

Agrarian economy and condition of the peasants during the Sultanate rule.

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Abstract:

The paper tries to highlight the economic structure and the condition of the peasants within the framework of the agricultural sector. It also tries to trace down the various developments related to agriculture during the Sultanate era and refers to important crops that showcased their importance at that time. The status of the peasants is also treated with due importance, delving deep into perspectives and ideas of scholars regarding them. The focus of the paper is to create a zone of knowledge and familiarity with the peasantry class and their development in the Sultanate period.

Keywords: Chaudharies ,Khuts, Muqaddams, bigha,

With the establishment of the Muslim rule in India changes in different directions had taken place and the economy was no exception to it. However, scholars are most unanimous regarding the effects of the Sultanate rule. D.D.Kosambi and other scholars have pointed out that the Sultanate rule had a devastating effect on Indian economy.¹ Mohd. Habib argued however that the establishment of the Sultanate rule had not a positive effect it virtually brought about an urban revolution.² Irfan Habib modified the version slightly and argues that the Sultanate rule had brought about positive changes in the economy.³

According to the available evidences we come to know that there was an improvement in the agrarian economy. The improvement could be attributed to certain factors such as in agricultural production new technologies were introduced. Irfan Habib has pointed out in his work that for irrigational purposes Persian Wheels were in use. The Sultan themselves used to take positive steps by digging up canals. Firuz Shah Tuglaq is known especially for digging up several canals for irrigational purposes. We also find or get an idea about the production of various types of crops along with commercial crops. So the prosperity in the agrarian sector created a sound basis for the growth and development of the overall economy. So far as the non-agrarian economy was concerned it may be pointed out that there were various types of industries that had flourished in the Sultanate period. So far as the mining industry was concerned Habib pointed out that salt was produced in the Salt Range in the Sambar.⁴ Gold and silver were relatively scarce commodities. Only in the Kolar region gold field was found in limited quantity due to which gold and silver had to be imported from outside India. The textile industry was a well developed industry along with the building and paper making industry.

Agrarian economy and agricultural production constituted the basis of the prosperity of the Sultanate economy. The abundance of land in proportion to the peasants tilling was definitely an important factor in the growth and expansion of agriculture. Agriculture was carried out by peasants living in villages; cultivation was based on individual peasant farming and the size of the land cultivated by them varied greatly from the large land holdings of the Khuts or headmen to the petty plots of the Balahous or the village menials.

The implements used by the peasantry were hardly different from those employed until the fourteenth century. Wells were probably the major source of artificial irrigation in most of the areas. Muhammad bin Tuglaq advanced loans to the peasants for digging wells in order to extend and expand cultivation. However, in some localities water was blocked by throwing dams upon streams providing another source of irrigation for better farming. In the fourteenth century we also get information about the building up of canals getting a strong inspiration from Central Asia proving to be a detrimental factor for the development of the process of irrigation. It was under Firuz Shah Tuglaq that the biggest network of canals known in India until the nineteenth century was created. From wells and canals peasant raised water by various means and an improvement in one of the systems of water lift probably belonged to the Sultanate period. The use of Persian Wheel might well have greatly contributed to the expansion of irrigation. The peasants during the rule of the Delhi Sultanate cultivated a large amount of crops. Ibn Batuta gives a fairly detailed description of the various crops harvested in India in the seasons of autumn and spring. It also tells us that the Kharif crops were sown on the same soil as the Rabi crops. The more important was that the same peasant sowed different crops

¹ Kosambi,D.D. *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*. Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1956.

² Habib,Mohammad. *Studies in Medieval Indian Polity and Culture: The Delhi Sultanate and Its Times*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015.

³ Habib,Irfan and Tapan Raychaudhury. (ed.) *The Cambridge Economic History of India (vol: 1) c:1200-c:1750*. UK: Cambridge University Press. 1982.

⁴ Ibid.,

for two harvests in the year. The information we get about the crops during that time was that a list of twenty five crops' was estimated as mon per bigha. For most other crops modern estimates for daily are not available. Another set of data which may be used are the prices of the agricultural products given in Barani, Abul Fazal and statistical records. This could help us trace changes in the state of supply of each commodity in relation to which assuming that the pattern of demand has remained largely the same. It would be seen from the relative prices prevailing in Alauddin Khalji's time that the crops which needed artificial irrigation were more highly valued than the crops that would do largely without it. Thus the Kharif food crops were raised solely on rain and inundation hatched very low prices. The harder Rabi crops such as barley and gram also were rated lower with the respect of wheat and sugarcane than the later periods. Based on the reliability of the available data, it can be assumed that land abundance of the time encouraged more extensive system of agriculture ensuring a larger production of rain-grown crops with a consequential relative restriction of crops needing higher inputs especially in the form of agricultural irrigation. There were more shortages of pasture laws as a result of which the agriculture could proceed relatively in an easier form.

