



PEASANTRY AND VILLAGE ORGANISATION: IN MEDIEVAL PUNJAB

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Peasantry may be defined as the persons who are directly related to the land and its production. As such they were comprised of the various categories of proprietors and non-proprietary cultivators in the Punjab. Among the proprietors there were differences in terms of resources, size of holdings, area owned and the produce obtained.¹ While defining the peasantry in his book S. Nurul Hasan talks in terms of the free peasant economy and tenant-cultivator economy and further comments that important form of rural organization was the free peasant economy that is the proprietors.²

The general belief that the proprietary right in land did not exist in India before the coming of the British no longer holds ground in the face of the recent studies on the concept of proprietary right. S. Nurul Hasan underlines the universality of proprietary rights in land during the Mughal period as well as their importance for agrarian relations when he observes that all agricultural land belonged to one or the other type of primary *zamindars*/or the proprietors. The rights held by them were hereditary and alienable. In case the proprietors left their land the state could get such a piece of land cultivated by anyone else and the proprietary right of the owner was recognized by paying him a certain of the produce share called *malikana* on account of his *milkiat*³ or ownership. It has also been emphasized that the proprietors had the right to reclaim the land even after a long period.⁴

A person who brought new land under cultivation, in accordance with the Hindu as well as the Mohammdan law as it was then understood, entitled to be recognized as the proprietor of the soil.⁵ A number of the Persian documents of Mughal period clearly show that agricultural land was heritable and alienable through sale, gift or mortgage in the upper Bari Doab in the Punjab.⁶ For the Punjab also a good deal of evidence has been brought to light recently to substantiate the existence of the proprietary right in land. A number of legal documents related

¹ Radha Sharma, "The State and Agrarian Society in the Early 19th century Punjab," *Pre Colonial and Colonial Punjab*. Ed. Reeta Grewal and Sheena Pal, Manohar Publication, 2005, p. 143.

² S. Nurul Hasan, *Thoughts on Agrarian Relations in Mughal India*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1973, p. 17.

³ Milkiat, Land Held in Absolute Property, and Free of Rent Property, Ownership, Possession. H.H. Wilson, *A Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms*, Munshiram, Manohar Lal, Delhi, 1968, p. 325.

⁴ Radha Sharma, *Peasantry and the State Early 19th Century Punjab*, K.K. Publishers and Distributors, New Delhi, Shimla, 2000, p. 78.

⁵ S. Nurul Hasan, *Thoughts on Agrarian Relations in Mughal India*, p. 18.

⁶ Radha Sharma, "The State and Agrarian Society", p. 144.



to the cases of sale, gift and mortgage in the Upper Bari Doab from the late 17th to the mid 19th century, leave no doubt that agricultural land was heritable and alienable. In 1711, for example a *qanungo* of Batala in Pargana Kahnuwan purchased an entire village from its Rajput *maliks* for 700 rupees. In 1738 the Gujar proprietors of Gajju Basaun in Pargana Kathua sold entire village for rupees 900 to one Mirza Sadullah Beg.⁷

There are a score of references in Ganesh Das's *Char Bagh-i-Punjab* regarding to purchase of landed property by the Khattris in the 18th and early 19th century. The wadhawan Khattris, for instance, owned a several villages in the pargana of Gujrat.⁸ The early reports of the British administrators and settlement officers also provide ample evidence to this effect for the dominions of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The revenue accounts of the Maharaja and the early British records leave no doubt that every piece of cultivated land in the dominions of Ranjit Singh belonged to one proprietor or the other.⁹ They further underline the fact by citing the cases of purchases and mortgage of land before 1849.¹⁰

Among the proprietors of land, there were some who held large areas, a whole village or even a number of villages. These holders of large areas usually gave their land to non-proprietary cultivators or tenants for cultivation. Such large proprietors constituted a small proportion of the proprietors and their percentage varied from 0.5 in Jalandhar to 40 in Jhang.¹¹ Presumably a large proportion of the area cultivated by the non-proprietary cultivators was owned by the large proprietors.¹²

