

4. THE POLITICAL ROLE OF THE ZAMINDARS

In Chapter V, we found that the word *zamindar* had a very wide connotation and could apply both to the ruler of a large kingdom to a person who had only some rights to a portion of a village. Nevertheless, in general, it would be correct to speak of the *zamindars* as a distinct class of potentates who had many features in common. First, one thing, their rights did not originate from imperial grants—though there were some exceptions to this; secondly, command over armed retainers was usually a necessary complement of their right, and they were frequently leaders of caste-groups. The main point of conflict between the imperial authorities and the *zamindars* was the size of the latter's share in the land revenue or in the surplus produce. In the imperial territories the *zamindars* were treated almost as mere tax-gatherers, on behalf of the State and the assignees, and a share was allowed to them as compensation for their work. Their exactions from the peasants were restricted not only by formal regulations but really much more by the fact that the high pitch of the revenue demand would have left little with the peasants to be taken by anyone else. In such a situation it would become difficult for the *zamindar* to collect the revenue and pass it on to the authorities without harming his own interests. A similar dilemma faced the autonomous chiefs. They too had to pay revenue or tribute or both. Nor were they at any time free from the threat of annexation to the Empire. Even at the same time, since the *zamindars*, whether as tax-gatherers or chiefs, usually had armed force at their disposal, they could not as easily be dealt with by the administration as it would have wished, as they were always a thorn in its side.

Thus the statements of official chroniclers frequently reflect an attitude of hostility towards the *zamindars* as a class. Abu-l-Fazl declares that "the custom of most of the *zamindars* of Hindustan is that leaving the path of righteousness they look to every side and whoever appears more powerful and tumult-raising, they join him."² Elsewhere he remarks that Rāja Bhārāmāl "out of wisdom and good fortune, aspires to leave the ranks of *zamindars* and become one of the select of the Court", as if the two positions were mutually incompatible.³ The con-

1. Within four years of Aurangzeb's accession, for instance, three large states were annexed: Kuch Bihar (1661), Palamau (1661) and Navanagar (1663).

2. *A.N.*, II, p. 63.

3. *Ibid.*, 156.

historian of Aurangzeb follows Abu-l Fazl in using the word '*zamīndārāna*' in the sense of opportunism or disloyalty.⁴

In documents written from the official point of view, it is assumed as a matter of course that the main danger to law and order came from the *zamindars*, who refused to pay the revenue and had to be cowed down or destroyed by force either by the *faujdar* or the *jagirdar*.⁵ The erection of a fort by any *zamindar* immediately aroused the suspicions of the authorities and could apparently be a sufficient justification for punitive action against him.⁶ The letters of Ra'd-andaz Khan, the *faujdar* of Baiswara (?-1702), are particularly revealing in this respect, and they show this official as constantly leading or sending expeditions in an area in the plains quite close to the heart of the Empire against *zamindars* whose principal fault is usually stated to be refusal to pay the revenue, though this is almost invariably coupled with the allegation that they were engaging in robbery and plunder.⁷ It is possible that the appointment of *zamindars* by grant from the Court, a practice which comes into particular prominence during Aurangzeb's reign, was largely motivated by the desire to establish new local interests, in order to counterbalance the power of the old *zamindars*.⁸

We can, perhaps, ourselves generalise from this evidence and infer that the struggle between the imperial administration and the *zamindars*, breaking out frequently into armed conflict, was an important feature of the political situation of the time. We have, however, a direct statement to this effect from Manuchy, who wrote in or about 1700: "Usually the viceroys and governors are in a constant state of quarrel with the Hindu princes and *zamindars*—with some because they wish to seize their lands; with others, to force them to pay more revenue than is customary."⁹ He adds elsewhere that "usually there is some rebellion of the *rajahs* and *zamindars* going on in the Moghul kingdom."¹⁰

4. Rāja Karan Bhūrtiya of Bikaner, we are told, did not present himself at Aurangzeb's court because of "evil intentions and *zamīndārāna* considerations". ('*Alamgirnama*', p. 571). For Abu-l Fazl's use of the term, see A.N., II, p. 63.

5. *Hidayat-al Qawa'id*, f. 7a-b (duties of a *faujdar*); *Bayaz-i Izad Bakhs* "*Rasā*" (?), I.0.4014, f. 2a-b (the exploit of a *jagirdar* in a semi-humorous petition to God).

6. *Ahkam-i 'Alamgiri*, f. 205a-b; *Insha-i Roshan Kalam*, f. 6b. The forts were known in Hindi as *garhis*. (Cf. *Durr-al 'Ulum*, f. 73b, for the use of this term).

7. *Insha-i Roshan Kalam*, ff. 2a-4a, 6a-b.

8. See Chapter V. Sec. 3.

9. Manucci, II, pp. 431-2.

10. *Ibid*, 462.

It was, probably, more than anything else, their position in this unequal contest with the imperial power that compelled the zamindars to adopt a conciliatory attitude towards their peasants whose support would have been indispensable to them during defence as well as in flight. Moreover, being local men, closely acquainted with the conditions and customs of the peasants, they were probably able generally to make more flexible arrangements with the peasants under their control than could the officials of the *Khalisa* or the assignees, who were unfamiliar with local practices and were interested only in an immediate increase in assessment.

