



Exploring the Role of Revenue officials in Eighteenth Century Eastern Rajasthan

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Abstract:

The eighteenth century was a period marked by an intense interplay of vigorous forces of change and realignment. In the wake of declining imperial authority, the political situation became extremely volatile and released a whole series of forces, which invariably transformed the entire socio-economic fabric of the society in the post-Mughal period. In such a state of affairs the groups of revenue officials like the Patels and patwaris perpetuated their roots deep in the society in a manner, which enabled them emerge as more stable patterns of local power and thereby acted as a viable social group in the changing socio-economic scenario.

Keywords: *Eighteenth century, Revenue official, Socio-economic scenario*

There is an ongoing debate and controversy amongst historians surrounding the economic and political history of the eighteenth century in India. The century was one of the most turbulent times in the history of the subcontinent. The beginning of the century is recognized as a period when the Mughal Empire faltered and declined. It splintered into many different localized states, thus paving the way for the British East India Company's penetration into the society, which in turn led to British imperial control. Colonial takeover was completed in the 19th century. The nature of these processes, however, is hotly debated, and there are different themes of controversy.

There are many who argue that the eighteenth century Indian history was in fact an age, which saw economic prosperity, their analyses though, do not look at 'India' the subcontinent as a whole. If the latter constraint was imposed, it was perhaps an age of decline. Once the scale of examination is brought to more local levels the general argument of decline may not necessarily apply. This is what C.A. Bayly attempts to do in his works. He examines the micro-economic system and expands outwards, pointing out groups of society who were in fact prospering greatly during these times. In this context, the study of a class of revenue officials at the village level operating in Eastern Rajasthan can shed enormous light on socio-economic dynamics of the period and help us understand the contours of change during the eighteenth.

A large mass of village and pargana documents pertaining to agrarian history since 1664 are preserved at the Rajasthan State Archives at Bikaner. They shed immense light on the structural and functional aspects of agrarian society. Closely linked with agrarian economy were social relations, both, between and within the various constituents of rural society and vice versa. Changes in the economy could alter the pattern of social relations. A study of village records from this perspective provides a reliable indicator of social change.¹

¹ Dilbagh Singh, *The State, Landlords and Peasants; Rajasthan in the Eighteenth Century*, Manohar Publications, 1990, p.1.

The revenue machinery was being influenced and manipulated by these local revenue officials in the last few decades of the Mughal empire who had been consolidating themselves steadily between the state and the peasantry. The imperial administration had depended to a large extent on the support and the valuable information provided by these social groups at the local level; thereby constituting the fulcrum of the Mughal empire. This group, therefore, because of its skill and specialized service to the state may be said to have assumed a position of considerable importance and therefore was in a favorable position to benefit from changing politico-economic conditions of the time. Further, the system of frequent transfers would have necessitated the need for some arrangements for ensuring continuity in the local records and revenue practices. Such a high degree of specialization and considerable dependence of the state on them makes this group an element of immense significance in the politics and economics of the eighteenth century Eastern Rajasthan.²

Corresponding to Mughal revenue administration, the administrative arrangements of the Kachhwahas were directed mainly towards ensuring continuity in local records and revenue practices. To achieve this end, the administrative structure was managed by large number of local officials with distinct duties.³The villages in Eastern Rajasthan as in other parts of India were headed by the Patel (headmen). The patwari (record keeper) was also an integral part of the village organization. The documents of the period shed considerable light on their position and functions and indicate how the agrarian administration functioned at its lowest level.⁴Although the land revenue of the village was assessed by the state officials, the responsibility for collection and assessment of the revenue rested with the Patel and patwari respectively.⁵ These were the officials who were permanent local officials, owing their position partly to birth and partly to imperial authority, but unaffected by the transfers of assignees.⁶ It is essentially the permanence, which made them significantly indispensable for the sustenance of land revenue machinery of the state.

A large part of the imperial territory consisted of villages assigned in jagirs, therefore, for compliance of imperial orders in these assignments the state relied upon these local village officials for ensuring steadiness in the process of land revenue collection and distribution. As the holders of revenue assignments i.e. the jagirdars were posted at a great distance from their assigned lands, these could hardly have been managed without leaving a great deal of initiative to the local functionaries who were skilled in the job of financial management.⁷ Moreover, the jagirdar had to manage a new assignment after every short interval; he could hope to be familiar with the details of the revenue paying capacity and the local customs of each new jagir. Nor would his short tenure at any one place enable him or his agent to build up a local administration from scratch. These local officials thus provided a mechanism whereby they ensured some degree of continuity in local records and revenue practices.⁸ Therefore, they had steadily developed as stable

