

## AGRARIAN RELATIONS IN SIKKIM : THE LIMITS OF CHANGE

TANKA BAHADUR SUBBA

### Introducing Sikkim

Sikkim, the 22nd State of India, lies between 27°5' and 28°9' north latitude and 88°56' east longitude and has an area of 2818 square miles. The altitude varies from 800' above sea level (a.s.l.) to above 28,000' a.s.l. at Kanchenjanga—the second highest peak in the world. The area between 7,000' and 14,000' a.s.l. is almost uninhabited except by some seasonal graziers like the Bhutias and Sherpas or Gurungs and above this altitude is generally covered with glaciers which form the source of the two major rivers of Sikkim—Teesta and Rangit.

The State is surrounded by Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and West Bengal on the north, west, east and south respectively. Thus, despite its small size it has three international boundaries with Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan.

The earliest form of cultivation in Sikkim was shifting cultivation. The initial immigration of the Tibetans did not bring about any change in the mode of agriculture because they were basically traders and herdsmen while some of them were engaged in administration. It was only after the Nepalese immigration that a significant change took place in the local economy.

The Nepalese immigration in Sikkim, excluding a few 'aboriginal' Nepalese tribes like the Limbus and Mangars, had

started as early as the mid-18th century when Prithivi Narayan Shah, the Gorkha King, conquered the chiefs and kings ruling different parts of Nepal, one after another, and finally consolidated the whole of it in 1769. Many Newars and Mangars fled away from Nepal during this period and settled in Sikkim. Another flow of Nepalese immigration took place after 1780 when Nepal invaded Sikkim and ruled its territory upto the west of Teesta river till 1817, when under the Treaty of Titaliya, the land occupied by Nepal was restored by Sikkim with the British help. However, the heaviest flow of their immigration was between 1871 and 1888 during which the forests were extensively cleared for agricultural cultivation. The whole area of Sikkim measured, mapped and assessed for revenue and grazing grounds were also made taxable.<sup>1</sup>

Gradually the markets developed, roads and bungalows were constructed and dispensaries and schools opened.<sup>2</sup> The basis of taxation and revenue was finalised by J. C. White, the first political officer of the British India to Sikkim. However, until 1947 (from 1907 to 1947 Sikkim was a British protectorate), the development of Sikkim was insignificant. The feudal system was in practice, the tax was high, forced labour was in vogue and there was practically no investment on economic development.<sup>3</sup> Development activities in Sikkim began to take shape only after Indian Independence in 1947, though the active participation of India in the same started after 1975 when Sikkim was granted statehood.

The Sikkimese economy is basically agricultural. There are only two tea gardens—Temi and Kewzing—both of which are located in the south district. The cultivation takes place usually between 2000' and 5000' a.s.l. only, below 2000' being mostly covered with forest and above 5000' with unproductive land and still above with glaciers. The most important crop in Sikkim is maize with 50 per cent of the total cultivated area or 2.0 lakh acres under it. The land under cardamom cultivation is 20,000 acres, orange 2,500 acres and the rest under other minor crops like paddy, wheat, oilseeds, potato, ginger and other vegetables.

Transport is a big hurdle in the path of rapid development in Sikkim. The State Government is making sincere attempts to connect even the remotest areas but still the communication

network is very poor and would have been even poorer but for the strategic importance of this State which led to rapid construction of roads by the army, specially in its north district. Due to poor communication system the local resources have not been properly developed and tapped. All these features have a bearing on the enduring agrarian relations in Sikkim.

### The agrarian history of Sikkim

The oldest form of land measurement in Sikkim was in *Dhoors* or paces of land. Taxes from the tenants were collected from as early as the history of Sikkim. Even before the inception of the Namgyal Dynasty (in 1642) in Sikkim the *Kazis* used to hold grants of land from the former *Maharaja*, which was hereditary. Land grants were made by the *Maharaja* as a reward or inducement for administrative efficiency<sup>4</sup>. The most peculiar feature of the zamindari system in Sikkim was that the landholder was bound to the land for payment of the revenue for the whole term of settlement. The holders of land could not sell the land under the terms of contract they entered into<sup>5</sup>.

