AGRARIAN QUESTION IN THE 18TH CENTURY CENTRAL ASIAN PEASANT REVOLTS

Imtiyaz Shah

Abstract

The peasant revolts, described as "the weapons of the weak," were multicausal phenomenon. Some factors sowed their seeds, some nurtured them while some helped in their outburst. The paper is an endeavour to analyze the agrarian factors behind the peasant revolts. Retrieving the data from the historical and revenue records, the paper reveals that the major factor that triggered the revolts, was the exploitative character of the agrarian system. The peasants, as the main source of the income for the state, were subjected to number of unethical and illegal exactions which ultimately brought about economic insecurity to them and, consequently, triggered the revolts. Since the revolts led to loss of income to the state and landlords which forced the rulers to initiate several relief measures. This later proved rhetoric and sounded more to the benefit of state and landlords than the peasants who continued to suffer.

Keywords

Feudal Gifts, Defensive Reactions, Weapon of Weak, Central Asian Khanates, Peasants, Tax, Levy, Production, Landlords, Agrarian, Peasant Revolts, Khans and Amirs, Exactions.

Introduction

This is one of the relatively least studied aspect of the agrarian history of Central Asian Khanates.¹ Peasant revolt may simply be described as a civil defiance by the peasants. These revolts usually occur on account of the threats to peasants' access to an economic subsistence. In medieval Central Asia as elsewhere in the period, these revolts for want of political insight and leadership were usually expressed through predatory and protective strategies including acts of exodus, protest, denial of tax and rent, concealment of produce, carelessness, wreckage of agricultural implements.² However, the classic act of the defiance was refusal to pay land revenue³ that, in fact, constitutes the common trait in the peasant revolts of Central Asians during the period under study. In the 20th century a discourse started among the social scientists regarding the nature, wider socioeconomic and political implications of the peasant revolts. Consequently, diverse theories were advocated. James C. Scott described them as "weapons of the weak," while Eric Wolf termed them as "parochial reactions" by politically unaware class (peasants). Some understand them as "defensive reactions" of the economically marginalized class of society. Whatever the descriptions, the fact of the matter remains that these revolts proved a dynamic force against

the injustice inflicted on the peasants and, thus, a catalyst for anti-systemic change.⁶

Inequitable Economic Resources and Peasant Exploitation

In the 18th century discourse on Central Asia, there is a consensus among the debaters that the century was a period of political crises and economic stagnation. Under the scenario, in order to relieve the state from paving the civil and military officials in deficient cash and ensure the state control over the remote areas, the Khans and Amirs distributed some portions of land as grants among heirs, civil and military officials called (tankhoh/chek).⁷ The mechanism instead of solving the problem for smooth administration gave rise to the growth of large estates of the feudal type with a varying share in the overall land composition. For example, as per the land records in Bukhara 12.2 percent land was personal property of the Amir (khasa); 55.8 percent amlok (state land); and 24.2 percent wagf. While in Khiva, 2/3rd of the land belonged to the Khan and other landlords, 1/7th was waaf and amlok. As regards the land with peasant ownership, called *milki*, it was only 7.8 percent in Bukhara and 1/10th in Khokand. The peasants working on these estates were the mere tenants, held non-proprietary land rights, and paid a certain quantum, usually substantial, of their produce as rent, tax and interest.¹⁰

Since peasants were the basic source of income for the state and landlords, therefore, were forced to pay maximum through taxes and levies. The major land tax (kharaj) was realized at 2/3rd of the produce as against ½ or 1/4th prescribed by the state. 11 Mirobana (water duty) was charged at the rate of 10 percent of the annual produce and so were four cattle required to be annually delivered by each tribal family in the name of *kibitka* (house tax). 12 The additional levies (wajuhat) included kish puli (levy on a pair of draught animal in relation to land holding), yak shira (head-wise levy on draught animals), qafshan (levy paid towards revenue functionaries like amlokdar), tanaf puli and alaf puli (levy on orchards and vegetable gardens), kuprul puli (toll on bridges), baj (custom duty paid towards the lord), nikhana (duty on marriage contracts), tarikana/tarakana (duty on legal documents of inheritance), ¹³ various gifts presented to landlords on the eve of community feasts (toi) apart, ¹⁴ in all fifty five in Bukhara and twenty five in Khiva. 15 Further, the peasants were required to perform several unpaid services (hasher) to their landlords, to maintain their orchards, canals, houses and roads. 16 The extracts from a letter written in 1874 by a native complaining against the exactions of the Khan of Khokand is quoted here in this regard:

