

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Economy and Society in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

Paper 1 • Unit 22

Land revenue, the mansabdari system, karkhanas, Indian Ocean trade and the textile export economy: 85 marks in four years and the most quantitative unit in Paper 1.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Economy and society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: population, agricultural production, craft production; towns, commerce with Europe through Dutch, English and French companies, a trade revolution; Indian mercantile classes, banking, insurance and credit systems; conditions of peasants, conditions of women; evolution of the Sikh community and the Khalsa Panth.

The land revenue system

Asked in 2025 through Todar Mal and again through Mughal revenue administration and the agrarian structure. This is the machinery on which everything else in the unit rests, so get the terms exact.

- Settled around 1580 and associated with **Raja Todar Mal**, the **zabt** or **dahsala** system, based assessment on measured area, on classification of land, and on a schedule of average prices and yields over the previous ten years.
- Land was classified as **polaj**, cultivated every year; **parauti**, left fallow briefly; **chachar**, fallow three or four years; and **banjar**, uncultivated for five or more, with graded rates accordingly.
- Measurement used the **bigha** standardised with the **ilahi gaz** and the bamboo **jarib** with iron rings, which removed a standing source of fraud in the rope measure.
- State demand was conventionally about one third of the average produce, assessed in cash, which forced the peasant into the market and is the origin of monetisation in the countryside.
- Alternative systems coexisted: **ghalla bakhshi** or **batai**, crop sharing; **kankut**, estimation by appraisal; and **nasaq**, assessment from past records, used widely in Bengal and where measurement was impractical.
- Under the **jagirdari** system, revenue rather than land was assigned to nobles for the upkeep of contingents, with **khalisa** land reserved for the imperial treasury, and jagirs were transferable, which prevented the growth of hereditary local power but discouraged long-term investment.
- A **zamindar** was a hereditary intermediary with a customary claim, usually about ten per cent of the collection, who was not a proprietor in the later legal sense, and **Irfan Habib** and **Nurul Hasan** established the classification of zamindar types that examiners expect.
- For the 2025 question on the agrarian structure, the argument is that Mughal revenue administration brought continuity in the zamindar's position and the village community, and change in monetisation, in cash assessment and in the growth of a market in revenue rights.

KEY TERMS

Zabt — Assessment on measured area at cash rates fixed from a ten year schedule of prices and yields.

Jagir — An assignment of revenue, not of land, granted to a noble in lieu of salary and normally transferable.

Nasaq — Assessment made from past collection records rather than by fresh measurement, common in Bengal.

Mansabdari and the ruling class

The administrative machinery is examinable in its own right and it is also the mechanism whose failure produced the jagirdari crisis of the next unit.

- Every officer held a **mansab** expressed in two numbers: **zat**, fixing personal rank, pay and status, and **sawar**, fixing the number of cavalry to be maintained.

- Branding horses under the **dagh** system and the **chehra** descriptive roll of soldiers were introduced to prevent the fraud of borrowed mounts and phantom troopers at muster.
- Ranks ran from very small mansabs to seven thousand for the highest nobles, with higher figures reserved for princes, and the schedule of pay was elaborate and precisely graded.
- **Jahangir's** du-aspa sih-aspa device allowed the sawar obligation to be increased without raising the zat rank, which preserved the hierarchy while adjusting military capacity.
- The nobility was ethnically composite by policy, with **Turani, Irani, Afghan, Rajput and Indian Muslim** groups, and Akbar's incorporation of Rajputs is the clearest expression of sulh-i-kul in institutional form.
- **M. Athar Ali's** statistical study of the nobility under Aurangzeb, showing the growth in numbers and the widening gap between assigned and realisable revenue, is the standard citation and the bridge to the decline debate.
- The **jama** was the assessed revenue and the **hasil** the amount actually collected, and the persistent gap between them is the technical heart of the crisis, since a jagir paper-rated at a high jama might yield far less.
- The system's virtue was that it prevented a hereditary landed aristocracy, and its defect was that it made every noble dependent on continuous imperial success to sustain his assignment.

Craft production and the karkhanas

The 2025 paper asked about the role of imperial karkhanas and how they reflected the ideological and functional imperatives of the empire, so this needs a full treatment rather than a mention.

