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# UNIT 17 AGRARIAN STRUCTURE: RELATIONS

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## 17.1 INTRODUCTION

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Rural society was a conglomeration of those who have been generally termed the 'dominant sections' and the vast majority who tilled the land and sweated it out. We can begin our discussion by probing into the position of the superiors and the nature of power that they enjoyed. According to Irfan Habib the highly centralized Mughal state extracted a large proportion of peasants surplus produce through an elaborate system of revenue taxation. The bulk of the revenue resources were distributed among the nobles or *mansabdar* through transferable *jagirs*. The purpose was to secure the military might of the empire and the loyalty of its political agents. A subordinate share of the surplus produce went to the *zamindars* whose participation in the system was essential to facilitate the process of revenue collection from the peasants. However, the *Zamindars* possessed permanent superior rights over the produce of land while *jagirdars* enjoyed no such permanent rights.

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## 17.2 AGRARIAN CLASS STRUCTURE: THE ZAMINDARS

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We can begin with a brief discussion of the institutional means of access to rural resources through the system of rights to surplus produce. The image of the Mughal empire portrayed by Irfan Habib is that of a highly centralized state that extracted a large proportion of the peasant's surplus through an elaborate system of revenue taxation. The redistribution of these resources came to be the principal mode of securing the military might of the empire and the loyalty of its political agents. The bulk of the resources of the empire were distributed among the nobles or *mansabdars* through transferable *jagirs*. A subordinate share of the revenue accrued to the hereditary holders of superior rights in land, collectively termed the *zamindars*, whose participation in the system was essential not only on political consideration but also to facilitate the process of revenue collection from the peasantry.

*Zamindars* in Mughal India were socially a heterogeneous group. Their position, rights as well as obligations varied a great deal. For purpose of analysis Nurul Hasan has classified the *zamindars* into three categories – autonomous chieftains, intermediaries and primary *zamindars*. According to Professor Hasan these categories are hierarchical but not mutually exclusive. Also there was a latent struggle for land, power and authority among them. Thus attempt of bigger Rajas to bring intermediary *zamindars* under their control was a continuous feature. The *zamindars* as a class were also divided on caste/clan/tribe lines. The Mughals tried to utilize conflicts between various sections of the *zamindars* for their own purpose both in terms of hierarchy and caste composition. The heterogeneity of the *zamindar* class needs to be emphasized in order to understand their multiform behaviour.

Despite this inherent weakness the *zamindars* as a class constituted a formidable element in medieval Indian society and polity. They were in control of tremendous territorial and revenue resources. According to *Babar Nama* 1/6th of the revenue of Hindustan came from the territory of the *zamindars*. From the point of view of military resources they were a power to be reckoned with. The total military strength of the *zamindars* according to Abul Fazl (c. 1595) stood at 4.4 millions. Moreover the *zamindars* were strongly entrenched into the rural society and dominated it by virtue of caste links and customary ties. They were the most important link to gain access to local resources. The Mughals were faced with the problem as to how to curb the power and authority of the *zamindars* in the interest of a centralised state, and how to draw them into the task of administration for the sake of stability. The working of the Mughal revenue system depended upon the ability of the Mughal govt. to overawe the *zamindars* with their superior military might. At the same time the Mughals tried to resolve the basic contradiction between the two which centered around the question of distribution and redistribution of revenue resources. The *zamindars* were integrated into the Mughal administrative apparatus to the extent that they had become partners, albeit unequal partners of the Mughal ruling class in its exploitation of the peasantry. The Mughals endeavoured to convince the *zamindars* that it was more profitable for them to look for the support of the state rather than defying its authority. A small portion of the *mansab* holders such as the Rajput, Baluch and Ghakkar chiefs belonged to the *zamindar* class. They were granted *jagirs*. The Mughals integrated the *zamindars* with the land revenue administration for realizing land revenue from the peasants. At the local level Mughal state also remained largely dependent on the *zamindars* for the implementation of its agrarian policy particularly the expansion and improvement of cultivation. A share in the *jama* or revenue was also allowed to them as compensation for services rendered to the state.

However, the major source of conflict between the *zamindars* and the Mughal state was the size of the former's share in the surplus produce. Irfan Habib has pointed out that the zamindar's share was restricted not only by imperial rules and regulations, customary practices, but really much more by the fact that the high pitch of revenue demand left little with the peasants to be taken by anyone else. Hence clash of interest between the two.

The Mughal policy towards the *zamindars* was contradictory. Abul Fazl (c. 1595) and Mughal chronicles of the 17th century used the word *zamindarana* in the sense of opportunism or disloyalty. From the official point of view the *zamindars* were regarded as main danger to law and order and reluctant to pay land revenue. That the Mughals were not able to overawe the *zamindars* is completely obvious from their categorization of the *zamindars* into *zortalab* and *raiyati*. *Nor did the Mughals succeed in isolating the zamindars from the peasants.* The *zamindars* never gave up the ambition of enlarging their rights. Yet the Mughals depended heavily on the *zamindars* and they themselves strengthened their position in the rural society.

We can infer from the evidence of the Mughal period that the struggle between the imperial administration and the *zamindars*, breaking out frequently into armed conflict, was an important feature of the political situation of the time. Manucci wrote around 1700 that Mughal governors are in a constant state of quarrel with the *zamindars* and that usually there is some rebellion of *zamindars* going on in the Mughal kingdom. It is evident that the Mughals could not finally resolve the basic contradiction that revolved around the appropriation of surplus.

The possession of *zamindari* right not only implied dominant position and higher social status in the rural society but also conferred certain economic advantage which made the *zamindari* right highly valuable. His principal fiscal right was to demand *malikana* from the *raiyat*. In addition the *zamindar* also claimed many customary perquisites on many occasions in rural social i.e. cess at the time of marriage, birth, festival, etc. He had also the right to demand *begar* on the basis of customary practices from peasants, artisans and menials. *The zamindar* was also entitled to pay land revenue at concessional rates on their personal holdings. In *pargana* Merta the *zamindars* possessed nine per cent of the total cultivated land and paid only Rs. 19 as land tax whereas the normal tax burden amounted to Rs. 200. *Zamindars'* land holding was also exempted from the payment of common village expenses and many other taxes. A substantial part of his holding was devoted to the cultivation of cash crops as he was in a position to provide necessary inputs. There is also evidence indicating that a part of his liquid capital was invested in usury. That the *zamindari* right was considered worth possessing is evident from the point that there was an evergrowing tendency on the part of several members of dominant castes to create new *zamindari* rights in *raiyati* villages. There are also instances of establishment of *zamindari* rights through forced sale.

The higher social status of the *zamindar* was manifested in the variety of customary rituals he performed in the social life of the village community. It was his customary privilege to beat the drum at the time of arrival and departure of a marriage procession in the village. The bridegroom was required to call upon the *zamindar* and offer him presents. It was obligatory on part of the *raiyat* to extend invitation to the *zamindar* for a feast at the time of marriage.

Between the *zamindar* and a section among the *raiyat* there existed a relationship of mutual dependence. The economic aspect of this relationship was of primary importance. The *zamindar* who possessed substantial holding was dependent on the peasants for its cultivation.

According to Irfan Habib the unequal conflict with the mighty imperial power compelled the *zamindars* to adopt a conciliatory attitude towards their peasants who would have become their allies. It is quite likely that the peasants and the *zamindars* could have clash of interest over the part of the surplus that latter claimed. It is, however, remarkable that this contradiction did not fully develop in the Mughal empire. On the contrary the official view as reflected in Alamgirnama was that the *zamindars* generally managed to keep the peasants conciliated. Caste and traditional ties were perhaps factors in preserving and strengthening bonds between the two. The role of caste is obvious in the case of the Jats and the Maratha rebellions. One, however, cannot visualize a uniform pattern of relationship. The relationship between the two depended on various factors such as caste composition, customary practices, state of economy, strength of the peasant community and the nature of administrative control.

