

Economic Condition of Punjab before Sikh Sovereignty

Amit

Research Scholar

Department of History

MDU, Rohtak, Haryana, India

Abstract

The Himalayan ranges and the land of five rivers in the north-west of India have through their passes provided a convenient passage not only to invading hordes from outside but also to daring merchants on both sides. Mughals provides a strong ground for the growth of agriculture and the related facilities to the province. The self-dependent economy of that province is capable to export a variety of goods to the outer world as well as to Indian subcontinent. The overland route connected Punjab with the Mughal Empire through commercial, cultural and ethnic intercourse with the land of Persia and Central Asia. The advantageous physical and geographical position of the Punjab created the potential of its material resources in terms of rich agricultural and non-agricultural production on the one hand and on the other it provided a

convenient passage to Central Asian and Persian horses, Kabul fruits and Kashmiri shawls on their way to Delhi and Agra and thence to different parts of sub-continent. During the eighteenth century the trade across these overland routes had been vitally affected by the policies of the innumerable Sikhs and non-Sikh chiefs of the Punjab who came into ascendancy in the process of resisting and supporting the cause of the Afghans. However, the growth of the Sikh power in the Punjab had a serious impact upon the trading activity. Many trade centers emerged as important destinations of trade and commerce like Lahore and Multan having a focal position all over world for economic activities.

Keywords : *Pargana, Sarkar, Mandi, Mela, Banjaras, Baniyas, Gur, Shawals, Pind.*

Contents

During eighteenth century, the main source of the wealth of Punjab was agriculture. Natural fertility of the soil, adequate rainfall and the availability of other irrigation facilities combined to distinguish this province from the point of view of agriculture production. Land yielded so much that not only the requirements of province were met, but food-grains were also exported to the other parts of country.¹

During the period which preceded the advent of Mughals, there was no efficient revenue administration and the prosperity of the cultivator was dependent on the goodwill of king. The revenue was arbitrarily assessed at the time of each harvest and it was collected with an atmosphere of comparative tranquility. The Mughals considered that the prosperity of the country directly depended on the prosperity of cultivators. Armies were strictly forbidden from destroying the standing crops, and they were not allowed to commit any transgressions while marching through the country.

Mughal emperors took great interest in the improvement of irrigational facilities to the cultivators. Wasteland was

reclaimed, wells were sunk, tanks were constructed and four canals were opened to give an impetus to agriculture. MunshiSujan writes “ Near Shahpur have been taken out Ravi river a loyal canal which goes to the garden of Shalimar in Lahore, a second canal which goes to the Pargana of Pathankot, a third which goes to the Pargana of Batala, and fourth which goes to the Pargana of Bair Patti. These canals do good to the crops of the Mahals”.² among other methods of irrigation, there were Persian-wheel which drew water from the wells by means of a chain of earthen pots fastened to a rope. This method of irrigation was very much prevalent when Babur conquered India.³ In all the places of habitation there were the common pastures of the agriculturists and there was no difficulty in feeding the cattle.

Agriculture of Punjab in this period, however, was handicapped by undermining of the human element. The weaker stamina of peasant, devitalized by under-feeding and the famines., resulted in recurring setbacks, with the result that improvement was not commensurate with the interest taken and efforts made. In the matter of methods of cultivation, the quality of seed, and the use of improved

type of implements, therefore, not much heady made. Invasions by Afghans, Marathas can consider another cause behind the backwardness of Punjab agriculture in this period. Punjab did not experience between 1600 to 1900 an agricultural revolution such as in some other countries coincided with the adoption of a policy of enclosure, or followed on the development of the modern ocean-borne commerce.⁴

The land was cultivated by small holders, the substantial capitalist farmer being practically non-existent. Agricultural labor was generally immobile. Poor as the peasant was, there was little to tempt him away from his village, so long as his village could supply his food. There were also a large number of landless labors who were practically serfs, tied to the land, in a condition of periodical slavery to the cultivators who fed and clothed them the return for their labor.⁵

The spring harvest of Suba of Lahore produced wheat, Cabul Vetches, Linseed, Mustard seed, Arzan, Peas, Carrots, Barley, Adas, Safflower, Poppy, Potherbs, Onions, Fenugreek, Persian Watermelon, Indian Watermelon, Cumin and Ajwain. The autumn harvest produced

Sugarcane, Common Sugarcane, Dark-coloured Rice, Common Rice, Kalt, Mash, Cotton, Moth, Gal, Turiya, Arzan, Indigo, Henna, Hemp, Potherbs, kachara, Pan, Singhara, Jowari, Lahdara, Kodarm, Mandwa, Sesame, Shamakh, Mung, Kori and Turmeric.⁶The spring harvest of Suba of Multan produced wheat, Cabul Vetches, Barley, Adas, Safflower, Poppy, Potherbs, Linseed, Mustard seed, Arzan, Peas, Carrots, Onions, Fenugreek, Persian musk melon, Indian musk melon, Cumin, Kur Rice, and Ajwain. For the purpose of cultivation the Punjab was divided into revenue assessment circles.

