



A study of agricultural land in the 19th century Bikaner state

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Abstract

The society of the 19th century erstwhile Bikaner princely state had a marked pattern of the exploitation of the peasants that resulted in numerous peasant led movements. In order to understand the true character of the feudal set up of the erstwhile times the whole set up of the economic system based on land must be gauged. The inner functioning of the land based feudal order can be understood first by enumerating the types of lands and their organic relationships with the peasants, the feudal lords and the maharaja. The specific geographical features of the state like desert, arid environment and consequent dearth of water for agriculture provides a different perspective to the peasantry life of the area. In the article an attempt shall be made to delineate the fine characteristics of the land based feudal systems by briefly defining the types of the lands prevalent then.

Keywords: Princely, feudal, land, organic, character etc

Introduction

The Society of Bikaner state was living under feudal set-up. The Maharaja was the chief of the state as the head of his clan with numerous kinsmen as petty chiefs. He granted them *Jagirs* in lieu of the various services rendered by them to his state. This accounted for more than 60 % of the land of State coming under the control of the *Jagirdars*. These *Jagirdars* were exempted from attending law courts and no one could file a suit against them without obtaining permission from the ruler. The ruler and his nobles (*Jagirdars*) could thus be compared with the main and the minor pillars of a tent. The state, in fact, did not belong to the ruler; it belonged to the clan as a whole ^[1]. Their relationship was not that of the lord and the vassal, but that of the lord and his kinsmen. These kinsmen claimed social equality with the lord in all matters, domestic and political. Such a relationship has been officially acknowledged in letters that passed between the lord and his chiefs ^[2]. Although the chiefs were obliged to pay tribute and homage and performed certain services to their lords, they regarded themselves as the rightful heirs of all the possessions they held ^[3]. What was true of the lord *vis-a-vis* his state was true of the chief *vis-a-vis* his *Jagir*.

The common partnership was recognised by the bestowing of the *Jagir* by the lord in lieu of military or other services rendered to him by the chiefs (*Jagirdars*). Though the chiefs exercised full powers within their *Jagirs*, the exigencies of changed political circumstances during the Mughal and the British rule, put them under certain duties and obligations to their rulers. When the rulers received protection from the Mughals and the British later on, they levied certain taxes like *Rekh*, *Chatund*, *Hukmanama*, *Nazrana*, etc. on the *Jagirdars*. The *Jagirdars* had to pay annually a tax called 'Rekh' at the rate of 8 per cent of the gross rental value of their *Jagirs* and had to perform *chakri* (service) by supplying horsemen, camel sawars and footmen in accordance with a specified scale, i.e. one horseman for every 1000/- rupees of revenue; one camel sawar for every 750 rupees; and one foot soldier for every 500 rupees of revenue ^[4].

Chatund (chakri) was another cess paid by a *Jagirdar* in lieu of securing exemption from personal attendance at the

capital for a certain period of time. When a *Thakur* died, his heir paid a succession fee known as *Hukmanama*, at the rate of 3/4th of the gross rental value of the estate, to be paid in cash or by making over his villages for a year to the *Khalsa* for the recovery of the *Hukmanama* fee. On the demise of a *Jagirdar*, his estate was placed under *Zabti* (sequestration). The ruler immediately posted a party consisting of a civil officer and a few soldiers till the payment of the *Hukmanama* by the heir was made and he received a fresh *patta of the Jagir* from the ruler ^[5].

The *Jagirdars* had also to pay, on various occasions, *Nazar noota-barar* (marriage-tax), *Ganeem-barar* (war-tax), *Nazarana*, etc. Disobedience to lawful summons or orders of the state by the *Jagirdars* was considered as a grave political offence leading to the confiscation of their *Jagirs* ^[6]. It would be worthwhile to point to the condition of the land tenure as it existed then in the states, as both of its units, the rulers and their chiefs, subsisted mainly on the land and were closely related to the peasantry.

Land Tenure

As regards the rights on land, the ruler of the state was the actual and absolute owner of the territory or land conquered by his ancestors. Those who accompanied and helped the ruler were rewarded with estates (*Jagirs*) on certain conditions. They became the *Thakurs* or *Jagirdars*. There were two types of tenures - (i) *Khalsa* and (ii) *Jagir* ^[7].

Khalsa

The land under the direct control of the ruler was called the *Khalsa*. Report of the Rajasthan-Madhya Bharat Jagir Enquiry Committee describes land tenure in the khalsa villages in Bikaner State- "The actual act of founding the village will probably be marked by a ceremony. Each cultivator would build his house on the spot selected for the village site and would help to excavate the tank. He then would break up and bring into cultivation as much land as he thought proper and wherever he liked at a greater or less distance from the village site, There was no partition of the whole or part of a definite area by virtue of joint landlord claim over it; each cultivator had a right to hold the fields which he broke up and a certain area of waste around them

as against the other members of the village. This right descended to his heirs in accordance with the custom and to such an extent was the right respected and is so still that a cultivator who is absent from his village for several years is justly entitled in the opinion of the countryside to the possession of his ancestral fields and house whenever he returns. There never has been in the great majority of the Khalsa villages any group of persons who asserted or exercised any claim as joint landlords of the whole area of the village nor at the time any groups who made such a claim based on Inheritance. The villages consisted of groups of independent cultivators the right of each of whom is based on his being either the first clearer of land or the descendant of such a clearer and was limited to the actual area held by him; he had no responsibility and consequently no contingent right in regard to the holding of any other cultivator nor had he any claim over any undivided portion of the occupied waste; he had merely a customary right to graze his cattle there^[8]."

