

---

---

# THOUGHTS ON AGRARIAN RELATIONS IN MUGHAL INDIA

Saiyid Nurul Hasan

333.3220954025  
N 939 T

PEOPLE'S PUBLISHING HOUSE

333.3220  
954025  
N 939 T



**INDIAN INSTITUTE OF  
ADVANCED STUDY  
LIBRARY SIMLA**

THOUGHTS ON  
AGRARIAN RELATIONS IN MUGHAL INDIA

Thoughts on  
Agrarian Relations in Mughal India

SAIYID NURUL HASAN



PEOPLE'S PUBLISHING HOUSE

New Delhi

Ahmedabad

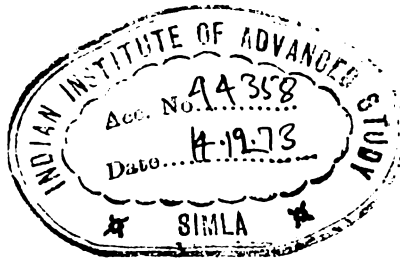
Bombay

February 1973 (P 39)



Price: Rs. 4.00

333.3220954025  
N939 T



2311

---

Printed by D. P. Sinha at New Age Printing Press, Rani Jhansi Road, New Delhi-55, and published by him for People's Publishing House, Rani Jhansi Road, New Delhi-55.

## PREFACE

This little book is based on the talks I gave at the Patna University in April 1971 as National Lecturer in History under the University Grants Commission programme. In order to retain the style and spirit of these lectures I have not introduced any change. I will feel happy if some of the questions I have raised regarding agrarian relations in Mughal times are pursued further by historians.

The talks were tape-recorded and later typed with the help of Dr N. P. Verma of Department of History, Patna University. Professor R. S. Sharma, Dr Qeyamuddin Ahmad and Professor Satish Chandra were good enough to prepare the manuscript for press. To all of them I express my sincere thanks.

*New Delhi*  
*January 1973*

S. NURUL HASAN

DATA ENTERED

## CONTENTS

Problems, Sources and Method	1
Organization of Agrarian Economy	18
Fluctuating Landed Classes <i>vis-a-vis</i> the State	30





## I. PROBLEMS, SOURCES AND METHOD

I am happy to have the privilege of addressing a distinguished gathering on the problems of agrarian history of medieval India with special reference to agrarian relations. To a learned audience like this I need hardly spell out the problems of agrarian history which are worrying the students of medieval India. Briefly I shall indicate what appears to me to be some of the most baffling problems.

First of all—I am saying this not in order of importance—is the question whether the relationships in India could be considered to be feudal in character and, if so, what was the nature of this feudalism? In what ways was it different from the type of feudalism that had existed in India in the earlier phase? And what are the changes, if any, that were taking place in this feudal structure?

There is no doubt that in medieval India the surplus produce was controlled by the intermediaries and also a part of it was appropriated by them. By all accounts the major share of the surplus went to the *amīrs*, although the process of cultivation and the rural life was certainly controlled by the zamindar. The *amīr* could not exist independently of the zamindar. This is a system which can only be described as feudal if we accept a totally modified definition of feudalism. It is mainly a system (1) in which the major source of production is agricultural production, (2) in which a substantial share of the surplus produce is appropriated by a class which holds power militarily, (3) in which the economic power of the class which appropriates surplus is based not only on the military strength of that class but

also on the role that class is playing in the production process, whether of agricultural production or the subsidiary handicrafts production, and (4) in which this dominating class in spite of changes within its fold is by and large a fairly closed group. We notice that there is very little chance of this class being overthrown by those who are actually cultivating or engaged in the process of cultivation, that it is dominant socially, politically and militarily, that even the revolts against the imperial government are dominated by this class and finally that, while this class is dependent on the emperor or the king for its position in many ways, the imperial system itself is dependent on the support of this particular class. It is only in this sense that we can call this system a feudal system.

But if you use the word feudal in the western European sense of the term, then quite obviously we do not have any of the characteristics of the western European feudalism. I would go along with Professor R. S. Sharma that the word feudalism should be used. It should be used because it helps us to understand certain vital characteristics of a phase of social development which undergo a change subsequently. This is my reason for rejecting the formulation of the Asiatic mode of production. It appears to me that there is very little evidence of the existence of what was deemed to be communal ownership. What was the village community? It was really the community of the proprietors in a village, especially where the village happened to be a *bhavyāchāra* village or a village of coparcenaries. But otherwise, in the sense of the village commune or the village community holding rights over land as a whole, we have hardly any evidence.

The medieval system has been regarded as "oriental despotism", which, I think, is a very much over-worked word. The most interesting refutation of the theory of oriental despotism is in the writings of the Britishers who came to India between 1743 and 1793. In that 50-year period they had discussed this question at great length. If you compare the concept of property as defined by Blackstone in the pre-Adam Smith period—Blackstone's commentaries as you know were written before Adam Smith—then you will find that the concept of property is very similar to the

concept of property that was in existence here. So in that sense it is basically a feudal relationship, that is to say, the property is not an exclusive property. The capitalist definition of property is the absolute right to use, to abuse and to dispose of; the word *abuse* is the vital word. This term actually originated after Ricardo's theories began to influence the British jurists, because the right to abuse property was never recognized in the pre-capitalist phase. In medieval India the zamindar had absolute rights in terms of property. But he had simultaneously the obligation to ensure that cultivation was continued, and that good quality crop (*jins-i-kamil*) was sown. This system of overlapping and overriding rights undergoes a change in the capitalist system, where taxation acquires a meaning totally different from the pre-capitalist relationship. Since I find a great deal of similarity between the concept of property in Mughal times and the concept defined by Blackstone in the pre-physiocratic and pre-Adam Smith phase, I suggest that the Mughal system was feudal and pre-capitalist in character.

Coming to the concrete aspect of the agrarian relations in medieval India, the problem has become particularly acute because we notice two very distinct elements in the ruling class, by which I mean the class that was enjoying the benefits of surplus agricultural production. From the time of the Sultanate in particular—I am not denying the existence of this class earlier—we observe that there are two entirely different elements, the element which the medieval historians have started calling the nobility or the *umara* (pl. of *amir*), to use the contemporary Persian term, and the hereditary landed classes, be they chieftains, or the various types of intermediaries or the proprietors of land of other descriptions. These two mutually exclusive classes subsequently began to merge with each other or established overlapping relationships with each other, and yet retained their distinct identity, and this poses a number of problems which I shall not attempt to answer in this very short time. Nor do I have the competence to answer these questions even to my own satisfaction, leave alone to your satisfaction.

The questions that arise are : Did this constitute double exploitation ? Or if there was no double exploitation, what was

the fundamental relationship between these two distinct elements of society, and in what way did it affect the organization of Indian polity and society? And this naturally takes us to the next problem of agrarian history. What was the nature of the medieval state in terms of social relationships? Was this state dominated by one section or the other? Was it fundamentally assisting one group of the agrarian ruling class or the other? What was the nature of contradictions between these various classes? And what was the overall and net impact of these contradictions on the social situation prevailing during the medieval period?

Some time ago it was treated as axiomatic that basically the social relationships in India remained constant, and that there was no change. This was a view which was first put forward by various British authors, and in a way it was accepted by the late Dr K. M. Ashraf. But while this statement can be accepted as true in a very, very broad sense, the question still arises: How broad is the sense in which we can accept it? Because we do find numerous changes taking place in the position of various elements of the ruling class or the nobility from the lower to the higher, from the higher back to the lower, constant struggles and strifes frequently expressing themselves in military struggles, sometimes remaining basically and fundamentally economic struggles, with the state or the state apparatus, if you prefer to use that term, playing a definite part in this struggle. And these changes are there for us to see if we care to do so. Therefore we are not able to accept any longer the old hypothesis of a static medieval society; it was a changing society. But we still do not know what was the nature of this change, what was the direction of this change, and what factors caused this change. However, the broad outline seems to be discernible, and this takes us to our next problem.

Was this society capable of transforming itself? This question has been posed by different scholars in different ways. But basically the problem remains the same. Some people have asked: Could India or Indian society have developed into a capitalist society or a modern industrial society if the British had not intervened? As students of history we are all allergic to playing

the game of "ifs" of history. It is fruitless to speculate on the "ifs" of history, it is even unprofessional and unhistorian-like to do so.

Having said so, I still want to pose the question : Could our society have been transformed into an industrial society or into a capitalist society or into a modern society if the British and the other Europeans had not intervened? Whether it would have happened or not is a different matter. The question is : Was our society capable of doing so? Did it have within itself the germs of social change or was it too static?

