UNIT 6: PEASANTS, TRADERS AND WORKERS UNDER THE MUGHALS

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6.1 Learning Objectives

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

- Understand the system of agriculture and trade under the Mughals
- Understand the various land revenue systems
- Understand the uprisings and their need and outcome.

6.2 Introduction

The Mughal Empire (1526-1707, and formally until 1857) ruled over one of the most wealthy agrarian and commercial economies in the early modern world. The stability offered by Mughal political authority, combined with administrative reforms and developing market networks, permitted considerable advances in agriculture, trade, artisan production, and urbanization. While Mughal rulers' achievements are frequently studied through the lenses of political history and imperial administration, the empire's operation was largely dependent on the labor and productivity of peasants, artisans, traders, soldiers, and other working groups. These social categories served as the economic foundation for Mughal civilization, helping to build one of pre-modern Asia's largest empires (Richards, 1993).

Agriculture remained the primary activity of the bulk of the population and formed the foundation of the Mughal economy. Peasants grew a variety of crops, including wheat,

rice, barley, millets, sugarcane, cotton, indigo, tobacco, and pulses. The availability of fertile land, irrigation facilities, and the integration of rural production into larger market networks all helped to drive agricultural expansion. The growing commercialization of agriculture stimulated the production of cash crops to supply both domestic industry and foreign trade. As a result, agrarian production not only supported rural populations, but also provided the surplus required for urban expansion and imperial administration (Habib, 1999).

The Mughal state obtained its primary income from land revenue, making the agrarian sector crucial to imperial administration. Raja Todar Mal's attempts to develop systematic land surveying and revenue assessment led to a high level of competence in revenue management under Emperor Akbar. The Zabt system, which assessed revenue demand using average crop yields and prices, became a key component of Mughal fiscal administration. Revenue collection was overseen by a complicated governmental apparatus that connected the imperial center to rural agrarian culture. This system's efficiency allowed the empire to sustain a huge army, a complex administrative machinery, and extensive public institutions (Chandra, 2005). Political stability, increased communication networks, and expanded foreign business all contributed to the prosperity of trade during Mughal rule. India became a major worldwide trading hub, attracting merchants from Central Asia, Persia, Arabia, Europe, and Southeast Asia. Major commercial centers like Agra, Lahore, Delhi, Surat, Ahmedabad, Patna, and Dhaka evolved as manufacturing and trading hubs. Indian textiles, indigo, spices, saltpetre, silk, and precious stones were exported to foreign markets, and horses, luxury items, metals, and other commodities were imported. The expansion of commerce helped to monetize the economy and enhance the link between rural and urban markets (Raychaudhuri & Habib 1982).

Artisans and craftspeople played an important role in Mughal civilization. The empire was known for producing high-quality textiles, metals, jewelry, carpets, paper, shipbuilding, and architectural craftsmanship. Skilled artisans toiled in villages, towns, and imperial workshops (karkhanas), creating goods for both internal and international markets. The demand created by royal patronage, urban elites, and foreign merchants fueled specialized manufacturing and the expansion of artisan industries (Habib, 1999). The military establishment was also instrumental in the Mughal Empire's survival. Akbar developed the Mansabdari system, which structured military and administrative people into a hierarchy based on rank and responsibilities. Mansabdars maintained cavalry contingents and were given income assignments known as jagirs in exchange for imperial service. The military thus remained closely connected to the agrarian economy because revenue from land financed the empire’s defence and expansion (Richards, 1993).

Slavery, although less central to production than in some contemporary societies, existed within the Mughal Empire in various forms. Slaves were employed in domestic service, military households, royal establishments, and administrative functions. Some individuals entered servitude through warfare, purchase, debt, or inheritance, while others attained positions of trust and influence within elite households. The institution reflected broader social hierarchies and labour arrangements within Mughal society (Eraly, 2007). The Mughal Empire's wealth did not

come without difficulties. Heavy revenue demands, local exploitation, agrarian misery, and political instability periodically sparked opposition among rural inhabitants. Peasant uprisings by the Jats in the Agra-Mathura region, the Satnamis in Haryana, and the Sikhs in Punjab indicated the growing unhappiness of rural populations during the late Mughal Empire. These movements demonstrate the dynamic interaction between imperial power and agrarian culture, as well as the difficulty the empire faced in retaining control over its large regions (Chandra 2005). Thus, studying peasants, traders, workers, militia, artisans, slaves, and peasant resistance yields a thorough knowledge of the Mughal Empire's socioeconomic roots. Their contributions shaped the agricultural, commercial, and administrative structures that sustained one of the most influential political formations in Indian history.

