

4. Peasants, Zamindars and the State

Agrarian Society and the Mughal Empire

(c. Sixteenth- seventeenth centuries)

2 Mark Questions:

1. On an outline map of world, mark the areas which had economic links with the Mughal Empire, and trace out possible routes of communication.

Ans: Iran, Afghanistan, China, the countries of Central and Western Asia, Italy, Portugal, France, Britain, Holland, etc.

Possible Routes: Trade that linked to Mughal Empire in India.

- (i) Sea route via Atlantic Ocean to Cape of Good Hope (South Africa), Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean.
- (ii) Red Sea, Arabian Sea, Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal to China Sea.
- (iii) Land Route from Central Asia to Afghanistan through moderns Pakistan up to Kerala or Goa.

2. To what extent to do you think caste was a factor in influencing social and economic relations in agrarian society?

Ans: (i) Cultivators were divided on the basis of their caste and other caste-like distinctions or caste-based distinctions. Thus, among the peasants were many who worked as agricultural labourers (majurs) or worked as manacles. Thus, they were not allowed to live in villages. They resided outside the village and were assigned to do menial tasks and lacked resources. Thus, they were poverty-stricken.

(ii) Caste distinctions had also begun to permeate other communities as well. In Muslim communities menials were like halkhoron (scavengers). A direct relation existed between caste poverty and social status.

(iii) In the seventeenth century Marwar Rajputs are described as peasants and equated with jats. They were given an inferior status in the caste hierarchy.

(iv) Castes like Ahirs, Gujjars and Malis reached an elevated status in the eastern regions.

(v) The pastoral and fishing castes like the Sadgops and Kaivatas acquired the status of peasants.

3. Examine the evidence that suggests that land revenue was important for the Mughal fiscal system.

Ans: The following evidence suggests that land revenue was important for the Mughal fiscal system:

1. As the land revenue was the economic mainstay of the Mughal Empire, there was an administrative apparatus to ensure control over agricultural production, and to fix and collect revenue in the empire. There was diwan who was responsible for supervision of the fiscal system of the empire.
2. Information about the agricultural lands and their production was collected before fixing the amount of taxes on people.
3. The land revenue arrangements consisted of two stages – assessment and the collection.
4. Amil-guzar or revenue collector was directed to give choice to cultivators to pay in cash or kind. The payment in cash was preferred.
5. While making assessment of land revenue, the state officials tried to maximize its claims.
6. The Ain compiled the aggregates of cultivated and cultivable lands. The classification of lands was made under Akbar and different land revenue to be paid by each was fixed.

4 Mark Questions:

4. Discuss, with examples, the significance of monetary transactions during the period under consideration.

Ans: (i) The political stability provided by the Mughal helped in establishing hoarsening trade relation with Ming (china), Safavid (Iran) and Ottoman (Turkey) empires. It led to increase in outland trade from China to the Mediterranean Sea.
(ii) The Discovery of new lands and sea routes also gave an impetus to Asia's trade with Europe. As a result enormous amount of silver entered India as payment for goods bought from India.
(iii) Jovanni Karari, an Italian traveller, who passed through India in 1690 has written how the silver reached India from all parts of the world. From his description, we also came to know how there was an exchange of cash and goods

in India in the 17th century.

(iv) This benefitted India as she did not have enough resources of silver. Therefore, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries there were sufficient reserves of silver in India and the silver rupya was available readily.

(v) The mutual exchange in villages took place. As villagers established their links in the urban markets, there was a considerable increase in monetary transactions. In this way, villages became an important part of the monetary market.

(vi) It was due to the monetary transactions, became easier to pay daily wages to the labourers in cash and not in kind. This resulted in an unprecedented expansion in the minting of coins and circulation of money allowing the Mughal state to extract taxes and revenues in cash.

5. Describe the role played by women in agricultural production.

Ans: (a) Women played an important role in agricultural production. They worked shoulder to shoulder with men in the fields. The men tilled and ploughed the lands while the women sowed, weeded and threshed the harvest. Agricultural production at the time was carried out with the labour and resources of the entire.

(b) The women performed important tasks such as spinning yarn, kneading clay for pottery and embroidery. Thus, the peasant women who were skilled artisans worked not only in the fields but even went to their employer's houses and even to the markets, if necessary.

(c) Among the landed gentry class women had the right to inherit property. Women, including widows participated in the rural land market. Selling property which they had inherited especially in Punjab.

(d) Both Hindu and Muslim women inherited Zamindars. They were free to sell or mortgage their zamindari rights. In eighteenth century, Bengal had many women-Zamindars. In fact, the Raj shah Zamindars which was one of the most famous of the time was headed by a woman.