Once we come to discuss this issue several matters deserve our consideration. For example, the problem which was posed rather sharply in the 19th century by diverse writers was : Was there a village community in India? And if so, what was its nature? What did it mean? Did it mean communal ownership of land during the medieval period, or was land basically individually owned? Did agricultural self-sufficiency, and self-sufficiency of the village or a group of small villages in fact exist? Or was trade, internal as well as overseas, carried on a large scale? Was the economy developing into a monetary economy? And if there was the growth of monetary economy, how fundamental was this growth? After all the use of money has been in existence from the fifth century B.C., but this does not necessarily mean that the country in general, and especially agrarian society in general, had developed a full-fledged monetary economy. And what was the role of money? Was it merely an instrument of exchange? Was the exchange carried on fundamentally through the barter system or was money economy in its modern sense playing a significant part? In this connection we cannot ignore the fact: Was production increasing and expanding? Was the technique of agricultural production undergoing any change? Was there any factor contributing to change? Was there an agrarian crisis? And if there was an agrarian crisis, what do we mean by it? Did it mean the collapse of agriculture? Did it mean the collapse of agrarian relationships?

In this connection I need hardly emphasize before an audience like this the importance of village industries. I think that one of the major points which we should consider is this : Why was it

that Gandhiji came to the conclusion that the uplift of Indian rural society was linked up with the revival of village industries? Does it mean that when Gandhiji was born the memory of village industries was still so vivid and its collapse still so apparent that he concluded that if the countryside in India is to be put back on its feet the village industries must be revived? If so, are we conscious of the extent and the magnitude of village industries which existed in India before India was drawn into the vortex of modern industrial economy? It is obvious that no study of agrarian relationships will be adequate unless simultaneously we investigate the nature and extent of village handicrafts.

This takes us back to an earlier question but in a slightly modified form : What was the overall impact of the state system and of the changing state policies on all these different facets of agrarian relationships? Quite obviously the economy of our country had been in medieval times, as it still is, primarily an agrarian economy. We were not facing the type of difficulty which was being faced in the West, that is to say, agricultural production had apparently reached the plateau which made further expansion virtually impossible. We in India until about six years ago were so firmly convinced of the capacity of our land to yield more agricultural produce by extending and expanding cultivation that even during the Second World War and afterwards the slogan of "grow more food" meant digging up your lawns! If there was any lawn in a university or elsewhere, wheat was sown and grown therein. And this was the theme which you can find throughout the medieval period. In most of the Mughal documents that have survived, instructions are continuously given for expanding the area under cultivation. The exact wordings were "populate more land", which obviously meant bringing more areas under cultivation. In pursuance of their policy of extending the cultivated area, the emperors freely bestowed zamindāri rights on those who would bring forest and waste under cultivation. It is also significant that the majority of the *madad-i-ma'āsh* grants (revenue-free grants given for charitable purposes) related to uncultivated land. So the overall impact of the state on agrarian relations is another problem which must concern us and to which, I confess, we do not know any satisfactory answer.

These are some of the major problems of agrarian relationships which we have to tackle, but we are not fully in a position to do so. The principal cause of our failure to do so lies in the nature of the source material that we have. As everybody knows, these were not the problems that really exercised the minds of the medieval intelligentsia, and therefore the writers of the medieval period in general did not expound their views on these questions. Even where there are references to agrarian relationships, they are in the nature of broad comments—rather like those one hears in Parliament today wherein the prejudices of an individual based on limited observation are sought to be put across as a generalized fact covering the entire Indian situation. Such statements and comments, and the type of comments we ourselves make every day, are certainly not based either on any empirical assessment or on any statistical analysis.

Let me give you another example. Some of us may believe that there has been no change in the Indian agrarian situation for the last 500 years. But really the Indian situation has radically changed. There has been a complete revolution; old values have disappeared and a totally new society has been born. The nature of the change is described in various ways depending upon the class to which the speaker may belong. If he belongs to the zamindar class which is tending to lose its power, the generalizations will be of this type : What has happened ? These illiterate and uneducated people have come into power, there is no law and order in the countryside. On the other hand if he belongs to the newly emerging rich peasant class then he will remark: Oh, what a social change there has been! If he belongs to the class of landless peasantry, he will express his total dissatisfaction with this change, and so on. Such attitudes can be observed even today when we have the means of securing statistical information, when we can go and make empirical observations, when social sciences have developed so much, and when we have advanced means of communication, mass media.

Therefore for a medieval observer to make comments with any sense of proportion, I think, would be impossible. I am emphasizing this point because many of us have tended to write

books on history on the basis of the observations of contemporaries or on the basis of the generalizations made by contemporaries, especially of the foreign travellers. Is there any reason to assume that Bernier was more competent than Katherine Mayo for example? It is difficult to accept Bernier's statement that the peasantry was better off under the autonomous rajas than in the rest of the empire, not only because the French doctor's prejudice in favour of feudal rights apparently clouded his judgement, but also because the available original records indicate that the rate of assessment of land revenue and other taxes charged from the peasants in the territories of the chiefs was not lower than that in the contiguous areas outside the chief's dominions.<sup>1</sup> But whereas Katherine Mayo's observations are rejected out of hand, Bernier's are regarded as sacred.

Can we really understand such a complex problem as that of agrarian relations on the basis of these comments whether by Indians or by foreigners who came and visited India? I have had the occasion to read, and, I am sure, historians of modern India must have seen numerous examples, the reporting by officials from the districts. If we look carefully into them we find how absurd many of these reports have been and how factually incorrect they tend to be. This is the case with the reports of people who were actively engaged in tackling administrative problems. We will therefore be justified in saying that a casual comment made by any one must be scrutinized in order to see to what extent it is true. You can see my difficulty in accepting general comments and observations, whether by Indians or by foreigners. Take statements like this: In the reign of such and such a king everything was good, but in the reign of so and so everything was bad. We know that whatever happened before our times appears to be good to most of us; that old days are always "good old days", and the present is always the "bad present". Why should we really waste so much of our time and energy in attempting to understand the agrarian relationship of

<sup>1</sup> The *arsattas* of *parganas* Amber and Sawai Jaipur, when compared with those of *parganas* Chatsu and Hindaun, reveal a general similarity in the rates of assessment.



medieval India in terms of such observations and comments? If this method is to be totally rejected for understanding the present social situation in India, why does it become a valid method for understanding the social situation in the medieval period? And yet what are we to do? If we do not accept them, where do we go?

We can take the view that we will keep on studying history in the exact manner our forefathers did. We will keep on filling the "gaps" of medieval Indian history which means one monograph for each king, and what has not been written on is the "gap" which is easily identified. The chapters are ready-made: The first is ancestry, birth and early childhood; the second is accession and the problems of accession; the third is wars and conquests; the fourth is minor wars and rebellions; the fifth is administration; and the sixth is society and culture during the age. I am not attempting to denigrate the importance of such studies. If that work had not been done, we would not be sitting together and talking of newer problems. Today we can talk, and I am saying it with all humility, of a radically new way of research because of the excellent work already done by our predecessors. But are we for ever and ever going to write history on the old pattern and filling the gaps of this type? Because if we are not going to fill the gaps of this type, then what is the type of source material that we have? We cannot manufacture the source material; I wish we could. Only we cease to be historians if we do that. Then what do we do?

The nature of the source material is going to condition partly the nature of our research, and yet we have to break through and evolve newer methods so that with the same type of source material we are able to answer the type of questions that are worrying us. This means having a second look at our source material and attempting new methods of investigation. Now one of the methods is that you subject your chronicles to a quantitative analysis so that the qualitative statements can then be checked up with the actual quantitative data. I know that in this audience perhaps I am disrespectfully quoting the example of Sher Shah, but I will remind you that if you take the principal source of the reign of Sher Shah, namely Abbas Sarwani's book,

in the last few pages there is an account of the administration of Sher Shah, an account which led the late K. R. Kanungo in 1921 to describe exactly how Sher Shah administered his kingdom. There is a statement that Sher Shah divided his kingdom into a number of *sarkārs*. In each of the *sarkārs* he appointed a *shiqdār-i-shiqdārān* and a *munṣif-i-munṣifān* on the basis of which the more sophisticated among our scholars draw very nice charts and diagrams how Sher Shah administered his kingdom. I started by accepting this. Then I thought let us see how many individuals were appointed *shiqdār-i-shiqdārān*. In the whole of Sarwani's book, barring these last four pages, there is no reference to any single individual having been appointed *shiqdār-i-shiqdārān* of such and such a *sarkār*. There is a variety of titles which are used: *walī*, *ḥākim*, *amīn*, etc. All these terms are used, but what is never used is the term *shiqdār-i-shiqdārān*. This is just to illustrate how we take things for granted without carefully consulting the original sources.