During the early Tibetan rule in Sikkim the raiyats were directly controlled by the palace. These raiyats were of two types: *Nangzans* and *Zimchungpas*. The former referred to the constant place attendants and the latter, to those who served the *Maharaja* on tours<sup>6</sup>. The villagers—Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis mostly belonged to the latter group. The whole country was divided into twelve districts under twelve *Bhutia Kahlons* or ministers and twelve Lepcha heads of *dzongs* or castles.<sup>7</sup> The monasteries had no land and depended on the gifts and donations from the people.<sup>8</sup>

It is noted that besides land tax the raiyats had to render free services to their landlords, *mandals* (headmen) and *Karbaris* (account assistants of mandals) of the respective blocks. The landlords meaning the *Kazis* and *thikadars* had magisterial powers in civil and criminal matters and could easily dispossess a raiyat if they could utilize the various form of free and forced labour like *Kalo bhari*, *Zharlangi* and *kuruwa* for their personal benefits. The condensation of *Kalo bhari* (black load) meaning forced labour by leaders like Tashi Tshering Bhutia and Sonam Tshering Lepcha in the 40's with a large peasant participation is a burning

example of the feudal excesses in this Himalayan kingdom.

The nature of feudal exploitation or forced labour in Sikkim may be described here more elaborately.

The name *kalo bhari* became the symbol of forced labour in Sikkim because the raiyats there had to carry loads wrapped with black tarpaulin across the border to Tibet. Nobody could tell exactly when it started but it might have started since as early as the Indo-Tibet trade had started during the latter half of the nineteenth century. There were two British camps at Faridzong and Gyangtshé of Tibet where utensils, textiles and medicines were supplied by the Indian Political officer with the help of the Marwari businessmen and the *kazis* or *thikadars*. The political officer stationed in Gangtok demanded coolies from the Maharaj who in turn asked the *kazis* and *thikadars* to collect the labourer. These labourers were paid a very low wage but the risk of life, while carrying a load of about 37 kg across the snow-bound border, was very high. Many labourers died on the way for which there was no compensation. On the top of that, if they failed to comply, they were whipped, jailed or fined depending on the capacity and whims of the *kazis* and *thikadars*.

The raiyats in Sikkim not only had to carry the loads across the border but also within the country. Under *zharlangi* system, they had to carry loads free of payment either in cash or in kind for the tourists and officers (who used to be mainly the British). The incoming tourists came upto Gelkhola by train, where they had to be picked by the coolies. There were some reserved coolies in places like Gangtok, Singtam, Melli and Rangpo. They had to remain there in groups, with their own clothes and utensils including the food for fifteen days after which another batch of villagers would replace them. These reserved coolies were called *kurwas*.

Besides all these, the raiyats had to render free labour services to their landlords, headmen and the account assistants. This was lifted up vide Notification No. 5874/G dated 15.8.1924 and in lieu of it a system of cash payment called *bethi* was introduced. In some remote villages, however, the earlier system continued.

Land administration in Sikkim till 1975 was carried out on the basis of notifications brought out from time to time. One

such notification (No. 1208/L.F. 1950) classified the raiyats into two broad classes.

1. **Primary holders**—referring to the lessess in their home farm areas and *bustiwallas* in their holdings. A *bustiwalla* means a person who has rights to possess, use, sell, mortgage and inherit the land.
2. **Secondary holders**—referring to *kutiadars* and *adhiadars*. A *kutiadar* means a person engaged in cultivation by giving a stipulated amount of cash or crop to the primary holders and an *adhiadar* means one engaged in cultivation and giving half of the produce to the primary holder. The bulk of the Nepalis belonged to the category of secondary holders till early 60's.

Though the *adhiadars* and *kutiadars* are put in the category of secondary holders, their right to till the land was limited to one agricultural year only ~~had~~ thereafter it depended upon the will of the primary holders. It was only after the Sikkim Cultivators' (Protection) Act, 1975 was enacted that these people were *legally* provided with the protection of the tenure.<sup>10</sup> But since the Government did not maintain any tenurial records, the above provisions did hardly take place.

In Sikkim, there were three types of holdings till the independence of India : (i) owned by the State Government, (ii) under the private Estate of the Maharaja, and (iii) managed by the monasteries. According to the Government Notification No. 2627/2727 dated 6.7.1948, the private estates and monasteries' land were abolished. But like other notifications this one was also did not find proper enforcement.

