UNIT 5: PEASANTS, TRADERS AND WORKERS UNDER THE DELHI SULTANATE

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5.1 Learning objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the agrarian and trade structure of the Delhi Sultanate period.
- Analyse the land revenue systems.
- Understand the condition of the citizens of Delhi Sultanate.

5.2 Introduction

The Delhi Sultanate (c. 1206-1526 CE) is a major period in medieval India's socioeconomic history. The Sultanate, founded by Turkic monarchs and then enlarged by succeeding dynasties like as the Mamluks, Khaljis, Tughlaqs, Sayyids, and Lodis, saw significant advances in agriculture, trade, administration, urbanization, and social structure. While political and military events have frequently dominated historical narratives, the Sultanate's operations were largely dependent on the productive activities of peasants, artisans, traders, soldiers, and slaves, who formed the backbone of the medieval economy. The study of these groupings sheds light on the nature of economic production, social connections, and state development during the time (Habib, 1999).

Agriculture was the primary foundation of the Sultanate's economy. The majority of the population was made up of peasants who cultivated crops such wheat, rice, barley, millets, sugarcane, cotton, and pulses. Agricultural productivity supported both rural society and the growing urban centers that arose during Sultanate control. The state received a significant percentage of its revenue from land taxes levied on

cultivators. As a result, the agricultural sector dominated administrative policies. Several kings, most notably Alauddin Khalji and Muhammad ibn Tughlaq, implemented policies to govern agricultural production, assess land revenue, and expand state control over rural resources (Chandra 2007).

The land revenue system served as the Sultanate's financial base. Revenue was typically collected in the form of a portion of agricultural produce, however techniques varied by location and period. The iqta system, which awarded revenue assignments to military and administrative officers, was critical in keeping the Sultanate's administrative and military infrastructure operational. Revenue extraction not only supported the royal court and bureaucracy, but it also funded military battles and civic projects. The interaction between peasants, local intermediaries, and state authorities thus became a distinguishing aspect of the rural economy (Satish Chandra, 2015). Along with agriculture, trade arose as a significant aspect of economic life. The Delhi Sultanate benefited from its strategic location inside vast economic networks that connected India to Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean world. Cities like Delhi, Multan, Lahore, Daulatabad, Cambay, and Bengal grew into major commercial and craft manufacturing hubs. Merchants helped carry textiles, horses, spices, precious metals, food grains, and luxury products between regional and worldwide markets. Throughout the Sultanate period, trade growth enhanced monetization and spurred urban expansion (Raychaudhuri and Habib, 1982).

The thriving commercial economy employed a considerable number of artisans and skilled laborers. Textile weavers, metalworkers, carpenters, potters, leather workers, stone masons, and other artisans were essential in providing both local and long-distance markets. The development of royal workshops (karkhanas) boosted specialized production by hiring a large number of artisans to produce textiles, weapons, jewellery, furniture, and luxury products for the court. These developments increased vocational diversity and boosted the urban economy (Habib, 1999). Military troops also played a significant role in Sultanate society. The existence of a sizable standing army was critical for territorial expansion and political stability. Soldiers, cavalrymen, and military commanders were compensated with income assignments and salaries. The military organization was inextricably linked to the agrarian economy since land revenue funded defense spending and administrative tasks. As a result, the militia became an intrinsic part of the Sultanate's governmental and economic systems (Jackson 1999). Slavery was another important institution during this time period. Slaves worked in domestic service, administration, agriculture, military operations, and royal institutions. Many slaves had key positions in the political system, and some advanced to positions of great importance. Slavery under the Delhi Sultanate diverged from purely economic forms of servitude, and it frequently served as an important mechanism of political patronage and social mobility (Nizami, 1989).

Peasants, traders, artisans, warriors, and slaves worked together to shape the Delhi Sultanate's society and economy. Their efforts aided agricultural production, facilitated commercial growth, bolstered state institutions, and encouraged urban development. An investigation of these groups provides a better understanding of the social and economic underpinnings on which the Delhi Sultanate was established.

