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Citizens, Finally, But No Place to Settle: The Magats, one of Afghanistan's most marginalised minorities

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[Khadija Hossaini](#) • [Thomas Ruttig](#)

The Magats – a small ethnic group most frequently called ‘Jogi’ by others, a term often considered derogatory by them – have been living in Afghanistan for more than a century. Until recently, they were stateless but have now started a struggle for legal recognition and acknowledgement of their identity. The first successes, such as registration as voters, have been driven by political calculations on the government side, and they still face regular discrimination. In this paper, AAN’s Khadija Hossaini and Thomas Ruttig summarised the available but scattered research, tried to make sense of what one author called “the terminology jungle” of Afghanistan’s itinerant groups, find the place and role of the Magat among them and in Afghan society, with a particular view on their women, and finally – speaking to members of the community around Kabul over many months in 2019 and 2020 – looked at the political motives behind their current, somewhat improved situation, at least with regards to citizenship.

Struggling to prove they are Afghans

We could not prove that we were from this country. Very few [of our] people had a tazkera [identity document] from the old days. Very often [the authorities] told me and my father to ‘go back to where we belong’. Only this year, were we able to secure tazkeras for the adults in our families. It was not a problem for one family, or ten families, but a problem for the entire Magat population.

Saber, a 40-year-old man living with his 78-year-old father and the entire family in Chaman-e Babrak settlement, Police District (PD) 4, who told AAN this story, is the community representative of 300 Magat families.

Haji Dastagir, a 62-year-old Magat living in the Pul-e Kampani informal settlement in PD 5 in West Kabul, told AAN:

One thing that remained in common [for us] was that we never stayed long enough in one place to settle there. We did not have land to settle on so we went from place to place. If the host community were good, they would let us live there for that year or even more. If they were not friendly and welcoming, we would pack and leave for another place, another village or another city corner. [...] If they were kind and had sympathy for their fellow Muslim brothers, they would assist us, if not we aimed for another village to settle for a while.

Shamsuddin, a 52-year-old, living in a camp in the Arzan Qemat area of Butkhak in PD 12 in eastern Kabul, said:

Our livelihood was largely dependent on gasht wa faqiri (begging and asking for things). (1) This is not because we did not know any better, but because we did not have land to work on and wealth to invest with.

A Magat woman in one of the Kabul camps who did not want to be named (she does not publicly identify herself as Magat) said

It is not that we do not have anyone. We have maleks (community leaders), we are a big community, and generally we should be heard. [But w]e do not have any land to settle on. I do not have kids, but if I had, they would not be able to go to school due to bullying and discrimination.

The Magat (with stress on the first syllable, ie pronounced Mágat) are an originally semi-nomadic group that lived on both sides of the Amu Darya, in northern Afghanistan and what used to be southern Russian/Soviet Central Asia. They used to engage in seasonal migration within this region, and sometimes further to Iran, India or China.

In today's Afghanistan, Magats are living in the north and north-east of the country and in and around the capital Kabul. Outside their centre Mazar-e Sharif, they have a regular presence in Maimana and Andkhoy (in Faryab province) and Shulgar, a district of Balkh province, according to a 2008 [paper by Olaf Günther](#), a German specialist on Afghan and Central Asian semi-nomads including the Magats (he calls them Mugat), who currently teaches at Palacky University Olomouc in the Czech Republic.

According to contemporary research and the Magats' own narratives, they have become increasingly settled and, as a result, permanent settlers in Afghanistan over the last 130 to 150 years. This trend was increased by the closure of the Soviet-Afghan border between 1930s to 1950s and, more recently, by the war. "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," according to a [profile by the Minority Rights Group \(MRG\)](#). Another paper, published [by the Samuel Hall consultancy](#) in 2011, confirmed that nomadic practices were disappearing within these communities. 100 per cent of the households it surveyed in and around Mazar-e Sharif and Kabul said they were sedentary.

According to the MRG report, the Magats belong "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." Most other Afghans – and even most studies by non-Afghan researchers quoted in this report (except for Günther, [Gatelier](#) and Masalskiy, a Russian writing in 1913) (2) – refer to the Magat by the derogatory term 'Jogi'. Günther [spoke](#) of a "terminology jungle" (more about this below).

Until very recently, the Magats were not recognised as citizens of Afghanistan. This was despite the facts that two relatively recent citizenship laws – one passed during the Najibullah government in 1992 (full text [here](#)) and one in 2000 under the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan ([here](#)) – contained stipulations that would have opened the way for the Magats to be recognised as Afghan citizens, but were not implemented. (3)

For the Magats, this situation appeared to not have been a practical problem until the Afghan conflict began in the late 1970s. Then, most of them – as millions of other Afghans – had to flee. "Given their long habit of mobility," the Samuel Hall study pointed out, "most of them naturally opted for migration and fled the country to take refuge in Pakistan, Iran and Tajikistan, following the same migratory paths as their compatriots." The growing necessity of documentation for different government services has made issues of legal recognition and identity a vital need for the social and political survival of this group. Samuel Hall, based on the definition of the UNHCR, defined the political status of Magats as "de jure stateless persons, despite a century-long presence in Afghanistan."

According to a 2016 [survey of the Norwegian Refugee Council \(NRC\)](#), 98 per cent of the Magat population had not obtained a *tazkera*; the other two per cent were registered as 'Tajik' or 'kuchi'. This lack of an ID card and the difficulties in obtaining one had wide repercussions. As the Gandhara blog, one of the few media outlets looking at the group and its problems in recent years, [summarised](#), "their stateless status prevents them from owning property, building business, accessing jobs, education, healthcare, other services, and fundamental rights." Particularly, the lack of a *tazkera* directly hampers the chances of their children to get enrolled in public schools. The Magats were also deprived of their right to vote. The Samuel Hall study called this "a form of institutional discrimination."

