



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Life Rhythm of The Rajmahal Peasantry during 18th Century Mughals

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### Introduction:

Jharkhand state has been naturally bifurcated into two great zones. Chota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana.<sup>1</sup>The fascinating Rajmahal area comes within the periphery of Santhal Pargana.<sup>2</sup> Rajmahal due to its strategic location, became pivotal centre of administration during Mughals and continued to be a strategic place for the British. Though it has a rich and varied cultural account of its own from the ancient but positioning it as a capital of the suba of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in the sixteenth-seventeen century added glory to its reputation. It has been a mute spectator of varied socio economic, political dimensions and a witness to the stiff resistance to the establishment of the company rule. Rajmahal at present a subdivision of Sahibganj district in Jharkhand lies between 24<sup>o</sup>43' and 25<sup>o</sup>18' N and between 87<sup>o</sup>27' and 87<sup>o</sup>57'E, with an area of 741 square miles. It measures about 40 miles from North to South and narrows down towards the North, at one point being only twelve miles.<sup>3</sup> Towards North and East flows the pious river Ganga and beyond that lie Purnea and Malda, to west the boundary is formed by the Manjhwa hills running from North to south extending to Bhagalpur and Godda. To the South the boundary is formed by an irregular line of hills and high land running from east to west which form the watershed between the Humani and Bansloi rivers south of line lie the Dumka and Pakur of santhal pargana and Jangipur of Murshidabad. They consists of a succession of hills, plateau, valleys and ravines, the general elevation of which varies from 500 to 800 feet

above sea level though some hills are of a maximum of 2000 feet.<sup>4</sup>

During 16<sup>th</sup> -17<sup>th</sup> century it was the capital of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and held the most administrative functions. The area comprising of Pakur, Godda, Dumka which is called Santhal Pargana constituted the heart of the Administrative unit Rajmahal and it was called Damin-i-koh. Damin-i-koh is a Persian term meaning 'skirts of the hills'. It's area stretched Ganges on the North and the Brahmani on the south. The tract it covers consists of hills surrounded by flat country with fertile valley lying at the top of the hills lies the table land suitable for plough cultivation. The valleys lying at the foot of the hills are well watered by streams, and are cultivated and inhabited for the most part by the Santhals. Though they are the immigrants otherwise it was formerly inhabited by Paharias. They (Paharias) were commonly known as freebooters or cattle lifters<sup>5</sup>.

### **Social Composition and stratification:**

The village in Rajmahal represented the features of a diversified socio-economic whole which produced, more or less, everything that was demanded as well as needed within. Till recent past the villages required as well as demanded hardly anything from outside. The need for clothes, medicines, salt and tea was borne out from the sale of surplus produce by the peasantry at such market towns which were available at Rajmahal, Dacca, Maksudabad, Balasore, Hooghly, Bhagalpur, Teliagarhi, Gaur, Burdwan, Munger. Self-sufficiency was rendered possible by the co-existence and interrelation of a large number of special groups of workers found in the Indian village. The husbandman, blacksmiths, carpenters, weavers, potters, oil pressures, cobblers, the washer man, the shepherd, the won(grocer), the galladar (corn-dealer), barbers, priests and the pir and beggar, who have all been connected with the village economy, contributed their share individually as well as collectively, to the socio-economic as well as socio-religious stability of the village. The periodical urs (fairs) gave to the remotely placed villager's opportunities to meet and exchange their commodities.<sup>6</sup> The remarkable historian, Elphinstone had described the peasant's villages as "Little republics, having nearly everything they can want within themselves." The activities of the villages were regulated, as far as possible, a self-propelled and self-dependent economic unit. Broadly speaking, the needs of the village community were satisfied either within the village or by the neighboring villages. The prime economic necessities were food and clothing. The

majority of members that is peasants of the typical village community were, therefore obvious, cultivators and weavers. The additional needs, such as, farming implements and utensils, were provided by the smith. The potter made pots, and the goldsmith, ornaments. The simple needs of the villager could be met by these craftsmen or tradesmen. The small trader supplied the other goods which the village did not produce. Economic transactions within the village were conducted in a lucid and logical manner. Further they contributed their labor to the production of agro based goods such as sugar and oil.

