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“A Historical Study of the Agricultural System and Peasant Life in Gwalior State during the Scindia Rule (1726–1949)”

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Abstract:

This research paper examines the agricultural system and peasant life in the Gwalior State during the rule of the Scindia dynasty (1726–1949) from a historical and analytical perspective. The primary objective of the study is to analyze the structure of land tenure, revenue system, irrigation facilities, and agricultural production, and to evaluate their impact on the socio-economic conditions of the peasantry.

The study adopts a historical research methodology based on both primary sources, such as archival records, administrative documents, and gazetteers, and secondary sources, including books and research articles. The findings reveal that the agricultural system during the Scindia period was largely traditional and heavily dependent on monsoon rainfall, with limited irrigation infrastructure. Land ownership patterns included zamindari and tenancy systems, which often imposed a considerable burden of taxation on the peasants.

Furthermore, the peasantry generally experienced low income levels, indebtedness, and a poor standard of living. Frequent natural calamities, uncertain rainfall, and high land revenue demands further aggravated their conditions. Although certain administrative and irrigation reforms were introduced by the Scindia rulers, their impact remained limited in improving overall agricultural productivity and peasant welfare.

The study concludes that the agricultural system under the Scindia rule exhibited a mixed character, combining traditional practices with partial reforms. However, these reforms were insufficient to bring significant improvement in the socio-economic conditions of the peasantry. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical dynamics of rural economy and agrarian life in princely India.

Keywords: Gwalior State, Scindia Dynasty, Agriculture, Peasant Life, Land Revenue System

Introduction:

Agriculture has historically formed the backbone of the Indian economy, with the majority of the population depending on it for livelihood. In this context, the study of regional agrarian systems provides valuable insights into the socio-economic structure of past societies. The Gwalior State,

located in central India, was one of the prominent princely states under the rule of the Scindia dynasty from 1726 to 1949. This long period witnessed significant developments in administration, land management, and rural life, all of which had a direct impact on the agricultural system and the peasantry.

During the Scindia rule, agriculture was not only the primary occupation of the people but also the main source of state revenue. Consequently, policies related to land tenure, taxation, and irrigation played a crucial role in shaping the lives of farmers. The agrarian structure was largely traditional, with heavy dependence on monsoon rainfall and limited access to modern irrigation facilities. Systems such as zamindari and tenancy were prevalent, often placing a substantial economic burden on cultivators.

The condition of peasants during this period was influenced by multiple factors, including land revenue demands, climatic uncertainties, and socio-economic inequalities. While the rulers introduced certain administrative and agricultural reforms over time, their effectiveness in improving the overall condition of the peasantry remains a subject of historical inquiry.

This study seeks to analyze the nature of the agricultural system in Gwalior State under the Scindia and to assess its impact on peasant life. By examining historical records and existing literature, the paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of agrarian history in princely India and to highlight the broader implications of past policies on rural development.

Review of Related Literature:

Kumar et al. (2025), studied on “*Economic Analysis of Wheat Cultivation in Gwalior Region*” and analyzed the cost and return structure of agriculture. The study revealed that increasing input costs and unequal distribution of resources significantly affect farmers’ profitability and sustainability.

Sharma et al. (2025), examined “*Agroforestry Systems Adopted by Farmers of Gwalior District*” and explained that integration of forestry with agriculture improves productivity and income stability. The study highlighted the importance of sustainable practices in enhancing agricultural outcomes.

Kokale et al. (2024), analyzed “*Agriculture 4.0: Modern Technologies in Farming*” and discussed the role of digital innovations in agriculture. The study emphasized that technological advancements can improve efficiency and transform traditional farming systems.

Nitharwal et al. (2024), studied “*Agricultural Market Behavior in Madhya Pradesh*” and found that market fluctuations and pricing systems directly influence farmers’ income. The research highlighted the role of market structures in agricultural development.

Chandra et al. (2024), examined “*Economic Analysis of Crop Production and Cost-Benefit Structure*” and revealed that agricultural productivity depends on regional resources, climate, and infrastructure. The study pointed out that limited irrigation increases risk for farmers.

Khan and Ameta (2025), studied *“The History of Indian Agriculture”* and explained that historical agrarian systems were largely revenue-oriented. The study highlighted that heavy taxation significantly affected peasants’ economic conditions.

