



Village Life in Mughal Times

In the times of the Mughals, India was considered to be one of the more prosperous countries in the world. Mughals, Rajputs and Afghans battled each other just to lay claim over this prosperity. The wealth enabled jagirdars, zamindars and raja-maharajahs to lead lives of comfort and luxury, and enabled Mughal emperors to erect fabulous monuments such as the Red Fort and the Taj Mahal. With an eye on this prosperity, traders also came from Europe to India.

However, the wealth of India did not simply fall out of the sky. The secret of the power of the Mughal empire and the wealth of the Mughal amirs lay in the fields - in the hard labour of the peasants. Mughal emperors and amirs partook of the yield of the peasants in the form of land tax.

What kind of life did the peasants have? What were their homes like? What did they grow? How much tax did they pay? How much were they able to save? Come, let's read about the life of peasants in Mughal times in this chapter.

What can you find out from this picture about village houses, about people's clothing, and about their lives and work?

Villages

Below is a scene from a village in the Mughal period. It was painted during the time of Akbar.



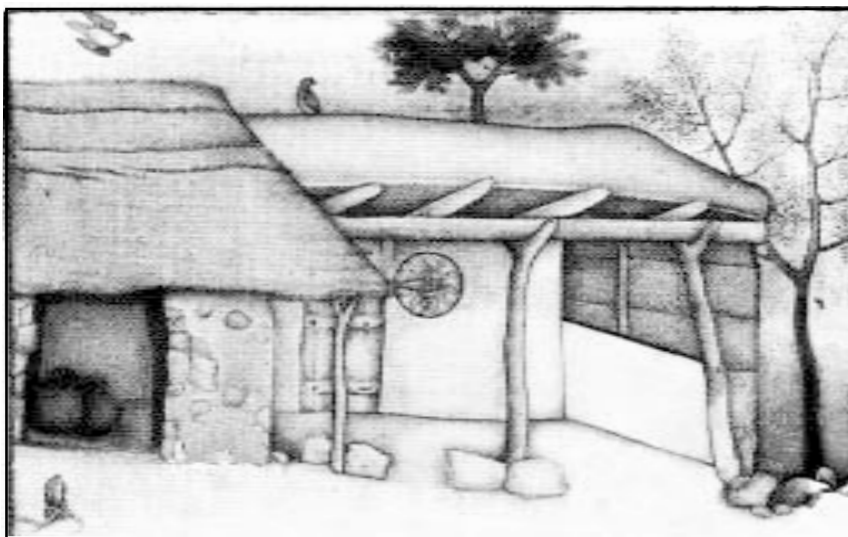


What do these pictures that were painted in Mughal times tell you about how peasants lived then?



The villages had rich as well as poor people. This picture of a common peasant's house was painted by an artist named Bichitra. What materials have been used to make this house?

Most peasants lived in huts of wattle and daub (woven reeds or bamboo plastered with mud). Driven from their homes by war, famine, drought and oppression, the peasants would often have to quickly leave their houses and set up shelter in new places.

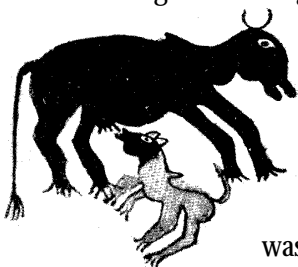


A village hut in Mughal times

Food

Now let us take a look inside the hut of a common peasant. You would find only a few utensils, and they would be made of clay. In those days, brass and bronze were very expensive and aluminium and steel had not come into use.

The clay utensils would be used to cook *khichdi* (iKcaDl) of moong and rice, and to make rotis of bajra or jowar. Along with this there might also be a little vegetable and ghee. Because milk was available aplenty in those days, ghee was quite inexpensive. Apart from ghee, sesame (til) and mustard (sarson) oil was also used.



Why would more ghee have been available in those days? Discuss in your class.

Groundnuts were not grown in South Asia then, hence its oil was not available.

Also many vegetables that you now eat were not grown here in those days.

Till the Mughal times, potatoes, pumpkins, tomatoes, peas, chilly, guavas, and custard apples were not grown at all in South Asia. These are all fruits and vegetables from South and North America which traders from Europe brought to India towards the end of the Mughal period.

However, vegetables such as broadbeans, spinach, sweet potatoes, gourds of different kinds (ribbed, bitter, bottle, etc.) ladyfingers, and brinjals were common.