The question arises that what were the processes whereby the *zamindars* and the peasant came together? The growing pressure of revenue demand not only fanned peasant resistance but also compelled large number of *zamindars* to turn to rebellion since they were not only the collecting authority but also had permanent interest in land which coincided with those of the peasantry. Secondly, the *zamindars* also commanded a traditional loyalty from some of their peasants. Many of the armed retainers of the *zamindars* were peasants. They served the *zamindars* either because of caste affiliations and in return for economic considerations. These peasants could be drawn into adventures that *zamindars* might undertake in pursuit of his own feuds or ambitions. According to Irfan Habib the *zamindars* and the peasants joined each other in rebellion in two situations. Distress owing to growing pressure of land revenue which affected both the peasants and *zamindars* and in the second the struggle was essentially that of *zamindars* in which the peasants were primarily involved owing to customary allegiance. The Jat and Maratha *zamindars* had a definite social base among peasants of their castes. The widespread disturbances in at least two regions – Agra-Eastern Rajasthan and Mughal Deccan were set in the background of a resurgence of *zamindari* power on the one hand and increasing tendency to exploit the peasant on the other.

J.F. Richards has questioned Irfan Habib's formulation that the *zamindar* rose in rebellion as a result of the growing pressure of revenue demand on the rural society. His counter argument is that rising production and monetisation placed the *zamindars* in more advantageous position. The local *zamindars* had slowly gained a military advantage vis-a-vis imperial army. The Mughals did not have the will and resources to disarm aggressive *zamindars*. Instead the long term effect of Mughal agrarian system on the rural society increased the confidence and resources of the *zamindars* which encouraged them to enter into conflict with the other prominent groups.

However, what is indisputable is the fact that the Mughals could not maintain the social balance which was the basis of the so called 'Mughal stability'. The clash of interest between the *zamindars* and the state and between different sections of the *zamindars* could not be resolved. These conflicts according to Nural Hasan led to frequent clashes, disturbed law and order and seriously weakened the administrative and military power of the state. After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 the Mughal administration became too weak to maintain the social equilibrium. The Mughal empire was waning and it was the *zamindars* who were exerting themselves.

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### 17.3 PEASANT STRATIFICATION

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The village population comprised different sections and categories of people, each with different functions and status. The superior section of the village society was

composed of *zamindars*, *muqaddams*, *chaudhari*, *qanungo* (rural aristocracy). They owed their status partly to hereditary superior right in land and partly to their position in the apparatus of revenue administration. The *jagirdari* system did not alter the structure of rural society.

From the economic standpoint, however, the most important section of the village population comprised the cultivators who are collectively referred to as *raiyyat*. The terms *raiyyat* and *asami* are often used in general sense to denote peasants. Other terms such as *khwud-kasht*, *pahi*, *muzara*, *hali* were specific to different sections within the peasantry and hence not interchangeable. They were differentiated from the *kamins* (artisans and menials) and other occupational classes who could also engage in cultivation. Both numerically and because of their role in the village economy and society the agriculturists dominated the village.

**Table 1**  
**Distribution of Artisan and Menial population in Eastern Rajasthan**

Village	Agriculturists	Artisans, menials
Badahera	93	33
Rangpura	56	9
Aranya	32	12
Chadelpur	55	7
Vorkhedi	20	6

The peasant population in many villages was overwhelmingly of the same caste, often of the same lineage group. Even in the 18<sup>th</sup> century a village could easily be identified as a Jat, Ahir, Gujar, Meena or Rajput village. Other villages had a fair mixture of peasant castes, although one or the other caste was still in a dominating position which is evident from the following Table pertaining to eastern Rajasthan:

**Table 2**

Village Caste Households	No. of Peasant Households	Dominant Caste	No. of Other
Chandelpur	45	Jat	33
Aranya	32	Meena	26
Rangpura	56	Jat	51
Kuthi	51	Meena	25
Mojpur	17	Jat	11
			Ahir 6

The peasant proprietors were termed *khwud-kashta* and those cultivators who did not have lands of their own were known as *muzarian*. The *khwud-kashta* formed majority among the peasants. Less numerous than the *khwud-kashta* were *pahis* who were essentially migratory cultivators. They could be either residents of neighbouring villages or those who had deserted their original villages.

Apart from the *khwud-kashta*, *pahi* and *muzarian*, a section of the peasants comprised share croppers and *halis* or *majure* who had overlapping positions and fluctuating rights. The dividing line between the *muzarian* and *halis* was the possession of ploughs and oxen. There are references to peasants who sank to the status of *mujur* or *hali* due to the loss of agricultural assets. The categorization of the rural population was thus based on 1) Caste and occupation, 2) residential

status, and 3) the nature of rights in land. The position of each resident in the social hierarchy of village was mainly determined by these factors. The possibility of transformation from one rank to another within the rural society, must also be taken note of. *Khwud-kashta* could sink to the position of tenant or *pahi*. *Pahi* could rise up the hierarchy and become peasant proprietor. Agricultural labourers improved their position by acquiring ploughs and bullocks.

There was a vast difference in the resource position of individual peasants. This is indicated by references to peasants who cultivated large holdings by hiring in full time agricultural labourers. They also possessed a number of surplus ploughs and bullocks which they rented out to the needy peasants. As for the small peasants, though they might be the owners of their holdings, quite often did not have enough resources and looked to the richer section for the supply of agricultural as well as consumption loans.

In order to illustrate large intra group stratification and disparities in the distribution of land and agricultural implements we may refer to some documents from eastern Rajasthan.

**Table 3**  
**Pattern of Distribution of Size of Holding in Eastern Rajasthan**

<b>Village Saluno</b>		
<b>Total no. of cultivators</b>	<b>No. of cultivators</b>	<b>Size of holdings</b>
20	2	8 <i>bighas</i>
(8 cultivators grew only <i>kharif</i> 12 obtained two harvests)	6	20 to 30 <i>bighas</i>
14 cultivated cash crops	8	50 to 80 <i>bighas</i>
6 only food crops)	4	100 to 200 <i>bighas</i>
<b>Village Sagod</b>		
<b>Total no. of cultivators</b>	<b>No. of cultivators</b>	<b>Size of holdings</b>
19	3	less than 10 <i>bighas</i>
	4	10 to 20 <i>bighas</i>
	13	50 to 80 <i>bighas</i>
	14	100 <i>bighas</i>
<b>Village Board</b>		
<b>Total no. of cultivators</b>	<b>No. of cultivators</b>	<b>Size of holdings</b>
22	7	less than 10 <i>bighas</i>
	11	20 to 50 <i>bighas</i>
	6	more than 100 <i>bighas</i>
<b>Village Khairabad</b>		
<b>Total no. of cultivators</b>	<b>No. of cultivators</b>	<b>Size of holdings</b>
33	14	less than 10 <i>bighas</i>
	15	30 to 80 <i>bighas</i>
	5	more than 100 <i>bighas</i>
<b>Village Vaqod</b>		
<b>Total no. of cultivators</b>	<b>No. of cultivators</b>	<b>Size of holdings</b>
42	29 landowners	13 landless

**Pattern of Distribution of Ploughs**

In village Jholpa, in eastern Rajasthan 244 ploughs distributed over 83 cultivators average 3 per cultivator. However, the picture undergoes a change if we consider individual cases:

13	less than 1 plough	5	more than 5 ploughs
14	1 to 2 ploughs	2	33 ploughs each
50	3 to 5 ploughs		

Concentration of numerous ploughs in the hands of a few members of the village community is also testified to by a document pertaining to village Dhulia, in eastern Rajasthan. Out of 203 ploughs 102 were owned by 2 Rajput cultivators.

In village Pasrao, in eastern Rajasthan there were 74 ploughs out of which 18 were held by the village headman, 25 by a Rajput and 9 by a Mahajan. Similarly in village Ratwara out of 39 ploughs available 19 were possessed by two Rajputs.