"... were [peasants] to keep the roads in repair, to build houses for the Khan, to cultivate his gardens and to clean out the canals, men are seized in all parts of the country and forced to work. These get no pay, not even their food, and besides this, when half a village is forced to work, the other half is compelled to pay a tax of two tenga a day for each man during his work. Anyone who runs away or who refuses to pay is whipped. Sometimes people have been whipped to death, and others have been buried alive in the place of work ...".17

The artisan and merchant communities were subjected to aminana (tax

paid by whole-sales in Bukhara Khanate)¹⁸ and *dallyali* (tax paid by the retailers towards the lords), 19 besides the payment of zakat at the rate of $2\frac{1}{2}$ percent of their annual earnings aside.²⁰ On account of the multiplicity of exactions on the peasants and traders, Sudr-ud-Din Ayni, a native of Emirate of Bukhara sarcastically maintains that only air was exempted in Bukhara. ²¹ The exactions were so high that the concept of saving did not exist and purchasing over land (milki) was too distant for fear of high exactions.²² Paradoxically, rent was collected in advance for several years together and arbitrarily increased as high as seven fold.²³ On top of it, they had to buy the commodities at the exorbitant prices fixed by the landlords themselves which was embarrassing to all lower strata of the Khanates.²⁴ Compared to the high prices, wages were substantially low. A cobbler in Bukhara usually earns only 45 puls daily,²⁵ whereas bread alone cost half the amount of his daily earnings. Similarly, a room in the caravanserai could be held at 2-4 tangas a month. 26 The prices of the dress material being unaffordable,²⁷ people wore ragged clothes.²⁸ There was, therefore, a marked difference between the peasant earnings and the market prices of their daily consumer goods.

Peasant Revolts

Under the circumstances of high and large number of exactions, the peasants had just not a little earnings for the whole year.²⁹ Consequently, they were forced to look around for food and borrow loans or else resort to theft and brigandage.³⁰ The loans (*bunak*) were provided by the landlords at quite high interest rates ranging between 40 and 60 percent when these were obtained by the landlords at low interest rates of 8-9 percent.³¹ The debts so accumulated would force the peasant to sell whatever and if ever they had any material possession with them.³² The gap could have been easily plugged by them with surplus produce, which they did not have due to high exactions, traditional agricultural tools and lack of requisite manures.³³ Most of the land situated between Panjdeh to Yalatun of the Murgab valley of Samarkand³⁴ was deserted.³⁵ This brought them face to face with their tax collectors and landlords with exodus as a viable alternative to escape their highhandedness.³⁶

Though references to various revolts are ample but lack several details about their real nature and character. Out of the scanty details, 1784 uprising in Bukhara erupted swallowed over 1,000 people. In 1800 the Turkmen peasants and artisans of Merv reacted to the excesses of the Bukharan *zakatchis* and in 1801, the revolt spread to Kerki. Mazandaran in 1813. The Yamuts and Goklan tribes stirred up and resisted the rule of Astrakhan in 1826-27 and 1841. The biggest uprising was that of the Kitay Qipchaq of Miyan Qala situated between Bukhara and Samarkand against the reign of Sultan Haider (1800-25 AD). Khokand experienced several disturbances during the reign of Sher Ali Khan (1842-45 AD). In 1855, Abdul Vasi organized the revolt of the peasants of Baljuan against the exorbitant rent/tax structure of Amir Muzaffar (1860-1885) of Bukhara. Hard pressed by the excesses of the state and landlords/feudatories in Tashkent, the masses at large welcomed the anti-feudal response of General Chernief in 1865, notwithstanding his representing the imperial

Russia, stating ... let every man carry on his work – houses, gardens, fields, lands, and water mills, of which you have possession, will remain your property. The soldiers will take nothing from you ... ⁴⁵ It was perhaps for this reason that the masses of the Emirate appreciated the upcoming Russian rule. ⁴⁶ In 1858 AD, in Tashkent and Dast-i-Qipchaq, the peasants of Kyrgyz and Kazak ethnic background sharply reacted to the additional taxes and levies levied by Mirza Ahmad Qushbegi. ⁴⁷ The tax collectors who had been sent there were robbed, stripped almost naked, and beaten back leading to killing of one functionary. ⁴⁸ The uprisings gained momentum under the Tsarists (1860-1917 AD). Shahr-i-Sabz region of Samarkand registered a strong uprising in 1868 AD. ⁴⁹ Similarly, three oblasts of Samarkand, Farghana and Syr Darya experienced 668 uprisings from 1887-1898: 429 in Farghana, 182 in Samarkand, 57 in Syr Darya. The 16 bandit attacks in Farghana and 9 in Samarkand in 1899 enhanced to 324 in Farghana by 1917 and 166 in Samarkand by 1915. ⁵⁰

