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## Agrarian Structure and Land Revenue System under the Mughal Emperor Akbar

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### Abstract:

*The agrarian structure of the Mughal Empire formed the economic backbone of imperial authority, and under Emperor Akbar (1556–1605), significant reforms were introduced to stabilize, rationalize, and centralize the land revenue system. This study examines the agrarian organization during Akbar's reign, focusing on the relationship between peasants, zamindars, jagirdars, and the imperial state. It analyses the evolution of revenue assessment methods, especially the zabt and dahsala systems, and evaluates their economic, administrative, and social impact. By drawing upon primary sources such as the Ain-i-Akbari and modern historiography, the paper argues that Akbar's agrarian reforms were not merely fiscal adjustments but part of a broader project of imperial consolidation. While these reforms enhanced administrative efficiency and ensured steady state income, they also reveal the structural pressures placed upon the peasantry. The study highlights how agrarian management under Akbar became a foundation for Mughal stability and long-term political expansion.*

**Keywords:** Agrarian structure, Akbar, Mughal land revenue, zabt system, dahsala, zamindars, jagirdari system

### Introduction:

The Mughal Empire was fundamentally an agrarian state whose political strength depended upon control over land and agricultural surplus. In sixteenth-century India, agriculture constituted the principal occupation of the population, and land revenue formed the largest share of imperial income. When Akbar ascended the throne in 1556, he inherited not only territories but also a revenue system that lacked uniformity and effective supervision. Regional variations, arbitrary assessment, and local power structures often limited central authority. Recognizing that stable revenue was essential for maintaining a large standing army and administrative machinery, Akbar undertook a series of reforms that restructured agrarian administration across the empire (Richards, 1993).

Akbar's agrarian reforms were gradual and evolved over time, particularly during the 1570s

and 1580s. They were closely associated with the work of capable officials, most notably Raja Todar Mal, whose administrative experience contributed to the development of systematic land measurement and revenue assessment. Rather than relying solely on conquest, Akbar sought durable governance based on rational administration and detailed record keeping. The reforms were therefore both economic and political in character, designed to strengthen imperial control while ensuring predictable revenue extraction (Chandra, 2007).

### **The Nature of Agrarian Structure in Mughal India:**

The agrarian structure under Akbar was characterized by a layered hierarchy involving peasants (raiyyats), zamindars, jagirdars, and imperial officials. At the base of this structure were the peasants, who directly cultivated the land and generated the agricultural surplus upon which the empire depended. Although the Mughal state claimed ultimate sovereignty over land, actual cultivation was carried out by village communities that possessed customary rights. These rights were not ownership in the modern legal sense but were recognized through continued occupation and payment of revenue (Habib, 1963).

Peasants varied in economic status. Some were khud-kasht cultivators who owned their ploughs and cattle and cultivated their own fields, while others were tenants or sharecroppers with limited resources. Despite such variation, all were subject to state revenue demand. The central issue was not ownership but the extraction of surplus. The Mughal state aimed to ensure that a fixed proportion of agricultural produce was transferred to the imperial treasury. Thus, agrarian relations were deeply shaped by fiscal considerations (Habib, 1963).

Above the peasants stood the zamindars, who played a crucial intermediary role. Zamindars were local chiefs, hereditary landholders, or influential rural magnates who collected revenue on behalf of the state and retained a share as remuneration. Their authority was often rooted in lineage, caste status, and military power. While they recognized Mughal sovereignty, they also defended their local privileges. Akbar's policy toward zamindars was pragmatic: he incorporated them into imperial service while ensuring that they did not become autonomous rivals (Chandra, 2007).

The jagirdari system formed another important layer of agrarian administration. Under the mansabdari system, Mughal officials were granted jagirs, which entitled them to collect revenue from specified territories instead of receiving direct salary from the treasury. Jagirdars did not own land permanently; their assignments were transferable. This prevented the consolidation of independent regional authority and maintained centralized control. However, tensions often arose between jagirdars and local zamindars, especially when revenue demands were high (Richards, 1993).

### **Evolution of Revenue Reforms under Akbar:**

In the early years of Akbar's reign, revenue collection continued largely on the basis of existing regional practices. However, as the empire expanded and administrative challenges increased, the need

for a uniform and predictable system became urgent. Initial experiments included crop-sharing arrangements and rough estimates of produce. These early measures revealed the difficulty of assessing agricultural income across diverse ecological regions (Chandra, 2007).

The turning point came in the 1570s when systematic measurement of land was introduced. The use of standardized measuring rods (jarib) ensured more accurate calculation of cultivated area. Land measurement reduced dependence on guesswork and limited corruption among local officials. By quantifying land under cultivation, the state gained greater clarity regarding potential revenue yield (Habib, 1963).