We cannot understand anything about Sher Shah's reign unless we study Abbas Sarwani's book with great care. And yet this observation of Abbas Sarwani when subjected to a quantitative analysis creates doubts in our minds. Now I am not going into the controversy why he used these terms. For example, a chronicler may write that in the reign of so and so this happened to the nobles, but such an observation has to be supported by facts and figures. For example, my colleague Dr Athar Ali decided to make out a list of all the nobles of the reign of Aurangzeb, and establish the pattern of their promotion and the grade of the *manṣab* they attained. It is hard work, but once such a list is prepared it enables us to discard faulty generalizations.

Exaggeration is not a virtue which we have acquired only lately. We have the experience of it for centuries. All of us like to generalize, and it depends on what the mood of the author is at a given moment, what his historical prejudices are, and what he sincerely believes to be true although his contemporaries may not be accepting those things to be true. And then there is that wonderful institution, the *bāzār* gossip, which many of the westerners tended to believe in and to reproduce. And yet even when we know that a particular person could have

no other access to information except the *bāzār* gossip we still tend to accept his statement. Therefore every statement becomes in a sense subject to scrutiny and confirmation. I am not saying that every statement is to be disbelieved. All that I am submitting is that we have to evolve new methods of subjecting these generalized statements to rigorous criticism on the basis of (a) quantitative analysis, and (b) the statement of facts which are narrated as first-hand observations. We must see whether the generalizations which have been made are borne out by the actual narratives. We have to put the question in such a manner that the narrative is made to yield at least some information on the types of problems that are worrying us. For example, let us concretely examine the incidents mentioned by the chroniclers having a bearing on the relationships between any of the nobles and any of the ruling chiefs. Let us collect all these facts, analyze them and sift them; maybe the picture that begins to emerge is more reliable than the one that has been commonly made. If we come across the statements of the chroniclers that on such and such an occasion the zamindars were for the king or against the king, then we can test them with the present sophisticated techniques of analysis, which will enable us to define the type of relationship, the nature of relationship, the regional variations, if any, the changes in terms of time that were taking place. The question of revenue administration, on which there is a great deal of information, can also be subjected to this type of investigation.

If we change our focus from revenue administration to agrarian relations, then a close study of the revenue administration in itself will give us some worthwhile information about this subject. Fortunately in regard to revenue administration, we have two types of material apart from the chronicles. First, there are the innumerable administrative manuals, *dastūrul ‘amals*. *Dastūrul ‘amal* has its limitations. Like all manuals, we can assume, it must have been observed more in its breach. And yet these manuals, if scrutinized properly, can yield a great deal of information. I am giving you as an instance the classification of land by Akbar for the purposes of assessment of revenue, a classification which was based not on fertility but on continuity of production. I am referring to the *polaj*, *paṛautī*, *chachar* and *banjar* form

of classification. But there is, on the other hand, a general statement in the *Ain-i-Akbari* that land was classified into three categories, the good, the middling and the bad, although nothing further is said about the good, the middling and the bad. However, there is considerable detailed description of what is *polaj*, what is *chāchar*, what is *banjar*, and what is *paṛauti*. If we link it up with the other instructions that are given in that text, the instruction to bring more and more land under cultivation and to take various steps if a particular village becomes deserted, then we have a fairly clear picture of the basic policy of the state.

It appears that one of the most serious problems that the administration encountered at that time was how to bring under cultivation land which had either never been brought under cultivation or which had gone out of cultivation. And therefore concessional rates of revenue and such other things as the grant of *zamindari* rights were given so that this could be implemented. The administrative manuals also define various types of rights and other institutions. I have a feeling that if we continue the investigations which we are making in many of our universities by analyzing these administrative manuals more carefully, we will be able to get considerable information on the problems of agrarian relations.

The other type of revenue documents is the original revenue records which fortunately for us have survived in various places. The two biggest collections are, as you know, in Bikaner and in Hyderabad. In Bikaner for the 17th and 18th centuries we have the most complete records of the former princely house of Jaipur. We know that many *parganas* were held by the rulers of Amber, either as their *watan jagir* or as *jāgīr* or in any other form, and the detailed abstract of each *pargana* with the details of each village were maintained; many of these have fortunately survived. I am referring to the *arsattas*. Several papers have been written on the nature of the *arsatta* records. I have myself done some work in relation to the information contained in these records. For example, if we get information regarding the detailed revenue collected village-wise or *pargana*-wise, one of the things we can do is to detect the changing proportion as between the *kharif* and the *rabi* harvests. Is the revenue collected from *kharif* grow-

ing in proportion to the revenue collected from *rabi'* over a period of years in a fairly large area? We may find this tendency in 5-6 *parganas* or perhaps even more. I have made an analysis of 6 *parganas*. It seems that between 1663 and 1743 the proportion of revenue from the *rabi'* crops increases compared to that from the *kharif* crops. Now this region is situated in eastern Rajasthan between Jaipur, and Delhi and Agra, and we know that this area depends for irrigation almost entirely on rainfall. Therefore traditionally the *kharif* harvest has been the principal harvest. Hence if the relative position of the *rabi'* harvest has been increasing it means that more inputs have been going into cultivation. Without more inputs we cannot have more *rabi'* production in that part of our country. This poses never problems. Where is this investment coming from ?

Let us take another aspect of the same problem which I attempted to investigate—that is to say, let us find out the mode of assessment and the amount of revenue assessed. In attempting to bring the two sets of figures on the same scale, a serious difficulty arises. You will either get the quantity where it is *ghalla-bakhshi* or the area where it is *zabt*. Now the two cannot always be put on the same scale because some of the crops were assessed on the basis of crop-sharing where the total production is given in terms of quantity whereas some were assessed on the basis of *bighas*, and you get the total area under cultivation.

I posed this problem before the late D. D. Kosambi, and, the brilliant mathematician that he was, he suggested a formula which to his mind was very simple, but it is very very complex. The original intention was that we would take all the data to him and request him to work it out, but as bad luck would have it he died. He was the only statistician who said how the two types of evidence could be put on the same scale. After his death I proceeded on the basis of whatever little I could understand of his suggestion. It was possible to work out the area under each crop in the two harvests as also the yield in terms of quantity per *bigha*. The picture that emerged more or less confirmed the impression gained from a comparison of the amount of revenue realised from the two harvests.

Further, if changes in the cropping pattern are taking place,

then coupled with this change in the relative position of the *kharif* and *rabi'* harvests and changes in cropping production we can start examining (a) whether any extension of cultivation is taking place or (b) whether the yield or productivity of land is going up. Another problem which we could tackle by utilizing these revenue statistics is to find out the changes in the price level.

Changes in the price level present an interesting feature. If there is a sharp fall in the price of one commodity in one part of Rajasthan it is very soon reflected in a similar fall in the price of the same commodity in a very different part of Rajasthan, and if this change in the price situation also corresponds to the change in price situation as available from the European Company records, then it is quite clear that there is no self-sufficiency of the village economy. If there was a self-sufficient village system how is it that the products of different parts of the country were being made available to the villager? Some statistics from Bengal bearing on this subject have survived. If we take those along with the information contained in the *arsattas* of Rajasthan, we can see that the system in East Bengal was not so totally different from the system in eastern Rajasthan. We come across the *nirkh bazar* where fluctuations in prices were well reported in terms of different types of currency, and so on.

What is significantly absent in these records is a document which is also found in Bihar but which is more common in UP and in the other parts of our country and which is a traditional document, that is to say the field book. It provides all the relevant details about the field under cultivation. It tells us: Who is its cultivator? Who is its owner? What is cultivated? Unfortunately this particular document has not survived in good numbers for the different parts of the country. Had it been so, many of the problems on which we are speculating today would have been conclusively solved.

The earliest revenue documents prepared by the British administrators in the second half of the 18th century have not yet been given sufficient attention. As you know, when the British first came to Bengal and acquired *dīwanī* rights they had to offer their comments on what the land

system was. They had to answer these questions: Who was the proprietor of the soil? What were the rights of the different categories of zamindars? There were sharp differences of opinion amongst extremely knowledgeable British administrators such as Warren Hastings, Philip Francis, James Grant, Sir John Shore and Boughton Rouse, to quote only a few. Each one of them put forward his own theory. There is no doubt that these people made actual observations. Assuming that they were influenced by their own prejudices and predilections, as Ranjit Guha has rightly pointed out in *Rule of Property in Bengal*, assuming that they were trying to understand the Indian situation in terms of their own experience, the question that arises is: How is it that the information given by the Indians is equally contradictory? And because of this I started examining the nature of information supplied by the Indians.

