

TRIBAL STUDIES OF INDIA SERIES T 122

**TRIBAL  
ECONOMY  
IN  
TRANSITION**

**M. K. SUKUMARAN NAIR**

The tribal mode of production survives in present day African society and still dominates in Meghalaya. However, its specific and transitional problems in the context of India have not received adequate attention from scholars of economics.

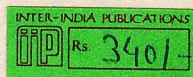
In the present book, Dr. M.K. Sukumaran Nair presents his data based analysis of the structure of the tribal economy of Meghalaya and the process of its transformation. The author has discussed with scholarly thoroughness the various facets of the socio-economic formations in Meghalaya and has provided deep insight into its land tenure system; type of cultivation prevalent in the State; the impact of a fairly high degree of commercialisation of agriculture on the economic structure; aspects of production, consumption and surplus across holdings of varying sizes and the relative efficiency and socio-economic characteristics of shifting and settled agriculture and also identified the key determining factors in the process of agrarian transition. In nutshell, the agrarian structure displays a high degree of stability and the peasant differentiation have not developed to any significant extent in the State. Finally, the author concludes that to preserve the traditional property relations against the onslaught of capitalism in times to come, it would be more in tune with the conditions of the tribal economy of Meghalaya to organise production along co-operative lines, where the Government itself becomes the active partner in it.

This book would arouse interest in scholars and researchers of agriculture, science, anthropology, sociology, economics and those employed in rural development and tribal welfare.

Dr. M.K. Sukumaran Nair (b.1948) is M.A. Economics from the University of Kerala and Ph.D. from North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. During 1971-75, he worked as Research Associate at Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum and in 1976 as Research Associate, Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, New Delhi and during 1976 to 84, as Lecturer, Department of Economics, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. An economist by training, he acquainted himself with social anthropology.

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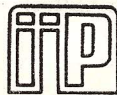
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# TRIBAL ECONOMY IN TRANSITION

(A Study of Meghalaya)

M.K. SUKUMARAN NAIR

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# Preface

THIS study forms a substantial part of the Ph.D. work of the author submitted to the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong in 1983. It addresses itself to an analysis of the structure of the tribal economy of Meghalaya and the process of its transformation. Tribal social formations still survive in present day African society and also some parts of the world including India. Such formations characterised by communal land control, predominance of 'slash and burn' and hoe technology involving a rotation of land and kinship originated production relations, dominate agriculture in the hill areas of north-east India. Although some theoretical advance has already been made outside India on the basis of the African experience, the specific and transitional problems of tribal economies in the context of India have yet to receive adequate attention. The present study is a modest effort in that direction, taking the Meghalaya economy as a case in point.

The study is largely based on primary data generated through a sample survey in the study area. The data were collected during the course of the survey of an ICSSR Research Project of which the author was a co-investigator. It is only appropriate that I make use of this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to the ICSSR for this indirect help.

From the very beginning of the idea of this study, I have been continuously accumulating debts to the many people who have helped me with advice, encouragement, suggestions and criticism. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my research supervisors T. Mathew and N. Krishnaji for their unstinted guidance, support and persistence without which it is unlikely that this study would ever have been completed. They have considerably influenced my thinking on various aspects of the problem.

For gifts of friendly criticism and personal encouragement I owe much to Asit Banerjee. I have benefited from many discussions with Nirmal Chandra on the subject-matter in Chapters 2 and 5 and Nilkant Rath on Chapters 2 and 6. I am profoundly grateful to S.N. and Misra and Amalendu Guha who read an earlier draft and offered many useful suggestions. My debts to Mercy Vijaya John, S. Radhakrishnan and G. Raveendran Nair are of a considerable order.

My thanks are due to S.N. Guhathakurta who as the Head of the Department of Economics, NEHU, Shillong provided me with facilities at the stage of writing up the first draft of the manuscript. I also thank Godfrey Pathaw who prepared several versions of the type script with patience and precision. I am solely responsible for the too many shortcomings that still remain.

Cochin-22  
August, 1986

M.K. SUKUMARAN NAIR

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## Introduction

LITERATURE on agrarian relations in tribal societies is rather scanty. There have been attempts, however, in recent years, by anthropologists<sup>1</sup> to understand the relations of production in such societies. But, the analysis of the 'economic base' necessary for unfolding the nature of the process of production, merely serves as a background to the discussion of the superstructure in these studies.<sup>2</sup> And in their attempts to come to grips with the complexities of the superstructure, the anthropologists have often overlooked the immense potentialities of the economic data for the purpose of studying production relations.

In a broad sense, tribal economies may be described as 'primitive agricultural communities' mainly practising shifting cultivation or engaged in hunting/food-gathering activities. Population is generally sparse and production close to subsistence levels. The corresponding socio-political structures are sometimes treated as being 'segmented'. However, our knowledge of tribal economies encompassing these features is too inadequate for us to develop any determinate theoretical structure. Nevertheless, there is a need to study these subsistence level economies with a view, above all, to understanding their dynamics. A study of this nature may help us, among other things, to assess the prospects of an increase in productivity and output to meet the growing needs of the people.

Most of the studies on Meghalaya agriculture have been mainly, if not exclusively, concerned with the ecological aspects of shifting cultivation.<sup>3</sup> Besides, these studies do not seem to have been successful in developing meaningful concepts and

analytical categories useful for an understanding of the 'rules' and the 'laws' governing the functioning of the agrarian structure.