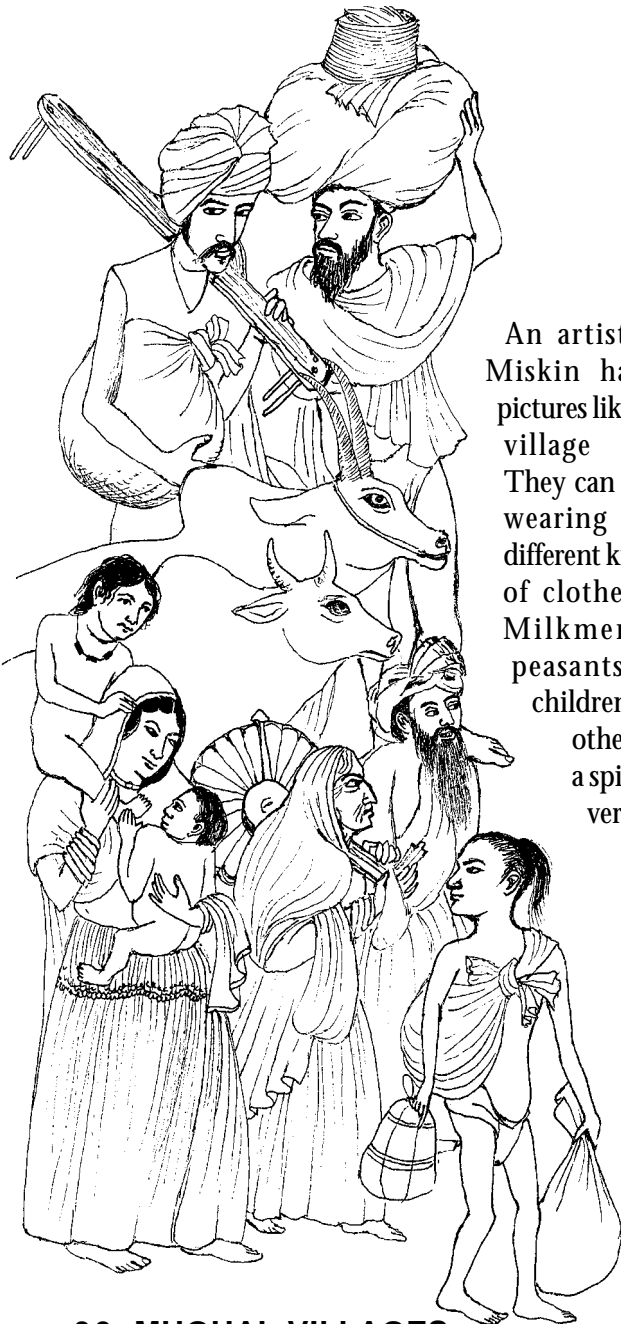
Common fruits were bananas, mangoes, jack-fruits, watermelons, ber, grapes and pomegranates.

In those days chilly was not grown in India. What do you think people would have used in its place?

Cloth and Clothing

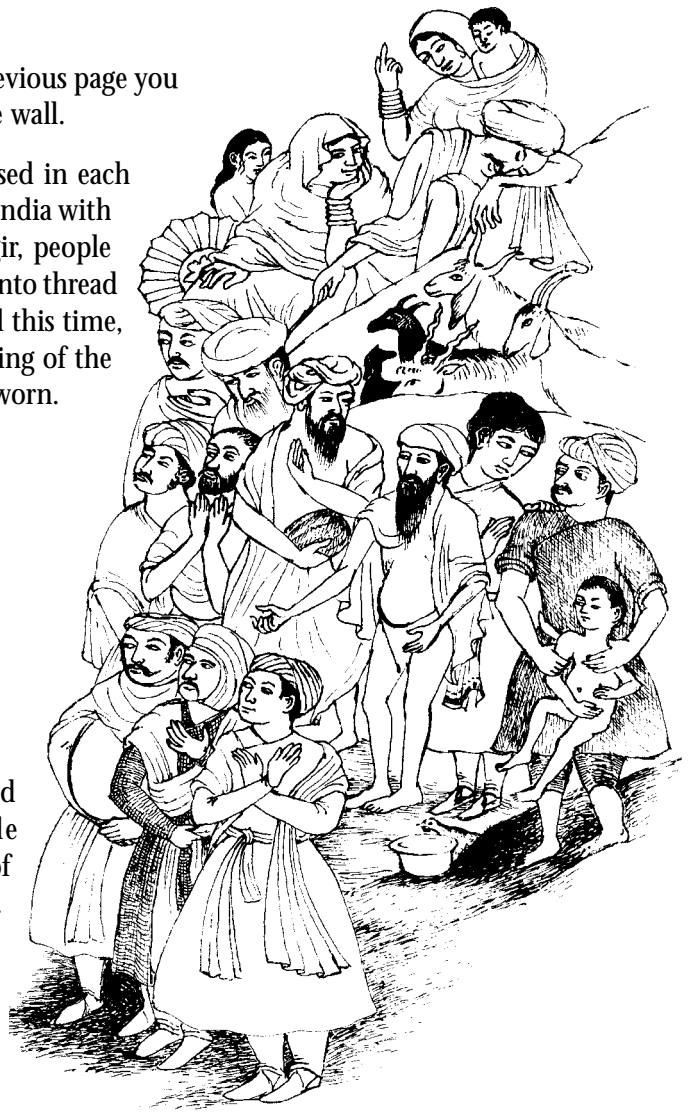
If you look carefully at the picture on the top of the previous page you will spot a charkha (spinning wheel) hanging from the wall.

