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A HISTORY OF AGRICULTURE IN INDIA

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Volume II

A History of Agriculture in India, Vol. II, covers the period from A.D. 1206 to 1761, which saw the rise and spread of Islam, the rule of the Turks, the spread of the bhakti-cult, the splendours of Vijayanagar, the rule of the Mughals, with an Afghan interlude, the Portuguese discovery of India, and the rise of Maratha and Sikh powers. During this period, culture was mostly urban-based and agriculture was considered an activity not worthy of notice by the elite. Consequently, the peasants were generally poor. Nevertheless, sifting through the well-documented accounts of the contemporary historians, the author gives us a vivid account of how gardening and landscaping reached excellence in Mughal India. Extensive quotations from *namas* written by the courtiers and accounts of European travellers give us an insight into the keen observations of Babur and Jahangir on plants, birds and animals, and provide us information on crops, fruit plants, animal husbandry and the prices of agricultural commodities during the medieval period. We also learn about the reclamation of waste-lands, the digging of the Jamuna Canal, the construction of the Vijayanagar dam, the methods of land-revenue assessment, and the administrative reforms of Sher Shah Suri and Akbar. Of no less importance is the Portuguese discovery of India, which brought in its wake maize, tobacco, potato, tomato, beans, groundnut, cashewnut, rubber, pineapple, guava, and flowers such as morning-glory, nasturtium and marigold. This panorama of agricultural history is unfolded against the prevailing political and socio-economic background.

A HISTORY OF AGRICULTURE IN INDIA

VOLUME II
EIGHTH TO EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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PREFACE

INDIAN history has been divided into ancient, mediaeval and modern periods. The period between A.D. 1206 (the year of accession of Qutb-ud-din Aibak as Sultan of India) and 1761 (occupation of Delhi by the Marathas) is ordinarily accepted as the mediaeval period of Indian history. The mediaeval period is also designated as Muhammedan period in contrast with the earlier Hindu-Buddhist period of ancient India.

The sources of information on Mediaeval India are the observations of Arab geographers on Sind, Multan and Gujarat, the histories recorded by the Muslim historians, the accounts of travellers and biographies of the Mughal emperors.

The history of a country cannot be properly understood in isolation from that of other countries. Events in Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and Afghanistan in the mediaeval period profoundly affected India. Hence, it is necessary to know about religious, cultural and socio-economic movements which took place in these countries. The rise of Islam in Arabia in the seventh century affected the course of history profoundly. Islam sparked a social revolution which had an impact on all the countries in the neighbourhood of Arabia, including India. Sind, which had maritime and trade relations with Arabia, Iraq and Iran, was conquered by the Arab, Muhammed-bin-Qasim in A.D. 711, and in the ninth century it had two independent Arab principalities.

In the tenth and eleventh centuries Arab geographers wrote on the geography, climate, people, soils and crops of Sind and Gujarat. The earliest among them was Ibn Khurdadba, a high official of the Caliphs of Baghdad, who died in A.D. 912. He employed his leisure in topographical and geographical researches, and the result was his book *Kitāb-l Masālik wā-l Mamālik (Book of Roads and Kingdoms)*, in which he provides an excellent description of Sind, its people and crops.

Ibn Haukal, a native of Baghdad, a traveller and a trader, travelled in the various countries under the Muhammedan rule between A.D. 943 and 968. He gave the same title to his book as Ibn Khurdadba. His description of Sind and Multan is vivid. He mentions a number of towns which he visited and also gives the names of crops which he saw growing in Sind.

Al Idrisi, a native of Ceuta in Morocco, was a well-known geographer. He travelled in Europe in the early twelfth century and eventually settled in Sicily at the court of Roger II, at whose instance he wrote *Nazhatu-l Mushtaq*, a book on geography. He compiled it from the existing works,

and further information he derived from travellers whose verbal statements he compared and tested. He described the towns of Sind, Multan and Gujarat, as well as the crops.

