

Part-II: CHAPTER 4
PEASANTS, ZAMINDARS AND THE STATE
Agrarian Society and the Mughal Empire
Revision Notes

Key concepts in nutshell

- Peasants and agricultural production - Geographical diversity
- Looking for sources - Historical Epic and Records, Important chronicles - Ain-i-Akbari, Records from Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan.
- Peasants and their lands - cultivation was based on the principle of individual ownership.
- Irrigation and Technology - Expansion of agriculture, monsoon remained the backbone of Indian agriculture, artificial system of irrigation had to be devised, agriculture often harnessed cattle energy.
- An abundance of crops - two major crops - the kharif and the rabi, new crops came from different parts of the world.
- The village community. Caste and the rural milieu - Rajputs are mentioned as peasants.
- Panchayats and headman - The panchayats was usually a heterogeneous body; the headman was chosen through the consensus of the village elders, functions of the panchayat. Village artisans.
- The existence of substantial members of artisans. A little republic - deep inequities based on caste and gender distinctions.
- Women in agrarian society - women's role in the production process, high mortality rates among women, women petitioned to the panchayat, Hindu and Muslim women inherited zamindaris.
- Forest and tribes - Beyond settled villages, livelihood came from the gathering of forest produce, hunting and shifting agriculture, jungles provided a good defence. Inroads into forests - the state required elephants for the army, hunting expeditions by the Mughals, the spread of commercial agriculture.
- During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries about 85 percent of the population of



India lived in its villages. Both peasants and landed elites were involved in agricultural production claimed rights to a share of the produce. This created relationships of cooperation, competition and conflict among them.

- The basic unit of agricultural society was the village, inhabited by peasants who performed the manifold seasonal tasks that made up agricultural production throughout the year tilling the soil, sowing seeds, harvesting the crop when it was ripe.
- The panchayat was headman known as muqaddam or mandal.
- Documents from Western India – Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra - Record petitions sent by women to the village panchayat, seeking redress and justice.
- The Zamindars held extensive personal lands termed milkiyat, meaning property. Milkiyat lands were cultivated for the private use of zamindars, often with the help of hired or servile labour.
- Zamindars also derived their power from the fact that they could often collect revenue on behalf of the state, a service for which they were compensated financially.
- Both cultivated and cultivable lands were measured in each province. The Ain compiled the aggregates of such lands during Akbar's rule. Efforts to measure lands continued under subsequent emperors. For instance in 1665, Aurangzeb expressly instructed his revenue officials to prepare annual records of the number of cultivators in each village.
- The testimony of an Italian traveler, Giovanni Careri, who passed through India c, 1690, provides a graphic account about the way silver traveled across the globe to reach India.
- The Ain is made up of five books (daftars) of which the first three books describe the administration.
- The Ain completely departed from this tradition as it recorded information about the empire and the people of India, and thus constitutes a benchmark for studying India at the turn of the seventeenth century.

Peasants and Agricultural Production

- i. The basic unit of agricultural society was the village, inhabited by peasants who performed the manifold seasonal tasks.
- ii. Several kinds of areas such as large tracts of dry land or hilly regions were not cultivable.



Moreover, forest areas made up a substantial proportion of territory.

- iii. **Sources:** The major source for the agrarian history of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries are chronicles and documents from the Mughal court. Ain-i Akbari of Akbar's court meticulously recorded the arrangements made by the state.
- iv. Some other sources are detailed revenue records from Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
- v. Besides, the extensive records of the East India Company provide us with useful descriptions of agrarian relations in eastern India.
- vi. All these sources record instances of conflicts between peasants, zamindars and the state. In the process they give us an insight into peasants' perception of and their expectations of fairness from the state.
- vii. **Peasants and their land:** The terms most frequently used to denote a peasant were raiyat (plural, riaya) or muzarian, kisan or asami.
- viii. There is reference of two kinds of peasants in the seventeenth century – **khud-kashta** (they were residents of the village in which they held their lands) and **pahi-kashta** (they were non-resident cultivators who cultivated lands elsewhere on a contractual basis).
- ix. An average peasant of north India did not possess more than a pair of bullocks and two ploughs, most of them possessed even less.
- x. In Gujarat peasants possessing about six acres of land were considered to be affluent; in Bengal, on the other hand, five acres was the upper limit of an average peasant farm.
- xi. Cultivation was based on the principle of individual ownership. Peasants bought and sold their lands like other property owners.
- xii. The abundance of land, available labour and the mobility of peasants were three factors that accounted for the constant expansion of agriculture.
- xiii. **Irrigation:** Monsoons remained the backbone of Indian agriculture, as they are even today. But there were crops which required additional water. Artificial systems of irrigation had to be devised for this. Irrigation projects received state support as well.
- xiv. Though agriculture was labour intensive, peasants did use technologies that often harnessed cattle energy.
- xv. Agriculture was organised around two major seasonal cycles, the **kharif** (autumn) and the **rabi** (spring).
- xvi. During the seventeenth century several new crops from different parts of the world reached the Indian subcontinent. For example, Maize (makka), was introduced into India



