

# SHORTER NOTE

## LAND AND POLITICS IN HILL AREAS OF NORTH BENGAL

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### INTRODUCTION

The study of the relationship between land and politics draws its implicit rationale from the Marxian concepts of the basis and super-structure. Marx's fundamental idea is that the economy is the basis of all other systems like politics, religion, education and philosophy. The recent trend among the sociologists is, however, towards the Weberian concept of inter-dependence between the various sub-systems of the society. They are increasingly emphasising on factors like education, urbanisation or modernisation as important in social relationships. The present study based on one month's field-work in a hill village finds some role of these factors also but the decisive factor in the political relationships is still the land.

The present note conceives of land not only as a basic force of production but also as a symbol of values and ethos of the society. Land may have lost some of its economic significance due to fragmentation and division of holdings in the plane areas and more so due to soil erosion, landslides etc, in the hills. But the symbolic value of land is still high, which offers the present study a scope to investigate its potentialities. Here the word 'politics' has been understood simply as power or the relationship between the subordinate and superordinate. This simple though crude conceptualisation of the society in a dichotomous model of elite vs mass has many limitations but at the same time is very helpful for an exposition of the Marxian analysis,

## THE VILLAGE

Sindipong, the village under study, is situated in the Kalimpong Subdivision of Darjeeling District, West Bengal. It is 3 miles off on the east of the town with a total population of 2273 out of 377 households. The percentage of literates in the village is 54.42 per cent and of illiterates, 45.58 per cent. 73.56 per cent of working population work in the agricultural sector, 21.58 percent in service and 4.86 percent in business. The total area of the village is 1548.72 acres and the area under cultivation is 1512.72 acres.

## LAND AND POLITICS : A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The Kalimpong Subdivision of Darjeeling District was under Sikkim until 1706, since then it remained under Bhutan until 1865 when it was finally annexed by the British India (Dozey 1922). Thus to know about the early relationship between land and politics in this area one has to look into the history of both Sikkim and Bhutan. So far as Sikkim is concerned it is well known that there existed a crude form of feudalism. The king, the thikadars (meaning leaseholders), the kazis (aristocrats also serving as jurists and administrators), and the mandals (headmen incharge of revenue collection and block administration) not only had unaccountable amounts of rent free land but the political and judicial powers were also in their hands (Basnet 1974 :64-68) though a kind of detailed hierarchy was there within themselves also. They received free services from the raiyats with the number of working days varying according to their rank. The kazis and the thikadars were entitled free labour from the raiyats for 15 days, the mandals for 5 days and the karbaris (accounts assistants of mandals) for 3 days. Besides some occasional gifts the labourers did not get anything. Failure to observe this duty would mean penalties or fines. Such a system continued in Sikkim until the early part of the 20th century.

It is quite difficult to say how was the system in Kalimpong under Bhutanese regime. Markham's report (1971 :34 :36) on Bhutan shows a moderate tax payment and an existence of three classes—priests, governmental officials and the landholders (who had no administrative power)—arranged hierarchically. A few isolated cases found in Kalimpong show that there existed landlordism in Bhutan. For example, the Pedong Kazi had more than 100 acres of land until recently and Rani Chunni Dorji of Bhutan still holds a massive area of land in Kalimpong. However, even during the Bhutanese regime it is recalled by the villagers that mandals were the chief link between the King and the raiyats. Therefore, they obviously enjoyed considerable power at the block levels,

The relationship between land and politics has, therefore, remained very close in the history of the hill areas of north Bengal in the sense that the landlords or, in other words, the mandals, the Kazis, the thikadars, etc. were the most important power holders. Their superordinate position was unchallenged for a long time probably for two reasons: the people were illiterate to a large extent and, secondly, they were politically not very conscious.

