

Peasants, Zamindars and the State

Sources to reconstruct the agrarian history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

1. Chronicles and documents from the Mughal court

One of the most important chronicles was the *Ain-i Akbari* authored by Akbar's court historian **Abu'lFazl**. This text meticulously recorded the arrangements made by the state to ensure cultivation, to enable the collection of revenue by the agencies of the state and to regulate the relationship between the state and rural magnates, the zamindars.

2. **The detailed revenue records** from Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan dating from the 17th and 18th centuries.
3. **The extensive records of the East India Company** provide us with useful descriptions of agrarian relations in eastern India.

All these sources record instances of conflicts between peasants, zamindars and the state. They give us an insight into peasants' perception of and their expectations of fairness from the state.

Various Terms used for describing peasants

- The term which Indo-Persian sources of the Mughal period most frequently used to denote a peasant was **raiyyat** or **muzarian**. In addition, we also encounter the terms **kisan** or **asami**
- Sources of the seventeenth century refer to two kinds of peasants – **khud-kashta** and **pahi-kashta**.
- The **khud-kashta** were residents of the village in which they held their lands.
- The **pahi-kashta** were non-resident cultivators who belonged to some other village, but cultivated lands elsewhere on a contractual basis.
- People became pahi-kashta either out of choice or out of compulsion.
- When terms of revenue in a distant village were more favourable peasants moved to other villages. Sometimes they were forced by economic distress after a famine.

Possessions of peasants

- Average peasant of north India possessed a pair of bulls and one plough. Others possessed two pairs of bulls and two ploughs; most possessed even less. In Gujarat peasants possessing about six acres of land were considered to be affluent. In Bengal, five acres was the upper limit of an average peasant farm. Cultivation was based on the principle of individual ownership.

Irrigation and technology used by the peasants

There were three factors that contributed for the expansion of agriculture.

- Abundance of land,
- Available labour
- Mobility of peasants.
- Since the primary purpose of agriculture is to feed people, basic staples such as rice, wheat or millets were the most frequently cultivated crops. Monsoons remained the backbone of Indian agriculture. But there were crops which required additional water. Artificial systems of irrigation had to be devised for this.
- In northern India the state undertook digging of new canals and also repaired old ones like the shahnahr in the Punjab during Shah Jahan's reign.
- Though agriculture was labour intensive, peasants did use technologies that often harnessed cattle energy.
- One example was the wooden plough, which was light and easily assembled with an iron tip or coulter.
- A drill, pulled by a pair of giant oxen, was used to plant seeds, but broadcasting of seed was the most prevalent method.
- Hoeing and weeding were done simultaneously using a narrow iron blade with a small wooden handle.

Agricultural production in the 16th and 17th centuries: Seasonal cycles and crops

- Agriculture was organised around two major seasonal cycles, the **kharif** and the **rabi**. This would mean that most regions produced a minimum of two crops a year whereas some, where rainfall or irrigation assured a continuous supply of water, even gave three crops.
- ❖ In the Mughal provinces of Agra produced 39 varieties of crops and Delhi produced 43 over the two seasons.
- ❖ Bengal produced 50 varieties of rice alone. However, the focus on the cultivation was basic staples such as rice, wheat, pulses and vegetables etc.
- ❖ The Mughal state also encouraged peasants to cultivate cash crops such as cotton, oilseeds and sugarcane which brought more revenue
- During the seventeenth century several new crops from different parts of the world reached the Indian subcontinent. **Maize** (*makka*) was introduced into India via Africa and Spain and by the seventeenth century it was being listed as one of the major crops of western India. Vegetables like tomatoes, potatoes and chillies were introduced from the New World at this time, as were fruits like the pineapple and the papaya.

The Village community

- Agricultural production involved the intensive participation and initiative of the peasantry. Agriculture was based on the principle of individual ownership. But they belonged to a collective village community. There were three constituents of this community-the cultivators, the panchayat, and the village headman.