The question arises as to what extent the caste status corresponded to the economic status of cultivators. One criterion to determine the nature of economic differentiation is the possession of ploughs and bullocks. The significance of this exercise lies in the attempt to assess whether the concession granted to the upper castes was reflected systematically in the differential ownership of key productive resources. Disparity in the ownership of these assets in terms of caste is apparent but it is not acute. We may say that caste status cannot be seen as an automatic proxy for economic status but the majority of the prosperous peasants belonged to the upper castes.

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## 17.4 THE NOTION OF POWER

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We can look into the factors which created within the peasantry socio-economic disparity and situations of power for some and powerlessness for others.

### 17.4.1 Sources of Power Within the Peasant World

The connection between caste and power is slightly complicated. The complication arises because one has to consider both ritual ranking as well as the power that accrued to them or was appropriated by them in the economic and political sense because of their favourable position in that hierarchy. There was the division of peasants into the categories of *khwud kasht*, *muzarian*, *pahi*, *hali* and menials. The question is whether or not the caste composition of each of these categories broadly corresponded to their status. Caste was also the basis of the divisions of agrarian class 'into caste peasantry on the one hand and the menials (agricultural labourers) on the other. However, the situations cannot be understood merely in terms of the powerful high caste vs. the powerless low caste notion. Without undermining the inequalities created by the caste system, we may argue that caste did not create conditions of complete and total power for some and utter powerlessness for others.

Caste was an entitlement to material well being as there was considerable difference in the economic positions of various castes. Upper castes were also assessed at concessional rates. Caste ties prompted peasants to collective action.

### 17.4.2 Land and Resources

From the unequal access to land and resources arose several imbalances and dependencies in rural society. The possession of resources needed to cultivate land

was an important source of power. It instantly increased the possessors reckoning in rural society as well as in the eyes of the state. Our documents, whenever they list the *asamis* of particular village or those who migrated from elsewhere to bring land under cultivation, mention the numbers of plough and oxen held by them. We know of poor peasants who depended on those who possessed surplus implements. Possession of resources was so valued that it also became an entitlement to more favourable treatment in the allocation of land and higher status.

Lack of resources resulted in various forms of agrarian dependence. Agricultural labourers represented the most extreme form of agrarian dependence. Widespread indebtedness also reduced the autonomy of the peasants in cropping decisions. Indirect interventions in the labour process of the peasant proprietor or *khwud kasht* could have been exercised through the manipulation of the terms of debt repayment. In one instance we find the money lender demanding repayment of grain loan in the form of raw cotton after the harvest.

### 17.4.3 Money

Those who possessed money wielded considerable power. It is best evident from the position and status of money lenders in rural society. It was a power that arose out of the strength of their purse. Almost all sections of the rural society depended on money lender in one way or the other. It was on the strength of their money that the money lenders acquired land, hereditary offices and tracts in *ijara*. Infact they were emerging as strong competitors to traditional leadership of the village. Poorer section of the village society was critically dependent on credit offered by money lenders. Indebtedness intensified exploitation even then we come across instances of peasants siding with moneylenders against *zamindars*, etc. It was in the large scale purchase of offices that the importance of money in power play is best exemplified. Money became an alternative source of gaining access to agrarian resources.

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## 17.5 CATEGORIES OF PEASANTS

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Within the village peasants themselves were stratified into number of categories on the basis of the nature of holdings.

### 17.5.1 *Khwud-Kashta*

The term *khwud-kashta* implied hereditary ownership of land and the right to sell or mortgage it. The essential feature of this tenure was the possession and use of personal ploughs for tilling the land holding owned by the family. *khwud-kashta* had the right to get back his holding even after the lapse of 10-15 years provided he cleared revenue dues. The upper caste and richer *khwud-kashta* relied on full or part time labour for cultivating their holdings as their women did not work in the fields and the Brahmans and Rajputs did not plough land themselves. In their case the use of hired labour irrespective of the size of land holding was indispensable. The number of ploughs owned by a *khwud-kashta* was a measure of his status. A section of the *raiyat* who did not own ploughs had to lean heavily on those *khwud-kashta* who possessed surplus ploughs.

The richer section of the *khwud-kashta* and superior caste peasants enjoyed tax concessions and leading positions in the rural society. The *khwud-kashta* status also incorporated complete or partial exemption from payment of common village expenses. In short, the *khwud-kasht* were relatively well off peasants, owners of the best land,

possessors of numerous ploughs and bullocks and in addition enjoying a favourable tax rating. It was also noted by the Mughal administration that the richer section of the *khwud-kashta* at times manipulated to shift their burden on to the common peasants. They also tried to repress the small peasantry by converting the raiyati holding into their *khwud-kashta*. Officially, the conversion of raiyat kashta land into *khwud-kashta* was prohibited. Despite official restriction this trend asserted itself gradually. The richer section who had resources at their disposal, were involved in the purchase and mortgage of land holding belonging to the resources of the poor peasants which led to the development of share cropping and tenant farming.

The *khwud-kashta* were expected to implement the agrarian policy of the state because of their ability to invest capital need for expansion and improvement of agriculture. It was noted by the administration that a section of the *khwud-kashta* could maintain cultivation even in lean years while majority of the small peasants would give up cultivation. It was an awareness of this situation that enabled the well off *khwud-kashta* to consolidate their position vis-a-vis the state and weaker section of the village community.

### 17.5.2 The *Pai Kasht*

The *pai* or the *pahis* were those who came from villages other than the village where they resided. The position and the nature of their land rights varied depending on their caste, duration of stay, their agricultural capital, availability of land and the customary practices of the area. They were mostly inferiors in caste and status. Occassionally, those from the upper castes also became *pahis*. Though by and large poor no summary conclusions about their economic conditions are possible. Those with ploughs and bullocks were better off and they were more likely to be singled out by the state for concessions. Through the offer of payment of land revenue at concessional rate, by extending help in the construction of hutment, through preferential treatment in the allotment of cultivable waste, the *pahi*'s resources and labour potentials were put to use in the interest of the state.

There were two categories of the *pahis* the first may be termed non-resident cultivators. They usually came from neighbouring villages and cultivated land without becoming the resident of the village, tilled the land as tenants and had no right to sell or mortgage it. The *pahis* were induced to develop newly colonized and depopulated villages and they were charged land revenue at a concessional rate. This sometimes made the *pahis* even better off than the resident cultivators, but being outsider, they did not have social status.

The second category of the *pahis* was essentially migratory cultivators who came from far off villages and *parganas*. The extent of the mobility of such peasants is evident from the fact that they came from far off regions. In 1665 four hundred *pahis* migrated from the Deccan and settled down in 36 villages of *pargana* Malrana in Rajasthan. The *pahis* brought 416 ploughs along with them. The migrant *pahis* were offered attractive terms on two consideration: 1) they had to leave their ancestral villages, and 2) because of their agricultural capital. They were permitted to construct their hutment in the village by undergoing the custom of *chhaparbandi* and acquire the resident status. In due course of time they could transform themselves into *Khwud-kashta*.

The reasons for the migration of the *pahis* are sometimes mentioned in the document. Famines, wars, oppression, by local authorities, excessive taxation, demand for revenue arrears, indebtedness, non availability of credit, search for better terms and

conditions are all cited as reasons for migration. According to a late 17<sup>th</sup> century document from eastern Rajasthan *patels* and raiyats of tappa Phagi migrated to Aurangabad due to famine. According to the census of 78 villages of *pargana* Malarna about 10% were migrants, 7% from the neighbouring *parganas* and 3% arrived from Deccan and Malwa. About 4% of the cultivators had also emigrated from the *pargana*. The recognition by the state of the ability of the peasants to migrate in search of better conditions and thereby affect the states' revenue constituted a vital element of the state agrarian policy. There was a section among the peasants prepared to migrate if better terms were available elsewhere.

It is also evident from our documents that the *pahis* were less numerous than the *khwud kashta*. According to a *yaddashti* document pertaining to *pargana* Pinayan the total number of cultivators in 20 villages was 391, of which only 76 were *pahis*. There were no *pahis* in 5 villages and in the remaining 15 their number varied from 1 to 22. They formed 19% of the total number of cultivators in that *pargana*.