#### LAND AND POLITICS IN THE POST-INDEPENDENT ERA

Apparently changes took place everywhere in India after it gained independence. The agrarian system had perhaps well ossilitated during the rule of the British to shrug off the attempts to change the traditional hierarchy by the Indian administrators who were also basically drawn from the traditionally superordinate class only. In the Marxian analysis the lack of change in the agrarian hierarchy is mainly due to the implicit support of the people in power in the continuation of the traditional hierarchy. Land reforms have failed almost everywhere (Thorner 1962 :5). The sustained relationship between land and politics can be shown in the Table 1.

Table 2 shows informal elites and their class background.

These tables show a very heavy representation of the landowners class in both the formal and informal power structures. Here formal power structure means the members of the statutory panchayat and the informal power structure means the group of the influential people in the village. The representation of the landowners in the two Tables is 88 per cent and 87.5 per cent respectively. Compared to this the representation of the sharecroppers' class is quite negligible in both the Tables—11.1 per cent in Table 1 and 12.5 per cent in Table 2. The class of the agricultural labourers has not been represented in either of the Tables.

#### CONCLUSION

The above discussion and the presentation of the primary data show that the relationship between land and politics is still very strong in Sindipong. Though this village alone cannot be regarded as representative of the whole north Bengal the situation at least in the hill areas of north Bengal cannot be expected to be very different either. The modern forces of change like education and urbanisation have yet to play a significant role in changing the political relations of the village. The traditional factors like age and landholding still mean a lot in the local village life. Merillat (1970 :321) rightly remarked: 'In any event most observers agree that the large and

'middle' landlords are still a major force in Indian politics, especially of the state and local levels.'

It should be, however, noted that education is gradually gaining ground in the political sphere also. Except 2 or 11.1 per cent members of the formal elites, who are illiterates all the rest are educated to some extent and 4 or 22.4 per cent are graduates. Though education basically depends on the economy of which the land is the root, not all the landowners having an equal amount of land are equally educated nor all of them are equally conscious of the political affairs. Education as the basis of status, therefore, has some role to play in the political relationship.

This is where Marx suffered due to the simplicity of his theory and Weber got an opportunity to make an inroad into the sphere of the social scientists in a very significant way. Land is definitely a major factor in any social relationship. This is accepted by Weber also but while Marx regards the same with some kind of absolute potentiality Weber makes us aware of other factor also such as status which is not always dependent on economy. Moreover, if land were an absolute factor, agrarian revolutions should have taken place without leadership and politicization. But the studies of Pande (1974:1087), Migdal (1974:300) and Zagoria (1974:), to name a few, show a considerable role of leadership and politicization in any agrarian movements.

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TABLE 1  
Formal Elites and their Class Background

Caste	No. of Elites	Class
Brahman	1	Landowners
Newar	3	"
Limbu	3	"
Tamang	1	Sharecropper
Bhujel	3	Landowner (2), Sharecropper (1)
Lepcha	4	Landowner
Bhutia	1	"
Muslim	2	"
Total	18	Landowner=16 or 88.9 per cent Sharecropper=2 or 11.1 per cent

TABLE 2  
Informal Elites and their Class Background in 1979

Caste	No. of Elites	Class
Brahman	2	Landowner
Chhetri	2	Landowner (1) Sharecropper (1)
Newar	8	Landowner (7) Sharecropper (1)
Tamang	3	Landowner
Kami	2	"
Bhujel	2	Landowner (1) Sharecropper (1)
Lepcha	5	Landowner
Total	24	Landowner=21 or 87.5 per cent Sharecropper=3 or 12.5 per cent

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TABLE

Industrial class and their class background in 1970

Class	% of total	% of males
Landowner	2	3
Landowner (I) Share-cropper (I)	3	3
Landowner (I) Share-cropper (I)	8	8
Landowner	2	2
Landowner (I) Share-cropper (I)	2	2
Landowner	2	2
Landowner (I) or 87.5 per cent share-cropper (I) or 15.8 per cent	14	14

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