



International Journal of Social Sciences Insights

A Globally Recognized Quality Refereed (Peer Reviewed) &
Online Journal of Multidisciplinary Social Science Research

Web: socialinsights.in



JAGIRDARI SYSTEM AND REVENUE CRISES IN THE SUBAH OF DELHI UNDER THE LATER MUGHALS (1707-1757)

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Article info

Received – 20 August 2025
Received revised -12 September 2025
Accepted -19 September 2025
Available online -29 September 2025
Pages: 12- 15

Keywords : Mughal, Delhi, Subah, Jagirdari, System, Revenue, Crisis, Instability, Aurangzeb, War, Rebellions, Agriculture

Abstract

In the early eighteenth century, the Mughal Empire gradually faced a crisis in its political power and economic structure. The death of Aurangzeb in 1707 not only marked the end of a single ruler but also initiated a long-term instability within the empire. In particular, the Subah of Delhi, which was the political, economic, and cultural center of the Mughal Empire, was particularly hard-hit by this crisis. The economic structure of the Subah of Delhi was primarily based on the Jagirdari system, which began to weaken due to factors such as the growing political ambitions of jagir holders, irregularities in revenue collection, administrative corruption, and a lack of government control. Between 1707 and 1757, the Jagirdari system in the Subah of Delhi faced not only administrative disruptions but also profoundly affected the revenue collection process. The centralization of power and wealth by jagir holders for their own benefit, irregularities in revenue payment, and excessive pressure on peasants became the root causes of economic instability. This directly impacted agricultural production, urban industry, crafts, and trade. Consequently, the economic stability of the Subah of Delhi began to weaken and the social fabric began to disintegrate. This paper analyzes how these weaknesses in the Jagirdari system were not merely an administrative crisis but also became one of the primary causes of the decline of Mughal power. In this study, we will also attempt to understand how changes in the jagir system, revenue crisis, political instability, and social influences intersected to accelerate the decline of Mughal rule in the Subah of Delhi.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The journey of Indian-English writings has been quite long and wide. Covering diverse issues and multiple themes, it has become representative of the age, class, country. In the post-independence era, the main themes of Indian-English writers have been man-woman relationship, socio-political consciousness and the conflict between

The Jagirdari system formed one of the central pillars of Mughal administrative and revenue organization. Originating during the Delhi Sultanate and refined under Akbar's rule, it became a crucial mechanism for ensuring both imperial control and military strength. Through this system, Mansabdars were granted temporary rights to collect revenue from specific lands (jagirs) in exchange for military and administrative services. This arrangement created a direct link between the emperor's authority and the provincial elite.

However, over time, this system began to weaken due to arbitrary distribution of jagirs, frequent transfers of jagirdars, factional court politics, and growing local autonomy. Nowhere were these tensions more visible than in the Subah of Delhi — the empire's political and administrative heart. As the central power weakened after Aurangzeb's death in 1707, the Jagirdari system gradually transformed, creating revenue instability, administrative inefficiency, and local power struggles.

This article examines the **evolution, functioning, and transformation** of the Jagirdari system in Delhi Subah, and analyses how its internal weaknesses contributed to the **decline of Mughal power in the eighteenth century**. By exploring its administrative structure, revenue mechanisms, and political implications, this study aims to understand why a system that once strengthened the empire eventually became a source of its disintegration.

2.0 Background of the Jagirdari System

The most important pillar of the Mughal administration was the Mansabdari and Jagirdari system. The emperor granted Jagirs to his Mansabdars in exchange for their military and administrative duties. Jagirs meant an official's temporary right to the revenues of a particular territory. The Jagirdars duty was to collect fixed revenue from that territory and, in return, to support his military and administrative expenses. This land was not a permanent possession but a temporary appointment.

The Jagirdari system was an important part of the Mansabdari system. It developed well during the reign of Akbar. At that time, the land across the empire was divided into two main divisions: Khalisa and Jagir. Khalisa was the land whose revenue went directly to the emperor, while Jagir was the land assigned to Mansabdars in exchange for their service. While some subsequent rulers maintained this system, by the time of Aurangzeb, it had experienced numerous changes and weaknesses. While Akbar had maintained a systematic distribution of Jagirs, the arbitrary division of Jagirs, frequent transfers, and court politics under subsequent emperors destabilized the system. Even during Aurangzeb's long reign, this system failed to remain completely strong that escalated the political and economic weakness.