6. What are the problems in using the Ain as a source for reconstructing agrarian history? How do historians deal with this situation?

Ans: (a) The Ain-i Akbari written by Abu'l Fazl in 1598 contains invaluable information for reconstructing the agrarian history of the Mughals. But it has its own limitations.

(b) Numerous errors in totalling have been detected. These are, however, minors and do not detract from the overall quantitative accuracy of the manuals.

(c) Another limitation is the skewed nature of the data. Data was not collected uniformly from all provinces. For example, Abu'l Fazl has not given any description regarding the caste composition of the zamindars of Bengal and Orissa (Odisha).

(d) The fiscal data collected from various sources is in detail yet some important parameters such as, wages and prices have not been incorporated properly.

(e) The detailed list of prices and wages found in the Ain-i Akbari have been acquired from data pertaining to the capital Agra and its surrounding regions. It is, therefore, of limited value for the rest of the empire.

(f) Historians have dealt with the situation by supplementing the account of the Ain by information got from the provinces. These include detailed seventeenth- eighteenth centuries revenue records from Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. These have been also supplemented by records of the East India Company.

7 Mark Questions:

7. To what extent is it possible to characterise agricultural production in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries as subsistence agriculture? Give reasons for your answer.

Solution:

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the abundance of land, available labour and the mobility of peasants were three factors that were responsible for the constant expansion of agriculture. As rice, wheat or millets were the most frequently cultivated crops, it is said that the primary purpose of agriculture was to feed people. But the focus on the cultivation of basic staples did not mean that the agriculture was only for subsistence due to the following reasons:

1. Crops such as cotton and sugarcane were jins-i kamil or perfect crops. The Mughal state encouraged peasants to cultivate such crops as they brought in more revenue. Thus, cotton was grown over a vast territory spread over Central India and the Deccan plateau, whereas Bengal was famous for its sugar.
2. Cash crops such as all sorts of oil seeds and lentils were also grown.
3. During the seventeenth century, new crops such as maize (makka) reached India via Africa and Spain. It became one of major crops of western India.
4. Vegetables like tomatoes, potatoes and chilies were introduced from the New World. New fruits – pineapple and the papaya too reached India. All these were grown by the peasants.

Thus, it was not subsistence agriculture but subsistence and commercial were mixed together in an average peasants' holding.

8. How were the lives of forest dwellers transformed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? (Or)

Describe the lives of forest-dwellers in the 16-17th centuries.

Ans: Transformation in the lives of forest-dwellers (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries):

- (i) Huge areas were covered with forests in the various parts of India in the 16th and 17th century. Forest-dwellers were called Jangli. The term 'Jungli' was used to describe those whose occupations included activities such as hunting, gathering of forest produce, and shifting cultivation. These activities were performed according to a specific reason in the various regions. Consider the example of the Bhils who fished in summer and collected forest produce in spring. Such activities enabled the forest tribes to be mobile which was a characteristic feature of their life.
- (ii) As the state required elephants for the consolidation of mighty army, the *peskesh* levied on the forest people to supply of elephants.
- (iii) The lives of the forest-dwellers led to the spread of commercial agriculture. Forest products like honey, beeswax, gum and lac were in huge demand. Gum and lac became major items of overseas exports in the seventeenth century and earned valuable foreign exchange.
- (iv) Elephants were also captured and sold.
- (v) Tribes like the Punjab Lohanis engaged in overland trade with Afghanistan and internal trade in Punjab as well.
- (vi) Social factors were also responsible for transforming the lives of the forest-dwellers.
- (vii) Many tribal chiefs became zamindars, some even became kings. They recruit people from their own tribes in their army for example in Assam; the Ahom Kings depended on people who rendered military services in exchange of land.
- (viii) By the sixteenth century, the transition from a tribal to a monarchical system had taken place. In *Ain-i Akbari* description has been mentioned about the existence of tribal kingdoms in north-eastern India. Description is also made regarding the kings who fought and conquered a number of tribes. New cultural

influences also entered in the forested areas. Probably Sufi saints played a remarkable role in spreading Islam in these areas.

9. Examine the role played by Zamindars in Mughal India.

Ans: The zamindars were the people who did not directly participate in the processes of agricultural production, but they enjoyed high status in the society.

