New Social Forces and Changing Land Relations among the Khasis in Meghalaya

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Introduction

Ever since they came in contact with colonial modernity, the tribal communities in mainland India were subjected to worst forms of exploitation, oppression and forced displacement. The manner in which the tribal communities have lost control over their resources and found themselves marginalized during colonial and post-colonial periods has been well-recorded in several scholarly writings on tribes (Elwin, 1991; Furer-Haimendorf, 1985; Fernandes, 1992, Singh, 2002). However, the experiences of tribal communities in North-East India, especially of those tribes inhabiting the hill areas is quite different compared to the tribal communities of mainland India. During the colonial period, the geo-strategic interests compelled the British colonizers to leave the hill areas almost unadministered. Colonial declaration of the hill areas as 'backward', 'excluded' or 'partially excluded', prevented to some extent the migration of non-tribal Indians into these areas and allowed considerable autonomy to the hill communities to continue with their traditional tribal life-styles without much of interference from the colonial government. (Chaube, 1999; Syiemlieh, 1989; Bhattacharjee, 1978; Nag,

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2002) As they had little contact with the rest of British India, the Indian nationalist movement did not have much impact on the hill communities. Their isolation from the Indian mainstream led to the birth of separate ethnic identities amongst the hill tribes. After India became independent, the Indian nationalist elite sought to integrate the hill areas into the Indian Union. But they did recognize the historic specificity of the hill communities of the erstwhile composite Assam and hence tried to win over them by bringing the hill districts under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which formally recognized the customary rights of the tribals over their land, forests and other natural resources, and created Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) to enable tribal communities to administer themselves with little interference from the state governments. Although Nagas rejected the Sixth Schedule status and demanded independence, other hill communities of Assam – Khasis, Jaintias, Garos, Mizos, Karbis and Dimasas – initially accepted the autonomous district status and the district councils constituted in the hill districts did take up different measures to protect and promote the interests of the tribal communities (Gassah, 1998; Rao, 1976). However, the growing dissatisfaction among the emerging educated elite among different hill communities led to the movement for a hill state, which resulted in the formation of the state of Meghalaya, comprising primarily the three hill communities, namely Khasis, Jaintias and Garos (Chaube, 1999; Bhagawati, 2000, Lyngdoh, 1996).

Prior to the formation of Meghalaya, each of the three hill districts – Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills – had their own Autonomous District Councils. The birth of Meghalaya in the year 1972 enabled the indigenous tribal communities to wield control over the state government. It no doubt brought some changes in the relationship between the state government and the ADCs, but the district councils continued to operate. As both state government and the district councils are in the hands of the indigenous peoples, it is expected that the customary rights of the indigenous tribal people would be better protected. Initiatives like reservation of majority of assembly seats for indigenous tribes; preferential treatment for local tribes in matters of education and employment; enactment of Act preventing non-tribals from buying tribal lands etc., are expected to empower the tribal communities in the hills

further. However, the experience shows that although the government interventions could protect the tribal communities from the exploitation and domination of the non-tribal communities, they could not prevent changes in tribal land relations, leading to the birth of class distinctions within the indigenous tribal communities. The present paper throws light on the changes taking place in land relations in the Khasi villages in Meghalaya and assesses the impact of these changes on their traditional tribal ways of life.

Traditional Land Relations among Khasis

Khasis are basically matrilineal, wherein the lineage and inheritance are determined along maternal lines. The ancestral property is inherited by the youngest daughter, known as *Khaddu*, who acts as the custodian of the family property. Theoretically women are in control of the property, but in practice men – in their capacity, as husbands, uncles and brothers –influence the management of the use of land and other resources inherited (Mukhim, 2011; Nongbri, 2003). Traditionally, the villages were organized along clan lines. The head of the clan who established the village acted as the village head and was expected to manage the clan lands on behalf of and in the interests of the clan members. Although the members belonging to other clans could also come and live in the villages, the founding clan members had greater say in the affairs of the traditional villages.

