

CHAPTER 8

PEASANTS, ZAMINDARS AND THE STATE **Agrarian Society and the Mughal Empire** ***(C. Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century)***

Q. 01. Discuss, with examples, the significance of monetary transactions during the period 16th and 17th century.

Ans. The significance of monetary transactions during sixteenth and seventeenth centuries :

- (i) In the early decades of sixteenth century farmers were allowed to pay land revenue in cash or kind. Due to the facility to pay land revenue in cash money, monetary transactions played vital role in Indian economy.
- (ii) Village artisan (potter, blacksmith, barber, etc.) use to provide specialized services to the villagers. Though most common way of compensating them was giving them a share of the harvest but their was another system also under this system artisans and individual peasants, house hold entered into a mutually negotiated system of remuneration, most of the time goods for services. For example, eighteenth-century records tell us a zamindars in Bangal who remunerated blacksmiths, carpenters, even goldsmiths for their work by paying them “a small daily allowance and diet money”. This later came to be described as the Jajmani system, though the term was not in vogue in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such evidence is interesting because it indicates the intricate ways

in which exchange networks operated at the micro-level of the village. Cash remuneration was not entirely unknown either.

- (iii) The seventeenth-century French traveler Jean-Baptists Tavernier found it remarkable that in “India a village must be very small indeed if it has not a money changer called a Shroff. (They) act as bankers to make remittances of money (and who) enhance the rupee as they please for paisa and the paisa for these (cowrie) shells”.
- (iv) 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. This was good for India as it did not have natural resources of silver.
- (v) As a result, 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.
- (vi) This facilitated an unprecedented expansion of minting of coins and the circulation of money in the economy as well as the ability of the Mughal state to extract taxes and revenue in cash.
- (vii) 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. It also gives us an idea of the phenomenal amounts of cash and commodity transactions in seventeenth-century India.

Q. 02. To what extent do you think caste was a factor in influencing social and economic relations in agrarian society ?

Ans. Caste as a factor in influencing social and economic relations in agrarian society.

- (i) Sizeable number of major (labourer). Deep inequities on the basis of caste and other caste like distinctions meant that the cultivators were a highly heterogeneous group. Among those who tilled the land, there was a sizeable number who worked as menials or agricultural labourers (major).
- (ii) Despite the abundance of cultivable land, certain caste groups were assigned menial tasks and thus relegated to poverty. Though there was no census at that time, the little data that we have suggest that such groups comprised a large section of the village population, had the least resources and were constrained by their position in the caste hierarchy, much like the Dalits of modern India. Such distinctions had begun permeating into other communities too.
- (iii) **Muslim halakhoran etc.** : In muslim communities menials like the halakhoran (scavengers) were housed outside the boundaries of the village, similarly malla hza das (literally, sons of boatmen) in Bihar were comparable to slaves.
- (iv) **Direct co-relation between caste and socio economic position** : There was a direct correlation between caste, poverty and social status at the lower strata of society such correlations were not so marked at intermediate levels. 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. The Gauravas, who cultivated land around Vrindavan (Uttar Pradesh), sought Rajput status in the seventeenth century.
- (v) **Rise in hierarchy of caste** : Castes such as the Ahirs, Gujars and Malis rose in the hierarchy because of the profitability of cattle rearing and horticulture. In the eastern regions, intermediate pastoral and fishing castes like the sadgops and Kaivartas acquired the status of peasants.

Q. 03. Discuss the ways in which panchayats and village headmen regulated rural society.

Ans. Regulation of rural society by Panchayats and headmen :

- (i) **Meaning of Panchayat :** The village panchayat was an assembly of elders, usually important people of the village with hereditary right over their property.
- (ii) **General composition and importance of Panchayat decision :** In mixed-caste villages, the panchayat was usually a heterogeneous body. An oligarchy, the panchayat represented various castes and communities in the village, though the village menial-cum-agricultural worker was unlikely to be represented there. The decisions made by these panchayats were binding on the members.
- (iii) **Selection dismissal and main function of headman or muqaddam :** The panchayat was headed by a headman known as muqaddam or mandal. Some sources suggest that the headman was chosen through the consensus of the village elders, and that this choice had to be ratified by the zamindar. Headmen held office as long as they enjoyed the confidence of the village elders, failing which they could be dismissed by them. The chief function of the headman was to supervise the preparation of village accounts, assisted by the accountant or patwari of the panchayat.
- (iv) **Funding of Panchayat or sources of Income Panchayat :** The panchayat derived its funds from contributions made by individuals to a common financial pool.

- (v) **Item of expenditure :** These funds were used for defraying the costs of entertaining revenue officials who visited the village from time to time. Expenses for community welfare activities such as tiding over natural calamities (like floods), were also met from these funds. Often these funds were also deployed in construction of a bund or digging a canal which peasants usually could not afford to do on their own.
- (vi) **Various function of panchayat :** One important function of the panchayat was to ensure that caste boundaries among the various communities inhabiting the village were upheld. In eastern India all marriages were held in the presence of the mandal. In other words one of the duties of the village headman was to oversee the conduct of the members of the village community "chiefly to prevent any offence against their caste".
- (vii) **Imposing fines and expulsion from caste and community :** Panchayat also had the authority to levy fines and inflict more serious forms of punishment like expulsion from the community. The latter was a drastic step and was in most cases meted out for a limited period. It meant that a person forced to leave the village became an outcaste and lost his right to practise his profession. Such a measure was intended as a deterrent to violation of caste norms.
- (viii) **Caste or Jati Panchayat :** In addition to the village panchayat each caste or jati in the village had its own jati panchayat. These panchayats wielded considerable power in rural society. In Rajasthan jati panchayats arbitrated civil disputes between members of different castes. They mediated in contested claims on land, decided whether marriages were performed according to the norms

laid down by a particular caste group, determined who had ritual precedence in village functions, and so on. In most cases, except in matters of criminal justice, the state respected the decisions of jati panchayats.

- (ix) **Petitions presented by caste panchayat and their impact :** Archival records from western India - notably Rajasthan and Maharashtra - contain petitions presented to the panchayat complaining about extortionate taxation or the demand for unpaid labour (beggar) imposed by the "superior" castes or officials of the state. These petitions were usually made by villagers, from the lowest rungs of rural society. Often petitions were made collectively as well, by a caste group or a community protesting against what they considered were morally illegitimate demands on the part of elite groups. These included excessive tax demands which, especially in times of drought or other disasters, endangered the peasants' subsistence. In the eyes of the petitioners, the right to the basic minimum for survival was sanctioned by custom. They regarded the village panchayat as the court of appeal that would ensure that the state carried out its moral obligations and guaranteed justice.