Fortunately the bulk of this material has survived in the various libraries of Britain and Europe, but most of it is preserved in the India Office, all in Persian. I have ventured to give my own hypothesis regarding the sharp differences of opinion among these Indians who were writing. I consider it to be symptomatic of social change that each person described one aspect of land rights at a given point of time, and this naturally resulted in the confusion we notice. However, that is neither here nor there. For the first time in these documents the questions were posed and answers given as to the identity of the proprietor. There were several other issues. How did proprietary rights emerge? What were the details of these proprietary rights? How was succession sanctioned? What happened if a person went away and left his land? What happened if someone else acquired the right of collection, and so on?

These questions were put particularly on four occasions, in 1772, in 1775, in 1787, and finally in 1788. One questionnaire had 14 questions, another had 52 questions which is the most detailed, and then there were two with 4 questions each. These questions and answers have survived, and are very important for understanding the views of individuals. But at the same time what has survived is a detailed account in over 52 volumes of the revenue administration of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and of

the revenue administration of the whole of the Mughal empire. Figures are available. There is one series which gives the changes in *jāgīr* holdings. We can subject such statements to a quantitative check. For instance, we have a statement that during the Mughal empire after Akbar the transfers of *jāgīrs* were very frequent. Now here the *jāgīrs* are arranged *ṣubah*-wise, *sarkār*-wise so that we can check such observations. We can detect these changes and answer a number of questions. How frequent these changes were? Is this tendency to be observed everywhere? Or is it confined to a few areas? Are there any differences between the outlying provinces and the central provinces?

Again, the details about the zamindars, the *jotdārs* are available at least so far as Bengal, Bihar and Orissa are concerned. This could be subjected to further analysis. There are some other documents which I have not found in Persian except by way of examples, but the translations of these documents are to be found in the revenue consultations of Bengal; these are the *pattas* (documents stating assessed revenue demand). The *patta* is of every type, the *patta* as well as the *muchalka* (undertaking to pay) and the *qabūliat* (document recording acceptance of revenue demand). These have been translated, and a fairly good cross-section of the *pattas* is to be found in the revenue records of the East India Company so far as Bengal is concerned for the period 1765 to 1793. I am a little doubtful about depending entirely on this type of material because the examples may not be typical. It may not be a fair sample. But if we use this sample together with the sample which has survived in the original Persian, perhaps some sort of a generalization would become valid. This is roughly the nature of the source material for agrarian history which is available to us.

I have not deliberately referred to the very important source which we have to use constantly and to which I have made references, that is to say, the records left by the trading companies. The trading company records are very important, but they are not directly important for this purpose. I have also not referred to another mine of information because my study of these documents has been much too inadequate; I have in mind the Portuguese records. I learnt



a little bit of Portuguese about three years ago. Although it was not enough for me to be able to use this, it was enough to be able to understand the nature of these records. The Portuguese records should throw a great deal of light on many of the problems of the economic history of the period. Some of my friends in England were good enough to translate copies of Portuguese documents that are available in the India Office. With the help of these translations and with the help of some other translations which have been made in the India Office, I have been able to get a general idea of the type of information that is contained in the Portuguese records. But I am sorry to say that I have not used the records of Goa. I hope that someone who knows medieval history and Portuguese as well will take the trouble of going through the available records at Goa and try to see what light can be thrown on agrarian relations by them.

## II. ORGANIZATION OF AGRARIAN ECONOMY

Earlier, I attempted to focus attention on some of the most important problems of agrarian relations and the difficulty in answering the questions relating to the agrarian history of the period because of the nature of the source material. I also indicated some of the methods which might be usefully employed in studying agrarian relations.

I shall now touch very briefly on those aspects which I think are now more or less accepted, and hazard a few hypotheses in relation to the changes that were taking place. From what I have said earlier it will be apparent that what I am submitting for your consideration here can only be a tentative hypothesis; much more work has to be done before we can say anything with certainty. Then there is another important consideration. Our country is so vast and its geography so varied, that its economy cannot be exactly the same at any time. And yet, as a result of the establishment of the Mughal empire, some uniformity was introduced into the institutions. Therefore, although it is possible for us to make generalizations for the country as a whole, we must remember that in many cases these generalizations would be oversimplified.

Broadly speaking, the bulk of agricultural economy in India during the medieval period was of two types—the free peasant economy and the tenant-cultivator economy. I think, it is now accepted that the most important form of rural organization was the free peasant economy. I would first like to indicate the type of evidence on the basis of which it can be said that the free peasant economy was the dominant form of rural organization.

It was the constant endeavour of the Mughal state to ensure that cultivation was extended ; the extension of cultivation could not naturally be carried out by an average agricultural labourer who did not have the resources to do so. In one of the 18th century documents relating to the present state of Bihar we have come across a term which may be peculiar only to this part but which nevertheless does indicate a general type. The word used is *halmir*, that is to say, a person who had at his disposal four or more ploughs, and usually the extension of cultivation was undertaken by persons who could command four or more ploughs. And a person who brought new land under cultivation was, in accordance with the Hindu as well as the Mohammedan law as it was then understood, entitled to be recognized as the proprietor of that soil. In Mughal terminology he would be recognized as the zamindar and also as the *mālik* of that particular piece of land. There is definite evidence from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries that persons who brought new areas under cultivation were recognized as the *mālik* or the proprietors of the land.<sup>2</sup> The India Office series of documents, which I mentioned earlier, also contain frequent references to *jotdārs*. For any land, the following questions were asked: Who is its proprietor or in whose *jotdārī* does it lie? In whose *ta'lluqdārī* is it? And in whose zamindari is it situated?

The *jotdār* can have only one meaning, and that is a free peasant cultivator. He may or may not do the cultivation himself but nevertheless he would be responsible for carrying on the cultivation. We also come across in medieval documents the words *kṛṣaka* and *kisān* used in much the same sense. The term *kisān* is used in the 18th century, but *kṛṣaka* occurs even earlier. The term *ra'īyyat*, which is most commonly used in the Mughal documents, is, as I attempted to show, mainly used for a zamindar. But, in the manner the word *ra'īyyat* is used in different

<sup>2</sup> In an article presented by Professor Satish Chandra and Dilbagh Singh to the Indian History Congress session held in December 1972, "Stratification and Structure in Rural Society in Eastern Rajasthan". evidence is cited of peasants coming from outside the village, with their ploughs, to cultivate *banjar* land. Such peasants, termed *pahir*, had *mālikī* rights.

chronicles, it seems that these were large peasant proprietors. The word *muzāra'* is also used and is supposed to be distinct from the term *ra'īyyat*, and *muzāra'* would include not merely the peasant proprietor but also the tenant-cultivator, and this, I think, is the only justification for using two distinct terms, the *ri'āya* and the *muzāra'*. However literally *ri'āya* means subject, and *muzāra'*, one who lives on cultivation.

When the British came here they were a little worried about these terms, and so they asked some of the knowledgeable persons to define the word *muzāra'*. We have some very interesting definitions of the term *muzāra'*. In spite of the confusion in these definitions, it is absolutely clear that the term *muzāra'* is used almost invariably for the person who is undertaking cultivation himself. *Muzāra'* incidentally is also used in the sense of a revenue farmer, but from the manner the word *muzāra'* is used in the Mughal documents it is clear that it does not refer to revenue farmer. The term *ra'īyyat* would be used for both the zamindars who would be conducting cultivation through tenant-cultivators as well as for free peasant cultivators.

In the Rajasthani documents the term *ri'āya* is almost always used in a sense that approximates more or less to the free peasant cultivator.

Professor Irfan Habib has discussed the term *khudkāsh* at some length, and it has also been discussed by Moreland. We should not get confused by the definition which is given by the earlier British administrators; the definition of *khudkāsh* which is rather unusual is given in the Introduction to the *Amini Commission Report*. *Khudkāsh*, according to that definition and also according to a minute of Warren Hastings and Boughton Rouse, is the land of the cultivator who cultivates it in the village where he stays; it is different from the *pāhikāsh*, that is to say, the land which a person cultivates in a village other than the one to which he belongs. Now this is in my opinion a confusing definition of the word *khudkāsh*.

The word *khudkāsh* is well understood even now; at least before 1947 it was very well understood as a person who himself organizes cultivation, and that is the sense in which Jahāngīr

had used so that his *'āmils* were instructed not to make the lands of the *ri'āya* their own *khudkāsh*.