It was, therefore, not Bernier alone, who noted that the peasants found "less oppression and allowed a greater degree of comfort" in "the territories of a Raja."¹¹ This is clearly recognised even by the official historian of Aurangzeb, who says that "the zamindars of the country of Hindustan, for considerations of policy—for winning the hearts of, and conciliating, the peasants, in order that they may not cease to obey or pay revenue to them—conduct themselves gently in exacting the revenue in the mahals of their zamindari, and do not apply the regulations and laws followed in the imperial dominions."¹²

It came about, therefore, that the zamindars frequently attracted to their lands peasants absconding from areas directly under imperial administration. This was noted in general terms by Pelsaert and Bernier,¹³ but a manual written in 1714 is even more explicit. The mansabdars, presumably holding jagirs, "throw the burden (lit. hand) (of their extortions) upon the peasants, and the peasants are without help. When the peasants become desperate for their lives, they abscond from the *ra'iyyati* country and, making their way to the country of rebellious zamindars, settle there. The country of the rebellious zamindars thus becomes well populated and the rebels gain in power every day."¹⁴

11. Bernier 205.

12. 'Alamgirnāma, p. 781. Cf. also *Fathiya-i 'Ibriya*, ff. 47b-48a.

13. Pelsaert 47; Bernier 205.

14. *Hidayat-al Quwa'id*, Aligarh MS., f. 56a-b. The author attributes the increasing oppression of the peasantry by the mansabdars to the fact that the latter did not hold high mansabs and, therefore, could not afford to maintain contingents large enough to deal with the seditious elements. They accordingly stood in need of money and since they could not take anything from the powerful zamindars, their hand fell heavily upon the peasants.

The word *ra'iyyati* in this passage can signify either peasant-held country directly under imperial administration or, simply, revenue-paying country.

These general statements are illustrated by certain specific instances from the 17th century. For example, when under A'zam Khān, Governor of Gujarat (1632-42), the peasants suffered great oppression, "most of them fled and took refuge with the *zamindars* in distant places."¹⁵ A'zam Khān thereupon led an expedition against Navanagar to compel its '*zamindar*' to expel the peasants who had fled to his territory, so that they might return to their old homes.¹⁶ In Malawa a similar campaign was organised against the *zamindar* (or rather his guardian) of Kanwar, not only because he did not "pay the revenue in the proper way", but also because "the peasants of some of the *mahals* of the *jagir* of the Governor, who had fled to the territory of Kanwar, evaded paying the revenue as well, being backed in this by those infidels."¹⁷ In the reign of Aurangzeb we come across a complaint by the *faujdar* of Talkokan to the effect that, first, a large number of the peasants had fled to the territories of the *zamindars*; and, then, when he had brought them back by force and settled 600 villages with them, the Portuguese of Salsette enticed them away.¹⁸

The peasants and the *zamindars* thus frequently became associated in the struggle against Mughal authorities. The case of Kuch Bihar may not be typical, but it is significant. When the kingdom was annexed in 1661, the Mughal officials introduced there the methods of "revenue assessment and collection, according to the regulations followed in the *mahals* of the imperial territories." This caused a general revulsion against the conquerors among the peasants, who were treated with much greater leniency by their deposed *raja*, Bim Narāyan, in the general manner, we are told, of the *zamindars*. The peasants, therefore, rose and expelled the Mughal troops and officials.¹⁹ In the same way, where the Mughal authorities took forcible steps to obtain the

A similar statement is made in the *Mazhar-i Shahjahani* (20-21). When the revenue demand imposed upon the *arbābs* (officials corresponding to *chaudhurs* in Sind, who were mostly *zamindars*) became excessively heavy, they rebelled. In such cases the peasants always followed them and absconded from their lands, because if they stayed on upon their lands, they had to meet the high revenue demand imposed by the authorities, while the *arbābs* would come and slay them. Our work adds that the peasants followed the *arbābs* also because they belonged to the same places.

15. *Mirat*, I, p. 216.

16. *Lahori*, II, p. 232; *Mirat*, I, p. 214.

17. *Lahori*, II, p. 370.

18. *Karnama*, ff. 243b-244a.

19. *'Alamgirnāma*, pp. 781-2; *Fathīya-i 'Ibriya*, ff. 47b-48a.

return of fugitive peasants from the lands of the *zamindars*, the result in many cases could have been only to direct peasant migration towards those who were able to defy them, i.e., towards "the rajas who in rebellion," as Pelsaert says.²⁰

These peasants would not only add to the resources of the *zamindars* by engaging in cultivation, but could also provide recruits for their armed bands. Such primitive troops were probably helpful against the professional cavalymen of the Mughal armies. But terrain and numbers still counted, as the Marathas were to show so strikingly. The new feature that comes to the fore in the reign of Aurangzeb is, indeed, that the *zamindars'* struggle against the Mughals is no longer merely defensive. As the number of starving, homeless peasants grew and the peasants took to arms themselves, it became possible for the *zamindars* to organise them into large bands, and even armies, and employ them in predatory warfare with the object of extending their own *zamindaris* or areas of dominance.

In the next Section we shall study in some detail the extent of peasant elements in the great revolts against Mughal power. As we will see, the *zamindars'* leadership was not established over all the peasant risings; nor is there any reason to believe that all rebellious actions by *zamindars* were supported by the peasants. But the fact remains that the most successful revolts, e.g. those of the Marathas and the Jats, were led by men, who were, or aspired to be, *zamindars*. And this fact assumes supreme importance, when we consider the historical results of these revolts.

5. AGRARIAN ASPECTS OF THE REVOLTS AGAINST MUGHAL EMPIRE

Various explanations are put forward for the revolts which brought about the collapse of the Mughal Empire. The study offered in this Section lays no claim to being comprehensive or to having covered all aspects of the revolts. It is not intended to argue against theories that consider either 'Hindu Reaction' or 'National Re-awakening' as the main motive force behind the opposition to Aurangzeb. It does need stressing, however, that the partisans of these theories rely more on present sentiment than on contemporary evidence. For the rest, the reader may judge their case as presented in their own writings. Here our main concern is with what our 17th and early 18th

20. Pelsaert, p. 47.

century authorities have to say. And it will be seen that they, at any rate, put the greatest store by the economic and administrative causes of the upheaval and know little of religious reaction or national consciousness.

