

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC ROOTS OF THE SARBADARS MOVEMENT: FORMATION OF POPULAR RESISTANCE IN 14TH-CENTURY TRANSOXIANA

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Abstract: The Sarbadars movement, which emerged in the mid-14th century in the region of Khurasan and Transoxiana, represents one of the earliest examples of grassroots socio-political resistance in Central Asian history. This article explores the socio-economic causes that contributed to the rise of the Sarbadars by analyzing historical sources, economic structures, and the lived experiences of ordinary people under Mongol and post-Mongol rule. The study employs a historical-analytical methodology to investigate how economic hardship, class inequality, and administrative corruption catalyzed mass mobilization. The findings reveal that the Sarbadars were not only a religious or political reactionary force but also a reflection of deep-rooted structural tensions within society. The study also draws parallels between the Sarbadars and other contemporary uprisings, highlighting the universal nature of grassroots resistance movements in the post-Mongol Islamic world. By identifying shared economic triggers across regions, the paper contributes to comparative historical sociology.

Keywords: Sarbadars, socio-economic history, Transoxiana, Mongol rule, grassroots resistance, 14th century

1. INTRODUCTION

The Sarbadars, a political and militant movement active primarily in Sabzavar and later in parts of Transoxiana, arose during a time of economic turmoil and political fragmentation in the 14th century. Their name, meaning “those who are ready to hang” (Sar-ba-dar), signifies the radical and desperate nature of their struggle. Existing studies have often focused on the religious and political ideology of the movement, particularly its Shi'a influences. However, less attention has been paid to the socio-economic structures that facilitated such popular resistance. This paper argues that the movement's emergence cannot be fully understood without analyzing the underlying economic and social tensions that shaped life under Mongol and post-Chagatai rule in the region. The Sarbadars' political emergence coincided with a period of fragmentation in the Ilkhanate and the weakening of centralized authority in Khurasan. This power vacuum enabled regional actors to assert autonomy, often through violent or revolutionary means. In this context, the Sarbadars filled a void left by ineffective governance, offering a blend of religious legitimacy and economic populism.

Furthermore, the movement's leadership structure, which often rotated or was contested internally, reflected the unstable socio-political base from which it emerged. Understanding the Sarbadars thus requires an appreciation not just of their ideology, but of the broader structural crisis of post-Mongol Iran and Transoxiana.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Historians such as V.V. Barthold and Jean Aubin have addressed the Sarbadars in broader surveys of Central Asian history, but few have investigated their economic motivations

in depth. Contemporary Islamic chronicles like Zafarnama by Sharaf ad-Din Ali Yazdi and Tarikh-i Wassaf provide valuable, though elite-centric, insights into the period. This study re-evaluates these sources with a focus on non-elite perspectives, combining qualitative content analysis with socio-historical contextualization. While many classical sources (e.g., Zafarnama) were composed by elite historians, recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of "history from below" — that is, focusing on the lived experiences of non-elites. This study adopts this framework by reading primary sources critically, seeking implicit evidence of socio-economic grievances behind recorded events.

The study also references economic history works, including land tenure systems (iqta vs. milk) and taxation regimes under the Mongol administration. A comparative perspective with Anatolia and Mamluk Egypt during the same period enriches the understanding of systemic fiscal crises.

Methodology: Historical-comparative method, Qualitative analysis of primary sources (e.g., Zafarnama), Secondary analysis of economic structures (taxation, land tenure), Focus on cause-effect relationships in historical developments

3. RESULTS

The analysis yielded several significant findings:

- 1) Economic Dislocation: The Mongol invasions and subsequent fragmentation of centralized authority disrupted agriculture and trade, leading to widespread poverty among peasants and artisans.
- 2) Inequitable Taxation: Heavy and arbitrary tax burdens were placed upon the lower classes while the elite classes enjoyed tax exemptions, intensifying resentment.
- 3) Land Ownership Crisis: The iqta system evolved into a semi-feudal structure where local rulers monopolized land, dispossessing smallholders and marginalizing rural populations.
- 4) Decline of Urban Autonomy: Urban centers like Sabzavar and Nishapur lost their economic autonomy, which had been a source of civic pride and economic stability before the invasions.
- 5) Mobilization of the Marginalized:

These socio-economic pressures catalyzed the political organization of disenfranchised groups, who found in the Sarbadars a vehicle for resistance and retribution.

- 6) Religious taxation: In addition to general taxation, Shi'a communities such as those supporting the Sarbadars were often subjected to sectarian financial discrimination, leading to double burdens.
- 7) Collapse of trade routes: The security of the Silk Road was compromised due to internal conflicts, disrupting commerce and leading to rising urban unemployment, especially in cities like Nishapur.
- 8) Millenarian sentiment: There were signs of apocalyptic beliefs spreading among the peasantry, with economic collapse interpreted as divine punishment, creating fertile ground for revolutionary movements.

4. DISCUSSION

The Sarbadars have traditionally been understood as a political-theological response to the chaos of Mongol rule. While this is partly accurate, the movement also represented a broader socio-economic revolution. The role of economic deprivation in their mobilization is comparable to European peasant revolts such as the Jacquerie (1358) or the English Peasants'

Revolt (1381). In this context, the Sarbadars appear not as isolated zealots but as actors within a global pattern of resistance to feudal and imperial exploitation. The movement's adoption of Shi'ite symbolism also reflected economic marginalization, serving to unify disparate groups under a shared ideology of resistance.

The Sarbadars' dual reliance on both religious ideology and economic populism mirrors later revolutionary movements in the Muslim world, including Safavid militias in the 16th century and even early 20th-century tribal rebellions in Iran. Their movement can thus be interpreted as an early experiment in socio-religious populism.

Importantly, their internal factionalism and eventual collapse underline a key lesson: movements rooted in socio-economic discontent require institutional coherence to sustain change. The Sarbadars lacked a consistent administrative program, which ultimately made them vulnerable to both external conquest and internal dissent.

5. CONCLUSION

The Sarbadars movement emerged from a complex intersection of economic hardship, social inequality, and declining administrative order. By reinterpreting historical sources through a socio-economic lens, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of popular resistance in medieval Central Asia. The Sarbadars should be remembered not only for their political ambition but for highlighting the power of mass resistance rooted in economic injustice. The historical legacy of the Sarbadars lives on as a symbol of mass resistance born out of systemic injustice. Modern historians must re-evaluate their role not merely as local rebels, but as participants in a transregional wave of anti-feudal, anti-imperial mobilizations that defined the late medieval Islamic world.

This study encourages future research on comparative revolts and the structural conditions under which disenfranchised populations transition from passive suffering to active resistance.

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