Singh (2023), examined *“Agriculture in Princely States of India”* and found that agriculture was mainly rain-fed with limited irrigation facilities. The study highlighted the vulnerability of farmers due to dependence on monsoon rainfall.

Sharma (2022), analyzed *“Maratha Revenue System and Agrarian Structure”* and revealed that high land revenue demands created economic pressure on peasants. The study explained the exploitative nature of taxation policies.

Gupta (2021), studied *“Rural Society and Peasant Life in India”* and found that peasants were economically weak and often trapped in debt. The study highlighted the impact of social inequality on rural life.

Jaffrelot (2022), examined *“Indian Politics and Society”* and explained that historical agrarian policies have long-term effects on rural inequality and development. The study emphasized the relevance of past systems in understanding present conditions.

Kumar (2023), analyzed *“Agricultural Development in Central India”* and found that traditional farming practices dominated agriculture for a long period. The study highlighted the slow adoption of modern techniques.

Patel (2024), studied *“Rural Economy and Land Ownership Patterns”* and revealed that unequal land distribution significantly affects agricultural productivity and farmers’ living standards.

Verma (2023), examined *“Land Reforms and Agrarian Change in India”* and explained that land reforms had limited success due to uneven implementation. The study highlighted the persistence of historical inequalities.

Rao (2022), analyzed *“Agricultural Policy and Development in India”* and found that many modern agricultural challenges are rooted in historical policy frameworks.

Mishra (2024), studied *“Rural Life in Central India”* and revealed that poverty, lack of education, and poor healthcare facilities are major issues in rural areas.

Yadav (2023), examined *“Agriculture and Social Structure in India”* and found that farmers occupy lower socio-economic positions due to lack of resources and opportunities.

Sahu (2022), analyzed *“Land Tenure Systems in India”* and explained that zamindari and tenancy systems led to exploitation and economic dependency of peasants.

Need and Importance of the Study:

The present study titled *“A Historical Study of the Agricultural System and Peasant Life in Gwalior State during the Scindia Dynasty (1726–1949)”* is significant due to the limited scholarly attention given to regional agrarian histories, particularly in central India. While Indian agricultural

history has often focused on British-administered provinces, princely states like Gwalior have remained comparatively underexplored. This study fulfills the need to bridge that gap by providing a systematic and in-depth understanding of the agrarian structure, land revenue system, irrigation practices, and cropping patterns prevalent during the Scindia rule.

It also highlights the socio-economic conditions of peasants, including issues of indebtedness, tenancy, and subsistence living, thereby offering a grounded view of rural life beyond official records. From a theoretical perspective, the study draws upon Marxist Theory and Conflict Theory to interpret class relations, exploitation, and power dynamics between landlords, state authorities, and peasants, while elements of Postcolonial Theory help in examining the indirect impact of British colonial policies on the princely state's agrarian economy. The importance of this study lies not only in enriching historical knowledge but also in providing insights relevant to contemporary rural development and policy formulation. By understanding past agricultural practices and peasant struggles, policymakers and scholars can draw lessons to address current agrarian challenges in India. Furthermore, the study contributes to historiography by emphasizing micro-level regional analysis, making it valuable for students and researchers in history, sociology, and education. Overall, it preserves the socio-cultural and economic heritage of the rural population of Gwalior and establishes a foundation for comparative and interdisciplinary research.

Objectives of the Study:

1. The present study **aims to analyze** the agricultural system of Gwalior State during the Scindia rule (1726–1949).
2. The study **focuses on examining** land tenure systems, revenue policies, and irrigation facilities.
3. The research **aims to evaluate** the socio-economic conditions of peasants during the period.
4. The study **seeks to explore** the impact of agricultural policies on rural life and productivity.
5. The research **aims to assess** the effectiveness of agricultural reforms introduced during the Scindia rule.

Research Questions:

- What was the nature and structural organization of the agricultural system in Gwalior State during the rule of the Scindia Dynasty (1726–1949)?
- How did land tenure systems, particularly zamindari and tenancy arrangements, influence land ownership patterns and agricultural production in Gwalior State?
- What impact did land revenue policies have on the economic condition and livelihood of peasants during the Scindia period?
- How did irrigation facilities and dependence on monsoon rainfall affect agricultural productivity and stability in the region?
- What were the socio-economic conditions of peasants, including issues of indebtedness,

taxation, and vulnerability to natural calamities?

