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Zamindars under the Mughals*

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The *zamindar* class played a vital role in the political, economic, and cultural life of medieval India. During the Mughal period its importance increased, and its position in society became more complex.[1] The surplus of agricultural production, appropriated from the peasants, was shared among the emperor, his nobles, and the zamindars, and the power exercised by the *zamindars* over the economic life of the country—agricultural production, handicrafts, and trade—was tremendous. In spite of the constant struggle between the imperial government and the *zamindars* for a greater share of the produce, the two became partners in the process of economic exploitation.

Politically, there was a clash of interests between the Mughal government and the *zamindars*. Most of the administrative difficulties which the Mughal emperor had to face were the result of the *zamindars'* activities. At the same time, the administration had to lean heavily on their support. In the cultural sphere, the close links of the *zamindars* with the imperial court contributed in no small measure to the process of cultural synthesis between the distinctive traditions of the various communities and different regions, and between the urban and rural cultures. At the same time, the separatist, localist, and parochial trends received powerful patronage from the *zamindar* class. The Mughal empire

*From R.E. Frykenberg (ed.), *Land Control and Social Structure in India History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

[1]The following discussion of the *zamindars* is aimed at focusing the attention of historians on the urgent need for a detailed study of the working of the *zamindari* system during the Mughal period. The opinions expressed are tentative and are based on only a small fraction of the evidence available.

achieved its great power largely because it could secure the collaboration of this class; but the inherent contradictions between a centralized empire and the *zamindars* were too deep to be resolved. These contradictions within the Mughal empire contributed to its downfall even before the Western powers were established in the country.

The word '*zamindar*' gained currency during the Mughal period. It was used to denote the various holders of hereditary interests, ranging from powerful, independent, and autonomous chieftains to petty intermediaries at the village level. Before the Mughals, the chieftains were designated as *rajas, rais, thakurs,* and so on, while the small intermediaries would be termed *chaudhuris, khots, muqaddams,* etc. The Mughal practice of using the same generic term for the holders of widely varying types of landed interests is a reflection of the Mughal desire to reduce the chieftains to the status of intermediaries while compensating them in other ways.

The existence of the various types of landed interests was the result of a long process of evolution spread over several centuries. By the close of the twelfth century, a pyramidal structure had already been established in agrarian relations. Even though there were important regional differences, the nature of land rights in most parts of the country was basically similar. During the sultanate period (1206–1526), significant changes in land rights occurred, but the essential features remained more or less the same. However, the process of change accelerated during the Mughal period.

Zamindars in the Mughal empire may be classified in three broad categories: *(a)* the autonomous chieftains; *(b)* the intermediary *zamindars;* and *(c)* the primary *zamindars.* These categories were by no means exclusive. Within the territory held by the autonomous chieftains were to be found not only vassal semi-autonomous chiefs, but also intermediary as well as primary *zamindars.* While the intermediary *zamindars* exercised jurisdiction over groups of primary *zamindars,* most of the intermediary *zamindars* were also primary *zamindars* in their own right. A chieftain might exercise primary rights over some lands and intermediary rights over others, while simultaneously enjoying 'sovereign' or 'state' powers over his dominions.

It may be noted that the territories held by the *zamindars* were not separate from the *khalisa* or *jagir* lands. The distinction between the *jagir* and the *khalisa* lay only in the distribution of the state's share of the revenue. If the revenue from a particular area were deposited in the imperial treasury, it would be deemed to be *khalisa*; if it were to be assigned to an officer in lieu of salary, it could be considered a

jagir. Thus, the *khalisa* as well as the *jagir* comprised various types of *zamindaris*. A careful study of the various types reveals that there was hardly a *pargana* in the Mughal empire in which there were no *zamindars*.[2]

The Chieftains

The chieftains were the hereditary autonomous rulers of their territories and enjoyed practically sovereign powers. Since the establishment of the sultanate the Sultans had tried to obtain from these chieftains the recognition of their overlordship and imposed on them the obligation to pay regular tribute and to render military assistance to the sultanate whenever called upon. But there were many cases of resistance or rebellions; and the nature of control exercised by the imperial government depended upon the extent of military pressure which it could bring against the chieftains. On a number of occasions, during the course of struggles against the sultan's authority, the ruling houses of the chieftains were altogether overthrown or their territories substantially reduced. Conversely, taking advantage of the weakness of the imperial authority, the chieftains would on occasion assume independence, or extend their territories. In either case, the rights of the vassals of the chieftains and of the intermediary or primary *zamindars* were not substantially affected. By the time Akbar (1556–1605) came to the throne, such autonomous chieftains held sway over the major portion of the Mughal empire; many who had accepted the overlordship of the Surs had by now become independent.