There were discriminations also in the land ceilings among the different classes of people. The *kazis*, *thikadars* and *mandals* held large areas of land earlier and they still own big areas of land. In 1974, a land ceiling was imposed vide Notification No. 8545/G that the *bustiwallas* could not hold land more than 20 acres, *mandals* not have 30 acres and *kazis*, *thikadars* etc. not above 100 acres. The last category of people were, however, allowed to hold lands up to 200 acres with Government's approval and subject to the payment of Rs. 5 every 20 acres of excess

land. However, there was no limitation imposed on their holding of cardamom fields, orange garden, homestead, fodder and fuel forests etc.<sup>11</sup>

There were discriminations not only on the basis of 'class' but also 'ethnicity'. For example, the Nepalese had to pay Rs. 2 per acre of class I paddy field but for the same class of paddy field the Lepchas and Bhutias had to pay Re. 1.8 *annas* (1 *anna* = 6 *pāse*) and for Class II paddy field the rate of revenue per acre was Re. 1.8 *annas* for the Nepalis while it was only Re. 1.2 *annas* for the Lepchas and Bhutias. Such a system, started in 1915 by Charles Bell, was in vogue till the 1st Settlement Operation and proclamation of the Maharaja in August, 1956.<sup>12</sup>

Again according to a report<sup>13</sup> the amount of excess land (above the ceiling fixed) on the basis of community was as follows : Bhutias=2795.01 acres, Lepchas=645.40 acres and Nepalis=1352.83 acres. If the percentage of population of each of these communities is compared with their respective excess lands, it is very high among the Bhutias, followed by the Lepchas and rather insignificantly by the Nepalis. However, acquisition of such lands has been reported to have succeeded only partially : those who carry out these duties being, more often than not, those who own excess lands or those who are otherwise affiliated with persons having lands.

### The limping change

The Sikkimese society which has a long association with the feudal system, with ineffective land reform measures, has left little scope for a dramatic change in the present. The *kazis* still hold considerable areas of land. Some *kazis* like Bermek kazi and Tshazong kazi are reported to be holding above 1,300 acres of land till now. Kazi Dawa Gyatsho of Chuchen village, west Sikkim, declared himself that he held 400 acres of land. Kahar Singh Kami, the *mandal* of kamling block of west Sikkim, is also reported to have 100 acres of land. Similarly, there are other *mandals*, *karbaris*, *kazis* and *thikadars* who still own considerable area of land.

Thus, though the zamindari system is formally abolished, the vestiges of it are still prominent. Their civil, criminal and judicial powers have been forfeited but they still hold the most

powerful positions in the administrative set up of the State. This has become possible because they were the best educated and much more alert than the common mass. Moreover, they enjoyed all the facilities for developing their personality more conveniently than most others.

The population of Sikkim has increased remarkably over the years but still the average landholding size per household is about 6.0 acres. The chief form of tenurial relation existing down the ages is the *adhia* which means a system of division of the produce into two equal halves between the landowners and sharecroppers. A common feature of such a system in West Bengal is that the landowners are less interested in the land leased out but in Sikkim it is not so. There, the lessors quite actively participate in the agricultural operation at least on the land leased out on *adhia* system.

The relatively greater participation of the landowners in the production process in Sikkimese villages than in West Bengal is perhaps due to the fact that most of the lessors in Sikkim are cultivators themselves with little or no other sources of income. Moreover, the extent of irrigated land is very limited in Sikkim. Therefore, they try to get the maximum from their dry lands. Leasing out is usually seen only when the family does not have enough manpower to work on the field and specially when the holding is fragmented.

The division of produce on 50 per cent basis is however, more apparent than real. A lessee borrows money from different sources to meet the cost of production which is very high but the loans are repaid mostly in kind. The rate at which the paddy is valued at present is about Rs. 60 to 80 per *muri* (75 Kg.) The low value of crop, ill-matched by a low rate of production, ultimately leaves nothing for the *adhiadars* or *pakhureys* (landless tenants). Many of the moneylenders go to the threshing grounds themselves to collect their dues while some of them ask the loanees to reach their share at their houses.