But rural India was not characterized by the settled peasant's production alone. There were several kinds of areas, such as, large tract of dry land or hilly regions not cultivable in the same way as the more fertile expansion of land. In context to Rajmahal where almost 81% of the population was being supported by agriculture forming a larger unit of peasants. This peasantry class was a social part formed out of different religions, castes, tribes and sect.<sup>7</sup> In every village; peasants were more or less comprised of three fragmented groups. Larger group was that of the petty producers who were comparatively self-sufficient in as much as they did not hire out or hire in labour and just lived about their subsistence level. Second group was composed of the owners of large holdings who hired labour to the moderate extent. Village muqaddam and patwari belonged to this group. Third group consisted of the large scale producers who wholly or solely depended upon village labour. Zamindars, qanungos and chaudhuris belonged to this group.<sup>8</sup> However, the peasantry termed as muzari'an, ri'ayaand kishawarzanin the Persian sources, was the most predominant group that contributed to the social formation of the village.<sup>9</sup> According to Moorcroft, the peasantry comprised both the Hindu and the Mohammedan, who together owed their association to several castes.<sup>10</sup> In the social stratification peasants belonged to the lower segment of the society. Cultivators were known as 'asami', 'raya' or 'mazaram' 'khudakhasta', 'Pahikashta', 'Muqarra'. Basically the peasants were of three classes – 'Riayah Khudkastha', who had field and house in the same villages, 'Riayah Pahikashta', who had fields and house in different villages, 'Muqarrari Riayah' were those who had possession larger than they could cultivate. The term which the Indo-Persian sources of the Mughal period most frequently used to denote a peasant was raiyat, plural riaya, or muzarian. In addition, we also encounter the term kisaan or asami. Some of the 17<sup>th</sup> century refers to two kinds of peasants Khudkasht and Pai kasht. The former was residing in the village in which they

held the lands. The latter were non resident cultivator who belonged to some other villages but cultivated lands elsewhere on a contractual basis. The raiyat became paikasht by their choice and favor to meet extra needs.<sup>11</sup>

### **Agricultural Production:**

A general perception that rings round the intellectual and is common in discussion is the mode of agricultural production in Rajmahal in particular and India in general, has been the traditional and indigenous, applied to capitalize the agriculture production during 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century. There are several evidences including British and European accounts, revealing the change in mode of production and flourishing state of agriculture in the pre British period. The sophistication of Indian agriculture was beyond the comprehension of the Europeans<sup>12</sup>. Despite few writers in their accounts like E.C. Schottley, in his “Principles of rational agriculture applied to India (1876-98)” Lord Mayo in his “Dispatch of April 9, 1870”, A.O. Hume in his “Agricultural Reform in India (London 1879)” have argued that Indian agriculture didn’t depart from the traditional and indigenous mode resulting in the backwardness of the country.

India being a land of farmers has always accorded an important position in the Indian society. There are historical records showing that Indian agriculture has already passed through great revolution as compared to Europe as there are evidences exposing the scientific method of farming like crop rotation and use of suitable manures, seeds and specialization of crops. Indian agriculture was heading towards a technical phase, remains no doubt. The agricultural technology owned up by the peasants in India were no less inferior than the technology used by peasants in other parts of the world. The peasants cultivated the traditional crops but when they were exposed to the new crops they produced it with the same enthusiasm and zeal. Abul Fazl says that during Akbar rule, in each locality as many as forty one crops were cultivated in a year<sup>13</sup>. The method of agricultural production since ancient times has not been static and it has changed according to the needs of times. In the 17<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> century, Mughal rulers tried to increase the agricultural productivity, the crops, its cultivation, assessment and production brought about enhancement in the land revenue. Bernier says that Bengal rice is carried upto Ganges as far as Patna, exported by sea to Masulipatnam and many other ports of Coramondal. It is also sent to foreign Kingdoms principally to the islands of Ceylon and the Maldives<sup>14</sup>.