Akbar and his successors not only continued the policy of the sultans of demanding from the chieftains a recognition of their overlordship, the payment of tribute, and the rendering of military assistance, but also introduced the following new elements in their treatment of the chieftains:

1. Akbar was the first emperor who realized the importance of forging powerful links between the empire and the chieftains by absorbing many of them in the imperial hierarchy and the administrative machinery. This policy was continued by his successors; and it is estimated that during the latter half of Aurangzeb's reign (1658–1707), 81 persons belonging to the ruling houses of the chieftains held *mansabs* of 1000 horsemen and above, representing almost 15 per cent of the

[2]See Irfan Habib, 'The Zamindars in the *Ain*', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* (Allahabad, 1958).

total number of *mansabdars* of a 1000 or more horsemen.[3] When a chieftain received a high *mansab* (a military rank regulated by the supposed number of horsemen the holder of the title could bring into the field), he also received a substantial *jagir* for the support of his troops. The revenue from this *jagir* would far exceed that of the chieftain's hereditary dominion; for example, the *jagir* granted to a *mansabdar* of 5000 *zat*, 5000 *sawar*, was expected to yield a yearly revenue of 8.3 lakhs of rupees which was several times the income of many of the principal Rajput rulers.[4] This policy resolved to an appreciable degree the basic contradiction between the chieftains and the imperial power and made it more fruitful for them to seek promotion in the imperial service than to cast off the imperial yoke and attempt to expand their territory in defiance of imperial authority. The imperial service also provided to the retainers and clansmen of the chieftains lucrative employment as well as a share in the plunder while conducting campaigns on behalf of the empire. Apart from bringing monetary advantages, imperial service was a source of power to the chieftains and enabled them to strengthen their position by recruiting and maintaining large armies.

2. The Mughals asserted the principle which later came to be known as that of 'paramountey'. This meant that a chieftain depended for his position on the goodwill of the emperor rather than on his inherent rights. Only such of the chieftains were designated 'rajas' as were given the title by the emperor. While generally conforming to the law of primogeniture and hereditary succession, the Mughals asserted the right of 'recognizing' a younger son or even a distant relative of a deceased *raja* as his successor. The emperor Jahangir (1605–27) specifically claimed this right when he rejected the nomination of a younger son by Rai Rai Singh of Bikaner and nominated the elder one instead. Similarly, on the death of Raja Man Singh of Amber, the claims of Maha Singh, the son of Man Singh's eldest son, were overruled, and Bhao Singh, a younger son of Man Singh, 'was given the principality of Amber with the lofty title of Mirza Raja'.[5] When Raja Sangram, the chieftain of Kharakpur in Bihar, incurred the displeasure of the emperor

[3]M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb* (Bombay and New York, 1966), p. 13.

[4]This figure was calculated on the basis of the eight-month scale. The *zat* rank was the personal rank of the officer, while the number of his horsemen was indicated by the *sawar* rank.

[5]*Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* (Aligarh, 1864), p. 130. Also see pp. 106 and 145.

and action was taken against him, he was killed and his territories were taken over in *khalisa*; but after some time they were restored to his son, Raja Rozafzun. During Shahjahan's reign (1627–58), the claim of Jaswant Singh of Marwar was upheld in preference to that of his elder brother on the grounds that he was the son of the favourite wife of the late *raja*, a decision the reverse of that made by Jahangir with regard to Bikaner. The assertion of this right of the emperor to decide who would be the ruler of a principality not only strengthened the control of the central government over the chieftains, but also gave the latter a sense of personal obligation to the emperor. The well-known policy of matrimonial alliances with the houses of the leading chieftains further strengthened the sense of attachment of the chiefs to the emperor. The Mughal insistence that the chiefs should remain in attendance at the court of the emperor or a governor, or should be represented there by one of their close relatives if they themselves held posts elsewhere, helped to consolidate the imperial hold over the chiefs.