Caste and the rural milieu

- Despite the abundance of cultivable land, certain caste groups were assigned menial tasks and thus relegated to poverty. Such groups comprised a large section of the village population, had the least resources and were constrained by their position in the caste hierarchy, much like the Dalits of modern India.
- In Muslim communities menials like the halalkhoran, those who cut meat were housed outside the boundaries of the village; similarly the mallahzadas, boatmen in Bihar were comparable to slaves.
- There was a direct correlation between caste, poverty and social status at the lower strata of society.
- In Marwar, Rajputs are mentioned as peasants, sharing the same space with Jats, who were accorded a lower status in the caste hierarchy.
- The Gauravas, who cultivated land in Uttar Pradesh sought Rajput status in the seventeenth century.
- Castes such as the Ahirs, Gujars and Malis rose in the hierarchy because of the profitability of cattle rearing and horticulture.
- In the eastern regions, intermediate pastoral and fishing castes like the Sadgops and Kaivartas acquired the status of peasants.

Panchayats and Village headmen

- The village panchayat was an **assembly of elders**. In mixed-caste villages, the panchayat was usually a heterogeneous body. The panchayat represented various castes and communities in the village so it is called an oligarchy.
- The panchayat was headed by a headman known as **muqaddam** or **mandal**. Some sources suggest that the headman was chosen through the consensus of the village elders, and that this choice had to be ratified by the zamindar. Headmen held office as long as they enjoyed the confidence of the village elders. The panchayat derived its funds from contributions made by individuals to a common financial pool.

Functions of Panchayat

- The village headman supervised the **preparation of village accounts**, assisted by the accountant or patwari of the panchayat.
- The panchayat had to **undertake welfare measures for the village people** (community welfare) such as construction of bund or digging the canal which peasants usually could not afford to do on their own.

- The panchayat also made **arrangements against natural calamities**, like floods, famine, droughts etc.
- One important function of the panchayat was to ensure that **caste boundaries among the various communities** inhabiting the village were upheld. In eastern India all marriages were held in the presence of the *mandal*.
- Panchayats also had the authority to **levy fines and inflict more serious forms of punishment** like expulsion from the community. It meant that a person forced to leave the village became an outcaste and lost his right to practise his profession.
- In western India people of lower castes presented petitions to the panchayat complaining about extortionate taxation or the demand for unpaid labour (begar) imposed by the “superior” castes or officials of the state.
- In the eyes of the petitioners the right to the basic minimum for survival was sanctioned by custom. They regarded the village panchayat as the court of appeal that would ensure that the state carried out its moral obligations and guaranteed justice. The decision of the panchayat in conflicts between “lower –caste”peasants and state officials or the local zamindar could vary from case to case. In cases of excessive revenue demands, the panchayat often suggested compromise. In cases where reconciliation failed; peasants took recourse to more drastic forms of resistance, such as deserting the village.

Role played by the Jati Panchayat

- In addition to the village panchayat each sub-caste or jati in the village had its own jati panchayat. These panchayats wielded considerable power in rural society.
- In Rajasthan jati panchayats arbitrated civil disputes between members of different castes.
- They mediated in contested claims on land, decided whether marriages were performed according to the norms laid down by a particular caste group and determined who had ritual precedence in village functions, and so on.
- In most cases, except in matters of criminal justice, the state respected the decisions of jati panchayats.

Life of Village artisans

- 25 per cent of the total households in the villages were artisans. The distinction between artisans and peasants in village society was a fluid one; as many groups performed the tasks of both. Cultivators and their families would also participate in craft production – such as dyeing, textile printing, baking and firing of pottery, making and repairing agricultural implements.
- Village artisans – potters, blacksmiths, carpenters, even goldsmiths – provided specialized services. In return, the village people gave them a share of the harvest, or an allotment of land, perhaps cultivable wastes, which was likely to be decided by the panchayat.

