biradari is likely to oppose that candidate. Rivalries between local zamindar biradaris give rise to and reinforce factional politics in rural constituencies. On the respondents mentioned that: *"A zamindar biradari would give strong opposition to rival zamindars. Biradari members collectively strive for the win of candidate they support, which is the matter of biradari honour. Through this, zamindar biradaris show their political clout at local level against rivals."* Similarly, if a zamindar biradari decides to contest local bodies' election, the rival biradari may announce to contest election against them or support a candidate contesting against them. Smaller zamindar biradaris, with lesser votes would offer their support to any of the dominant biradaris to demonstrate their political significance. Biradari honour keeps members of a zamindar biradari united against their opponents in elections.

In this study, the respondents mentioned that contesting election requires monetary resources, biradari support, social networking and recognition at local level. Members of service-providing zats usually lack these social and economic resources owing to their subordinate standing in caste hierarchy. More importantly, they are in minority in most of the Punjabi villages compared with their zamindar counterparts (Usman, 2011). Therefore, kammis generally do not contest election or get involved in election campaign in favour of any candidate. Both zamindar and kammi respondents were of the view that even if a kammi biradari has monetary resources, zamindars of village would not like them to contest election. In case any member of a kammi biradari contests local bodies' election, zamindars would not vote for them. Zamindars consider it against their caste pride that kammis acquire leadership roles. A young Kammi respondent mentioned that: *"Even his biradari members, especially those who are dependent on zamindars for their livelihood, might not vote for a kammi who contests election."*

In Local Bodies' Election 2001, quota of seats was reserved for peasants and women. The respondents mentioned that a few of the men and the women from kammi biradaris contested this election and won their seats. This political change however benefited zamindars rather than empowering kammis. Zamindars nominated the representatives of larger kammi biradaris to contest peasant seats in order to grab votes of their biradari members for important seats on panel that were contested by zamindars themselves. Similarly, members of zamindar biradaris nominated kammi women for reserved seats

on their panel. Kammi respondents were of the view that zamindar men did not like women from their families to contest election and politically participate at local level. This suggests how zamindar men were able to maintain existing power relations in the village setting, even if the state endeavoured to incorporate marginalized segments such as kammis and women in power sharing at grass root level.

### **Rights to Participate in Election Campaign**

The study found that the kammis of the village do not usually participate in election campaign of National or Provincial Assembly elections. In a previous study, Ahmed (2009) explained how the active supporters financially contribute in election campaigns and acquire leadership roles by arranging public meetings for politicians. This study argues that these active supporters almost always belong to different zamindar zats. Politically marginalized status of kammis does not allow them to actively participate in election campaigns and acquire leadership roles.

During the election campaign, candidates usually approach the voters in villages through their biradari affiliations. They contact the representatives of zamindar biradaris to request for the votes of their biradari members. After a successful negotiation, the representatives of a zamindar biradari would traditionally invite a politician at their place to announce their support in the presence of biradari members and offer dua-e-khair (prayer for luck). It is a customary way of making it public that a certain biradari has collectively announced their supporting for a candidate (Usman, 2011). Many zamindar biradaris have permanent association with a politician or a political party. They play important role in election campaign by facilitating politicians to get support of other zamindar biradaris of different surrounding villages. As previously mentioned, they may also fund the election campaign of a politician (Ahmed, 2009).

The respondents mentioned that, during the election campaign, politicians generally do not approach members of kammi biradaris. On their visit to a village, locally influential zamindars supporting that politician would invite representatives of kammi biradaris to join in. Kammi respondents were of the view that, at such occasions, zamindars give representation to kammi biradaris to get their votes by pleasing them. Conversely, a few zamindar respondents mentioned that influential zamindars invite kammis to demonstrate their control over kammi voters of the village. On such occasions, politicians negotiate only with zamindars. Kammis present in the meeting do not mostly get an opportunity to talk directly to a politician. In rare cases, however, a local politician during local bodies' election might visit a kammi

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biradari, if they have significant number of votes, to ask for their support. Politicians generally make such contacts with a kammi biradari in accompany with local zamindars. Kammi respondents considered that zamindars do not like politicians to approach kammi of their village without their involvement. In response, politicians generally do not overlook the interests of locally influential zamindars who support their campaign in many ways (Ahmed, 2011).