I. *Revolts in the Agra Region, and the Jats:*

Speaking of the province of Agra, Abu-l Fazl observes that "owing to the peculiarity of its climate the peasant masess (*'umūm-i ri'āyā*) of that territory are notorious throughout the vast country of Hindustan for rebelliousness, bravery and courage."¹ The area on both sides of the Jamuna figures constantly as the scene of military operations against rebellious peasantry. Akbar once personally led an attack on a village;² and we read of a *raja* in a *pargana* close to Agra, who used to engage in robbery and defended himself, when attacked, with the assistance of *ganwārs* or peasants.³ During the next reign it was reported to the Court that "the *ganwars* and cultivators" on the eastern side of the Jamuna, near Mathura, "do not cease to commit highway robbery and, protected by dense jungle and fastnesses, live in rebellion, have no fear of any one and do not pay the revenue to the *jagirdars*." An expedition was despatched against them, as a result of which, "numbers of them were killed, their women and children taken captive and a great booty acquired by the victorious troops."⁴ This happened in the 18th regnal year of Jahangir, and yet twelve years later (1634) a campaign on a far more elaborate scale had to be organised against "the malefactors" on both sides of the Jamuna, who used to commit robberies on the Agra-Dehli route. "Ten thousand of those human-looking beasts" were slaughtered, and their women and children and cattle—"beyond computation"—were seized⁵ In the 18th year of *Shah-jahan* the 'rebels' near Mathura were apparently still out of control.⁶ When Sa'dullah Khan died in 1656 "the gamors of severall his townes

1. A.N., III, p. 231.

2. *Ibid.*, II, p. 163. The village lay in the *pargana* of Saketa (*sarkar* of Qanauj) and the attack was made in the 7th year of the reign. Cf. also Manucci, I, pp. 132-4.

3. Badauni, II, pp. 151-2. The name of the *pargana* is given as Jalesa, probably a mistake for Jalesar.

4. T.J., 375-8.

5. Qazwini, Add. 20734, pp. 679-80; Or. 173, ff. 237b, 239; Lahori, I, ii, pp. 71-2, 76. The latter adds that 12,000 troops were deployed against the rebels, 7,000 to the east and 5,000 to the west of the Jamuna.

6. Lahori, II, p. 425.

[i.e. villages in his *jagirs*] neare Agra rose in armes. But....they were suddainely surprized by Abdall Nubby, his fouzdarr, their townes sacked and such as escaped not by flight, either slaine or imprisoned."⁷

(Such had been the past history of the area which was to be the cradle of the Jāt revolt in the time of Aurangzeb.) It will be noticed that in the accounts of the earlier revolts, the revolting peasants are not identified with Jāts. The usual term for them is *ganwār*, or villager, and in one or two cases, at least, they were probably led by Rajput *zamindars*.⁸ Nevertheless Manuchy, who treats of their revolts in some detail, knows the Jat rebels of Aurangzeb's reign also as simply 'peasants' and assumes them to be the partisans of the same cause as of those whom Akbar had oppressed.⁹ The Jats are, *par excellence*, "a peasant caste";¹⁰ they inhabited villages between Dehli and Agra¹¹ and are also entered as *zamindars*, under many *mahals* in the Doab and the trans-Jamuna plains, in the *Ain*. It is therefore, not unlikely that they had already participated in many of the previous conflicts with the authorities.

The Jat rebellion, properly speaking, dates from the time when Gokulā Jāt, the *zamindar* of Talpat near Mathura, "assembled a large army of Jats and other villagers and raised a rebellion."¹² He was killed in 1669;¹³ but the leadership passed to Rāja Rām Jāt and then to his nephew Chaurāman Jāt, who is said to have been the son of a *zamindar* of eleven villages.¹⁴ Over wide areas the peasants refused to pay revenue and took to arms. We thus learn from the grant of a

7. *Factories 1655-60*, p. 65.

8. Thus the villagers against whom Akbar personally led an expedition are described as Rajputs in Manucci, I, p. 132, who has here very probably drawn upon local tradition. This is very probable also, since the Chauhans are entered as the *zamindars* of the *pargana* (Saketa) in the *Ain*, I, 446. Similarly in Jalesar, where the rebellion was organised by a *raja*, the Guhilots, Sūraj (bansīs) and Bankras are shown as *zamindars*. (*Ibid*, 443).

9. Manucci, I, 134: He says the 'villagers' took their revenge upon Akbar when they desecrated his tomb in 1691 (*recte* 1688).

10. *Tashrih-al Aqwam*, f. 155a; Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, Calcutta, 1896, III, p. 40.

11. "The cultivators of villages between Dehli and Akbarabad (Agra) were of the Jat caste." (Shah Waliullah, *Siyasi Maktubat*, p. 48).

12. Isardas, f. 53a.

13. *Ma'asir-i 'Alamgiri*, pp. 93-94.

