

Afghanistan - Jogi and Chori Frosh

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Profile

Jogi and Chori Frosh are semi-nomadic communities belonging to the larger Jat ethnic minority who trace their origins to Tajikistan and Pakistan, respectively, and have historically engaged in seasonal migration around Afghanistan and into neighbouring states. In recent years, these communities have become increasingly sedentary, with more established populations scattered across Afghanistan and in greatest concentration on the outskirts of the main cities of the country's north. Although there is little recent or reliable information available regarding the size of Jogi and Chori Frosh communities in Afghanistan, estimates suggest they make up an estimated 20,000-30,000 people, including approximately 1,500 Jogi families and 350 Chori Frosh families spread across northern Afghanistan. The accuracy of these figures is further complicated by the impact of decades of conflict: this has disrupted the migratory patterns of Jogi and Chori Frosh communities, leading some to flee to other countries temporarily or permanently, or move to other areas of Afghanistan, such as outside Kabul in Charahi Qambar, where they live amongst other IDPs and nomadic communities.

The lack of information surrounding Afghanistan's Jogi and Chori Frosh communities points to the relative invisibility of the challenges they face, which stands in contrast to the visibility of their distinct cultural practices. Like the majority of Afghans, Jogi and Chori Frosh are Sunni Muslims, predominantly speaking Dari but also community-specific dialects. Despite these commonalities, Jogi and Chori Frosh communities are discriminated against on account of their ancestral origins and related social and economic practices, including high levels of female labour participation rates, for which they are considered 'outsiders'. This has contributed to their severe economic, social, and political marginalization, a situation exacerbated by the frequent denial of recognition of their citizenship.

It is important to note that the labels used to refer to these communities have been externally assigned and carry with them negative connotations, having become synonymous with the

social categories imposed on what are in practice disparate groups. The term 'Jogi', for example, is often used in a derogatory manner as a synonym for 'beggar' and bears similarity with other exonyms such as 'gypsy'. Nevertheless, Jogi and Chori Frosh communities have increasingly adopted these labels for self-identification: for this reason and due to the lack of appropriate alternatives to effectively refer to these communities, these labels will be used with due recognition of their shortcomings.

History

Although details regarding the background of Jogi and Chori Frosh communities in Afghanistan are scarce, their presence can be better understood in the context of the origins and migratory patterns of the broader Jat population. Jats are regarded as having originated from what is now the north of India and Pakistan, with some accounts suggesting that migration to areas of Central Asia dated as far back as the 10th century BC as part of a population transfer between rulers in north India and Persia. Jat populations have since dispersed, and at present are spread across different areas of South, West, and Central Asia, including in Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. Constituting peripatetic populations, Jats engage in planned and systematic mobility as an adaptive strategy, often for the sale of goods and/or services, distinguishing them from pastoral nomads such as Kuchi.

Jats do not represent a single ethnic group: rather, those grouped together under the blanket label, 'Jat', have distinct identities, and generally would not self-identify according to this broader classification. This diversity is reflected by the migratory history of Jogi and Chori Frosh. Until part way through the 20th century, Jogi engaged in frequent back-and-forth migration between Tajikistan and Northern Afghanistan, which has since diminished, due significantly to the hardening of borders under the former Soviet regime in Tajikistan. Other members of the Jogi community indicate that they have historically migrated from other areas of the surrounding region, including Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan. In contrast, Chori Frosh trace their more recent origins to Pakistan, to which they continue to travel frequently. These disparate histories impact their respective engagement in the economic and social sphere of Afghanistan: for example, female members of the Chori Frosh community commonly sell handicrafts and other goods from Pakistan at markets in northern Afghanistan.

Despite this heterogeneity, there are certain similarities between the Jogi and Chori Frosh communities, and amongst the broader Jat population, most notably a shared marginality. Jogi and Chori Frosh communities have been present in Afghanistan for many decades, though continue to occupy a liminal status within society, considered outsiders who have 'come to Afghanistan'. While the precise origins of this discrimination are not clear, it has drawn on the physical features and social practices of these groups. Jats are generally understood as having 'darker' features, reflective of their assumed Indian origins, and have had their religious affiliations questioned. Also contributing to these processes of 'othering' have been endogamous practices of Jogi and Chori Frosh and their distinct linguistic dialects.