In those days, the spinning wheel had begun to be used in each house. We mentioned before that the charkha came to India with the Turkish people. By the time of Akbar and Jahangir, people had widely adopted its use. Women would spin cotton into thread and the village weaver would weave it into cloth. Until this time, the people of India wore less cloth. But, after the coming of the spinning wheel greater quantities of cloth came to be worn.



An artist named Miskin has made pictures like these of village people. They can be seen wearing many different kinds of clothes. Milkmen, peasants, jogis, children, women and many

other kinds of people can be seen. Can you find someone with a spinning wheel? Can you distinguish between those who were very poor and those not so poor? Look carefully at the picture to spot them.



Agriculture

As is the case today, in Mughal times too the biggest problem in farming was that of irrigation. In those days, people had to make do with tanks, canals and wells. There were no motor pumps or electricity, as we have today. Therefore, much less land could be irrigated. Most of the land was unirrigated. Thus only the monsoon crop (kharif) could be grown in many places.



Since there were no chemical fertilizers or pesticides, or high yielding seeds, the yield was less than it is today. But still, the productivity of the land (the yield per hectare) was amongst the highest in the world in those days.

The soil in the river valleys of India is extremely rich. With their hard work and intelligence, the peasants took advantage of this soil to raise two crops in a year.

On the other hand, in the best fields in most European countries farmers could grow only one or two crops in three years. The soil there was not good enough to grow wheat two years in a row – so after growing one wheat crop each field would be left untilled to fallow, or planted with oats in rotation.

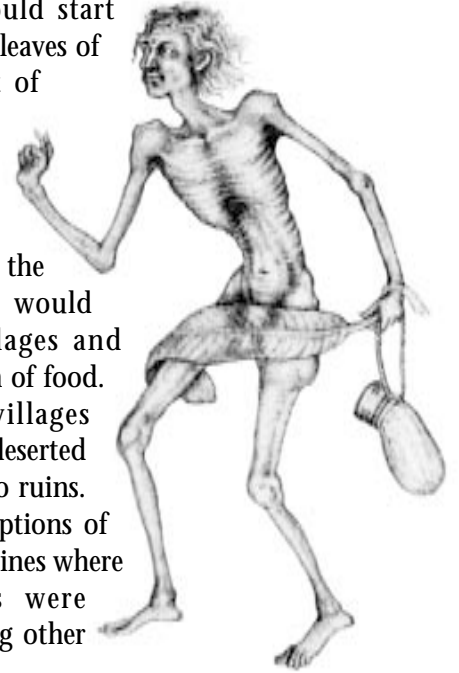
Most parts of Europe have a heavy and deep soil. Such soil cannot be ploughed without a special, strong kind of plough. But such ploughs were not made in those days. That is why the productivity of European soil was much lower than that of Indian soil.

European travellers were astonished to see that not only could Indian peasants grow two crops in a year in some areas, but also so many different kinds of crops could grow in the warm climate of India. In a single village, fifteen kinds of kharif (monsoon) crops and ten kinds of rabi (winter) crops might be grown. In addition to this, fruits, vegetables, and spices were also grown. There was hardly any other country in those days where such varied crops were grown in a single village. This productivity was indeed the basis of India's famed prosperity.

However, even though they grew so many crops, the peasants remained very poor. Many children would die of malnutrition and the common people lived under the threat of starvation.

The Condition of the Peasants

When the rains were sufficient and the crops were also good, the peasants would have enough to get by. But they would not be able to save anything for difficult times. Thus, whenever the rains were scanty and water sources dried up, the crops could not grow, and then the peasants would have absolutely nothing to live on. In times of famine, thousands of people would become victims of starvation and epidemics. Things would get so bad that people would start eating grass and leaves of wild trees. Out of desperation, many peasants would sell themselves and their children to the wealthy. People would leave their villages and wander in search of food. Hundreds of villages would thus be deserted and slowly fall to ruins. There are descriptions of such terrible famines where human beings were reduced to eating other human beings.



Such is the story of the peasants of the Mughal period - all the wealth was grown in their fields and all the poverty resided in their homes.



A sick man attended by horn players, drawn in the Punjab hills

You must be thinking, how did this happen? After all, what happened to all the large harvests that peasants reaped?

Land tax

A large part of the agricultural produce was taken away in the form of tax. During the time of Akbar, one third of the crop would be taken from the peasants as tax. But in the reign of Jahangir and Shahjahan the burden of taxation kept increasing.

