Chapter 8: Peasants, Zamindars and the State

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 What are the problems in using the Ain as a source for reconstructing agrarian history? How do historians deal with this situation?

The Ain-i Akbari poses several problems. First, it presents the agrarian world largely as a view "from the top" — its purpose was to depict Akbar's empire as socially harmonious under a strong ruling class, so revolt against the state is shown as destined to fail. What it tells us about peasants is therefore a view from the apex, not from those who worked the land. Second, numerous errors in totalling have been detected, ascribed to arithmetic or transcription slips by Abu'l Fazl's assistants. Third, the quantitative data are skewed, since they were not collected uniformly from all provinces — for example, the caste composition of zamindars is missing for Bengal and Orissa, and the detailed prices and wages come mainly from areas around the imperial capital Agra, limiting their relevance elsewhere. Historians deal with these limitations by supplementing the Ain with sources that originated away from the Mughal capital — detailed revenue records from Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the extensive records of the East India Company for eastern India. These record instances of conflict between peasants, zamindars and the state, and thus offer insights into peasants' own perceptions and their expectations of fairness.

Q2 To what extent is it possible to characterise agricultural production in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries as subsistence agriculture? Give reasons for your answer.

Agricultural production of this period cannot be characterised purely as subsistence agriculture. It is true that the primary purpose of farming was to feed people, so basic staples such as rice, wheat and millets were the most frequently cultivated crops, their distribution corresponding to a descending scale of rainfall. To that extent a subsistence element was certainly present. However, the sources also frequently mention jins-i kamil (literally, "perfect crops"), which the Mughal state actively encouraged peasants to grow because they yielded higher revenue. Cotton and sugarcane were jins-i kamil par excellence — cotton was grown across central India and the Deccan plateau, while Bengal was famous for its sugar. Cash crops also included oilseeds such as mustard, and lentils. This shows that subsistence and commercial production were closely intertwined within an average peasant's holding. The commercial dimension is reinforced by the arrival of new crops during the seventeenth century: maize came via Africa and Spain and became a major crop of western India, while tomatoes, potatoes, chillies, pineapple and papaya were introduced from the New World. Thus, while staples for self-consumption were central, the strong presence of commercial crops means production was only partly subsistence-oriented — it had a significant market-oriented character.

Q3 Describe the role played by women in agricultural production.

Women and men worked shoulder to shoulder in agrarian society, performing specified roles. While men tilled and ploughed the land, women sowed, weeded, threshed and winnowed the harvest. With the growth of nucleated villages and individuated peasant farming, production rested on the labour and resources of the entire household, so a sharp segregation between home and field was not possible. Women were equally central to artisanal production — spinning yarn, sifting and kneading clay for pottery, and embroidery depended heavily on female labour; the more commercialised the product, the greater the demand on women's work. Peasant and artisan women worked not only in the fields but also went to the houses of their employers or to the markets when necessary. Women were also valued as child bearers in a labour-dependent society; high female mortality meant a shortage of wives, giving rise to customs such as payment of bride-price (rather than dowry) and the acceptance of remarriage for divorced and widowed women. Biases linked to biological functions persisted — menstruating women could not touch the plough or the potter's wheel in western India, nor enter betel groves in Bengal. Among the landed gentry, women could inherit property; women, including widows, participated in the rural land market and inherited and sold or mortgaged zamindaris, and women zamindars were known in eighteenth-century Bengal, including at the head of the famous Rajshahi zamindari.

Q4 Discuss, with examples, the significance of monetary transactions during the period under consideration.

Monetary transactions were highly significant, as a cash nexus had already developed through trade between villages and towns. In the Mughal heartland, revenue itself was assessed and collected in cash, and Akbar instructed the amil-guzar to strive to make cultivators pay in cash while keeping payment in kind open. Artisans producing for the export market, such as weavers, received their advances or wages in cash, as did producers of commercial goods like cotton, silk and indigo. The depth of monetisation is captured by the French traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, who found that even a very small Indian village had a money-changer, or shroff, who acted as a banker and made remittances. This cash economy was sustained by the flow of silver: expanding trade with Europe and the opening of the New World brought huge amounts of silver bullion into Asia, much of it gravitating towards India, which had no silver resources of its own. This ensured a remarkable stability of metal currency, especially the silver rupya, enabling an unprecedented expansion in the minting and circulation of coins and the state's ability to extract taxes in cash. Monetisation was further accelerated by the brisk buying and selling of zamindaris and by zamindars selling the produce of their milkiyat lands and establishing markets (haats). Giovanni Careri's account vividly describes how silver from across the globe ultimately centred in the Mughal Empire.

Q5 Examine the evidence that suggests that land revenue was important for the Mughal fiscal system.

