
RURAL ECONOMIC STRUCTURES IN THE *AIN-I-AKBARI*: AN INDISPENSABLE PRE-MODERN SOUTH ASIAN HISTORICAL SOURCE

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Abstract: The *Ain-i-Akbari*, compiled by Abu'l Fazl between 1590 and 1596, constitutes one of the most indispensable textual foundations for reconstructing the agrarian economy of pre-modern South Asia. As the administrative compendium appended to the *Akbarnama*, it offers an unparalleled window into the Mughal Empire's rural structures through its meticulous documentation of land measurement, revenue assessment, agricultural regimes, irrigation systems, artisanal production, and market networks. This article examines the *Ain* as a primary source for understanding the organization of rural life under Akbar, highlighting the sophistication of the imperial revenue apparatus, the ecological diversity of agrarian production, and the interconnectedness of village economies with regional and imperial markets. It analyses Abu'l Fazl's detailed articulations of land classification, crop patterns, and irrigation technologies while situating them within the broader administrative reforms of the Todar Mal *bandobast*. Attention is also given to the dynamic interplay between agriculture, craft production, livestock management, and commercial exchange that sustained rural livelihoods. By juxtaposing the *Ain*'s normative prescriptions with the socio-economic realities implied in its data, the article emphasizes both the strengths and the silences of the text, particularly its idealized portrayal of administrative efficiency and limited engagement with social stratification and local-level tensions. Ultimately, the study argues that the *Ain-i-Akbari* remains an indispensable source for understanding the economic foundations of Mughal power, while also requiring critical reading informed by comparative sources and regional contexts.

Keywords: *Abu'l Fazl's Ain-i-Akbari, Mughal Agrarian Economy, Land Revenue System, Rural Economic Structures*

Introduction: The *Ain-i-Akbari*, composed by Abu'l Fazl Allami between 1590 and 1596, stands as one of the most remarkable administrative documents produced during the Mughal period in India. As the third volume of the *Akbarnama*, this Persian text provides an extraordinarily detailed account of the administrative organization, revenue system, and socio-economic conditions of the Mughal Empire under Emperor Akbar's reign¹. The work offers unparalleled insights into the rural economy of sixteenth-century India, documenting agricultural practices, land revenue systems, crop patterns, and the lived experiences of rural populations with a precision rarely found in pre-modern South Asian sources.

The rural economy formed the backbone of the Mughal Empire's prosperity and political stability. Agriculture constituted the primary economic activity, engaging the vast majority of the population and generating the revenue that sustained the imperial administration, military apparatus, and court culture². Abu'l Fazl's meticulous documentation provides historians with an invaluable window into understanding how agrarian production was organized, measured, and taxed during one of India's most significant historical periods.

The Administrative Framework and Land Revenue System

Abu'l Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* presents a sophisticated administrative framework that governed rural economic life throughout the Mughal Empire. The empire was divided into twelve provinces, each subdivided into *sarkars* (districts) and subsequently into *parganas* (fiscal units comprising multiple villages). This hierarchical structure enabled systematic revenue collection and administrative oversight across vast territories³. The administrative machinery included provincial governors, *faujdar*s who provided military support, *amalguzars* as revenue collectors, and village-level officials including the *qanungo* (revenue record keeper), *chaudhari* (village headman), and *patwari* (land accountant)⁴.

The cornerstone of rural economic organization was the land revenue system, which underwent significant reforms under the Todar mal bandobast, named after Raja Todar Mal, Akbar's finance minister⁵. Land was carefully measured using the standardized *ilahi gaz* (approximately thirty-

¹ For the dating and composition of the *Ain-i-Akbari*, see Abul Fazl Allami, *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol I, tr. H. Blochmann, Manohar, Delhi, 2023 (Introduction). The work forms the third volume of the *Akbarnama* project undertaken by Abu'l Fazl at Emperor Akbar's direction.

² Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System in Mughal India, 1556-1707*, Bombay, Asia Publishing House, 1963, pp. 1-5. This book provides comprehensive analysis of the rural economy drawing extensively on the *Ain-i-Akbari*.

³ The administrative divisions are described in detail in Book II of the *Ain-i-Akbari*, (*Ain II*) which systematically covers each province with statistics on *sarkars*, *parganas*, and *revenue*. Abul Fazl Allami, *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol II, tr. H. Jarrett, Manohar, Delhi, 2023, pp. 37-46. Also, for details see, Shireen Moosvi, *The Economy of the Mughal Empire c. 1595: A Statistical Study*, New Delhi, OUP, 1987, pp. 16-35.

⁴ For the administrative hierarchy and official functions, see Shireen Moosvi, *The Economy of the Mughal Empire c. 1595: A Statistical Study*, *Op.cit.*, pp. 174-89.

three inches), and agricultural land was classified into four categories based on productivity: *polaj* (cultivated annually), *parauti* (occasionally left fallow), *chachar* (left fallow for three to four years), and *banjar* (uncultivated for five years or more)⁶. Abul Fazl documents the prices and yields of various crops across different reigns providing data that enabled relatively equitable revenue assessments.