We do not have detailed information on racial or caste affiliation of the large proprietors but we conform some idea of their composition on the basis of the data available from the early British records. In Hosharpur and Jalandhar, they were mostly the Shaikhs, Sayyids, Rajputs, Jats, Khattris and the Pathans. In the district of Rawalpindi also, the Rajputs, Sayyids and the Gakkahrs did not cultivate with their own hands and were recognized as the Sahun.¹³ It is important to note that some of the large proprietors of the Mughal times were ousted as proprietors by Jats, Kamboh and Arains who were the actual tillers of land. No longer in possession of land, original large proprietors known as *ta'alluqdars* or *malikan-i-ala* were entitled to a share of the produce in recognition of their farmer right.¹⁴ The cultivators who usurped the rights of the non-cultivating proprietors in connivance probably of the administrators were known as *malik-i-qabza*. They were important in Gujarat and held about 10% of the area under plough. There were over 10,000 such holdings in the district of Jhelam.¹⁵

⁷ Radha Sharma, *Peasantry and the State*, p. 78.

⁸ Ganesh Das, *Char-Bagh-i-Punjab*, See us Radha Sharma, *Peasantry and the State*, p. 79.

⁹ Radha Sharma, *Peasantry and the State*, p. 79.

¹⁰ Radha Sharma, *The Peasant Proprietors in the Core Region of the Dominions of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, JRH, Vol. II, G.N.D.U. Amritsar, 1981, p. 26.

¹¹ Radha Sharma, "The State and Agrarian Society," p. 144.

¹² Radha Sharma, *Peasantry and the State*, p. 80

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 81.

¹⁴ Indu Banga, "Landed Rights in medieval Punjab," JRH, Vol. IV, G.N.D.U. Amritsar, 1983, pp. 45-46.

¹⁵ Radha Sharma, *Peasantry and the State*, p. 80.



During early 19th century Punjab “the great mass of landed property” was held by the small proprietors, cultivating all or part of their holdings. They were termed as peasant proprietors.¹⁶ Peasant proprietors was the owner of the land he cultivated, paid the revenue and pocketed all the profits. Thus one and the same man was usually an absolute proprietor and generally the sole cultivator in the Punjab.¹⁷

They were important not only because of their numbers but also in terms of the area held and cultivated by them. In the district of Jalandhar, the number of peasant proprietors were 66,000 and they cultivated nearly 80% of the total area under cultivation. The peasant proprietors in Gujranwala were about 88% and in Sialkot 75%.¹⁸ Peasant proprietors relationship to land was that of owner cultivators and with the reference to labour the peasant proprietors family provided the basic and major work force for the farm. In the management and use of landed property they were free to grow the crops. They wanted, to dispose off their produce in the way they liked.¹⁹ Numerically and in terms of the area cultivated these peasant proprietors, using their family labour and the means of cultivation’s owned by themselves, constituted the most important class in the Punjab.²⁰ They also enjoyed the right to sell their property. Hereditary succession among the males was recognized.²¹

Predominant among the peasant proprietors in the Punjab were the Jats with their numerous clans. They were especially numerous in the districts of Jalandhar and Hoshiarpur where they held about 53 and 64% of the proprietary holdings. The Rajputs were next in importance in numbers to the Jats. In Jalandhar the number of the Rajput proprietors was more than 17,000 and about 11,000 in Hoshiarpur. They owned about 80% of the villages in Lahore. The other land holding castes and tribes in the Punjab were the Arains, Sainis, Kambohs, Malliars, Baghbans, Gujars and the Awans. There were about 11,000 Arains in Jalandhar among the proprietors. In the district of Lahore the Kambohs and the Arains owned 90 villages, probably cultivating land by themselves.²²

There is some information that Brahmans, Khattris, Tarkhans, Lohars and Chamars, the traditionally non-proprietary castes also owned and cultivated small patches of land. In Hoshiarpur district there were around 300 Khattris who owned and cultivated land. There are references that Khattris and Brahmans were land owners in several villages in the pargana of Jalandhar. The Brahmans owned 91 villages in the district of Gurdaspur and 6 in Gujranwala.²³

¹⁶ Indu Banga, *Agrarian System of the Sikhs*, See us Himadri Banerjee, *Agrarian Society of the Punjab*, Manohar Publication, New Delhi, 1982, p. 1.