6.3 Agriculture and trade under the Mughals

Agriculture and trade were the twin pillars of the Mughal economy, ensuring the Empire's political stability and prosperity. Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Mughal state ruled over one of the world's largest agrarian economies. Agricultural output provided the revenue required to support the imperial administration, while flourishing trade linked India to large regional and worldwide commercial networks. During the Mughal period, the interdependence of these industries helped to drive economic expansion, urbanization, and the emergence of a thriving market economy (Habib, 1999).

The majority of the inhabitants worked in agriculture, which served as the foundation of rural life. The lush alluvial plains of the Indo-Gangetic region, as well as the river basins of Bengal, Gujarat, and the Deccan, were ideal for widespread cultivation. Peasants cultivated a wide range of food crops, including wheat, rice, barley, jowar, bajra, and pulses. Commercial agriculture, in addition to subsistence crops, grew rapidly throughout the Mughal Empire. Cotton, sugarcane, indigo, tobacco, silk, and opium were grown in large numbers to suit home and export demands. This diversification of agricultural production reflected the increasing integration of rural economies into market networks (Richards, 1993). The Mughal monarchs promoted agricultural expansion by encouraging wasteland cultivation and funding irrigation projects. Wells, tanks, canals, and water-lifting devices like the Persian wheel boosted agricultural output in many areas. The state understood the significance of preserving agricultural output because land revenue was its primary source of income. As a result, efforts were undertaken to ensure that revenue was assessed and collected on a regular basis while yet allowing for profitable farming to continue.

One of the most notable developments in Mughal agrarian administration was Emperor Akbar's implementation of systematic revenue reforms. Raja Todar Mal created the Zabt system, which involves measuring land and calculating revenue based on average agricultural yields and current prices during a ten-year period. Revenue demand was generally fixed at approximately one-third of the produce and could be paid either in cash or kind. This strategy increased administrative efficiency while allowing the state to retain a stable fiscal structure. Revenue collection was overseen by a network of officials who linked rural production to imperial administration (Habib, 1999). Agricultural prosperity boosted trade by providing marketable surpluses.

The Mughal Empire experienced a phenomenal increase of both internal and external commerce. A network of roadways, caravan routes, riverine transport systems, and market centers permitted the transportation of products over long distances. Agra, Delhi, Lahore, Ahmedabad, Surat, Patna, and Dhaka arose as major commercial centers for the trade of agricultural output, manufactured goods, and imported commodities (Raychaudhuri & Habib, 1982).

Internal commerce connected rural farmers to metropolitan customers and manufacturing centers. Merchants, brokers, bankers, and transporters all played important roles in the movement of products across the empire. The expansion of commercial activity stimulated the use of cash, and Mughal silver rupees became a popular medium of exchange. A relatively stable monetary system promoted market integration and facilitated long-distance trade transactions (Chandra, 2005). International trade thrived under the Mughals, thanks to India's strategic position in the Indian Ocean trading network. Indian textiles, particularly cotton and silk fabrics, were highly valued in Asian, African, and European markets. Other exports included indigo, sugar, spices, saltpetre, opium, and precious stones. In exchange, India imported horses from Central Asia and Arabia, silk from Persia and China, luxury goods, metals, and a variety of manufacturing commodities. Ports like Surat, Hooghly, Masulipatnam, and Cambay were key gateways for maritime trade, attracting merchants from all over the world, including Portuguese, Dutch, English, French, and Armenian traders (Richards 1993). The rise of trade also boosted artisan production and urbanization. Textile weaving, metalworking, papermaking, shipbuilding, carpet weaving, and jewelry manufacturing grew in response to domestic and international demand. The success of commercial centers facilitated the establishment of financial institutions, credit mechanisms, and merchant networks that connected India to global markets (Raychaudhuri and Habib, 1982).