Kazwini, a native of Kazwin in Iran, compiled an encyclopaedia named *Ajaibu-l Makhluqāt era Ghaibaibu-Mawjudāt* (*Wonders of things created, and marvels of things existing*) in A.D. 1275. In it he described the Sun temple of Multan and the temple of Somnath in Gujarat.

The Muhammedan historians of the Sultanate were mostly courtiers and *qādis*. They were contemporaries who had seen and taken part in the events they narrated. That is why their record of events is vivid and authentic. Their histories are, however, records of battles, conspiracies, revolts, murders and fratricides. Elliot remarks, 'Of domestic history, we have in our Indian Annalists absolutely nothing, and the same may be remarked of nearly all Muhammedan historians, except Ibn Khaldun. By them society is never contemplated, either in its conventional usages or recognized privileges; its constituent elements or mutual relations; in its established classes or popular institutions, in its private recesses or habitual intercourses. In notices of commerce, agriculture, internal police, and local judicature, they are equally deficient. A fact, an anecdote, a speech, a remark, which would illustrate the condition of the common people, or of any rank subordinate to the highest, is considered too insignificant to be suffered to intrude upon a relation which concerns only grandees and ministers, thrones and imperial powers.'¹

One is constrained to remark that it is agriculture and the condition of cultivators which were of least interest to the Muhammedan historians. May be, it was due to the fact that Islam is an urban religion, and the emphasis on the part of the Muhammedan elite was on administration, trade, commerce and urban life. As such, they considered agriculture as an insignificant activity not worthy of notice and those who practised it as persons of no consequence.

There are, however, two exceptions to the general rule among the Muhammedan historians of the Sultanate period, viz. Zia-ud-din Barni and Shams-i-Siraj Afif. Barni belonged to the ruling class of Delhi. His father Mu'ayyid al-Mulk was *naib* to Arkali Khan, the second son of Sultan Jalal al-din Khalji. His paternal uncle Malik 'Ala' al-Mulk was the *Kotwal* of Delhi under Sultan 'Ala' al-din Khalji and a prominent royal counsellor. His maternal grandfather, Sipah Salar Husam al-din, was appointed to the *shahnagi* of Lakhnauti by Sultan Balban. Barni himself became a *nadim* or boon companion of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlak. In his *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi*, Barni records facts relating to administration,

¹Elliot, H.M. and Dowson, J. *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, Vol. I, pp. ix-xx

agrarian conditions and economy.

Shams-i-Siraj Afif in his *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi* provides administrative details and gives information on the condition of the common people. According to Professor Dowson, this history gives us altogether a better view of the internal condition of India under a Muhammedan sovereign than is presented by any other work, except the *Ain-i-Akbari*. Written in a plain style, the book is chapterized unlike other works. Afif descended from a family which dwelt at Abohar. His great-grandfather was the Collector of Revenue of Abohar. He himself was attached to the court of Firozshah Tughlak and accompanied him on his hunting expeditions. He provides details about the founding of the city of Hissar Firoza, the present-day Hissar. He also describes the sources of the king's revenue and the digging of the West Jamuna canal.

Of the Islamic travellers who came to India during the Sultanate, the most perceptive was Ibn Battuta. On 14 June 1325, he started on his travels from his home town of Tangier in Morocco. He travelled in Africa, Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Central Asia, India and China. It is estimated that he covered 120,700 kilometres (75,000 miles) on foot, by horse and by camel. In India he enjoyed for some years the patronage of the Sultan Muhammed Tughlak, who appointed him *Qadi* of Delhi. Later on, he incurred the displeasure of the Sultan for associating with a dissident Sufi, and he thought it prudent to leave Delhi. The Sultan, out of politeness, appointed him his envoy to the Emperor of China, and he reached China by sea. On his return to Tangier, Ibn Battuta dictated his memoirs, which contain information on the people of the countries he visited, their climate, physical features, mineral products, fauna and flora. Incidentally, the only account of the crops of north India in the Sultanate period is in Ibn Battuta's travelogue.