By the year 1700, half the yield was being taken from the peasants as tax. Can you imagine, after taxes had been paid and grain set aside for seeds, what would be left for the needs of the peasant's families?



Come, let us visit a village of those days. Let us get to know what the people underwent during the times of the emperors Akbar, Jahangir, Shahjahan and Aurangzeb.

The Story of a Village (Village Kararia, Suba Agra)

Tax to be paid in cash, not in grain

In the suba of Agra lay the village of Kararia. As villages went it was quite small - with about 80 peasant families. There were also 5 families of craftsmen, who made things of wood, iron and leather. Some craftsmen made clay pots and some wove cloth. Most of the peasants were Jats by caste, but there were also some Gujar peasants.

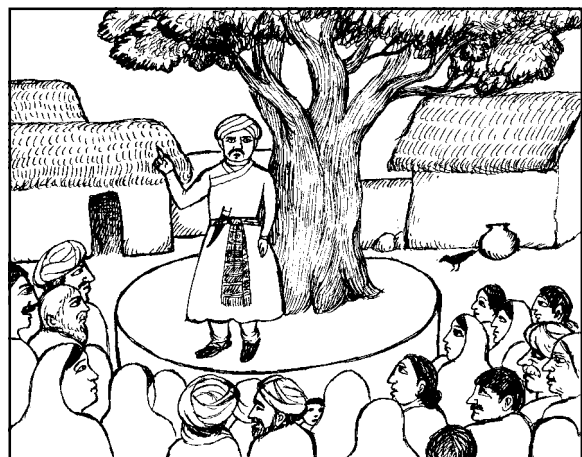
It was around the year 1580. The kharif crop stood swaying in the breeze -- bajra, jowar, moong, moth, til and kodon. One day, a group of horsemen came to the village from the nearby town of Bayana. On entering, they went straight to the house of the zamindar, Suraj Dev Jat. In a few moments the news had spread in the whole village that these men had come to measure the peasant's fields to assess how much tax they would have to pay.

The patel (headman) of the village and the patwari (accountant) were summoned to the house of the zamindar. They were the wealthier and more important peasants of the village who helped in collecting the taxes from the people.

In the evening the panchayat was called and all the people of the village collected at the

chaupal (square). The officer who had come from Bayana to fix the tax was called Puranmal. He said, "We have come here under orders from Muzaffar Khan and Raja Todarmal, the ministers of Emperor Akbar. The emperor has changed the system of assessing and collecting tax for the whole empire. This year you will pay the land-tax not in grain, but in money."

Immediately, a whisper started up among the people. After some time a peasant stood up to say, "But till now we have been paying land-tax only in grain." Puranmal said, "You can now sell your crop in Bayana and pay land-tax from that cash."



Trying to get the peasants to his side, the zamindar Suraj Dev said, "Why are you getting so upset? Earlier too you paid one third of the crop - you still have to pay the same. Only, not in grain, but in cash."

"We had heard that Emperor Akbar is good and we thought that he might reduce the land-tax. But now he's just added to our troubles," a peasant said.

What had been changed -- the quantity of taxation or the form of taxation?

In comparison with the peasants of the Mughal period, do the peasants of today have to pay more as land tax or less?

What advantage would the jagirdar have had if the tax was paid in cash instead of grain?

The Peasants Sell Grain to the Banjaras

That year all the peasants of Kararia carted their grain to Bayana. Peasants from many nearby villages had also brought their grain. Much more grain was brought for sale at Bayana than ever before.

Buying and selling grain was done by the banjaras (migrant traders). A group of 30-40 banjaras would travel from place to place with 200-300 bullocks. They would purchase grain, sugar



Banjaras loading grain

and jaggery (गड़) from villages and then sell them in various distant cities. Starting from the hills of the Himalayas, they would move, selling and buying, all the way to Cambay, Bengal and south India.

All the peasants sold their grain to these banjaras. In exchange for some of the grain, they bought salt and for the rest they took cash so that the tax could be paid.

The Collection of Land Tax

A few days later the amil of the jagirdar turned up in the village.

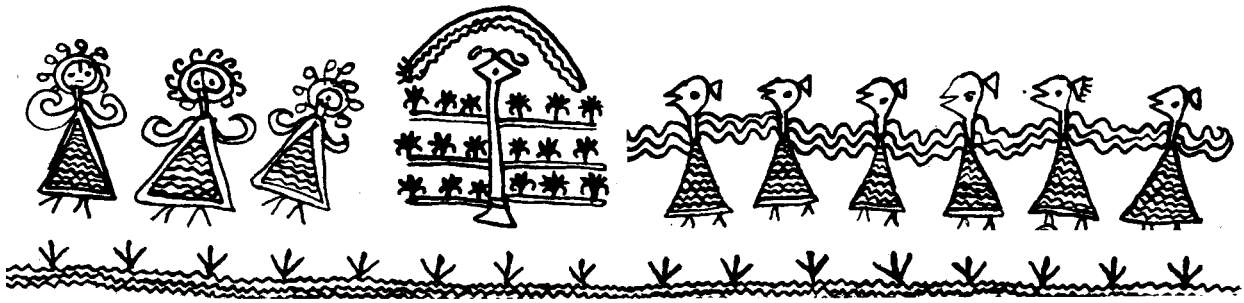
Do you remember who the amil was and what he did?

