

UNIT 20 AGRARIAN STRUCTURE

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20.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will discuss the agrarian economy during the 13th-14th centuries. We will also try to gauge in what ways the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate affected the agricultural production and agrarian relations. After going through this Unit, you should be able to learn about:

- the extent of cultivation, the crops grown by the peasant, canal irrigation and its impact, and
- the agrarian relations, the changes in the position of the previous rural structure and the subordinate rural aristocracy.

20.1 INTRODUCTION

It will of course be unreasonable to expect that the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate would have effected any radical changes in the system of agricultural production, though the coming of certain new technologies seem to have helped irrigation and there was spread of some market crops such as indigo and grapes. However, it was the agrarian relations that underwent a significant change. According to D.D. Kosambi, these changes did no more than intensify the elements already present in India 'feudalism', while Muhammad Habib regards these to be not only radical but so progressive in nature that to him these deserved the designation of 'rural revolution'.

20.2 AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION

During the 13th-14th centuries, the land-man ration was very favourable. The population of India around A.D. 1200 was obviously much less than what it was around 1800; though how much less we do not know. There is no statistical information but the accounts of the contemporaries clearly suggest that inhabited area in the 13th-14th centuries was much smaller than at the close of the 16th century. Large tracts even in such fertile regions as the Ganga-Yamuna Doab were covered by forests and grass lands. The *sufi* Nizamuddin Auliya in the 13th century found wayfarers travelling between Delhi and Badaun harassed by tigers. In the 14th century, the forest in the region, according to Barani, was thick enough to provide refuge to vast number of peasants against the Sultan's armies. Even in Babur's time (1526-30), crossing from Central Indian forest, elephants used to roam in Kalpi and Yamuna ravines south of Kanpur. But before the close of Akbar's reign (1605) the middle Doab was reported to be fully cultivated. This clearly suggests that, during the Delhi Sultanate, there was abundance of cultivable land that was yet to be brought under plough.

The control over bits of land was, therefore, not as important as on persons cultivating them. We will discuss the implications of this for agrarian relations at the proper place. However, the land-man ratio is also crucial for understanding the nature of agriculture. A favourable ratio of land to man naturally implies agriculture to be extensive. In simple terms, extensive agriculture is that where the increase in production is attempted by bringing more area under crop. On the other hand, agriculture is called intensive if the production is sought to be increased on the same tract by using higher agricultural inputs: for example, more labour, better ploughing and irrigation. Owing to abundance of cultivable land in the Delhi Sultanate, agriculture was extensive in nature. The large area of cultivable waste and fallows naturally provided good pasturage facility for cattle. The author of the *Masalik al Absar* records that in India cattle were innumerable and their prices were low. Afif reports that no village in Doab was without a cattle-pen which were called *kharaks*. Bullocks were so plentiful that the pack-animals and not the bullock-carts were the main means of carrying grains and other goods.

20.2.1 Crops and other Agricultural Produce

One of the most remarkable feature of the agriculture of the time was the large number of crops grown by the peasants of the Delhi Sultanate. This has perhaps no parallel in other parts of the world except perhaps in South China. Ibn Battuta was struck by the multiplicity of crops grown and described in sufficient detail the various crops grown in the two cropping seasons. He also suggests that in the region around Delhi double cropping was also practised, that is, on the same soil both the *kharif* and the *rabi* crops were raised. Thakkur Pheru, the mint-master at Delhi under Alauddin Khalji, writing in c. 1290 lists some twenty-five crops grown under two harvests and gives also their yields. While the yields cannot be comprehended owing to the uncertainty of the units used, one gets a fairly good idea of the crops raised. Among food crops, he mentions, wheat, barley, paddy, millets — *juar*, *moth* etc. and pulses (*mash*, *mung* lentils, etc.). For cash crops, sugarcane, cotton, oil-seeds, sesamum, linseed, etc. are referred to.

One may perhaps legitimately assume that improved facilities of irrigation would have helped extend the area under *rabi* (winter) crops such as wheat, sugarcane etc. With the 'Islamic raiders' making of wine from sugarcane became widespread and a new rural industry emerged, at least around Delhi and in the Doab by the 14th century as is evident from Barani's account. Thakkur Pheru surprisingly omits the dye-crop (indigo) though its production is testified to by the fact that indigo was already an important item of export to Persia. It is recorded that the Il Khanids tried to encourage indigo plantation in Persia to avoid dependence upon India for its supply. The probable use of lime-mortar in the indigo-vats by providing an improved surface should have helped the manufacture of dye.