It is probable that the fourteenth and the fifteenth century saw the introduction of sericulture or the breeding of mulberry silk worm for producing true and qualitatively superior silk. But sericulture properly reached India from China very slowly and possibly by a long and devious route. Persian sericulture obtained another spurt of development under the rule of the Mongols. By the fifteenth century evidences and accounts of the mulberry trees, silkworms and cocoons can be found. The first firm evidence of sericulture in Kashmir is no older than Tarik-i-Rasidi completed in 1547. Earlier references of silk-weaving in Kashmir occur in the works of Kalhana and Srivara.

On the Indian fruit growing Ibn Batuta's account seems most instructive. The mango was the most highly priced fruit but it was entirely seed grown. The practice of grafting is not been mentioned. Grapes were rare and were raised only in a few localities besides Delhi. These were possibly cultivated by peasants; for we find Muhammad bin Tuglaq urging that peasants should be encouraged to shift to the raising of grapes. However, his successors such as Firuz Shah Tuglaq himself laid out 1200 orchards in the vicinity of Delhi to grow seven varieties of grapes. The produce was so abundant in nature that the prices of grapes is said to have fallen to a rate just five times to that of wheat.

The agrarian economy during the Sultanate period cannot be complete without an account of the rural society that was evidently stratified. At the upper most strata there were the landed aristocrats and at the bottom of the social hierarchy there was the ordinary peasantry. In between the two there were Khuts, Muqaddams and Chaudharies whose economic and social status much resembled to that of the landed aristocracy. As Barani has pointed out that they used to collect taxes from the ordinary peasantry but themselves did not pay any taxes to the state as a result of which most of them had become fabulously rich. It was Alauddin Khalji who strictly enforced rules to bring these rural classes within the taxation network and in the process of which the state had been the gainer and most of the Chaudharies and Muqaddams had been impoverished. This process had been depicted by Barani though there is an element of exaggeration in it. But still it cannot be denied that the undue advantages enjoyed by these sections were denied by Alauddin.

The condition of the peasantry during the Sultanate period has been a subject matter of controversy among the historians. Irfan Habib's view of the status of peasants as almost like the semi serfs has been well contradicted and criticised by historian⁵ Harbans Mukhia who thinks that the peasants enjoyed freedom and was not under any kind of bondage.⁶ In view of these two extreme views, it is difficult for us to arrive at conclusion acceptable to all. Therefore it would be prudent on our part to take into consideration the actual condition of peasantry during the period and the review.

The State used to impose huge taxes on the peasantry which was almost fifty percent of the total produce being collected from them. In the matter of collection the iqtadars were entrusted prior to Alauddin Khalji who introduced a regular system of rural taxation which was definitely harsh on the common people or the peasantry. However, Irfan Habib has shown that in order to make his market control system effective Alauddin had to ensure regular supply of grain from the peasantry for the different markets for the daily administrative purposes. This is as done much to the detriment of the interest of the peasantry. Habib is of the opinion that the peasants were semi-serfs during the medieval time contradicted by Mukhia on the opposite view point treating the peasants as free entity. According to Harbans Mukhia, the peasantry enjoyed free status in ancient as well as early medieval India, given the condition of the fertility of the soil as well as land grant ratio, the peasantry enjoyed relatively better position as because of the fact that they could move from one place to another as and when the necessary situation demanded. It was therefore a great extent to which the peasants enjoyed freedom. Moreover, in case of India extra economic coercion like that of Western Europe was that of the idea of necessity. So, Mukhia thinks that the peasantry enjoyed freedom during the medieval period.

In view of these two extreme positions it can be stated that medieval Indian rulers extended cooperation to the peasantry. The State used to take initiative in the matter of irrigation to facilitate the extension of agriculture. Secondly, in the times of crises the State used to grant the peasantry exemption from the payment of taxes. We can also find instances of the government giving loans to the peasantry in times of scarcity. Taking into consideration these factors it may be stated that their condition was definitely

⁵ Habib, Irfan and Tapan Raychaudhury. (ed.) *The Cambridge Economic History of India (vol: 1) c:1200-c:1750*. UK: Cambridge University Press. 1982.

⁶ Mukhia, Harbans. *Perspectives on Medieval History*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Limited. 1993.

better than the status of semi-serfs. However, the agriculture was definitely in a flourishing state and the agrarian economy provided the sound basis of the overall economic prosperity very much during the Sultanate period.

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