The amil went to the house of the zamindar Suraj Dev Jat and told him to collect the tax from the people of the village. The amil said, "In your village the kharif crop has been sown over a total of 9,000 bighas. I have calculated this with the patwari. This adds up to Rs. 17,000 in tax. Please have this amount collected and kept for me. I am going for a round of the other villages of my jagirdar. When I return in ten days I will take the money from you."

Suraj Dev Jat called the patel and the patwari and told them to collect the tax from the peasants. The patwari said, "And what if someone refuses to pay?"

The zamindar said, "Two of my horsemen and four soldiers will go with you; let me see who has the guts to refuse."

After two-three days they had collected the tax from most of the people. No tax could be collected from some peasants whose crop had been lost due to hail.



When the amil of the jagirdar came, Suraj Dev handed him the money collected as tax along with an account. The patel and the zamindar together explained that due to hail, land-tax could not be paid by some peasants. The payment due could be noted against their names and collected from them over the next two-three years. The amil had this noted in the account of the patwari.

When the amil was about to leave, Suraj Dev hinted that he had forgotten about something; at which the amil handed him ten percent of the total land-tax collected. This was Suraj Dev's 'malikana' or commission. In return for having the land-tax collected from the village people, the zamindars were paid this malikana.

The amil paid the patel and also the patwari some percentage of the land-tax.

As it is, the zamindars and patels were given a discount in land-tax. They paid only one-fourth of their produce in land-tax whereas the common peasants were required to pay one third of their crop.

Who was benefiting by the collection of land-tax?

If there was no zamindar, patel and patwari, what are the things that the jagirdar's amil would have had to do to collect land-tax?

1 _____

2 _____

What did the amil give the zamindar for his help?

Was the amil able to collect the entire amount of the jagirdar's salary?

Debt

The common peasant had many difficulties. Sometimes the crop would not fetch a good price in the market. Then they would not have enough money to pay the land-tax. In such a situation they would have to borrow money from the money-lender to pay the tax. If they were unable to pay, the zamindar's men would often beat them up.

"We Will Farm Elsewhere!"

Burdened with debt, three peasant families decided to leave Kararia village for another place. They had heard that the amil of that place was giving concession in land-tax to newcomers who would settle there. He was also giving taqavi (a development loan) to buy oxen and ploughs.

After these three families had decided to leave, they went to the patel of the village to tell him. The patel frowned and said, "Very well. But there are 20 bighas of land in your name in this village. Who will pay the land-tax for that? The jagirdar's amil will demand his entire money, whether the land has been tilled or not. If you go away, we will have to go around trying to find someone who will plough your land. You think leaving your land and running away is just a joke? No one can just get up and leave their land!"

"But what shall we do with the land? We have neither ploughs, nor oxen nor seeds. All our farming is being done in debt - that doesn't leave anything for us to eat," the peasants replied.



Hearing this the voice of the patel rose in anger, "Go! Let me see how you run away from the village! I will send the zamindar's soldiers and have you arrested. Then you can starve in prison!" he said.

