

AGRARIAN RELATIONS: MUGHAL INDIA

Revenue Grantees (ৰাজহ অনুদানপ্ৰাপ্তসকল)

- There was the class of **religious men, scholars and destitutes** (নিঃস্ব) who were patronised by the state.
- These grants were known as *suyurghal* or *madad-i maash* (aid for subsistence জীৱিকাৰ বাবে সাহায্য).
- A separate department under the charge of the *sadr-us sudur* looked after these grants.
- If the aid was **given in cash**, it was known as *wazifa*.
- These grants **did not invest the grantee with any right over land** but were entitled to the prescribed revenue from its produce.
- Akbar put the ceiling of such grants of land to **100 bighas per person**.
- The policy of Akbar was to grant **half cultivable and half waste land** to improve agriculture.
- The grant was **for the lifetime of the grantee and the heirs could apply for a renewal**.
- Generally, **only a part of the grant was allowed to heirs**.
- Most of these lands were concentrated in the upper Gangetic provinces (highest in **Delhi and Allahabad**).
- Another type of grant (*waqf*) was given permanently to institutions- for the maintenance of **religious tombs, shrines, madrasas**, etc. etc.
- The *madad-i maash* grants were intended **to develop waste lands**.
- Generally, these were given to *Shaikhs and Sayyids* and other men of learning.
- **In emergency** they joined the government forces to curb local disturbances.
- Thus, some of them transformed themselves into **small zamindars**.

The Zamindars

- The word *zamindar* is derived from two Persian words – *zamin* (land) and *dar* (holder).
- The *zamindars* held the **most significant position** in the agrarian structure of Mughal India.

- During the pre-Mughal period, the word *zamindar* has been used in the sense of the chief of a territory.
- From Akbar's time onwards, this term was officially used for any person with any hereditary claim to a direct share in the peasant's produce.
- The areas without *zamindars* were termed *raiyati* (peasant held).
- Nurul Hasan divides the *zamindars* into three categories.
 1. **Primary zamindars** who had some proprietary rights over the land;
 2. **Secondary zamindars** who held the intermediary rights and helped the state in collecting land revenue; and
 3. **Autonomous chiefs** – had autonomous rights in their territories and paid a fixed amount to the Mughal State.

Zamindari Rights

- Abul Fazl- *Zamindars* **did not signify a proprietary right in land.**
- It was a claim on **the produce of the soil**, co-existing in a subordinate capacity, with the land revenue demand of the state.
- like any article of private property, it could, and was, **freely bought and sold.**
- It was also **inheritable and divisible.**
- At times, the *zamindars* **had settled villages** and distributed its land among the peasantry.
- The king, however, **could create zamindari in villages where none existed.**
- He **could also dislodge a zamindar**, but this was a right he exercised only in case of **sedition or non-payment of revenue.**
- The medieval rulers **recognised the rights of the zamindars**, but were equally insistent on treating them as agents of the government for revenue collection.
- for the service (*khidmat*) so rendered, the *zamindar* was entitled to a percentage of the total revenue collected.
- This percentage in official documents is stated to **be 10%** and is described as *nankar* (allowance).
- When the administration decided to collect the revenue through its own agents, by-passing the *zamindar*, the latter was entitled to a share in the collection of revenues called *malikana* (**proprietary right**), and like *nankar*, was fixed at 10% of the total revenue collected.

- Besides their principal fiscal claim, the *zamindars* also exacted a number of petty **perquisites** from the peasantry.
- Some of the well-known cesses so realised were *dastar shumari* (turban tax), house tax (*khana shumari*), cesses on marriage and birth, etc.
- The *zamindars* used to collect taxes from weekly markets also in their areas.
- At times, they are found collecting toll tax on merchandise passing through their territories.
- there were chiefs or chieftains – **the rajas, raos, ranas and rawatas** – who were more or less autonomous in their estates, governing them without any interference from the imperial administration.
- Their obligation to the king did not go beyond paying him a fixed amount as tribute (*peshkash*).
- The Imperial administration recognised their semi-autonomous status, and exercised no control over their internal administration once they had paid the usual *peshkash*.