5.3 Agriculture and trade under the Delhi Sultanate

The Delhi Sultanate's economy was built around two main pillars: agriculture and trade. The Sultanate's prosperity was mostly dependent on agricultural output, which provided food for the populace and revenue for the state, while trade enabled the movement of products, wealth, and cultural influences across regions. The expansion of crops, the establishment of market networks, and the growth of urban centers all played important roles in medieval India's economic transition (Chandra, 2007). Agriculture was the foundation of the Sultanate economy because the vast majority of the inhabitants lived in villages and relied on farming for a living. The rich plains of northern India, particularly the Indo-Gangetic area, enabled the cultivation of a wide range of crops. The main crops were wheat, rice, barley, and millets, although cash crops such as sugarcane, cotton, indigo, and oilseeds were also grown extensively. Crop diversity represented the varying climatic and geographical conditions of Sultanate-ruled regions (Habib, 1999).

Irrigation developments helped to accelerate agricultural expansion. The rulers of the Delhi Sultanate understood the importance of irrigation in enhancing agricultural productivity. The most important contribution was made by Firuz Shah Tughlaq (1351-1388), who built multiple canals to deliver water to agricultural areas. These canals connected rivers to cultivated zones, allowing farming to expand in formerly unproductive areas. Wells, tanks, reservoirs, and water-lifting devices like the Persian wheel were all used to support irrigation. Such advances helped to boost agricultural output and rural wealth in many areas (Satish Chandra, 2015). The agrarian system was intimately related to the Sultanate's land revenue administration. Land revenue was the principal source of governmental income and was often collected as a percentage of agricultural production. He ordered the measurement of cultivated land and sought to assure direct revenue collection from peasants, eliminating the power of local intermediaries. The state's efforts to manage income collection demonstrated the importance of agriculture as the Sultanate's economic backbone (Habib, 1999).

While agriculture sustained the rural economy, trade stimulated urban growth and commercial activity. The Delhi Sultanate occupied a strategic position connecting India with Central Asia, West Asia, and the Indian Ocean trading world. This geographical advantage encouraged both inland and overseas trade. Merchants transported agricultural products, textiles, spices, metals, horses, and luxury goods across extensive commercial networks. Important trade routes connected Delhi with Multan, Lahore, Bengal, Gujarat, and the Deccan, facilitating the movement of goods and people throughout the subcontinent (Raychaudhuri & Habib, 1982). During the Sultanate period, urban centres were key trade hubs. Cities like Delhi, Multan, Lakhnauti, Cambay (Khambhat), and Daulatabad grew became commercial and industrial hubs. These cities' expansion was fueled by a vibrant class of merchants, moneylenders, and artisans. Marketplaces acted as exchange points for both local products and imported goods from other countries. Commercial prosperity also increased the circulation of cash, particularly silver tanka and copper jital coins, which facilitated economic transactions and helped to monetize the economy (Jackson, 1999).

International trade was another important aspect of the Sultanate economy. India sent textiles, spices, sugar, indigo, and precious stones to Persia, Arabia, East Africa, and Southeast Asia. In return, India received horses, luxury goods, metals, and certain manufactured goods. The Sultanate's military strength relied mainly on cavalry, therefore importing high-quality horses was very vital. Ports on India's western coast, notably those in Gujarat, played an important role in connecting the country to the Indian Ocean's maritime commerce networks. Craft output increased as trade expanded. Textile weaving, metalwork, leather processing, ceramics, and other industries thrived with the help of merchants and kings. Royal workshops (*karkhanas*) employed numerous artisans to produce goods required by the court and the military. Consequently, agriculture, trade, and industry became interconnected sectors of the Sultanate economy. Agriculture and trade were fundamental to the economic structure of the Delhi Sultanate. Agricultural production ensured food security and generated revenue, while commercial activities fostered urbanization, market integration, and economic growth. Together, these sectors contributed to the stability and prosperity of the Sultanate and played a crucial role in shaping the socio-economic landscape of medieval India.