Of the Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagar, which was extinguished by the Sultans of Deccan in 1565, a graphic account is provided by Abdur Razzak. He was born at Herat on 6 November 1413 and died in 1482. His father, Is'hak, was employed by Sultan Shah Rukh as a *Qazi* and *Imam*. He was sent by Sultan Shah Rukh as his ambassador to Devaraya II, the Hindu King of Vijayanagar, in 1443. He is the author of *Mulla 'u-s Sa'dain*, a travelogue, in which he provides a descriptive account of Calicut and Vijayanagar. Along with an account of the Hindu King Devaraya II, and his court, he describes life in Vijayanagar, and the methods adopted for catching elephants.

The best account of the Sultanates of Deccan is provided by Firishta. Muhammed Kasim Hindu Shah, surnamed Firishta, was born at Astarabad, on the borders of the Caspian Sea, about A.D. 1570. His father travelled in India and eventually reached Ahmadnagar in Deccan, and was employed by Murtaza Nizam Shah as a Persian tutor for his son. After his father's

death, he proceeded to Bijapur in 1589 and was employed by Ibrahim Adil Shah. He wrote his history of India, known as *Tarikh-i-Firishta*, on a suggestion from Ibrahim Adil Shah, who felt the need of a general history of the Muhammedans in India avoiding falsehoods and flatteries which had disfigured works of this nature. Firishta completed his history in 1612 when Jahangir was ruling over Delhi. He named it *Gulshan-i-Ibrahimi* after his patron, and *Nauras-nāma*, after the new capital Nauras, which the king commenced building in 1599. Firishta made extensive use of Barni's *Tarikh-i-Firozshahi* in dealing with the Sultanate of Delhi in his history.

After the defeat of Humayun by Sher Shah in 1540 an Afghan interregnum starts in the history of India, which lasted till 1555. An account of this period is provided in *Tarikh-i-Sher Shāhi* and *Wakiāt-i-Mushtāqi*. *Tarikh-i-Sher Shāhi* was written by Abbas Khan Samani by order of Emperor Akbar. Abbas Khan was an Afghan connected by marriage with the family of Sher Shah. He provides an excellent account of the revenue regulations of Sher Shah. Shaikh Rizkulla Mushtaki (1492-1581) provides an account of Sher Shah's constructive works, e.g. roads and sarais, in his *Wakiāt-i-Mushtāki*.

Tarikh-i-Daudi was written by Abdulla during the reign of Jahangir. His account of the Afghan kings commences with the reign of Bahlol Lodi and concludes with the reign of Daud Shah, the last Afghan ruler, after whom he named his history.

The Mughal period is well documented in the *namas* and histories. *Babur-nama* was dictated by Babur to a scribe during 1528 to 1530 in one of the gardens in the suburb of Agra. *Humayun-nama* was written by the historian Ghias-ud-din alias Khondamir in 1534. *Akbar-nama* and *Ain-i-Akbari* were written by Abu-l Fazl during the reign of Akbar. Abu-l Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* provides authentic information on crops and fruit plants grown in Mughal India, prices of commodities, and animal husbandry. For the state of agriculture and animal husbandry in Mughal India, it has the same value as Kautilya's *Arthashastra* in Mauryan India. Jahangir wrote his own biography, the *Tuzk-i-Jahangiri*, in which he recorded his observations on animals, birds and plants.

During the reign of Akbar, the writing of histories was encouraged. Three outstanding works written during his reign are mentioned below.

Tarikh-i Alfi, a history of the Muhammedan nations up to the thousandth year of the Hijra era, was written at the command of Emperor Akbar. In this project a number of authors participated, but the main work was done by Maulana Ahmad. A part of this history was written by Asaf Khan. It is divided into five books and it extends from A.D. 622 to 1592.