- ❖ Zamindars in Bengal who remunerated blacksmiths, carpenters, even goldsmiths for their work by paying them “a small daily allowance and diet money”. This later came to be described as the **jajmani** system, though the term was not in vogue in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Village as a “little republic”

- Some British officials in the nineteenth century saw the village as a “little republic”. Because villages were made up of fraternal partners of sharing resources and labour in a collective. However, this was not a sign of rural egalitarianism.
- There was individual ownership of assets and deep inequities based on caste and gender distinctions. A group of powerful individuals decided the affairs of the village, exploited the weaker sections and had the authority to dispense justice.

Role played by women in Agrarian Society under Mughal rule

- Women worked shoulder to shoulder with men in fields. Men tilled and ploughed, while **women sowed, weeded, threshed and winnowed the harvest**. With the growth of nucleated villages and expansion in individuated peasant farming the basis of production was the labour and resources of the entire household.
- **Biases related to women’s biological functions did continue**. Menstruating women, for instance, were not allowed to touch the plough or the potter’s wheel in western India, or enter the groves where betel-leaves were grown.
- **Artisanal tasks such as spinning yarn, sifting and kneading clay for pottery, and embroidery** were among the many aspects of production dependent on female labour. In fact, peasant and artisan women worked not only in the fields, but even went to the houses of their employers or to the markets if necessary.
- Women were considered **an important resource in agrarian society** also because they were child bearers in a society which depends on labour. At the same time, high mortality rates among women – owing to malnutrition, frequent pregnancies and death during childbirth – often meant a shortage of wives.
- Shortage of women led to the emergence of new social customs in peasant and artisan communities that were distinct from those prevalent among elite groups. Marriages in many rural communities required the payment of **bride-price** rather than **dowry** to the bride’s family.
- **Remarriage** was considered legitimate both among divorced and widowed women. The importance attached to women as a productive force also meant that the fear of losing control over them was great.
- According to established social norms, the household was headed by a male. Thus women were **kept under strict control by the male members** of the family and draconian punishments were given to suspected infidelity on the part of women. Women sent petitions to the village panchayat, seeking redress and justice. Wives protested against the infidelity of their husbands or the neglect of the wife and children by the male head of the household.

- Amongst the landed gentry, **women had the right to inherit property**. Instances from the Punjab show that women, including widows, actively participated in the rural land market as sellers of property inherited by them. Hindu and Muslim women inherited zamindaris which they were free to sell or mortgage. Women zamindars were known in eighteenth-century Bengal.

Life of forest dwellers in Mughal Period

- According to estimates based on contemporary sources, an average of **40%** of the land was covered by forests.(Scrubland(kharbandi)or dense forest(jangal)
- Forest dwellers were termed **jangli** in contemporary texts. Jangli did not mean an absence of “civilisation”.The term described those whose livelihood came from the gathering of forest produce, hunting and shifting agriculture. These activities of the forest dwellers were largely season specific in nature.
- For example, the Bhils used to collect forest produce in the spring season, fish in the summer, cultivate crops in the monsoon and used to hunt animals in the autumn and winter. This sequential procedure perpetuated mobility, which became a distinctive feature of forest tribes.

Babur’s remark on the forest dwellers

- He considered the forest to be a subversive place-a refuge (mawas) for trouble makers to hide and avoid paying taxes.
- Babur says that jungles provided a good defence “behind which the people of the pargana become stubbornly rebellious and pay no taxes”.

Intrusion into the forest

- The Mughal state required elephants for the army. So the **peshkash** levied from forest people often included a supply of elephants. In the Mughal political ideology, the hunt symbolised the overwhelming concern of the state to ensure justice to all its subjects, rich and poor. Rulers went for regular hunting expeditions which enabled the emperor to travel across the extensive territories of his empire and personally attend to the grievances of its inhabitants.

Exchange of Commodities

- The spread of commercial agriculture was an important external factor that impinged on the lives of those who lived in the forests. Forest products –like honey, beeswax and gum lac, elephants – were in great demand. Some, such as gum lac, became major items of overseas export from India in the seventeenth century. The exchange of commodities took place via the barter system as well. For example, the Lohanis in the Punjab engaged with overland trade with countries like Afghanistan, along with trade within the Punjab region.

