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Topic: Agrarian Crisis During Mughal Period

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Agrarian Crises During Mughals

Peasant resistance was a continuous feature under Mughal rule, and was often put down by ruthless severity. However repression had gone on all the time along with attempts at conciliation and assimilation simultaneously.

- The new feature we find in Aurangzeb's time is greater spirit of defiance and resistance, and better organization, either by local landed elements or charismatic leaders.
- There has been a tendency to put all these movements under a common heading, such as Hindu reaction to the narrow, bigoted policies of Aurangzeb, or the result of increased economic exploitation. However we need to understand the specific features of each of these movements. It should also be remembered that in medieval times, most anti-establishment movements had to draw upon religion as a binding force.

During the reign of Aurangzeb, the Mughal Empire was faced with numerous rebellions and revolts from the Jats, Satnamis, Sikhs and Marathas. Irfan Habib has viewed these as peasant uprisings.

Sources

Habib relies heavily for his information of the period on the works of Bernier(French), St.Xavier, Peter Mundi, Niccolo Manucci(Europeans) and Bhimsen.

Causes

Economic Factors

1. Land Revenue System: Mughal practice was to pitch the land revenue demand at the

highest possible rates so as to secure the resources for the military operations of the empire. The smaller peasants were often left with barely subsistence level produce after paying taxes. Also, insistence of payment in cash, made the peasants subject to the vagaries of market forces.

2. **Transfer and Escheat:** The practice of reckless and frequent transfers and law of escheat put pressure on the *jagirdars* to extract as much as they could from their jagirs in as short a period of time as possible. As a result there was no investment in agriculture which could yield long-term benefits.
3. **Ijaradari-** Further, the mansabdars who were in the grip of financial crisis (shortfall of hasil from jama) or found themselves unable to manage their jagirs, started farming out the jagirs to the highest bidder. The Ijaradari system, which started from Shah Jahan's time, grew more during the time of Aurangzeb.
4. **Fraud:** If this was not enough, some jagirdars of Gujarat were trying to extort more than the whole produce in revenue by the simple expedient of estimating the yield at two and a half times the actual one. Aurangzeb's order prohibiting the imposition of numerous taxes by the jagirdars proved largely ineffective.

Administrative Factors

- **Insensitivity:** The administration was insensitive towards the needs of the peasants.
- Degenerated and demoralized bureaucracy as Aurangzeb was giving preference to ulemmas instead of long time nobles.
- **Preoccupation of Aurangzeb:** Due to preoccupation of Aurangzeb with Deccan and other rebellions, the local zamindars were able to organize themselves and resist.
- **Jagirdari Crisis:** The Jagirdari crisis had also led to weakening of jagir system and growing power of zamindars.
- **Conflict of Interest:** There was a conflict of interest between jagirdars and zamindars as well. When jagirdars pressed for more revenue this naturally increased the pressure on zamindars. It was against the zamindar's interest that peasants be exploited to such an extent that they leave en masse - something jagirdars didn't care about. So zamindars also sided with the peasants and revolted.

Socio-Cultural Factors

1. The level of orthodoxy had increased under Aurangzeb and officials had turned insensitive to cultural feelings of people.
2. The growing influence of sectarian movements had strengthened the regional identities and hence increased the level of consciousness among people. In case of Afghans, the Raushanai movement had laid the cultural foundation.
3. The zamindars (specially the primary zamindars) had close caste, clan or religion based links with the peasantry. They also had their own forts and small armies and thus they organized the peasants behind them who too found a leadership (as it was difficult for them to rally on their own against the Mughal army) and many peasant revolts broke out. Religion was often used as rhetoric to rally the peasants.

Implications

Under such conditions, the peasants raised the banner of revolt against the Mughal state in the

seventeenth century, which resulted in the agrarian crisis. The revolts of the Satnamis, the Jats, the Sikhs and Marathas during the reign of Aurangzeb were, according to Irfan Hibib, peasants uprisings.

Here the quotes particularly two European writers 1) Peter Mundi in 1670s who said that in the Mughal Empire one revolt or the other is going at some place all the time 2) another one by Niccolo Manucci, the Italian traveler writing in 1700 he said that the main problem is to confront the zamindars.

Forms of Passive Resistance

- Flight -Either by individual peasants or that of an entire vilage. This could happen particularly if there were accessible areas held by autonomus chiefs or 'zortalab' zamindars, where the peasant might hope to get better terms. Bernier records that due to severe oppression peasants took to flight and " a considerable portion of the land remain untilled". During the reign of Jahangir the peasants were so cruelly and pitilessly oppressed that the fields remained unsown and grew into wildernesses.
- For Mughal authorities the flight of the peasants to the lands of chief was sufficient justification for military expeditions being sent against them.
- When flight was not possible, or not likely to be rewarding the peasants had no choice but to stay in their villages and try to delay or refuse payments. In such situation the Mughal authorities either slaughtered or enslaved them along with their women and children.
- Peasants finally take to armed resistance when unable to cope with ever increasing oppression.

Conclusion: While Habib made a valid point with regard to exploitation, it would be simplistic to view the above movements as mere peasant uprisings and the decline of the Mughal Empire in just these terms. Other factors in these uprisings also need to be looked at.