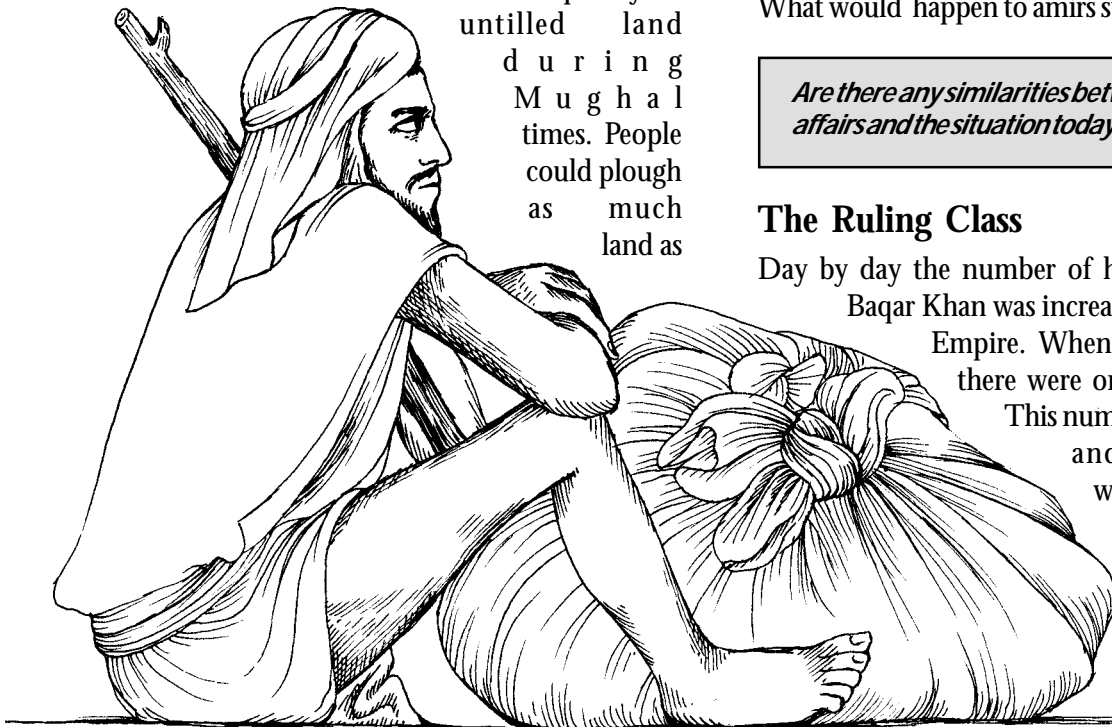
This threat scared the peasants. In silence they returned to their homes. But hardly a month had passed before one of the families ran away at night and could not be traced even after a great deal of searching.

The village patel had tried to stop the people from leaving. For whose good did he do this?

The zamindars kept soldiers. What have you understood about the functions of these soldiers so far?

No Field to Remain Unsown

There was plenty of untilled land during Mughal times. People could plough as much land as



they wanted. That is why those peasants who suffered hardships in one place would often leave their villages in the hope of taking up farming in another place. This tendency of the peasants irritated the zamindars and jagirdars. They wanted more and more peasants to come and settle in their areas and farm as much land as possible. That is why they would give newcomers land as well as concessions in land-tax.

They would also try hard to prevent peasants from running away from their areas. If they could not stop a peasant family from leaving, they would give the land to another peasant to plough so that there would be some crop and the land-tax could be paid. However, if the original owner of the land returned he could get his land back. But in his absence, the fields could not remain unsown. For if fields remained uncultivated, how would the jagirdars, the zamindars and the emperor manage? What would happen to amirs such as Baqar Khan?

Are there any similarities between this state of affairs and the situation today? Explain.

The Ruling Class

Day by day the number of high amirs such as Baqar Khan was increasing in the Mughal Empire. When Akbar was ruling there were only 51 high amirs.

This number kept increasing and in 1700 there were more than 500 such amirs.

How were the expenses of all these amirs to be met?

Taxes Go Up in Kararia

By the time of Emperors Shahjahan and Aurangzeb, land-tax had increased tremendously - from one third of the crop under Akbar, to one half. In addition to what was permitted by the emperor, the jagirdars would try to extract even higher taxes.

It must have been the year 1655. The Mughal emperor Aurangzeb had given Kararia village to Raja Jai Singh as jagir. Jai Singh was a prominent amir of the Mughal empire.

No sooner was the kharif crop harvested than the amil of Raja Jai Singh appeared to collect the land-tax. The first thing he said to the zamindar was, "This time the peasants will pay a new tax. It will be used to pay the fee for the patwari, instead of having it paid by the jagirdar."

Flaring up at this, the zamindar said, "How can this be done? Already the rate at which you are taxing the peasants doesn't even leave them with enough to eat! Now we are reaching a point where we zamindars can't even collect from the peasants what it has been our right to collect. Go! Go and tell the jagirdar that the people of this village will not pay this new tax!"