The view that these communities are exogenous to Afghanistan has persisted despite the fact that Jogi and Chori Frosh, as with other peripatetic peoples, have become more sedentary in recent years. This long-term trend of sedentarization is not a complete process, and has been influenced by a range of factors. Amongst these include the cementing of state boundaries, processes of urbanisation, and decades of conflict and political instability ranging from the Saur Revolution (1978), Soviet Occupation (1979-1989), civil war (1992-1996), the Taliban regime (1996-2001), and the more recent war in Afghanistan since 2001. While some Jogi and Chori Frosh fought alongside the mujahideen during the Soviet occupation, many fled the country for Tajikistan, Pakistan, and Iran. For example, according to a 2010 study by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) in Chahari Qambar, an informal settlement outside Kabul, 98.3 per cent of Jogi living in the area had fled the country during conflict or the Taliban regime, having returned since 2003. Insecurity during these years disrupted the migration patterns and therefore livelihoods of these groups, with many choosing to settle in and around Afghanistan's cities in search of improved economic opportunities and access to goods and services.

At the same time, improved transportation infrastructure and processes of urbanization have disrupted their previous role as intermediaries between rural areas and city centres between which they facilitated the transfer of information and petty trade.

These dynamics impacted the scale and nature of migration of Jogi, Chori Frosh, and other nomadic and semi-nomadic communities by increasing the costs associated with these practices: for example, the migration routes of Kuchi pastoral nomads became increasingly unsafe due to the presence of minefields. This has also had implications on the social organisation of these communities. When Jogi in areas such as Mazar-e-Sharif in Northern Afghanistan do engage in migration, they do so less frequently as a family unit, and instead select members to temporarily migrate to cooler areas during the summer, with the rest remaining behind.

Current challenges

In the current context, social and institutional discrimination against Jogi and Chori Frosh have coalesced, further entrenching their liminal status in Afghanistan. The challenges facing Jogi and Chori Frosh in Afghanistan are linked to the socio-political implications of decades of conflict, including the collapse of state structures, as well as influential forces both increasing the salience of ethnicity and pushing for greater homogeneity at various junctures. This is despite the fact that some positive measures have been introduced in recent years, including provisions in the 2004 Constitution stating that all Afghans should be treated equally, and that measures should be taken to improve the livelihood of nomads.

A key issue facing Jogi and Chori Frosh is their lack of recognition as citizens of Afghanistan, not only socially, but also at an institutional level. The Afghan Citizenship Law passed in 2000 stipulates that an individual living in the country for over five years, aged over 18, and having not committed any crimes has the right to apply to citizenship. Yet their ability to secure a tazkera – Afghanistan's national identification card – is often constrained. Providing proof of

citizenship, the tazkera is effectively a precondition to accessing social services, education, health care, and employment: it is also required to secure other documents, such as a passport, marriage certificate, or driver's license, and also property title deeds for land ownership. While lack of a tazkera is not uncommon among many Afghans, what distinguishes the situation of Jogi and Chori Frosh from other communities is the absence of formal channels to access one should they need to do so. Indeed, the Ministry of Interior has in the past stated that in order for Jogi and Chori Frosh to secure the tazkera, Parliament would first have to adopt a law recognizing them as citizens.

Notably, the specific challenges faced by Jogi and Chori Frosh have been recognized in the National IDP Policy introduced in 2014, which states that :'[The] Mol [Ministry of Interior] will cooperate with MOWA [Ministry of Women's Affairs], MoLSAMD [Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyred and the Disabled] and MoBTA [Ministry of Borders and Tribal Affairs] to see that assistance is given to...members of certain groups, notably the Kuchi, Jogi and Chori Frosh, who generally do not have Tazkera and who face special difficulties in acquiring them'. This represents a key policy change, as a result of insecurity and limited government capacity including lack of proper training of officials, yet implementation is lagging.

Contributing to these are the formal procedures involved with securing a tazkera. Applications require verification by a local elder registered as an official community representative that the applicant is part of the community, or that they are the child of a community member already registered and in possession of a tazkera. In addition to challenges presented on account of their mobility, it is likely local elders or other family members of Jogi and Chori Frosh applicants would also not possess any bureaucratic record. Furthermore, Jogi and Chori Frosh who have attempted to obtain documentation from government offices have reported discriminatory treatment.

Alternative avenues towards securing the tazkera have also been introduced, including attestations by two Afghans possessing tazkera as well as by the local police department. Similarly, under the Registration of Population Records Act 2014, Kuchi, or pastoral nomads, are able to secure tazkera in their seasonal place of residence, following verification of their identity by a kuchi malik and a close relative.