Military Strength of Zamindars

- The *zamindars* employed their **footmen and cavalry**.
- These troops helped them in the realisation of land revenue and subjugation of peasantry.
- Almost all *zamindars* had their own small or big *qilachas/garhi* or forts.
- According to the *Ain-i Akbari*, the troops of the *zamindars* in the whole Mughal Empire exceeded **forty-four lakhs**.
- In Bengal they **possessed thousands of boats**.

Chaudhuris

- Some of these *zamindars* were designated as *chaudhuri* for the purpose of collection of revenue.
- One of the prominent *zamindars* of a *pargana* was appointed *chaudhuri*, **generally one in each pargana**.
- The *chaudhuri* was supposed to collect the revenue from other *zamindars* of the *pargana*.
- Apart from their customary *nankar*, these *chaudhuris* were entitled to another share in the land revenue collected by them.

- This was termed ***chaudhurai*** which amounted to two and a half per cent of the revenue collected.
- Unlike the *zamindar*, the ***chaudhuri*** was appointed by the state and could be removed for improper functioning.

Other Intermediaries (অন্যান্য মধ্যস্থতাকারী)

- Each village had a number of hereditary officials.
- The most important of them was the **village headman (*Muqaddam* in Northern India and *Patel* in the Deccan)**.
- He was the person responsible for the **collection of land revenue and maintenance of law and order in the villages**.
- For the services so rendered, he was granted a part of the village land revenue-free, though, in some cases, he was **also remunerated in cash** at a percentage of total land revenue realised.
- In addition, he was also entitled **to receive some amount of produce** from peasants.
- In the task of the collection of land revenue the *muqaddam* was assisted by the village accountant (***Patwari* in Northern India and *Kulkarni* in the Deccan**).
- The *patwari*'s task was to maintain a **record (*Bahi*)** of the revenue collected from the individual peasants and its payment to the state authorities.
- Like the *muqaddam* he was also remunerated by the grant of revenue-free land or by a fixed commission in the total revenue collected.
- His allowance was **much smaller** than that of the village headman.
- The office and the accompanying privileges of **both the *muqaddam* and *patwari* were hereditary**.

Peasantry

- They were the **main producing classes**, directly involved with the agricultural production.
- Though the class had **a number of strata within it**.
- The peasants constituted the primary class in rural society and the revenue collected from them **sustained (টিকিয়াই রাখিছিল) the whole state apparatus**.
- The peasant had to pay a large part of their produce as land revenue.
- The bulk of the peasantry **lived on the subsistence level of existence**.

Land Rights of Peasantry

- There has been a **long debate among historians** regarding the rights of the peasantry over land.
- Peasant's claim to land was **not disregarded by the state**, yet he was **never allowed to alienate from land**.
- It appears that peasants had all the rights over land as long as he cultivated it.
- The *zamindars* or state had no right to evict the peasant as long as he cultivated the land and paid the revenue.
- It seems that proprietary rights (মালিকানাধীন অধিকাৰ) in land were not quite developed during the Mughal period.
- However, the **most important aspect of the period is the varying claims** (ভিন্ন দাবী) over the produce of the land.
- In contemporary accounts we come across a number of references **to the flight of the peasantry from villages because of oppression or other problems**.
- A number of instances are available about **peasants settling individually or in groups in various regions**.
- The **mobility** (গতিশীলতা) **of the peasant** was an established practice in Mughal India.
- This mobility was more pronounced in cases of their **oppression in one region or natural calamities like floods and famines**.

Stratification of Peasantry (কৃষকৰ স্তৰবিন্যাস)

- The stratification was due to inequalities in **wealth and social status**.
- Peasants with large resources cultivated **bigger plots of land, and even employed labourers on his fields**.
- They could acquire head-ship of a village (*muqaddam* or *patel*)
- Richer peasants are referred to as ***khudkasht*** (self-cultivated) in Northern India, ***gharuhalas*** in Rajasthan and ***mirasdars*** in Maharashtra.
- The poor peasants are referred to as ***reza ria'ya*** (small peasant) in Northern India, ***paltis*** in Rajasthan and ***kunbis*** in Maharashtra.
- One major reason for this can be found in **the wide prevalence of cash-nexus**.

