



FACULTY OF JURIDICAL SCIENCES

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Lecture-39



MEDIEVAL INDIA

Peasant, Zamindars and the State

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. Further, they contributed their labour to the production of agro-based goods such as sugar and oil. But rural India was not characterised by settled peasant production alone. Several kinds of areas such as large tracts of dry land or hilly regions were not cultivable in the same way as the more fertile expanses of land. In addition, forest areas made up a substantial proportion of territory. We need to keep this varied topography in mind when discussing agrarian society.

Peasants and their lands

The term which Indo-Persian sources of the Mughal period most frequently used to denote a peasant was raiyat (plural, riaya) or muzarian. In addition, we also encounter the terms kisan or asami. Sources of the seventeenth century refer to two kinds of peasants – khud-kashta and pahi-kashta. The former were residents of the village in which they held their lands. The latter were non-resident cultivators who belonged to some other village, but cultivated lands elsewhere on a contractual basis. People became pahi-kashta either out of choice – for example, when terms of revenue in a distant village were more favourable – or out of compulsion – for example, forced by economic distress after a famine. Seldom did the average peasant of north India possess more than a pair of bullocks and two ploughs; most possessed even less. 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; 10 acres would make one a rich asami. Cultivation was based on the principle of individual ownership. Peasant lands were bought and sold in the same way as the lands of other property

The Zamindars

Our story of agrarian relations in Mughal India will not be complete without referring to a class of people in the countryside that lived off agriculture but did not participate directly in the processes of agricultural production. These were the zamindars who were landed proprietors who also enjoyed certain social and economic privileges by virtue of their superior status in rural society. Caste was one factor that accounted for the elevated status of zamindars; another factor was that they performed certain services (khidmat) for the state. 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. The zamindars could sell, bequeath or mortgage these lands at will. 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. Control over military resources was another source of power. Most zamindars had fortresses (qilachas) as well as an armed contingent comprising units of cavalry, artillery and infantry. Thus if we visualise social relations in the Mughal countryside as a pyramid, zamindars clearly constituted its very narrow apex. Abu'l Fazl's account indicates that an "upper -caste", Brahmana-Rajput combine had already established firm control over rural society. It also reflects a fairly large representation from the so-called intermediate castes, as we saw earlier, as well as a liberal sprinkling of Muslim zamindaris.

MCQ

1. Which of the following officials were responsible for the collection of crore of dams during the rule of Akbar?

- a. Qanungos
- b. Karoris
- c. Mansabdars
- d. Amil

2. Consider the following statements regarding the system of dahsala instituted by Akbar:

- I. Under this system, the average produce of different crops as well as the average prices prevailing over the last ten (dah) years were calculated.
- II. One-third of the average produce was the state share and the state demand was, however, stated in cash.
- III. The produce of a bigha of land under share was given in maunds but on the basis of average prices, the state demand was fixed in rupees per bigha.

Which of the following statement(s) is/are correct?

- 1. Only I
- b. I and II
- c. I and III
- d. All of the above

3. Consider the following statements regarding the zabti system incorporated by Akbar during his reign:

- I. The system of measurement and the assessment based upon that measurement is called the zabti system.
- II. Akbar introduced this system in the area from Lahore to Allahabad, and in Malwa and Gujarat.
- III. The zabti system was a further development or the dahsala system.

Which of the following statement(s) is/are correct?

- a. Only I
- b. I and II
- c. I and III
- d. All of the above

4. Consider the following statements regarding batai or ghalla-bakhshi system of assessment followed under Akbar:

- I. In this system, the produce was divided between the peasants and the state in fixed proportion.
- II. The crop was divided after it had been thrashed, or when it had been cut and tied in stacks, or while it was standing in the field.
- III. This system was considered a very fair one, but it needed an army of honest officials to be present at the time of the ripening or the reaping of the crops.

Which of the following statement(s) is/are correct?

- a. Only I
- b. I and II

- c. I and III
- d. All of the above

5. Which of the following statements is correct regarding the batai and zabti system?

- I. The peasants were allowed to choose between zabti and batai under certain conditions. Thus, such a choice was given when the crops had been ruined.
- II. Under batai, the peasants were given no choice and they had to pay in kind only.
- III. In case of crops such as cotton, indigo, oil-seeds, sugar-cane, etc., the state demand was invariably in cash.

Which of the following statement(s) is/are correct?

- a. Only I
- b. I and II
- c. I and III
- d. All of the above