Although official statistics are not available, surveys have shown that as a result of their non-recognition and linked bureaucratic processes, the majority of Jogi and Chori Frosh remain undocumented. According to a 2011 UNICEF study, in 80 per cent of Jogi homes in the surveyed areas of Mazar-e-Sharif and Kabul, no one is registered or has any form of identification. More recent research from 2015 has highlighted that of those Jogi who do possess tazkera, 83 percent have Kuchi tazkera. Further, gendered dynamics regarding tazkera possession amongst the broader population are replicated amongst Jogi, with virtually no recorded female registration rates.

While peripatetic communities such as Jogi and Chori Frosh display considerable adaptability and resilience, the pace of change, non-recognition, and related bureaucratic obstacles have led to low levels of education, severe poverty, and substandard settlement conditions for these

communities. Access to education is a particularly acute issue for Jogi communities, with lack of documentation and attendant challenges in securing land ownership being key obstacles towards admission. The 2011 survey commissioned by UNICEF in Mazar-e-Sharif highlighted that 83.9 per cent of Jogi children were out-of-school, as compared to a rate of 47.2 per cent amongst the non-Jogi urban poor.

This contributes to lack of economic opportunities, with many Jogi and Chori Frosh engaging in economic activities such as begging, the sale of small items, and fortune telling in order to subsist. These activities and their economic marginality feed into pre-existing stereotypes about these communities, including rumours of prostitution and child abduction. Contributing to this is the high level of female engagement in the labour market – in some areas with rates tenfold higher than non-Jogi women. This, alongside the factors previously noted, including their physical features and language, and in addition to their residence in white tents in rural areas, have reinforced their status as ‘outsiders’ in Afghanistan. Surveys have suggested that their income is half that of neighbouring urban poor, and they experience considerably higher levels of food insecurity. Therefore, in contrast to the assumption that more sedentary lives in urban areas would improve access to state institutions, public services, and employment opportunities for these communities, Jogi and Chori Frosh have been further locked into a low social standing within Afghan society. Unlike the Kuchi population, they are not afforded any formal opportunities to advance their political participation.

Nevertheless, during the tenure of former President Hamid Karzai, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) submitted a letter detailing the situation of the Jogi community, including their inability to access national identification documents. The AIHRC reportedly received a positive response, including from the Population Registration Department, which indicated that Jogi should be able to receive the tazkera. The response from provincial officials has, however, been mixed. Whilst some tazkera were issued to Jogi individuals, the response in some locations has reportedly diverged from the official line and reflects a continued unwillingness to provide Jogis with tazkera. This highlights ineffective coordination between the various levels of government, but also the persistence of the discriminatory belief that these groups do not belong to Afghanistan.

Ways forward

As a priority, a path towards citizenship must be made clearly available to Jogi and Chori Frosh communities, and any inconsistency between central policy and local implementation addressed, thereby dealing with issues regarding their non-recognition. It is crucial that this is coupled with initiatives to support Jogi and Chori Frosh in securing national identification documents. These initiatives will need to work at various levels: for instance, trainings and awareness raising amongst government officials; efforts to support Jogi and Chori Frosh knowledge of and access to tazkera through providing information and resources; and advocating for more appropriate and accessible registration processes. This should include advancing the implementation of the National IDP Policy, including the provision focused on improving access to tazkera for Jogi and Chori Frosh.

Linked to this, there is a need for further examination of initiatives at the local level to address the absence of documentation amongst these groups to assess their efficacy, recommend improvements, and replicate these efforts if appropriate. This includes Balkh province, where in 2014 a memo was distributed amongst officials instructing them to provide national identity cards to Jogi if approved by selected representatives of the community linked to the Balkh Provincial Council. Reports from government officials having indicated distribution of over 1,000 national ID cards, yet these figures are contested by local organizations, highlighting the need for further assessment.

Finally, efforts should be made by key actors operating in Afghanistan, including the Afghan government and the AIHRC, to conduct updated research regarding the nationality status of Jogi and Chori Frosh in Afghanistan, and any other semi-nomadic communities that may be affected by statelessness. The absence of research and up-to-date information surrounding these communities contributes directly to the relative invisibility of this issue. This should be disseminated widely to those working in areas in which these communities reside, including humanitarian and development organizations who can include this in the design and content of their activities.

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