Social changes in the lives of forest dwellers

- Social factors also brought changes in the lives of forest dwellers. Like the head men of the villages, tribes also had their chieftains. The chieftains of tribes became zamindars and some even became kings. Tribal Kings recruited people from their lineage groups or demanded that their fraternity in order to build up their army.
- ❖ For example, Tribes in the Sind region had armies comprising 6,000 cavalry and 7,000 infantry.
- ❖ In Assam, the Ahom kings had their paiks, people who were obliged to render military service in exchange for land. The capture of wild elephants was made a monopoly of the Ahom kings.

Transition from a tribal to monarchical system

- ❖ The transition from a tribal to a monarchical system had started much earlier in India. Ain-i-Akbari observes the presence of tribal kingdoms in the north east. War was a common occurrence between tribal kingdoms in the north-east.
- ❖ For example, The Koch kings fought and subjugated a number of neighbouring tribes in a long sequence of wars through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Role of the Zamindars in rural society during 16th and 17th century

- Zamindars were **landed proprietors** and also enjoyed certain social and economic privileges. Caste was one factor for their elevated status. They performed certain services (*khidmat*) for the state.
- The zamindars held extensive personal lands (milkiyat, meaning property). Milkiyat lands were cultivated for the private use of zamindars with the help of hired labour. The zamindars could sell or donate these lands at will.
- Zamindars also enjoyed the right to collect revenue on behalf of the state. They had control over military resources. They had fortresses (qilachas) as well as armed contingent comprising units of cavalry, artillery and infantry. They constituted the very narrow apex in the pyramid.
- Abu'lFazl's account indicates that most of the Zamindars were from an "upper-caste", Brahmana or Rajput. It also reflects a fairly large representation of Zamindars from the so-called intermediate castes, as well as a liberal sprinkling of Muslim zamindaris.
- The dispossession of weaker people by a powerful military chieftain was quite often away of expanding a zamindari. It is, however, unlikely that the state would have allowed such a show of aggression by a zamindar unless he had been confirmed by an imperial order.
- Zamindars spearheaded the colonisation of agricultural land, and helped in settling cultivators by providing them with the means of cultivation, including cash loans. The buying and selling of zamindaris accelerated the process of monetization in the countryside.

- In addition, zamindars sold the produce from their *milkiyat* lands. There is evidence to show that zamindars often established markets to which peasants also came to sell their produce.
- Although there can be little doubt that zamindars were an exploitative class, their relationship with the peasantry was reciprocal and one of the paternalism.
- Two aspects reinforce this view.
- First, the bhakti saints, who eloquently condemned caste-based and other forms of oppression. They did not portray the zamindars as exploiters or oppressors of the peasantry.
- Second, in a large number of agrarian uprisings which erupted in north India in the seventeenth century, zamindars often received the support of the peasantry in their struggle against the state.

Land Revenue System under Mughal Rule

- Revenue from the land was **the economic mainstay of the Mughal Empire**. It was therefore vital for the state to create an administrative system to ensure control over agricultural production, and to fix and collect revenue from across the empire.
- This system included the office of the *diwan* who was responsible for supervising the fiscal system of the empire. Thus revenue officials and record keepers penetrated the agricultural domain and became a decisive agent in shaping agrarian relations.
- The land revenue arrangements consisted of two stages – first, assessment and then actual collection. The *jama* was the amount assessed and *hasil*, the amount collected.
- Akbar decreed ordered *amil-guzaror* revenue collector that he should strive to make cultivators pay in cash, the option of payment in kind was also to be kept open. While fixing revenue, the attempt of the state was to maximise its claims.
- Both cultivated and cultivable lands were measured in each province. Efforts to measure lands continued under subsequent emperors. Aurangzeb instructed his revenue officials to prepare annual records of the number of cultivators in each village. Yet not all areas were measured successfully.

The Flow of Silver coin into Mughal Empire

- The Mughal Empire was the large territorial empires in Asia among the Ming (China), Safavid (Iran) and Ottoman (Turkey) empires that had managed to consolidate power and resources during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries
- The political stability achieved by all these empires helped create vibrant networks of overland trade from China to the Mediterranean Sea.
- Voyages of discovery and the opening up of the New World (America) resulted in a massive expansion of India's trade with Europe.