via Africa and Spain which gradually became one of the major crops of western India. Vegetables like tomatoes, potatoes and chillies were introduced from the New World at this time, as were fruits like the pineapple and the papaya.

The Village Community

- i. Apart from individual ownership, lands belonged to a collective village community as far as many aspects of their social existence were concerned. There were three constituents of this community – the **cultivators**, the **panchayat**, and the **village headman** (muqaddam or mandal).
- ii. **Distinctions:** Deep inequities on the basis of caste and other castelike distinctions meant that the cultivators were a highly heterogeneous group. Like- despite the abundance of cultivable land, certain caste groups were assigned menial tasks. One who tilled the land was known as menials or agricultural labourers (majur). In Muslim communities menials like the halalkhoran (scavengers) were housed outside the boundaries of the village.
- iii. There was a direct correlation between caste, poverty and social status at the lower strata of society.
- iv. In a manual from seventeenth century Marwar, Rajputs are mentioned as peasants, sharing the same space with Jats, who were accorded a lower status in the caste hierarchy.
- v. Castes such as the Ahirs, Gujars and Malis rose in the hierarchy because of the profitability of cattle rearing and horticulture.
- vi. **Headman:** The village panchayat was an assembly of elders headed by a headman known as muqaddam or mandal.
- vii. The headmen held office as long as they enjoyed the confidence of the village elders, failing which they could be dismissed by them.
- viii. The panchayat derived its funds from contributions made by individuals to a common financial pool.
- ix. One important function of the panchayat was to ensure that caste boundaries among the various communities inhabiting the village were upheld.
- x. Panchayats also had the authority to levy fines and inflict more serious forms of punishment like expulsion from the community.
- xi. In addition to the village panchayat each caste or jati in the village had its own jati panchayat.



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- xii. **Village artisans:** The distinction between artisans and peasants in village society was a fluid one, as many groups performed the tasks of both.
 - xiii. Cultivators and their families would also participate in craft production – such as dyeing, textile printing, baking and firing of pottery, making and repairing agricultural implements.
 - xiv. Village artisans – potters, blacksmiths, carpenters, barbers, even goldsmiths – provided specialised services in return for which they were compensated by villagers by a variety of means, mostly by giving them a share of the harvest, or an allotment of land, etc.
 - xv. Some British officials in the nineteenth century saw the village as a “**little republic**” made up of fraternal partners sharing resources and labour in a collective. But this was not a sign of rural egalitarianism because there existed deep inequities based on caste and gender distinctions.

Women in Agrarian Society

- i. Women and men had to work shoulder to shoulder in the fields, so a gendered segregation between the home (for women) and the world (for men) was not possible in this context. But biases related to women’s biological functions did continue.
- ii. Artisanal tasks such as spinning yarn, sifting and kneading clay for pottery, and embroidery were among the many aspects of production dependent on female labour.
- iii. Women were considered an important resource in agrarian society also because they were child bearers in a society dependent on labour.
- iv. Marriages in many rural communities required the payment of bride-price rather than dowry to the bride’s family.
- v. According to established social norms, the household was headed by a male. Thus women were kept under strict control by the male members of the family and the community.
- vi. Amongst the landed gentry, women had the right to inherit property. Women zamindars were known in eighteenth-century Bengal.

Forests and Tribes

- i. Apart from the intensively cultivated lands, India had huge swathes of forests – dense forest (jungle) or scrubland (kharbandi) – existed all over eastern India, central India, northern India (including the Terai on the Indo-Nepal border), Jharkhand, and in peninsular India down the Western Ghats and the Deccan plateau.



- ii. Forest dwellers were termed jangli as their livelihood came from the gathering of forest produce, hunting and shifting agriculture. These activities were largely season specific.
- iii. Regular hunting expeditions enabled the emperors to travel across the extensive territories of his empire and personally attend to the grievances of its inhabitants.
- iv. The spread of commercial agriculture was an important external factor that impinged on the lives of the forest-dwellers.
- v. Elephants were also captured and sold.
- vi. Social factors too wrought changes in the lives of forest dwellers. Like the “big men” of the village community, tribes also had their chieftains.
- vii. New cultural influences also began to penetrate into forested zones.