*Khudkāsh* land therefore, according to this early British definition, would indicate the land where the bulk of the people were cultivating lands or living. This is really an indication of the special type of proprietary rights.

From the date of the *Amini Commission Report*, it will be clear that after that the word "zamindar" began to be used for revenue farmers by the British; quite obviously they could not use the term zamindar in the sense it was intended to be used in the earlier period. Again, from the manner in which the *madad-i-ma'āsh* documents were drafted, it will be noticed that in most of these grants the land given was described as *zamīn-i-uftādah qābil-i-zirā't*, that is to say, the land which is uncultivated but which is cultivable and which is not included in the revenue rolls. Evidently the person to whom *madad-i-ma'āsh* is granted would be a religious person; he could be a Hindu or a Muslim. The Mughal *farmāns* published by Dr K. K. Datta contain a number of *madad-i-ma'āsh* grants that were given as donations to non-Muslims or to retired officials; it could be given as a pension sometimes. I have come across two such *madad-i-ma'āsh* grants whose copies exist in the Khudabakhsh Library; these were granted to persons who had been rendering service. One is in a collection which I have not been able to identify; the other is in the well-known collection, *Insha-i-Harkaran*.

The *madad-i-ma'āsh* grants required confirmation at the accession of each monarch, but the hereditary succession was not interfered with usually. In due course the *madad-i-ma'āsh* grants also acquired the character of zamindari, as appears from the sale-deeds of *madad-i-ma'āsh* lands in the 18th century. As the British administrators make out, most of these *madad-i-ma'āsh* holders or revenue-free grantees acquired proprietary rights or almost semi-proprietary rights. But this could only be possible if this was the dominant form of making revenue-free grants. I mean unless there was a large number of persons holding two to three hundred *bighas* of land which they were cultivating themselves, this particular form of giving revenue-free grant would not have been so common. This is the standard form which obtained in

almost the whole country from Gujarat to Bengal, and from Kashmir to the Deccan. If you also see the list of concessional landholders in the *arsattas* of Rajasthan, there again you get a similar picture that there are persons who are holding 50-100-200 *bighas* of land ; they are either exempted from payment of revenue or required to pay only concessional revenue.

What I am trying to make out is that we find a very large number of persons holding 50-200-300 *bighas* of land, many of whom were also doing cultivation themselves. But at the same time they were organizing cultivation in other ways also. Only a few documents of the actual field book called the *khataunī* belonging to the late 18th century have survived, but I have no doubt that the examples they give would be typical. I have not come across the *khataunī* of any village having more than 10 names in the field book—10 names as proprietors. So, broadly speaking, one could say what these were ; they could not be large zamindars, but they would be, by and large, free peasants. Place names also throw some light on the system. A careful study of these would be rewarding.

The organization of cultivation was roughly as follows : Some of these were self-cultivating peasants who were carrying on cultivation with the help of their collaborators, especially in the *bhayyāchāra* system, of which there is plenty of evidence right from the *Aīn-i-Akbarī* onwards. Members of a clan group utilized the services of what seems to be known a little later in the Mughal period as the *khidmatipraja*. The *khidmatipraja* almost always consists of what we now call the scheduled castes, who were not permitted to hold land themselves, who were expected to render labour services of different types, and who in return for this were either given strips of land at the very borders of the village or a share of the produce for having rendered customary services. It is therefore very clear that in this organization caste was playing a very important role. Not enough work has been done by us on the role of caste in the organization of agriculture at the grassroots level. The taboo regarding ploughing by higher caste people made it necessary that there should be a considerable body of agricultural labourers for ploughing and

performing other agricultural services, leaving the rest of the process of cultivation to the peasant proprietors.

Many of the peasant proprietors, there is evidence to show, gave out their land on a sharecropping basis, a system which survives even today in many parts of the country. In Bengal the whole of the *tebhāgā* movement in the forties of the present century was based on the demand for two-thirds of the crop for the sharecroppers, leaving one-third to the owner of the land. We come across the customary one-third rate in medieval times also, which may have continued from the ancient period. In the medieval period evidence suggests that where the seed and other inputs were provided by the landholder, in whose name the field stood, the actual agricultural labourer got one-third; on the other hand where the inputs were provided by the labourer himself he took two-thirds and gave the landholder one-third of the produce. I do not think that any substantial percentage of these peasant proprietors was engaged in the actual cultivation almost entirely with their own labour, though the available evidence on this point is totally inadequate. It is necessary to go deeper into the evidence, but my overall impression is that very few of these peasant proprietors were carrying on cultivation entirely by themselves.

These peasant proprietors were holding the *milkiyat* rights, and as such they were recognized as zamindars unless, for other reasons which we shall discuss a little later, their zamindarī rights were suppressed. These persons also enjoyed the right to sell their property. Hereditary succession among the males was recognized. Why the females were excluded we can only guess. The personal law of succession of the Muslims was not applicable. In this case all the evidence points to that. It was considered necessary, however, that either with the change of proprietary rights or of succession there will be a renewal of the *patta*. And in the case of large owners, which we shall discuss a little later, a formal *sanad* from the higher officers was needed. The *patta* meant that it was the responsibility of the new proprietor to pay the stipulated revenue for which he submitted a *muchalka* (undertaking) and a *zāminī* (surety). Since the surety had to be provided in all such cases, the practice operated as one of the major

factors leading to the rise of the moneylender in the village. As cash payment became more and more common, the local moneylender accepted whatever currency the landholder paid and charged the *batta* (commission) for converting it into the standard currency. The landholder was responsible for maintaining the continuity of cultivation and ensuring that the land did not go out of cultivation so that the revenue did not suffer. He was also responsible for ensuring the continuous cultivation of superior crops or *jins-i-kāmil*, a term which is still used in revenue terminology in many of our villages. If such a peasant proprietor left the land it would be temporarily given to somebody else. But the proprietor would still be entitled to receive the *malikāna* and to get back the land whenever he was in a position to take it back; the *malikāna* rights in this case were usually 10 per cent of the gross produce. The principal obligation of such a person was to render or to submit revenue, *mālguzārī*. Whosoever happened to be the primary proprietor was held responsible for payment of the imperial revenue, but he would be entitled to hold back 10 per cent out of the imperial revenue as his *malikāna* share.

Now that sufficient documentary evidence is available, we can say that all that the actual cultivator paid was deemed to be the imperial revenue, and that the share of all intermediaries or all proprietors was a lawful deduction from this imperial revenue. Once upon a time there was a confusion that the imperial revenue was over and above whatever was supposed to have been collected from the actual cultivator. But now it is very clear that any type of expenditure or any type of concession or any type of tax to which any functionary or proprietor or intermediary was entitled had to go out of the imperial share, and it was the duty of the authorities concerned to submit to the imperial government a full statement of the total amount that was collected whether by way of *māl* (regular revenue) or *jihāt* (cesses). In addition to the two items there was a third item called *sa'ir-jihāt* or taxes other than land revenue. Collectively all this came to be known as *abwābs*, and the early British documents take care to demarcate the revenue from the cess. It is also discussed at some length by Sir John Shore.



It is found in the *Amini Commission Report*, in three-four minutes of Warren Hastings which are published as appendices to the *Annals of Rural Bengal* and so on.

The two systems which were fairly common before the time of Akbar and Sher Shah, namely the *muqta'i* system or the *nasaq* system, are translated by Moreland as group assessment. I do not agree with this interpretation. Moreland is correct up to the point that the revenue of a village was assessed in a lump sum on the basis of earlier records. Once the revenue was determined the responsibility of its payment devolved on the village headman, who had to distribute this amount among the individual proprietors. But a statement of the amount collected from the proprietors had to be submitted to the imperial government right from the time of Sher Shah. I do not think that it could have become the common practice in the short time that Sher Shah had at his disposal. But from the time of Akbar onwards it did become the common practice. Again, it is possible to infer on the basis of the *arsattas* which I quoted that perhaps the revenue statements were not given individually. It was not stated how much revenue was due from an individual ; on the other hand the total revenue under each crop was given, the total area under cultivation or the total quantity produced was mentioned, and the state share that was due was almost always specified.

So the main function of the peasant proprietor, so far as the state was concerned, was to keep up cultivation, to cultivate superior crops and to give the revenue to the imperial authority or to the local functionary, whichever was the case.

