



Economic and Social Developments Under the Mughals

by S.M. Ikram

S. M. Ikram was a member of the Pakistan Civil Service and a Visiting Professor of International Affairs at Columbia University. He had written a number of books on the history of Islam in India and was the co-editor of The Cultural Heritage of Pakistan. This book on the political and cultural history of Muslim India and Pakistan highlights that the past the study of Muslim civilization has focused on the Arab countries, or at best extended to Iran or the Ottoman Turkey, and that there exists a need for studying the Muslim background of modern countries like Pakistan and Indonesia.

Secondary Source:

Both Akbar and Jahangir interested themselves in the foreign seaborne trade, and Akbar himself took part in commercial activities for a time. The Mughals welcomed the foreign trader, provided **ample** protection and security for his transactions, and levied a very low custom duty (usually no more than 2½ percent ad valorem). Furthermore, the expansion of local handicrafts and industry resulted in a reservoir of exportable goods. Indian exports consisted mainly of manufactured articles, with cotton cloth in great demand in Europe and elsewhere. Indigo, saltpeter, spices, opium, sugar, woolen and silk cloth of various kinds, yarn, **asafoetida**, salt, beads, borax, turmeric, lac, sealing wax, and drugs of various kinds, were also exported. The principal imports were **bullion**, horses, and a certain quantity of luxury goods for the upper classes, like raw silk, coral, amber, precious stones, superior textiles (silk, velvet, brocade, broadcloth), perfumes, drugs, china goods, and European wines. By and large, however, in return for their goods Indian merchants insisted on payment in gold or silver. Naturally this was not popular in England and the rest of Europe, and writers on economic affairs in the seventeenth century frequently complained, as did Sir Thomas Roe, that “Europe bleedeth to enrich Asia.” The demand for articles supplied by India was so great, however, and her requirements of European goods so limited, that Europe was obliged to trade on India’s own terms until the eighteenth century, when special measures were taken in England and elsewhere to discourage the demand for Indian goods.

Glossary:

ample: sufficient

asafoetida: a herb used in cooking

bullion: bars of gold or silver

continued on next page

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Economic and Social Developments Under the Mughals *continued*

The manufacture of cotton goods had assumed such extensive proportions that in addition to satisfying her own needs, India sent cloth to almost half the world: the east coast of Africa, Arabia, Egypt, Southeast Asia, as well as Europe. The textile industry, well established in Akbar's day, continued to flourish under his successors, and soon the operations of Dutch and English traders brought India into direct touch with Western markets. This resulted in great demand for Indian cotton goods from Europe, which naturally increased production at home. Even the silk industry—especially in Bengal—was in flourishing condition. Bernier wrote: "There is in Bengal such a quantity of cotton and silk, that the kingdom may be called the common storehouse for these two kinds of merchandise, not of Hindoustan or the Empire of the Great Mogol only, but of all the neighbouring kingdoms, and even of Europe."

Apart from silk and cotton textiles, other industries were shawl and carpet weaving, woolen goods, pottery, leather goods, and articles made of wood. Owing to its proximity to sources of suitable timbers, Chittagong specialized in shipbuilding, and at one time supplied ships to distant Istanbul. The commercial side of the industry was in the hands of middlemen, but the Mughal government, like the earlier sultans, made its own contribution. The emperor controlled a large number of royal workshops, busily turning out articles for his own use, for his household, for the court, and for the imperial army. Akbar took a special interest in the development of indigenous industry. He was directly responsible for the expansion of silk weaving at Lahore, Agra, Fathpur-Sikri, and in Gujarat. He opened a large number of factories at important centers, importing master weavers from Persia, Kashmir, and Turkistan. Akbar frequently visited the workshops near the palace to watch the artisans at work, which encouraged the craftsmen and raised their status. It is said that he took such an interest in the industry that to foster demand he "ordered people of certain ranks to wear particular kinds of locally woven coverings ... an order which resulted in the establishment of a large number of shawl

Glossary:

continued on next page

Economic and Social Developments Under the Mughals *continued*

manufactories in Lahore; and inducements were offered to foreign carpet-weavers to settle in **Agra, Fathepur Sikri,** and **Lahore**, and manufacture carpets to compete with those imported from Persia.” In the course of time, the foreign traders established close contracts with important markets in India, and new articles which were more in demand in Western Europe began to be produced in increasing quantities. Among the foreign inventions that excited Akbar’s interest was an organ, “one of the wonders of creation,” that had been brought from Europe.

Glossary:

Agra, Fathepur Sikri, and **Lahore:** cities in the Mughal Empire