- **Karkhanas** were imperial workshops producing textiles, arms, jewellery, manuscripts, carpets and objects for court use, staffed by salaried craftsmen under a **darogha**.
- Their **functional** purpose was supply: the court, the harem, the army and the diplomatic gift economy required goods in quantity and to a standard the open market could not guarantee.
- Their **ideological** purpose, which the 2025 question specifically asks about, was display. Monopolising the finest craftsmanship expressed sovereignty, since the emperor was presented as the source and patron of excellence, and gifts of khilat from the karkhana bound recipients into a hierarchy.
- They also functioned as **training and standard-setting** institutions, and the dispersal of karkhana-trained artisans after Aurangzeb spread imperial standards to provincial and Rajput courts.
- The critical assessment: karkhanas concentrated skill on luxury production for a narrow market, absorbed the best craftsmen into non-market employment, and did not generate the technological change or capital accumulation that a wider commercial demand might have.
- Outside the karkhanas, production was overwhelmingly by **household artisans** organised through caste-based occupational groups and financed by merchant advances.
- The **dadni** or advance system is the key commercial institution: merchants and later the European companies advanced money and sometimes raw material to weavers against future delivery, which tied the artisan to the buyer and shifted risk onto the producer.
- **Textiles** dominated: Bengal muslin, Gujarati and Coromandel cottons, Kashmiri shawls and Banaras silks, and Indian cotton textiles were the largest manufactured export in world trade before the Industrial Revolution.

KEY TERMS

Dadni — The advance system by which merchants financed weavers against future delivery, binding the artisan to a single buyer.

Khilat — A robe of honour bestowed by the emperor, often karkhana-made, that created a hierarchical bond of obligation.

Towns, trade and the coming of the European companies

The 2025 and 2026 papers both came here, on Portuguese maritime power and on Indian textiles in world trade. Keep the companies in chronological order and know what each actually changed.

- The **Portuguese** arrived with Vasco da Gama at Calicut in 1498 and built an armed seaborne empire based on Goa from 1510, using the **cartaz** pass system to tax and control Indian Ocean shipping.
- For the 2025 question, Portuguese disruption is best assessed by distinguishing what they changed and what they did not: they introduced organised naval violence and the licensing of trade, which was genuinely new, but their share of the total Asian trade remained modest and Asian shipping continued.
- The **Dutch VOC**, chartered in 1602, concentrated on the spice monopoly in the archipelago and used Indian textiles primarily as the currency to buy spices, which is why they were so active on the Coromandel coast.
- Chartered in 1600, the **English East India Company** established itself at Surat in 1613 after Hawkins and Roe, and built Madras from 1639, Bombay from 1661 and Calcutta from 1690.
- The **French Compagnie** from 1664 established Pondicherry and Chandernagore and became a serious rival only under Dupleix in the 1740s.
- Decisive economically is the **bullion** flow: Europe had little Asia wanted except silver, and American silver flowed to India through this trade, which financed Mughal monetisation and is why Indian prices and coinage responded to global bullion movements.
- **Urbanisation** was substantial by the standards of the age, with Agra, Delhi, Lahore, Ahmedabad, Dacca, Surat and Patna among the largest cities in the world, and Mughal towns were administrative, manufacturing and market centres at once.
- The **trade revolution** named in the syllabus consists of the shift from a Mediterranean and overland route to the Cape route, the entry of joint-stock companies with permanent capital and armed force, and the reorientation of Indian production towards European demand.
- **Surat** was the premier port until its decline in the eighteenth century, and **Ashin Das Gupta's** work traces that decline to the loss of Mughal naval protection, Maratha raids and the shift of trade to Company-controlled ports.
- For the 2026 question on Indian textiles clothing the world, the evidence is the scale of the trade, the range from coarse Guinea cloth for the Atlantic slave trade to fine muslin, and the British protective legislation against Indian calicoes from 1700 and 1721, which is the clearest proof of competitive superiority.

Mercantile classes, banking and credit

Named explicitly in the syllabus and rarely prepared. It is also the mechanism that explains why political power could change hands so quickly in the eighteenth century.

- The **sarraf** was money changer, assayer and banker, essential in a system with multiple mints and coins of varying fineness, and the assay fee and **batta** discount were his business.
- The **hundi** was a bill of exchange transferring money between cities without moving cash, and its use across the subcontinent shows a genuinely integrated credit market.
- **Insurance**, the **bima** contract, covered goods in transit by land and sea, and rates varied by route and season, which is direct evidence of commercial sophistication.
- The **Jagat Seths** of Murshidabad were the greatest banking house, financing the Bengal revenue, remitting it to Delhi and effectively controlling the province's currency, and their defection was decisive at Plassey in 1757.
- Other major groups were the **Virji Vora** of Surat, described by English factors as the richest merchant in the world, the Gujarati Bania and Jain networks, the Chettiars in the south, and the Marwaris who spread across the subcontinent.
- **Karen Leonard's** great firm theory, that the withdrawal of banking support from the Mughal centre precipitated its collapse, connects this section directly to the eighteenth century unit.
- Indian merchants operated without the corporate form, armed force or state backing that the European companies enjoyed, and that institutional asymmetry rather than any deficiency of capital or skill is the explanation historians now prefer.
- **Shroffs and the coinage** deserve a line: the Mughal silver rupee was of famously consistent fineness, free minting allowed anyone to bring bullion to the mint, and that reliability is what made the currency acceptable across Asia.
- **Portfolio capitalists**, a term from **Sanjay Subrahmanyam** and **C. A. Bayly**, describes men who combined revenue farming, trade, banking and military entrepreneurship, and they are the group that adapted best to the eighteenth century.