².According to the study so far made the expression ‘ Rajasthan’ was first used in the Bansantgarh stone inscriptions of 682 V.S. (625.AD). Later on it found mention in Muhnot Nenas Ki Khyat and in Veerbhan’s Rajroopak both written in the eighteenth century. The expression in the stone inscription as well as in the two works was used in relation to the abode where the ruler lived. It was the famous historian Col.James Tod who used the expression in the larger and wider context. In his celebrated work Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan published in 1829, Tod defined Rajasthan as “that part of the country where Rajput” rulers reside. See B.L. Panagaraya, N.C.Pahariya, Political, Economic and Cultural History of Rajasthan, Rawat Publications, 2003.

³ Irfan Habib, The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707, second revised edition, Delhi, manohar, p.316 & 331.

⁴ S.P.Gupta, The Agrarian System of Eastern Rajasthan, p180.

⁵ For functions of Patels refer to Dilbagh Singh The State Landlords and Peasants, pp.180- 186.

⁶ Irfan Habib, The Agrarian System of Mughal India, p.317.

⁷ C.A.Bayly, The Rise of Corporations, p.138.

⁸ Irfan Habib, The Agrarian System of Mughal India, p.317.

patterns of local power between the state and agrarian society because of their skill and enormous knowledge.

Besides overcoming the administrative difficulties and hurdles by providing personal supervision these local officials were also expected to maintain and strengthen the revenue paying capacity of the assigned villages. This was made possible on account of their being permanent officials because of which they showed personal interest primarily with a view to increase their income by enhancing the total collections through his personal efforts. Bringing virgin and deserted lands under cultivation by efficient management was also part of their duty.⁹

The Patel is depicted in the documents as the chief village official. His office formed a regular part of the local land revenue administration. In Eastern Rajasthan the Patels often belonged to the dominant caste of the village i.e. Jats, Minas and Ahirs etc. The Chaudahri sometimes held the office of Patel too.¹⁰ He was a person whom the revenue authorities held responsible for payment of the assessed revenue of the village. He was thus responsible for the collection of the revenue share from each individual peasant and the performance of his service was regarded as an indispensable official service to the state.¹¹ The Patel was both a peasant and sometimes a petty zamindar.

We shall now examine the position of the Patel in pargana Hindaun. In the eighteenth century, Hindaun formed a part of suba and sarkar Agra.¹² Hindaun was taken by Sawai Jai Singh on jagir from Saadat Khan for 13, 60,000 dams in the year 1713.¹³ Based on the arsatthas pertaining to the year 1713-1755, the share of ijara held by different types of ijaradars in various years needs to be examined. Some interesting variations in the composition of the various categories of ijaradars in different years have been noticed. For example in the year 1755 the Patels had the all time low share of ijara i.e. 4 per cent. The other lean years for the Patels were 1732 (7 per cent), 1748 (9 per cent) and 1755 (4 per cent). This indicates that the Patels did not always have the lion's share in the total amount of ijara. However, in 1728 the share of the Patels was equal to that of chaudharis and qanungos who had a large share in pargana Hindaun and continuously registered their presence as ijaradars every year between 1713 and 1755. Another notable feature of the period is the sudden emergence of the raiyati (peasants) as the highest bidder for ijara in 1755 (58 per cent of the total).¹⁴

They also made a bid for ijara by forming groups amongst themselves, which is an interesting feature of the joint ventures in Hindaun. In 1714 A.D. out of the 20 joint ventures, 19 were groups of Patels.¹⁵ The number of Patels in a group ranged from two to five. The Patels obviously attempted to have the largest chunk of ijara either individually or in groups. Nevertheless a monopoly over the ijara system could not be created by any individual or any group.

This shift of preference by the state from earlier traditional classes (bhomias, taalluqdars etc) to new leading groups and individuals indicates the emergence of a new class of influential groups. As the state was granting ijara to a wide variety of people belonging to the towns as well as the

⁹ Dilbagh Singh, State, Landlords and Peasants, p.149.

¹⁰ S.P.Gupta, The Agrarian System of Eastern Rajasthan, pp.180-181.

¹¹ Dilbagh Singh, 'Position of the Patel in Eastern Rajasthan during the Eighteenth Century', PIHC, Jabalpur, 1970, p.361

¹² S.P.Gupta, The Agrarian System of Eastern Rajasthan, p.32.

¹³ Ibid., p.19.

¹⁴ Arsatthas of the concerned years, pargana Hindaun.