That many Magats finally received ID cards in 2019 is not fully coincidental. While it appears to be an essential move to give rights and a voice to one of the most marginalised groups in Afghanistan, it also can be counted as a strategic move by the government for political purposes. After all, 2019 was the year of the presidential election, and every vote counted in a race that was expected to be tight ([AAN analysis here](#)). The basis for the provision of ID cards to many Magats was a specific presidential order (no 250, dated 21 April 2018) which framed it as a rights issue. The request application form drafted by the Central Civil Registration Authority (*edara-ye markazi-ye sabt-e ahwal wa nufus*) specifically mentioned that

"As we get closer to the upcoming election, the office has started registering for Tazkera and it is essential for the group to have the documentation."

Saber's family were living as migrants in Iran for 24 years due to the war. He said that, after the collapse of the Taliban regime, they returned to Afghanistan in 2001: "We had UNHCR documents that would qualify us as former refugees and now internally displaced persons." They went to Jawzjan where they had lived before migrating to complete their documentation to be assigned land for resettlement. In contrast to their successful registration as voters, he said the land issue still remained unresolved.

An informant from an informal Magat settlement in Chaman-e Babrak, in PD 4 in Kabul's north, who asked that his name not be published, described had a similar experience:

When we were back from Iran, after living there for almost 25 years, we went to Jawzjan and were asked for a tazkera for land distribution. I could not find a single person who could prove my father and grandfather lived there. They suggested we solve our problem in Kabul. Since then we have become displaced in Kabul. It has been 17 years now that I have been struggling to prove that everyone I knew from my family had been a resident of Afghanistan.

Who are the Magats?

a) The 'other nomads'

In order to distinguish the type of nomadism of the ‘Jat’ groups from the better known and larger groups of Afghan pastoral nomads, known as *kuchis* who are mainly Pashtun (there are also Uzbek and Turkmen nomads), different terms are used. RM Hayden coined the term “service nomads” for these groups, referring to the fact that they are not engaged in food production (unlike the *kuchis* with their flocks of mainly sheep), but had each developed a specialised mode of livelihood in relationship with other, larger communities. Ethnographer Aparna Rao (1950-2005) – who researched many of these groups in Afghanistan and elsewhere – introduced the term “peripatetic” for them. It is now most widely used in academia. This term refers to their itinerant lifestyle, travelling between various areas and with artisanal work, peddling and begging (called *gadai* or *talab khwastan*) as the sources of their livelihoods. (4)

While the *kuchis* would own sheep, goats and/or camels, according to Günther, the Magat have few animals, mainly horses. For their wanderings, they would hire lorries. Again, in contrast to the *kuchis*, who traditionally live in black tents made from wool, the peripatetic groups would live in white canvas tents. Therefore, one could also use the non-academic term ‘the other nomads’ for them: this was the title chosen by Rao for her 1987 book.

Danish ethnologist Asta Olesen, in her 1994 book *Afghan Craftsmen*, described various peripatetic groups in the pre-war Kabul region (but not the Magat) servicing sedentary groups, along with a long-established pattern of seasonal migration of potters, sieve makers, threshers, peddlers, trainers of animals (monkeys, snakes), blacksmiths, barbers, musicians, prostitutes and beggars.

The names used for some of these groups, such as *Cheghelbaf*, *Ghalbelbaf* (both sieve maker), *Chori-Forush* (bracelet sellers; *Bangriwal* or *Bangudi-Forush* in Pashto) or *Shadibaz* (monkey players) indicate that ethnic and socio-economic categories referring to their livelihoods overlap. This is similar to synonyms historically used for the *kuchis*, such as also as *powenda* or *malدار* (livestock tender and livestock owner), referring to their main source of income.

With one exception – the Ghorbat (or Cheghelbaf), who are Shia – all these groups are Sunni Muslim. They are usually endogamous, ie marrying among themselves, although Günther also [reported](#) marriage relations with other Muslim groups, but not with non-Muslim peripatetic groups.

The surrounding population would consider the professions carried out by the peripatetic groups as inferior, dirty or shameful. Since they are needed, though, they would make arrangements to deal with them. Despite the shared religion, marriage relations were not undertaken or even eating from the same plate. The social part of this relationship is reminiscent of the institution of *hamsaya* in Pashtun society where weaker groups – of the same or a different ethnic group – seek the protection of a stronger group in exchange for services (see an example [in this AAN report](#), p6).

The asymmetrical relationship between the itinerants and the surrounding population creates a social hierarchy, with the former as inferior and the latter as superior. This reflects the itinerants’ different ethnicity and origin, and might even be a remnant of caste relations common on the Indian subcontinent and the neighbouring regions influenced by it.

Rao, however, found that none of these groups in Afghanistan refers to itself as ‘Jat’ “and even strictly rejects this term” as they consider it derogatory. At the same time, she wrote, all six groups she researched “still called each of the other five ‘Jat’.”

b) How many Magats are there?

Due to the general lack of reliable population surveys, there are no reliable sources for the ethnic distribution of the population in Afghanistan. For Magats, the absence of data is even more glaring. Most literature gives an estimate of between 20,000 and 30,000 Magats currently living in Afghanistan. This range was also used by the Magat community leaders interviewed by AAN in Kabul and Mazar-e Sharif. According to the 2011 study by Samuel Hall, there are 1-1,500 Magat households in northern, northeastern and central Afghanistan, most of them in the north and with some 600 households in Kabul. With an average of 5.3 members, this would put their population at only between 5,300 and 7,950. Other sources say there are an estimated 1,500 Magat families in different formal and informal settlements in Kabul alone.