14. Saiyid Ghulām 'Alī Khān, *Ṭarīkh-i Sa'ādat*, Naval Kishor ed., 1897, pp. 54-55.

zamindari near Mathura that the 25 villages covered by it were all inhabited by "evil-mannered rebels", and the grantee was required to expel them and settle new 'revenue-paying' peasants.¹⁵ In 1681 Mu'tafat Khān, the *faujdar* of the district around Agra, was killed when leading an attack on a village whose peasants had refused to pay the revenue.¹⁶ And later in the same decade we hear a *jagirdar* complaining that for three years he could not obtain anything from his *jagirs* near Agra "owing to the rebellion."¹⁷

The leadership in the Jat rebellion seems to have been largely in the hands of *zamindars*.¹⁸ Thus seizure of *zamindari* from others was for its leaders, apparently, one of the leading objectives of the rebellion. It was said in mid-18th century, when Jat power was at its height, that "the lands that the Jats have brought into their possession are not their own, but have been usurped from others. The (rightful) proprietors (*mālikān*) of those villages are still to be found." So that if a just king gave the old proprietors some assistance, they could be incited to fight against the Jats.¹⁹ One of the net results of the Jat rebellion was certainly a great extension of Jat *zamindari*, particularly in the middle Doab. This can be seen from a comparison of the areas, for which Jats were entered as the *zamindar* caste in the *Ain*, with the areas held by Jat *zamindars* in pre-Mutiny days (1844).²⁰

The Jat revolt was a huge plundering movement. This was, perhaps, inevitable under the narrow caste-horizons of the peasants and the plundering instincts of their *zamindar*-leaders. The area devas-

15. *Nigarnama-i Munshi*, ff. 199a-200a, Bodl., ff. 157b-158a, Ed. p. 152. The grant was made on the recommendation of Hasan 'Ali Khān, the *faujdar* of Mathura, who had been responsible for the defeat and capture of Gokula.

16. Manucci, II, pp. 223-4; *Ma'asir-i 'Alamgiri*, p. 209.

17. *Riyaz-al Wadad*, f. 16b. The letter seems to have been written immediately after the campaign against 'Bijapur and Haidarabad'.

18. As stated above, Gokula was a *zamindar*, and Chauraman, the son of a *zamindar*. Of Sūrajmal, Chauraman's grandson, under whom the Jat power reached its zenith, it was said that "although he spoke the Braj dialect and wore the dress of a *zamindar*, he possessed an intelligence that made him a Sage among his people" (*Imadu-s Sa'adat*, p. 55).

19. Shah Waliullah, *Siyasi Maktubat*, 50-51.

20. See Elliot's Maps in *Memoirs, &c.*, ii, p. 203. It will be noticed that the extension is very marked in Middle Doab, but not in Upper Doab, where, if anything, the area under Jat *zamindari* has contracted. The obvious reason for this is that the Jat Rebellion was really a rebellion of the Jats of the Braj country and never affected the Upper Doab.

tated grew from the one *pargana* of Sa'dabad, plundered by Gokula,²¹ and the *parganas* around Agra, sacked by Raja Ram,²² to its highest extent under Chauraman, when "all the *parganas* under Agra and Dehli had been sacked and plundered and, from the tumult of that perdition-seeker, the routes and ways were blocked."²³

So far as we know, the Jat rebels (in spite of Haridas) had no connexion with any particular religious movement. In the Satnāmi and Sikh rebellions, on the other hand, religion almost entirely replaced caste as the cementing bond among rebel ranks.

II. The Satnāmīs :

The Satnāmīs were a sect of the Bairāgis. The traditional date of the foundation of this sect by a native of Narnaul is 1657. The Satnami beliefs, as stated in the sect's scripture, centred round an unalloyed monotheism. Ritual and superstition were alike condemned. There was also a definite social aspect of the message. Caste distinctions within the community of believers were forbidden; so also living on the charity of others. An attitude of sympathy with the poor and hostility towards authority and wealth is apparent from such commandments as the following: "Do not harass the poor... Shun the company of an unjust king and a wealthy and dishonest man; do not accept a gift from these or from kings."²⁴

21. *Ma'asir-i 'Alamgiri*, 93.

22. Isardas, ff. 98b, 131b.

23. *Ibid.*, f. 135b. A concerted campaign in 1690-91 (cf. *ibid.*, 136a-137b) broke Chauraman's power and for the remaining part of Aurangzeb's reign, the rebellion smouldered on without any large-scale outbreak. It flared up again after Aurangzeb's death under Chauraman himself, and a Jat Kingdom was ultimately established, with its capital at Bharatpur; this reached its greatest extent under Surajmal (1756-63).

24. This entire passage is based on the MS of the scripture, *Satnām Sahāi* ("Pothi Ghyān Bāni Sādh Satnāmī"), in the Library of the Royal Asiatic Society, London (Hind. 1). The language is Braj Bhasha. The text is given in the Nagari as well as Arabic script. In the latter, an introductory portion in verse (running up to f. 34b) is added.

The quotation is from f. 44b (cf. also f. 38a).

In the beginning of the introductory portion, f. 1a, the native place of the founder is said to be Bijhasar in the country of Narnaul. Narnaul is situated in the Mahendragarh District of East Punjab. In the colophon in Persian at the end of the text of the scripture in Arabic characters, the date of the foundation of the sect is given as Baisākh, 1714 Samvat. This I have accepted the more readily since the prohibition of tobacco smoking (f. 33b) practically precludes an

Such a religion could best appeal to the lower classes. The following description of its followers is from the pen of a contemporary historian:

"There is a group of Hindu mendicants, known as Satnamis, who also called Mundiya.²⁵ They consist of some four or five thousand householders in the *pargana* of Narnaul and Mewat. Although Mundiya dress like mendicants, yet their livelihood and profession is usually agriculture and trade in the manner of grain-merchants small capital.²⁶ Living according to the ways of their own community they aspire to reach the status of a good name (*nek-nām*), which is the meaning of the word *satnām*. But if any one should attempt to impose tyranny and oppression upon them as a display of power or authority, they will not tolerate it; and most of them bear arms and weapons."²⁷

