

12th Standard History

Peasants, Zamindars and the State Agrarian Society and the Mughal Empire

- During 16th and 17th centuries, nearly 85% of Indian population lived in villages.
- Agriculture was the main occupation of the people.
- Peasants and landlords were engaged in agricultural production.
- Agriculture, the common occupation of peasants and landlords created a relationship of co-operation, competition and conflict among them.
- Agriculture was the main source of the revenue of the Mughal Empire. That was why revenue accessor, collectors and record-keepers always tried to control the rural society.
- The basic unit of agricultural society was the village. It was inhabited mostly by the peasants.
- Peasants were engaged in the agricultural activities through the years.
- Our major sources of the agricultural history of the 16th and 17th centuries were the chronicles and documents written by the scholars under the supervision of the Mughal court.
- Ain-i Akbari, written by Abu'l-Fazl has records of arrangements made by the state for ensuring cultivation, collection of taxes by the state to regulate the relationship between state and rural zamindar.

- Sources of 17th centuries depict that there were two kinds of peasants. These were the Khud Kashta and Pahi Kashta.
- Khud Kashta permanently lived in villages. They had their own land and practised agriculture over there, while the Pahi Kashta cultivated land on a contractual basis, which originally belonged to someone else.
- Abundance of land, availability of labourers and mobility of the peasants were the major causes for the expansion of agriculture.
- Rice, wheat and millets were the commonly cultivated crops.
- Agriculture was mainly organised in two major seasons; Rabi and Kharif. Maximum two crops were sown in a year.
- Monsoon was considered as the backbone of the Indian agriculture during these days. Hence, agriculture was mainly dependent on rainfall.
- Many new crops like maize, tomatoes, potatoes and chillies were introduced here from the new world in the 17th century.
- Village panchayat was elected by the assembly of the elders. The headmen of the panchayat was called Mandal or Muqaddam. He enjoyed his post until he had the confidence of the elders of village.
- Village panchayat had the right to levy fines and expulsion of anyone from the community. Expulsion from the community was a strict step which was meted out for a limited period.
- It was very difficult to recognise the difference between peasants and artisans. It was so because both these two groups used to perform both kinds of works.
- People such as, potters, carpenters, blacksmiths, barbers, goldsmiths, etc. provided their services to the village men and were compensated through villagers by a large number of means.

- Jajmani system was also prevalent there. Under this system, blacksmiths, carpenters and goldsmiths were remunerated by Zamindars of Bengal for their work by paying them a small daily allowance diet and money.
- Among the landed gentry women enjoyed the right to inherit property.
- The term 'Jungli' was used to describe those whose livelihood came from hunting, gathering and from forest produces.
- Zamindari consolidation was a slow process. It could be done through various sources like colonisation of new lands, by transfers of rights, with the order of the state and by purchase. These were those processes which perhaps permitted lower castes to reach to the ranks of Zamindars.
- Zamindars played an important role in colonisation of agricultural land and helped the setting cultivators by providing them with means of cultivation and cash loans.
- Ain-i Akbari discussed many matters in details, i.e. the court and administration of the empire, sources of revenue, literary, cultural and religious traditions of the people.
- Ain-i-Akbari remained an extraordinary document of its time even after certain drawbacks.

During the 16th and 17th centuries most of the population of India, i.e. about 85 percent lived in villages. Both peasants and landed elites were involved in agricultural production and claimed their rights to have a share of the total produce.

Historical Sources of Agricultural Society and Mughal Empire:

- The basic unit of agricultural society was village, inhabited by peasants who performed manifold tasks, like-tilling the soil, sowing seeds, harvesting the crop, etc. Major source for the agrarian history of the 16th and early 17th centuries are chronicles and documents from the Mughal court.

Ain-i-Akbari:

- Most important chronicle was Ain-i Akbari authorised by Akbar's court historian Abul Fazl.
- The Ain is made up of five books (daftars), of which the first three books describe the administration of Akbar's regime. The fourth and fifth books (daftars) deal with the religious, literary, and cultural traditions of the people and also contain a collection of Akbar's 'auspicious sayings'.
- Despite of its limitations, Ain remains an extra ordinary document of that period.

Other Sources:

- The other sources included revenue records of Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and extensive records of the East India Company. All these provided us with useful descriptions of agrarian relations in Eastern India.

- During the Mughal period, peasants were called as raiyat and there were two kinds of peasants i.e. Khud-Kashta and Pahi-Kashta.
- Khud-Kashta were residents of the village in which they held their lands. Pahi-Kashta were non-resident cultivators who belonged to some other village and cultivated lands on contractual basis.
- The constant expansion of agriculture was due to the abundance of land, available labour and the mobility of peasants.
- Monsoons remained the backbone of Indian agriculture, but irrigation project (digging new canals and repaired old ones) received state support.
- Agriculture was organised around two major seasonal crops, Kharif (autumn) and the rabi (spring) crops.
- Agriculture in medieval India was not only for subsistence. Mughal state encouraged peasants to cultivate jins-i-kamil, i.e., perfect crops (cotton, sugar, etc) for better profit.

Land Revenue System of Mughal Empire:

- Revenue from the land was the economic mainstay of the Mughal empire.
- The office of the diwan, revenue officials and record keeper all became important for the agricultural domain.
- The land revenue arrangements consisted of two states i.e. first, assessment (jama) and then actual collection (hasil).
- Both cultivated and cultivable lands were measured in each province.
- At the time of Akbar, lands were divided into polaj, parauti, chachar and banjar.