Land revenue was the economic mainstay of the Mughal Empire, since the state derived the bulk of its income from agricultural production. This importance is reflected in the elaborate administrative apparatus the state created to control agriculture and to fix and collect revenue across the rapidly expanding empire. At its head was the office (daftar) of the diwan, who supervised the fiscal system, while revenue officials and record keepers penetrated the agricultural domain and became decisive agents in shaping agrarian relations. The state first sought specific information about the extent of agricultural lands and their produce before fixing taxes. Revenue arrangements had two stages — assessment, giving the jama (the amount assessed), and collection, giving the hasil (the amount actually realised). Akbar's instructions to the amil-guzar, the preference for cash with the option of payment in kind, and the various methods of assessment such as kankut and batai all show the system's centrality. Land was measured province by province, the Ain compiled the aggregates during Akbar's reign, and measurement continued under later rulers — in 1665 Aurangzeb ordered his revenue officials to prepare annual, village-wise and peasant-wise records of cultivation. The Ain's third book, the mulk-abadi, is devoted to the fiscal side of the empire and provides rich quantitative data on revenue rates, measured area and assessed revenue for the twelve provinces. All this demonstrates how vital land revenue was to the Mughal fiscal system.

Q6 To what extent do you think caste was a factor in influencing social and economic relations in agrarian society?

Caste was a powerful factor shaping social and economic relations in agrarian society, though its influence varied across the social ladder. Although cultivators were engaged in a common agricultural economy, deep inequities on the basis of caste and caste-like distinctions made them a highly heterogeneous group. A sizeable number worked as menials or agricultural labourers (majur), and despite the abundance of cultivable land, certain caste groups were assigned menial tasks and relegated to poverty. These groups formed a large section of the village population, possessed the least resources, and were constrained by their place in the caste hierarchy, much like the Dalits of modern India. Such distinctions penetrated other communities too — among Muslims, menials such as the halalkhoran (scavengers) were housed outside the village boundaries, and the mallahzadas of Bihar were comparable to slaves. There was thus a direct correlation between caste, poverty and social status at the lower strata. At intermediate levels, however, these correlations were less rigid and some mobility was possible. A seventeenth-century Marwar manual lists Rajputs as peasants sharing space with Jats, who ranked lower; the Gauravas near Vrindavan sought Rajput status; and castes such as the Ahirs, Gujars and Malis rose in the hierarchy owing to the profitability of cattle rearing and horticulture, while the Sadgops and Kaivartas in the east acquired peasant status. At the top, caste underpinned the elevated status of zamindars, with a Brahmana-Rajput combine exercising firm control over rural society. The panchayat worked to uphold caste boundaries, holding marriages in the presence of the headman and punishing offences against caste, while each jati also had its own panchayat. Thus caste structured relations from the lowest labourers to the landed elite.

Q7 How were the lives of forest dwellers transformed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries?

The lives of forest dwellers, termed jangli in contemporary texts, were transformed by several external and internal forces. Being jangli did not mean an absence of civilisation; it described those whose livelihood came from gathering forest produce, hunting and shifting agriculture, activities that were largely season-specific — among the Bhils, spring was for gathering produce, summer for fishing, the monsoon for cultivation, and autumn and winter for hunting. This presumed a mobility that was a distinctive feature of forest tribes. The state's intrusion altered this world. The forest was seen as a subversive place of refuge (mawas) for rebels who paid no taxes, yet the state also needed its resources: it required elephants for the army, so the peshkash levied from forest people often included elephants, and in Mughal ideology the royal hunt symbolised the state's concern for all its subjects. The spread of commercial agriculture was a major external factor — forest products such as honey, beeswax and gum lac were in great demand, gum lac becoming a major seventeenth-century export, while elephants were captured and sold and some tribes, like the Lohanis, engaged in overland trade between India and Afghanistan. Social change was equally important: like the "big men" of villages, tribes had chieftains, and many tribal chiefs became zamindars and some even kings, building armies by recruiting from their lineages — as with the Ahom kings and their paiks. The transition from tribal to monarchical systems, though begun earlier, became fully developed by the sixteenth century, illustrated by the wars of the Koch kings. New cultural influences also penetrated these zones, with sufi saints (pirs) playing a role in the slow spread of Islam, while the clearing of forests for agriculture, as described in the Bengali Chandimangala, steadily reduced the forest world itself.

Q8 Examine the role played by zamindars in Mughal India.