Relief and Responsive Measures

Since the state and landlords thrived on the rent and labour of the peasants, the major source of their income they, as such, strived to keep the tenants in good humour for they laid golden egg for them. Nonetheless, as a pressure tactics, they used force to reckon with the restive peasants. The response of the Amir Subhan Kuli Khan (1681-1702 AD) and Bagi Mohammad of Bukhara offer the typical example in this behalf. Being the lord and overlord, the former enhanced the rent of the peasants by seven times,⁵¹ and the latter stopped the water supply of Nasaf Canal for irrigation of the arable land of the restive peasants.⁵² Simultaneously, for strategic reasons, they combined force with aid and assistance of the tenants, and provided them relief in terms of food, clothing and agricultural implements like metal plough driven by horses, voke and assess: the latter were also used to drive mills (Chahar Kharas - Four Ass Mills).⁵³ True the peasants were bound to render extra service to the landlords for the maintenance of their fields and houses.⁵⁴ At the same time, the landlords facilitated them drawing water from the canals for irrigation of their agricultural fields.⁵⁵ Credit loans (bunak) and other agricultural implements were advanced to them and, at times, levies and taxes were remitted.⁵⁶ The provision of providing food, clothes etc. were the other sources of support to the tenants.57

No doubt, at times, such a relief caused financial loss to the state and landlords, but they made up the same by enforcing their own choice of production on the peasants. While Mohammad Rahim, Khan of Khiva, exempted cattle and other taxes of the tenants, he juxtapose forced them to grow wheat, rice, sesame and jugan to meet their export demand, which automatically restricted the scope of free peasant production. Further, the tenants were barred to sell whatever little surplus they had until the feudatories had disposed of whole lot of produce and that too at the arbitrarily fixed prices. Similarly, the credit loans were advanced to the tenants at the high interest rate of 40-60 percent. Slaves too were subjected to a certain share of their produce to the lords. For instance, a Russian slave, Gregory Pulakoff, paid seven *tillas* to his master out of the income. Thus, state/landlord support to

the tenants was virtually rhetoric, and sounded more to the benefit of lords than the peasants. Peasants' recalcitrance was but natural to follow the above phenomenon.

Role of the States vis-à-vis Landlords and the Peasants

The privileges granted to landlords by the Amirs and Khans had some adverse implications. Not only the peasants were exposed to increasing complications but state lost the revenue in the regions assigned to the assignees. 62 Since it was a complicated problem so the state thought in terms of bringing the statelandlord-peasant relationship within the legal framework. With this intention, Amir Nasrullah (1826-1860) in Bukhara, introduced several politicoadministrative reforms,63 to re-establish the state sovereignty and subject everything including the begs to it. Accordingly, he confiscated all tankhoh grants and brought them under amlok (state land) suggesting, thereby, that the rights of the landlords on land were of non-usufruct nature. Subsequently, tankhoh grants were re-allotted to the able and loyal men who acknowledged the king as their sovereign. Similarly, waaf grants were rationalized on paternal rather than the hierarchical lines. 64 The begs were also directed to share a certain part of their revenue with the state (the king). 65 Slavery was abolished by Abdul Ahad (Amir of Bukhara 1885-1910) though its reminiscence continued. 66 The Khan of Khokand, Alim Khan (1799-1811), worked out a four-pronged plan to strengthen the state against the feudal system: forbade feudal gifts and the taxes/levies except those prescribed by the state. He also de-recognized the prices of legal deeds at will and instead of land grants paid his officials in terms of regular salary.⁶⁷ Similarly, in Khiva, Illtuzar or Ilt Nazar (1804-1806) marginalized the power of the landlords/feudatories by including Sarts in administration.68

The facts and figures analyzed above, lead to believe that notwithstanding these measures, the excesses on the peasants perpetuated as before. The landlords, sufficiently powerful, hindered the reforms to retain their privileges. Under the situation, the state found it imperative to increase its exactions from the peasantry as was the case under various Khans and Amirs. Even the early Tsars (1860-1917) proved of no respite to the peasants.⁶⁹ The regime change proved just putting old wine in new bottles for the peasants of the Khanates.

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