- (i) The zamindars considered their land as their property (milkiyat). They had control to sell, give and mortgage their property.
- (ii) They enjoyed many social and economic privileges because of their superior status in society.
- (iii) The zamindars belonged to the upper caste which added to their exalted status in society.
- (iv) The zamindars rendered certain services (khidmat) for the state. As a result of their service they received and attained higher position in the state.
- (v) The zamindars had the right to collect revenue on behalf of the state and also received financial compensation for this work.
- (vi) The zamindars had kept strict control over the military resources of the state. They kept a fortress and a well knit armed unit comprising cavalry, artillery, and infantry.
- (vii) The zamindars also played significant role in developing the agricultural land. They helped in the settlements of farmers by lending them money and agricultural instruments. It resulted in an increase in agricultural produce and the sale and purchase of land by the zamindars. There are also evidences that the zamindars held bazaars. The farmers came to these bazaars to sell their crops.
- (viii) If we observe social relation of village of Mughal age as a pyramid then zamindars were at the top. They occupied the highest position in the society.
- (ix) No doubt the zamindars exploited the people but their relations with the farmers depended on their mutual togetherness and hereditary part on age. So, they were able to get peasants in case of the revolt against the state.

10. Discuss the ways in which panchayat and village headmen regulated rural society. (Or)

Explain the role of Panchayat in the Mughal rural Indian society during 16th-17th centuries.

Ans: Regulation of rural society by panchayats and headmen:

(i) Meaning of panchayat: The village panchayat consisted of an assembly of elders, they represent different castes and communities except the menial class. Usually important were people of the village with hereditary right over their property.

(ii) General composition and function: In the mixed caste village, the panchayat was usually a heterogeneous body. The panchayet represented different castes and communities in the village.

The village panchayat was headed by Muqaddam also known as mandal. He was elected with consensus of the village elders and remained in the office till he enjoyed the confidence of village elders. His function was to prepare village account with the help of patwari.

(i) The main function of panchayat was to ensure that caste boundaries among the various communities inhabiting the village were upheld.

(ii) It had also the authority to levy fines and taxes.

(iii) It can also give punishment like expulsion from the community.

(iv) Each Jati in the village had its own Jati panchayat. Jati Panchayat wielded considerable power in the society. In Rajasthan, the Jati panchayats arbitrated civil disputes between members of the different castes. It also mediated in disputes claims on land, decided whether marriages had been performed according to that castes norm, etc. In most cases, the state respected the decisions taken by the Jati Panchayat.

(v) The panchayats were also regarded as the court of appeal that would ensure that the state carried out its moral responsibilities.

(vi) For justice petitions were often made to the panchayat collectively by a group of caste or a community protesting against what they considered to be morally illegitimate demands on the part of elites.

(vii) In cases of excessive revenue demands, the panchayat often suggested a compromise. If this failed, the peasants took recourse to more drastic forms of punishment such as deserting the village.

10 MCQs on Chapter 4 - Peasants, Zamindars and the State Agrarian Society and the Mughal Empire (c. sixteenth- seventeenth centuries)

1. Who was the founder of the Mughal Empire in India during the sixteenth century?

1. Akbar
2. Babur
3. Aurangzeb
4. Jahangir

2. What was the primary occupation of peasants during the Mughal period?

1. Trading
2. Agriculture
3. Artisanry
4. Animal husbandry

3. Who were the intermediaries between the Mughal state and the peasants responsible for revenue collection?

1. Emperors
2. Zamindars
3. Sufis
4. Artisans

4. Which Mughal emperor is known for introducing the Mansabdari system in the sixteenth century?

1. Akbar
2. Humayun
3. Shah Jahan
4. Aurangzeb

5. What term is used to describe the revenue system where a fixed share of the agricultural produce was collected by the state?

1. Jaziya
2. Khums
3. Zamindari

4. Todarmal

6. Which Mughal emperor is credited with the construction of the Taj Mahal in memory of his wife Mumtaz Mahal?

1. Akbar
2. Shah Jahan
3. Aurangzeb
4. Jahangir

7. Who were the Mansabdars in the Mughal administration?

1. Peasants
2. Artisans
3. Military officers
4. Zamindars

8. During the Mughal period, what was the hereditary class of revenue collectors known as?

1. Zamindars
2. Mansabdars
3. Sufis
4. Artisans

9. Which Mughal emperor is associated with the policy of Sulh-i-Kul, promoting religious tolerance and inclusivity?

1. Akbar
2. Aurangzeb
3. Babur
4. Humayun

10. What term is used to describe the practice of revenue farming, where individuals or groups bid for the right to collect revenue in a particular area?

1. Jaziya
2. Iqta
3. Kankut
4. Jagir

Answer Key:

1. b. Babur
2. b. Agriculture
3. b. Zamindars
4. a. Akbar
5. c. Zamindari
6. b. Shah Jahan
7. c. Military officers
8. a. Zamindars
9. a. Akbar
- 10.c. Kankut

THE END