The settlements in Kabul seem to be established more recently. Pre-2000 literature reviewed for this report does not give any hint of a Magat presence around Kabul. Community leader Saber told AAN that his group moved to Kabul 17 years ago now “to solve the issue with our citizenship.”

Given these figures, the often-used figure of 20,000 to 30,000 ‘Jogi’ people, for example by community leader Saber or in the media (see for example [here](#)), seems to refer to the entire peripatetic ‘Jat’ population of Afghanistan, reflecting the fact that the two terms are often used as synonyms, although they describe different groups and subgroups.

c) Persian or Indian – or Central Asian?

In the absence of genetic, chromosome or blood haplogroup (tracing a common ancestor) studies of Magats, academics have speculated on the origins of the Magats based on the group's own oral histories and the languages they speak with each other. However, what is most important in the Afghan context is what this group says about their own origins and what non-Magat Afghans believe about their origins.

Olesen and Rao link the Magats to the Ghorbats ("departed from their home or homeland") who are of Persian origin and arrived in Afghanistan a few centuries ago when the Ottomans ruled over most of Central Asia and the Middle East. (They do not give an exact timeline.) As Shia, however, the Ghorbat would be religiously different from the Sunni Magat, unless they have converted or practice *taqia*. Günther [considers](#) that their name might refer to Zoroastrians, or 'fire worshippers' – in Old Persian, 'fire' is 'mugh'. This, then, would indeed point to an Iranian and not Indian background of this group.

Polish researcher Jadwiga Pstrusinska, [writing](#) in 2004, recalled Magats living in Qaysar, in the northern province of Faryab, locally labelled 'Haidaris'. She wrote: "Haidaries [sic] have been linked mainly with Qipchaqs – as servants living on their land. Qipchaqs [who are of Turkic origin] consider Haidaries to be originally Baluchis from south-eastern Iran who brought blacksmithing with them and who settled on lands already occupied by Qipchaqs. Other views expressed by informants are that they belong to the Cha[ha]r Aymaq group or that they were Ta[j]iks."

That many non-Magat Afghans call them 'Jats' refers to a supposed Indian origin. Some sources (for example [here](#)) indeed suggest a Panjabi or even Bengali origin for at least some of the peripatetic groups prior to when they became scattered around the Middle East and Central Asia.

Günther, based on his analysis of the Magats' oral traditions and linguistic structures, [concluded](#) they were local Central Asians. This also seems to be indicated by the names of their four subgroups, given both by Günther and Rao, which all refer to areas in Central Asia as their narrower geographic origin: Balkhigi, Tashkurghani (also known as Jalali, according to Rao), Kolabi and Bukharayi.

Magats themselves have a different narrative of their origins and do not link themselves with a peripatetic population prior to the migration to Afghanistan. While there is little personally remembered among their elders interviewed, the common and strongest notion relates them back to Samarkand, Bukhara and Kolab (Tajiki: Kulob), in today's Tajikistan. Baz Muhammad, an 87-year-old community elder living in the Chahrahi-ye Qambar informal camp of 400 families in west Kabul, told AAN:

We are from seven major cities in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. My origin goes back to Kolab and my grandfather and his father and their fathers lived settled lives in Kolab before he migrated to Afghanistan.

Shamsuddin from the Arzan Qemat camp told AAN:

I have heard stories of my people being merchants and travelers, of traveling to Kolab and Samarqand. I have heard so many great stories.

Saber from Chaman-e Babrak camp traced back his origin to Tajikistan:

When the [Soviets] occupied Central Asia, we were forced to migrate. Originally, 210 families came to Afghanistan and that is when they adopted a nomadic lifestyle. Back then, they did not care about military service or politics, they would travel around like kuchis. With a tighter regulation on the borders, war, and insecurity, we again were forced to leave the way we were living, settling in cities. Only then, did we realise our rights, the importance of documentation and how necessary it was.

d) Shifting identities

Despite being a distinctive ethnic group, the Magat have often internalised the external notions about them and their ethnicity – at least when talking to outsiders. Self-identification, particularly of smaller or vulnerable groups, is also always situation- and context-related. In such situations, Magats often identify as Tajik or Uzbek. The Samuel Hall study said that 76 per cent of the Magat surveyed claimed to be Tajik, 23 per cent Jogi and one per cent Uzbek. A 2015 [study for the Czech aid group People In Need \(PIN\)](#) had 39 per cent Tajik, 36 per cent Jogi and 16 per cent Tajik-Jogi.

Some Magat women, when approached by AAN, first refused to discuss their identity at all or denied that they were Magats and first introduced themselves as kuchis, Pashtuns from the east or displaced persons from different areas of Afghanistan.

e) What is their language?

When conversing with people from outside their community, most Magats are able to use their skills in the languages of the larger group surrounding them. They would use Dari and Uzbeki in the north, Pashto and Dari in the east.

However, when speaking among themselves, they speak a different language. When speaking to AAN, interviewees, and mostly female ones, did not want to reveal its name. They often called it the "Kuchi language," or sometimes even "a kind of Pashto."