Land is central to traditional Khasi life. To them land is not only a primary source of livelihood, but is also something that carries cultural and religious meanings and identities. Primarily in Khasi villages, two types of land relations were visible. The villages had common lands – *Ri Raid* – over which the whole community could lay claim. The community councils (*raid durbars*) decided as to how the Ri Raid lands had to be used. Usually the Ri Raid lands were allocated for shifting cultivation. The nature of shifting cultivation itself was such that the land could be cultivated for a short period, after which the cultivators have to switch over to other lands for cultivation. If a person to whom the Ri Raid land was allocated failed to occupy or make use of it, the land reverted to the community. But alongside *Ri Raid,* Khasi villages also had *Ri Kynti* lands, where those who invested their labour and capital

and made permanent improvements in the lands, could claim exclusive control over the lands. In all respects they were private lands, which could be held by the households as long as they worked on it. Earlier, in Khasi society no household was deprived of access to land. Those who did not have *Ri Kynti* land, could claim usufructuary rights over the Ri Raid land (Agnihotri, 1997; Datta-Ray, 1997). Although the jhum cultivators could not claim ownership and transferable rights over the jhum lands, their rights over the fruits of their labour were not denied. Apart from *Ri Raid* and *Ri Kynti* lands, one could see in the Khasi Hills, clan lands, joint family lands and lands owned by ruling families like Syiems, Myntries and Lyngdohs. The cultivation was undertaken with family labour, primarily for self-consumption. What was produced in excess of their needs was usually sold in local markets. The land markets in the hills were stagnant and suffered from various degrees of imperfections (Nair, 1986; Das, 2005). Not just agricultural lands, but even forests and other natural resources were in the control of villages or clans. Since land was considered as the property of the community, and not of the government, there was no need for payment of land revenue. Although clan leaders or village heads had privileged social status within the villages, they were not very different from other villagers or clan members in terms of their economic status. It is often mentioned in different scholarly writings that absentee landlordism, tenancy and landlessness were unknown in the traditional Khasi society.

The ideal type of tribal land relations, as presented in the above section, no doubt existed in pre-colonial Khasi society. But ever since the hills came under the British rule, there has been a gradual change in the land relations. Some of these changes in land relations were taken note of in the Report of the Land Reforms Commission for the Khasi Hills, 1975 which contended that the traditional tribal land relations are almost intact. The study conducted by M.K. Sukumaran Nair in mid-eighties more or less agreed with this report. After this there has been no major empirical study on land relations in Meghalaya. Because of the opposition from the traditional elite, no cadastral survey could take place in the Khasi Hills. Hence it is difficult to understand the changes that have taken place in the land relations during the last two decades. The pilot study on land relations in Khasi Hills initiated recently as a

part of the Special Assistance Programme (SAP) in the Department of Political Science, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, has revealed that much of the earlier assumptions about the land relations in Khasi Hills are now redundant. Contrary to the general assumptions that there is uniform pattern of land relations among Khasis, one can see differences in land relations across clans, villages and districts. In many of the surveyed villages in West Khasi Hills and Ribhoi districts, Ri Raid lands and clan lands are almost privatized. The Meghalaya Land Transfer Act no doubt restrained the purchase of tribal lands by non-tribals. But as there are no restraints on the purchase and sale of land among the indigenous tribes, one can see people buying lands in different villages. As a result, many villages in the Khasi Hills have ceased to be single clan villages. As there are no restrictions on how much land one could acquire, in some villages we come across big landowners owning hundreds of acres of land. Although most small peasants cultivate lands and produce food crops mainly for self-consumption, we also come across villages where the better off peasants going for horticulture, plantations and commercial crops. The growth of population and decline of common lands is forcing the poor peasants and jhumias to become tenants. Where tenancy is not found economical, one can see landless peasants opting to work as casual labourers in agriculture and mines. For understanding how these non-tribal practices could make way in the Khasi Hills, it is necessary to understand new indigenous social forces that decades of colonial and post-colonial rule have given birth to.

Emergence of New Social Forces

Colonial rule initiated a decisive change in the traditional social structure of the Khasi community. Although the British avoided direct interference in the day-to-day affairs of the hill communities, certain interventions such as building of the city of Shillong as an urban centre and making it the capital of the province of Assam, migration of non-tribal communities to the city of Shillong to assist colonial economy and administration, colonial patronization of Christian missionaries and their educational institutions in the Khasi Hills facilitated the growth of educated indigenous elite in the Khasi Hills. (Chaube, 1999; Bareh, 1997; Lyngdoh, 1996). They found jobs in government offices, educational institutions,

Christian missionary establishments and in service and retail trade sectors. These sections showed that it is possible to eke out a comfortable living outside the villages. This led many indigenous tribal people to flock to the urban centres in search of greener pastures.

The process of change was activated further after India became politically independent and the Khasi Hills became a Sixth Schedule area. The formation of Autonomous District Council (ADCs) and the participation of Khasi people in general elections brought in a new indigenous social category called professional politicians, unknown to traditional Khasi society. Unlike traditional tribal Khasi chiefs, the indigenous politicians are well conversant with theory and practice of constitutional politics and modern administration. Being educated, the indigenous political elite could influence, mobilize and lead other sections of the Khasi society in pursuit of the demand for a hill state. Formation of the state of Meghalaya strengthened the Khasi politicians giving them direct access to power and pelf.