Unlike today the Punjab of that time was forests, as the cultivation was not carried out on scientific methods that was find now; hence the forests grew in abundance. The forests of Punjab were divided into two categories: The forests of plains and those of the hills. Mughals had to take special measures to protect the people from the robbers who always took shelter in those thick jungles. At least there two such forests in Punjab which were always the place of refuge for the lawless and rebels, such as the Lakhi jungle situated in Sarkar of Dipalpur and the Kahnuwan in Gurdaspur district. All these forests were regarded as fuel and

fodder reserves and some closed forests were opened to grazing in times of draught.

When the Arabs stopped the trans-shipment of goods through the Red Sea in the seventh century, the trade once again had to be diverted through the Black Sea, Harat and Kabul. As a result of this, there was a phenomenal increase in trade and important commercial centers like Constantinople and Kabul became the hub of activity and also the headquarter of trade into India and in fact became a focal point for a thriving commercial artery, pumping goods from the countries in the north to as far down as Lahore.⁷The second route which passed through Multan and Qandhar linking up in India and Persia, had been established during the Arab conquest. Now both the routes began to be exploited to their fullest capacity.

There was yet another route which linked the Punjab with Tibet and Western China. It can through the Punjab and Kashmir and carried a vast section of the trade. Internal trade continued to flourish along the traditional rivers and road routes, practically in the same way as during the Hindu times. The Muslim kings, particularly the Mughals, had of course given the kind of solidarity to these

commercial transactions, with the result that the imperial capital of Delhi and the provincial capitals like Multan of Lahore expanded.

A large variety of articles such as cotton, silk, woolen, fabrics, beads, yarn, indigo, salt, sugar, opium, borax, lac, sealing wax, etc., continued Indian exports, whilst the imports consisted largely, horses, luxury goods, curious and fabulous, which the Mughal rulers, devoted to dalliance and ostentatious display, loved to acquire. Lahore and Multan thus emerged as important bustling centers of trade and commerce.⁸

Conveyance was effected by means of pack-animals, as the road were not fit for vehicles, while the danger of theft and violence was usually too great to permit of the passage of small or unprotected convoys. Traders have to wait for considerable long time. No lonely road was safe; trade caravans were set upon and life was held cheap. The majority of the road guards or watchmen were above reproach, but were unable to cope with the menace. However, many of them stooped to blackmail.⁹ this had to speak generally, a crippling effect on trade and industry. Some traders who had influence could always contravene or by-pass local laws.

Thus, the entire trading enterprise was uncertain and irrational. Prices were determined on an ad-hoc basis and therefore fluctuated according to the vagaries of fortune.¹⁰

As regard the internal trade, the Punjab was self sufficient in almost every respect. The organizations of Mela (fair) were the fixed destinations for the exchange and sell of commodities around the province. It had always enough for internal consumption and for export. The Banjaras carried on businesses of conveying the surplus produce from one Sarkar of the province to another on a fairly large scale. It is not possible to give an exact estimate of the volume of internal trade, but a fairly idea can be had from the fact that village lying around the headquarters of their respective Sarkars, with their Mandis (markets), were brisk centers of trade where exchanges of commodities took place in peaceful times.⁶¹ the trading castes were the Kshatris in the center and the north, the Baniyas in east, and Aroras in west. The village trader was the collecting and distributing agent, but he almost always combined money lending with shop keeping. Nearly every cultivator was his client, and to him much of the agricultural

produce of the village was handed over at a low price, to liquidate debts which had sometimes accumulated for generations.

The produce of village, i.e. food and cloths, was mainly consumed by the villagers themselves. Even the towns depended for most of their supplies on the country surrounding them. Agricultural manufacturers were essentially primitive. The preparation of flour and wheat was, in general, a purely domestic undertaking. Gur (molasses) was extracted from sugarcane in village presses and furnaces of the type which are still generally prevalent in Punjab. The neighborhood of Lahore produced a costly form of Gur known as candy.