The revenue assessment methodology combined detailed field surveys measuring dimensions, assessing soil quality, and recording crop types. The system recognized that different crops yielded varying returns and applied differentiated tax rates accordingly⁷. The actual revenue demand typically constituted approximately one-third of the estimated gross produce, with provisions for remissions during crop failures or famines, though implementation depended heavily on local officials' discretion⁸.

This elaborate administrative structure reflected the empire's recognition that effective rural economic management required detailed local knowledge combined with centralized oversight. The system aimed to balance the empire's revenue needs with the productive capacity of agricultural communities, though the actual implementation often varied significantly across different regions and time periods.

Agricultural Production, Irrigation, and Regional Diversity

The *Ain-i-Akbari* documents remarkable crop diversity across the empire. Food grains formed the foundation of agricultural production, with rice predominating in water-abundant regions like Bengal and coastal areas, while wheat dominated the northwestern plains. Other grains including barley, millet, and various pulses were grown extensively based on soil types and rainfall patterns⁹. Beyond food grains, cash crops played increasingly important roles. Cotton cultivation expanded significantly, supporting a thriving textile industry producing goods for domestic consumption and international trade. Sugarcane, indigo, oilseeds including sesame and mustard, and various spices contributed to agricultural diversity and commercial exchange¹⁰.

⁵ The reforms associated with Raja Todar Mal are discussed in the *Ain-i-Akbari* Book II (*Ain 15*). For analysis of Raja Todarmal's recommendations, see Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System in Mughal India of Mughal India*, *Op.cit.*, pp. 128, 242, 273.

⁶ These land classifications are detailed in the *Ain-i-Akbari*'s discussion of revenue principles. The system recognized that soil fertility and cultivation intensity varied significantly. The *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol II, (*Ain XI*), *Op.cit.*, pp. 68-75. Abu'l Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, trans. Blochmann, vol. 1, 273-274; W. H. Moreland, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India*, Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1968, pp. 13-18.

⁷ The *Ain-i-Akbari* provides extensive price lists and yield data for various crops across different regions, compiled in systematic tables that represent remarkable statistical documentation for the period. For details see *The Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol II, (*Ain 15*), *Op.cit.*, pp. 75-93.

⁸ For discussion of revenue rates and payment methods, see Habib, *The Agrarian System in Mughal India*, *Op.cit.*, pp. 257-97.

⁹ The crop diversity documented in the *Ain-i-Akbari* is analyzed in Moosvi, *Economy of the Mughal Empire*, with detailed statistical compilations of crops by region, *Op.cit.*, pp. 121-125.

Water management proved critical for agricultural productivity. Wells represented the most widespread irrigation source, operated by human labor, animal power, or mechanical devices like the Persian wheel (*rahat*). Canal irrigation played important roles where rivers could be diverted, while tank irrigation proved valuable in regions with pronounced seasonal rainfall¹¹. The administrative system recognized irrigation's impact by assessing higher revenue rates for irrigated versus rain-fed agriculture, acknowledging both greater productivity and the substantial investments required for irrigation infrastructure¹².

The document's province-by-province descriptions reveal striking regional variations reflecting India's ecological diversity. Bengal exhibited intensive rice cultivation and highly productive agriculture supporting dense populations. The northwestern plains featured wheat cultivation with irrigation from wells and canals. Gujarat combined agricultural production with significant commercial and manufacturing activities, particularly cotton cultivation and textile production for maritime export¹³. These regional variations meant uniform policies often produced different outcomes, requiring administrative adaptation to local conditions, a challenge addressed with varying degrees of success.

Village Economy, Artisanal Production, and Commercial Integration

The village formed the fundamental unit of rural economic organization, with communities including diverse occupational groups beyond cultivators. Artisans including carpenters, blacksmiths, potters, and weavers provided essential goods and services, while specialized service providers created interdependent economic relationships sustaining village communities¹⁴. Land rights involved complex arrangements with some cultivators holding heritable occupancy rights while others worked as tenants. Village common resources including grazing lands, forests, and water bodies supported livestock raising and provided supplementary livelihood opportunities¹⁵.

¹⁰ Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History*, Vol I, (1200-1750), New Delhi, CUP, 1982, pp. 222-24.

¹¹ The various irrigation devices and their operation are described in the *Ain-i-Akbari*. For technological aspects, see Irfan Habib, "Technological Changes and Society: Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries" in *Medieval India: Researches in the History of India, 1200-1750*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1992.

¹² Irrigation is discussed in the *Ain-i-Akbari*'s treatment of agricultural practices. For detailed analysis, see Habib, *The Agrarian System in Mughal India*, *Op.cit.*, pp. 24-36.

¹³ See Footnote 10.

¹⁴ For village structure and economy, see Habib, *The Agrarian System in Mughal India*, *Op.cit.*, pp. 118-35. The diversity of village occupational groups is evident from references throughout the *Ain-i-Akbari*.

¹⁵ Land rights and tenure arrangements are complex topics addressed in Habib, *The Agrarian System in Mughal India*, *Op.cit.*, pp. 196-256, with detailed discussion of various categories of cultivators and intermediaries. The roles of village officials are described in the *Ain-i-Akbari*'s administrative sections and analyzed in studies of Mughal revenue administration by Moreland, Habib and Moosvi.