Agriculture and trade served as the Mughal Empire's economic backbone. Agricultural production generated the surplus necessary for state revenue and market exchange, while commercial activities integrated India into regional and international trading systems. These sectors worked together to promote economic prosperity, urban expansion, and administrative stability, establishing the Mughal Empire as one of the world's most important economic powers in the early modern period.

6.4 Land revenue systems

The land revenue system was the cornerstone of the Mughal Empire’s administrative and economic structure. Since agriculture was the primary source of wealth and the principal occupation of the majority of the population, the Mughal state derived most of its income from taxes imposed on agricultural production. Revenue collected from the countryside financed the imperial administration, military establishment, public works, and courtly expenditures. Consequently, Mughal rulers developed one of the most sophisticated systems of revenue assessment and collection in pre-modern India. The evolution of these revenue arrangements reflects the empire’s efforts to establish effective control over agrarian resources while ensuring a stable flow of income to the state (Habib, 1999).

The most important development in Mughal revenue administration occurred during the reign of Emperor Akbar (1556–1605). Under the guidance of his finance minister Raja Todar Mal, a systematic method of land measurement and revenue assessment was introduced. This reform sought to replace arbitrary taxation with a more uniform and predictable system. The cultivated land was carefully surveyed, measured, and classified according to its productivity. Revenue demand was calculated on the basis of average yields and prevailing market prices, thereby creating a more rational framework for taxation (Chandra, 2005).

Akbar's most celebrated revenue structure was the Zabt system. Under this system, the state assessed revenue based on detailed measurements of farmed land and statistical estimations of average yield. Data on crop yields and prices were collected over ten years, and the average was used to calculate the state's share. Overall, the state claimed almost one-third of the average production. Revenue was typically paid in cash, which facilitated monetization and improved market integration. The Zabt system was most successfully implemented in areas with steady agricultural circumstances, particularly in northern India's fertile provinces of Agra, Delhi, Lahore, and Allahabad (Habib 1999).

Todar Mal established the Dahsala system in 1580, which was closely related with the Zabt system. The name Dahsala literally means "ten-year system." In this arrangement, average produce and prices from the preceding ten years were used to create a standardized revenue demand. This eliminated annual swings and increased certainty for both cultivators and revenue officials. The Dahsala system was a notable administrative improvement since it allowed for more precise revenue assessments while reducing arbitrary exactions (Richards, 1993). In places where detailed land measurement was problematic, different revenue assessment procedures were used. One such method was batai, or crop-sharing. Under this method, the real produce was divided between the cultivator and the state in a predetermined ratio. Batai existed in several forms. In Bhaoli, the produce was divided after harvesting, while in Khet Batai, division occurred before harvesting based on estimated yields. This method was particularly useful in areas where agricultural conditions varied significantly and accurate measurement was impractical (Satish Chandra, 2005).

Another method was Kankut, a system that combined measurement (*kan*) and estimation (*kut*). Revenue officials estimated the likely yield of crops by inspecting the fields and measuring portions of cultivated land. Assessment was then based on these calculations. Kankut was commonly used in western India, especially in Gujarat and parts of the Deccan, where local conditions required flexible methods of revenue determination (Habib, 1999). The Nasaq system represented yet another method of revenue assessment. Under this arrangement, revenue demand was fixed on the basis of previous collections and local estimates rather than fresh measurement. It was particularly useful in areas where administrative resources were limited or where long-standing local practices existed. Although less precise than the Zabt system, Nasaq enabled the state to collect revenue efficiently in regions not fully integrated into the imperial administrative framework (Richards, 1993).