This system remained somewhat regulated during Aurangzeb's long reign. However, after him, when the empire came under the rule of weak rulers, the flaws of the Jagirdari system became apparent. The arbitrary division of Jagirs, frequent transfers, and court factionalism made the system unstable.ⁱ

3.0 Nature of the Jagirdari system in the Subah of Delhi.

The Jagirdari system was a form of administration and revenue distribution in the Subah of Delhi. Instead of paying cash salaries, officials (Jagirdars) were granted the right to collect revenue from specific lands. This right did not equate to ownership of the land, but rather to receive the income from that land. This system evolved from the Iqta system of the Delhi Sultanate and was further strengthened under Mughal rule. Jagirdars handled local administration and revenue, but were supervised by state officials such as the Diwan and Amin. Under this system, peasants generally retained their hereditary rights. The Jagirdari system in the Subah of Delhi was complex because it was the main political center of the empire. It posed several significant problems. Often, jagirs were granted to powerful nobles and factions within the court, by passing qualified officials, leading to inequality and irregularity in the distribution of jagirs. Nazir Khan and Khan Khana are examples of this high-ranking court officials who were granted large jagirs based on court politics rather than their administrative experience.

Jagirs were often distributed as a bargain between powerful factions or leaders within the court to maintain their support. This prevented many capable officials with experience in managing land and revenue from receiving jagirs that increased corruption. Jagirdars were frequently transferred, depriving them of the opportunity to establish stable land tenure. They extorted high taxes from farmers simply to reap quick profits. This increased pressure and exploitation on farmers. The lack of security and migration of farmers often led to land becoming barren, further exacerbating the difficulties in revenue collection. Thus, the Jagirdari system in the Subah of Delhi became an example of exploitation and chaos.

4.0 Changes in the Jagirdari system

In the early eighteenth century, the Jagirdari system formed the backbone of the Mughal Empire's administrative and revenue system. The Jagirdars' primary duty was to collect revenue from their territories and provide a portion of it for the army and administration.ⁱⁱ After 1707, the nature of jagirs underwent a marked change. While

permanent jagirs had previously been prevalent, temporary jagirs now began to proliferate. As a result, the rights of Jagirdars became unstable and their political position weakened.ⁱⁱⁱ Simultaneously, the jagirs were divided into smaller areas, making the Jagirdars' power regional and independent of the central government. The revenue collection system also underwent significant changes during this period. The Jagirdars' right to directly collect revenue from the land gradually declined, and the contract system became prevalent in its place.^{iv} The role of the Jagirdars also changed during this period. Previously, they were merely revenue officials and military officers, but now they began to establish political dominance in their territories. Many Jagirdars began to act as independent rulers and directly interfere in Delhi's political affairs.^v The result was that the Jagirdari system altered the balance of power between the center and the Subah's. The increasing independence of the Jagirdars weakened the central government and led to political instability in the Subah of Delhi. The main reasons for the changes included wars of succession and power struggles, weaknesses in the central administration, financial pressures due to frequent military campaigns and foreign invasions, the Jagirdars' desire for autonomy, and local rebellions. These factors accelerated the transformation of the Jagirdari system and made it difficult to maintain it. As a result, the transformation of the Jagirdari system in the Subah of Delhi created instability in the revenue system, increased the independence of the Jagirdars, and weakened the hold of central power. This change began to play a decisive role in weakening the unity of the empire.^{vi}

5.0 Revenue crisis due to the Jagirdari system

Changes in the structure of this system and instability in its operation led to a revenue crisis. The primary reason was the temporary nature of jagirs. Between 1707 and 1757, the number of permanent jagirs declined, and jagirs began to be granted on a temporary basis. This led Jagirdars to collect revenue solely for short-term gain and to neglect agricultural improvement or long-term investment, which reduced land productivity and affected revenue collection.^{vii} Furthermore, this period saw decentralization in revenue collection. Jagirdars had the right to directly collect revenue, but by the mid-18th century, they used this authority to expand their military and political dominance. This led to the prevalence of the contract system, which led to a lack of transparency and control in revenue collection. This decentralization created instability in the revenue system and weakened the financial capacity of the central government. The growing independence and selfishness of the Jagirdars were also important causes of the revenue crisis. They did not limit their authority to revenue collection alone, but established political dominance in their territories. Many Jagirdars broke free from the control of the central government and began to function as independent entities in their territories. This situation led to revenue collection being shaped by their personal interests, affecting both the quantity and quality of revenue.^{viii} Additionally, administrative weaknesses and corruption intensified the crisis. The Jagirdari system distributed revenue collection tasks across multiple levels, increasing the potential for corruption among Jagirdars, their subordinate officials, and contractors. This system fostered revenue evasion and under-collection in the Subah of Delhi, adversely impacting the government treasury.