Conditions of the peasantry

Named in the syllabus and the subject of a live historiographical dispute. Present it as a dispute, not as a settled account of misery.

- The village was internally stratified rather than uniform, with **khudkasht** resident cultivators holding hereditary rights and **pahikasht** non-resident tenants cultivating on terms, and the difference in security is substantial.
- Below both were **landless labourers**, frequently from the lowest castes, whose position **Irfan Habib** documented and whose existence disproves any romantic picture of an undifferentiated peasant community.
- The **muqaddam** or village headman and the **patwari** or accountant mediated between the village and the state, and both took a customary share.
- Habib's thesis is that revenue demand pressed to the limit of subsistence drove **peasant flight**, which was the characteristic form of resistance, and armed **zamindar-led rebellion**, and that this was the system's structural crisis.

- The revisionist qualification, associated with **Muzaffar Alam** and others, is that regional evidence shows prosperity and expanding cultivation in Awadh and Punjab, so the crisis was uneven rather than universal.
- **Commercial crops** including cotton, indigo, sugarcane and opium spread in this period, and cash assessment pushed cultivators towards them, which raised both income and risk.
- **Famine** recurred, with the Gujarat famine of 1630 to 1632 the most severe of the century, and the state's relief effort was real but limited relative to the scale.
- The balanced position to write: the Mughal peasantry was stratified, taxed heavily by the standards of the time, capable of resistance through flight and revolt, and living in an agrarian economy that was expanding and commercialising rather than stagnant.

Conditions of women

The syllabus names it and the 2024 paper asked about Hindu and Muslim women in an earlier period, so the theme is live. Handle it with evidence rather than generalisation.

- Elite Mughal women held substantial economic power: **Nur Jahan** issued farmans and struck coin in her name, **Jahanara** owned ships trading to the Red Sea and held the revenues of Surat, and both endowed buildings and gardens.
- **Property rights** differed by law and by community, with Muslim women holding defined shares under Islamic inheritance and dower, while Hindu women's rights were largely confined to stridhan.
- **Purdah** was practised across elite Hindu and Muslim households and was a marker of status, which meant it was less rigidly observed the further down the social scale one looked, since peasant and artisan women worked outside.
- Women's labour was essential and largely invisible in the records: **hand spinning** was overwhelmingly female work and the foundation of the textile export economy, along with weeding, harvesting, husking and dairying.
- **Sati** existed and was practised principally among the Rajput and some other elite groups, and both Akbar and Aurangzeb attempted restrictions, with limited effect; European travellers' accounts exaggerate its frequency and should be used carefully.
- **Female infanticide** among some Rajput clans and the practice of **jauhar** in siege conditions are documented, and both are connected to the same honour codes.
- **Gulbadan Begum's** *Humayunnama* is the outstanding female-authored source, and the poetry attributed to **Zeb-un-Nissa**, Aurangzeb's daughter, indicates literary education among royal women.
- **Slavery and domestic service** existed on a significant scale in elite households, and Akbar restricted the enslavement of prisoners of war, which is a documented policy rarely mentioned in answers.
- The methodological point worth making: almost all our evidence concerns elite women, so statements about the condition of women in general rest on inference from scattered material, and a careful answer says so.

The evolution of the Sikh community and the Khalsa

The syllabus places this here and it is regularly missed. Learn it as an institutional evolution rather than a list of Gurus.