¹⁷ Radha Sharma, “The State and Agrarian Society,” p. 145.

¹⁸ Radha Sharma, “Peasantry Proprietors in the Core Region,” p. 28.

¹⁹ Sukhwant Singh, *Technological Break Through and Peasant Enterprise Peasant Proprietors in the Punjab*, Manpreet Parkashan, Delhi, 2002, p. 15.

²⁰ Indu Banga, “Landed Rights in Medieval Punjab,” pp. 44-45.

²¹ S.Nurul Hasan, *Thoughts on Agrarian Relations in Mughal India*, p. 22.

²² Radha Sharma, *Peasantry and the State*, pp. 84-85.

²³ Radha Sharma, “The Peasantry Proprietors in the Core Region”, pp. 30-31.



The average area per proprietor varied from one district to another and also within a district. As noticed above the average size of holding per proprietor was 12.5 acres in Jalandhar. In the district of Hoshiarpur, the average area per proprietor was 22.43 acres. The average area per proprietor was 27 acres in Lahore, it was 13 acres in Amritsar, 15 acres in Gurdaspur, 44 acres in Jhang. Usually the average size of holding of the proprietor was small in the districts with higher density of population.²⁴

There was also difference in the average area owned and average area cultivated by the proprietor. In Jalandhar for example average area owned per proprietor in acres was 12.5 and the average area cultivated per proprietor was 9.25 acres.

The differences on the higher side indicates lower resources at the command of proprietors and the differences on the lower side suggests higher degree of resources as the disposal of proprietors.²⁵ In organization of cultivation non-proprietary cultivators (tenant) played an important role.²⁶ The non-proprietary cultivators (tenants) subsisted on the cultivation of land belonging mostly to large proprietors and *madad-i-maash* grantees and very small proprietors besides the common land of the village proprietary body. They cultivated about 1/3 of the total area under cultivation. They were known by different terms in various parts of the Punjab.²⁷

The non-proprietary cultivators of the Sikh dominions may be divided into two broad categories. *Muzarian-i-mustaqil* and *muzarian-i-ghair-mustaqil*. The former may be further divided in to three classes. *Asamian-i-qadim*, who were coming down from the late 18th century, *mustaqil purana*, who started cultivating around 1810, and *mustaqil jadid*, who were the latest to start cultivation.²⁸

Some of the non-proprietary cultivators (*muzarian-i-mustaqil*) no doubt, will be in a privileged position by virtue of their long association with the proprietary classes. Early British administrators also underline this fact when they observed that in the Punjab there were some non-proprietary cultivators (*muzarian-i-mustaqil*) who not only enjoyed occupancy position, but also did not pay anything beyond the government revenue on their land. The owed this position most frequently to their having consented in former days to come and help the village body in cultivating enough land to meet the heavy assessment of some rapacious Sikh governors.²⁹

The non-proprietary cultivators did not have the right to sell or alienate their holdings. This was the most important difference between them and the peasant proprietors. But there is plenty of evidence to suggest that, in case a non-proprietary cultivators left his field, the other cultivators

²⁴ Radha Sharma, *Peasantry and the State*, p. 88.

²⁵ Radha Sharma, *Peasantry and the State*, p. 89

²⁶ S.Nural Hasan, *Thoughts on Agrarian Relations in Mughal India*, p. 24.

²⁷ Radha Sharma, "The state and Agrarian Society," p. 145.

²⁸ Indu Banga, *Agrarian System of the Sikhs*, p. 180.