### 17.5.3 The Muzarians

The *muzarian* were, as a category of cultivators less privileged than the *khwud kashta* and were occasionally dependent on the village money lender, *zamindar* and headman for bullocks, ploughs and seeds, etc. The *muzarian* belonged to two distinct categories, namely state tenants and tenants of superior section.

State tenants were those who cultivated surplus land and land abandoned by some *khwud kashta* in the village under specific terms and conditions mentioned in the patta issued by the state revenue officials. There used to be competition to attract tenants on the part of the state officials, *madad-i maash*, and *inam* holders.

The position, rights and economic conditions of the state tenants rested on such concrete conditions as the availability of cultivable waste and the nature of implements owned. Tenants who had implements of their own were preferred by the state. They could bargain with the officials for securing pattas on favourable terms. The terms of tenancy varied. Some of them worked as short term contractors, cultivating a particular land holding for a single harvest or for a period of one year, but the contract was renewable. According to some documents land revenue demand on the state tenants was 40% of the produce on the cultivation of *banjar* and 50% where the land cultivated was *polaj*. In course of time a section of state tenants, originally assigned to cultivable waste, became settled and acquired hereditary occupancy rights over land.

The second category of the tenants tilled the personal lands of the superior sections (*zamindars*, *muqaddams*, holders of *inam*, *madad-i maash* grants) and other prosperous peasants who depended upon tenant cultivators partly owing to the social factor and partly due to the pattern of land holding. A large proportion of land was held by the dominant and richer section which was partly let out to the tenants. Whereas the state tenants paid only land revenue to the state these tenants had to pay in addition rent or *malikana* to the owner which came to about 15% of the produce. If we add it to the 40 to 50% taken away as state revenue, the share demanded from the tenants can be computed to 55 to 65% of the produce. The proportion could go even higher if the tenant did not have required agricultural inputs and borrowed them from the owner. Many of these tenants were in debt to the owner. The existence of such tenants in spite of the great *abundance* of cultivable land can be explained in terms of their inability to invest in their holdings.

### 17.5.4 Share Croppers

Share cropping is also a form of dependence. It cannot be equated either with untouchability or landlessness. It arose out of poor peasants inability to get enough from his own holding or his poor resource position. *Sanjha* entailed a specific production relationship between investment and labour and between investment and redistribution. Under this arrangement one group provided necessary investment or productive resources and labour power was provided by another group. Under the *sanjha* tenure the resource poor peasants cultivated land conjointly with the *zamindars* and other prosperous cultivators who resorted to this arrangement because of their substantial land holdings for which they could not provide required labour and personal supervision. Small peasants supplemented their income by working on *sanjha* holding. In some cases, the land was owned by the *zamindar* but inputs or cost of production was shared by the *sanjhadars*. But mostly, it was the proprietor who bare the cost of production. A special feature of the *sanjha* was the differential revenue assessment for the two parties of *sanjha*: the *zamindars* were assessed at concessional rates and the peasants were required to pay normal rates. Moreover, the *sajha* holding was not liable to exemption from *malba dues*.

### 17.5.5 Agricultural Labourers

The caste factor necessitated a certain supply of hired labour. A large reserve for such labour was supplied by the menial castes. Apart from the landless menials a section of the small peasants was also available to render part time agricultural labour. There are numerous references to full time and part time agricultural labourers (*halis, majure*) who were employed by different sections of the rural society. The *halis* are categorized as *Brahman ka hali, Rajput ka hali, zamindar ka hali* and *gaon ka hali* signifying agricultural labourers under the employment of the upper caste cultivators, superior sections such as the *zaminder*, village headman and those who rendered labour within the frame work of the village community. Thus in one village in eastern Rajasthan out of 28 *halis* ten were hired by the richer section and the rest served the village community. Some of the *halis* belonged to the agriculturist castes. Thus in a village of *pargana* Barsana out of 40 *halis* 5 belonged to the middle caste and the rest were artisans and menials who included Khati, Lohar, Nai, Kumhar, Teli, Mahar (water carrier) and Balahi (tanner). Female *halis* were also employed. Thus in a village of *pargana* Barod out of 8 *halis* 5 were male and 3 were female *halis* who belonged to Jat and Ahir castes. In the majority of cases, full time *halis* were employed for a period of 3 to 4 months and received monthly wage. Thus in village Umaheri out of 5 *halis* 4 were paid monthly wages at the rate of Rs.2 and the 5<sup>th</sup> designated as Chamar received Rs.1.50 per month. Female *halis* were paid lower wages as compared to their male counterparts. In village Bhawro two elderly Ahir female *halis* were paid 1.25 per month and one young Jat female *hali* was paid Rs.2 per month. The *halis* were also given a small fraction of food crop produce. *Gaon ka hali* or those employed by the village community rendered agricultural labour at certain periods of peak agricultural activities such as sowing, harvesting, weeding, etc. They were paid through a share of the produce. Their share in the produce varied from 0.50 to 1% of the gross produce. They were also allotted small plots of land in lieu of services rendered to the community.

### 17.5.6 The Kamins

The *kamins* formed the lowest rung in the social hierarchy of the village. They are also referred to as paoni and *begaria*. They served to cater to the village community

requirements for agricultural implements as well as labour. The low castes such as Chamar, Balahi, Thori, etc. worked as the village menials and also supplied agricultural labour to the village community especially in the busy season.

It is not entirely clear as to what was the status of cultivators belonging to the professional and service castes i.e. *kamins*. Irfan Habib is of the opinion that the hereditary division of labour imposed by the caste system prohibited the low castes from acquiring the status of peasants thereby creating a 'fixed reserved labour force for agricultural production.' But there is ample evidence to show that *kamins* could become full time agriculturists. We can divide the *kamins* into two categories 1) who performed services to the village community and also rendered begar to the superior sections on customarily fixed share of the grain heap before the payment of revenue. Second category of the *kamins* were agriculturist, paying land revenue to the state. They were exempted from begar and payment of taxes on their caste related professions. Khati, Teli, Kumhar, Kalal and service castes such as Chamar, Balahi and Nai are referred to as *asami* land or tax payers. In some villages they constituted 10 to 17% of the recorded *asamis*. Our evidence indicates that the number of cultivating *kamins* was significant and widespread.

Despite official restrictions on the expansion of khud kasht holding at the cost of *raiyat* land, this trend asserted itself gradually. The resource rich *khwud kashta* were involved in the mortgage of lands of the *raiyat* on a large scale. The best agricultural land thus tended to pass into the hands of this moneyed class. This caused acute tension between the privileged and under privileged categories of cultivators in their joint petitions the unprivileged demanded that these be limited to their actual land holdings and should not be extended to land acquired from the unprivileged i.e. exemption from *malba*.

This brought about a new relationship into the village society, namely between the richer and poorer section of the peasants who were reduced to the status of tenants and dependent peasants. The extension of the *khwud kashta* holdings had several implications for the function of the village community. The well to do *khwud kashta* who were able to consolidate large holdings, with consequent demand for increased labour supply, used their status and capital to keep the *raiyat* poor and dependent. When a small peasant in adverse circumstances had to barrow money or grain for subsistence, the rich *khwud kashta* lent money on the mortgage of land. In one instance they mortgaged 175 fields out of 350 belonging to the *raiyat* at the time of famine and scarcity. Often the richer *khwud kashta* let out the agricultural land they had acquired to the erstwhile peasant proprietor on condition of paying rent. Many *khwud kashta* thus transformed themselves almost completely into rentiers.

The richer section could maintain cultivation even in lean years while majority of small peasants were hard pressed to cultivate even small holdings. It was an awareness of their situation that enabled the privileged and richer section to consolidate their position in the village community vis-a-vis the state. The administration could not have been wholly insensitive to these realities. In order to protect the interest of the ruling class the state authority maintained social and economic disparity one reinforcing the other.

The state had to maintain the richer groups within rural society as some kind of insurance for continuing cultivation in lean years. The state also realized that it was the rich groups which could expand cultivation and engage in cultivation of superior crops.

