

CASTE AND AGRARIAN STRUCTURE : A STUDY IN HILL DARJEELING AND SIKKIM

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The agrarian aspect of the caste structure was, until recently, rather the neglected field of sociological investigation in India. It was in the writings of Mukherjee (1957), Kumar (1965), Beteille (1969), Berreman (1972), Thorner (1976), etc. that the first appreciation of this vital aspect of Indian rural society is reflected.

The caste and agrarian relationship is expected to differ from one place to another, from one social/cultural condition to another. It is this belief quite early sparked by Lundberg in his *Foundations of sociology* (1939) that makes the point here for discussing the hill region.

It may not be worthwhile here to go into the various definitions of caste as such a task would take a lot of space unnecessarily. Suffice to mention here the way it has been understood : as a hereditary, endogamous, localised groups whose relationships are based on their respective positions in the ritual hierarchy. The agrarian structure is also understood here to mean the relationship among the landlords, owner-cultivators, tenants, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers (Beteille 1974 : 32).

The present study, however, slightly deviates from Beteille or the track he followed regarding the classification of the agrarian society. This is but quite spontaneous in the sense that the three-tier agrarian classification of Beteille (1974) or Thorner (1976) did not seem very meaningful in the context of the region under study. The main reason for this is that in the high altitude villages the middle class of Beteille or Thorner is either insignificant

or non-existent while the same class is bulky in the lower altitudes. Moreover, the economy of the hills characterised by large tracts of unirrigated lands, very small size of landholding, single cropping, large uncultivable lands and forests, etc. make it difficult for the agricultural labourers to exist as a separate category altogether. It is for these reasons that the simple classification of the agrarian society into *pattadars* or landowners and *pakhureys* or landless seems sociologically more viable.

This simple classification can be supported on some more grounds. There is no local term to represent 'agricultural labourer': the word *khetala* means any person working in the field of another person. But he may be a landowner or a landless, a casual helper or a regular worker. Thus the word *khetala* does not refer to a class but a functional category. Similarly, the word 'sharecropper' does not have any complementary term in the local language though currently the word *bargadar* is being popularised. If a sharecropper is a landowner he is locally called an *adhiawal* and a *pakhurey* if he is landless. A *pakhurey* does, however, also mean those landless who do no sharecropping at all. Sociologically also, the sense of class identification is found more along this simple classification than along the three-tier classification.

The caste structure

The study of the caste structure in four villages—Tanek, Purbong and Rangbull in Darjeeling and Takuthang-Chuchen in Sikkim have shown that the caste ranking is primarily based on the ritual criteria. Until suggested, the economic or secular criteria did not come forth. It has been found that Nepal had only some tribal groups and the caste system among them was introduced by the Indian emigrants during the Muslim invasion in India (14th century). Some of the tribes to be first converted were the Khas or Chhetris, the Gurungs and the Mangars (Northey and Morris 1974).

An interesting part of the Nepalese caste history is that it was legalised during the 14th century by King Jayasthiti Malla. A major reshuffling in the same took place after King Prithivinarayan Shah consolidated the whole of Nepal (1769). The

Newari caste structure which was running parallel to the Gurkhas' was engulfed into the latter rather forcefully (Nepali 1965 : 147-148).

The Nepalese caste structure underwent many changes after it was brought to this region by the immigrants. Though the local social system was perhaps not very inhibitive to their caste structures the migration and the very presence of the non-Hindu people like the Lepchas and the Bhutias in the region had an impact upon their caste structure.

The caste structure, as it exists in the region today, has broadly three classes—high, middle and low. The high caste group consists of Bahuns, Thakuris and Chhetris; the middle caste group comprises of Newars, Rais, Limbus, Yakhas, Tamangs, Mangars, Gurungs, Sherpas, Jogi, Sunwars, etc.; and the low castes include Kamis, Sarkis and Damais. The structural distance at the caste group or caste level is more detailed and strictly maintained in Nepal (see Furer Haimendorf 1966, Rosser 1966, Caplan 1970) than in the region under study. Each of these caste groups has an internal hierarchy in Nepal but in Darjeeling or Sikkim the intra-caste group hierarchy can be seen among the high and the low castes only—the middle castes have no such internal hierarchy in the ritual sense though a few claim a higher status.

Another relevant point to be noted here is the presence of a large number of other communities like Lepchas, Bhutias, Mainyas (Marwaris), Biharis, and Dukpas. In Nepal, except in the *terai* region, the intrusion of the non-Nepalis into the rural Nepalese settlements is still very limited. Such a social composition may also have had important implications on the rigidity or flexibility of caste relations.