²⁹ B.H. Baden Powell, *The Indian village community*, Cosmo Publications, Delhi, 1972, pp. 25-26.



in the village would be invited to cultivate the land and give to this non-proprietary cultivators, when he came back, his share.³⁰

The non-proprietary cultivators who subsisted on the cultivation of the land belonging to others subject generally to the payment of land revenue and cesses to the state and *malikana*³¹ or proprietary dues to the proprietors.³² As observe above in some parts of the dominions of Ranjit Singh some of the non-proprietary cultivators paid no *malikana* to the proprietors. Else where the amount of *malikana* paid was rather small and its rate varied from 1 ½ to 25%.³³

The rate of *malikana* collected in Jalandhar was about 5% of the revenue. In Gurdaspur, it ranged between 2.5 and 12.5% and from 10 to 15% in Gujrat. In Gujranwala and Lahore where ever the *malikana* was collected it rarely exceeded 6.25% or one anna in a rupee. In shahpur, it varied from 5% to 25% of the revenue.³⁴

The *pahi-kasht* as those who cultivate lands belonging to a village where they do not reside, they were considered as tenant-at-will by the early British administrators and having only a temporary accidental interest in the soil they cultivate.³⁵

The *pahis* were divided in to two categories. One comprised those who tilled the proprietors land belonging to *muqaddams*, *chaudharis* and the *inam* lands held by *zamindars* or by *madad-i-maash* holders. *Pahis* of this type often did not have their own accessories for cultivation: the ploughs, bullocks and seeds were supplied or rented out to them by the superior sections in village society, such as the *muqaddams*.³⁶

Second category of *pahis* were who had their own implements for cultivation were important in the growth, expansion and even the normal functioning of the village society. It was one of the important duties of the village headman (*muqaddams*), to bring new land under cultivation or to induce *pahis* to cultivate the land.³⁷

The bulk of the population of a village must have consisted of proprietors and non-proprietary cultivators. Besides these there were some other classes in the village like agricultural labourers and the different professionals whose services were hired by the proprietors in agricultural operations. The black-smith, carpenter, potter and leather workers were quite essential in agricultural operations. They repaired agricultural implements and were remunerated at each

³⁰ S.Nurul Hassan, *Thoughts on Agrarian Relations in Mughal India*, p. 27.

³¹ Malikana: Pertaining or Relating to the Malik, or Proprietor, as His Right or Due, Applied Especially in Revenue Language, to an Allowance Assigned to a *zamindar* or to a Proprietary Cultivators, H.H. Wilson, *A Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms*, p. 325.

³² Indu Banga, "Landed Rights in Medieval Punjab," p. 45.

³³ J.S. Grewal, *The Reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, p. 14.

³⁴ Radha Sharma, *Peasantry and the State*, p. 113.

³⁵ Satish Chandra, *Essays on medieval Indian History*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2003, p. 176.

³⁶ Ibid, p.177.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 179.



harvest.³⁸ Their remuneration was as *haq-sep* or *haquq-i-kamiana*. It was a fixed share of the crop which varied from one region to another. It ranged from 10 to 15% of the gross produce of the proprietor. Their share was deducted from the total production of the village. They worked under a system which was known as *sepi* system in the Punjab. This was a system of interdependence in which each caste professional group in a village performed a form of service for the others. It involved mutual obligations for work and payment and signified relationship between food producing families and those who provided goods and service.³⁹

The tenures of the peasantry had a close bearing on the conception of the village community under the Sikhs. Henry Maine was responsible for underlining 'commonkinship' and 'joint ownership' of the village communities in India. The sense of proprietorship among the agricultural community of a village, according to Baden Powell, did not necessarily imply common proprietorship. The village owners whatever their origins, have a strong sense that, as a body have the land lord's right over the whole area of the village, arable and waste alike, but there was never any 'socialistic' or 'enjoyment in common' idea of property.⁴⁰ Indeed there is not evidence in support of communal ownership of land. However, a village was generally inhabited by a certain cousinhood, having their own headman, accustomed to joint action and mutual support. This kinship group was described as brotherhood as *Bhaiachara*.⁴¹

The proprietors acted as a body for the management of the affairs of the village and the corporate body which came into existence for such collective action was known as the 'village community. By village community, we do not mean that there was village commune that owned the land on behalf of all its members. In fact, the proprietor's right to land was always his individual right but there were some spheres outside that of production, where the proprietors of a village acted collectively.⁴² The collective action of the corporate body was required mainly for the management of the village finances and payment of revenue. The accounts of the villages expenses were maintained by the *Patwari* who kept on account of the income and expenditure of the village and was paid from the village fund. Every individual members of the proprietary body paid a certain amount to 'common financial pool' or *malba*⁴³ of the village. In some areas this fund was called *bacch*.⁴⁴