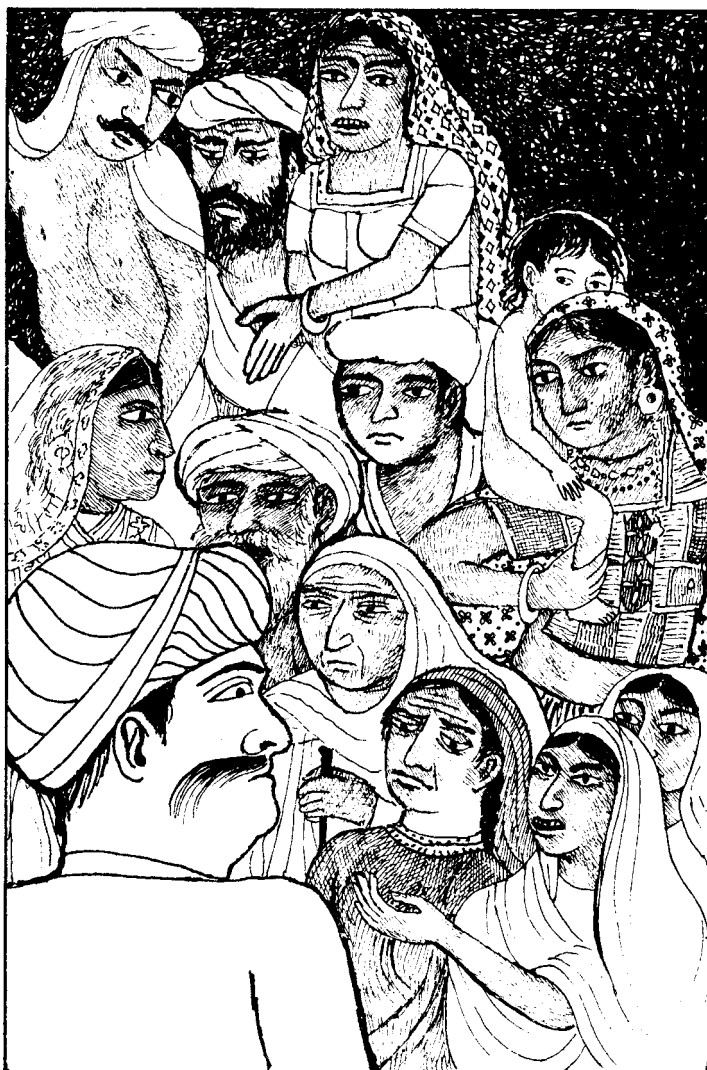
You know how the zamindars had to pay a lower rate of tax in comparison to the peasants. They also received a portion of the land-tax that the jagirdar took from the peasants. On top of this, they would make the peasants pay them additional amounts on various pretexts. Like the bhogpatis in the old days (who you read about last year), the zamindars used to extract levies from the peasants on their houses, cattle, on weddings, journeys, festivals and so on.

In whose interest did the zamindar oppose the amil's attempt to increase tax?

At the panchayat the peasants gave the amil a piece of their mind. They said that if no one else in the nearby area pays this tax, why should they?

Despite all this, the amil remained stubborn and threatened that if the patwari fees did not come from Kararia he would return with the army and create havoc.

The next day the people of the village decided in the panchayat that they would take their complaint to Raja Jai Singh at Agra. They collected some other peasants from nearby villages and around 20 of them reached Agra.



The Peasants Complain to the Jagirdar

In the grand palace of Raja Jai Singh, the peasants narrated their woes. One peasant said, "Maharaj, last year 50 maunds of jowar grew in my field. The amil took 25 maunds in land-tax. The zamindar took away 7 maunds in addition. And then, showing some earlier dues, the amil took away another 5 maunds. On top of this the village moneylender claimed 2 maunds because last year I had borrowed from him for seed. And now this year a new tax is being imposed. From where will we pay it and if we do manage to pay it, what will we eat?"

Listening to such accounts, the jagirdar agreed to remove the new tax and told them that he would tell the amil not to collect it. The peasants breathed a sigh of relief and left for their village.

But the very next year Raja Jai Singh was transferred and a new jagirdar came in his place. His amil too tried to collect the new tax. When this happened 40 peasant families left Kararia for another village.

The Peasants Plead with the Emperor

Over time, the situation in Delhi, Agra, Bayana and other nearby villages continued to worsen. All around, the excesses of jagirdars and their amils increased. Peasants of many villages even reached emperor Aurangzeb with their appeals.

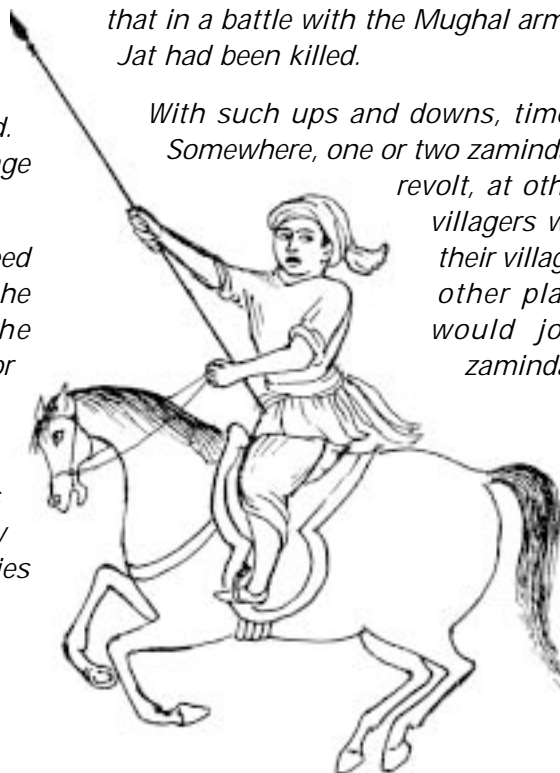
The emperor did promise them that they would be protected but he did not want to do anything against his jagirdars. He issued many farmans to his officers saying that illegal taxes should not be taken, under no condition should more than half the crop be taken, and the peasants should be helped to improve and increase cultivation. But no one listened to these grand proclamations.