Pulses also formed one of the major parts of the food of the people of Medieval India. Pulses were mostly grown in Bihar, Doab, Allahabad, Oudh, Lahore, Multan and Malwa. The chief pulses grown were moong, moth, mash etc. in the autumn harvests<sup>15</sup>. In medieval times also for the vegetarian people pulses formed a rich source of protein. The indigo of Bengal was coming into prominence. The usual weight of a bale was about 220 lbs. for Biana and 150 lbs. for Sarkhej. The effect of Dutch and English purchases was to extend the production of indigo. During the reign of Aurangzeb indigo was largely exported from Bengal<sup>16</sup>.

During Akbar rule Bengal was first in sugar production. Abul Fazl says that two kinds of sugarcane; paunda and ordinary was grown in the regions of Agra, Allahabad, Oudh, Delhi, Lahore, Multan, Malwa and Ajmer.<sup>17</sup> Sugar in large quantities was supplied to Golconda, Karnatic and also to Arabia and Mesopotamia through the towns of Mokha and Basra and even Persia. India's sugar under the reign of Jahangir was of three types; candy, powered and jiggery as at present. Opium was manufactured from poppy seeds. Its cultivation required finest soil and the fields and proper weeding and watering was also required. The seed was sown in November and harvested in February and March. The poppy heads were cut out and scratched with a sharp instrument and a milky juice extracted which became brown in colour and after constant exposure to the sun and air is carefully collected by the farmer. The important centres of its production were Patna, Bihar, Malwa, Berar, Ghazipur and Khandesh. Burhanpur and Bengal produced huge quantities of tobacco. Tobacco was exported to Arakan and Pegu.

During the medieval period vegetables were also cultivated. Vegetables such as spinach, turnip, kachnar, chaulai, bethuwa, ginger, boi, peas, garlic, onion, carrot, radish, onion, carrot, radish, lettuce, sweet potato, lemon and numerous other varieties. These were grown in Agra, Allahabad, Delhi, Lahore, Malwa, Bengal, Bihar, Multan, Khandesh. Potatoes were introduced by Portugese and spread rapidly prior to that of Jahangir reign.<sup>18</sup>

The Mughal emperors introduced new crops and cultivation. Musk- melon, water melon, apple, grapes, orange, guava, pomegranate, mango, date, fig, apricot, banana, pineapple, pear, various varieties of berries were grown in many parts of the country especially in Kashmir, and in the subas of Lahore, Delhi, Agra, Allahabad, Awadh, Bengal, Bihar, Malwa, Multan and Ajmer.<sup>19</sup>

### **Agrarian obligation and misery of life:**

India has a particularly intriguing agrarian history; so in the various stages of historical developments; land systems and social arrangements on lands in different parts of India had changed. At the same time the place of peasant in the Indian Social Structure, its agrarian economy the role of various classes of peasantry in social, economic and political transformation and then major attempts to resist oppression and injustice had always been focus of discussions for the contemporary intelligentsia and recent academic research as well.<sup>20</sup> Mughal India, peasants had both rights as well as obligations. We have information in the form of an Aurangzeb's Farman to Muhammad Hashim. According to P. Saran, in Mughal India, the peasants were the ultimate proprietors of land<sup>21</sup> Prof. Irfan Habib says that peasants of Mughal time enjoyed hereditary right of occupancy which the English gave to some section of the peasants after permanent settlement.<sup>22</sup> The peasant of Mughal India had no right to enjoy abandon or dispose of the land under his plough as he might choose at certain occasions. He could not refuse to cultivate.