The Fund (*malba*) was supplemented by the collection of certain rents and profits from the common lands of the villages, including waste area, from *ahtarafi* a tax on artisans, *haq-buha* a sort of house tax on non-proprietors, and from *dharat*, a fee on weighting grain sold in the village and in some cases from *thana patti*, a tax on marriages. The village fund, thus obtained

³⁸ Harish C.Sharma, "Artisans in the Punjab under Maharaja Ranjit Singh", *Maharaja Ranjit Singh and His Times*, Ed. J.S. Grewal and Indu Banga, G.N.D.U., Amritsar, 1980, p. 179.

³⁹ Radha Sharma, *Peasantry and the State*, p. 91.

⁴⁰ Baden Powell as quoted in Indu Banga, *Agrarian System of the Sikhs*, pp. 185-186.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 186.

⁴² Radha Sharma, *Peasantry and the State*, p. 91.

⁴³ *Malba: Village Expenses, Usually Liquidated in the Same Manners as the Public Assessment*, H.H.Wilson, *A Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms*, p. 324.

⁴⁴ Radha Sharma, *Peasantry and the State*, p. 92.



was utilized for a number of items: payment of fees or perquisites of various officials, payment of loan and other village expenses including general repairs and entertainment of the village.⁴⁵

For the internal administration of the village there was the *panchayat*⁴⁶ literally a committee of five, it was a committee of the heads of houses. The *muqadam* and the *Patwari* were helpful to the *panchayat* in running the local administration of the village. Most of the disputes were settled in the village by the members of the *panchayat*.⁴⁷ The *panchayat* also decided about the proportion to be sanctioned for the common expenses of the villages.⁴⁸

Muqaddam and *Patwari* played an important role in village organization. The *Muqaddam* was generally appointed for a single village. In fact more than one *Muqaddam* could be found at places in a single village for each of its major subdivisions generally known as *Tarafs* and *Pattis*. *Muqaddam* were generally given revenue free land for the purpose of extending cultivation either directly or through the *Zamindars* of the village. They were generally received certain percentage of revenues collected. There are references in the *Khalsa Darbar Records* to *pachotra*, or 5% commission.⁴⁹

The *patwari's* primary duty was to maintain revenue records for every village under his jurisdiction. During the *Sikhs* times, there was hardly a village which had a *patwari* entirely for itself. A single *patwari* looked the records of each of *tappas*. In *Gujranwala* on the average, nearly five villages were covered by a single *patwari*. The customary remuneration of the *patwari* ranged from 1% to 2% of the collection made from the villages under his jurisdiction.⁵⁰

The general policy of *Maharaja Ranjit Singh* towards the agrarian classes was guided by the consideration of security and enhancement of revenues. The state favoured those who were prepared to keep land under cultivation and pay the revenue. Extension of cultivation and replacement of deserters were important aspects of the policy of the state. However *Maharaja* did not overlook the welfare of the people. This is clearly reflected in his order and general instructions to the *kardars* and *ijaradars* and all those who were entrusted with the work of assessment and collection of revenue.⁵¹

The policy of *Maharaja Ranjit Singh* to confer proprietary rights on those who brought new land under the plough encouraged cultivation. Artificial means of irrigation, like wells and canals, too played a crucial role in the extension of agriculture and agricultural production. *Maharaja Ranjit Singh* and his provincial governors took keen interest in developing artificial means of

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 92.

⁴⁶ *Panchayat: A Native Court of Arbitration Consisting of Five or More Members Chosen by the Parties Themselves*. H.H.Wilson, *A Glossary of Judicial and Revenue Terms*, p. 394.

⁴⁷ Mohinder Singh, *Peasantry and Village Organization in Mughal India*, pp. 67-68.

⁴⁸ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, p. 155.