Finally, the impact of military campaigns and invasions was also significant. During 1707–1757, the Subah of Delhi faced repeated internal rebellions and external attacks. Jagirdars had to spend money to maintain their military forces, and to do so, they increased revenue collection. In the process, additional taxes were imposed on peasants, which affected agricultural production and led to a long-term revenue crisis.^{ix}

6.0 The role of the Jagirdari system in the decline of Mughal power

In the eighteenth century, the Mughal Empire was going through political, administrative, and economic crises. The Jagirdari system, the backbone of Mughal rule, played a significant role in this decline. After Aurangzeb's death in 1707, the Jagirdari system underwent several changes, weakening central authority and leading to the empire's disintegration. Originally, the Jagirdari system aimed to allow the state to own its land and grant Jagirdars the right to collect revenue from that land. However, after 1707, several weaknesses within the Jagirdari system in the Subah of Delhi became apparent. The most significant change was the temporary nature of jagirs. The practice of granting temporary jagirs instead of permanent jagirs increased, leaving Jagirdars unable to implement long-term reforms. They collected revenue only for short-term gain, leading to a decline in land productivity and impacting revenue collection.^x

By around 1720, the entire Jagirdari system had begun to collapse. The government's fixed revenue (jama) was not being collected from the fields (hasil). In the words of historian Athar Ali, "this disjunction between assessment and realization" was a fundamental weakness of late Mughal revenue administration. ^{xi}When the jagirdars were unable to collect their promised revenue, they resorted to coercion against the landlords and peasants. Conflicts broke out with those landlords who resisted. Many villages were deserted, agriculture declined, and the village economy deteriorated completely. It became increasingly difficult for the royal diwan to grant new jagirs, as most of the land was either degraded or no longer fertile. Furthermore, the nobles began to refuse to be sent to barren and unsettled areas. As the Jagirdari system weakened, the emperor was no longer able to trust his mansabdars. Many nobles were left with no substantial estates, so they maintained their armies merely for the sake of name. As a result, the imperial army weakened, and with it, the power of the Mughal government also began to decline.

The process of revenue collection also became decentralized. Jagirdars were no longer merely revenue officials; they expanded their authority to include political dominance. In the Subah of Delhi, Jagirdars used their position to divert revenue to their own interests and, in many cases, stopped remitting it to the emperor. This weakened the central government's financial power and led to a breakdown in administrative control.^{xii} Furthermore, the growing independence of the Jagirdars weakened Mughal authority. Jagirdars not only collected revenue but also amassed political power in their territories. Many Jagirdars ruled their territories as independent rulers. This disrupted the balance of power between the central government and the Jagirdars in the Subah of Delhi, and the

Jagirdars hindered the consolidation of the empire. Corruption and administrative weakness further deepened the problems of this system. Revenue collection in the Jagirdari system occurred at multiple levels, increasing the potential for corruption among Jagirdars and their subordinates. This led to revenue evasion and reduced collection in the Subah of Delhi, depleting the emperor's treasury.^{xiii} Military campaigns and external attacks also complicated the situation. During 1707–1757, the Subah of Delhi repeatedly grappled with internal rebellions and external invasions. Jagirdars had to increase revenue collection to maintain their military forces. This often resulted in additional taxes being imposed on peasants, which affected agricultural production and exacerbated the revenue crisis in the long run.^{xiv}

Between 1707 and 1757, the Jagirdari system in the Subah of Delhi gradually began to break down. This breakdown was a sign of the weakening power of the Mughal emperors. During the regime of Great Akbar, this system was very intelligently designed officers (Mansabdars) were granted land to serve the state and maintain an army. However, this system later became a jumble. Jagirdars began to obtain by threat excessive revenues from their lands, distressing farmers, and villages began to fall apart. The number of officers increased so much that it became difficult to provide jagirs to everyone. Much land was leased out (Ijara), where contractors began to force money from farmers. This made life difficult for the people.

Historian Irfan Habib argues that the Jagirdari crisis “represented not merely an administrative malfunction but a structural contradiction of the Mughal economy itself.”^{xv} As long as the emperor was strong, the system functioned well. But as soon as the emperor's grip weakened, everything fell apart. Its effects were clearly visible in the Delhi province like Many villages were deserted, Landlords rebelled in their own territories, Governors had no money left to govern, and peasants began facing starvation. By the Third Battle of Panipat (1761), this entire system had collapsed. Petty chieftains and powerful individuals now ruled the Delhi province according to their own whims.

Thus, the zamindari system, once the Mughal state's strength, became its greatest weakness. It depleted the treasury, disenfranchised the peasantry, and led to political chaos. These circumstances ultimately led to the rise of the British and the end of Mughal rule.

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