3. Although all the sultans had claimed the right to call upon their vassal chiefs to render military assistance to the sultanate whenever required to do so, the Mughals were successful in utilizing systematically the military services of even such chieftains as did not hold *mansabs*. In practically all the major campaigns conducted by the Mughals the contingents of the vassal chiefs played a prominent part. For example, during the reign of Akbar a number of the leading chiefs of south Bihar served under Raja Man Singh in the Orissa campaign of 1592. At about the same time in Gujarat, many vassal chiefs were required to provide contingents of *sawars* or horsemen, at the call of the governor. The troops supplied by the chieftains contributed appreciably to the military might of the Mughal empire. How greatly valued was this military obligation of the chiefs may be judged from Jahangir's statement describing the importance of Bengal in terms of the obligations of its chiefs to supply 50,000 troops rather than in terms of the enormous revenue it provided.[6]

4. The Mughal emperors appear to have pursued the policy of entering into direct relationship with the vassals of some of the more important chieftains, thus reducing the power of these chieftains and creating a new class of allies. The most obvious example of this policy may be seen in the case of Garha Katanga where Akbar established direct relations with the vassals of the Garha chief. Sometimes the vassals of

[6]Ibid., p. 7.

the ruling chiefs were directly offered imperial *mansabs* as in the case of Marwar after Jaswant Singh's death.

5. Of great importance was the Mughal attempt to treat the hereditary dominions of the autonomous chiefs as *watan jagirs*. This meant that theoretically the chiefs were supposed to have the status of *jagirdars*, and thus were subject to the imperial revenue regulations, but exercised *jagirdari* rights in hereditary succession over their territories, which were consequently immune from transfer. Even though this theory could be applied mainly to the chiefs who were enrolled as *mansabdars*, the imperial government made attempts to change the character of the tribute payable by the chiefs into land revenue assessed on the basis of the actual production. It is difficult to estimate the extent to which the Mughals succeeded in this effort as we find that a very large number of chiefs continued to pay tribute on an irregular basis, which was known as *peshkash*.[7] However, even in fixing the amount of the *peshkash*, the Mughal administrators tried to obtain data regarding the area under cultivation, the crop pattern, and the revenue realized by the chiefs from their vassals or subordinate *zamindars*. The information in the *Ain-i-Akbari* regarding the states of the chieftains and the account of the revenue settlement of Gujarat conducted by Todar Mal in the sixteenth century provide the most obvious evidence of this effort. In spite of the fact that this policy could be enforced only with partial success, it increased the de jure as well as the de facto control of the empire over the chiefs. It also increased the imperial pressure on their economic resources and compelled many of them to seek imperial service as *mansabdars*. Administratively it tended to bring the land-revenue system of the chiefs in line with the Mughal pattern.

6. The Mughal emperors succeeded to a greater extent than their predecessors in compelling the autonomous chiefs to conform to imperial regulations, especially in regard to the maintenance of law and order and the freedom of transit. Not only were the emperors able to make the chiefs take vigorous action against rebels, criminals, and fugitives who happened to enter their territory, but they also claimed the right to dispense justice to those who appealed to the imperial government against their chiefs. For example, when Raj Suraj Singh of Bikaner arrested the retainers of his brother Dalpat, Jahangir ordered

[7]Detailed information on the assessment of *peshkash* from the *zamindar* of Trichnopoly from the years AH 1104–17 (1692–1706) may be seen in the Central Records Office, Hyderabad, Reg. no. 83 of Aurangzeb's reign.

that they be released.[8] Several *farmans* are in existence directing the chieftains not to harass traders passing through their territory or to levy taxes on them. Even though several instances are recorded of chiefs disobeying the imperial orders and levying unauthorized taxes on transit goods, there is no reason to doubt that such orders were generally respected.

The existence of a large number of independent principalities in the country and its political fragmentation could hardly have contributed to its progress. Internecine warfare, a logical corollary of such fragmentation, could not have been conducive to material progress. It is difficult to accept François Bernier's statement that the peasantry was better off under the autonomous rajas than in the rest of the empire,[9] not only because the French doctor's prejudice in favour of feudal rights apparently clouded his judgement, but also because the available original records indicate that the rate of assessment of land and other taxes paid by the peasants in the territories of the chiefs were no lower than those in the contiguous areas outside the chiefs' dominions.[10] Furthermore, if there had been no centralized empire subjecting the chiefs to the payment of tribute, which in the last resort was passed on to the peasants, some other powerful chieftain would have established his overlordship and extracted tribute of a similar type and magnitude.