Zamindars were a class of landed proprietors who lived off agriculture but did not participate directly in the processes of production, enjoying social and economic privileges by virtue of their superior status. Their elevated position rested partly on caste and partly on the services (khidmat) they rendered to the state. They held extensive personal lands called milkiyat, cultivated for their private use with hired or servile labour, which they could sell, bequeath or mortgage at will. A key source of their power was that they could often collect revenue on behalf of the state, for which they were financially compensated, and many also commanded military resources, holding fortresses (qilachas) and armed contingents of cavalry, artillery and infantry — the Ain records an enormous combined zamindar force. Visualised as a pyramid, the zamindars formed its narrow apex, with a Brahmana-Rajput combine dominant alongside intermediate castes and Muslim zamindaris. Some zamindaris originated in conquest and the dispossession of weaker people, but this required confirmation by an imperial order (sanad); more commonly they were consolidated slowly through colonisation of new lands, transfers of rights, state orders and purchase, which even allowed some lower-caste people to enter their ranks as zamindaris were bought and sold briskly. Zamindars played a developmental role too: they spearheaded the colonisation of agricultural land, settled cultivators by providing the means of cultivation and cash loans, sold the produce of their milkiyat, and established markets (haats), thereby accelerating monetisation of the countryside. Although undoubtedly an exploitative class, their relationship with peasants also had elements of reciprocity, paternalism and patronage — the bhakti saints did not depict them as oppressors, and in the agrarian uprisings of seventeenth-century north India, zamindars often received peasant support against the state.

Q9 Discuss the ways in which panchayats and village headmen regulated rural society.

The panchayat and the village headman were central to regulating rural society. The village panchayat was an assembly of elders, usually important people with hereditary rights over their property, and in mixed-caste villages it was a heterogeneous body — an oligarchy representing various castes and communities, though the village menial-cum-agricultural worker was unlikely to be represented. Its decisions were binding on members. It was headed by a muqaddam or mandal, often chosen by consensus of the village elders and ratified by the zamindar, holding office so long as he enjoyed the elders' confidence; his chief function was to supervise the preparation of village accounts, assisted by the patwari. The panchayat drew funds from a common pool contributed by individuals, which were used to entertain visiting revenue officials, meet community welfare needs such as tiding over floods, and build a bund or dig a canal. A major function was to uphold caste boundaries: in eastern India all marriages were held in the presence of the mandal, whose duty was to prevent any offence against caste. Panchayats could levy fines and impose serious punishments such as expulsion, which turned a person into an outcaste who lost the right to practise his profession — a deterrent against violating caste norms. In addition, each jati had its own jati panchayat, which arbitrated civil disputes, decided on contested land claims, judged marriages and ritual precedence; the state generally respected their decisions except in criminal matters. The panchayat also served as a court of appeal: villagers petitioned it against extortionate taxation or demands for unpaid labour (begar), and it often suggested compromise, failing which peasants could resort to deserting the village as a form of

resistance.

Q10 On an outline map of the world, mark the areas which had economic links with the Mughal Empire, and trace out possible routes of communication.

This is a map-work exercise, so refer to the "Flow of Silver" section and mark the regions the chapter names as economically linked to the Mughal Empire. Mark the other great Asian empires of the age — Ming China, Safavid Iran and Ottoman Turkey — along with the New World source of bullion (America), and the European trading nations of France, England and Portugal. Also mark Persia (with Smyrna for silk), the Red Sea port of Mocha, Basra at the head of the Persian Gulf, the silver mines of Japan, and the eastern destinations of Mughal commodities — Pegu and Tanasserri (Myanmar), Siam (Thailand), Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the Maldive Islands and Mozambique. For routes, trace the overland network running from China to the Mediterranean, and the sea routes by which silver moved from America through Europe into Turkey and Persia and then via the Red Sea and Persian Gulf to India, together with the ship routes carrying Indian goods eastward to Southeast Asia and westward to Europe. Mark only the places named in the chapter and do not invent additional sites.

Q11 Visit a neighbouring village. Find out how many people live there, which crops are grown, which animals are raised, which artisanal groups reside there, whether women own land, how the local panchayat functions. Compare this information with what you have learnt about the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, noting similarities and differences. Explain both the changes and the continuities that you find.

This is a project (choose one), so visit a nearby village and record its population, the crops grown, the animals raised, the artisanal groups present, whether women own land, and how the local panchayat functions. Then set these findings against the chapter's account of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries — comparing, for example, today's panchayat with the oligarchic panchayat and muqaddam of Mughal times, present crop patterns and cash crops with the staples and jins-i kamil described, and women's land rights now with the inheritance and bride-price customs noted in the text — and write up both the continuities and the changes you observe, keeping your comparisons grounded in what the chapter actually says.

Q12 Select a small section of the Ain (10-12 pages, available online at the website indicated below). Read it carefully and prepare a report on how it can be used by a historian.

This is a project (choose one), so select a short section of the Ain-i Akbari (10-12 pages) from the online source indicated in the chapter, read it carefully, and prepare a report on its value to a historian. In your report, note the kinds of information it offers — such as the quantitative data on revenue, measured area and the castes and troops of zamindars — and weigh its usefulness against the limitations the chapter discusses, namely that it offers a view from the apex, contains errors in totalling, and provides unevenly collected data, so that historians must supplement and cross-check it with other sources.