

CC-7: HISTORY OF INDIA (c.1206-1526)

III. SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

(C). CHANGES IN RURAL SOCIETY; REVENUE SYSTEM

RURAL SOCIETY

As before, peasants formed the overwhelming majority of the population. The peasant continued to work hard and to eke out bare subsistence. There were recurring famines and wars in different parts of the country, and these added to the hardships of the peasant. All the peasants did not live at the level of subsistence. Apart from the village artisans and share-croppers, there was a more prosperous section of people who were owner cultivators of their lands. They were considered the original settlers of the village, and dominated the village panchayats. The village headmen (muqaddams) and smaller landlords (khuts) enjoyed a higher standard of life. In addition to their own holdings, they held lands for which they paid revenue at concessional rates. Sometimes, they misused their offices to force the ordinary peasants to pay their share of the land revenue also. These people were prosperous enough to ride on costly Arabi and Iraqi horses, wear fine clothes, and behave like members of the upper classes. As we have seen, Alauddin Khalji took stern action against them and curtailed many of their privileges. Even then they continued to enjoy a standard of life higher than that of the ordinary peasants. It seems that after the death of Alauddin, they were able to resume their own ways. A section which enjoyed a high standard of life were the Hindu rais or autonomous rajas, many of whom continued to hold their previous estates. There are a number of references to the visits of the Hindu rais to the court of Balban. There is little doubt that these Hindu rais continued to be powerful even in the area under the direct control of the sultans of Delhi.

The peasantry, known as the balahar paid one-third of their produce as land revenue sometimes even one-half of the produce. Besides land revenue, they

paid certain other taxes which prove that taxation during this period was as much, if not higher than, as in the previous period. In other words, the peasants were always living at the subsistence level which was easily denied by the frequent wars, thus resulting in large scale, and not so infrequent, famines. Muqaddams and Small Landlords had a better standard of life, for they readily misused their power in order to exploit the ordinary peasants. Autonomous Chieftains constituted the most prosperous rural section. Though they were now a defeated ruling class, they were still powerful in their respective areas and continued to live a luxurious life as in the pre-Muslim period.

REVENUE SYSTEM

It is not possible to find any uniform and regular system of fiscal administration throughout the whole of the Sultanate period but what the Sultans had in common before them was the Muslim theory of taxation and the traditions of the land in which they were destined to wield the sceptre. Iltutmish divided the kingdom into iqta amongst his soldiers and nobles as their remuneration for their services.

Balban made a review of the existing system and found a lot of corruption and mismanagement among the assignees or the iqta holders. The iqta holders or muqtis who had received the villages in the Doab by way of salary no longer rendered military service either voluntarily or were incapable of service due to old age or disease. Balban, however, could not bring about any effective change in them owing to the appeals of Malikul Umra Fakhruddin, the kotwal of Delhi. Balban took another step to supervise iqta holders. He appointed his sons to important provinces as governors and created the office of bhwaja. It was a sort of diarchy though in a very limited sense, created by Balban. Though muqta was chiefly the incharge and the khwaja his subordinate, the fact that the latter was responsible to the central government gave him a sort of authority and made him an obstacle in the way of independence of the muqtas.

Besides iqtas there were other lands as well, i.e. the Delhi country comprising mainly of the khalisa land and directly under the revenue ministry, and the river country of the Doab under the governors. The fact that amils gave accounts directly to the central government indicates that the revenues of these regions were directly controlled by the central government.

There were three modes of assessment; (a) compounding, (b) sharing and (c) measurement. But during the thirteenth century there was nothing definite like this compounding system, and the system which prevailed in the provinces and the iqtas might be called a mixture of farming and compounding systems.

During the reign of Alauddin Khalji the most important change that was effected was in the mode of assessment. He insisted on actual measurement of land. Nearly the whole of the centre of the kingdom came under the rule of assessment by measurement.

Alauddin Khalji raised the scale of taxation to the highest point. He also imposed a 'grazing tax'. For the realisation of arrears of revenue Alauddin Khalji created a branch in the wizarat called mustakhraj. With Alauddin Khalji's death his system too was thrown into oblivion.

Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq departed from the policy of the great Khalji monarch and yet he wanted to have a happy and prosperous peasantry. He assessed revenues on iqtas and wilayats and the holders of these i.e., iqtadars, muqtas and walis, were made responsible to the central government for the payment of revenue. The muqtas and walis realised the revenue from the cultivators through the agency of muqaddams and khuts. Unlike Alauddin Khalji, Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq granted certain concessions to the khuts and muqaddams. One of the most important steps taken by Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq was that he ordered that the demand should be made on the actual produce (hasil). This was definitely a very statesman-like step taken by Ghiyasuddin because it clearly provided for

concessions in cases of crop failures and other such unforeseen calamities. He was also mild upon the Hindu cultivators and definitely ordered that they should not be taxed so much as would force them to leave their land.

Muhammad Tughlaq's policy of increasing the taxation in the Doab failed. He selected the Doab for his experiment because it was fertile and nearest to the central government. But he certainly did not want to create new taxes. He simply wanted to go back to the policy of Alauddin Khalji and that too only in a limited area, i.e., the Doab.

The old custom of granting iqtas was continued and muqtis and amils continued to serve the purpose of revenue collection. Firuz Tughlaq, on coming to the throne at once marshalled his energies to bring about stability and order. He tried his best to win the confidence of all shades of men. Firuz attempted to increase his income by means of improved quality of cultivation and superior crops, by means of haqi shirb or water tax over and above kharaj on land irrigated by canals (its scale being one-tenth) and by income of gardens.

In pursuance of the legal sanction, Sultans derived a substantial amount from jizyah. Besides jizyah, khums, ghari etc. also constituted an important source of income to the state.

ESSENTIAL READING AND REFERENCE

Chandra, S, History of Medieval India (800-1700)

Puri, Gopal k., Indian History