A centralized empire, by establishing comparatively greater peace and security, by enabling trade and commerce to expand, and by increasing and diversifying the purchasing power of the consuming classes which led to the development of industries, brought about conditions favourable to the growth of a money economy. The emergence of a money economy began to affect agricultural production to a considerable extent, especially because revenue was being realized more and more in cash. It also led to the expansion of cash crops and the extension of the culivated area, partly as a result of the demand for greater

[8]*Farman* no. 29, dated 9 October 1614, in the *Descriptive List of Farmans, Manshurs and Nishans* (Bikaner, 1962), published by the Government of Rajasthan Directorate of Archives.

[9]François Bernier, *Travels in the Mughal Empire, 1656–1667*, trans. V.A. Smith (London, 1916), p. 205.

[10]Comparing the *arsattas* (monthly accounts of receipts and disbursements) of the *parganas* of Amber and Sawal Jaipur with those of the *parganas* of Chatsu and Hindaun reveals a general similarity in the rates of assessment (Rajasthan State Archives).

revenue.[11] To the extent that the Mughal empire succeeded in establishing its authority over the numerous chieftains and the considerable measure of success that it achieved in unifying the country politically and administratively, it played a progressive role in the development of Indian society.

There is no doubt that the Mughals were more successful than any of their predecessors in bringing the numerous chieftains within the pale of their empire. As a result of intensive military campaigning they compelled the chieftains in practically the whole country to accept their suzerainty. In accordance with the tenets of their policy enumerated above, they succeeded in securing loyalty and willing co-operation from the overwhelming majority of the chieftains and conformity with the broad aspects of their administrative policy. To this extent they were able to place curbs on the powers of the chiefs.

However, the policy of firmness coupled with friendship was able to resolve the contradiction between the chieftains and the imperial government only to a limited extent. Not all chiefs could have been granted high *mansabs* and lucrative *jagirs*. Furthermore, many of the nobles who were not *zamindars* envied the security enjoyed by the chiefs in imperial service and brought pressure on the emperor to restrict the grants of *mansabs* and *jagirs* to this class. As the pressure on *jagirs* increased, the emperor was no longer in a position to satisfy the aspirations of the chieftains. In such a situation many of the chiefs enjoying high positions in imperial service attempted to convert the *jagirs* assigned to them outside their ancestral territories into their hereditary dominions, as in the case of Sir Singh-deo Bundela during the reign of Jahangir and Jai Singh Sawai of Amber during the reign of Muhammad Shah. The imperial policy of demanding the payment of land revenue based on cultivated area could only have reduced the share of the chiefs. Rebellions were therefore inevitable. The chiefs hardly ever missed the opportunity of taking advantage of the difficulties facing the empire. For example, the chieftains of Orissa and Bengal supported Shahjahan when he rebelled against his father, but they quickly deserted the rebel prince when he was defeated by the imperial forces. On the other hand, whenever, because of various difficulties, the imperial government was unable to maintain its military pressure

[11]For an excellent discussion of the impact of money economy on agricultural production and for the nature of the agrarian relations existing in the Mughal empire, see Irfan Habib, *Agrarian System of Mughal India* (Bombay, 1963).

on the *zamindars*, the revolts became more frequent. Such was the case in the seventeenth century during the reign of Aurangzeb when the chieftains of Maharashtra, Bundelkhand, Mewat, and Rajputana, all took up arms against the Mughal empire and in their struggle drew upon the support of the lower classes of the *zamindars*, and also sometimes the peasants, especially when they belonged to the same clan or caste. The widespread dissatisfaction of the chiefs with the imperial government seriously weakened the military power of the Mughal empire. The empire depended too much on the support of the chiefs to have been successful in suppressing their power completely.

The frequent revolts of the chieftains, leading to long-drawn-out military campaigns and the inability of the imperial government to prevent the chiefs from expanding their dominions, placed a serious drain on the economy, adversely affected agricultural production in many cases, and weakened administrative unity. Consequently, by the close of the seventeenth century, the economic and administrative advantages of a unified empire had begun to disappear.

