

A Study of *the Agrarian System of the Mughals*

The Revenue Giants –

Introduction

The Mughal Empire, one of the most prominent and enduring empires in Indian history, was sustained through a complex and organized agrarian revenue system. Central to this system were the "Revenue Giants" — powerful landholders and state functionaries responsible for collecting and remitting taxes. This agrarian structure was not just a financial framework but a socio-political system deeply embedded in the imperial governance. The chapter "*The Revenue Giants*" explores these dynamics, offering insights into the roles of zamindars, kisans (peasants), and the elaborate departments that monitored land revenue collection.

Zamindars – The Revenue Intermediaries

Zamindars were the backbone of the Mughal revenue structure. They held hereditary rights over land and were responsible for collecting revenue from the peasants (kisans). There were different categories of zamindars:

- **Autonomous Zamindars:** These were powerful chieftains who often acted independently of the Mughal state. While nominally under Mughal rule, they exercised local authority and sometimes resisted imperial control.
- **Intermediary Zamindars:** Appointed by the Mughal administration, these zamindars collected revenue on behalf of the state in exchange for a portion of the revenue.

Zamindars enjoyed a privileged status in society but were often kept in check by the central administration to prevent them from becoming a threat to imperial authority.

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Kisans – The Agricultural Backbone

Kisans, or peasant cultivators, formed the base of the agrarian pyramid. They were the producers of revenue through their agricultural labor. The kisans were primarily responsible for:

- Cultivating the land allotted to them.
- Paying taxes based on the assessed value of their crops.
- Complying with the administrative regulations imposed by both zamindars and Mughal officials.

Though essential to the economy, kisans were often vulnerable to exploitation due to heavy tax burdens and arbitrary control by zamindars or corrupt officials. In years of famine or poor harvest, their situation could become dire.

Role of Jagirdars in the Revenue System

Another critical component of the Mughal agrarian system was the **Jagirdari system**. Under this arrangement, Mughal nobles and officers were granted **jagirs**—land assignments from which they were expected to collect revenue instead of receiving cash salaries.

- Jagirdars did not own the land but had **temporary rights to revenue collection**.
- They were expected to **maintain troops** and provide military support when required.
- The **Diwan** ensured that jagirdars did not misuse their authority or oppress peasants.
- A rotation system (*bihshti*) was sometimes used to prevent jagirdars from becoming too powerful in one region.

This system created a **network of loyal officers** across the empire, but over time, as the number of jagirdars increased and revenue failed to match their claims, it became a source of instability.

The Departmental System – Monitoring Land Revenue

The Mughal Empire had a sophisticated bureaucratic system that oversaw revenue collection. The **Diwan** was the head of revenue at the provincial level, and under him operated several key officials:

- **Amin**: Responsible for assessing land revenue based on land quality and expected yield.
- **Qanungo**: Maintained local revenue records and helped implement imperial assessments.
- **Patwari**: Village-level accountant who kept records of land ownership and tax obligations.

- **Faujdar:** Ensured law and order, especially during revenue collection drives.

The revenue system was monitored through detailed surveys and audits. The emperor's court relied on extensive documentation and inspections to minimize corruption and inefficiency.

Contributions of Individual Mughal Emperors

Each Mughal emperor played a crucial role in shaping and reforming the agrarian revenue system. Their policies influenced the structure, efficiency, and fairness of the system.

1. Emperor Akbar (1556–1605)

Akbar was the architect of the most organized revenue system in Mughal India. Under the guidance of his finance minister, Raja Todar Mal, Akbar introduced the **Dahsala system**, a statistical method that averaged crop yields and prices over a ten-year period to determine fair revenue rates.

- Standardized land measurement using the *bigha* system.
- Classified land based on fertility and crop productivity.
- Reduced the arbitrary powers of zamindars by appointing imperial officials.
- Established the **Ain-i-Dahsala**, which served as a manual for land revenue assessment.

Akbar's reforms created a predictable and efficient tax structure, balancing the needs of the state with peasant welfare.

2. Emperor Jahangir (1605–1627)

Jahangir largely continued Akbar's administrative policies. He displayed a keen interest in justice and governance, as recorded in his memoirs (*Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*).

- Promoted fairness in revenue collection.
- Ordered regular audits of jagirs and land grants.
- Emphasized the rights of peasants in state correspondence.

While Jahangir did not introduce major reforms, his reign maintained the integrity of the existing system.

3. Emperor Shah Jahan (1628–1658)

Shah Jahan's rule was marked by stability and economic prosperity. The revenue system remained largely based on Akbar's model but saw further formalization:

- Strengthened the **zabt system**, which relied on accurate land measurement.
- Focused on efficiency in **jagir** administration to ensure timely revenue flow.
- Encouraged infrastructure like canals to improve agricultural output.

Despite prosperity, increasing revenue demands placed some pressure on the peasantry.

4. Emperor Aurangzeb (1658–1707)

Aurangzeb maintained the bureaucratic structure but faced new challenges:

- His religious conservatism led to stricter moral codes but did not disrupt revenue mechanisms.
- Ordered anti-corruption drives in the revenue department.
- Appointed inspectors to monitor jagirdars and amins.
- However, his prolonged wars and political centralization led to **overburdened kisans** and **fragmentation** in some areas.

By the end of his reign, the system began to crack under administrative overload and regional uprisings.

5. Later Mughals (Post-1707)

After Aurangzeb, the Mughal Empire's authority declined rapidly:

- Emperors like Bahadur Shah I and Muhammad Shah had limited control over provincial administration.
- **Ijara system** (revenue farming) became common, where the right to collect revenue was auctioned to the highest bidder.
- Zamindars grew more autonomous, often resisting imperial oversight.
- Peasant conditions worsened due to irregular assessments and exploitative revenue agents.

This era marked the breakdown of centralized agrarian management.

The Decline and Legacy of the Revenue System

By the 18th century, the Mughal agrarian revenue system had deteriorated due to:

- Weakened imperial control.
- Over-centralization followed by fragmentation.
- Rising power of zamindars and regional governors.

Despite its decline, the Mughal revenue framework left a legacy of organized governance and became the **blueprint for British land revenue policies** such as the Permanent Settlement and the Ryotwari System.

Cultural and Economic Impact of the Revenue Giants

The economic backbone created by the revenue system had **long-term cultural effects**:

- Surplus revenue helped fund **art, architecture, and education**.
- It contributed to the rise of **urban centers** and flourishing of **local crafts**.
- The patronage of zamindars created **regional courts and artistic schools**, especially in Bengal, Awadh, and Deccan.
- However, over time, the growing wealth gap between zamindars and peasants led to **social tensions**.

Thus, the revenue giants were not just fiscal figures—they shaped the **social, economic, and cultural contours** of Mughal India.

Conclusion

The chapter "*The Revenue Giants*" in *The Agrarian System of the Mughals* illustrates how the Mughal Empire built and sustained an expansive agrarian revenue system. Zamindars served as intermediaries, kisans as the economic backbone, and imperial departments as the regulators. The contributions of Mughal emperors from Akbar to Aurangzeb shaped this system's growth and eventual decline. Though not without flaws, the Mughal agrarian administration was among the most structured economic frameworks of its time, reflecting both imperial ambition and socio-economic complexity.