The Mughal income system was intimately linked to the Jagirdari system. Instead of paying salaries directly from the imperial treasury, the state delegated revenue-generating territories known as jagirs to officials known as mansabdar. These officials gathered revenue from allotted areas and utilized it to support troops and carry out administrative duties. While the land remained nominally under imperial ownership, the jagirdars had significant authority over income collection. This model linked budgetary management to the empire's military structure and became a distinguishing element of Mughal rule (Chandra, 2005).Revenue management was overseen by a hierarchy of officials. The Amil were in charge of collecting local revenue, whereas the Qanungo kept land and cultivation records. The Patwari kept village accounting, while higher-level officials reviewed how the system worked. Detailed record-keeping and regular surveys demonstrated the bureaucratic competence of Mughal administration (Habib 1999).

Despite its administrative gains, the revenue system placed a significant strain on growers. Excessive demands from jagirdars, variations in agricultural productivity, and local corruption all contributed to peasant suffering and rural unrest. Nonetheless, the Mughal land income system remained one of the most organized fiscal organizations of the early modern era, playing a critical role in the empire's political and economic survival.

6.5 Condition of peasants, militia, artisans and slaves

Mughal India's social and economic structure was supported by the labor and activities of many occupational groups, among which peasants, military people, artisans, and slaves played important roles. These organizations played critical roles in agricultural production, military administration, craft manufacture, and domestic service. The Mughal Empire's agrarian economy, state policies, market pressures, and social hierarchies all had an impact on their conditions. Understanding their status sheds light on the functioning of Mughal society and economics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Habib, 1999).

Peasants made up the vast bulk of the population and were the backbone of the Mughal economy. They grew food grains such as wheat, rice, barley, and millets, as well as commercial crops including cotton, sugarcane, indigo, tobacco, and opium. The empire's success was strongly reliant on its productivity because land revenue was the primary source of state income. Although peasants generally had customary rights to the land they worked, they were obliged to pay a significant portion of their harvest as revenue. Under the Mughal tax system, the state frequently claimed roughly one-third of agricultural output, while actual demands varied by location and period (Chandra, 2005). The plight of peasants was not consistent across the empire. Wealthier farmers, known as khud kasht, tended their own lands and frequently owned ploughs, animals, and agricultural equipment. Poorer peasants and landless laborers, known as muzariyan, worked in harsher conditions and were more vulnerable to debt. Droughts, famines, crop failures, and high revenue demands all have the potential to have a substantial impact on rural communities. Nonetheless, the extension of cultivation, the

emergence of market-oriented agriculture, and the rising demand for cash crops presented prospects for economic advancement in some areas (Habib 1999).

The militia or military establishment held a privileged place in Mughal culture. The Mughal Empire had a strong and complex military structure that was critical to territorial growth, political stability, and imperial authority. The military was organized under Akbar's Mansabdari system, which allocated officers ranks and responsibilities based on their status and military requirements. Mansabdars commanded cavalry contingents and received revenue assignments (jagirs) in exchange for their services (Richards, 1993). Military members had status, a steady paycheck, and prospects for social advancement. The cavalry was the most significant branch of the Mughal army and got special attention from the state. Soldiers were recruited from a variety of ethnic and regional groups, including Central Asians, Afghans, Rajputs, and Indians. During the later Mughal period, the military system experienced issues such as irregular salary payment, competition among nobility, and increased demand on income resources. Despite these limitations, the militia remained an important part of imperial administration and government (Chandra, 2005). Artisans were another important component of Mughal civilization and contributed significantly to economic development. The Mughal period saw a significant increase in handicraft production and manufacture.

Many artisans worked freely in villages and towns, while others were engaged in royal workshops called karkhanas. These workshops manufactured luxury products, weapons, furniture, textiles, and ornamental objects for the imperial court and aristocracy. Skilled artisans frequently had economic security as a result of royal patronage and market demand. Nonetheless, their livelihoods were still dependent on market swings, merchant networks, and the purchasing power of urban residents. The rise of local and international trade facilitated the growth of artisanal manufacturing and specialization (Habib, 1999). Slavery occurred in Mughal India, but it was not the major means of economic output. Slaves were obtained by conflict, purchase, debt, tribute, or inheritance and worked in domestic, military, agricultural, and administrative settings. The institution of slavery in Mughal India differed from plantation slavery found elsewhere because slaves were integrated into households and political structures rather than concentrated in large-scale productive enterprises (Eraly, 2007).

