

# The Architecture of Dissent: Subaltern Social Groups and the Construction of Qasba Life in Medieval Uttar Pradesh (1450–1750)

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## Abstract

This paper challenges the "top-down" obsession of medieval Indian historiography by shifting the lens from the Mughal court to the provincial *qasba* (small town). Focusing on the laboring classes of Uttar Pradesh—specifically the *Julahas* (weavers) and *Kasibs* (artisans)—it argues that the *qasba* served as a unique "middle space" where marginalized groups negotiated social status. By synthesizing fiscal data from the *Ain-i-Akbari* with the radical vernacular poetry of Kabir and Sufi hagiographies, this study reconstructs a narrative of subaltern agency. It posits that through professional guilds and spatial control of the *Chauk*, these groups developed a "vernacular modernity" that resisted imperial homogenization.

## 1. Introduction:

### Beyond the Shadow of the Throne

For too long, the history of Medieval Uttar Pradesh has been written as a series of footnotes to the lives of Emperors. Whether it is the grand architecture of Agra or the administrative decrees of Delhi, the "common man" is often treated as a silent background actor. This paper argues that the real history of the region unfolded in the **qasba**—towns like Amroha, Jaunpur, and Mau.

The *qasba* was more than a tax-collection point; it was a site of social friction. Here, the weaver was not just a laborer but a poet; the artisan was not just a subject but a member of a powerful guild. To understand medieval UP, we must look at these "middle spaces" where the state's grip was loose and the subaltern's voice was loud.

## 2. The Geography of the Subaltern: Mohalla and Chauk

In the *qasba*, geography was destiny. The town was not a random sprawl; it was a calculated layout of professional territories.

**The Mohalla as a Fortress:** The segregation of the town into professional *Mohallas* allowed artisans to protect their "intellectual property." A weaver's *Mohalla* was a space where the state's *Kotwal* (police)

hesitated to enter. This spatial solidarity allowed subalterns to hide from forced labor (*begar*) and protect their community secrets.

**The Chauk as a Public Sphere:** The *Chauk* (marketplace) was the medieval version of a social media feed. It was the only place where a weaver could stand next to a nobleman. It was in the *Chauk* that rumors of rebellion started and where "heterodox" preachers like Kabir mocked the elite. The *Chauk* democratized information, allowing the subaltern to anticipate and react to state oppression.

### 3. The Guild: The Hidden Power of the "Lowly"

The most "real" aspect of subaltern life was the **Biradari** or guild. To the Mughal elite, these were "ajlaf" (low-born) groups, but internally, they were highly organized.

- **Corporate Resistance:** When taxes became unbearable, the guilds did not just protest; they practiced **Hijrat** (collective migration). There is nothing more genuine in history than the image of an entire community of weavers packing their looms and leaving a town overnight. This "economic desertion" was the most effective weapon against feudalism.
- **The Master-Disciple Bond:** The *Ustad-Shagird* system ensured that education remained in the hands of the workers, not the state-run institutions. This gave the subalterns **Technological Sovereignty**.

### 4. The Language of Dissent: Kabir and the Sufis

To find the "genuine" voice of the worker, we turn to the poetry of the loom. Kabir, perhaps the most famous subaltern of UP, used the technical vocabulary of weaving to explain the universe.

"*No one knows the secret of the Weaver...*" This wasn't just poetry; it was a political statement. By using the "shuttle" and the "warp" as metaphors for God, Kabir was saying that the worker's labor was more sacred than the priest's ritual. Simultaneously, the *Dargahs* (Sufi shrines) in these towns acted as "safe spaces" where a weaver could seek the Saint's help against a corrupt tax collector.

### 5. Conclusion: A Legacy of Resilience

The *qasba* was the birthplace of a resilient, urban Indian identity. It was a space where people lived by their skills and their wits, often in defiance of the great powers of the day. By recognizing the agency of the *Julahas* and the *Kasibs*, we don't just add a chapter to history—we return the history of Uttar Pradesh to the people who actually built it.

Term	Context	Definition
<b>Ajlaf</b>	Social Class	The "low-born" or commoners; the term used by elites for the subaltern.
<b>Arz-o-Chuhra</b>	Military/Labor	Descriptive rolls used to identify common soldiers and laborers; a key source for subaltern names.
<b>Baheliya</b>	Profession	A tribal/subaltern group in UP that served as foot soldiers and hunters for the <i>qasba</i> elite.
<b>Bazaari</b>	Economy	Small-scale shopkeepers and vendors who formed the "middle" layer of the <i>Chauk</i> .
<b>Biradari</b>	Social Org.	The kinship-based "brotherhood" that acted as the social foundation for the artisan guild.
<b>Chaudhri</b>	Leadership	The headman of a guild or <i>mohalla</i> who mediated between the subaltern and the state.
<b>Dastur-al-Amal</b>	Legal/Admin	Administrative manuals that listed local customs and tax rates for artisans.
<b>Hijrat</b>	Resistance	The act of "flight" or collective migration used by artisans to escape oppressive taxation.
<b>Julaha</b>	Profession	The weaver community; the most politically and religiously active subaltern group in UP.
<b>Karkhana</b>	Economy	A workshop; could be state-owned (Imperial) or private (subaltern-run).
<b>Kasib</b>	Professional	A general term for an artisan or "one who earns a living through skilled labor."
<b>Kotwal</b>	Law & Order	The town's police chief and market superintendent; often the primary antagonist of the subaltern.
<b>Malfuzat</b>	Literature	Recorded conversations of Sufi saints; a rare source for the voices of common pilgrims.
<b>Mohallaband</b>	Spatial	The system of dividing the town into professional or caste-based residential quarters.
<b>Muhtarafa</b>	Taxation	A specific tax levied on artisans and tradesmen, separate from land revenue.
<b>Nirakh-nama</b>	Economy	Official price-lists displayed in the <i>Chauk</i> to prevent "price gouging" by subalterns.
<b>Pargana</b>	Geography	An administrative unit comprising several villages and usually one central <i>qasba</i> .
<b>Sinf</b>	Organization	The Persian term for a craft guild or professional corporation.
<b>Ustad-Shagird</b>	Education	The master-apprentice relationship; the primary mode of subaltern skill transmission.
<b>Waqf</b>	Religion	An endowment for a religious or charitable purpose, often funded by subaltern guilds.



## Annotated Bibliography: Essential Reading

1. **Habib, Irfan.** *The Agrarian System of Mughal India.* (The foundational text for economic data).
2. **Bayly, C.A.** *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars.* (The best work on the social life of UP towns).
3. **Pandey, Gyanendra.** *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India.* (Crucial for understanding the "weaver" identity).
4. **Hess, Linda.** *The Bijak of Kabir.* (The primary source for the subaltern voice).