From Ibn Battuta's account, we get information on fruit growing in the Delhi Sultanate. It appears that technique of 'grafting' was not known by peasants. Earlier grapes were grown only in the few places besides Delhi but Muhammad Tughluq's urging to peasants to improve cropping by shifting from wheat to sugarcane to grapes and Feroz Tughluq's laying down of 1200 orchards in the vicinity of Delhi to grow seven varieties of grapes seems to have made them so abundant that, according to Afif, the prices of grapes fell.

However, the Indian peasants did not practise sericulture (rearing of silk-worm) at that time and no true silk was produced. Only wild and semi-wild silks, namely, *tasar*, *eri* and *muga* were known. Ma Huan, the Chinese navigator in 1432, makes the first reference to sericulture in Bengal.

20.2.2 Canal Irrigation and Its Impact

Agriculture was generally dependent upon natural irrigation, that is, rains and floods. Since cultivation was largely based on natural irrigation, the tendency was to grow mostly single, rain-watered *kharif* (autumn) crop and coarse grains more.

Canal irrigation is described in our sources. The Delhi Sultans themselves got the canals cut for irrigation. Ghiyasuddin Tughluq (1320-25) is reported to be the first Sultan to dig canals. But the cutting of canals in a much bigger way was undertaken by Feroz Tughluq (1351-88). Feroz Tughluq cut two canals from the river Yamuna

carrying them to Hissar, one from the Kali river in the Doab joining the Yamuna near Delhi; one each from the Sutlej and the Ghaggar. Certainly, it was the biggest canal network in India till the 19th century.

Canal irrigation helped greatly in the extension of cultivation in the eastern Punjab. Now there was an emphasis on the cultivation of cash crops like sugarcane, etc. that required more water than other crops. Afif says that a long stretch of land of about 80 **krohs** (200 miles) vast irrigated by the canal **Rajabwah** and **Ulughkhani**. According to Afif, as a result of abundance water available, peasants in the eastern Punjab raised two harvests (**kharif** and **rabi**) where only one was possible earlier. This led to new agricultural settlements along the banks of the canals. In the areas irrigated by the canals 52 such colonies sprang up. Afif comments enthusiastically, "neither one village remained desolate nor one cubit of land uncultivated."

Check Your Progress 1

1) What were the implications of the prevailing favourable land to man ratio during the Delhi Sultanate?

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2) Write a note on canal irrigation.

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3) Which of the following statements are correct or wrong? (Mark \checkmark or \times)

- i) Muhammad Tughluq built a number of canals for irrigation.
- ii) Double cropping was practised during the Sultanate period in the Doab.
- iii) Sericulture was practised by Indian peasants during the 13th-14th centuries.

20.3 AGRARIAN RELATIONS

Crucial to any discussion of agrarian economy is, indeed, the nature and extent of change that resulted in the agrarian relations since the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. This involves, first of all, an assessment of the pre-1200 agrarian structure. Without entering into the debate whether the prevailing socio-economic order deserves the appellation 'feudal' or not, we can perhaps say with some certainty, that on the eve of the Ghorid conquest, the ruling class was heavily ruralized like contemporary feudal aristocracy of Western Europe.

Minhaj Siraj designates the chiefs opposing the Ghorians and the early Delhi Sultans as **rai** and **rana** and their cavalry commanders as **rawat**. From the epigraphic evidence from different parts of Northern India, the earlier feudal hierarchy of **rāja (rai)**, **ranaka (rana)** and **rauta (rawat)** is fairly well established.

In the early phase, the Sultans tended to enter into settlement with this defeated and subjugated rural aristocracy. As discussed earlier, **kharaj** was largely the tribute imposed upon them. It seems that even after the replacement of this tribute by vigorously assessed tax imposed on the peasants under Alauddin Khalji, the older rural aristocracy had some role to play in revenue collection. This can be inferred from an incident of Alauddin Khalji's reign. Ghazi Malik, the governor of Dipalpur when wanted to pressurise Rana Mal Bhatti, according to Afif, one of the **rais (rajas)**

headmen) and **chaudhuris**. The incident suggests that though the members of subjugated aristocracy, wherever present, were at least till the early years of the 14th century, held responsible for collecting and paying the land revenue. The administration, too, exercised the right to collect it directly through village headmen and **chaudhuris**.