The net result was growing inequality resulting in turn to the concentration of land at the higher end and increase in the number of dependent peasants on the other. This fact is vividly brought into focus by the petition filed by the *raiyat* of village Phagi. They complained that earlier they owned 700 ploughs and now they own just 28 ploughs. Many documents testify to the deteriorating condition of the *raiyati*. In village Pahari the number of ploughs belonging to the *raiyat* fell from 300 to 50. Their growing pauperization was accompanied by an ever increasing burden of debts which ultimately deprived many peasants of their fields and wells. The economic disparity in the village community grew and the accumulation of capital enabled the richer section to exploit the poor strata of the peasantry more intensively. The kind of equilibrium and the relationship of interdependence created by land *abundance* situation collapsed due to the working of economic forces. The result was that the number of tenants and dependent peasants increased without any corresponding increase in pressure on land and the power of the richer section grew further. With the pauperization of a large section of the peasantry and concentration of wealth in a small section, the rural society in the 18th century thus became more unequal and segmented than before.

In view of the various forms of dependence and interdependence that existed in the rural society it would be conceptually more accurate to view the individual cultivating family unit as part of a complex production system. This was particularly so because of the fact that control over local capital was restricted into the hands of rural elites and moneylenders.

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## 17.6 CREDIT RELATIONSHIPS AND THE MONEY LENDERS

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Peasants' needs and demand for loan can be attributed to their 1) revenue obligations 2) subsistence and seed loans 3) to build up agricultural assets and 4) to meet social obligations. Irfan Habib on the basis of the 18<sup>th</sup> century evidence from Bengal states that the peasant took loan mostly to pay land revenue. In Rajasthan loans were obtained to buy seeds, to dig wells, and for personal consumption, etc. There is a clear indication of the important role of credit in agricultural production.

The main sources of credit during the medieval period were *bohras*, *mahajans*, *sahukars* and the State. These were not two competing alternatives but complimentary to each other. Loans to the individual were largely provided by the *bohras* and the loans on large scale were generally collectively made to the *raiyat* by the state. The loans were given for the development and agrarian restoration, colonization, etc. and when *bohra* was not available or he was reluctant to offer money on credit to the needy peasants.

Irfan Habib believes that the growth of money lending was almost an inevitable accompaniment of demand for land revenue in cash. It did not really generate any agricultural capital, but merely marked a parasitical growth on agriculture. However, our evidence from Rajasthani documents indicates that credit from private money lender was intrinsic to the system of agricultural production and the money lender provided useful service to the peasant community, enabling them to maintain cultivation 20 cultivators and survive in lean years during the *rabi* harvest, to dig up wells with the help of money lender. The state too recognized the important role that they played in the rural economy in the context of the dominance of 'subsistence sector' and in areas where production was uncertain due to geographical factors.

Money lending in the rural areas was not restricted to the Bania caste, Brahmans *Sanyasis*, *chaudhuri qanungo*, *zamindars* and rich cultivators also worked as money lenders. Some *mahajans* combined it with trade and agriculture. Rural magnates who combined these activities and in some cases also held administrative office existed in the 17th-18th centuries. In conflicts regarding mortgage of land it was this category of rural magnets that were involved. In addition to lending money rural rich also hired out wells and other assets. Money lending was widespread in the rural society, as instances of raiyat of *parganas* in eastern Rajasthan falling under debt are numerous. In Rajasthan *tagai (taqavi)* was not interest free. Nine per cent interest was charged on loans both in cash and kind.

The rate of interest in eastern Rajasthan ranged from 9 to 25%; in Marwar region it was 10 to 36%, while in Maharashtra it ranged from 37.5 to 60%. The rate of interest was higher on unsecured loans and lower rate was charged where security was offered. State helped in securing repayment of loans provided it were not more than 10 years old. No help was extended where the state realized that recovery would adversely affect peasant production.

State also imposed restriction on the operations of the *bohras*. These were aimed at restricting the degree of exploitation as well as to ensure uninterrupted cultivation. Peasant's response to excessive demand of the *bohras* generally resulted in the desertion of the village. In order to prevent desertion of villages that the state issued instructions to that local official that 1) *bohra* should not harass the *raiyyat* for the payment of old loans; and 2) repayment should be made in accordance with the harvest output. General principal in regard to all loans was 1) repayment of fresh loans soon after the harvest 2) recovery of old loans if current harvest was extremely good; and 3) installments should be fixed according to the paying capacity. The state also fixed restrictions to the maximum limit for compound interest. The total debt should not exceed twice the principal amount. In situation of acute distress of the *raiyyat* a moratorium on all repayments of loans was imposed for the time being.

These restrictions, however, must not be taken to imply an antagonistic relationship between the state and the *bohra*. The *bohra* served a large number of small borrowers and the state fully realized the important role played by them in the rural production system and marketing thereby ensuring the flow of revenue to the state. The rationale for restriction lies in the objective of the state to subordinate the claims of the *bohra* to its own revenue demand. An integral part of the policy to regulate and limit *bohra* exaction was the provision to extent state *taqavi* when the *bohra* refused to offer loan. *Bohras* were also encouraged to offer loans supported by official assurances for recovery. These assurances were crucial in allaying the private *bohra*'s fear of default in condition of uncertain production or desertion by the peasantry.

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## 17.7 THE VILLAGE AND THE VILLAGE COMMUNITY

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The village was both a primary territorial locus and a revenue unit. The village was viewed as a discrete entity not only in terms of its physical space but also in the sense of a social collective represented by the village community with the *muqaddam* as its chief spokesman. This is most clearly brought out in representations made to the higher authorities by the *muqaddam* pleading on behalf of the entire village on a variety of issues common to the whole cultivating community.

In the official writings of the early British administrators on the Indian rural society the village communities are identified on the social foundation of the peasant economy in India. The village community is characterised as a closed corporate foundation depending on small scale production to meet its own requirements. According to the British official writings India was a land of little village republics and the people of India lined under this simple form of municipal government or small republics.

Sir Charls Matcalfe describes the character of the village community as little republics almost independent of any foreign relations and unchanging in character. He also believed in the interdependent community character of the various classes of inhabitants living in the village. James Mill confirmed his belief in the village community as a corporation. Sir Henery Maine found the Indian Communities as an organized self acting group of families exercising a common proprietorship over a definite tract of land. According to him there were two types of village communities 1) in which the village authority was lodged with the village *panchayat* and 2) in which the authority was in the hands of village headman. Elphinstone also believed in the concept of Village community as being a form of municipal institution with some local jurisdiction. He also asserted that 1) The village community was not a universal phenomena in India. 2) we also maintained that 2) not all the classes of functionaries (artisans, etc.) lived in every village and that 3) within the village the waste land was owned by the state rather than the Village community. Baden Powell assumed that the concept of Village community was associated with the land revenue system and that the Village community was not invariably the simple survival of a primitive age. He did not agree that the Indian Village was inherently democratic or republican in its constitution. He viewed the village essentially as a community of separate cultivating land holders and other village functionaries organized as a small monarchy or oligarchy. He identified two types of villages raiyati or non-*zamindari* and *zamindari* village.

All these formulations need critical examination in the context of the complexity of the structure and functioning of the village community during the pre-colonial period.

The view of the village community as democratic or primitively democratic institutions seems questionable. In all populist accounts of the village community the starting point is to postulate the village community on a more or less universal basis of social organisation with specific features such as political autonomy, economic anarchy, social homogeneity and the unchanging character of this closed collectivity.

The village was viewed as a territorial concept as well as a fiscal unit. It was also viewed in the sense of a social collective represented by the headman. He made representation to the higher authorities on behalf of the entire village on a variety of issues common to the whole cultivating community.

To start with the village never was an isolated self regulating unit. The question is how such a concept could be reconciled with the obligation to pay land revenue to the state by and large in cash. The assumption that the village headman acted as the representative of the collective interest and that he was subject to the control of the peasant community is equally dubious. He was also as much under the control of the imperial administration.