⁴⁹ Indu Banga, *Agrarian System of the Sikhs*, pp. 82-84, *Muqaddam: The Muqaddam Applied Especially to the Village Headman*. He was Sole Village Official Besides the *patwari*, See us, B.N. Goswami and J.S Grewal, *The Mughals and The Jogis of Jakhbar*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 1972, p. 142.

⁵⁰ Indu Banga, *Agrarian System of the Sikhs*, pp. 86-87

⁵¹ Radha Sharma, "The State and Agrarian Society," p-148.



irrigation.⁵² To advance *taqavi* loans to the needy cultivators and to supply materials for the repair of wells, or even dig new canals, was a part of this policy. The *taqavi* loans were advanced through *chaudharis* and *muqaddams* who distributed them among individual cultivators and stood surety for the repayment. The advancing of *taqavi* loans to the peasants was an important method of encouraging cultivation, *taqavi* loan for the purchase of seeds and cattle. It seems that loans given to the peasant by the headman on their account were also known as *taqavi*.⁵³

It has been observed that the number of peasant proprietors was increasing in the region during the reign of the Maharaja. The state also recognized the rights of those who were ready to invest their capital or labour in bringing more land under cultivation. The welfare and protective attitude of the state towards the agrarian classes under Maharaja can be discerned from his standing orders to administrators, military *commanders* and *sahukars*.⁵⁴

The orders of Maharaja issued in 1834 makes it absolutely clear that his attitudes towards the cultivators was one of the protection against whosoever might think of injuring their interests. Sardar Tej Singh, who was commanding the *Kampu-i-mualla* was ordered to ensure the protection of crops, and property of the poor people.⁵⁵

The agrarian policies of Ranjit Singh were favourable to the actual cultivator consequently many of the non-cultivating proprietors who did not directly contribute towards production or the income of the state lost some ground. They were reduced to the status of nominal or superior proprietors know as *malikan-i-ala*, *ta'alluqdars*. Conversely the status of the non-proprietary cultivators improved to that of the proprietors to be known as *malik-i-qabza* who had full ownership of the land they occupied but had no share in the common land.⁵⁶ Some postoral people became agriculturists. Also some of the artisans and craftsman, and other service performing persons, became proprietors of small pieces of land.⁵⁷

The Maharaja attention to the preservation of crops and pastures from depredations was remarkable Maharaja accepted to the requests of local *Zamindars*, *Chiefs* and *thanadars* that the stationing of the troops in their area would cause damage to their crops. In 1809-10 Fateh Khan of Sahiwal approached the Maharaja with a request that the camping of the royal troops in his area had caused a considerable damage to the crops. He also granted remission in land revenue if his camp remained in a particular area a long time.⁵⁸

The state provided relief to the peasants on account of natural calamities and scarcities and in all those other situations in which they were unable to meet the revenue demand. In famine conditions, grain was distributed among the cultivators, both for subsistence and sowing. In

⁵² J.S. Grewal, *The Reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, p. 14.

⁵³ Radha Sharma, "The state and Agrarian Society," pp. 149-150.

⁵⁴ Ibid, pp. 152-153.

⁵⁵ Radha Sharma, "The state and Agrarian Society," p. 149.

⁵⁶ Radha Sharma, *Peasantry and the State*, pp. 152-153.

⁵⁷ J.S. Grewal, *The Reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh*, p. 33.

⁵⁸ Radha Sharma, "The State and Agrarian Society," p. 148.



1833, when a famine broke out in Kashmir, the Maharaja sent thousands of mules laden with wheat and rice for free distribution among famine stricken people from mosques and temples.⁵⁹

On the whole area under cultivation increased during this period. This was also a result of the revenue policy of the state to demand less from the peasants. By doing so the Maharaja did not favour any particular caste, clan or community. The jats benefited from the state policy merely because they constituted the largest group among the agriculturists. This policy also served the purpose of maintaining power by creating a mass base.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Radha Sharma, *The State and Agrarian Society*, p. 149.

⁶⁰ Radha Sharma, *The Peasant Proprietors in the Core Region*, p. 34



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