The Intermediary *Zamindars*

The category comprised the various types of *zamindars* who collected the revenue from the primary *zamindars* and paid it to the imperial treasury, or to the *jagirdars*, or to the chieftains—or in certain cases kept it themselves. Such intermediaries not only formed the backbone of land-revenue administration, but were also responsible for the maintenance of law and order. In return for their services they enjoyed various types of perquisites, such as commissions, deductions, revenue-free lands (*nankar* or *banth*), cesses, etc. Usually their share of the revenue ranged between 2.5 and 10 per cent. Most of the *zamindars* possessed hereditary rights, though in a few cases they held their position on short-term contracts.[12] Among the intermediaries may be included *chaudhuris*, *deshmukhs*, *desais*, *deshpandes*, certain types of *muqaddams*, *qanungos* and *ijaradars*, and the class of *zamindars* who contracted with the state to realize the revenue of a given territory and who began to be known during the second half of the seventeenth century by the generic designation of *talukdars*. Practically the entire country was under the jurisdiction of one or the other type of intermediary *zamindars*. The statement in the *Ain-i-Akbari* regarding the caste

[12]For a discussion of the various types of land rights, see B.R. Grover, 'Nature of Land Rights in Mughal India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, I, 1–23.

of *zamindars* in *parganas* other than those under the chieftains seems to refer to this class.[13] The fact that in the majority of the *parganas* the *zamindars* belonged to a single caste and also that persons of the same caste were the *zamindars* of many contiguous *parganas* suggests that certain families or clans held *zamindari* rights over large tracts.

While the rights of the intermediary *zamindars* were hereditary, the state reserved to itself the authority to interfere with succession and even to partition the jurisdiction among brothers or relations. In the case of imperial displeasure some of these intermediaries could be dismissed or transferred. An order of Akbar mentions the dismissal of a *chaudhuri* in Ilahabad on the grounds that he had been harassing the pilgrims going to the Triveni for holy baths.[14] A *nishan* (order) of Murad Bakhsh conferred the *desmukhi* of a *pargana* in *suba* Telingana on one Rama Reddy, rejecting the claim of half the deshmukhi of the *pargana* put forward by the adopted son of his elder deceased brother.[15] Aurangzeb issued an order that there could not be more than two *chaudhuris* in a *pargana*; if there were, they were to be dismissed.[16] In some cases the Mughal emperors conferred *zamindari* rights on persons appointed to maintain law and order or to facilitate the assessment and collection of land revenue.[17] Akbar's *farman* to Gopaldas conferring on him the rights of *chaudhuri* and *kanungo* in *sarkar* Tirhut formed the basis of the subsequent rise of the Darbhanga *raj*.[18] To satisfy the desire of the high *mansabdars* and nobles not belonging to the *zamindar*

[13]'Account of the Twelve Subas', in H.S. Jarrett (trans.), Abul-Fazl-i'Allami's *Ain-i-Akbari* (2nd edn, Calcutta, 1949). II.

[14]Copies of a number of *farmans* issued in this connection by Akbar and Jahangir were made available to the writer by Dr. M.A. Ansari of Allahabad University.

[15]Andhra Pradesh State Archives, Hyderabad, Shahjahani Register, vol. 40, no. 608, *nishan* dated 15 Ramazan, twenty-third regnal year of Shahjahan. The *suba* was a division of the empire, like a province.

[16]Habib, *Agrarian System*, p. 292.

[17]A *farman* of Shahjahan issued during the fifth regnal year promised *zamindari* rights to anyone who could bring the turbulent *zamindars* of the *parganas* of Kant and Gola under control. He was then to found a town named after the emperor in that region. A photostat of the *farman* is in the possession of the writer. See also Grover, 'Nature of Land Rights', p. 12.

[18]Qeyam Uddin Ahmed, 'Origin and Growth of Darbhanga Raj (1574–1666), Based on Some Contemporary and Unpublished Documents', *Proceedings of the Indian Historical Records Commission*, XXXVI, pp. 88–98. The *sarkar* was a government administrative district.

class to acquire hereditary territorial rights, the Mughal emperors instituted the practice of conferring *watan* and *altamgha jagirs*. In such cases the persons concerned were given permanent *jagirdari* rights. Usually the territories granted in such *jagirs* were small, comprising a single village or a small number of villages, though in some cases they were larger. The holders of these jagirs tried to acquire proprietary rights and in due course were often called upon to pay land revenue. For instance, the *watan jagirs* granted by Jahangir to Anirai Singh Dalan developed into large and powerful *zamindaris* of Anupshahr in Bulandshahr District. A similar case was that of the *watan jagir* granted during the reign of Jahangir to Miran Sadr Jahan at Pihani in Shahjahanpur District.