Tabākāt-i Akbari was written by Nazim-ud-din Ahmad Bakshi. It is said that Nazim-ud-din was incomparably upright, and excelled all his contemporaries in administrative knowledge as well as in the clearness

of his intellect. He was appointed by Akbar to the office of the Bakhshi of the Government of Gujarat.

Tarikh-i Badauni was written by 'Abdu-l Kadir Badauni. It is a general history of India from the time of Mahmud Ghaznavi to 1596. Badauni studied various sciences under renowned scholars and excelled in music, history and astronomy. On the orders of Akbar he translated two out of the 18 sections of the *Mahabharata*.

The best and most impartial history of the Mughal India is *Muntakhabu-l Lubāb* by Muhammad Hashim alias Khafi Khan. He commences with the invasion of Babur and concludes with the fourteenth year of the reign of Mohammed Shah. Muhammad Hashim was a private gentleman living at Delhi and on his own initiative compiled a register of all events of Mohammed Shah's reign. The value of Khafi Khan's history lies in its record of events during the reign of Aurangzeb when the writing of histories was forbidden, and Khafi Khan was obliged to continue his labours in secret. He also provides details regarding the Marathas, their methods of warfare and collection of *chauth*.

Apart from *namas* and histories, we get information of great value from the accounts of European travellers about the Mughal India. During the seventeenth century a number of European travellers, English, Dutch, French and Italian, came to India. The most prominent of these were Ralph Fitch (1583-1591); John Mildenhall (1603-1605); William Finch (1608-1611); William Hawkins (1608-1613); Thomas Coryat (1614-1617); Edward Terry (1616-1619); Francisco Pelsaert (1620-1627); Pietro Della Valle (1623-1624); John De Laet (1625-1631); Peter Mundy (1628-1634); John Albert de Mandelslo (1638-1639); Sebastian Manrique (1640-1642); Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1640-1667); Niccolao Manucci (1653-1708); M. Francois Bernier (1656-1668) and Monsieur de Thevenot (1666-1667). Of them Pelsaert, Manucci and Bernier made excellent observations on the crops and people of India. Bernier, the French doctor—the most scholarly of all—came of a peasant stock and he noted with sympathy and concern the wretched condition of the peasants in India.

There are histories of India by British historians written before Elliot and Dowson's classic work, *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*. These are James Mill's *History of British India* (1817), G.R. Gleig's *History of the British Empire in India* (1830) and Mountstuart Elphinstone's *History of India—the Hindu and Mahometan Periods* (1841).

James Mill divided the pre-British history of India into two periods, Hindu and Muhammedan. He was a utilitarian, and his history betrays that bias. 'In looking at the pursuits of any nation, to draw from them indications of the state of civilization, no mark is so important as the nature of the *end* to which they are directed,' states Mill. He continues, 'Exactly in proportion as *utility* is the object of every pursuit, may we regard a

nation as civilized. Exactly in proportion as its ingenuity is wasted on contemptible and mischievous objects, though it may be, in itself, an ingenuity of no ordinary kind, the nation may safely be denominated barbarous.

'According to this rule, the astronomical and mathematical sciences afford conclusive evidence against the Hindus. They have been cultivated exclusively for the purposes of astrology, one of the most irrational of all imaginable pursuits—one of those which most infallibly denote a nation barbarous.'

It is not correct that the mathematical sciences of the Hindus were applied to astrology alone. The greater number of the results of their arithmetic, algebra, and astronomy have no relation to astrology and are indispensable to the ordinary purposes of social life.

If Mill's thesis of utility is accepted, then basic science has no place in the civilized society and those who indulge in it cannot claim to be civilized. How ill-informed was James Mill about the achievements of the Hindus in science is amply proved from the researches of Sir William Jones, who regarded the ancient Hindus as the Greeks of Asian civilization. Their inventions included the decimal scale, apologues and the game of chess, and, according to Jones, the Vedanta contained all the philosophies of Pythagoras and Plato.