5.4 Land revenue systems

The land revenue system was the Delhi Sultanate's primary source of income (1206-1526 CE), serving as the medieval state's financial underpinning. Because agriculture was the primary employment of the populace, the Sultanate relied largely on revenue from agricultural produce to fund its army, administrative machinery, royal family, and public works. The evolution of the tax system under various rulers demonstrates the state's growing attempts to gain direct control over rural resources while maximising fiscal returns. Although tax management varied by region and dynasty, certain key institutions and practices arose that had a considerable impact on later medieval Indian agrarian systems.

The Sultanate's fundamental land tax, known as Kharaj, represented the state's portion of agricultural produce. According to Islamic legal traditions, Kharaj is a levy placed on cultivated land, particularly in regions captured by Muslim kings. In practice, however, administrative concerns took precedence over solely religious grounds when determining income demand. The tax was typically collected in kind or in cash, depending on local conditions and market accessibility. Revenue was a significant amount of the produce, often accounting for one-third to one-half of total output (Chandra, 2015). The Iqta system was unique to Sultanate administration. The Sultan allotted geographical units, known as iqtas, to military officers and administrative officials known as muqtis or iqtadars. Instead of earning monthly wages from the national treasury, these officials were given the authority to collect revenue from certain territories. The funds raised were used to maintain troops, cover administrative costs, and support local governance. Although the muqti wielded enormous power inside the iqta, ownership of property remained with the state, and the assignment was often transferable. This approach allowed the Sultanate to maintain a sizable armed force without placing undue strain on the state treasury (Jackson, 1999).

Alauddin Khalji (1296-1316 CE) implemented substantial modifications in the revenue system. Concerned about the growing influence of local chiefs, intermediaries, and revenue collectors, Alauddin implemented measures to increase direct governmental control over agricultural resources. He ordered a careful measurement of cultivated land in the fertile Doab region between the Ganga and Yamuna rivers and set the state requirement at roughly half of the yield. Revenue was collected directly from cultivators, decreasing the role of local landowners and intermediaries like khuts, muqaddams, and chaudhuris. These reforms raised state income and administrative efficiency while transferring more budgetary responsibility to the peasantry (Habib, 1999). During Muhammad bin Tughlaq's rule (1325-1351 CE), additional experiments in revenue administration were carried out. To improve state revenues, he aimed to raise revenue demands in the Doab region. However, the policy coincided with agricultural crisis and famine, causing severe hardship and peasant rebellion. Recognizing the negative results, the Sultan then implemented agricultural loans known as Sondhar or Taqavi loans, which were designed to assist peasants in purchasing seeds, cattle, and farm equipment. Although their execution was patchy, these regulations show the state's understanding of the link between agricultural productivity and revenue creation (Satish Chandra, 2015).

Firuz Shah Tughlaq (1351–1388 CE) introduced a more pragmatic approach. He aimed to stabilize revenue administration by decreasing arbitrary taxes and supporting agricultural expansion. Firuz Shah invested in irrigation projects, such as canal construction, which boosted cultivable land and thus revenue. He also endeavored to match taxation more closely with Islamic legal norms, abolishing certain taxes deemed illegal. These initiatives helped to maintain relative agrarian stability during his tenure (Chandra, 2007). Apart from Kharaj, various additional taxes were imposed. Ushr was imposed on Muslim-owned land and was often lower than Kharaj. Jizya, a poll tax imposed on non-Muslims, provided an additional source of revenue. Taxes on trade, grazing, houses, and various commercial activities further supplemented the state’s income. However, land revenue remained the dominant component of the fiscal system throughout the Sultanate period (Habib, 1999). The revenue administration involved a hierarchy of officials. The Diwan-i-Wizarat**,** headed by the Wazir, supervised financial affairs, while local officials such as *amils* and *muqtis* were responsible for assessment and collection. Record-keeping and land measurement gradually became important features of administration, reflecting the increasing sophistication of fiscal management. Despite these efforts, revenue collection often depended upon local conditions and the balance of power between the state, intermediaries, and cultivators.