Many scholars working on the hill states underscored the rise of a strong middle class, which was an off-shoot of the growth of higher education and the policy of reservations in government jobs (Datta-Ray, 1983). It is held that this educated middle class is the most powerful force in the politics of Meghalaya. But the fact is that apart from the middle class, the post-colonial developments facilitated the birth of proto-bourgeois class having stakes in politics, administration, inter-state trade, transport business, mining and other commercial activities. This heterogeneous 'class' loves luxurious bourgeois life-style and aspires for palatial houses, trendy cars, modern gadgets and foreign tours. But they fall short of the skills and abilities of the bourgeois class. Unlike the industrial bourgeoisie who invest capital in production process and directly supervise production process by employing wage labourers, the proto-bourgeoisie are primarily rent seeking leisure class, which seeks to amass wealth through manipulation of administration or by employing middle-men - local or non-local. Ethnically they may still be tribal in their outlook, but economically they have moved far away from traditional tribal economies. It is in the background of the emergence of these social forces that we need to examine the changes taking place in land relations in the countryside.

Changing Land Relations

Traditional landownership in Khasi Hills started changing during colonial rule, when some of the clans started selling or leasing clan lands to the British and its subjects. The city of Shillong was built by the British by purchasing land from local Khasi clans. Even then some clan members who understood the significance of money started leasing lands for commercial and residential purposes to the non-tribal people who came to reside in Shillong city (Syiemlieh, 1989; Giri, 1990). It was during the British rule itself that land could be used for purposes other than agriculture. As a result of urbanization, land value in and around Shillong city increased by leaps and bounds and made certain clans and households very rich.

The Shillong urbanization experience had its impact in interior villages as well. The emerging proto-bourgeois class entrenched in state politics, administration, mining, contracts, real estate, inter-state trade business and commercial agriculture, began to show interest in buying lands in villages far away from urban centres. Enterprising clan members in different villages, either with or without the consent or knowledge of the clan members / villagers began to facilitate the transfer of large chunks of communal / clan lands to the rich indigenous elite, interested in using the land for different commercial purposes. In some villages, the community received some material benefits in the form of royalty, employment or compensation. But in most cases the transfer of communal / clan lands was done by a handful of indigenous elite in the villages, taking advantage of people's illiteracy and ignorance. In all such cases, only some indigenous elite developed at the cost of other villagers.

In her study, Tiplut Nongbri (2003) shows how the state government policies also have contributed to the alienation of tribal lands. After the formation of Meghalaya, the state government modified the status and functions of ADCs and introduced certain policy changes which enabled the state government to acquire lands in the name of development and general welfare. The government invoked its special powers to force some village communities to part with their lands for hydro-electric projects, factories, government buildings etc., giving them token compensation. This apart, the government's bias against shifting

cultivation and its support to settled cultivation has also led to changes in landholding pattern among the Khasis. Earlier, most cultivators relied on shifting cultivation for their livelihood. In steep hilly areas where communication is inadequate and sufficient land for terracing is not available, shifting cultivation was the only alternative. Jhum was indispensable in tribal areas owing to the limits of the technology-absorption capacity of the local communities. As long as population is within limits and land is in abundance, shifting cultivation does not cause much of a problem. But when the number of dependents increase and the jhum cycle is reduced, there is threat to environment. Taking the pretext of stalling such danger, the governments in northeastern states have been discouraging shifting cultivation and encouraging the tribals to go in for settled cultivation (Dutta, 1992). In the name of development and increased productivity, the hill communities are asked to go for terrace cultivation and use HYV seeds and chemical fertilizers. Instead of traditional food crops, the villagers are encouraged to opt for commercial crops and horticulture. But such options are possible only for those cultivators who can invest in labour and capital. When those who could make such improvements, the *Ri Raid* became *Ri Kynti* lands, with inheritable and transferable rights. Such changes in landholding pattern no doubt benefit relatively well-off people, but they adversely affect the households with limited means. Several jhum cultivators, who cannot afford to invest in land improvement, end up losing control over the lands that they were traditionally cultivating (Dutta, 1992; Datta Ray, 1997).