One feature quite common to both Nepal and the region under study is the presence of the non-Hindus in the society. Among the non-Hindus, the Buddhists (Buddhamargi Newars, Tamangs and Sherpas) have been well assimilated into the caste system since long but the fact that they are not very particular

about the ritual paraphernalias of Hindus explains the relatively fluid caste relations in areas where they are numerically dominant. Thus in Rangbull where the non-Hindu population is quite high (47.38%) the caste structure is quite lax though there are other reasons also simultaneously contributing to the flexibility of the caste relations in the village, e. g., higher level of urbanization.

Migration, one of the most distinctive features of the Napalese society in this region, also has played an important role in this matter. The recent migrants are called *sukumbasi* and enjoy a lower social status than the earlier settlers called *raithaney*.

Regarding commensal relations among the various castes in the region, a wide variation was noticed from village to village in the degree of deviation from the standard rules which were but same in all the villages. Moreover, the relatively less advanced, remote and low altitude villages had a stronger adherence to the formal commensal and marital rules. But of these two, the marital rules were found to be more carefully safeguarded by the society than the commensal ones. A breach of marital rule is followed by a system of punishment called *jat danda* (*jat* meaning caste and *danda* punishment) but no such formal punishment is meted out to one who breaches a commensal rule. This is probably due to the reason that a breach of commensal rule may often pass unnoticed but a breach of marital rule does not skip the eyes of the villagers. These rules, however, vary according to the ritual distance between two castes.

The agrarian class structure

The study of the agrarian class structure in different villages shows significant variations as well as similarities. The low altitude village like Tanek (2000'-2700' a.s.l.) is found to have a greater number of sharecroppers than a relatively higher altitude village like Purbong (2700'-3400'). Rangbull, a still higher altitude village (6400-7100'), has no sharecroppers at all. The sharecropping is also partly linked with the average landholding size. But then the higher altitude villages are found to have a smaller landholding size than the lower altitude villages.

The greater popularity of sharecropping in the lower altitudes is found mainly due to a higher productivity of land. The net time taken for the crop to ripe also differs markedly even in an altitude difference of 1000'. Again the lower altitude villages usually have more of irrigated lands where the sharecropping is more prominent than in the non-irrigated lands. The reason for this, besides a higher productivity and greater sustenance power of such land, is the wider scope of being employed for the share cultivators or obtaining loans, etc.

Unfortunately, such lands are very limited even below 3000'. In Tanek, for example, only 34.96% of the land is irrigated. The net period of employment even on an irrigated land of adequate size is not more than 3 to 4 months a year. Thus the villagers automatically move out of agriculture in search of alternative employment. The inevitable result of this phenomenon is the negligence of agriculture. In the change process from primary to secondary or tertiary occupations, the agriculture has been marred instead of being revitalised.

The process of agricultural change in the wake of commercialization of economy and demographic pressure has made the conditions of the poor even worse. But a class consciousness does not seem to have developed among them as yet. There has been some social groupings on the basis of political affiliation or some common economic interest but not on the basis of class. The *Kishan Sabha* of Tanek and the Agricultural Labourers' Union in Rangbull are a few such cases.

The study of the agrarian class structure on the basis of various criteria like education, income, occupation, spatial mobility and styles of life show a difference (in statistical terms) in different villages. Such differences are, in general, sharper in the lower altitude and more backward villages than in the higher altitude and more advanced villages.

The class differences in various villages vary in respect of production, distribution and consumption also. The greater the occupational or economic diversification in a village less the

participation of the *maliks* in the production process and vice versa. The Takuthang-Chuchen, for instance, has a limited economic diversification and the participation of the *maliks* in the production process is also quite high.

The process of distribution is closely linked with the process of production. Less the participation of the lower class in the production process less the distribution of the same in their favour. The more urbanized and higher altitude villages have thus a very limited scope for a better distribution of agricultural produce. Like distribution, consumption is also closely linked with production. Less participation in the production means less distribution and also a less consumption given that there are no other potential sources of income which are usually absent in the rural and remote villages. Thus the relationships of production, distribution and consumption differ significantly from village to village due to different forces of production like land, altitude and labour.

Differences are, however, only one side of the coin; the similarities another. One of the most significant similarities is the larger percentage of landowners and more so of the small cultivators in all the villages studied. Similarly, the statistical data on education, occupation and income in general showed a higher position of the *pattadars* vis-a-vis the *pakhureys*. Migration has also been found to be a common factor in inflating the landless and changing the class relations. Some amount of similarity has also been noticed in respect of production, distribution and consumption but the basic rule of the game—the superordinate position of the *pattadars*—is the same everywhere.

Caste and agrarian class structure

The caste and agrarian class relationship is also not found uniform in all the villages studied. The class position of the low castes in Purbong, for example, is quite high compared to their position in Tanek and Takuthang. On the other hand, the high castes have a very low class status in Purbong but their class position in Takuthang and Rangbull is quite high.