The land revenue system of the Delhi Sultanate was a complex institution that linked agricultural production with state formation. Through mechanisms such as Kharaj, the Iqta system, land measurement, direct assessment, and revenue reforms introduced by rulers like Alauddin Khalji, Muhammad bin Tughlaq, and Firuz Shah Tughlaq, the Sultanate sought to maximize fiscal resources while maintaining political authority. These developments not only sustained the medieval state but also laid important foundations for subsequent agrarian and revenue systems in India.

5.5 Condition of peasants, militia, artisans and slaves

The Delhi Sultanate's socioeconomic system (1206-1526 CE) was supported by the labor and contributions of many social groups, mainly peasants, militia, artisans, and slaves. These groups served as the Sultanate's productive and administrative foundation, contributing significantly to agriculture, military organization, urban development, and economic production. Their circumstances, however, varied greatly based on their work, social standing, and relationship with the state. An investigation of these groups sheds light on the functioning of medieval Indian society and the economy during the Sultanate period (Chandra 2007). Peasants were the largest portion of the population and the foundation of the agrarian economy. Most peasants lived in villages and relied on agriculture for a living. They grew food grains like wheat, rice, barley, and millets, as well as industrial crops like cotton and sugarcane. Although agriculture contributed to the Sultanate's wealth, peasants' living conditions were frequently harsh due to the high load of land revenue. In some locations, state demands might reach up to 50% of the produce, particularly during Alauddin Khalji's reign. In addition to income payments, peasants were occasionally expected to perform labor and other duties. Natural disasters such as droughts, famines, and floods exacerbated their problems.

Within the rural hierarchy, distinctions existed among cultivators. Wealthier peasants and village headmen, known as *khuts*, *muqaddams*, and *chaudhuris*, often enjoyed privileges and exercised local influence. However, rulers such as Alauddin Khalji attempted to curtail their powers and establish direct control over revenue collection. Despite periodic state interventions, the economic well-being of peasants largely depended on agricultural productivity, climatic conditions, and the efficiency of local administration (Satish Chandra, 2015). The militia and military troops had a prominent role in Sultanate life. Because the Delhi Sultanate was basically a military state, a substantial army was required for territorial development, defense, and the preservation of political authority. The military was mostly composed of cavalry, infantry, archers, and specialist forces. Soldiers were recruited from a variety of ethnic and geographical origins, including Turks, Afghans, Mongols, and Indians. Many military officers received iqtas or income assignments instead of wages, although regular soldiers were paid in cash. The implementation of horse branding (dagh) and descriptive rolls (chehra) by Alauddin Khalji represented efforts to increase military efficiency and avoid corruption (Jackson, 1999). Although military service offered opportunities for social mobility and prestige, it was also associated with considerable risks. Soldiers frequently participated in campaigns against rival kingdoms, rebellions, and external invasions. The success of the Sultanate largely depended upon the loyalty and effectiveness of its military establishment. Consequently, the militia occupied a privileged position compared to many other occupational groups within society (Chandra, 2007).

Artisans were another prominent segment of the populace who contributed greatly to urban economic life. The Sultanate's urbanization and commercialization increased demand for manufactured items and handicrafts. Textile weaving, metalworking, carpentry, pottery, leather processing, jewelry manufacturing, stone carving, and weapon production are all carried out by artisans. Many people worked

alone, while others were hired in royal workshops known as karkhanas. These state-controlled factories manufactured luxury products, guns, furniture, textiles, and ceremonial items for the royal court and administrative agencies (Raychaudhuri & Habib, 1982). The status of artisans varied according to their skill and sponsorship. Highly trained artisans sometimes enjoyed economic security and social respect, especially while working for the government or wealthy merchants. The growth of trade and urban markets opened up chances for specialized production and vocational diversification. At the same time, craftspeople relied on market demand and governmental stability for a living. Their work was critical in promoting both domestic consumption and long-distance trade networks.