- **Guru Nanak**, 1469 to 1539, taught the oneness of God, rejected ritual, caste distinction and idolatry, and established the institutions of **sangat**, congregation, **pangat**, eating together, and **langar**, the free kitchen.
- The institutional consolidation is the examinable thread: **Guru Angad** developed the **Gurmukhi** script, **Guru Amar Das** organised the **manji** system of preaching districts and strengthened the langar, and **Guru Ram Das** founded Amritsar.
- **Guru Arjan** compiled the **Adi Granth** in 1604 and built the Harmandir Sahib, and his execution under Jahangir in 1606 marks the beginning of conflict with the state.
- His successor **Guru Hargobind** responded with the doctrine of **miri and piri**, temporal and spiritual authority, wore two swords, built the Akal Takht and raised an armed following, which is the decisive turn towards a militarised community.
- **Guru Tegh Bahadur's** execution in 1675 under Aurangzeb, traditionally for defending the religious freedom of Kashmiri Pandits, hardened the conflict irreversibly.
- At Anandpur in 1699, **Guru Gobind Singh** founded the **Khalsa**, instituting the **panj kakar** or five Ks, the **amrit** initiation, the names Singh and Kaur, and a code of conduct that made the community visible and disciplined.
- He ended the line of personal Gurus, vesting authority in the **Guru Granth Sahib** as eternal Guru and in the **Khalsa Panth** as a collective, which is a genuine constitutional innovation.
- **Banda Bahadur** carried the struggle on after 1708, established authority in the Punjab plains, struck coin, and was executed in 1716, after which the community regrouped through the misls and eventually under Ranjit Singh.
- **Bhai Gurdas**, scribe of the Adi Granth and author of the vars, is the community's earliest theologian and the standard internal source for its early history, and citing him signals genuine reading.
- The analytical point: Sikhism evolved from a devotional reform movement within the wider Bhakti current into a distinct religious community with its own scripture, initiation, code and political organisation, and the transformation was driven substantially by conflict with the Mughal state.

KEY TERMS

Miri and piri — Guru Hargobind's doctrine of combined temporal and spiritual authority, symbolised by two swords.

Khalsa — The initiated community founded in 1699, with the five Ks, amrit initiation and a binding code of conduct.

Last-mile revision

- Zabt or dahsala under Todar Mal about 1580; polaj, parauti, chachar, banjar; ilahi gaz and jarib; roughly one third in cash.
- Alternatives: ghalla bakhshi, kankut, nasaq; jagir is revenue not land; khalisa is imperial; zamindar takes about a tenth.
- Mansab has zat and sawar; dagh and chehra prevent muster fraud; jama versus hasil is the gap that becomes the crisis.
- Karkhanas serve supply, display and training; dadni advances bind weavers; Indian cotton was the largest manufactured export in world trade.

- Portuguese 1498 and cartaz, VOC 1602, EIC 1600 and Surat 1613, French 1664; American silver flows in; British calico legislation 1700 and 1721.
- Sarraf, hundi, bima; Jagat Seths of Murshidabad, Virji Vora of Surat; Leonard's great firm theory; portfolio capitalists.
- Khudkasht and pahikasht; Habib on flight and rebellion; Alam on regional prosperity; Gujarat famine 1630-32.
- Sikh sequence: Nanak, Angad and Gurmukhi, Amar Das and manjis, Ram Das and Amritsar, Arjan and the Adi Granth 1604, Hargobind and miri-piri, Tegh Bahadur 1675, Khalsa 1699, Banda executed 1716.

Common errors to avoid

- Saying a jagir was a grant of land. It was an assignment of revenue and it was normally transferable, which is the whole point.
- Confusing zat with sawar. Zat fixes personal rank and pay, sawar fixes the cavalry contingent.
- Treating karkhanas only as workshops. The 2025 question asked for ideological as well as functional imperatives, so display and hierarchy must be there.
- Overstating Portuguese dominance of Indian Ocean trade. They introduced armed licensing but never controlled the bulk of Asian shipping.
- Presenting the Mughal peasantry as uniformly miserable or uniformly prosperous. Habib and Alam are both in the field and the truth is regional.
- Generalising about women from elite evidence without saying so. Almost all the sources concern the court.
- Reducing Sikh history to a list of ten Gurus. The examinable thread is institutional evolution: script, langar, scripture, miri-piri, Khalsa, and the vesting of authority in the Granth and the Panth.

Mains Practice

Evaluate the impact of Mughal revenue administration on the agrarian structure of North India.

20 marks · 250 words · 2025

“From Asia to Europe, from head to foot, everyone was clothed in Indian textiles.” Qualify with a critical account of India's foreign trade.

15 marks · 200 words · 2026

Portuguese maritime power disrupted the character of trade in the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth century. Review.

15 marks · 200 words · 2025

Examine the process of urbanization caused by the establishment of European trading companies in India.

15 marks · 200 words · 2024

Critically assess the role of imperial Karkhanas in Mughal India.

10 marks · 150 words · 2025

Highlight the features of the Portuguese colonial enterprise.

10 marks · 150 words · 2024