The language spoken within the group is called *zabon-e Magati* (Magati language; Mogati being the local pronunciation in Kabul, and called Mogatibey in Central Asia). However, some interviewees mentioned Inkoas as its name. (Inko is a corruption of Hindko, an Indo-Iranian language spoken in north-western Pakistan, in and around Peshawar – which could be an argument for the Magats' Indian origin.) According to the Samuel Hall study, 19.6 per cent of the respondents from the Magats and Chori Forush in the Mazar-e Sharif area claimed to use another language within their households, described as “specific dialects only known by the members of these communities.”

This makes most Magat at least trilingual, with Magati bringing them together as a community. One of AAN's interviewees, who asked to be called ‘Gulo's father’, said

Everywhere in this county, if you approach one of us, they will tell you they speak Magati, that they remember their fathers or grandparents called themselves Magati. We all speak the language; we should be identified according to it.

Polish linguist Jadwiga Pstrusińska [called](#) Magati a “secret language” based on a dialect of Persian/Dari but with a vocabulary borrowed from different languages from the Indian peninsula, Arabic, Turkish and “Asiatic gypsies.” According to her, it serves a very specific social function, namely to protect the interests of the group, related to a “sense of threat to [their] people or business interests,” by preventing outsiders from understanding their conversations. (5) Günther, who called the language “defamiliarised [modified] Tajiki,” agreed. He related that “all speakers [of it] I met underlined time and again that this language was exclusively meant to be a dissociation in public [from speakers of other languages].” In their families, the Magat would speak normal Tajiki, Persian, Pashto, etc.

f) What does the term ‘Magat’ mean, and why do they reject being called ‘Jogi’?

As we have seen, there are many different names given to the Magat by neighbouring communities and in the literature. The most common ones are Jogi (or Jugi), Ghorbat and Haidari.

Jogi is usually thought to be a reference to the Indian *yogi*, a Sanskrit word describing a religious beggar or itinerant (Günther). Most Magat consider the term derogatory because, as Magat interviewees told AAN, it is generally associated with beggars and with someone being ‘dirty’ or ‘unworthy’. They seem to have internalised this view of the surrounding population, apparently reflecting the connotation of *Yogi/Jogi* as a term for a Hindu, ie a non-Muslim.

AAN heard another explanation, that the term was derived from a trade Magat women were perusing: they would carry leeches, in Farsi ‘jok’, for bloodletting and to treat joint pain, and people started to call them by the name of that parasitic worm, making it Jogi, via Jok and Joki. Abdurrahim, a 76-year-old member of the Magat community in Bagrami district told AAN:

We introduced cupping (hejamat) with leeches in Afghanistan. Then they started to call us by that. (...) We call ourselves Magats [he pronounced it Mogat], but never Jogi.

Some Magats, however, take pride in the term Jogi. The Samuel Hall study quoted one interviewee as saying “I am proud that people call me Jogi. Because our ethnicity is Jogi. Jogi means *zirot*, it comes from the name of a shrine.” Indeed, one group of the Magat, the Bukharayi, are followers of the Sufi *tariqa* founded by Borhanuddin Naqshband, whose shrine is in Bukhara.

The name that is used within the community itself is Magat. Gatelier quoted an informant in her 2004 article proudly stating: “We are all Magat!” And Günther has an example where Magat referred to themselves simply as *odam* (human being). Therefore, we are using the non-discriminatory term preferred by the majority of the community to refer to them in this text.

Losing the social niche

In contrast to the other peripatetic groups in Afghanistan, the Magats do not have – or no longer have – a specialised mode of earning their livelihoods, according to Günther. This seems to be a result of the changing political environment in the broader Central Asia, starting in the 19th century, and further uprooting from their original places of habitation as a result of the post-1978 Afghan wars.

According to Günther, the Magat would originally wander in loose groups through the region. These patterns of migration were first limited in the second half of the 19th century by the advance of Russian rule in Central Asia and then cut-off by the sealing off of the border between Soviet Central Asia and Afghanistan ([also see this AAN background](#)).

The Magats had no choice but to settle on one side of the border or the other. Günther wrote that the partial reopening of the borders after the collapse of the Soviet Union did not lead to a resumption of the old migrating patterns: “Afghanistan had not been adopted into the routes of mobility of the post-Soviet Mugat gypsies, as Afghanistan's Mugat did not see any reason why they should go to northern Central Asia.” This is confirmed by the PIN study quoted above in which interviewees told the authors that there were still about 600 families in Tajikistan. They said: “We don't get to see them, because the Afghan government does not give us the *tazkera* to visit them.” (6)

The various sources reviewed for this article indeed give a whole array of occupations for the scattered Magats who were apparently forced to diversify. Haji Dastagir from the Pul-e Kampani settlement, who had spent part of his life in Mazar-e Sharif, confirmed this to AAN:

The Jogis that lived in Mazar did not have a specific occupation. Some asked for money, some worked in day-to-day jobs and provided daily labour, some sold different handicraft articles and some engaged in animal trading.

Günther described them as “itinerant barterers” mainly peddling groceries and (cheap) jewellery, apart from collecting old clothes and shoes. He claims this was even the meaning of the name, Magat, they use as self-designation for their group. He said that some Magat also occasionally worked as non-professional musicians at gatherings of other parts of the population. There, they were allowed to play on the women’s side – in contrast to professional musicians, apparently of other ethnic backgrounds). The Magats, Günther wrote, “are sexually unsuspicious because of their [social] distance to the surrounding population and did not constitute a threat for their women,” as they were excluded from marital relations with them due to their inferior social position and distinct ethnic background making them ‘strangers’ in the eyes of the majority population.