Another contemporary writer castigates the community for being, in its extreme dirtiness, rendered foul, filthy and impure." "Thus," he, "under the rules of their sect they do not differentiate between Muslims and Hindus and eat pig's flesh and other disgusting things."²⁸

Even before they all went into rebellion they were, apparently, very submissive to the authorities. In the early years of Aurangzeb a revenue official declared that though certain "cultivators" in a village in the *pargana* of Bhatnair were "living with their women, children, possessions and cattle in the garb of Bairagis," they were free from the thoughts of sedition and robbery."²⁹ The revolt in Jagan (1672) as a rural affray. One of the Satnamis "was working in his fields when he exchanged hot words with a *piyāda* (foot-warrior), who was guarding the corn-heap. The *piyada* broke the Satnam's head by a blow from his stick. Thereupon a crowd of that sect followed that *piyada* and beat him so much as to reduce him almost to pulp." The *shiqqdar* then sent a contingent of troops and so the revolt began.³⁰

* date for the scripture. For the same reason, 1543, given in some modern writers (Tara Chand, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture*, Allahabad, 1954, p. 192; R. C. Majumdar, *History of Aurangzeb*, III (1928), p. 297) as the date of the founder's birth, is possible unless it is held that the scripture is not his composition.

Cf. *Dabistan-i Mazahib*, p. 251: "The Bairagis are also called Mundiya." *Baqqālān-i kam-māya* (Ma'muri). Khafi Khan reads 'tradesmen' instead of 'merchants'.

Ma'muri, f. 148a-b, Khafi Khan, II, p. 252.

Isardas, f. 61b.

Balkrishan Brahman, f. 56a-b.

Ma'muri, f. 148b, Khafi Khan, II, p. 253.

The plebeian character of the revolt is perhaps best indicated in the following words of scorn which a chronicler pours upon it :

"To the spectators of the wonderful works of Fate the occurrence of this event is a cause of amazement, i.e. what came into the head of this rebellious, murderous, destitute gang of goldsmiths (peasants?),³¹ carpenters, sweepers and tanners and other mean and ignoble men of artisan castes that their conceited brains became so overclouded? Rebellious pride having found a place in their brains, their heads became too heavy for their shoulders. By their own legs they were caught in the snare of annihilation. To unveil this tale, this huge horde of mischief-makers of the region of Mewat all of a sudden sprang up from the earth like moths and fell down from the sky like locusts. . . ."³²

Despite its great initial success, the repeated defeats inflicted on imperial troops and the occupation of Narnaul and Bairat, the rebels were finally destroyed by a large army sent from the Court. But they went down fighting bravely and the same historian, whose words have been quoted above, admits that despite the lack of all materials of war, they repeated the scenes of the great war of Mahabharat.³³

III. The Sikhs :

Just as it has been said that Islam is 'a religion for towns-people',³⁴ so it will, perhaps, not be wrong to say that Sikhism is a peasant religion. The verses of Gurū Nānak "are all in the language of the Jatt̃s of the Panjab. And Jatt̃ in the dialect of the Panjab means a villager, a rustic."³⁵ The author of the *Dabistān-i Mazāhib*, c. 1655, who gives us an intimate account of the Sikhs, adds that "among them there is no such rule as that a Brahman should not be a disciple (*sikh*) of a Khatri, for Nanak was a Khatri. . . . Similarly, they have made Khatri subordinate to the Jatt̃s, who are the lowliest of the caste of Bais (Vaishya). Thus of the great *masands* (nobles, agents) of the Guru

31. The printed text has *zargar* and is supported in this by Add. 19,495, f. 63a. But 'goldsmith' is a little incongruous here and it is most tempting to consider *zargar* a mistake for *barzgar*, 'peasant'. The two words are almost indistinguishable in Persian if written in a rapid hand.

32. *Ma'asir-i 'Alamgiri*, pp. 114-5.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 115-6.

34. Cf. F. Lokkegaard, *Islamic Taxation in the Classic Period*, Copenhagen, 1950, p. 32; M. Habib, Introduction to Elliot & Dowson's *History of India*, Vol. II, Aligarh reprint, 1952, pp. 2-3.

35. *Dabistan-i Mazāhib*, p. 285. Cf. Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes*, p. 105, for the use of the word *jat* in the sense of 'agriculturist'.

most are Jatts."³⁶ Gurū Arjun Mal (d. 1606) took the first steps in creating a well-knit and disciplined organisation. He appointed his agents in every town. "It has been ordained that an *udāsī*, or ascetic, is not a good believer. Owing to this some of the Sikhs (Disciples) of the Guru engage in agriculture, others in trade and service; and everyone according to his capacity pays a *nazar* each year to the *masand*", who received it on behalf of the Guru.³⁷ The Sikhs became a military power under Guru Hargobind (1606-45), who created an army of his own and, as a result, came into armed collision with Mughal power.³⁸ He thus founded a tradition, which was doggedly continued by the last Guru (1676-1708), till, finally, in 1709 Banda was able to lead into the field "an army of innumerable men, like ants and locusts, belonging to the low castes of the Hindus and ready to die" at his orders.³⁹ That the lower classes provided the backbone of this rebellion may be judged from the fact that even in the early 19th century, "most of the chiefs of the highest dignity" among the Sikhs were "low-born persons, such as carpenters, shoe-makers and Jatts."⁴⁰

IV. Other Revolts in Northern India :

These three rebellions do not by any means exhaust the list of peasant revolts in Northern India. Many of these are mentioned in our authorities as passing incidents. For example, we read that in 1575-6 the governor of Bhakkar levied the revenue at a uniform rate per *bigha* and "the peasants were subjected to oppression." The Mangcha tribe thereupon revolted and killed the tax-gatherers. They were, however, defeated and expelled from their lands.⁴¹ When Manuchy passed by Ilahabad in 1662, he found the Governor absent "on a campaign against some villagers, who objected to pay their revenue without at least one fight".⁴² Of disorders of a different kind were those perpet-

36. *Dabistan-i Mazahib*, p. 286; also p. 214. Similarly, *Khafi Khan*, II, p. 651: "Most of the followers of the guru of that perdition-bound sect belonged to the castes of Jats and Khattris of Panjab and other lowly castes of the infidels."