¹⁵ Arsatthas, pargana, Hindaun, V.S.1771/1714.

villages, the system appears to have become a popular form of land revenue management and revenue collection. The grant of ijara to the individual peasants and their village headmen was not unknown earlier but a spectacular rise in their numbers could be an indication that ijaradari was welcomed by the classes who had gained influence and affluence over the years. The barriers of the office or the caste could no longer come in the way of those aspiring for self-upgradation. The middle castes like the Gujjars, Jats, Minas, etc also demonstrated their keen interest in the revenue farming. Muslims are also found taking ijara as the pargana had a sizeable Muslim population.¹⁶

Similarly, the post of patwari also witnessed some contours of change during the eighteenth century. His office was also a hereditary one and its significance can be gauged from the fact that his name appears even in the description of Alauddin Khalji's administrative measures (1296-1316). As Abul Fazl tells us that, the duty of the patwari¹⁷ was to keep an account of "the expenditure and income" of the village.¹⁸ The patwari was the village accountant who maintained in the local language a full record of revenue collected by the amil from the village including arrears. He entered into his register the name of each cultivator, the area under each holder and the crops sown by each cultivator. He had to undertake surety along with the Patel that there would be no decline in the revenue assessed by state revenue officials. He furnished details on the basis of which higher authorities decided the disputes regarding the ownership of land and wells.¹⁹

Further, the great latitude in action enjoyed by a patwari can be gauged from the role he played in granting a reduction in the amount agreed upon in the patta to an ijaradar. Convincing arguments such as scarcity of rain or collection of a smaller hasil than assessed could help him win concessions in revenue. Claims of reduction were admissible only after verification by the state officials like the patwari along with the Patel.²⁰

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Thus, the position of patwari was an indispensable one for the state on account of the invaluable service they rendered by maintaining revenue records at the village level, which was the lowest

¹⁶ Muslims were a part of the cultivating classes. There is a strong suggestion that some of the Muslims must have been peasants from the lower strata who had changed their religion in an effort to improve their social status. See Satish Chandra and Dilbagh Singh, 'Structure in the Village Society in Eastern Rajasthan', PIHC, Muzaffarpur, 1972.

¹⁷ The patwari's name probably came from his concern with the pattas or documents stating the revenue-demand assessed upon a village or individual cultivators

¹⁸ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, p.167.

¹⁹ Dilbagh Singh, *The State, Landlords and Peasants*, pp.178-179.

²⁰ S.P.Gupta, *The Agrarian System of Eastern Rajasthan*, p.228.

²¹ The patwari's name probably came from his concern with the pattas or documents stating the revenue-demand assessed upon a village or individual cultivators

²² Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, p.167.

²³ Dilbagh Singh, *The State, Landlords and Peasants*, p.178-179.

administrative unit of the state. His revenue record was to be regarded by revenue and financial officials as the authentic evidence for actual payments.²⁴ Not only their bookkeeping skill and expertise but also their allegiance and integrity with which they served the state were vital elements for smooth and fair functioning of the entire revenue machinery. Since the records of the patwaris were also useful in auditing the accounts of the actual collection of the amils, they were in a position to enjoy certain degree of independence which they did not hesitate to use against the interest of the state. According to Abul Fazl's evidence, the patwari received remuneration both from the village funds and the imperial administration; he therefore had sufficient strength to control the sinews of local power.²⁵ Also he enjoyed a relation of mutual trust and faith from both sides, i.e. the state and the villagers.. Therefore the Patel naturally found a place of prominence in the village economy.

The eighteenth century was a period marked by an intense interplay of vigorous forces of change and realignment. In the wake of declining imperial authority, the political situation became extremely volatile and released a whole series of forces, which invariably transformed the entire socio-economic fabric of the society in the post-Mughal period. In such a state of affairs the groups of revenue officials like the Patels and patwaris perpetuated their roots deep in the society in a manner, which enabled them emerge as more stable patterns of local power and thereby acted as a viable social group in the changing socio-economic scenario. The 18th century thus began with the consolidation of the process that allowed non-gentry groups to enhance their positions through various new avenues that came their way thus paving the way for the emergence of a new powerful social order. What went in their favour was the fact that the state had always been dependent upon them on account of their skill and specialized service in revenue administration. These social groups at the local level, therefore, came to assume a position of considerable importance as is evident in the state of Jaipur. The transformations in the eighteenth century did not let them stifle in the post Mughal period, rather they acquired fresh lease of life by transforming themselves into local magnates and surviving into the British period as a vibrant group of people.

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²⁴ Irfan Hiabib, The Agrarian System of Mughal India, p.167.

²⁵ Irfan Habib, The Agrarian System of Mughal India, p.166.

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