Annika Schmeding wrote in her study for PIN that occupations Magats perform

... include begging; fortune telling; trinket selling; and fabricating and selling drums, bird cages, or sieves. Stereotypical views about these communities also associate them with abortion, bloodletting and prostitution.

Other sources of income are either under-developed or irregular (...). For instance, several [Magat] households encountered in this study are employed by non-[Magat] families in animal husbandry for which they are paid a set price per animal; [Magat] women become cleaning ladies and maids in non-[Magat] households; [Magat] men are passionately involved in raising birds, especially quails, for singing and fighting games, which provides an irregular surplus; some select men engage in the most Afghan of all sports: buzkashi, as riders and [as] jorchis (lit. town criers).

Rao added selling of herbal medicine, while the men were working in the harvesting of cotton and cereals. One of the few Afghan sources [describing](#) them said that the Magat women were engaged in “three main businesses”: selling cosmetics, begging and soothsaying. According to Günther, collecting old cloth was also the women’s job while the children would either beg or collect fodder for their animals. The Magat own horses, and sometimes breed them (for Buzkashi) or local variations of greyhound.

The Samuel Hall study quoted above called the Magats and the other peripatetic groups “the most marginalised communities in Afghanistan.” One of the results of this social exclusion is extreme poverty. For example, none of the Magat households covered in the 2015 PIN study “own any land, a factor, which they say, impacts every other level of their life.”

The special social role of Magat women

Schmeding’s description points to another important feature distinguishing the Magat and similar peripatetic groups from the main population, namely their tradition of women working. Women (and children) play a much larger role in contributing to household incomes than in the general Afghan population. According to the Samuel Hall study, 60 per cent of surveyed Magat (and Chori-Forush) households “have at least one woman working, compared with 5% in the rest of Afghan society.” Magat women earn up to 40 per cent and female children 2.3 per cent of the household incomes, according to the Samuel Hall study. The 2015 PIN paper found, however, that women only head 12 per cent of the surveyed households, “contrary to the general perception in Afghan society of Jogi [sic] households as [generally] economically and socially controlled by women.” Günther said the perception is based on the nature of the men’s work, as they “often go after their profession individually on the daily wage labour market and therefore cannot be perceived as a group by the local [...] population,” while the women often appear in – unveiled – groups.

Günther wrote from his field research:

In northern Afghanistan, the Magat women go gathering in the markets and the centres of the cities. For this purpose, they establish gathering collectives with women from other Magat groups [...]. They support each other, for example, in taking care of the children, exchange news, advise each other on current market prices and favourable selling places. [...] In my guest family [...], the young women would hand over the gathered items to the oldest women in the family [...].

Günther also wrote that the strong public role of the Magat women is favourable for non-Magat women: “It serves the women in many households of the majority population that the Magats bring items, particularly of female need, directly to their doors.” According to him, the Magats’ houses and tents do not have a distinction between male and female spaces, only during the night or when there are non-Magat guests.

Magat women’s and girls’ working also has adverse effects. It directly affects the school enrolment of girls. According to Samuel Hall, the rate of Magat female children in school is four times lower than that of non-Magats. As a result, “The levels of literacy of adults are – unsurprisingly – extremely low, with 99.2% of Jogi and Chori Frosh [sic] women and 96.2% of Jogi and Chori Frosh men completely illiterate.” According to the PIN paper, “[o]nly 13.3% of the male respondents and 1.2% of the female respondents were literate.”

The Magat women's contribution to their households' incomes makes the group significantly different from the rest of Afghan society. And, as Schmeding's paper points out, both this particular social feature and the nature of their professions are reasons why their community is excluded, or looked down upon, by the rest of Afghan society. Rao, in a 1986 paper "[Roles, Status and Mitches: A Comparison of Peripatetic and Pastoral Women in Afghanistan](#)", had already described the reason:

"In a predominantly Islamic society an unveiled woman unaccompanied by a male relative is outrageous enough. But the ,Ġat' [her spelling of Jat] woman went even further; she left her parental or conjugal home each day to peddle her wares and returned home with her earnings. She was thus a manifest challenge to existing norms and values. Similarly, the ,Ġat' man who stayed home to work at his craft, train animals, look after his children and do part of the housework in his wife's absence was frankly reversing the traditional role concept prevalent in the greater part of Afghan society."

Safia, a mother of two children working as a fortune teller whom AAN met at Qargha in northwestern Kabul, told AAN that fortune telling was something she learned from her mother when she was just a child.

This might sound odd to you, but this is education for us, the family's livelihood depends on women and children and we do our best not to disappoint the family. I learned this from my mother. I am taking my children to work with me too.

According to Günther, Magat women who are also healers are called *kalanua* – possibly a corruption of the Farsi/Dari word *kalan-ha*, for people (men) of influence. These women also often head households and are turned to for mediating in conflicts.

The PIN study denies the common perception that the livelihood of Magat families depends solely on women and that Magat men do not work outside. The paper said this is part of the social stigma against them. However, the fact that a significant percentage of family incomes is brought in by women gives them leverage in decision making. Acknowledging this pattern is often difficult for—or denied by—Magat men, reflecting the effects of more general Afghan cultural norms on the community.

Shayesta, another Magat mother, wandering with her children around the Arzan Qemat area, confirmed to AAN that her work brings her a sense of control she needs over her life:

My eldest daughter got really sick, her kidney stopped working and she became immobile, just lying in the corner of the room for weeks. I had some money saved for building a better shelter for us in the camp. My father-in-law also promised to dig a water well for the household if I continued saving up. However, when my daughter got sick, I decided to use the money for her treatment. With the resistance I first faced from the men in the family I knew if I had not saved up, they would not have helped me with the treatment. But I had the means to save her, and it gives me a sense of control over my and my family's life.