Most of the intermediaries were supposed to prepare the details of revenue assessment for the perusal of the state, help in the realization of the land revenue, encourage extension of cultivation, assist the imperial officers in the maintenance of law and order, and supply a fixed number of contingents. However, in actual practice, they were constantly struggling to enhance their rights and to appropriate to themselves a greater share of the revenue if not the whole of it. The extant records are full of references to the *zamindaran-i-zor-talab*, that is those who paid revenue only when it was demanded forcibly. Similarly, the intermediaries who contracted to collect revenue, either as *ijaradars* or as *talukdars* tried to avoid supplying detailed figures of assessment and only paid the stipulated amount. The Mughal custom of frequent transfers of *jagirs* encouraged the practice of revenue farming, or the letting of contracts to someone else to collect the revenue.

On the one hand, these intermediaries strove to consolidate their rights at the expense of the state; thus, for example, they often appropriated to themselves the state's right to dispose of the uncultivated wastelands. On the other hand, they intensified the exploitation of the rural population and attempted to depress the position of the primary *zamindars* under their jurisdiction. Since they had the responsibility to pay the land revenue, whether the primary *zamindars* paid it or not, they were led on occasion to collect the revenue directly from the peasants, in which case they were supposed to leave the primary *zamindars* the customary 'proprietary' share (*malikana*). But the temptation in such a situation to step into the place of the primary *zamindars* and become proprietors themselves must have been overwhelming.[19]

[19]For example, in 1703, Raja Ibadullah Kahn of Muhammadi contracted for

At they same time, they sought to build up hereditary territorial rights and, whenever the occasion arose, tried to become chieftains. As the Mughal empire became weak and the crisis of the *jagirdari* system was intensified, these intermediaries enhanced their power and frequently rose in rebellion along with the other intermediary *zamindars* of their own clan or joined hands with some of the chieftains who were in revolt against the imperial authority. Apart from the political and administrative disturbances which resulted from the tussle between such *zamindars* and the state, agricultural production and the position of the peasantry also suffered.

While the imperial authorities strove to subjugate the recalcitrant *zamindars* and attempted to force them to conform to the imperial land-revenue regulations, they could not afford to suppress this class as a whole. Under strong administrators the intermediaries generally performed their duties in accordance with imperial regulations and exercised their rights within specified limits. But under weak administrators the situation frequently got out of hand. The widespread revolt of these *zamindars* deprived the imperial officers of their income and consequently reduced their military strength. In turn, the officers started demanding transfers from the turbulent areas and even began to claim cash salaries instead of *jagirs*.[20]

The Primary *Zamindars*

The primary *zamindars* were for all practical purposes the holders of proprietary rights over agricultural as well as habitational lands. In this class may be included not only the peasant-proprietors who carried on cultivation themselves, or with the help of hired labour, but also the proprietors of one village or several villages. All agricultural lands in the empire belonged to one or the other type of the primary *zamindars*. The rights held by the primary *zamindars* were hereditary and alienable. Numerous sale deeds of such *zamindaris* dating back to the sixteenth

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the whole of the *parganas* of Barwar-Anjana and Bhurwara in *sarkar* Khairabad, *suba* Awadh, and in course of time acquired proprietary rights over the whole estate.

[20]Numerous cases are cited in a number of contemporary documents included in the Durr-ul-Ulum, a collection of papers arranged by Sahib Rai Surdaj in 1688–9, now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

century are still available.[21] The Mughal state considered it its duty to protect the rights of these *zamindars* and encouraged the registration of transfer deeds at the court of the *qazi* so that a proper record of claims could be maintained.