The villagers mentioned that the renowned politicians contesting national elections would not like to interact with the members of kammi biradaris, who are mostly uneducated and poor, especially when the zamindars help them to get the votes of kammi biradaris. A few of the educated and better off cobblers in the understudy villages started to network with local politicians during local bodies' election. However, zamindar respondents argued that the local politicians develop acquaintance with the representative of larger kammi biradaris merely for political gains. They do not give importance to those kammi over zamindars of their village, which keeps them at a subordinate position in the village hierarchy.

### Voting Behaviour of Marginalized Voters

Voting behaviour of kammi is strongly influenced by their subordinate standing in the caste hierarchy. Being collective service-providers of the villagers, every zamindar biradari of the village claims a right on their votes. During the election campaign, zamindar biradaris would traditionally invite the representatives of kammi biradaris at a collective sitting place in village to ask for their votes. Kammi do not usually refuse to any of them but abstain from favouring a zamindar biradari openly. Kammi respondents mentioned that if they openly support a zamindar biradari, the other zamindar biradaris get annoyed and may oppress them. For example, one of the kammi respondents said that: *"We visit every doorstep in village for livelihood. If we declare our support for any zamindar biradari in elections, we might never go at the doorstep of many other zamindars. So we keep it hidden."*

Kammi respondents talked about various factors that determine their voting behaviour in elections. The majority of them highlighted that a kammi household would support the members of a zamindar biradari who take care of them in the time of need by offering economic help. A few of the respondents considered that a kammi family mostly distributes their votes among the candidates supported by different zamindar biradaris of their village, so that none of the zamindar biradari is unhappy. Others explained how a kammi biradari would sit together to discuss and take a collective decision to support a zamindar biradari in election, though they keep their

decision hidden. However, Kammi always follow a zamindar biradaris of their village, since they cannot generally approach politicians directly. Despite these factors that determine the voting behaviour of kammi zats, many zamindar respondents stressed that kammi are free to use their rights to choice through secret balloting inside polling station and therefore their voting behaviour cannot be completely controlled by zamindars. Villagers were of the view that kammi biradaris lack unity to prove significance of their votes in election. It is easy to disunite a kammi biradari due to their socio-economic dependence on different zamindar biradaris, poverty and marginalized social standing. The respondents mentioned that the local influential at times bribe poor kammi for their votes and divide them as a biradari. The above discussion shows how the relations of economic dependence, poverty and subordinate social status may restrict the voting choices of groups placed lower in social hierarchy.

### **Conclusion**

Biradarism and caste, as a system of social stratification, divide individuals into hierarchically ranked categories, which are differentially powerful, privileged and esteemed. In rural Punjab, individuals' rights to political participation are shaped around their group's standing in caste hierarchy. Members of traditional zamindar biradaris are privileged to acquire leadership roles, contest election, participate in election campaign, openly exercise their voting rights and develop networking with political influential. On the other side, members of kammi biradaris are generally excluded from the local power structures and their political participation in village affairs is restricted due to their inferior biradari standing. Kammi are not generally involved in electoral politics, nor do they support any candidate openly. During the election campaign, politicians negotiate with zamindar biradaris for their votes. Representatives of zamindar biradaris help politicians to get the votes of marginalized segments of their village i.e. members of kammi biradaris. Kammi generally do not get an opportunity to interact with political influential directly. In short, ability to possess and exercise political power is associated with the membership in a zamindar biradari as a prerequisite and thus, the members of kammi biradaris are generally not able to attain the roles of leadership and patronage.



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