Magats' own perceptions have started changing, becoming more similar to those of the wider society. The 2011 Samuel Hall study found "increasing unease" about their women's active role among young male 'Jogis' in Mazar-e-Sharif, quoting an 18 years-old as saying: "It is very difficult for us to let our women work outside our houses. A lot of people say bad things about our women because they work outside. We do not like it because people see our women." The study continued saying: "Another evidence of this is the fact that the few Jogi men who achieved some social success made their women stop begging and stay in their houses." Günther observed the same: "Often, a Magat family adopts the cultural patterns on the surrounding population when settling in a certain neighbourhood. The economic cooperation between the sexes stops, the women remain indoors etc."

The Magats' legal place in Afghan society

The authorities reflect the general attitude toward the peripatetic population. Despite their long presence in the country, the Magats were not recognised as citizens, even though Afghanistan became increasingly ruled by laws, starting with Amanullah's reign in 1919.

The consequences of their statelessness have been grave for them. The restriction on them on owning real estate in Afghanistan, which is directly linked with their legal and citizenship status in the country, has reinforced their social stigma. No legal status has meant no permanent place to settle. They were faced with "the ever-present threat of expulsion," as the PIN study put it.

Mir Alam, 55 years old and a community leader in the Chaharrahi-ye Qambar settlement, speaking to AAN, when asked about the general social perception about their community, recalls the family discussion over how they were forced to leave his family's settlements in Qataghan (a now-defunct province encompassing Takhar, Kunduz and Baghlan) 50 years ago and were displaced first to Mazar-e Sharif, then Iran and then came back to Kabul in 2003:

We had land. My grandfather had bought some land in Qataghan. But after some years, we were forced out because of our property and had no choice but to migrate. They did not want Jogis in their neighborhood. We have never belonged to their community.

The situation of the Mir Alam family was exceptional, though. Two other Magat sources told AAN about a far more dire situation.

Shamsuddin from the Arzan Qemat camp said:

My father and grandfather both lived and died in Qataghan. My grandfather's grave is in Emam Sahib. However, we did not have land there and people did not really count us as one of their own, because we did not have anything. We did not own anything, and who likes poor communities?

Mullah Rahman, a 60 years-old living in a Magat settlement in Nassaji-ye Bagrami (near the defunct Bagrami textile mill) in PD 8 in Kabul's southeast, told AAN:

I was born in Qataghan. I was raised there before we were forced to migrate to Pakistan during the Soviet invasion. We did not have land properties. We never had owned land in any part of Afghanistan. What we did was mostly mazduri and gharib kari (daily labour). We were khana ba dush (lit: with the house on the shoulders) as long as I remember. One season in Takhar, one season in Mazar, sometimes in Kunduz. [...] Now, returned from Pakistan 10 years ago. I and my family have no place in Kabul that we can call home. Our community is living in a dirty backyard of this Mahal (community or village) and for being able to build a shelter or a tent here I have to pay 500 Afs (7.2 \$) of rent monthly.

The PIN study quoted one informant as saying:

Once we built houses and a mosque in Sheberghan [in Jowzjan province], but then they destroyed our houses. Another time we built houses on governmental land and again the people didn't let us stay there. They destroyed our houses. The fighting started and now we came here, twenty days ago, to our relatives. We don't have a specific piece of land where we would like to stay.

This situation prevails to the day. On the first day of Ramadan in 2015, an informal Magat settlement in Kabul's Chaman-e Babrak was attacked. According to a 2016 [Amnesty International report](#),

... police officers belonging to Police Station District Four of Kabul city and men in military-style uniforms (but not identifiable police or army uniforms) turned up at the settlement with bulldozers and started to destroy some of the makeshift shelters in Chaman-e-Babarak settlement. In an attempt to halt the destruction of their homes, a camp elder tried to negotiate with the men to stop the eviction and to let them stay on during the month of Ramadan. But as soon as the elder approached the armed men they started to beat him. Shortly after, a group of camp residents gathered in a protest against the elder's treatment and the destruction of their homes. They told Amnesty International that while they were demonstrating, the armed men and police started shooting at the demonstrators. In total 10 residents, including a 12-year-old boy, were injured in the shooting and a further two men died later in a nearby hospital run by Emergency, a medical NGO focused on trauma surgery.

While Amnesty reported of continued threats by different armed men since 2015, there has not been any attempt of forced eviction since 2018 in Chaman-e Babrak camp, community representative Saber told AAN. However, the grave of the killed men, located in the gateway to the informal settlement, is a reminder of both marginalisation and resistance for the community.

Residents of the Diwan Begi settlement in Kabul related several attempts by local strongmen, "warlords" and those in power to remove Magats from their places, sometimes successfully so. For instance, around 100 families who lived in an informal camp in the Karte-ye Parwan area on land that was originally government-owned were forced out in 2017. Now residential buildings and a private hospital have been built in its place.

Due to the absence of land and property ownership and continued dehumanisation and discrimination, the Magats also lack their own community graveyards and, wherever they lived, have not been allowed to use the graveyards of their neighbourhoods. Hekmat, the elder son of Baz Muhammad and father of three children living in Charrahi-ye Qambar, recalled:

My late grandfather, when he died, we first took his body to our neighborhood's graveyard in Khushhal Khan [Mena, in west Kabul]. People came and fought with us, they cursed us and called us dirty. They did not want him to be buried in their community's graveyard. It was winter. Imagine searching for a grave to bury your dead for hours. We finally took him to a public graveyard in Pul-e Charkhi."