Firishta's history was translated into English by General John Briggs in 1829. In 1832 Briggs published his *History of the Rise and Progress of Mohamadan Power in India*, in which he made use of his translation of Firishta's history. Montstuart Elphinstone's *The History of India—the Hindu and Mahometan Periods* (1841) also relies on Briggs's translation of Firishta's history for the account of the Sultanate period. Written in a pleasant style, Elphinstone's history of India is the best in the pre-Elliot and Dowson period. Narrating the qualities which a historian should possess, Sir William Jones remarks: 'The first duty of a historian was to be free from prejudice; his first obligation, to accept nothing as fact without reliable evidence. Having established his facts, the historian should narrate them in a pleasing style, preserving a proper chronology. He should unfold the causes at work in the historical process, taking into account the characters of distinguished men as well as the interplay of 'chance' and human motives. In short, "an unbiased integrity, a comprehensive view of nature, an exact knowledge of men and manners, a mind stored with free and generous principles, a penetrating sagacity, a fine taste and copious eloquence" were the necessary qualifications of a good historian. These are the qualities which Elphinstone had in ample measure.

The primary sources of information on the history of India in the Mediaeval period are the eight volumes of the *History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, by Sir Henry Miers Elliot, published from 1867 to 1877. Born in 1808, Elliot became Secretary to the Government of India in 1847

in the Foreign Department under Lord Hardinge and later on under Lord Dalhousie. He died at the early age of forty-five in 1853 in Cape of Good Hope in South Africa, where he had gone to restore his health. His papers were taken to London by his widow and were entrusted by the Directors of the East India Company to the care of Professor John Dowson of the Staff College, Sandhurst. These papers contained translations into English of the writings of the early Arab geographers and Muhammedan historians which were in Arabic and Persian. Some of these translations were by Elliot and others were by different English officers and Indian *munshis*. Professor Dowson edited these translations. The first volume was published in 1867 and the remaining seven by 1877. These eight volumes, along with the *Bibliotheca Indica* series published in about the same period by the Asiatic Society of Bengal, are the principal sources for the history of Mediaeval period.

The modern historians of Mediaeval India from 1903 onwards have been 'mining' Elliot and Dowson's eight volumes for their histories. These include such standard works as S. Lane-Poole's *Mediaeval India—Under Mohammedan Rule* (1903); Vincent Smith's *Akbar, The Great Mogol* (1917); Pringle Kennedy's *A History of the Great Moghuls* (1905 and 1911); the *Oxford History of India* (1919); the third and fourth volumes of the *Cambridge History of India*, viz. *Turks and Afghans* (1928) and *The Moghul Period* (1937). These histories, as well as those of Sir Jadu Nath Sarcar, are largely political and constitutional and are replete with details about court conspiracies, rebellions and battles. There are three exceptions, viz. Ishwari Prasad's *History of Mediaeval India* (1925); Rawlinson's *India, a Short Cultural History* (1937), and Michael Edwardes's *A History of India* (1961). Apart from political developments Ishwari Prasad's *History of Mediaeval India* also deals with art, architecture and literature. He made use of the works of Cunningham, Burgess and Marshall in the realm of archaeology. He also deals with the social, cultural and religious movements. Ishwari Prasad made a good attempt to present a history of India which deals with the life of man in its varied aspects.

An excellent cultural history of India is H.G. Rawlinson's *India, a Short Cultural History* (1937). It is a survey of the cultural scene in India from Vedic India to the nineteenth century. It deals with art and architecture, literature, education and social and religious movements.

In *History of India*, Michael Edwardes provides a balanced view of India's history. He has also attempted to give a view of the life of the people of India within the framework of political events. A bunch of photographs of buildings, sculptures, paintings and people provides a view of the country, its people and their culture.

W.H. Moreland of the Indian Civil Service, who served in the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, was a pioneer in the economic history of India.