In the organization of cultivation tenant economy also played an important part. One can see very clearly that between the free peasant economy and the tenant-cultivator economy there is a basic relationship. As a result of political factors a free peasant can easily become a tenant, and similarly a tenant can easily become a free peasant depending on the military and the class situation in any given village or locality or the type of administration that we have. I am particularly struck by two/three examples. The Minās were the dominant free peasant groups in eastern Rajasthan, and were looked upon as zamindars of that region until the time of Babar. Then gradually the Rajputs and

in a few places the Jats depressed the status of the Minās to that of tenants, and in some places they ceased to be even tenants but were reduced to the position of landless labourers ; many of them became vagabonds, and till lately they were classified as one of the criminal tribes. This is within a period of 400 years or so, and we can easily work out and trace their history. There are on the other hand other groups such as the Jats, who, once they become politically or militarily strong, not only rise to be zamindars but also come to acquire intermediary rights as zamindars depressing the other sections, especially the Ahirs, to a position lower than that of the tenants, because the tenants had certain rights, which I shall be discussing a little later, of which these people were deprived.

So the tenant economy grew quite obviously out of the free peasant economy as a result of political, social and economic factors. Political factors are quite obvious. Among the social factors I attach the greatest importance to the caste system. As the dominant group in any locality rose in the *varṇāśrama* ladder it sought the status of the previously dominant group in that region. The whole process worked as a sort of a chain reaction. Because the peasants lost politicaliy, they were sought to be depressed socially, and their social depression was adduced as a justification for depriving them of the rights they had been enjoying.

We cannot ignore several economic factors that led to the emergence of the tenant economy. One such factor was lack of investment where more investment was needed. I referred to the growth of the relative importance of the *rabi'* economy in portions of eastern Rajasthan requiring more and more inputs. Now wherefrom would more and more inputs come? In my opinion the free peasant belonging to this region was not economically strong enough to bring those inputs in. These could only be brought in by socially stronger groups, who in the process would naturally seek to reduce the free peasants to tenant farmers.

However in many respects the rights of the tenant-farmers were similar to those of the peasant proprietor, especially so in the matter of security of tenure. The lack of pressure on land,

of which there is ample evidence, guaranteed to the tenants an absolute security of tenure. There are examples to show that where a tenant wished to leave his land, he could be forced or induced to stay on his own land. There are not many instances of force being used in this respect. I have come across precisely three examples in original documents, although observations to this effect have been made by several other contemporaries; there may be many more documents. One of the three documents relates to Bihar wherein a zamindar asks another zamindar to send his forces to bring back his tenant to his own soil.

But the other examples in which the tenants were induced and persuaded to stick to the soil are numerous. Such cases are found in the time of Shahjahan, and we have come across about 15-20 documents of Aurangzeb's reign, and many of the 18th century which all speak of inducements offered to the tenants to come back to their lands. In the case of Banaras incident one rupee in cash was sent to each person to come back in addition to the expenses of his return. Now one rupee in those days had far more purchasing value than it has today; perhaps twenty-eight times would be a fair guess.

Here I would like to digress a little and say that on the basis of the records that I have seen I do not find many examples of the desertion of villages. In fact there is a remarkable continuity of the villages as they existed in the 17th century. I have found the village lists of a number of provinces of the 17th century, and I have been able to identify more than 75 per cent of those villages in the modern village maps on one-inch sheets. If my identification is correct then this is truly a remarkable continuity. Again, many *arsattas* mention the number of villages. Accounting for the changes in the boundaries of *parganas* the number of villages that are deserted is really very small.

Taking all these things into consideration I would put forward the view that the tenant economy was a fairly stable economy. However the fragmentation of holdings in settled areas frequently led to the migration from the villages to the towns and to other places in different ways. Where fragmentation was considerable and where the upper caste was not in a position to colonize new areas or to clear forests—for that is a very difficult

business—they would almost invariably go into the professional army. I can cite the example of the Rajputs of Buxar. We have the other types of instances concerning the menial castes. The menial castes were not permitted to hold land anywhere, and therefore if there was a surplus of population, that is to say, if they could survive the hardships of their environment, then quite obviously they would go to the cities or to the towns to seek employment there unless they were invited to go and settle down in another village in the same capacity in which they were living in their original settlements.

I am now putting forward a very tentative hypothesis. How is it that while there was very little pressure of population on the land, while the state was making continuous efforts to expand cultivation, tremendous expansion of crafts and towns took place simultaneously? We notice a lack of pressure of population on land on the one hand and growing urban population and growing handicrafts and industry on the other. There is no doubt that from the middle of the 16th century until the middle of the 18th century handicraft production increased tremendously. The numerical strength of the purely agricultural labourers could not have been very large, confined as they were to the *khidmatiprajā* or sections of *pāhikā.sht*. These are the only two major forms of agricultural labourers that we find in addition to, of course, certain categories of sharecroppers, especially in the adjoining tribal areas. There is a lot of evidence to suggest that the tribals living in the neighbouring areas were invited to undertake labour on a sharing basis. They would do the cultivation, and then they would go back after having taken their share of the produce; in fact they did not settle down. Now this implied that their status remained inferior to that of the tenant-cultivators.

The tenant-cultivators did not have the right to sell or alienate their holdings. This was the most important difference between them and the peasant proprietors. But there is plenty of evidence to suggest that, in case a tenant-cultivator left his field, the other cultivators in the village would be invited to cultivate the land and give to this tenant-cultivator, when he came back, his share. It was obligatory for the other cultivators of the village to cultivate the land left by a tenant-cultivator. But the tenant-cultivator

on his return, and sometimes, as I have found in one document—a person returning even after about three years—was entitled to get back his field and his share of the produce. The actual share is not mentioned in the documents. I do not know what was the share of a tenant-cultivator who, in fact, did not cultivate his land.

### III. FLUCTUATING LANDED CLASSES *VIS-A-VIS* THE STATE

It is reasonable to postulate that where there is large-scale tenant cultivation there would also be a large number of non-cultivating primary zamindars. I am deliberately using the term primary zamindar and avoiding the use of the word proprietary zamindar. As I submitted earlier, the rights were fluctuating all the time, and therefore a person who is a proprietary zamindar at one time may cease to be holding proprietary rights, and somebody else who is an intermediary may acquire direct rights over land. And therefore I would use the word primary zamindar in preference to the word proprietary zamindar; that is to say, the primary zamindar is not necessarily a small zamindar, he can also be a big zamindar. It means a zamindar who is directly exercising proprietary rights over land either as a peasant proprietor or as a person who is doing *khudkāshī* (cultivating his lands) or as a person who has given out his land to his tenant farmers. The primary zamindars were for all practical purposes the holders of proprietary rights over agricultural as well as habitational lands. In this class may be included not only the peasant proprietors who carried on cultivation themselves or with the help of hired labour but also the proprietors of one or several villages. All agricultural lands in the empire belonged to one or the other type of the primary zamindars. The rights held by the primary zamindars were hereditary and alienable. Numerous sale-deeds of such zamindarīs dating back to the 16th century are still available, and some of the transfer-deeds are preserved at the Central Records Office, Allahabad. The Mughal state considered it

its duty to protect the rights of these zamindars, and encouraged the registration of transfer-deeds at the court of the *qāzī*, so that a proper record of claims could be maintained.

Some of these non-cultivating primary zamindars were exercising their authority simultaneously as ruling chiefs in relation to the other areas or over various categories of intermediaries. Throughout this period we find a continuous shift in the position of the primary zamindars. Sandwiched as most of these zamindars were between superior zamindars and the state on the one hand and the peasantry on the other, they were constantly struggling to improve their position and thus came frequently into clash with both sides. Unless these zamindars were able to withstand pressure from above they passed on the burden of revenue demands to the cultivators and so contributed to the intensification of the economic exploitation of the latter. On such occasions they played an economically retrogressive role. But on many occasions they led the revolts of the peasantry against the heavy exactions of the state, often utilising the caste and clan appeal to rally support. Where revolts were not possible, many of these zamindars refused to pay the revenue until force was employed.

The second category of *zamīndārī* right was the intermediary right, which is not a proprietary right. It is the right of service, a service obligation. In medieval documents it is described as *khidmat*. Zamīndārī could be both *mālguzārī* as well as *khidmat-guzārī*. Where it is *mālguzārī* it is a primary right, where it is *khidmatguzārī* it is an intermediary right or an intermediary obligation. There are innumerable types of intermediaries. We may take the case of the *muqaddam* or the *mukhiyā*, who was usually chosen from among the primary zamindars of the village, sometimes the most important among them, who was paid differently. A very common mode of payment to the *muqaddam* for the services rendered by him was that he was taxed at a concessional rate. But sometimes he was also entitled to various types of discounts commonly called in medieval terminology as *rusūmāt muqaddamī*. The practice can be traced back to pre-Sultanate times when we hear of *pratihāra-prastha*, *akṣapaṭal-ādāya*, etc., meant for various types of royal officers.