While agriculture dominated, the *Ain-i-Akbari* documents various artisanal and manufacturing activities in rural settings. Textile production represented the most significant rural industry, with cotton spinning and weaving conducted widely across villages. Many rural households engaged in spinning as supplementary income, while specialized weavers produced fabrics ranging from coarse local cloths to fine textiles for elite markets and export¹⁶. Sugar production, oil extraction, pottery, blacksmithing, carpentry, and leather working created diversified rural economies extending beyond purely agricultural production¹⁷.

The rural economy exhibited significant commercial integration through market networks operating at multiple scales. Periodic markets, functioning on fixed days, enabled rural producers to sell surpluses and purchase manufactured goods while merchants facilitated connections to urban commercial centers¹⁸. Increasing monetization during Akbar's reign represented a significant development. Currency standardization facilitated commercial exchanges, and peasants increasingly paid land revenue in cash rather than kind, necessitating agricultural produce sales to obtain money¹⁹. The *Ain-i-Akbari*'s systematic price recording across regions reveals market integration, with price differentials reflecting transportation costs, local supply and demand, and seasonal variations.

Livestock played multifaceted roles, with cattle providing draft power for plowing and irrigation while supplying dairy products. Sheep and goat raising provided meat, milk, and wool supporting textile production. Forest resources in suitable regions contributed timber, fuel wood, and diverse minor products including honey, medicinal plants, and other materials for household use and commercial sale²⁰. The document records regional variations in livestock populations and their economic significance.

Challenges, Limitations, and Historical Significance

While presenting systematic administration and productive agriculture, the rural economy faced numerous challenges. Agricultural production remained highly vulnerable to climatic variations, with monsoon failures producing devastating droughts and excessive rainfall causing destructive flooding. The revenue burden placed substantial pressure on agricultural communities, with actual collections sometimes exceeding prescribed levels through additional levies and official

¹⁶ For information on Textile production, see Ishrat Alam, "A Dutch Memoir of 1603 on Indian textiles", in Irfan Habib (ed.), *Akbar and his India*, Delhi, OUP, 1997, pp. 294-97.

¹⁷ Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History*, Vol I, (1200-1750), Op.cit., pp. 264-307.

¹⁸ Moosvi, *The Economy of Mughal Empire*, c. 1595, Op.cit., pp. 309-28.

¹⁹ Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System in Mughal India*, Op.cit., pp. 380-92. For some aspects of the growth of money economy in India during the 17th century, see Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History*, New Delhi, OUP, 2003, pp. 235-46.

²⁰ For details, W.H. Moreland, *India at the Death of Akbar*, Delhi, Atma Ram and Sons, 1962, pp. 130-83. For commercial activities of the Mughal Emperors, see Satish Chandra, *Essays on Medieval Indian History*, Op.cit., pp. 227-34.

exactions. During poor harvests, even standard demands could prove crushing, forcing peasants into debt or land abandonment.

Political instability and military conflicts disrupted rural economic life through supply requisitions, crop destruction, and population displacement. Social hierarchies characterized rural communities, with dominant groups controlling superior lands and wielding disproportionate power while lower-status groups faced discrimination and limited opportunities. The expansion of commercial agriculture and increasing monetization created both opportunities and vulnerabilities, exposing peasants to market forces and price fluctuations beyond their control while sometimes leading to resource concentration as wealthy individuals accumulated lands.

Conclusion: The *Ain-i-Akbari* provides an extraordinarily rich source for understanding the rural economy of Mughal India during the late sixteenth century. Abu'l Fazl's systematic documentation offers historians detailed insights unavailable for most pre-modern societies, revealing sophisticated administrative apparatus attempting to manage and extract revenue from a vast agrarian economy while maintaining productivity and stability.

The rural economy rested fundamentally on agricultural production, which engaged the majority of the population and generated wealth sustaining imperial structures. The detailed land revenue system reflected administrative sophistication aimed at balancing revenue extraction with productive capacity. Agricultural diversity across ecological zones supported varied cropping patterns, while irrigation infrastructure enhanced productivity. Rural economic life extended beyond cultivation to encompass artisanal production, livestock raising, and commercial exchanges, with market networks connecting producers to wider trading systems.

However, the document's administrative focus presents an idealized picture requiring careful interpretation. Actual functioning often diverged from prescribed norms, with revenue collection potentially more extractive than regulations suggested and administrative protections operating imperfectly. Social hierarchies shaped economic opportunities in ways the text only partially addresses.

Nevertheless, the *Ain-i-Akbari* remains indispensable for studying rural economy in early modern India. Its systematic data compilation, comprehensive geographical coverage, and administrative detail provide foundations for historical analysis. When supplemented by other sources, archaeological evidence, and comparative analysis, the information preserved enables historians to reconstruct economic structures and lived experiences during a formative period of Indian history. The work stands as testimony both to Mughal administrative sophistication and to Abu'l Fazl's extraordinary scholarly achievement in documenting his contemporary world with remarkable thoroughness and precision.

References

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