- To what extent did agricultural policies and administrative practices during the Scindia rule influence rural life, social structure, and long-term agrarian development?

Research Methodology:

The present study adopts a historical and analytical research design to examine the agricultural system and peasant life in Gwalior State under the Scindia dynasty during the period 1726–1949. The research is qualitative in nature and follows a descriptive-analytical approach, focusing on the interpretation of historical facts, policies, and socio-economic conditions. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources; primary sources include archival records, land revenue documents, settlement reports, and gazetteers, while secondary sources comprise books, research articles, journals, and previous studies related to agrarian history and princely states. Data is collected through the method of document analysis, where relevant information is systematically reviewed and compiled.

The collected data is then analyzed using qualitative and historical techniques to examine agricultural policies, land tenure systems, and the socio-economic conditions of peasants. The study area is confined to Gwalior State, a significant princely state in Central India, and covers the entire period of Scindia rule. However, the study is limited by dependence on available historical records, some of which may be incomplete or biased. Despite these limitations, the research provides valuable insights into the agrarian structure and its impact on rural society, contributing to a deeper understanding of historical and contemporary rural development.

Agricultural System and Peasant Life in Gwalior -

(A) Agricultural System:

Land Tenure System: During the rule of the Scindia dynasty, the land tenure system in Gwalior State was primarily based on zamindari and tenancy arrangements. The ultimate ownership of land rested with the state, while cultivators were given rights to use the land for agricultural purposes. In many regions, intermediaries such as zamindars played a dominant role in land distribution, tax collection, and agricultural supervision. This multi-layered structure often created economic pressure on peasants, as they had to pay revenue not only to the state but also to intermediaries. As a result, peasants had limited control over land resources and faced reduced agricultural independence.

Crops: The major crops grown during this period included wheat, jowar, bajra, gram, pulses, cotton, and oilseeds. Agriculture was predominantly traditional and labor-intensive, relying on indigenous tools such as wooden ploughs, bullocks, and manual labor. Farmers used locally available seeds and followed seasonal cropping patterns based on monsoon cycles. Crop production was highly dependent on climatic conditions, especially rainfall, which resulted in frequent fluctuations in yield. In years of good rainfall, production increased, but in drought years, agricultural output declined

sharply, affecting rural livelihoods.

Irrigation: Irrigation facilities in Gwalior State were limited and underdeveloped during the Scindia period. Agriculture largely depended on monsoon rainfall, making it highly vulnerable to climatic variations. Traditional irrigation sources such as wells, ponds, tanks, and small reservoirs were used for limited agricultural support. The development of canal systems and advanced irrigation infrastructure was minimal. This lack of reliable irrigation often led to crop failure during drought conditions, directly impacting food security and peasant income.

(B) Revenue System:

Land Revenue (Lagan): Land revenue, or lagan, was the most important source of income for the state during the Scindia rule. It was generally assessed on the basis of land fertility, crop type, and estimated agricultural output. In many cases, the tax burden was relatively high, which placed significant financial stress on peasants. Since agriculture was uncertain due to rainfall dependency, farmers often struggled to pay fixed or semi-fixed revenue demands, leading to economic instability and debt accumulation.

Collection System: The collection of land revenue was carried out through state-appointed officials as well as intermediaries such as zamindars. The system was often strict and lacked flexibility in response to agricultural failures or natural disasters. In cases of delayed or unpaid taxes, peasants were subjected to penalties, fines, or even confiscation of land rights. This rigid system of revenue collection created a cycle of poverty and indebtedness, further weakening the rural economy and increasing dependence on moneylenders.

(C) Peasant Life:

Economic Condition: The economic condition of peasants in Gwalior State was generally weak and unstable. Low agricultural productivity, high taxation, and lack of modern resources resulted in widespread poverty among rural households. Most peasants were unable to generate surplus income and often depended on loans from moneylenders to meet basic needs. This continuous cycle of debt severely limited their economic mobility and long-term development.