Slavery was a significant institution in the Delhi Sultanate and held a unique place in its social structure. Slaves were obtained by combat, purchase, tribute, and inheritance. They worked in a range of roles, including domestic service, agriculture, military duty, administration, and royal residences. Unlike other kinds of slavery, certain slaves in the Sultanate may rise to positions of power via devotion and skill. The most notable example is Qutb-ud-din Aibak, who rose from slavery to become the founder of the Delhi Sultanate itself (Nizami, 1989). Large numbers of slaves were maintained by rulers such as Firuz Shah Tughlaq, who reportedly possessed thousands of slaves employed in administrative, military, and productive activities. While some slaves experienced harsh conditions and limited personal freedom, others enjoyed opportunities for advancement unavailable to ordinary commoners. The institution therefore functioned not only as a source of labour but also as a mechanism of political patronage and state control.

The treatment of peasants, militia, artisans, and slaves by the Delhi Sultanate represented the complexities of medieval Indian culture. Peasants, despite severe taxes, kept the agrarian economy going; military personnel ensured political stability and territorial expansion; artisans contributed to urban wealth and commercial progress; and slaves performed vital economic, administrative, and military roles. These groups worked together to establish the social and economic foundations for the Delhi Sultanate.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What was the principal occupation of the majority of people under the Delhi Sultanate?
2. What was the main source of revenue for the Delhi Sultanate?
3. What were the royal workshops established by the Sultanate known as?
4. Which system assigned revenue-yielding territories to military and administrative officers?

5.6 Let us sum up

After going through this unit, you have been able to that:

- Agriculture formed the foundation of the Sultanate economy**,** with peasants constituting the largest section of society. They cultivated food and cash crops and were the principal source of land revenue, which financed the administration and military.
- The land revenue system, particularly the Kharaj and Iqta system, was central to state finances. Rulers such as Alauddin Khalji introduced reforms to strengthen revenue collection and increase direct state control over agricultural resources.
- Trade expanded significantly during the Delhi Sultanate, linking India with Central Asia, West Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian Ocean world. Urban centres such as Delhi, Multan, and Cambay emerged as important commercial hubs.
- Artisans and skilled workers played a crucial role in economic growth. Textile weavers, metalworkers, potters, carpenters, and other craftsmen supplied goods for local markets, long-distance trade, and royal workshops (*karkhanas*), contributing to urban prosperity.
- Military personnel and slaves were integral to the functioning of the Sultanate. The militia ensured political stability and territorial expansion, while slaves were employed in domestic, agricultural, administrative, and military activities, with some attaining influential positions within the state.

5.7 Further Reading

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Nizami, K. A. (1989). *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

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5.8 Answers to check your progress

Answer 1: Agriculture
Answer 2: Land revenue system (Kharaj)
Answer 3: Karkhanas

Answer 4: The Iqta Systema

Model questions

A) Very Short Questions

1. Which crop was widely cultivated as a cash crop during the Delhi Sultanate?
2. Who constructed several canals to improve irrigation during the Delhi Sultanate?
3. Name one important commercial city of the Delhi Sultanate.
4. What was the title given to the officer in charge of an Iqta?

B) Short Questions

1. Explain the importance of agriculture in the economy of the Delhi Sultanate.
2. What was the Iqta system and how did it function?
3. Discuss the role of artisans in the urban economy of the Delhi Sultanate.
4. Describe the position and functions of slaves under the Delhi Sultanate.

C) Long Questions

1. Discuss the nature and significance of agriculture and trade under the Delhi Sultanate.
2. Examine the land revenue system of the Delhi Sultanate, highlighting the reforms introduced by Alauddin Khalji and the Tughlaq rulers.
3. Analyze the socio-economic condition of peasants, artisans, militia, and slaves during the Delhi Sultanate period.
4. Evaluate the contribution of traders, craftsmen, and military personnel to the economic and political stability of the Delhi Sultanate.

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