Then there was a *chaudharī*, usually of a *pargana*. He belonged to the class of the primary zamindars but was a leading zamindar. *Chaudharī* was hereditary, although it was an office. The main duty of the *chaudharī* was to assist in the collection of land revenue. He was entitled to various types of perquisites and a percentage of the total revenue. In his own individual territory-holding the *chaudharī* would be a primary zamindar, but in relation to a number of other zamindars he would exercise the powers of the *chaudharī*, collecting revenues from them on behalf of the state.

An important intermediary was the *ta'lluqdār*, who performed duties very similar to that of the *chaudharī*. The class of zamindars who contracted with the state to collect the revenue of a given territory began to be known during the second half of the 17th century by the generic designation of *ta'lluqdārs*. The word *ta'lluqdār* does not carry the same connotation in Bengal as it does in Avadh. In Avadh *ta'lluqdār* is usually a very big man who is assigned the responsibility of collecting revenue from a whole lot of other fairly big zamindars. In Bengal where large zamindaris were established, the large zamindars farmed out their own zamindari rights to inferior intermediaries who were called the *ta'lluqdārs*. Therefore the *ta'lluqdār* in Bengal is usually a small intermediary, but in Avadh he is a very big intermediary. The same is the position in Hyderabad. The equivalent of the term collector of a district in Hyderabad as late as 1946-47 was *ta'lluqdār*, head of a *ta'lluq*, thus indicating the territory which lay under the control of this officer.

Then there was the *qānūngō*, who was supposed to be responsible for maintaining complete records of production, of land rights, and of the revenues paid and the crops sown. When the term *qānūngō* first appeared I do not know. But from the time of Sher Shah the *qānūngō* certainly became one of the most important of the intermediaries.

I am indebted to Dr Qeyamuddin Ahmad for his paper<sup>3</sup> on the origin of the Darbhanga *rāj* wherein he has pointed out that this *rāj* really developed out of *chaudharī* and *qānūngōi* of the

<sup>3</sup> *Indian Historical Records Commission Proc.*, Vol. XXXVI, pt. II, 1961, pp. 89-98.



*sarkār* of Tirhut. So this would give you an idea also of the process of change that was taking place. In other words a person who was given the *chaudharī* and the *qanūngōī* would, if he became powerful and if he enjoyed the support of the superior authority, try to acquire primary zamīndarī rights over all the zamīndars, which would result in the depression of the status of the free peasant or of the small zamīndars under his jurisdiction. Sometimes these people attempted to become chieftains.

Then we come across the *khut*, another revenue functionary who served as an intermediary. I do not know the origin of this term ; it may have been derived from the Sanskrit word *kūṭa* (as in *grāma-kūṭa* and *rīṣṭra-kūṭa*) which is Persianized into *khut*, or it may have been of Arab origin. But it is one of the terms which appears fairly early in the period of the Turkish Sultanate<sup>4</sup> and continues to be in use right up to the time of the British occupation of Bengal.

*Ijāra* again is a different term for contract or revenue farming. It is very clear that *ijāra* could be given for a lump sum although it was not very common. It could be also assigned as a right to collect revenue sometimes of a particular harvest and sometimes of particular types of crop. *Ijāradārī* meant that the *ijāradār* would collect the revenue according to imperial regulations and submit detailed accounts to the imperial exchequer, in lieu of which he would get his own percentage or perquisites. *Ijāra* contracted for a fixed sum is rather rare. It has been assumed that *ijāra* was almost always made for a fixed amount, but as far as I know the actual *ijāra* documents do not prove this assumption.

Then *pattadār* is used in a general sense. As you know, *patta* is given for everything, but sometimes *pattadār* is also used in the broad sense of a person who was given the right to collect revenue without necessarily specifying what his status would be, and *pattadār* as such is used in certain parts of the country as a substitute either for *ta'lluqdār* or *ijāradār*. But it is used in con-

<sup>4</sup> Professor S. H. Askari informs me that the term *khut-i-khalj* occurs in the *Mukṭūbat-i-Muzaffar Shams Balkhi*, a fourteenth century work preserved in Khudabakhsh Library, Patna. Of course, it is frequently used by Barani.

junction with the word *'ilāqa* or *pattadār-i-'ilāqa*, which is specified in the document. Normally the other term *ta'lluqdār* should have been used in relation to *'ilāqa*, but why it is not used I do not know.

We have not exhausted the list of the intermediaries, which also included *deshmukhs*, *desais*, *deshpandes*, etc. Practically the entire country was under the jurisdiction of the one or the other type of intermediary zamindars. The statement in the *Am̄n-i-Akbarī* regarding the caste of zamindars in the *parganas* other than those under the chieftains seems to refer to this class. The fact that in the majority of the *parganas* the zamindars belonged to a single caste suggests that certain families or clans held zamindārī rights over large tracts.

The intermediaries played a very important political, administrative and economic role in the Mughal empire. Their principal duty was to submit the full revenue returns, to maintain law and order through their troops, to keep ferries and irrigation works in good order, and to ensure that assessments were reasonably made and complaints properly looked into.

What did the intermediaries get in return for their services? They enjoyed the right to various types of perquisites, such as commissions, deductions, revenue-free lands, cesses, etc. *Muḥaṣṣilāna* or *jarībāna*, the measurement tax or the tax for the collection of revenue, are also the type of cesses to which the intermediaries were entitled. But in lieu of these gains it was their duty to satisfy the primary zamindar, who was the basic revenue payer in the Mughal empire. Naturally *muḥaṣṣilāna* would have to be paid to the agents of the intermediary though sometimes an appeal would be made to the *am̄n* where there was a great deal of dissatisfaction among the primary zamindars.

A number of registers giving the particulars of the deductions made in favour of intermediaries has become available now. These deductions got mixed up with other revenue-free grants, and when the British had the assessments made these deductions were explained at some length. Dr Qeyamuddin Ahmed has referred to the detailed deduction registers that are still extant in Bihar. This was quite clearly a *kh'īmat* (service) for which apart from all the other deductions, the intermediary was paid

either a percentage which varied from office to office and from situation to situation. Usually their share of revenue ranged between 2½ per cent and 10 per cent. They were granted revenue-free lands (*nānkār* or *banthi*), or a lower rate of assessment of revenue, sometimes all the concessions together. Their appointment was always subject to official sanction, but usually the principle of hereditary succession was maintained. Although occasionally the imperial government considered it desirable to bifurcate or to divide the *chaudharī* or the *muqaddamī* of the village among two brothers or two cousins or other twins, usually the eldest son would succeed to the office ; sometimes if the elders of the village suggested that the eldest was not suitable, then somebody else succeeded.

An extremely interesting example from Bihar reveals the relationship between the intermediaries and the primary zamindars. In Shahabad district and in parts of Palamau district the Ujjainiyas acquired, in addition to primary zamindari rights, intermediary rights in respect of a fairly vast tract, and then they rose to be chieftains. At that stage they came into clash with the imperial government with the result that they were reduced back to the status of intermediaries but with a difference. The difference lay in the fact that while the actual revenue collected by them (*taḥṣil*) went on increasing, the gross revenue (*jama'-dāmī*) they had to pay to the imperial exchequer remained constant, and so the balance was appropriated by the Ujjainiya family over a fairly long period. Then again they became turbulent and sought to acquire the rights of a chieftain. Ultimately in the 18th century the local governor in Patna decided that these people deserved to be treated with some severity. And what he did was to establish direct relationship with the small, insignificant zamindars (*zamindārān-reza*) over whom the Ujjainiyas had acquired intermediary rights. That meant not only loss of income but also a tremendous blow to their prestige, although they later succeeded in winning back the favour of the governors. Eventually in many areas where the Ujjainiyas exercised zamindari rights as intermediaries they reduced the original zamindars to the position of their tenant-farmers. Thus they began to exercise primary zamindari rights in areas where they once functioned as inter-

mediaries. We find that the intermediary zamindars often tried to depress the status of the primary zamindars, and where the attempt was successful a fresh category of sub-proprietary rights emerged. Sometimes the intermediary zamindars created a class of sub-proprietors such as the *birtyas* in order to strengthen their position in the countryside.

This process had been going on all the time. The various elements such as the peasant proprietors or the small primary zamindars wanted to acquire a higher status and thus become intermediaries; on the other hand the intermediaries tried to reduce the primary zamindars to the status of tenant-farmers or tried to go up the ladder and become chieftains, and so on; this struggle was constantly going on. In this overall struggle, what was the role of the Mughal empire?