In *India at the Death of Akbar, an Economic Study* (1920) and *The Agrarian System of Moslem India*, Moreland presents an analysis of the economy of the Mughal Empire, the condition of the peasants, their habitat, their crops and implements. He also provides a detailed account of the revenue administration of the Mughals and their predecessors, the Afghans.

The trail blazed by Moreland remained neglected for a long time till Irfan Habib came on the scene with the publication in 1963 of *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707*. He is the first historian to diagnose the correct nature of the agrarian revolts of the Jats, Satnamis, Marathas and Sikhs, which ultimately shattered the Mughal Empire. By a massive array of evidence he also highlighted the wretched condition of the peasants in Mughal India. This must have come as a shock to those who are dazzled by the grandeur of the mosques, mausoleums, forts and palaces of the Mughals.

There are some writers of history who assign overwhelming importance to economic factors. Economic factors are no doubt important in history, but are not the sole factors. Man cannot live without bread, but he does not live by bread alone. More people have died for the sake of their faith and ideas than for bread. The spiritual side of human personality is equally important, and religion has played as great a role in history as economics.

Subjects such as history and economics are also attempting to become scientific in the present century. As in science, the search for truth is becoming the main concern of the historian. The duty of a historian is to discover truth, and he must not distort or suppress it to suit pre-conceived theories. Theory should be derived from the facts truthfully discovered. A mere collection of facts without an attempt at meaningful analysis and interpretation is a fruitless endeavour. However, it must be admitted that it is not easy to discover truth, for peoples' minds are clouded by wishful thinking and pre-conceived ideas.

This is an attempt to present a history of agriculture in the Mediaeval period, which covers the Sultanate and the Mughal rule. I have mainly relied on Elliot and Dowson's works and the accounts of travellers. It should, however, be noted that the facts and events that I have culled from these works are such as are usually ignored by historians whose main interest is in political and constitutional aspects.

Political history, however, cannot be totally ignored in a history of agriculture. Elliot concluded that the mediaeval Muslim society was morally inferior and its rulers were tyrants. This was not always so. There were some monarchs who were men of vision, with a constructive frame of mind, and with sympathy for the masses. It has been seen that whenever there was a broad-minded monarch ruling over India, with sympathy for the tillers of the soil, the economy improved and people were happy. This is

what happened during the rule of Firoz Shah Tughlak, Sher Shah Suri and Akbar. Hence, the arrangement which I have adopted is to describe the history of agriculture against the background of political history.

A source of which the historians have made little use are the paintings of the Mughal and the Rajput schools of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. No amount of writing can convey what a painting reveals. The Mughal portraits tell us about the physical appearance of principal actors in the drama of history and also reveal their character. The power which we see in the face of Akbar is no longer there in the faces of his successors. Contemporary portraits reveal the sensuousness of Jahangir, the elegance of Shah Jahan, the asceticism and the cunning of Aurangzeb, and the imbecility of the later Mughals who were rulers only in name. The paintings also reveal vividly the socio-economic conditions, the types of clothes worn by the people, their weapons and tools, and the fauna and flora. It was under the patronage of Akbar (1556-1605) that Mughal painting began and magnificent series were painted illustrating the *Babur-nama* and the *Akbar-nama*. Jahangir encouraged his artists to paint rare birds, animals and plants. The paintings of the *Babur-nama* illustrate the birds, domestic and wild animals and fruit trees grown in India during the reign of Akbar. In fact, the *Babur-nama* is the first illustrated Natural History of India in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Research and study of Indian miniature paintings has been my hobby since 1950. During the last thirty years, I have seen thousands of Mughal and Rajput paintings in public and private collections in India as well as in England, the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. This research enabled me to select paintings that are relevant to agriculture and animal husbandry.

This book provides a panoramic view of the condition of the cultivators of the soil, their crops and their political and socio-economic environment in the Mediaeval period of India, based on evidence from primary sources. It is not exclusively a history of agriculture but also a social history of that period.

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