The condition of slaves varied considerably depending on their role and status. Domestic slaves often served elite households and royal establishments, while others were employed as guards, attendants, or labourers. Some slaves acquired education, wealth, and influence through their association with powerful patrons. In certain cases, talented individuals rose to positions of responsibility and authority. However, the institution remained characterized by legal dependence and limited personal freedom, reflecting broader social inequalities within Mughal society (Richards, 1993). Peasants, militia, artisans, and slaves laid the social and economic underpinnings of Mughal India. Peasants sustained agricultural productivity and provided revenue; military men maintained imperial authority; artisans contributed to commercial and industrial expansion; and slaves performed a variety of household and administrative roles. These groups worked together to keep one of the most powerful and rich empires in early modern South Asia running smoothly.

6.6 Peasant uprisings in Mughal India

Peasant uprisings were a significant facet of Mughal India's socioeconomic and political history, especially in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Despite the Mughal Empire's complex administrative system and robust agrarian economy, disputes regularly arose between the state, local intermediaries, and cultivators. These conflicts emerged as a result of rising revenue demands, exploitation by revenue officials, social discrimination, religious tensions, and the decline of imperial power. Peasant resistance was thus more than just a reaction to economic suffering; it frequently reflected larger fights over local autonomy, community identity, and political authority (Habib, 1999).

The Mughal state relied significantly on land revenue, which provided the majority of imperial income. As the empire grew, the requirement to maintain a massive military and administrative system put a strain on agricultural resources. Revenue demands were frequently high, and in many locations, jagirdars and local authorities worked hard to boost collections in order to earn more money from their duties. Excessive taxation, unfair assessments, and aggressive collection methods frequently burdened cultivators. These pressures became especially acute at times of agricultural distress due to droughts, famines, or crop failures, contributing to rural unrest (Richards, 1993).

The Jat rebellion in the Agra-Mathura region was a major peasant movement during the Mughal Empire. The Jats were mostly agricultural communities, cultivating the fertile areas surrounding the Yamuna River. During Aurangzeb's reign, increased income demands and administrative intervention caused considerable resentment among the Jat peasants. In 1669, the Jats rose up against Mughal rule, led by Gokula. Although the insurrection was initially put down, resistance persisted under subsequent commanders such as Rajaram and Churaman. Over time, the movement grew into a regional political power, eventually helping to build the Bharatpur State in the eighteenth century (Chandra, 2005).

Another prominent occurrence was the Satnami uprising in 1672, which took place in what is now Haryana. The Satnamis were a religious society made up primarily of peasants, artisans, and small cultivators. The insurrection began as a fight between a Mughal soldier and a Satnami peasant, but it quickly grew into a larger threat to imperial authority. The Satnamis organized themselves militarily and had some initial success against Mughal soldiers. However, the revolt was eventually put down by Aurangzeb's troops. Historians see this movement as an expression of both socioeconomic complaints and communal resistance to local tyranny (Richards 1993). During the later Mughal period, the Sikh movement in Punjab expanded significantly in terms of agriculture. Originally a religious society founded by Guru Nanak, the Sikhs evolved into a political and military force under subsequent Gurus. Mughal policies under Aurangzeb, combined with disputes between local officials and Sikh populations, exacerbated tensions. Many peasants joined the struggle under Guru Gobind Singh's leadership, followed by Banda Singh Bahadur. Banda Singh's initiatives directly challenged Mughal rule and undermined the influence of local landlords and revenue

collectors. His policies, which apparently reallocated land to cultivators in specific places, received widespread support from rural residents (Grewal, 1998).