The most pitiable part of the distribution system is the fact that many of them cannot repay the loans in the same year it is taken, specially when the crops fail. And crop failure is quite a common phenomenon. Thus the debts continue over the years and keep growing more and more bulky. This is true not only of

the lesses but many small and poor farmers also.

The hardest hit category of people in the villages are the *khetalas* (agricultural labourers). Earlier they used to be paid in kind which facilitated some amount of downward flow of the agricultural produce in the villages. But in the recent years the labourers are paid mostly in cash which has thus blocked the system of distributing agricultural produce in the villages. This has worsened the condition of the agricultural labourers as the value of money has gone down considerably, while wages have not increased proportionately. The wage rate in the villages still continues to be Rs. 2-3 for females per day and Rs. 4-5 for males per day excluding the food and drinks provided during the work. However, there are some works like ploughing, walling and repairing the houses for which they are paid much higher. Fortunately, this category of the agrarian society has not as yet assumed a statically significant position.

My study in a few villages of West Sikkim shows that the sharecroppers are more interested in cultivating the irrigated lands than the non-irrigated, mainly for the following reasons: these lands are more productive, they have higher capacity to provide sustenance, production, and loans can be obtained more easily on the basis of such lands. As a result, more competition among them is seen for such lands. And more the competition among them more is the scope for the landowners to exploit them which logically implies that there is more scope of exploitation in the irrigated lands than in the non-irrigated ones.

Similarly, it is found that the lower altitude villages in general have a higher percentage of sharecroppers and also the extent of land under operational holding because the production is higher in such lands. Logically again, the extent of exploitation, or the scope for it, is also higher in such villages. Incidentally, the irrigated land are more common in the lower altitudes.

Now about the agrarian relations on the basis of consumption, it will perhaps be an exaggeration to state that the class relations distinctly follow different consumption patterns even when 'consumption' is taken in a very simple sense—to refer to the 'styles of life'. A large number of the landowning people are otherwise very poor and have little or no difference with the sharecroppers or agricultural labourers. A class difference with

regard to consumption is clear only between the most affluent landowners and the poorest of the poor. The people in the middle rank landowner or landless—do not have clear-cut class distinction regarding the styles of life. Moreover, it is found, as Mendher<sup>14</sup> did, that such relationships are often disturbed by caste and cultural relationships. In short, Sikkim still represents many features of a dependent economy—concentration of land-ownership, share-tenancy, credit-needs, usury, indebtedness, low levels of agricultural technology, etc—as enumerated by Jacoby.<sup>15</sup>

### The limits of change

The present situation of class relations in Sikkim seems to corroborate Bottomore's contention<sup>16</sup> that there is an increasing differentiation among the working class representing the cultivators. This is a pattern rather contrary to the Marxist theoretical formulation that the classes gradually become homogeneous. The cultivators who constitute the bulkiest category in the Sikkimese agrarian society cannot, according to Mønn<sup>17</sup> and Schickele<sup>18</sup>, make the best use of capital and lead to low production. /o.

The study of Latifundia and agricultural labour in Latin America by Feder<sup>19</sup> shows that a lack of agricultural development is due to a lack of participation by the absentee landlords. Thorner and Thorner<sup>20</sup> also maintain that the landholders not only suppress the poor but also refrain from participating in the agricultural development. In the context of Sikkim, these factors are largely true specially when the landowners are *kazis* or *thikadars* staying in the urban centres or away from their lands. However, other factors like inadequacy of infra-structural facilities and natural calamities as pointed out by Arora<sup>21</sup> are also worth a consideration. Khusro<sup>22</sup> adds that the decay in tenurial relations and the low use of inputs are the major factors for agricultural backwardness. Ladejensky<sup>23</sup> also talks, besides tenurial arrangements, of faulty legislation and the negative attitude of the government officials at all levels as some of the reasons for agricultural stagnation.

Most of the factors mentioned above stand true of Sikkim also. The peasants' lot has improved little over the past few

decades but they are absolutely quiet after the 'No-Rent Movement' of 1949, the 1973 Movement being a political one. The lack of politicizations by the left parties in Sikkim is probably not a reason behind their silence because Darjeeling hills, despite their politicization, old and deep, have remained quiet for ages.