The Flow of Silver and its Impact on Economy:

- Voyages of discovery and the opening up of the New World resulted in a massive expansion of Asia's, particularly India's trade with Europe.
- The expanding trade brought in huge amounts of silver bullion into Asia to pay for goods
- procured from India and a large part of that bullion gravitated towards India. This was good for India as it did not have natural resources of silver.
- As a result, the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries was marked by a remarkable stability in the silver currency.

Caste Based Village Communities:

- There were three constituents of village community, the cultivators, the panchayat and the village headman (muqaddam or mandal).
- The cultivators were a highly heterogeneous group. Caste inequalities were there and certain castes were assigned menial tasks and thus faced poverty.
- There was a direct correlation between caste, poverty and social status at the lower strata of society.
- Sometimes castes rose in the hierarchy because of their developing economic conditions.
- In mixed-caste villages the panchayat represented various castes and communities in the village, though village menial-cum-agricultural worker were not included in it

- The panchayat was headed by a headman known as muqaddam or mandal. Panchayat used their funds for community welfare activities.
- The village headman observed the conduct of the members of village community to prevent any offence against their caste.
- The panchayat had the authority to levy fines and inflict punishment.
- In addition to the village panchayat, each caste or jati in the village had its own jati panchayat. Jati panchayat enjoyed considerable power in rural society.
- In most cases, except in matters of criminal justice, the state respected the decisions of jati panchayats. There were substantial number of artisans in the villages, sometimes it was as high as 25 percent of the total house holds.
- Village artisans like potters, blacksmiths, carpenters, barbers, goldsmiths, etc provided specialized services, in return for which they were compensated by the villagers.
- Some British officials in the 19th century saw the village as a 'little republic' but it was not a sign of rural egalitarianism.
- There was individual ownership of assets and deep inequalities based on caste and gender distinctions.

Social and Economic Status of Women in Village Communities:

- Women and men had to work shoulder to shoulder in the agricultural fields.
- Men tilled and ploughed, w'hile women sowed, weeded, threshed and winnowed the harvest. Although biases related to women's biological functions did continue.

- Many artisanal tasks like spinning yarn, sifting and kneading clay for pottery and embroidery were dependent on female labour.
- Women were considered an important resource in agrarian society because they were child bearers in a society dependent on labour.
- Sometimes in rural communities the payment of bride-price, remarriage for both divorced and widowed women were considered legitimate. Women had the right to inherit property.
- Hindu and Muslim women even inherited zamindaris which they were free to sell or mortgage.

The Zamindars and their Power:

- The zamindars had extensive personal lands termed milkiyat (property) and enjoyed certain social and economic privileges in rural society.
- The zamindars often collected revenue on behalf of the state.
- Most zamindars had fortresses as well as an armed contingent comprising units of cavalry, artillery and infantry. In this period, the relatively 'lower' castes entered the rank of zamindars as zamindaris were bought and sold quite briskly.
- Although, there can be little doubt that zamindars were an exploitative class, their relationship with the peasantry had an element of reciprocity, paternalism and patronage.

Forests and Tribes:

- Forest dwellers known as 'jangli' were those whose livelihood came from the gathering of forest produce, hunting and shifting agriculture.

- Sometimes the forest was a subversive place, a place of refuge for troublemakers.
- Forest people supplied elephants to the kings.
- Hunting was a favourite activity for the kings, sometimes it enabled the emperor to travel extensively in his empire and personally attended the grievances of his subjects.
- Forest dwellers supplied honey, bees wax, gum lac, etc.
- Like the 'big men' of the village community tribes also had their chieftains.
- Many tribal chiefs had become zamindars, some even became kings.
- Tribes in the Sind region had armies comprising of 6,000 cavalry and 7,000 infantry.

Important Terms:

- **Raiyat:** It is used to denote a peasant in Indo-Persian sources.
- **Hasil:** It was the actual amount of revenue collected.
- **Khud-kashta Peasants:** The peasants who were the residents of the village in which they had their lands.
- **Pahi-kashta:** The peasants who generally belonged to another village.
- **Shroff:** A money changer who also acts as a banker.
- **Amin:** The officials that were responsible for imperial regulations.
- **Pargana:** An administrative subdivision.
- **Jama:** The assessed amount and to be collected as revenue.

Time line:

- 1526 – Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodi at Panipat and became the first Mughal Emperor.
- 1530-40 – The first phase of Humayun’ reign.
- 1540-55 – Humayun was defeated by Sher Shah in exiled at Safavid court.
- 1555-1605 – Humayun regains his lost territories.
- 1556-1605 – Rule of Akbar
- 1605-1627 – Rule of Jahangir
- 1628-1658 – Rule of Shah Jahan
- 1658-1707 – Rule of Aurangzeb
- 1739 – Nadir Shah attacked India and ransacked Delhi
- 1761 – In the third battle of Panipat, Ahmad Shah Abdali defeated the Marathas.
- 1765 – The diwani of Bengal transferred to the East India Company.
- 1857 – The last Mughal ruler, Bahadur Shah II was deposed by the British and exiled to Rangoon.