Simultaneously, classification of land became an essential feature of reform. Land was categorized into polaj (regularly cultivated), parauti (temporarily fallow), chachar (left uncultivated for several years), and banjar (wasteland). This classification was not merely descriptive but fiscal in purpose. It enabled differentiated assessment, recognizing that all land did not produce equal yield. Such administrative categorization reflects the growing bureaucratic sophistication of the Mughal state under Akbar (Richards, 1993).

#### **The Zabt System: Rationalization of Revenue Demand:**

The zabt system represented one of the most significant developments in Mughal revenue administration. Under this system, the state fixed revenue demand on the basis of the average produce of land and prevailing market prices. Rather than collecting actual produce, the assessment was monetized. This shift toward cash payment reflected increasing commercialization in parts of northern India, particularly in fertile regions such as the Gangetic plain (Habib, 1963).

The standard share claimed by the state was roughly one-third of the average produce. Although this proportion was not always uniformly applied, it served as a guiding principle. By converting produce into cash value, the state ensured predictable income and reduced logistical difficulties associated with storage and transport of grain. However, monetization also exposed peasants to market fluctuations, especially when crop prices declined but revenue demand remained fixed (Chandra, 2007).

Importantly, the zabt system was not implemented uniformly across the empire. It was mainly applied in regions where land measurement and record keeping were feasible. In areas with less developed administration, alternative methods such as crop-sharing continued. This uneven application demonstrates that Mughal revenue reform was adaptive rather than rigid (Richards, 1993).

#### **The Dahsala System and the Standardization of Revenue Assessment:**

One of the most significant refinements of the zabt system was the introduction of the dahsala system in 1580 under the supervision of Raja Todar Mal. The term “dahsala” literally means “ten years,” referring to the method of calculating the average produce and prices of crops over a ten-year period to determine revenue rates. This approach aimed to reduce annual fluctuations caused by

irregular monsoons, crop failures, or sudden price changes. By basing assessment on long-term averages, the Mughal administration sought to create stability both for the state and for cultivators (Habib, 1963).

The dahsala system represented a major step toward bureaucratic rationalization. Detailed statistical data were compiled regarding crop yields, regional variations, and market prices. This level of record-keeping reflects the increasing sophistication of Mughal administration under Akbar. By institutionalizing documentation and standardized assessment, the state reduced arbitrary exactions by local officials and increased transparency in revenue demand (Richards, 1993).

However, while the system aimed at fairness and predictability, its actual impact varied across regions. In fertile and commercially active areas, monetized revenue could be managed through market participation. In less developed regions, peasants sometimes struggled to meet cash demands, particularly during years of scarcity. Thus, the dahsala system combined administrative innovation with inherent structural pressures typical of agrarian empires (Chandra, 2007).

### **Raja Todar Mal and Administrative Reorganization:**

Raja Todar Mal occupies a central place in the history of Mughal revenue reforms. Before serving Akbar, he had administrative experience under Sher Shah Suri, whose own revenue reforms influenced later Mughal practices. Under Akbar, Todar Mal reorganized revenue administration by introducing systematic measurement, classification, and documentation. His contribution was not limited to fiscal techniques but extended to institutional restructuring of provincial administration (Habib, 1963).

Todar Mal ensured that revenue records were maintained at multiple levels, including village, pargana, and provincial offices. The appointment of officials such as the amil (revenue collector), qanungo (keeper of revenue records), and patwari (village accountant) created a layered bureaucracy that reduced reliance on informal arrangements. Such institutionalization strengthened imperial oversight over rural society (Richards, 1993).

The importance of Todar Mal's reforms lies not merely in technical adjustments but in their long-term impact. By embedding standardized procedures within administrative practice, Akbar's regime laid the groundwork for fiscal stability that continued into the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan. This continuity indicates that the reforms were not temporary experiments but foundational transformations in Mughal governance (Chandra, 2007).

### **Revenue Administration and Provincial Structure:**

The Mughal Empire was divided into subas (provinces), each governed by a subadar and supervised by a diwan responsible for revenue matters. The separation of military and revenue authority reflected Akbar's effort to prevent concentration of power in a single official. The diwan ensured that jagirdars collected revenue according to established rates and that imperial interests were

protected (Richards, 1993).

At the district (sarkar) and pargana levels, officials coordinated revenue collection and maintained accounts. The patwari's village records provided the foundation for higher-level assessment. This multi-tiered structure ensured information flow from village to imperial court. Such administrative layering illustrates how agrarian management became deeply integrated into statecraft under Akbar (Habib, 1963).

Moreover, documentation served as a mechanism of control. Written records limited the possibility of manipulation and created accountability. Although corruption was not eliminated, the emphasis on record-keeping distinguished Mughal administration from many earlier regimes. It signaled the emergence of a centralized bureaucratic state reliant on agrarian surplus (Chandra, 2007).