The anonymous Magat woman quoted above told AAN:

It's a huge struggle, when one of us dies, we have to deal with the grief as well as discrimination. We do not have any place to bury our dead. Most often, we are not allowed to bury them in our neighborhood graveyards. They [non-Magat] will not let a jogi [sic] be buried amongst their dead. So, we have to take them to public ones or fake our identity and bury them in areas where people do not know us. Jogis have no dead, they say.

The fact that the Magats do not have their own places to bury their dead due to communal discrimination, and that the places where they do bury them are in places where their identity as Magats is unknown to other communities, feeds the social stigma even more. Some Afghans even believe that the Magat eat their dead (see [here](#)) – a clear example of how the marginalisation of the community feeds further into discriminations, false beliefs towards them that lead to the further social isolation of the community.

Tazkeras for the elections

Authorities' interest in the Magat started in the 1970s and increased during the wars that broke out in the late 1970s. Rao wrote that the Daud government (1973-78) extended conscription on Magat men who, in return, received tazkeras. According to Günther, this practice was accelerated in the 1980s under President Najibullah, due to military necessities; the PDPA government had an acute shortage of recruits.

The Magats' own struggle for their rights started at a later date. Community leaders of the Magat told AAN that this started when they settled in the big cities after the collapse of the Taleban regime and their return from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Public advocacy for the legal documentation of the Magats has been going on since 2006 when the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) took up the issue of the Magats' documentation and brought it to the attention of the then-president Karzai. The major positive response was that Karzai sent instructions to an Internally Displaced Person's taskforce to provide tazkeras to the community. But the authorities never delivered on Karzai's promise, and this continued under the change in power since 2014. In 2014, when the National Unity Government under President Ashraf Ghani came to power, more applications were submitted to different ministries asking for legal rights and legal documentation. Baz Mohammad, the community elder from Chaharrahi-ye Qambar, recounted:

We wrote to the ministry of border and tribal affairs, ministry of justice, ministry of Refugees and Repatriation; we approached parliament members. They were tired of us. Finally, they said we have to write to the president. We sought help from some of the parliament members to write a request to the president.

Between 2011 and 2018, however, no Magat has received a tazkera based on their own ethnicity, according to key informants interviewed by AAN.

Finally, the April 2018 presidential order entitled the Magats to acquire a tazkera. But even then, the order issued by Ghani, an anthropologist, addressed them by their derogatory name – as “qawm-e Jogi” (Jogi tribe).

The first round of tazkera distribution among Magats was a very easy and straight forward procedure. In most cases, the officials went to the communities and their settlements and distributed the ID cards to the people there. Ziadullah, a father of five children, told AAN that he had received his tazkera in 2018 through a delegation from the civil registration authority that had visited their settlement in Chaman-e Babrak.

But then, when trying to apply for tazkeras for their children in Kabul, the Magats were asked to go to the provinces of their origin or the one stated as their origin in their tazkera to follow the official procedure. Ziadullah told AAN that for his children's tazkeras he was asked to go to Kunduz province because this was mentioned as his home province in his own tazkera. He said, however, he had obtained his tazkera based on the endorsement of a Magat elder whose tazkera was from Kunduz many years ago, while most other Magats got their tazkera during the last two years in Kabul. Sticking to the usual procedure is particularly tough for the Magat, as they do not have contacts in the provinces. Moreover, bad security and extreme poverty makes travelling for them even more difficult.

The 2016 NRC report confirmed that there was a clear difference between Kabul and other provinces when it came to the political willingness of local authorities to provide the Magats with tazkeras. The report said that outside Kabul, officials are less positive and open to the idea of considering Magats as citizens of Afghanistan. NRC also reported that in the formal and informal settlements for IDPs it surveyed, the number of Magats that had obtained a tazkera by 2016 was up to 20 per cent, while it exceeded 90 per cent for other groups living in the settlements. The report confirmed that the Magats that did report having a tazkera actually had obtained them as ‘kuchis,’ with registered winter and summer places of residence, while most Magats have settled in permanent places.

Corruption is another barrier to the Magats' legal documentation. Authorities now often illegally charge them 800 to 1000 Afghani (11.6 to 13.2 US\$) for a tazkera, even though, according to the law, they are free of charge for all citizens. Given the extreme poverty the community lives in, this practice makes it almost impossible to obtain tazkeras for the whole family. The Samuel Hall paper puts the Magats' household income at about half of what non-Magat households earn in the same community

Abdul Kabir, a Magat man of around 40 years of age, told AAN:

[Before], they gave us tazkeras on our doorsteps and with no charges. Now – ask everyone here – we have to pay about around 1,000 Afghani to be able to get one. And this is all illegal. They especially make it difficult for us because we are Jogi.

After the election campaign-related tazkera issuance (discussed further below), discriminatory behaviour by the authorities has picked up again. Ghayer, a Magat previously living in Kabul's Butkhak area and now in Jalalabad with his family, told AAN that when they were still in Kabul last year, their community leader finally managed to get tazkeras for the adults of the camp and for some of the children. Those families who also want to get tazkeras for their children, have to go back to Kabul as this is the place recorded in the adults' ID cards. He said:

The moment they get to know we are Jogi [sic], the procedure gets complicated. Normally applying for a tazkera, however complicated, does not take more than two days, but for us, it's very different. Now, for our children, if possible at all, it takes months and an extra amount of money which, for most, is not affordable.