37. *Dabistan-i Mazahib*, pp. 286-7. Cf. also *Khafi Khan*, II, pp. 651-2.

38. *Dabistan-i Mazahib*, p. 288.

39. *Khafi Khan*, II, p. 672.

40. Saiyid Ghulam 'Ali Khan, *Imadu-s Sa'adat*, Nawal Kishor ed., Lucknow, p. 71. See also S. Chandra, *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707-40*, pp. 50-51. He quotes an early 17th century writer, Wārid, to the effect that "a low-class scavenger or leather-dresser had only to leave his home and join the Guru, when in a short space of time he would return to his birthplace with his order of appointment (as an officer) in his hand."

41. Ma'sum, *Tarikh-i Sind*, pp. 245-6.

42. Manucci, II, p. 83.

rated by the Mewātīs in Mewat, who were constantly in rebellion and made plundering raids from their villages lying deep in the hills.⁴³ Jai Singh led a ferocious campaign against them in 1649-50,⁴⁴ but they still survived to give trouble later on.⁴⁵ Similarly the peasants of the Lakhi Jungle were "notorious for rebellion and mischief". They belonged to the castes of Wattūs, Dogars and Gūjars, and were so well protected by the various channels thrown out by the Satlej-Bias river and the forests created by the inundations, that most of the expeditions against them proved ineffectual.⁴⁶ In Aurangzeb's later days they are once said to have ravaged the whole *sarkar* of Dipalpur.⁴⁷

The Bundila rebellion, which began after Shahjahan's annexation of Orchha in 1635, and continued intermittently for the rest of our period, was essentially a dynastic affair, a war for the rights of a royal house. But two letters from the Mughal commander, Khān Jahān Bārha, show that here too the rebels were able, after a successful exploit, to call over to their side "zamindars and peasants" from "both the *ra'iyati* and *mawās* areas". Moreover, the peasants took the opportunity to evade paying the revenue whenever the rebels became active.⁴⁸

V. The Marathas:

We must now pass on to the Marāthas, who beyond doubt constituted the greatest single force responsible for the downfall of the Mughal Empire. In the year 1700, Bhimsen, while writing his memoirs, set himself to explain the reasons for the success of these "malefactors and Marathas". Himself a native of Burhanpur, and with decades of service in the Dakhin behind him, his views on the subject are of great significance. He begins purely with a military argument. The Mughal commanders were not maintaining their contingents up to the standards required by the regulations. As a result the "malefactors" did not entertain any fear of the Mughal *faujdars*, and so "those regions that have been assigned in pay to the *mansabdars* cannot be compelled to pay revenue". "The *zamindars* also, having obtained power, have allied themselves with the Marathas".

43. Pelsaert 15; Manucci, II, p. 458.

44. Waris: a: ff. 433a-b, 435b; b: ff. 64a-67a; Salih, III, pp. 110-12.

45. Manucci, II, p. 458.

46. Sujan Rai, 63; Manucci, II, pp. 457-8. Cf. also Akhyarat 43/53. The Wattus are a Bhatti clan (Ibbetson, Punjab Castes, pp. 145-6).

47. Ahkam-i 'Alamgiri, f. 215a.

48. 'Arzdasht-ha-i Muzaffar, ff. 6a-7a, 115b. The first letter describes the sack of Dhamoni and Chanderi by Champat and Ramsen.

He turns, then, to the second reason and here finds a connexion between the rise of the Maratha power and the oppression of the peasants in the imperial territories:

"The agents of the *jagirdars*, having apprehensions concerning the niggardly behaviour of the clerks of the Court, who on every excuse... effect a transfer, do not have any hope of the confirmation (*ba-hālā*) of the *jagir* for the following year, and so abandon the habit of protecting the peasant (*ra'iyat-parwarī*) and of firmness (*istiqlāl*). The *jagirdar*, who sends a revenue-collector (*āmīl*), owing to his own difficult circumstances, first takes something from him in advance (*qabẓ*); and the latter, reaching the *jagir*, keeps thinking, perhaps another *āmīl* is coming behind him, who has paid a larger *qabẓ*, and, so proceeding tyrannically, is unrelenting in his exactions (*taḥṣīl*). Some peasants are not remiss in paying the authorised revenue (*māl-i wājib*), but are made desperate by the evil of this excruciating spoliation. It came to be represented (at the Court) that the Marathas obtain collaboration from the peasants of the imperial dominions. It was, thereupon, ordered that the horses and weapons found in every village should be confiscated. When this happened in most villages, the peasants, providing themselves with horses and arms, joined the Marathas".

Bhimsen returns again to the subject of the oppression of the peasants and speaks of—

"the tyranny of the *paṭṭīs* of the *faujḍars*, *desmukhs* and *zamindars*, who on every excuse collect money from the peasantry—and besides this the imperial tribute (*peshkash-i pādshāhī*) was fixed upon the *zamindars*, people being appointed to exact it and sent everywhere to obtain supplies. There is no limit to the oppression of these men. The *zamindars* do not give a *dam* or *diram* from their own purse, but pay it after exacting it from the peasants. And the *jizīya* that has been imposed and collectors (*umrā*) appointed: Of their oppression and cruelty what may one write? For no description can suffice...."