20.3.1 Peasants

Cultivation was based on individual peasant farming. But this peasant economy was not at all egalitarian. The size of land cultivated by them greatly varied in size. From Barani's account it appears that at one extreme were the **khots** and **muqaddams** having large holdings and enjoying superior rights on ordinary peasants; and at the other was the **balahar**, the village menial holding a petty plot of land. Below the peasant, there must have been a mass of landless labourers but their presence could only be discerned from the later sources, since we did not find any mention in contemporary accounts.

In spite of the abundance of cultivable land, there was no proprietary right of the peasant over the land he tilled. On the contrary, even on his produce there were claims of the superior classes. The peasant, though recognised a 'free born' at times was deprived of the freedom to leave the land at will or to change the domicile.

According to Afif, a village had 200 to 300 male members and Barani says that each village had a **patwari** to keep accounts. His **bahi** (account register) was scrutinized to discover every payment, legal or illegal, made by the peasants to the revenue officials. The **patwari** was not a government official but a village official. He was certainly not a creation of the Delhi Sultanate. The presence of a village clerk for maintaining accounts may suggest that the village was an administrative unit outside the administrative system of the Sultanate. It seems that the village was collectively a tax paying unit otherwise why a clerk to keep village accounts was needed. The presence of **patwari** and the nature of his duties thus indicate existence of village community. It seems that in spite of Alauddin Khalji's efforts to assess the tax on individual peasant, in practice the village continued to remain the unit of land revenue payment. Barani's complaints about the 'burden of the rich falling on the poor' further indicates that the village community was not an ideal institution but itself a machinery of exploitation.

20.3.2 Rural Intermediaries

You have already read in Block 5 about the rural aristocracy called **khots**, **muqaddams** and **chaudhuris**. They belonged to the highest stratum of the peasantry. From Barani's account it appears that before Alauddin Khalji's agrarian measures they held revenue free lands. As a class, the village headmen were prosperous. Barani with malicious pleasure records that Alauddin Khalji imposed full land revenue upon them and withdrew the exemption from house and grazing tax. He prohibited them from levying any cesses of their own and thus he levelled them to the ordinary peasants.

However, since these rural intermediaries were necessary for the system of land revenue realization, these stern measures against them were not to last longer. Ghiyasuddin Tughluq introduced moderation. The exemption from grazing as well as tax on their own cultivation was granted again. But they were not allowed to impose any cess upon the peasantry. They received further concessions under Feroz Tughluq and, interestingly enough, these concessions and a resulting affluence are very approvingly described by Barani.

Among these rural intermediaries, the **chaudhuri** seems to have emerged during the 14th century. He is not mentioned by Minhaj or any other source of the 13th century. It is during the middle of the 14th century that he makes his appearance in Barani's account. Ibn Battuta defines him as the 'chief of a group of 100 villages' he calls (*sadi*). However, the usual term from the middle of the 14th century for a group of villages is **par gana**. Irfan Habib suggests that the **chaudhuri** was in fact a successor, though much reduced in authority, of the head of the **chaurasi** (group of eighty four villages) of Gujara-Pratiharas and Chalukyas.

From the time of Feroz Tughluq, all these intermediaries were given a blanket

Check Your Progress 2

1) Write 50 words on each of the following:

(a) Village Community

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(b) Chaudhuri

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(c) Patwari

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2) Put (✓) against correct and (✗) against incorrect statement given below:

(a) During the Delhi Sultanate peasant had proprietary rights over their holding.

(b) The **patwari** was a village official who maintained an accounts book.

(c) During the Sultanate period cultivable land on large scale

was yet to be brought under cultivation.

20.4 LET US SUM UP

To sum up, in the present Unit we have focussed on the agrarian structure – agricultural production, means of irrigation, peasants and the rural intermediaries – of the Delhi Sultanate. During this period large scale cultivable land was yet to be brought under cultivation. Double cropping was prevalent in the Doab. Canals were the major source of artificial irrigation. At village level differentiation (hierarchy) existed between the superior right holders (**khots, muqaddams** and **chaudhuris**) and the ordinary peasants (**raiyat**).

20.5 KEY WORDS

Cash-crops : Crops produced for markets

Distillation : Lit. substance was turned to vapour by heating, then the condensed vapour was collected

Kroh/Kuroh : Used for measuring distance. 1 **Kuroh** = 2.5 miles

Kharif : Autumn crop

Kharaks : Cattle-pens

Rabi : Winter crop

20.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sec. 20.2
- 2) See Sub-sec. 20.2.2
- 3) (i) × (ii) ✓ (iii) ×

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sub-sec. 20.3.1, 20.3.2
- 2) (a) × (b) ✓ (c) ✓