Despite the on-going discrimination, Abdul Qadir, a rare Magat high school graduate and one of their community leaders in Kabul interviewed by AAN in December 2019, said he estimated that around 8,000 of their community had cast their votes in the September 2019 election. This was confirmed by Saber, the community leader already quoted above. He estimated that 14,600 Magat votes had been cast from their communities in northern Afghanistan and Kabul.

This seems to reflect a collective gratitude towards president Ghani in return for his order that granted tazkeras and thus a national identity for the Magat. This was confirmed by Baz Mohammad: “I cast my vote for President Ghani, and I did it proudly. For 18 years no one heard us, we never were counted as Afghans, and he understood history and the suffering of a community enough to order tazkeras for us.” Ghani was proclaimer winner with a margin of 0.64 per cent of the vote, less than 12,000 votes. This means that if the leaders’ estimates are realistic, the Magat gave him two-thirds of the victory margin.

Conclusion

The Magats and similar groups in Afghanistan and the region have gone through deep social changes over the past one-and-a-half centuries. Much of this was induced by violence: the closing of borders and war. Forced to stop their specialised itinerant modes of lifestyle to a large degree, they settled down in northern Afghanistan, only to be uprooted by the recent rounds of war since 1979. These wars turned them into IDPs, now settled in temporary camps and informal settlements. As Annika Schmieding put it in her 2015 study: Magats were now “perceived as a part of the general population on the move.” Despite their long presence on Afghan soil and their symbiotic type of relationship with the majority population, they were not even considered second-class citizens.

The battle for Magats’ legal rights has been long and painful. Social isolation, hostile attitudes and pejorative language towards them, and their lack of agency due to the lack of citizenship rights has been a vicious cycle and slowed down the process of gaining their rights. This seemed to have been overcome when the government of Ashraf Ghani discovered their value as voters and made sure that many Magats received national ID cards and, with them, the right to vote in 2019. Since then, this process has reverted, and discriminatory behaviour by the authorities continues, according to some of the Magat contacts AAN spoke with, showing that the distribution of tazkeras was more a political manoeuvre than a rights-driven initiative.

The Magats and the other peripatetic groups in Afghanistan still exist largely at the sidelines of Afghanistan’s society. In Afghanistan, social bias is even more difficult to overcome than institutional discrimination. On the other hand, now that many have tazkeras and, as IDPs and returnees, are less distinguishable from the larger population, it is more difficult for the authorities to deny them other rights, such as the right to education and access to health facilities.

Edited by Christian Bleuer

(1) This is an Islamic concept, recognising those asking as legitimately poor, and obliging other Muslims to help them.

(2) Karine Gatelier, “La représentation des Mugat dans les sources écrites : réalité de leur mobilité et de la sédentarité”, *Cahiers d’Asie centrale*, 11/12 2004 (Les Montagnards d’Asie central). Masalskij is quoted in Gatelier: Masal’skij V. I., *Rossija: polnoe geografičeskoe opisanie našego otečestva*, vol 19, *Turkestanskij kraj* [[Russia: Complete geographical description of our fatherland, Vol 19: Turkestan]. St Petersburg, 1913. Günther’s papers are directly linked in the text where quoted.

(3) The 1992 law entitles the Magats to citizenship. Article 12 stipulates, for example, that if a child is found on Afghan soil without citizenship documentation of his or her parents, they have the right to receive citizenship documents. Article 15 also stipulates that stateless individuals of over 18 years of age can request citizenship, and would have to prove a stay of over five years in the country and a clean criminal record in this duration of stay to be given citizenship. Under the Taleban citizenship law issued in 2000, which is still valid according to the Ministry of Justice, the right to citizenship by birth is stated in article 10. A new citizenship law is under consideration and is with the Meshrano Jerga for finalisation at the moment. The draft stipulates in its article 15 that a stateless person can apply to become a citizen of Afghanistan if:

- s/he has reached 18 years of age;
- has lived in Afghanistan for more than five years;
- has committed no crimes and no legal charges pending.

Under the draft new law, passed by the lower house of parliament on 27 November 2019, applicants would not even have to state to which ethnic group they belong to receive legal documentation.

(4) RK Hayden, “The cultural ecology of service nomads”, in: *The Eastern Anthropologist* 32(4), pp297-309.

Rao’s main work consulted for this report is: [“Folk Models and Inter-Ethnic Relations in Afghanistan: A Case Study of Some Peripatetic Communities”](#), in: Jean-Pierre Digard (ed), *Le fait ethnique en Iran et en Afghanistan, Colloques internationaux du CNRS*, 1988.

(5) Such “secret languages” are also called “argot.” It seems that Magati is very similar to the argot or secret language Chistonegi, which is used by members of the Chistoni group, sieve weavers living scattered over the territory of the Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Sources:
Ruttig, Thomas (Author), Sabawoon, Ali Mohammad (Author), published by AAN

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(6) The aftermaths of the wars starting in 1979 may have allowed *some* Magats to once again travel across borders that were closed by the Soviets, as also itinerant groups were able to use refugee camps and refugee resettlement programs to get from Pakistan to Afghanistan, and from Afghanistan to Tajikistan. Getting to Tajikistan was a possibility again in the mid-1990s from camps in Kunduz or Takhar if someone claimed to be a refugee who was recently from Tajikistan. For example, the editor of this text met two Magat women in Dushanbe who spoke Urdu/Hindi, and the local researcher he was with at the time explained how they hopped from refugee camp to refugee camp. A return to Uzbekistan is, of course, completely impossible, due to its strictly sealed off border with Afghanistan.

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