In addition to this, the conditions of the peasants were aggravated beyond endurance from Maratha depredations: For,

"as the country has been divided into the *Khalisa* and pay-assignments of the *jagirdars*, so the Marathas too have distributed the very same country among their own 'pseudo-chiefs':⁴⁹ On one land there came to be two *jagirdars*. Quatrain: 'The village is ruined by a measuring rod with two measures, &c'. The troops of the (Maratha) leaders who come in for the sake of plundering the country, extort money from every *pargana* and all places, in accordance with their desire, and let (their horses) graze on and trample upon the cultivated fields... Order has disappeared... Now things have gone beyond every limit.

49. *Nā-sardārān*. This is the official term used for the Maratha commanders in Mughal records.

The produce of the fields does not reach the granary at all. They (the peasants?) are absolutely ruined".

This, apparently, drove the peasants still further into the arms of the Marathas: Thus "when many of Siva's⁵⁰ forts came into the possession of His Majesty (Aurangzeb), it became difficult for the Marathas to find a place to live and keep their dependants. (But) they have affinities with the peasants of the imperial dominions and left their families in their custody in inhabited places...." The passage closes with these words: "The peasants have abandoned cultivation and neither a *dam* nor *diram* reaches the *jagirdars*. Despairing and perplexed because of (their lack of) strength, many of the *mansabdars* of this country⁵¹ have gone over to the Marathas."⁵²

As a contemporary appraisal of the causes of Maratha success Bhim sen's statements are invaluable. Such facts as we possess amply justify the leading lines of his argument. The peasants of the Dakhin had suffered for decades before Shivaji's rise to eminence, from wars brought about by the steady pressure of the Mughals against the Dakhin kingdoms. Vast areas were ravaged by the invading armies, especially when no immediate annexation of the territory was foreseen: the grain was seized, the people slaughtered or enslaved.⁵³ Huge armies were stationed in the Mughal Dakhin and maintained largely from assignments in its provinces so that even in peace time the peasants were laid under a crippling burden.⁵⁴ And so, as we have already seen, the country was desolate and the peasants in flight, when Aurangzeb came to assume the viceroyalty of the Dakhin for the second time.

Thus even at that early period some of the peasants had begun to render aid to Shivaji. Before he set out to win his throne,

50. He, of course, means Shivaji's successors, or simply Marathas.

51. Bhimsen has here probably in mind either the *mansabdars* who had *jagirs* in the Dakhin, or the 'Dakhini' nobles, who had been serving formerly under the Bijapur and Golkunda governments.

52. *Dilkusha*, ff. 138b-140a.

53. Cf. Lahori, I, 316-17, 416-17, for such measures in territories belonging respectively to Ahmadnagar and Bijapur. For similar measures carried out in operations against the Marathas, see Fryer, I, p. 310.

54. This emerges most clearly from the letters Aurangzeb wrote as Viceroy of the Dakhin. The *jama* was considerably inflated, being over four times higher than the actual revenue (*Adab-i 'Alamgiri*, f. 40b; *Ruq'at-i 'Alamgir*, pp. 121-2); and the *mansabdars* found it most difficult to maintain their contingents from the income of their assignments (*Adab-i 'Alamgiri*, ff. 38a-b, 117b-118a; *Ruq'at-i 'Alamgir*, pp. 115-7 & *passim*).

Aurangzeb urged his officials to meet out capital punishment to "peasants, *deshmukhs* and *patels* of the *parganas* of imperial territories, who have gone over to the side of the enemy (i.e. Shivaji and his associates) and have exerted themselves in guiding or abetting those ill-destined ones."⁵⁵

At the same time, there will be no greater mistake than to consider Shivaji and the Maratha chiefs as conscious leaders of a peasant uprising. Shivaji himself was the son of a great Nizamshahi (and later 'Adilshahi) noble and he began his career as a chieftain in the Konkan. The fiscal and political practices of the Marathas bore the deepest imprint of their *zamindari* origins. Thus the *charuth*, the customary demand of Maratha raiders, derived from the traditional claim of the *zamindar* to a fourth of the land, whence of the land revenue, on a pattern we know to have existed in Gujarat.⁵⁶ It was, probably, typical that when Tārābāi sought peace with Aurangzeb she should have asked for "the *deshmukhī* of the country of the Dakhin," the acme of the ambition of any *zamindar*.⁵⁷ When by mid-18th century the Marathas had almost conquered an empire for themselves, their leaders knew of nothing better than to use their power to acquire *zamindari* rights everywhere. "The Marathas in general, but especially the Brahmins of Dakhin," says a writer of that period, "have the peculiar desire to deprive all people of their means of livelihood and appropriate it for themselves. They do not spare the *zamindari* of *rajas*, nor even the *zamindari* of small people like headmen and village accountants. Up-rooting heirs of ancient lineage, they establish their own possession and desire that the Brahmins of the Konkan should become the proprietors (*mālik*) of the whole world."⁵⁸

55. *Adab-i 'Alamgiri*, f. 175a-b.

56. See Chapter V, Section 1.

57. *Akhbarat* 47/73; Khafi Khan, II, p. 267. The right demanded by Tarabai is called *sardeshmukhi* (or, simply *deshmukhi*) in the latter work. The right implied a share in the revenue amounting to 9 (or 10) per cent.