The Zamindars

- i. The zamindars were a class of people in the countryside that lived off agriculture but did not participate directly in the processes of agricultural production.
- ii. They were landed proprietors who also enjoyed certain social and economic privileges by virtue of their superior status in rural society.
- iii. The zamindars held extensive personal lands termed milkiyat, meaning property.
- iv. Zamindars also derived their power from the fact that they could often collect revenue on behalf of the state.
- v. Most zamindars had fortresses (qilachas) as well as an armed contingent comprising units of cavalry, artillery and infantry.
- vi. Zamindars spearheaded the colonisation of agricultural land, and helped in settling cultivators by providing them with the means of cultivation, including cash loans.
- vii. 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.

Land Revenue System

- i. Revenue from the land was the economic mainstay of the Mughal Empire.
- ii. This apparatus included the office (daftar) of the diwan who was responsible for supervising the fiscal system of the empire.
- iii. The land revenue arrangements consisted of two stages – first, assessment and then actual collection.



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- iv. The jama was the amount assessed, as opposed to hasil, the amount collected.
 - v. In the list of duties of the amil-guzar or revenue collector, Akbar decreed that while he should strive to make cultivators pay in cash, the option of payment in kind was also to be kept open.
 - vi. Both cultivated and cultivable lands were measured in each province. The Ain compiled the aggregates of such lands during Akbar's rule.

Classification of Lands Under Akbar

The following a listing of criteria of classification excerpted from the Ain:

The Emperor Akbar in his profound sagacity classified the lands and fixed a different revenue to be paid by each. Polaj is land which is annually cultivated for each crop in succession and is never allowed to lie fallow. Parauti is land left out of cultivation for a time that it may recover its strength. Chachar is land that has lain fallow for three or four years. Banjar is land uncultivated for five years and more. Of the first two kinds of land, there are three classes, good, middling, and bad. They add together the produce of each sort, and the third of this represents the medium produce, one-third part of which is exacted as the royal dues.

The Flow of Silver

- i. The Mughal Empire consolidated powers and resources from the empires of Ming (China), Safavid (Iran) and Ottoman (Turkey) during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
- ii. 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.
- iii. An 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.
- iv. SO, the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries was also marked by a remarkable stability in the availability of metal currency, particularly the silver rupya in India.
- v. The testimony of an Italian traveller, **Giovanni Careri**, who passed through India c. 1690, provides a graphic account about the way silver travelled across the globe to reach India.

The Ain-i Akbari of Abu'l Fazl Allami



- i. Ain-i Akbari is a compilation of imperial regulations and a gazetteer of the empire.
- ii. It is a part of the Akbar Nama and was completed in 1598, after having gone through five revisions.
- iii. The Ain gives detailed accounts of the organisation of the court, administration and army, the sources of revenue and the physical layout of the provinces of Akbar's empire and the literary, cultural and religious traditions of the people.
- iv. The Ain is made up of five books (daftars), of which the first three books describe the administration.
- v. The first book, called manzil-abadi, concerns the imperial household and its maintenance. The second book, sipah-abadi, covers the military and civil administration and the establishment of servants. This book includes notices and short biographical sketches of imperial officials (mansabdars), learned men, poets and artists.
- vi. The third book, mulk-abadi, is the one which deals with the fiscal side of the empire and provides information on revenue rates, followed by the "Account of the Twelve Provinces".
- vii. The Ain remains an extraordinary document of its times. By providing fascinating glimpses into the structure and organisation of the Mughal Empire and by giving us quantitative information about its products and people.

Timeline:

Time Line Land Marks in the History of the Mughal Empire	
1526	Babur defeats Ibrahim Lodi, the Delhi sultan at Panipat, becomes the first Mughal emperor
1530-40	First phase of Humayun's reign
1540-55	Humayun defeated by Sher Shah, in exile at the safavi court
1555-56	Humayun regains lost territories
1556-	



1605	Reign of Akbar
1605-27	Reign of Jahangir
1628-58	Reign of Shan Jahan
1658-1707	Reign of Aurangzeb
1739	Nadir Shah invades India and sacks Delhi
1761	Ahmad shah Abdali defeats the marathas in the third battle of Panipat
1765	The diwani of Bengal transferred to the East India company
1857	Last Mughal ruler, Bahadur Shah II, Deposed by the British and exiled to Rangoon (Present day Yangon, Myanmar)