- An expanding trade brought in huge amounts of silver bullion into India to pay for goods procured from India. This was good for India because it did not have natural resources of silver
- As a result, the period between the 16th and 17th centuries was also marked by a remarkable stability in the availability of metal currency, particularly the silver *rupya* in India. This facilitated an unprecedented expansion of minting and circulating of silver coins.
- Italian traveller, Giovanni Careri, who passed through India c. 1690, provides a graphic account about the way silver travelled across the globe to reach India. It also gives us an idea of the phenomenal amounts of cash and commodity transactions in seventeenth-century India

The Ain-i Akbari of Abu'lFazlAllami

(Importance and limitations of Ain-i Akbari as a source of Akabar's reign)

- The *Ain-i Akbari* was the culmination of a large historical, administrative project of classification undertaken by Abu'lFazl at the order of Emperor Akbar. It was completed in 1598 after having gone through five revisions.
- The *Ain* was part of a larger project of history writing commissioned by Akbar. This history, known as the *Akbar Nama*, comprised three books. The first two provided a historical narrative. The *Ain-i Akbari*, the third book, was organized as a compendium of imperial regulations and a gazetteer of the empire.
- **The *Ain* gives detailed accounts of the organization of the court, administration and army, the sources of revenue and the physical layout of the provinces of Akbar's empire and the literary, cultural, religious traditions of the people and quantitative information of the provinces.**
- The *Ain* is made up of five books (*daftars*), of which the first three books describe the administration.
- The first book, called *manzil-abadi*, concerns the imperial household and its maintenance
- The second book, *sipah-abadi*, covers the military and civil administration and the establishment of servants. This book includes notices and short biographical sketches of imperial officials like mansabdars, learned men, poets and artists.
- The third book, *mulk-abadi*, is the one which deals with the fiscal side of the empire and provides rich quantitative information on revenue rates, administrative and fiscal divisions, total measured area, and assessed revenue (*jama*).

- After setting out details at the suba level, the *Ain* goes on to give a detailed picture of the sarkars below the *suba* in the form of tables, which have eight columns giving the following information.
- (1) *parganat/mahal*; (2) *qila*(forts); (3) *araziandzamin-i paimuda*(measured area); (4) *naqdi*, revenue assessed in cash; (5) *suyurghal*, grants of revenue in charity; (6) zamindars; columns 7 and 8 contain details of the castes of these zamindars, and their troops including their horsemen (*sawar*), foot-soldiers(*piyada*) and elephants (*fil*).
- The fourth and fifth books (*daftars*) deal with the religious, literary and cultural traditions of the people of India and also contain a collection of Akbar's "auspicious sayings".

Limitations of Ain-i-Akbari

- Although the *Ain* was officially sponsored to record detailed information to facilitate Emperor Akbar, **it was much more than a reproduction of official papers**. That the manuscript was revised five times by the author would suggest a high degree of caution on the part of Abu'l Fazl and a search for authenticity.
- For instance, oral testimonies were cross-checked and verified before being incorporated as "facts" in the chronicle. In the quantitative sections, all numeric data were reproduced in words so as to minimise the chances of subsequent transcriptional errors.
- Historians who have carefully studied the *Ain* point out that it is not without its problems. **Numerous errors in totalling have been detected**. These are ascribed to simple slips of arithmetic or of transcription by Abu'lFazl's assistants.
- **Data were not collected uniformly from all provinces**. For instance, while for many *subas* detailed information was compiled about the caste composition of the zamindars, such information is not available for Bengal and Orissa.
- Further, while the fiscal data from the *subas* is remarkable for its richness, some equally vital parameters such as prices of commodities and wages of workers from these same areas are not as well documented.
- These limitations notwithstanding, the **Ain remains an extraordinary document of its times**. By providing fascinating glimpses into the structure and organisation of the Mughal Empire and by giving us quantitative information about its products and people.