Zamindars Rebel against Mughal Rule

Meanwhile, news reached Kararia that a zamindar named Gokula Jat had rebelled against the emperor and the peasants of nearby villages had joined him. The zamindar of Kararia also thought of joining them. But he was also afraid - after all how could they face the mighty Mughal army! In a few days the news came that in a battle with the Mughal army, Gokula Jat had been killed.

With such ups and downs, time passed.

Somewhere, one or two zamindars would revolt, at other places villagers would flee their villages and at other places they would join rebel zamindars.



The main problem that the peasants had against Mughal rule was that they were charged a land-tax beyond all reasonable limits. However, why did the zamindars rebel against the Mughals? What was their grudge against Mughal rule?

Think over these questions:

Would the zamindars have benefited more if Mughal rule had not been there?

What benefit did the peasants hope to get by helping the zamindars to fight against the Mughals?

The Revolt of Raja Ram Jat

Fourteen years after the death of Gokula Jat there was another wave of protest. Some 30 kilometers from Kararia, the zamindar of a village named Sinsini revolted against Mughal rule in 1683. His name was Raja Ram Jat. He refused to pay the land-tax collected from the peasants to the jagirdar, Nawab Khan-e-Jahan, because he wanted to set up a kingdom of his own. Great was the excitement in Kararia and nearby villages. Nawab Khan-e-Jahan marched towards Sinsini to crush the revolt of Ram Jat. The raja of Amber, Bishan Das, also sent his army to assist Khan-e-Jahan.

Meanwhile, one day some peasants of Sinsini turned up in Kararia as they had relatives in the village. That very evening they called all the people of the village and told them about Sinsini and Raja Ram Jat. They said, "This time we will make these jagirdars bite the dust. Let the nawab and the raja of Amber come against us. All of you should also help us in this fight." A peasant said, "We need young men to fight the Mughal army. If we can get even ten young men from your village it will be of great help."

Almost at once came a voice from the crowd, "I'm ready. I'll come to Sinsini to fight the Mughal army!" Soon many other voices had risen. "Yes, me too", "Yes, I'll come too." Before long 22 of them had volunteered. That very

night they tied up their luggage, took their swords and spears and left to join the army of Raja Ram Jat.

About twenty days passed by. One day one of the boys who had gone to Sinsini came panting on a horse to Kararia. Standing in the middle of the village, he called out in jubilation, "Listen! Listen, people of the village, listen to how we defeated the armies of nawab Khan-e-Jahan and the king of Amber, Bishan Das. Listen to how we made the jagirdars and the fauzdars flee."

When the people of the village had collected he narrated the whole story. The army of Raja Ram Jat had repelled two attacks of Nawab Khan-e-Jahan. The nawab had been defeated and forced to flee. A wave of surprise and joy spread among the people of Kararia.

"Did the Jat peasants really defeat and chase away the army of the Mughals? How could this be?" Excited people with these thoughts on their minds moved towards the house of zamindar Suraj Dev, to persuade him to join hands with Raja Ram Jat.

Thus started the revolt of the people of Kararia village. The Mughal rule was rocked by this and many similar revolts. It became more and more difficult to collect land-tax. Now they had to fight to claim every rupee from the villages.



Exercises

- 1 What was the difference between agriculture in Europe and India in Mughal times?
- 2 What changes took place in the land-tax system in Akbar's time and what remained as before? Make a list.
- 3 What kind of help would the zamindar of Kararia village, Suraj Dev Jat, give to the amil?
- 4 (a) How did the patel of Kararia prevent the peasants from leaving the village and why?
(b) In the Mughal period, if some peasants went away, leaving their village and land, what would be done with their land? Also explain the reasons for this.
- 5 What did the zamindars take from the peasants? When the jagirdars started collecting more tax, what difficulty did this create for the zamindars?

6 The peasants made many attempts to solve their problems. What examples of such attempts did you see in this chapter?

7 (a) Against whom did Raja Ram Jat rebel and why?

(b) Why did some people of Kararia go to join the army of Raja Ram Jat?

8 In Jahangir's court there was a painter named Govardhan. He made a picture like the one on the right. Some people are enjoying the singing of wandering singers. At some distance the village can be seen.

(a) Does this village look like the villages of today?

(b) What are the other things you can see in this picture?

(c) What might the occupations of the people shown in the picture be?