The Maratha movement in western India had strong agrarian foundations. Although it eventually became a regional state-building operation, many of its followers were peasants and local warriors. Shivaji's movement grew out of rural discontent with both Mughal and Deccan Sultanate authority. The Maratha threat greatly reduced Mughal power in the Deccan, demonstrating the expanding limits of imperial authority in the countryside (Chandra, 2005). Several factors contributed to the rise of peasant uprisings in the late Mughal Empire. The rise of the Jagirdari system resulted in fierce competition among revenue assignees, who frequently took excessive taxes from growers. Simultaneously, the loss of central authority weakened the state's ability to regulate local officials and protect peasant interests. Economic disparities developed as powerful zamindars, jagirdars, and revenue collectors amassed wealth while poor peasants faced increasing difficulties. In certain situations, religious, ethnic, or regional identities bolstered peasant resistance, allowing small communities to organize collective action against the state (Habib, 1999). The significance of these uprisings goes beyond their immediate military outcomes. They reflect the Mughal state's intricate interaction with agrarian society, as well as the limits of imperial rule over local populations. Many rebellions paired economic complaints with a desire for political autonomy and social justice. Furthermore, the continuation of rural resistance contributed to the gradual erosion of Mughal authority in the eighteenth century, allowing regional authorities to arise across India (Richard, 1993).

Peasant uprisings in Mughal India were significant expressions of agrarian dissatisfaction and shifting political circumstances. Movements such as the Jat, Satnami, Sikh, and Maratha rebellions reflected growing tensions within the Mughal agrarian system and highlighted the empire's difficulties in keeping control over its large territory. These uprisings played a significant role in reshaping the political landscape of early modern India and contributed to the eventual decline of Mughal power.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who led the first major Jat uprising against the Mughals in 1669?
2. Who introduced the Mansabdari system in Mughal India?
3. What were the royal workshops of the Mughal Empire known as?
4. Who prepared the Dahsala revenue settlement under Akbar?

6.7 Let us sum up

After going through this unit, you have learnt that:

- Agriculture was the foundation of the Mughal economy, and peasants formed the largest section of the population. They cultivated food crops and cash crops such as cotton, indigo, sugarcane, and tobacco, which supported both domestic consumption and commercial trade.

- The Mughal land revenue system was highly organized, particularly under Akbar's Zabt and Dahsala systems. Land revenue constituted the principal source of imperial income and financed the administration, military, and public works of the empire.
- Trade flourished under Mughal rule due to political stability and extensive commercial networks. Major cities such as Agra, Delhi, Lahore, Surat, Ahmedabad, Patna, and Dhaka emerged as important centres of internal and international trade, linking India with Asia, Africa, and Europe.
- Artisans, craftsmen, military personnel, and slaves played crucial roles in the Mughal economy and society. Artisans produced textiles, metal goods, jewellery, and luxury items; the militia maintained imperial authority through the Mansabdari system; and slaves served in domestic, administrative, and military capacities.
- Growing agrarian pressures and administrative challenges led to peasant uprisings during the later Mughal period. Movements such as the Jat, Satnami, Sikh, and Maratha rebellions reflected rural discontent, weakened Mughal authority, and contributed to the gradual decline of the empire.

6.8 Further Reading

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6.9 Answers to check your progress

Answer 1: Gokula

Answer 2: Akbar

Answer 3: Karkhanas

Answer 4: Raja Todar Mal

6.10 Model questions

Very short questions

1. What was the name of the wealthy self-cultivating peasant in Mughal India?
2. What were revenue assignments granted to Mughal mansabdars called?
3. Which rebellion was launched by a religious community of peasants and artisans in 1672?
4. Which Mughal emperor suppressed the Satnami rebellion of 1672?

Short questions

1. Explain the significance of the Mansabdari system in Mughal administration.
2. Discuss the role of artisans in the Mughal economy.
3. Discuss the condition of peasants under Mughal rule.
4. Explain the relationship between jagirs and revenue administration.

Long questions

1. Examine the agrarian structure of Mughal India and evaluate its impact on the economy.
2. Discuss the major features of Mughal trade and commercial networks during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
3. Analyze the socio-economic position of peasants, artisans, militia, and slaves in Mughal India.
4. Critically evaluate the Mughal land revenue system with special reference to the Zabt and Dahsala systems.
5. Assess the causes and significance of peasant uprisings in the later Mughal period.

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