Land under the Khalsa was of three kinds: (a) *Bapi*, (b) *Gair-Bapi*, and (c) *Muafi*.

Bapi: Those lands which the cultivator possessed right from the times of his ancestors were called *Bapi* and the cultivator was called *Bapidar*. He possessed occupancy rights on his land and paid lighter rates than others and thus enjoyed a concession of about 20 per cent. The *Bapidar* was given certain other privileges, e.g. (a) the standing timber and grass in his field belonged to him. (b) He was charged at dry rates (land revenue charged on unirrigated land) if he sunk a new well. He continued to pay at the dry rate for 10 years if the well was *pacca*, and for 5 years if the well was *kaccha*. Thereafter he paid the usual wet rate charges (land revenue on irrigated land), (c) If he left his village due to famine or for some other reason, he was not to be deprived of his rights, provided he returned back within five years. He was also at liberty to mortgage his possessions to tide over his period of distress^[9].

Gair-Bapi: *Gair-Bapi* land was assigned at will. Here the cultivator had no hereditary rights over his lands. He was called *Gair-Bapidar*. Such a land could be taken under cultivation year after year by paying fixed land revenue to the state.

Muafi: The land given to the *Ranis*, *Thakurs* and near relations of the ruler for their maintenance, and to the *Brahmins* or *Charans* or religious institutions by way of charity was called *Muafi*. The *Muafidars* were totally exempted from the land revenue. These *muafi* lands were mainly divided as under

Jivika: The land assigned to the *Ranis* or the near relations of the ruler.

Juna Jagir: Lands of those *Jagirdars* whose estates had been attached or confiscated, but who were allowed to keep some lands for maintenance, were called the *Juna Jagir*.

Sasan and Dohli: When a village was granted in charity to a temple or *Math* or to a *Brahmin*, *Charan*, *Nath*, etc., it was called *Sasan* and was held rent-free. When the grant was of the portion of a village, or of some wells or fields, it was known as *Dohli*.

Inam: *Inam* lands were given as reward to those who were martyred.

Bhum: Lastly, the *Bhum* land was assigned to those *Rajputs* who paid no revenue, but performed certain public services, such as protecting their villages, tracking the criminals, escorting treasury and guarding officials while on tour^[10].

Jagir

The land under the management of the *Jagirdar* or *Thakur* was called *Jagir* or *Thikana*. Every *Jagir* estate was inalienable i.e. it could not be sold or transferred, a portion could, however, be mortgaged with the sanction of the ruler, but foreclosure was not allowed. The bigger estate-holders were called *Thakurs* and lived in their own fortresses on their *Jagir* land^[11].

The *Thakur*, or the chief, being supreme in internal matters in his *Thikana* or *Jagir*, enjoyed exclusive executive, administrative and police powers and appointed officials to look after the day to day administration of the *Thikana* or *Jagir*. The *Thakur* of a big *Jagir* was the prototype of the ruler in his own *Jagir* and enjoyed a semi-independent status^[12].

The officials appointed to look after the Administration of a *Thikana (Jagir)* were termed: *Kamdar*, *Vakil*, *Faujdar*, *Potedar*, *Daroga-Kothar*, *Mal-Hakim*, *Tafedar*, *Tolawati*, etc. The *Kamdar* looked after the revenue and general administration of the *Thikana*. He collected the land revenue including various types of cesses, and maintained the accounts of *Jama-Kharch* (receipts and expenditure). He supervised the work of the petty servants of the *Thikana*, negotiated with the officials of the state for payment of *Rekh*, *Talwar-Bandhai*, *Noouta Nazrana*, etc., and looked after such other matters of the *Jagir*^[13].

The *Potedar* looked after the treasury. The *Kothari* was incharge of the stores. The *Tafadar* kept the accounts of the share in the produce due to the *Jagirdar* at the time of *Batai*, and the *Tolawati* was employed by the *Jagirdar* to measure and weigh the produce^[14]. Each major *Thikana* posted a *Vakil* at the state capital to form a channel between the state and the *Thikana*. Almost every big *Thikana* had the post of a *Faujdar*. He was a military cum-police officer. His main duty was to guard the *Thikana* and to adopt all necessary measures in this regard^[15].

The village was the administrative unit in a *Jagir*. The chief functionaries in the village were *Chaudhary* or *Gameti* or headman, *Karwaria* or *Sahna*, *Patwari*, and *Bhambi*. At the time of the appointment of a *Chaudhary*, the Pag-ceremony was held. The *Thakur* placed a turban on his head and the *Chaudhary*, in his turn, offered *Nazar* to his master. He enjoyed certain privileges and immunities^[16]. The job of the *Kanwaria* or *Sahna* was to guard the standing crops so as to prevent the cultivators from collecting the grain before *latai*. The *Ganv-Bhambi* acted as a messenger of the *Jagirdar*. *Minas*, *Bhawaries* and *Bhils* worked as *Chaukidars* in the village. For these services the *Kanwaria* or *Sahna*, *Ganv-Bhambi*, *Mina*, *Bhawari* and the *Bhils* got their respective shares of the produce at the time of *batai*^[17].

Conclusion

To sum up, the peculiarities of the land based system of the erstwhile Bikaner state has been highlighted with greater attention to defining the relevant terminologies. To better understand the nature of the peasant movements there is

need to ascertain the basic fundamentals of the feudal system that entails the crux of the peasant-lord-king relationships. The feudal system of the Bikaner state alongside the lack of water resources in the region led to complexities in the operations of the agriculture of the area.

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