Although I cannot give a satisfactory answer to this question, I could indicate the lines on which my mind is working. Basically it appears to me that whereas the Mughal empire was fundamentally dependent on the cooperation and support of the zamindars of each of these three categories, namely the chieftain, the intermediary and the primary zamindar, there was at the same time a fundamental contradiction between the interests of the Mughal empire on the one hand and those of each of these three classes of zamindars on the other. The Mughal empire sought to resolve this contradiction by attempting to absorb the ruling chiefs into the imperial nobility and the administrative hierarchy. Akbar was the first emperor to clearly realize the importance of forging powerful links between the empire and the chieftains by absorbing them in the imperial hierarchy and the administrative machinery. Even the highest *manşabs*, important governorships and military commands were given to them. This policy was continued by his successors; and during the later half of Aurangzeb's reign, eighty persons, belonging to the ruling houses of the chieftains, held *manşabs* of 1000 and above (representing almost 15 per cent of the total number of *manşabdārs* of 1000 and above).<sup>5</sup> When the chief-

<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb*, Asia, Bombay, 1966.

tains received high *manṣabs* and important appointments, they received substantial *jāgīrs* which far exceeded in revenue their hereditary dominions.

The Mughals asserted the principle which later came to be known as that of "paramountcy". This meant that a chieftain depended for his position on the goodwill of the emperor rather than on his inherent rights. Only such chieftains were designated "rajas" as were given the title by the emperor. While generally conforming to the law of primogeniture and the customary law of hereditary succession, the Mughals asserted the right of "recognizing" a younger son or even a distant relation of a deceased raja as his successor. Although the right to call upon their vassal chiefs to render military assistance when needed by the emperor had been claimed by the sultans, the Mughals systematically utilized the military services of even such chieftains as did not hold *manṣabs*. Further, the Mughal emperors appear to have pursued the policy of entering into direct relationship with the vassals of some of the bigger chieftains, thus reducing the power of these chieftains and creating a new class of allies.

Of great importance was the Mughal attempt to treat the hereditary dominions of the autonomous chiefs as *watan jāgīrs*. This meant that theoretically they were supposed to have the status of *jāgīrdārs* and to be subjected to the imperial revenue regulations, but in practice they exercised *jāgīrdārī* rights in hereditary succession over their territories, which were consequently immune from transfer. Even though this theory could be applied mainly to the chiefs who were enrolled as *manṣabdārs*, the imperial government tried to change the character of the tribute (*pēshkāsh*) payable by the chief into land-revenue assessed on the basis of the actual production. The Mughal emperors also compelled the autonomous chiefs to conform to imperial regulations, especially in regard to the maintenance of law and order and the freedom of transit. Several *farmāns* are in existence directing the chieftains not to harass traders passing through their territory or to levy taxes from them.

As a result of these measures the ruling chief found it more profitable and advantageous to join the imperial service than to

attempt to retain his status as a big ruler; this process conferred on many of the rulers intermediary rights over large tracts, wherein they performed various kinds of services. Instead of giving all these rulers lump sums, the emperor tried to placate them by granting intermediary rights over large tracts of land. At the same time he tried to ensure that the rights of the free peasant were protected; and where for some historical reasons the free peasant had been reduced to the status of a tenant-farmer the rights of the tenant-farmer were also protected. The Mughals were shrewd enough to realize that on the continuation of superior cultivation depended the stability of the actual cultivator. Therefore conditions should be created in which the exactions of different types should never exceed a certain limit. This would mean that sufficient check would be exercised by the imperial authority, and so uniform revenue regulations were introduced. The cultivators had to be given a great deal of protection by way of maintenance of law and order, maintenance of communications, and so on, and as a result of the existence of an overall centralized empire the impetus given to economy in some ways percolated down to the cultivating class. There was also an attempt to ensure that the intermediaries, while their interests were protected, did not exceed the norms that were prescribed for them. This was the net objective of the Mughal policy.

The Mughal empire had in a way provided conditions for the "protection", if I may use the word within quotes, of the fundamental interests of these different classes of agrarian society, and as a result of the establishment of this empire its economic condition improved in many respects. A centralized empire by establishing comparatively greater peace and security, by enabling trade and commerce to expand, by increasing and diversifying the purchasing power of the consuming classes and thus helping the development of industries and manufactures, brought about conditions favourable to the growth of money economy. The emergence of money economy began to affect considerably agricultural production, especially because revenue was being collected more and more in cash. It also led to the expansion of cash-crops and the extension of the cultivated

area, partly as a result of the demand for greater revenue.<sup>6</sup> To the extent that the Mughal empire succeeded in establishing its authority over the numerous chieftains and the considerable measure of success that it achieved in unifying the country politically and administratively, it played a progressive role in the development of Indian society.

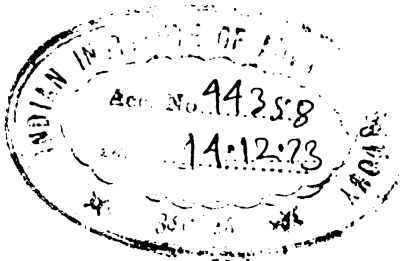
Yet at the same time the whole system was so full of contradictions that conflicts were inevitable, and these could not have been resolved within the four corners of the Mughal imperial system. Therefore while this system provided a great deal of stability for about two centuries nevertheless it generated more and more conflicts. There was conflict of interests between the various groups of landed classes. Again, quite frequently, especially where relationships based on kinship, clan, tribe, or caste proved to be strong, whenever the local intermediary or a local chieftain rose in rebellion he was able to muster behind him a very large section of primary zamindars as well as of the tenant-farmers against the imperial government. These rebellions were inevitable because not all chiefs could have been granted high *mansabs* and lucrative *jāgīrs*. Many of the nobles who were not zamindars envied the security enjoyed by the chiefs in imperial service and pressed the emperor to restrict the grants of *mansabs* and *jāgīrs* to this class. As the pressure on *jāgīrs* increased, the emperor was no longer in a position to satisfy the aspirations of the chieftains. Furthermore, towards the close of the Mughal rule the burden of the share of the different categories of zamindars as also of the imperial revenue demand ultimately fell on the cultivator and placed a strain on agrarian economy in which much progress was hardly possible. The imperial government tried its best to ensure that the peasant was not called upon to pay more than 50 per cent of the produce. But as imperial

<sup>6</sup> For an excellent discussion of the impact of money economy on agricultural production and for the nature of the agrarian relations existing in the Mughal empire, reference may be made to Irfan Habib's *Agrarian System of Mughal India*, Bombay, 1953. For a discussion on the nature of the agrarian crisis in the closing years of the seventeenth century, see Satish Chandra, *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court*, Aligarh, 1959 (second edition, PPH, Delhi, 1972).

authority declined and as the pressure on *jāgīrs* increased, the agricultural economy had to face a crisis which began to deepen in the 18th century.

All these factors ultimately led to the collapse of the whole system. When I use the phrase collapse of the whole system I am not really referring to the collapse at the village level. The collapse came at the level of the imperial government. But at the level of various small provinces which continued to owe their allegiance to the imperial government and in parts of provinces this system continued. Although this system survived at the provincial level or at a level lower, it maintained many of the weaknesses of the imperial system without bringing the advantages of a centralized empire, and therefore gradual disintegration started even at this lower level although at a later period. The most marked example of this is the collapse of the village industry. As the village handicrafts begin to collapse whatever "prosperity" the village has—I am using prosperity again within quotes in a purely relative sense—begins to disappear more and more.

I do not think I have answered the main question: Could this system have created conditions for its own regeneration? I do not think that my answer would be based on sound logic or on a great deal of facts. But if one is permitted to make an observation in the nature of an *obiter dictum*, then I would say; "Yes, it was capable." But that capability was not within the framework of the system as it had existed. It appears to me that the decay of the system had already started, and the process of this decline would have necessarily led to the overthrow of the system and to the emergence of something different. It is not essential that it could have only been overthrown by an external power.





### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1922, Professor Saiyid Nurul Hasan was educated at Allahabad and Oxford. He served as Professor and Head of Department of History at the Aligarh Muslim University from 1957 and as the Director of Centre of Advanced Study in History at the same place from 1968. He taught at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, and at the All Souls College, Oxford. Professor Hasan is a former Secretary of the Indian History Congress, and has been elected its General President for the 1973 session. At present he is Minister of Education and Social Welfare in the Government of India.