### **Peasant Conditions and Agrarian Relations:**

Despite administrative improvements, the agrarian system ultimately functioned to extract surplus from cultivators. Peasants bore the burden of revenue demand, and their livelihood depended heavily on climatic conditions. While Akbar introduced measures to reduce arbitrary assessment, the state's share remained substantial. In years of crop failure, remission policies were sometimes implemented, but enforcement depended on local officials (Habib, 1963).

Peasant mobility also played a role in shaping agrarian relations. Cultivators could migrate to areas with lighter revenue demands, forcing jagirdars to moderate their exactions. This mobility limited excessive oppression in certain regions. However, such movement also caused instability in revenue realization, especially for jagirdars whose assignments were temporary (Richards, 1993).

Historians have debated whether Mughal revenue demands were excessively burdensome. Irfan Habib emphasizes the heavy extraction of surplus and its implications for peasant distress, while some revisionist historians argue that the system allowed agricultural expansion and commercialization. The debate highlights the complexity of assessing agrarian conditions in early modern India (Habib, 1963; Chandra, 2007).

### **The Jagirdari System and Structural Tensions:**

The jagirdari system, though designed to maintain centralized authority, created structural tensions within agrarian administration. Since jagirdars were assigned territories temporarily, they often attempted to maximize revenue collection within limited tenure. This sometimes resulted in over-assessment and conflict with local zamindars and peasants (Richards, 1993).

The transferability of jagirs prevented the emergence of hereditary landed aristocracy independent of the emperor. However, it also reduced incentives for long-term agricultural investment by jagirdars. Because their control was temporary, jagirdars focused on immediate revenue extraction rather than rural development. This structural feature later contributed to what historians describe as the "jagirdari crisis" in the seventeenth century (Habib, 1963).

Nevertheless, during Akbar's reign, the system functioned relatively efficiently due to strong central authority and expanding territorial control. The balance between imperial oversight and local participation enabled revenue stability and administrative integration (Chandra, 2007).

### **Commercialization and Agricultural Expansion:**

Akbar's revenue reforms coincided with gradual commercialization of agriculture in certain regions. Monetized revenue demand encouraged peasants to produce cash crops such as cotton, indigo, and sugarcane. Expanding market networks linked rural production to urban centers and export trade. This integration of agrarian economy with commercial circuits marked an important transformation in Mughal India (Richards, 1993).

The growth of towns and artisanal production further stimulated demand for agricultural produce. Urban centers required food supplies and raw materials, creating interdependence between rural and urban economies. Such commercialization did not eliminate subsistence farming but introduced new dynamics into agrarian relations (Habib, 1963).

This economic expansion contributed to imperial prosperity. Stable revenue financed monumental architecture, military campaigns, and administrative expansion. Thus, agrarian reforms were directly connected to the cultural and political achievements associated with Akbar's reign (Chandra, 2007).

### **Historiographical Perspectives:**

The study of Mughal agrarian structure has generated substantial historiographical debate. Marxist historians, particularly Irfan Habib, interpret the Mughal system as one characterized by heavy surplus extraction and class differentiation within rural society. According to this perspective, the state's fiscal demands shaped agrarian relations and reinforced exploitation (Habib, 1963).

Other historians, such as John F. Richards, emphasize administrative efficiency and political integration. They argue that Akbar's reforms strengthened imperial authority and facilitated agricultural growth. Rather than viewing the system solely through the lens of exploitation, they highlight its institutional sophistication (Richards, 1993).

Satish Chandra adopts a balanced approach, recognizing both the administrative achievements and the social pressures inherent in the system. This historiographical diversity reflects the complexity of Mughal agrarian history and underscores the importance of multi-dimensional analysis (Chandra, 2007).

### **Conclusion:**

The agrarian structure and land revenue system under Akbar formed the foundation of Mughal imperial strength. Through systematic land measurement, classification, and standardized assessment under the *zabt* and *dahsala* systems, Akbar created a rationalized fiscal framework that ensured stable revenue flow. These reforms enhanced administrative centralization and strengthened imperial

authority across diverse regions (Richards, 1993).

At the same time, the system reveals the dependence of the state on peasant labor and agricultural surplus. While administrative reforms reduced arbitrariness, the burden of revenue remained significant. The interaction between peasants, zamindars, jagirdars, and imperial officials shaped rural society in complex ways (Habib, 1963).

In the broader historical context, Akbar's agrarian policies represent one of the earliest examples of large-scale bureaucratic fiscal management in early modern South Asia. They combined innovation with pragmatism and laid the groundwork for Mughal stability in the seventeenth century. The agrarian system was not merely an economic arrangement but a central pillar of Mughal state formation and imperial expansion (Chandra, 2007).

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