Social Life: The social life of peasants was simple, traditional, and largely community-based. Access to education, healthcare, and modern facilities was extremely limited, especially in rural areas. Social stratification was clearly visible, and peasants occupied lower positions in the social hierarchy. Despite hardships, rural communities maintained strong cultural and traditional bonds, which helped them cope with economic and environmental challenges.

Problems: Peasants faced multiple challenges, including irregular rainfall, frequent droughts, high land revenue, and exploitation by intermediaries. Natural calamities such as famine further worsened their living conditions. Lack of irrigation, absence of technological advancement, and dependency on traditional farming methods made agriculture highly risky. These combined factors

created long-term socio-economic instability in rural society.

(D) Agricultural Reforms and Efforts of the Scindia Rule:

The rulers of the Scindia dynasty introduced several limited reforms to improve agricultural conditions. Efforts were made to develop basic irrigation facilities such as wells, tanks, and small water reservoirs to support farming activities. Some administrative steps were also taken to organize and regulate land revenue collection more systematically. In certain areas, attempts were made to encourage better agricultural practices and improve productivity. However, these reforms were limited in scope and implementation. They failed to bring significant structural change in the agrarian system or substantially improve the socio-economic conditions of peasants.

Conclusion:

The present study on the agricultural system and peasant life in Gwalior State under the rule of the Scindia dynasty (1726–1949) reveals that the agrarian structure of the region was largely traditional, revenue-oriented, and dependent on natural conditions. Agriculture remained the backbone of the economy, but it was characterized by limited technological advancement, inadequate irrigation facilities, and heavy dependence on monsoon rainfall. These factors made agricultural production uncertain and vulnerable to climatic variations.

The study further concludes that the land tenure system, particularly zamindari and tenancy arrangements, created multiple layers of intermediaries between the state and cultivators. This structure often increased the financial burden on peasants and reduced their control over land resources. The revenue (lagan) system, although an important source of state income, was generally heavy and rigid in nature, which contributed to economic stress and indebtedness among the peasantry.

In terms of socio-economic conditions, peasants lived under persistent challenges such as poverty, low income, lack of education, limited healthcare facilities, and exposure to frequent natural calamities. Despite these hardships, rural society maintained its traditional structure and cultural continuity. The agricultural reforms introduced by the Scindia rulers, including limited irrigation development and administrative adjustments in revenue collection, brought only partial improvements and failed to bring structural transformation in rural life.

Overall, the study concludes that while the agrarian system of Gwalior State supported state revenue and ensured continuity of agricultural production, it did not significantly improve the living standards of peasants. The system reflected a combination of traditional practices and limited modernization, which ultimately resulted in persistent socio-economic inequalities in rural society.

Delimitation of the Study:

- The study is limited to Gwalior State under the rule of the Scindia dynasty during 1726–1949.
- The geographical scope is restricted to the historical boundaries of Gwalior State only.
- The study focuses only on agricultural system and peasant life, excluding other sectors like

industry, trade, and military administration.

- It includes analysis of land tenure system, revenue administration, irrigation facilities, and socio-economic conditions of peasants.
- The research is based on historical and documentary sources such as gazetteers, archival records, books, and research articles.
- The study does not include field survey or primary data collection from present-day population.
- It is primarily qualitative and historical in nature, not statistical or quantitative.
- Comparative references to other princely states are included only for supporting analysis, not as main focus.
- Due to the historical nature of the study, availability of complete and accurate records is limited.
- The study does not cover post-1949 developments or modern agricultural reforms in detail.

Significance of the Study:

- The study helps in understanding the historical agricultural system of Gwalior State under the Scindia dynasty (1726–1949).
- It provides insights into the land tenure system, revenue administration, and agrarian structure of the princely state period.
- The research highlights the socio-economic conditions of peasants, including poverty, indebtedness, and living standards.
- It contributes to understanding how historical policies influenced rural economy and agricultural development.
- The study is useful for analyzing the relationship between land revenue systems and peasant exploitation.
- It helps in identifying the limitations of traditional agriculture and irrigation systems in historical context.
- The research is significant for students and scholars of history, economics, and rural studies.
- It provides a comparative base for understanding modern agricultural reforms and rural development policies.
- The study also contributes to the documentation of regional history of Central India.
- It enhances understanding of how historical agrarian structures continue to influence present-day rural society.

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