Impact of Changing Land Relations

It is clear from the above that factors like urbanization, emergence of a proto-bourgeois class, manipulation of clan leaders and governmental policies have been bringing about changes in traditional landholding pattern of the Khasi tribes. There is a gradual conversion of communal / clan lands into private lands with heritable and transferable rights. There has been concentration of cultivable lands in the hands of a small section of indigenous elite. One can see extreme differences in land ownership in villages, with many owning a couple of acres of lands, and a few holding in some villages as much as one hundred acres of land. As

communal and clan lands started declining, the jhum cultivators are becoming tenants or landless labourers. Big landowners are lending their lands for tenancy. Some landowners who have shifted their residence to urban areas are also lending their lands to aspiring tenants. Although technologies that they use are still primitive, in some villages, one can also see enterprising farmers cultivating their lands and producing commercial crops with the help of hired labourers. Although most households indulge in cultivation for self-consumption, some have started producing marketable surplus for sale and profit.

Earlier, when the customary rights were intact, the land markets were weak. But of late, one can see purchase and sale of lands. Although the Meghalaya Land Transfer Act prevents outright sale of tribal lands to non-tribals, there is nothing which prevents the rich indigenous elite from purchasing lands from other tribal cultivators. Because of land transactions, homogenous clan villages are becoming extinct in Khasi hills. There is nothing that stops a villager from buying lands from other villages. Some enterprising clans from Shillong have in fact bought lands in West Khasi Hills and Ribhoi districts. Hence most villages are multi-clan villages. Exclusive rights of the founding clans are visible only in some villages. Earlier, the sale and purchase of lands were negotiated between the parties and the village dorbars were giving them sale deeds for a nominal fee. But of late, the people started registering their sale deeds in the district councils, so that they can have the advantage of seeking bank loans or sell lands to the government for commercial purposes.

Since there are no tenancy laws in the state, most tenants are to part with about 50 percent of their produce, even in cases where the landowners do not invest in cultivation in any form. Earlier, shifting cultivation was undertaken in Ri Raid lands. As common lands started disappearing, one could see landless peasants seeking lands from big landowners and practising shifting cultivation in private lands. Some landless labourers, small tenants and marginal farmers, who have very little lands, make their living by working as wage labourers in other's lands. Factors like limited scope for other reliable sources of income, weakening of traditional support systems in the villages and failure of the government to rehabilitate the landless jhumias, force them to seek

employment in mines and factories and even migrated to urban areas to work as casual labourers (Ganguly, 1997). They are forced to enter into occupations with which they are not familiar and compete with non-indigenous workers.

Another significant outcome of the changing land relations is further weakening of matriliny. In traditional Khasi society, despite all limitations, women did have some control over property, including land. Taking formal consent of women in charge of property, some enterprising men facilitated the sale of clan / joint property. Further, privatization of communal lands and commercialization of agriculture intensified competition among men for possession of land. Because of all these developments, women lost control over land, although they continue to possess house, cattle and other forms of ancestral property. As land is denied to them, the poor women from the villages are forced to enter into other forms of vocations such as petty trade, domestic help etc. Women from relatively well-off rural families and those women married to men in urban professions are leaving productive work and living like ordinary housewives in a patriarchal system. Either way the Khasi women in the villages are losing comparative advantages that they enjoyed in traditional matrilineal society (Nongbri, 2008).

Conclusion

What has been presented so far is based partly on the ongoing village surveys undertaken as part of SAP project of Political Science department of NEHU and partly based on the writings of some academicians and journalists. A comprehensive picture of the changing landholding pattern and its effects on the tribal society is difficult at the moment, because of the absence of cadastral survey. At one time, the government's efforts to undertake land survey were thwarted because of the fear that the government might interfere with the customary practices of the Khasi tribes. But at present, the situation is such that the changes taking place in landholding pattern are going against the very customary practices that the Khasis have tried to protect. The constitutional provisions and the institutional mechanisms created to protect and preserve tribal control over land and other resources could check the non-tribals from exploiting the indigenous tribes. But they failed to prevent or arrest the growing

class differentiation within the tribal communities. The changes in agrarian structure have given birth to classes with conflicting interests. As scholars like Dutta and Nongbri pointed out, the transition from jhuming to settled cultivation and privatization of the community lands have contributed to increase in economic inequalities, landlessness, reverse tenancy, indebtedness, insecurity, and hunger. The experience of the Khasi villages seems to suggest that tribal economies undergo changes even in the absence of direct interference and influence of the non-tribal communities. Since these tribal societies operate within the framework of market economy, the changes observed seem inevitable. There is a danger that the gradual disintegration of tribal economies, if not accompanied by creation of viable alternatives for the marginal farmers, landless labourers and small tenants, would plunge the state into conflicts of different kinds, not familiar to the tribal milieu. Unfortunately the existing political and administrative framework does not seem to have the capacity to direct the development processes in a way beneficial to all sections of the Khasi society.

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