The biggest industrial center in the province was Lahore. The factories of Lahore turned out many masterpieces of workmanship. Shawals of special texture, mayan and carpets of superior quality were made at Lahore in addition to arms and ammunition. "Lahore is by far the largest city in the east," says De Laet, who visited Lahore in Mughal period. According to MunsisajjanRai: "Bajwara¹¹ near Hoshiarpur, was famous for its cloths, especially for salts of Adhars, Derish, PanchTolia, Jhona White Chera, and gold embroidered Fotas. At Sultanpur in the

Jullundur Doab, were manufactured Chhint, Dolai, and embroidered cloths of a fine order, specially Baftas, CharishFotas, Sozani, Adoka, Table cloths, tray covers and small tents were manufactured swords, Jamdhars, and embroidered cloth. A species of horse resembling the Arab was also reared there, some of them selling for a thousand rupees each. Near the salt mines of Shamasabad, trays, dishes, lamps and other fancy articles of rock salt were made¹².

Oil pressing and cotton ginning were carried on by the primitive methods which are still in vogue in villages. Spirits were widely distilled from sugar by age-old methods, in spite of repeated edicts issued by Mughal emperors. Forests and jungles were numerous and consequently villagers generally had a better supply of firewood and timber than what is now possible. Iron and copper continued to be worked in the Himalayas, but the prosperity of these industries depended on the local supply of fuel for melting. Salt was mined in the salt ranges, and was taxed like everything else. Handicraft generally were characterized by variety of skill.¹³leather working was not a prominent industry, shoes being not so commonly worn. Saddles were mainly made of cloth and the halter of rope.

Horses were seldom used as beasts of burden.

Paper was made by hand and this was being done in jails. Good paper is manufactured in Sialkot, specially the Mansinghi paper and silk paper of very good texture white, clean and durable. These are exported in all directions.¹⁴brass had replaced earthenware, but the number of potters' caste who later took to agriculture, testifies to the relatively greater importance of the industry at that time. The ships and boats used in Indus and other rivers of Punjab were made at Lahore.¹⁵

Building as an industry was not popular at all. The ruling classes occasionally spent vast sums of small mud forts, mosques and tombs that were allowed to go to ruin by their successors. They lived for the most part rather in tents than in places. Craftsmen were paid meager salaries and were liable to ill treatment by the ruling classes. Textile industries were more important, as evidenced by the large number of the waver caste. Silk garments were widely worn by the upper classes, and the fashion of the time prescribed an extensive wardrobe for any one who desired to move in good society. Silk weaving was carried

on at Lahore, where Akbar, who had a special liking for it, established an imperial workshop. But here again the industry was handicapped by the poverty of workers. Though each man worked for himself, he was financially dependent on middleman, who advanced the price of the raw material and took over the finished articles at his own valuation, living the workers a scanty livelihood. The bulk of the profit from his work being appropriated in the one case by the middleman, as in the other by the moneylender and the state officials.¹⁶The conditions of the skilled artisans in indigenous industries, such as carpet weaver, leather weaver, brass workers and the like was not satisfactory.¹⁷the hereditary nature of many caste industries, and the tradition of preserving the trade secrets within the trade caste was another impediment in the way of uplift of this class.

AbulFazl makes a mention in the Ain-i-Akbari of copper and iron mines at Mandi and Suket now in Himachal Pradesh. Copper was smelted in considerable quantities in various parts of the outer Himalayas in Kulu, where the Killas-like roke persist along the whole range, and was known to be copper bearing. Iron

mines were also worked at KotKhai in Shimla and in the hill states of Jubbal, Bashahr, Mandi and Suket. There were quarries at Bakhli in Mandi, near Kanhiara in Kangra District and throughout Kulu which had good quality Makhiala and Shamasabad.¹⁸The beds of salt, in salt range from which the range derives its name, occur in the shape of solid rock on the slopes of this tableland, and from the largest known deposits in the world. The mineral was quarried at the village of Kheora a few miles north-east of PindDadan Khan, at Nurpur in Jhelum District, at Warcha in Shahpur District, and at Kalabagh in Mianwali District.

There was also a quarry of sweet lime in this region, says SujaRai Bhandari.¹⁹in Jammu there was a mine of tin. Gravel was taken from the stream Tavi, and by setting it on fire, tin of unparalleled whiteness, hardness and durability was made. In some places in the north mountains there were mines of copper, brass and iron, which also yielded revenue to government. In certain river, specially the Beas and Jhelum, gold was obtained by washing sand panning.²⁰

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