The assumption that the peasant economy had a communal and autarchic foundation is also open to strong criticism. The pattern of land ownership, and distribution of agricultural assets among individual cultivators reveal a considerable degree of

economic differentiation. It is also unacceptable that the peasant community was homogeneous or undifferentiated. A fair degree of economic differentiation had taken place due to unequal distribution of power, and other resources. Landlessness and agrarian dependence were visible in the rural society. Production decisions were taken by individual peasant family rather than collectively and obligation to pay tax was that of individual cultivator. In the revenue records arrears of revenue are shown against individual defaulters rather than the village community as a whole.

Another feature of the Mughal agrarian system was the diversification of the economy in the countryside. It was not that the village was producing only for the community or what the village needed through an integration of agriculture and domestic crafts. The rural economy on the other hand was marked by highly specialized commodity production, agriculture or otherwise and there was a considerable penetration of money economy into the countryside. The village economy was becoming more and more market oriented. The growth of commodity production led to the growing interaction between town and countryside between agriculture and handicraft activities. *Qasbas* are the indicators of the growth of rural markets. The village population was not so large as to accommodate all classes of artisans and other functionaries.

Thus the village community was not a closed stationary and strongly collectivist social foundation. The British writings neglected crucial aspects like differentiation and domination within the rural society and its dependence on wider economic and political institutions. These writings also failed to accommodate conflict and change. B.R. Grover argues that the concept of village community, as held by the British administrators in the 19th century, was based on their confusing the 19th century joint family *zamindari* estates known as *pattidari* and *bhaichara* land tenures with the communal ownership of land as such.

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## 17.8 FORMS OF PEASANT RESISTANCE

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At the crux of the agrarian system of Mughal India is the notion of a reckless exploited peasantry thrown into either flight or rebellion. Refusal to pay land revenue is seen by Irfan Habib as the classic act of defiance by peasants. Though complaints by peasants are mentioned, the focus is on flight, which according to Habib was the peasants' first answer both to famine as well as oppression. He treats armed resistance as the embodiment of peasant anger and desperation. In 'Peasant in Indian History' Habib details the excessive exploitation, which the medieval peasantry was subjected to and proceeds to analyse peasant revolts. Habib cites evidence of peasants uprooting crops and trying to delay or refuse payment of tax. Habib writes of the range of resistance, right from passive to armed resistance, the other variables in this context are not given due attention. The peasantry is shown as having few options to choose from. The basic premise is that peasants finally take to armed resistance when unable to cope with ever increasing oppression.

Harbans Mukhia has tried to explore the notion of resistance as being both silent and overt forms. He has suggested that peasant resistance could assume various forms depending on the production system. Lethargy, carelessness, haggling over payments, concealments, petitioning, threats to give up cultivation, violent upheavals have all been conceded as possibilities. He has argued that the peasants accept only a part of the ruling class ideology; he has visualized the peasantry as possessing a certain amount of power to resist and a considerable degree of dynamism, notwithstanding the fact of their exploitation.

Two positions are visible; first we have studies which focus on revolts. In the second category we have comments from historians conceding to the possibility of the passive, everyday form of resistance. Apart from these two positions on the forms of resistance two images of the peasantry also emerge. On the one hand, we have the picture of an utterly oppressed, absolutely hopeless and helpless peasantry not knowing what to do and how to survive in the face of over increasing exploitation, its only weapon being the ultimate one of rebellion. On the other hand we have a picture which cautions against placing them forever at the receiving end of exploitation, questions the wisdom of treating peasants as an utterly passive and powerless lot, argues that peasants resist the exercise of power in myriad ways and contest spaces in more ways than we usually think of.

Petitioning was one of the several methods of protest when peasants petitioned, they either pleaded for relief/concessions or reported exploitation and urged the state to take remedial actions. These were in the nature of complaint or protest. Implied in the petition is also a veiled threat of counter action if demands are not met. Petitions presuppose the petitioner's faith in the willingness as well as ability of the state to fulfill requests and redress grievances.

Most petitions were attempts to bring injustice to the notice of the state. Peasants petitioned against a variety of injustices. Most frequent were complaints about excessive demand of taxes. Attempt to force upon peasants taxes which were not customary were met with resistance. Regardless of the content of the petitions the seriousness of the issue and the desperation of the petitioner reported. The tone of petitions was never very loud, the posture never aggressive. The petitioners did not question the legitimacy of the structure of domination and subordination. What was opposed was the transgression of established practices. By petitioning peasants played up to the rhetoric of the traditional obligation of rulers to be fair and just.

A very interesting fact about petitions is that after the complaint had been made, petitioners invariably state that in the face of the reported transgression we cannot survive, cannot stay in the village, and the village cannot be populated. By stressing that they could not to survive or continue or prosper peasants let it be known to the state the urgency of remedial steps. They also caution the state of the consequences of the ruination of the petitioners.

Petitioning seems to have been a popular method of protest. It was probably also the first initial reaction to exploitation and the first line of defense. It entailed no risks. It was almost a sure way to get one's voice heard. The sheer number of petitions, the range of their contents the sections of rural society who petitioned prove that it was a popular and effective method of protest.

Non-payment or refusal to pay revenue by peasants was considered to be an outright defiance. Peasants who dared to refuse payments were called *zortalab/badamal*. However, non payment need not always assume the form of open confrontations. It varied from outright refusal to what seems like a policy on the part of peasants to delay, evade, underlay and not yield willingly. A variety of term appears in the Rajasthani documents for this kind of peasant's behaviour – *ujar* (to avoid and make excuses); *kotai* (falling short); *dheel* (delay); *sokhi* (throwing temper); *sukhan* (reluctance); *hujati* (argument); *seenajori* (defiance); *kahavati* (altercation); and *haramjadagi* (chicanery). These terms suggest that non payment assumed various forms from open refusal to pay up.

## Migration and Threat of Abandonment

Peasants deserted their villages when they were unable to cope with excessive exploitation. It is also significant that peasants sometimes threatened to migrate in response to exploitation. Late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century documents from eastern Rajasthan throw light on how peasants used the threat to migrate to their advantage. This evidence also indicates that in some cases migration or threat to migrate was an act of defence rather than a measure of desperation. There is ample evidence to show that desertion of villages in response to excessive demand was not infrequent and whenever peasants actually migrated, they were consoled, called back and pacified. Considering the land man ratio and the state's interest in uninterrupted cultivation desertion or threat to desertion invoked favourable response from the state. The peasants were pacified with assurances as well as concrete concessions to get them back.

## Subtle Resistance

From the analysis of documents from eastern Rajasthan it appears that the peasants including the richer section maneuvered, evaded, cheated and connived in an effort to retain for themselves as large a share of produce as possible. Thereby raising the question of relationship between what the state had demanded from them and actual payment in practice. There is a wide range of activities aimed at evading payment of land revenue in full such as removal of standing crops from the field, concealment of land and crop at the time of measurement, not disclosing area under cash crops and irrigated lands, not revealing the exact number of taxpayers, declaring superior crops as inferior crops, false declaration regarding the rate of tax applicable, tampering with measured area figures and getting holdings liable to be assessed at normal rates assessed at concessional rates. What is more striking is the fact that all sections of the village community, village headman and privileged category of cultivators, were involved in cases of cheating the state. The reported cases pertaining to these acts provide invaluable sight in the nature of collusions, collaborations and connivances within the peasant world which cut across differentiation and stratification. All sections of the rural society seem to be involved in the common objective to escape assessment to get away with lesser payment. Involvement of the richer section of the cultivators in the cheating of state indicates that the primary objective was not the securing of a bare subsistence level in order to meet the needs of survival but clearly an attempt to increase personal income at the cost of state. This day-to-day passive form of resistance best suited to the peasantry – a class scattered across the countryside lacking formal organisation and stratified both socially and economically.