In addition to those who had been enjoying these rights for generations or had acquired them by purchase, the Mughals conferred such *zamindari* rights on a large number of persons. In pursuance of their policy of extending the cultivated area, the emperors freely bestowed *zamindari* rights to those who would bring forest and waste under cultivation. It is also significant that the majority of the *madad maash* grants (revenue-free grants given for charitable purposes) related to uncultivated land. The *madad maash* grants required confirmation at the accession of each monarch, but the hereditary succession was not usually interfered with. In due course the *madad maash* grant also acquired the character of *zamindari*, as appears from the sale deeds of *madad maash* lands in the eighteenth century.

The *zamindars*, other than the peasant-proprietors, generally gave their lands in hereditary lease to their tenants, who enjoyed security of tenure in terms of the *patta* granted to them, on the condition that they paid their land revenue regularly. Even in cases of non-payment the tenant was not usually deprived of his landholding rights, but the arrears were realized by other means. Considering the fact that there was not much pressure on land, the rights of the landholding tenants were generally respected. At the same time, in view of the shortage of cultivators, the *zamindars* enjoyed the right to restrain the tenants from leaving their lands and to compel them to cultivate all arable land held by them.[22] From the evidence it seems that where the primary *zamindars* did not pay the land revenue, it was collected directly from the peasants, leaving about 10 per cent as the proprietary share (*malikana*) of the *zamindars*.[23] It may be inferred that this percentage represents the normal share of the *zamindars*. In addition to their share in land revenue, the *zamindars* were also entitled to a large variety of cesses, though a considerable portion of the income from such cesses had to be surrendered by the *zamindars* along with the land revenue.

[21]Numerous transfer deeds are preserved at the Central Records Office, Allahabad.

[22]See N.A. Siddiqi, 'Dasturul Amal-i-Bekas', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* (Aligarh, 1960).

[23]Grover 'Nature of Land Rights', p. 15.

The *zamindars* were deemed to be the *malguzars* or those on whom land revenue was assessed by the state. They were also expected to collect the revenue from the peasants and to deposit the share of the state with the higher authorities. It was their duty to assist the administration in the maintenance of law and order and in many cases to supply troops under the orders of their superiors.

Sandwiched as most of these *zamindars* were between the superior *zamindars* and the state on the one hand and the peasantry on the other, they were constantly struggling to improve their position and thus frequently came into conflict with both sides. Unless these *zamindars* were able to withstand pressure from above, they passed on the burden of revenue demands to the cultivators and so contributed to the intensification of the economic exploitation of the latter. On such occasions, they played an economically retrogressive role. But on many occasions they led the revolts of the peasantry against the growing exactions of the state, often utilizing the caste and clan appeal to rally support. Where revolts were not possible, many of these *zamindars* refused to pay the revenue until force was employed. As has been mentioned earlier, the intermediary *zamindars* often tried to depress the status of the primary *zamindars*, and where the attempt was successful a fresh category of subproprietary rights emerged. Sometimes the intermediary *zamindars* created a class of subproprietors, such as the *birtias*, in order to strengthen their position in the countryside.

Thus, there emerged not only a variety of land rights but also a kind of a pyramidal structure in agrarian relations wherein rights of various kinds were superimposed upon each other. The burden of the shares of the different categories of *zamindars* and also of the imperial revenue demand ultimately fell on the cultivator and placed such a strain on the agrarian economy that much progress was hardly possible. The imperial government tried its best to ensure that the peasant was not called upon to pay more than 50 per cent of the produce. But as imperial authority declined and as the pressure on *jagirs* increased, the agricultural economy had to face a crisis which began to deepen in the eighteenth century.

Politically and administratively, the *zamindar* class in general rendered loyal co-operation and assistance to the Mughal empire. Yet the conflict of interests between the *zamindars* and the state, and between the different classes of *zamindars*, could not be eliminated. The conflicts led to frequent clashes, disturbed law and order, and seriously weakened the administrative and military power of the state. The numerous measures adopted by the Mughal government to resolve these

contradictions worked well, but only for a time. By the middle of the seventeenth century, strains began to appear, and after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 the central government had become too weak to maintain the equilibrium between conflicting interests. In any case, the dependence of the Mughal empire on the various classes of the *zamindars* for its revenue resources as well as administration was far too deep for the conflict of interest between the empire and *zamindars* to be resolved. Only a class which was not dependent on the *zamindars* could have attempted to change the pattern of agrarian relations. Such a class had not emerged by the middle of the eighteenth century.