In general, the caste-class relationship is less corresponding in the higher altitudes than in the lower altitudes. Thus in the lower altitude village like Tanek the caste-class relationship is stronger than in the higher altitude villages like Purbong and Rangbull. Such a relationship is, however, not equally supported by each and every criterion taken for the present study. In Tanek and Takuthang for example, the caste-class relationship on the basis of landholding and income is not balanced. Barring a few such examples, the general relationship follows a pattern stated above.

It may be added here that a theoretical analysis is definitely more meaningful at the caste-group level but the intra-caste group and intra-caste level class differences cannot be ignored either. The present study finds considerable amount of class differences within a caste group or even a caste, for that matter.

If the structural distance within the caste and the agrarian class structures is compared, the distance is more within the caste structure than in the class structure though the agrarian classification has been simple enough. In a caste structure, the economic differences do not always correspond but all are aware of their ritual differences. Moreover, the ideology of work among the Nepalis is noteworthy : all the castes can and do follow almost every type of occupation though there are differences in their traditional occupations. On the other hand, the class differences are not often perceived due to caste, kinship and marital or friendship relationships. Moreover the class consciousness itself has not developed to the extent that the members of each class are clearly identifiable by the members or the same of another.

Comparison and conclusion

It may be desirable here to compare the findings on the caste and agrarian class relationship in different villages of Darjeeling and Sikkim with some of the findings elsewhere. Bailey (1972 : 266-75) in Bisipara, Orissa, finds a good deal of correspondence between the ritual and economic hierarchies before but such an association was found to have gradually changed due to widening

economic horizon though the caste itself was found left unimpaired. In the context of the region under study whether the ritual and economic hierarchies corresponded earlier does not arise as most of the area was covered with forests till the arrival of the British and the Nepalis. Thus those who came earlier could occupy bigger and better lands irrespective of their caste background and those who came later had to be satisfied with small and less fertile lands or no land at all.

The present study does not either fully incorporate the findings of Berreman (1972) in Sirkanda, a village in northern Himachal Pradesh. There he (*Ibid* : 40) finds a positive relationship between caste and land and the low castes were legally forbidden to hold any land. In Darjeeling and Sikkim, on the other hand, no such legal bar against the low castes to hold the land is reported nor the high castes are always found to have appropriated the land.

The study conforms to the observation of Beck (1972) in Olappalayam, south India, in respect of caste ranking but not in respect of internal differentiation. His observation (*Ibid* : 182) that the Brahmans and the ritually ranked groups show less of internal differentiation than the agricultural castes due to uniform traditional payment does not tally with the situation in question for two reasons : one, the traditional ritual payment is virtually absent and secondly, the middle castes have a horizontal status and those who have a vertical differentiation are the high and the low castes, while economic differentiation is distributed.

The findings of Breman (1979 : 6-7) that agriculture was open to all castes led to a dependence of lower castes on the upper castes resulting into a permanent bondage of the former to the latter also does not seem to be correct of the region under study. Nor does this study fully corroborate the findings of Djurfeldt (1976) in Thaiyur, Tamilnadu, where he finds (*Ibid* : 211) a definite relationship between the caste position and the means of production. It does not either fit with the findings of Epstein (1962) at Wangala and Dalena in south India. The absence of proper caste-class relationship in this region is not entirely due to the

widening economic relations as found by Epstein there but also due to its agrarian history—those who came earlier got the lands irrespective of their caste background.

Finally, reference may be drawn of Mencher's study (1978 : 136) at Chingleput District, Tamilnadu, where she finds the land dominance with the high castes and the numerical dominance with the low castes. But the present study often found the land dominance with other castes or communities like the Lepchas (Tanek and Purbong) and the Bhutias (Takuthang-Chuchen) and at times the Nepalese middle castes (Rangbull) and the numerical dominance with the middle castes in almost every village.

Therefore, the caste-class associationship in the region has as complex and varied structure as it can be. Even the general features of this region do not seem to correspond fully with the situations in other parts of India or even Nepal. While in most places the caste-class relationship is found positive it is not uniformly found so in this region. The main reasons for a lack of correspondence between the findings of the present study and of those conducted elsewhere are perhaps historical and ecological, which have been discussed in the paper already.

In the absence of class consciousness due to various factors discussed above the change aspect in this region cannot possibly be explained with the Marxian theory of change. This, however, does not mean that there is no exploitation of the *pakhureys* or 'those who do not own the means of production' by the *maliks* or 'those who own the means of production'. The degree and pattern of exploitation may differ but it is there. But surprisingly, the class polarization has not been able to take place. This is partly also due to a larger number of small cultivators many of whom are economically in the class of the *pakhureys* but socially among the *pattadars*. The Marxian concept of the forces of production determining the relations of production is, moreover, the only theoretical framework which explains the variation in the caste and agrarian class structure in different villages having different ecological and social conditions.

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