It is interesting to read in the English records of "a very great report of peace settled between the Mogull and Sevagee" in 1675, under which Shivaji was "to deliver up all the castles and country which he has taken from the Mogull" and in return "to be the Kings Desy of all his countrys of Deccan". (*English Records on Shivaji*, pub. by Shiva Charitra Karyalaya, Poona, 1931, Vol. II, p. 57). The offices of *deshmukh* and *desai* are identical.

58. Azad Bilgrami, *Khizana-i 'Amra*, Kanpur, 1871, p. 47. The work was written in 1762-3. The references to Dakhini and Konkani Brahmins were probably provoked by the fact that with the rise of the Peshwas, this caste of Brahmins tended to acquire a dominating position within the Maratha political system.

There is no reason to believe, moreover, that the peasantry in the Maratha Kingdom was free from oppression. How Shivaji treated the peasants in his dominions is described by Fryer, who visited parts of his kingdom in 1675-6. He demanded the revenue, we are told, at double the rates of former days,⁵⁹ leaving to "the Tiller hardly so much as will keep Life and Soul together."⁶⁰ And in Kanara "three-quarters of the Land lies unmanured (uncultivated) through the Tyranny of Seva Gi."⁶¹

Shivaji had use for the peasants in a different sphere altogether. They were the "Naked Starved Rascals" who formed his army.⁶² Armed with "only lances and long swords two inches wide,"⁶³ they were "good at Surprising and Ransacking," but not "for a pitched Field."⁶⁴ They had to live by plunder only, for Shivaji's maxim was: 'No Plunder, no Pay'.⁶⁵ This was the form of salvation which Shivaji and his successors held out to the destitute peasantry of the Dakhin. As Bhimsen's account shows, the military operations of the Marathas did not offer any relief to the cultivating peasants. On the contrary, they suffered grievously from their ravages. As the range of operations of the "Robber State"⁶⁶ grew, so too the numbers of its victims increased. But this seems only to have created a still larger number of "naked starved rascals", who, themselves plundered, had no alternative left but to join the plunderers in order to survive;⁶⁷ and so the unending circle went on.

"There is no province or district," confesses Aurangzeb in his last years, "where the infidels have not raised a tumult and since they are not chastised, they have established themselves everywhere. Most of the country has been rendered desolate and if any place is inhabited,

59. Fryer, II, p. 5.

60. *Ibid.*, I, pp. 311-12; also II, p. 66.

61. *Ibid.*, II, p. 86.

62. *Ibid.*, II, p. 67.

63. Manucci, III, p. 505.

64. Fryer, II, pp. 67, 68; Manucci, *op. cit.*

65. Fryer, I, p. 341.

66. This term is borrowed from V. A. Smith.

67. The Maratha armies thus retained their low-class composition even when they had conquered the larger portion of India. Writing in 1762-3, Azad Bilgrami tells us that "the army of the enemy (the Marathas) consists mostly of low-born people, like peasants, shepherds, carpenters and cobblers, while the army of the Muslims comprises mostly nobles and gentlemen. The success of the enemy is due to this that the enemy troops, being able to withstand great exertion, practice guerilla warfare (*jang-i qazzāqī*) and at the time of war cut off the supplies

the peasants there have probably come to terms with the 'robbers' (*ash-qiya*, official Mughal name for the Marathas)...."⁶⁸

Thus was the Mughal Empire destroyed. No new order was, or could be, created by the forces ranged against it.⁶⁹ The period which follows does not offer an edifying spectacle: the gates were opened to reckless rapine, anarchy and foreign conquest. But the Mughal Empire had been its own grave-digger; and what Sa'di said of another great empire might well serve as its epitaph:

The Emperors of Persia,
Who oppressed the lower classes:
Gone is their glory and empire;
Gone their tyranny over the peasant!⁷⁰

of grain and fodder of their opponent, reducing him to impotence... (although) there is no question of the low-born's possessing the courage and dignity that is ingrained in the nature of the noble-born." (*Khizana-i 'Amira*, p. 49).

The way in which the Maratha depredations created a larger and larger recruiting ground for the Maratha armies may be illustrated by the example of the Pindaris. "The Pindarries were fed and nourished by the very miseries they created; for as their predatory invasions extended, property became insecure, and those who were ruined by their depredations, were afterwards compelled to have recourse to a life of violence, as the only means of subsistence left them. They joined the stream which they could not withstand and endeavoured to redeem their own losses by the plunder of others." (J. Malcolm, *A Memoir of Central India including Malwa, &c.*, Vol. I, London, 1832 (3rd. ed.), p. 429). The Pindaris, who served as the auxiliaries of the forces of Maratha chiefs in the later days of the Peshwas, were the natural result and, in fact, quite symbolic, of the Maratha system.

68. *Ahkam-i 'Alamgiri*, f. 61b.

69. The failure of the 17th century uprisings in India to offer or effect anything better than the work of their opponents was due, as we have seen, to the historical environment and the particular correlation of class-forces existing at the time. It may here be instructive to refer to the history of China, the only country, perhaps, whose dimensions and ancient past make comparison with India possible. After enumerating a number of peasant revolts in China down to the Taip'ings, Mao Tse-tung observes justly that "the gigantic scale of such peasant uprisings and peasant wars in Chinese history is without parallel in the world." He adds, however, that "since neither new productive forces, nor new relations of production, nor a new class-force, nor an advanced political party existed in those days (ancient and medieval times)...., the peasant revolutions invariably failed, and the peasants were utilised after each revolution by the landlords and the nobility as a tool for bringing about a dynastic change." (Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works*, English edition, Vol. III, London, 1954, pp. 75-6).

70. "*Khabar dāri* as *khusravān-i 'Ajam*", &c., *Bostān*.

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