- Since land revenue in the larger part of India had to be paid in cash, peasants and cultivators were **forced to carry their produce to the markets or sell it to merchants** or moneylenders on the eve of harvest.
- those peasants who **could cultivate cash crops** would be placed in a better position, because of the **higher prices** they fetched in the market than those who, owing to their scarce resources, could only cultivate food crops **for which the prices were comparatively low**.
- Not all peasants could shift to cash crop cultivation since **it involved much expenses (good seeds, better fertilisers, irrigation facilities, and also more productive soil)**.
- The requirement of the payment of land revenue in cash would thus cause a widening gulf between the relatively better-off peasants and the poor peasants.
- The **regressive nature** (পশ্চাদমুখী প্রকৃতি) **of land revenue demand** was another major factor that caused and intensified divisions within the peasantry.
- The incidence of land revenue demand **being uniform for both the rich and the poor** peasants, in actual fact it fell more heavily on the latter than on the former.
- The **village organisation, or “village community”**, further perpetuated these divisions by levying lower revenue rates on the *khudkasht* peasants, and calling upon the *reza ri’aya* to meet the deficit thus arising in the total revenue claim.
- There were also **social inequalities** within the peasantry.
- They were also divided between the **permanent residents of the village** (*khudkasht* in Northern India, *mirasdar* in Maharashtra and *thalvaik* or *thalkar* in the Deccan) and the **temporary residents** (*pai/pahi kasht* in Northern India; *upari* in Maharashtra).
- **Caste associations and kinship ties** (*bhaichara*), even as they served as linkages that afforded supra-local affinities were also at the same time sources of divisiveness.
- Below the class of peasants existed in rural India a large population of **menial workers** (নীচ শ্রমিকৰ).
- They are described in the contemporary literature as **‘chamars’, balahars, thoris and dhanuks**, etc.
- They were a **cheap source of labour for the peasants and zamindars** to work on their fields during the sowing and harvest seasons.
- In the suppression of the menial workers, the state, the *zamindars* and the peasants were equal collaborators.

Relations between Agrarian Classes

- A number of groups appropriated (উদ্ধৃত অংশ গ্রহণ কৰিছিল) a share in the surplus of the produce, i.e., **jagirdars, religious grantees, zamindars and various intermediaries** at the village level.
- Both the *zamindars* and the *jagirdars* fed upon the surplus produce of the peasant, and therefore, **insofar as the exploitation of the peasantry was concerned, both acted as each other's collaborators.**
- Yet, the *zamindar*, being permanently based would **not allow exploitation that went beyond the alienation of surplus produce, for that would lead to exodus of the peasantry** and desertion of agricultural operations.
- The *jagirdars'* attitude is best reflected in **Bernier's** account who visited India in the mid-17th century.
- He writes that, because of the frequent transfers of *jagirs* the *jagirdars*, were not **bothered about the deplorable state of peasantry.**
- They therefore were interested in exploiting the peasantry to the maximum even at the cost of **their desertion and fields lying unattended.**
- In the **second half of the 17th century due to the uncertainty** of holding a *jagir* for a stipulated period, the *jagirdars* oppressed peasants.
- They had no regard for their welfare.
- According to Irfan Habib, 'While undoubtedly the Mughal administration sought to take measures **to regulate and moderate the jagirdars' exactions**, it is not certain that these could reduce the pressure for short-term maximization of revenue by individual *jagirdars*.
- Such pressure not only inhibited extension of cultivation, but also **involved the Mughal ruling class in a deepening conflict with the two major agrarian classes, the zamindars and the peasantry'.**
- The **divisions within the peasantry**, as also the deep **contractions that existed between the peasants and agricultural workers**, acted as severe constraints and weakened the capabilities of this class.
- Disjointed and truncated, this class **was quite incapable of confronting** the medieval despotic states.

- It did, however, revolt for two reasons: one, when the revenue demand appropriated **more than the surplus produce of the peasants**, thereby threatening their very subsistence.
- Peasant revolts in these circumstances **never went beyond asking for a reduction in revenue demand.**
- **Peasants also revolted as followers of a *zamindar*** who was leading a revolt against the state or *jagirdar* (mostly on the question of his claim to the produce of the soil).
- Peasant revolts, particularly those of the *Satnamis* and *the Jats*, in the reign of Aurangzeb were of this nature were actually *zamindari* revolts:
- The *zamindars* led them and the peasants served the purposes of the *zamindars* alone