As far as the material and living conditions of the peasants in medieval period is concerned, the peasant's right to enjoy the fruits from land was considerably restricted. The state share was fixed at one-half of the gross produce.<sup>23</sup> Each peasant was allowed to retain half of his produce, out of which he bore the expenditure incurred on the maintenance of the village and its records. The perquisites of land revenue functionaries were also paid by the peasants out of their own share. They were, therefore, left with less than one fourth of their produce and they subsisted on fruits, milk and vegetables etc.<sup>24</sup> According to Pelsaert "the inhabitants of the country and the city are for the most part poor....." Further he mentioned that "owing to their mode of life, which is that of beasts rather than men".<sup>25</sup> Their material possessions included a wooden pestle and mortar for husking rice, a few earthen vessels for cooking and earthen jars for storing grain. In general, "the peasants' huts were made with materials that were most easily procurable and without the use of much building skill".<sup>26</sup> They had mud-walled and thatch-roofed houses. Usually, the thatches were of paddy straw and reed. These houses had usually four storey. The lower storey was used for stabling the cattle and for keeping sundry stores. The second storey contained the family apartments. The third and fourth storey contained the household chattels.<sup>27</sup>

Due to their inborn poverty, the peasantry could afford to have a single dress which until torn fully was not changed.<sup>28</sup> It seems that the concept of washing them was quite unknown even though there was no scarcity of water. The women of the peasantry used a tunic of pattu for three or four years and which due to the constant use was susceptible to such a dirt that all the outsiders who passed through them looked upon them with “contempt and disdain” and were not used to wearing drawers (izars).<sup>29</sup> Notwithstanding their scanty means of subsistence, they exhausted whatever little resources they had on festivals, rites, pilgrimages, beliefs, etc.<sup>30</sup> The ‘taqavi’ seeds meant for the empty handed peasantry were fraudulently appropriated by “the village officials, the headman, and the patwari, and the value of the grain was gravely entered every year as an arrear against the village.

### **Land revenue system and its impact:**

It was Akbar’s administration that pioneered a land revenue system and set up a bureaucracy to run it; though it goes without saying that Sher Shah Suri was the fore runner of Akbar in the field of land revenue system. Sher Shah Suri laid down the principles which were followed later in the time of Akbar.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the land belonged to those peasants who enjoyed hereditary occupancy rights and the land was not sold or snatched so long as they paid rent or revenue (in case or a part of the production). In the year 1582 A.D. Raja Todarmal became the Diwan-i-chief and changed the whole revenue system. He made an aggregate of the rates collection to ten years. The survey of paimaish of the whole land was undertaken. Land was divided into four classes. Polaj land was the land which was regularly cultivated and yielded revenue from year to year. Parauti was the land occasionally left cultivated. Chachar land was left uncultivated for three or four years; whereas Banjar land was left uncultivated for five years. Revenue was taken in coins but it was certainly the average of last ten years, the peasants had to face the oppressions of feudal chiefs at the time of political instability; natural calamity; economic and authority crisis.<sup>32</sup> Whereas in some attempts peasants revolts were in the form of co-operation and support to their zamindars that were against the emperor and asserted their own political independence owing to the signs of decay of the imperial powers.<sup>33</sup>

**Conclusion:**

After the death of Aurangzeb in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century there was stagnation and deterioration in agriculture and impoverishment of the peasant factors like agricultural crisis, sub in feudation, decentralization of power etc. Peasant discontent increased and came to the surface. Agrarian conflicts were becoming visible gradually during the last phase of the Mughal Empire. Many peasants formed roaring bands of robbers and adventures and thereby undermined law and order and efficiency of the government. After securing the rights of Bengal the British primarily worked for enlargement of the country's revenue which reflected in their land policy and settlements. A series of experiments or assessments etc continued which redefined the rights of certain classes on the land, inaugurated a series of structural changes in control over land and in the relations among classes associated with land-cultivation. By the time, Dacca and later on in 1709 A.D Murshidabad under the Dewan of Murshid quli khan began to flourish as the occupation of the peasants were centered to the capital of Bengal subah., As a result, the socio economic and political charm and glory of Rajmahal gradually went on fading and waning away.

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