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## 17.9 AGRARIAN STRUCTURE: DECCAN

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Village in the Deccan was divided into habitational (*pandhari*) and cultivated area (*kali*). The habitational areas/houses left over by families for some reasons were known as *gatkul gharthana/gatkul vada*. The cultivated area was divided into number of *thals* (land). *Thals* in turn were further divided into *shet* or *set* (*kshetra* i.e. fields). The pasture land of the village (used in common) was known as *lokacha kuran/gayeran* while the pasture belonging to the state was called *sarkarcha kuran*. Villagers had to perform *begar* for cutting the fodder from the state's pastures. The cultivated land on the basis of the nature of the tenure/holdings was further subdivided into *four* major categories as we have seen in north India as well - *miras* or *thalkari* (peasant holdings), *inam*, *sarkari sheri* or *khalisa jamin* (crown land), *gatkul jamin* and *pad jamin* (waste lands).

Village headman (*muqaddam*) was the most powerful of the lot. Village community comprised of hereditary officials (*watandar*, *patel*, *kulkarni*, *muqaddam*) peasant proprietors (*miras*) and village servants (*baluedars*). There also lived 'outsiders/strangers'/*upari* (tenants-at-will). Usually their position was subordinate to *mirasdars*. But they could assume a status of a *mirasdar* by paying a fee (*nazar*).

Village headmen enjoyed right over the *gatkul jamin* and the waste lands. He could dispose that of. Village as a group (i.e. the village assembly) possessed right to sell waste lands as *inam*.

*Mirasdars* were the hereditary peasant proprietors. They were the original settlers of the village. They never loses their right over land unless they sold or gifted the land. Even those who deserted the village continued to possess their right over land. They are mentioned in the records as *gat-kuli*. They played active role in the village assembly and *gotsabha*. Their symbol 'plough' had to be affixed on all decisions (*mahajars*). In certain cases only the concerned *balutedar* was invited to attend the *gotsabha*.

### **Balutedars**

Village servants called *balutedars*. Traditionally they numbered twelve and designated as *barabalutas*. However, initially, the number appears to be only *five* and were called *panchkaruk* (potter, blacksmith carpenter, barber and washerman). The number of *balute* varied as per the size and need of the village.

Traditionally *balutedars* are grouped on the basis of their income as well as the services they provided to the village. On the basis of their income (*kaas*) they were grouped into three categories (rows). 1) *Thorali Kaas* (major row) consisted of *sutar* (carpenter) *lohar* (blacksmith), *mahar* (village watchman and performed other menial work), and *mang* (leather rope maker). 2) *Madhali Kaas* (middle row) included *kumbhar* (potter), *chambhar* (cobble), *Parit* (washerman) and *nhavi* (barber;). 3) *Dhakti Kaas* had *Bhat* (bard), *Mulana* (servant of the mosque and of the Muslim community of the village), *gurav* (temple priest), and *koli* (water carrier), *sonar/potdar* (goldsmith), *joshi* (the village astrologer), and *Ramoshi* (village guard).

On the basis of services they broadly consisted of a) village artisans and professionals, b) general servants of the village, and c) religious servants. They received lieu of their services specified quantities of grain (*baluta*) at harvest time, while some (*mahar*, etc.) also received *inam* land. Among the *balutedars mahar* community was quite large. The elected head of the community was known as *mehtar mahar* who looked after the community's welfare. In lieu of his services he was entitled to 1/9th of the entire *mahar watan* including grain, perquisites and donations. There existed clear distinction between the *watandar balutas* (hereditary) and *upari* (stranger) *balutas*. These *upari balutedars* were generally 'migratory' servants ready to fill up the gap where the need be. While making the payment (cash or kind) for their services no distinction was made between a *watan* or *upari balutedar*.

A.S. Altekar has emphasised since they were fulfilling the needs of the community, their 'maintenance was guaranteed'. But they did not possess freedom to migrate in search of better livelihood. Thus he negates their mobility aspect altogether and presented village community as 'self-contained' and 'self-sufficient.' Sociologists and anthropologists (Max Weber, W.H. Wiser, Karl Marx Baden Powell) have explained this relationship in terms of '*jajman*' and '*jajmani-haqq*' and their services

are termed as '*demiurgic* (village serfs; not paid for their services) mode of payment'. R.S. Sharma also argues that with the decline of urban centres artisans in large numbers migrated to the rural areas that resulted in the emergence of *jajmani* relations. However, both Fukazawa and A.R. Kulkarni rejects the presence of *jajmani* system. They argue that a) these *balutedars* (barring priest) were not employed by specific families instead they served the needs of the entire village; b) They received their remuneration as *haqq* (right), *lavajima* (perquisites) or *manpan* (privilege); and c) These *baluta watans* were not only hereditary but also transferable and saleable. A.R. Kulkarni has preferred to use the terms *gramsevak/grambhrutak* for them as is traditionally used in literature to address them.

Besides these *balutedars* we also hear twelve *alutas*. Grant Duff mentions the alutedars as naru and balutedars as karu. Fukazawa and Kulkarni maintains, however, since we do not come across the word *alutas* in the Marathi documents prior to the British period 'the term *aluta* was formed *alliteratively* with *baluta* in extension of the application of that word.' It will, however, be interesting to find that traditionally they were addressed as *panchkaruk* and this binary division is equally reported during the early medieval period. (for details see Section 12.6)

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## 17.10 AGRARIAN STRUCTURE: SOUTH INDIA

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In South India village was divided into number of residential wards probably on the basis caste/occupation. We do hear of *paraichheri* (for the Paraiyas) *kammanachcheri* (for kammalas), *kudiyirukkai* (for *kudi*) *vannarachheri* (for washermen), etc.

In South India at village level there existed *sabha/sabhai* and *ur*. *Sabha* was generally associated with *brahmadeya* villages and *ur* were present in non-*brahmadeya* villages or at least in these villages that were not exclusively controlled by the brahmans. If the donee of a *brahmadeya* village is one single individual it were known as *ekabhoga* (i.e. land enjoyed by a single individual); and if there were many donees in a *brahmadeya* village it was known as *ganabhoga* (i.e. the land enjoyed by a *gana*/group. Since the *ganabhoga* villages had to be governed/shared collectively their assembly came to be known as *sabha* and its share holders as *vidwan-mahajanas* or *mahajanas*. *Caturvedimangalam* (*brahmadeya*) village generally had a 'central' village associated with it were many small villages and each village was divided into small wards.

*Sabhas* possessed right to acquire or dispose of village lands. They appeared to have functioned in *ganabhogam* or *samudayam* villages (where property right was held in common) and worked on behalf of the village community. Parudari connected with temple administration perhaps also worked under the control Village *sabhas* and *uravars* also performed the function of revenue collection to be deposited to the imperial treasury. Thus they also worked as agents of the state revenue for collection. In case of failure of depositing the land tax in time the assembly had the right to deprive the landholders/cultivations from lands. They also possessed the right to impose or remit some local cesses that the assembly had the right to extract. It could not impose and remit any tax pertaining to or associated with imperial exchequer without the permission of the state. However, these local bodies possessed great influence and state could not remit or impose any tax without their consent. At times *uruvars* also acted as lease holders of the state land.

These assemblies also dispense the justice and punish the offenders. At times they could even confiscate the lands of the guilty/convict. Even it possessed the right to confirm temple lands and at times it shared lands in common with temples like tanks, etc. They also served as guardian of public lands, endowments and charities. During Bukka II's reign Rasappa, son of a merchant, Cinnappa granted a piece of dry land to God Kalledeva, the *mahajanas* were made incharge of the holding. *Sabha* continued to function during the Vijayanagara period and enjoyed as vigorous powers as it were under the cholas.