The more important reason is perhaps the tenurial insecurity which involves the whole gamut of social, economic and psychological aspects. Losing land is not as simple as it sounds. It means the uncertainty of getting new land, losing their huts so dearly made and building them again in a new place which means a large expenditure for them. It also means wooing new landowners, leaving their friends and neighbours and plunging themselves into a society and neighbourhood, whose reaction is not known before. It also means shedding off of their personality and being submissive not only in their generation but many more to follow unless the tide suddenly changes in their favour.

In this context, Migdal's observation<sup>24</sup> that the peasant participation in politics is in return for material inducements and of Pande<sup>25</sup> or Roxborough<sup>26</sup> that such struggles are often designed to convey their grievances to the high class or the authorities and not to uproot the system itself, seem quite true. Really, it seems that the society is not going to experience a class struggle till the lower classes get the minimum for subsistence. This subsistence to them, seems more attractive a bird than the hypothetical two in the bush promised by the leftists.

It should, however, be remembered that the spatial distribution of the households, lack of proper infra-structural facilities, low level of literacy, a kind of 'slave-mentality' developed during the long feudal years, etc. have also been responsible for inhabiting the political or social consciousness among the oppressed. Besides, the presence of a large number of cultivators who are socially among the landowners' class and economically among the landless makes it difficult for the society to move towards an agrarian revolution. And until they fight for their dues, the ruling elite who enjoy the fruit of semi-feudal society on the one hand and India's financial generosity on the other, will not budge an inch. This might be even more difficult to achieve for the peasants are now injected with a strong dose of ethnic feeling. The sentimental differences among the Lepchas, Bhutias

and the Nepalis are being widened up by the political leaders committed to power and prestige and not to the people who reward them with these. Unfortunately, the few educated and upcoming youths from among the oppressed have also been a part of this elite culture.

The experience in the various states of India shows that there has been a better land reform in the left-ruled states like Kerala and West Bengal. Thus, a lack of ideology both among the elite and the masses could have partly led to a slow and ineffective land reforms in Sikkim. It may be noted that Mohun Gurung has been trying to spread the left ideology in Sikkim for the last few years but so far the result has not been satisfactory at all. The level of political consciousness has risen up considerably after independence but the political sky of Sikkim is heavily clouded with the ethnic sentiments. This is probably a reason why the left ideology has not been able to find a base in Sikkim.

Besides the ethnic feelings playing an important role in the politics of Sikkim, caste also has found a safe niche at the village levels. Since, the levels of education, urbanization or modernization are still quite low, except in some parts of east and south districts, the caste ideology is a strong deterrent to the process of class formation. And, as such, the capitalist modes of production are only recently being introduced in the rural areas of Sikkim. Thus the caste identity of a person is more important than his class position in most villages of Sikkim including the Lepcha or Bhutia dominant villages of north and west Sikkim.

In short, some amount of change is noticed in the urban centres and the files of legislative assembly but the vestiges of feudal Sikkim do persist. What is sad to note is that there is no clear indication towards a meaningful change in the agrarian relations of Sikkim in the near future. The dependence on moneylenders and landlords, who are at times coterminous, is still very high. In fact, it is much higher than their dependence on the official sources of loan, which is just the opposite in the villages of Darjeeling. The lack of proper communication facilities and education is partly responsible for this. Much more could have gone to the benefit of the rural poor but for the lack of a commitment among the leaders and their own ignorance.

### Conclusion

It appears from above that there is little that is going to change in the next few decades. When it took a couple of centuries for Sikkim to reach the present state of agrarian affairs, it is not surprising if it seems to have a long way to thread before it reaches the level of West Bengal or Kerala (not necessarily in the political sense). However, it is also noticed that the changes after 1940<sup>s</sup> have been relatively fast<sup>er</sup> than before. Slavery, forced labour and free labour were removed after this period only and many social security measures are being taken in favour of the poor peasants. Had the appeal of caste and ethnicity not overpowered the people at large, the agrarian relations would have shown a better future given the state of affairs in this State for such a long time. Unfortunately, the elite of Sikkim encourage the ethnic differences because their interest lies in it.

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