Another semi-autonomous assembly of importance was *nadu*. Though it enjoyed almost similar powers its jurisdiction was comparatively much larger than *sabha* and *ur*. Its members were known as *nattavar/nattar* and *periyannattar*, *tandirinais* (Telgu region) and *okkuh* in Karnataka. Tamil inscriptions mentions *nattu-viniyogam*, *nattu-kanikkai* and *nattayam* extracted by the *nattavars*. Though *nattavars* of the Chola period were largely Vellala land-holders during the Vijayanagar period we find it included members of various communities including merchants, artisans etc. K.V. Subrahmanya, Venkata Ramanayya T.V. Mahalingam and Noboru Karashima argue that these bodies (both *ur* and *nadus* gradually lost their vitality during the Vijayanagara period itself. A Krishnaswamy, however, maintains that 'They did not actually destroy the *Sabha*, the *Ur* and the *Nadu*... But they did not actually revive these ancient institutions when they ceased to function...' He attributes the chief reason behind this trend was - 'feudal' and military organisation, the hostility of the Vijayanagara 'warriors', the 'highly centralised 'feudalism,' and the growth of substitute local institution 'the *nayankara* and *ayagar* systems. However, Saletore feels strongly that these assemblies continued till late. Mahalingam also attributes the chief factors behind this declining trend to "partly on feudal and partly on military basis'. Though, he agrees that there was no deliberate attempt on the part of Vijayanagara rulers to discontinue them. He further deliberates that "the evolution of the *ayagar* system and the direct appointment of officers responsible to the government from the administration of the local areas must have sapped the very foundations of local initiative and autonomy and stifled the free life of the village republics." Noboru Karashima (2001) while agreeing with Mahalingam emphasises the changing trend to the consolidation of *nayaka* rule in the regions that "the *nayakas* started to administer their territories employing their own agents by the beginning of the 16th century." There is no reference to exaction of cesses like *nattu-viniyogam*, *nattu-kanikkai*, and *nattayam* in Tamilnadu in the 16th century. Further, Noboru Karashima deliberates that the decline of *nadus* as territorial units could largely be as a result of establishment of *pettai* (new trade centre) and *nayakkattanams* (territories bestowed by the Vijayanagara rulers to the *nayaks* to govern themselves directly). Though, the usage of *nattavars* continued but *parru* became the effective administrative unit. We get frequent references to 18 *parru*, 17 *parru* in the 16th century. During the 15th century tussle between *nayaks* and *nattavars* became frequent; the latter representing the interests of the peasants to reduce the tax burden.

During the 13-14th centuries in South India a new class of non-Brahmana landlords emerged who got their land cultivated by *adimai* (slaves) and *kudi* (tenants). We do not know what kind of services provided by *adimai* or *adiyar*; probably Paraiyas and Pulias employed as agricultural labourers; while Vellalas worked as domestic servants. We do get references of *kudiyameru* (colonising land with the help of cultivators). Kudigals cultivated temple lands under the direction of the temple organisation as tenant. On the eve of peasant revolt in early 15th century most of the land held by landholders (Kaniyalar) who inturn rented it to the tenants (*kudi/kudigal*).

Thus peasants cultivated their own lands also get it cultivated with the help of slave labour (*admai* or else rented out to the tenants (*kudi/kudigal*). Towards the closing years of Vijayanagara period we find nayaks also emerging as lease holders of the temple lands. Our period also saw emergence of another class as lease holders – merchants –the chettis. Their emergence as lease holders appears to be as a result of growing trade and commerce during our period. Karashima argues that this trend deeply altered the agrarian relations. It led to the decline and sale of Brahmana lands (*brahmadeyas*) during the 13-14th centuries. Though the immediate reason was heavy taxation imposed by the Vijayanagara rulers. According to Karashima it should also “be viewed in the context of agrarian change, particularly differentiation in agrarian society. These lands...were mostly bought by non-brahmanas who became the local magnates of the lower Kavery valley and other regions towards the end of Chola rule. Nayaks’ effort to control production in their territories, employing their own agents, must have affected nattavar’s position as well.

Bunton Stein argues that like the change in the Tamil country in the Karnataka region as well local institutions were ‘altered’. Bunton Stein emphasises that suffix *Rattavade* (seven and one half lakh country), *Gangavadi* (96,000 country) “represent units of ethnically defined territoriality under local chiefs.” In contrast *ayagar* system of Karnataka became widespread – throughout the macro-region (Tamil country).

### ***Ayagars***

Like village servants of the north and *bara balutas* of the Deccan and Maharashtra in South India the village organisation during the medieval period emerged was known as *ayagar* system putting the *ur Chola* into the background. It was a body of 12 functionaries (like *balutas*) N. Venkata Ramanayya includes in the list of *ayagars* - *karnam/senabova*, *gauda/Reddi*, *talari*, *washerman*, shoemaker, barber, carpenter, goldsmith measured grain during harvest, *purohit* decided auspicious dates for ploughing and harvesting preceded over all the village ceremonies, waterman regulated water supply to the fields, potter and blacksmith. They were the village servants. Except the *karnam* (maintained accounts), *Gauda* and *Talari* (village watchman) no one else was associated with state functioning. *Karnam* used to assist in revenue collection in association with the Reddi. They collected the *jodi* from the ryots and deposited to the state treasury.

They were assigned plots of the village lands and enjoyed hereditary rights over it known as *mirasi* and paid *jodi*. Besides at the time of the harvest as was the case in Maharashtra they were paid by ryots fixed quantities of grains/produce as per the custom of the village. It was known as *mera*. Their position was hereditary and permanent. In situation of disputes over their rights state machinery used to intervene. They could sell or mortgage their rights. They also used to receive revenue free grants (*manyams*) that were granted to them in perpetuity in lieu of their services. Mahalingam asserts that “no transfer of property could be effected or grant made without the knowledge of these village functionaries.. Sales of land had to be made only with the knowledge of these officers...” A. Krishnaswamy argues that the system was completely new to the Tamil country. However, Bunton Stein maintains that we do get references to village headman, artisans, etc. in the Tamil country. According to him, ‘what was new in Tamil country, was perhaps not elsewhere, was the support of these persons and functions by special village tenures... Yet the *ayagar* system, long prevalent in Karnataka where land was generally less valuable, was introduced into Tamil country during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries suggesting a shift in the

relative power of the dominant landed people and those who performed village services.' ...This new basis of locality leadership altered earlier patron-client relations in a decisive way; it also led to significant changes in the land system of the time.'

However, Noboru Karashima raised his doubts over Burton Stein's statement that it was introduced in the Tamil region in the 15-16th centuries. He is doubtful his doubts whether it was ever introduced 'during and after' the Vijaynagar rule in the Tamil region. He argues that he does not find in any inscription reference to *ayagar*. The date, he says, used by Mahalingam, too, is from Kannada inscriptions and not Tamil.

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## 17.11 SUMMARY

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Village continued to remain the basic unit for administrative and revenue purposes. The notion that the medieval villages represented 'undifferentiated' and 'unstratified' mass hardly holds ground. Village community was highly stratified on the basis of caste, class and professions. Though state's concern was to ensure cultivation our records are full with instances of peasants' migrations and threats to migrations. *Zamindars* served as major link between the peasant and the state. They played a dual role of an exploiter, on the one hand, at times joined hands with peasants against the exploitation of the revenue officials/*jagirdars*. In the Deccan and south India village servants *balutedars/ayagars*) formed an important part of the village community. However, their relationship vis-a-vis village can not be equated with *jajmani* rights. During our period in south India drastic changes appears to have occurred in the agrarian relations. The growing prosperity of the region and large scale migration of Telegu warriors (poligars, *nayaks*) resulted in the decline in the *brahmadeya* lands, largely losing to the non-brahman cultivators.

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## 17.12 EXERCISES

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- 1) State various views pertaining to the village community during the medieval period.
- 2) Explain the notion of power in the context of village community in the medieval period.
- 3) 'The medieval village community represented undifferentiated, unstratified mass.' Comment.
- 4) Discuss the condition of peasants during the medieval period.
- 5) Critically analyse the presence of different categories of cultivators in the medieval period.
- 6) State the importance and the impact of 'credit' in the rural society during the medieval period.
- 7) Discuss the rights and perquisites of the zamindars and the bhomias.
- 8) Compare the agrarian structure of north India with that of the Deccan and south India.
- 9) State the salient features of the village community of the Deccan during the medieval period.
- 10) Critically examine the changing pattern of the village community of medieval south India.