There are economic as well as non-economic factors which contribute to the 'conservation' and 'dissolution' of tribal economies. Customs, traditions, religion, beliefs, etc. are some of the non-economic aspects influencing the evolution of tribal formations. Any attempt to study tribal economies in general and that of Meghalaya in particular needs to take all these factors into consideration. Further, the present day 'tribal' societies are much more complex than those which existed in earlier times, as they are co-existing and interacting with 'superior' socio-economic systems. Therefore, among the many facets of a contemporary 'tribal economy', the following deserve special attention:

1. an analysis of the internal structure of the specific economy;
2. the nature and extent of its interaction with exogenous factors; and
3. its internal dynamic which is, to a good measure, determined by both the aforesaid factors.

In analysing the above aspects of a 'tribal economy', and further in broadly developing an analytical structure of tribal agriculture in general, the formulations left behind by Marx and Engels may be taken as a good starting point.

Drawing on Marx's discussion, we may describe a tribal economy as mainly an agricultural/food-gathering one based on communal ownership of the means of production and communal appropriation of the surplus. In such a formation, "... individuals behave not as labourers, but as owners and members of a community who also labour. . . . Its purpose is the maintenance of the owner and his family as well as the communal body as a whole."<sup>4</sup> The first form of ownership, according to Marx, is tribal ownership. Agriculture constitutes the highest stage in this underdeveloped condition of production.<sup>5</sup> At this stage, a rudimentary division of labour develops through co-operation.<sup>6</sup> When population increases, reproduction of the tribal band becomes increasingly difficult within a given territory. As

### Introduction

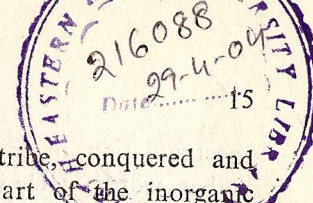
a consequence, tribal wars break out. A tribe, conquered and subjugated, becomes propertyless and part of the inorganic conditions of the conquering tribe's reproduction. The historic routes out of the communal system were the Asiatic, the Ancient and the Germanic forms of production which also Marx "sometimes calls the tribal mode of production."<sup>8</sup> In all these forms, "besides communal ownership, we . . . find . . . private property developing, but as an abnormal form subordinate to communal ownership."<sup>9</sup> Even though the forms of communal property that existed in various parts of the world differed, in all such forms the relationship of the direct producer to land was one of ownership.<sup>10</sup>

Marx's analysis of a 'tribal society' leaves many aspects of it unexplained.<sup>11</sup> He did not abstract the laws and tendencies of the tribal or primitive mode of production.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Marx's method and the analytical categories he developed can be of great use in understanding the laws of motion of a 'tribal economy'.

As the present study addresses itself to an analysis of the agrarian structure in Meghalaya and the dynamic forces within it, an understanding of the mechanism of transition from one mode of production to another is considered useful.<sup>13</sup> Tribal warfare has been identified as one of the chief factors that led to the formation of class societies.<sup>14</sup> Historically, the causes of tribal warfare can be traced to population increases and the consequent growth of the tendency to colonise. This, in fact, is considered the basis of the transition to class societies.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, tribal warfare cannot be regarded as the root cause of transition with regard to all tribal societies. In the case of contemporary tribal societies which exist within the well-defined territories of modern States, it is unlikely that an increase in population will lead to wars of conquests. On the contrary, if (for whatever reason) productivity<sup>16</sup> increases, reproduction of the society can take place without such wars.<sup>17</sup>

There is historical evidence to show that the transition from a nomadic to a settled way of life was made possible by increases in productivity of labour.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, under certain historical circumstances, a settled way of life, in turn, facilitated further increases in productivity.<sup>19</sup>

An increase in productivity may come through the slow



accumulation of inventions, discoveries and knowledge.<sup>20</sup> In other words, technical change is an essential pre-condition for increases in productivity. An increase in population density, under certain conditions, brings about technical changes and further increases in productivity.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the production of foodgrains goes up. Thus, an increased supply of foodgrains may lead to a further population growth in a given territory.<sup>22</sup> Changes in population density, thus, act as the cause as well as the consequence of productivity increases.

Changes in techniques of production and labour productivity bring about social division of labour and economic transition. An increase in labour productivity also increases the social surplus available in an economy. It must be emphasised that the size of the surplus and the consequent accumulation determine the nature of division of labour in a given society. The emergence and the size of the social surplus, along with the nature and pattern of its utilisation, determine the direction of economic and social change.

The role of population was only touched upon in the preceding discussion of the transition process. In agricultural/foodgathering tribal communities where the man-land ratio is considerably low, it is population growth which exercises a decisive influence on agrarian transition. Engels observes that "the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life. But this itself is of two-fold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence, . . . , on the other, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species".<sup>23</sup> Reproduction in a society with a growing population necessitates increasing material production to provide for the subsistence of the growing population.<sup>24</sup> From this it follows that the reproduction of the economy is crucially linked to the reproduction of the labour power. Such evidence as we possess strongly indicates that population density has played an important role in the transformations of pre-capitalist societies.<sup>25</sup> As we show subsequently, we would be justified in attributing decisive weight to this factor in the agrarian transition of Meghalaya.

Ester Boserup in her extensive work in the area of population growth and economic development argues that "under pressure of increasing population, there has been a shift in

recent decades from more extensive to more intensive systems of land-use in virtually every part of the underdeveloped regions."<sup>26</sup> In analysing the economic implications of increases in population density, she postulates a historical sequence of land utilization wherein early long fallow techniques are necessarily replaced by short fallow (both being forms of shifting cultivation practised in tribal societies in various parts of the world including Meghalaya even now); and where short fallow-techniques are replaced by annual and multiple cropping. Schultz has paraphrased Boserup's thesis on population and economic development in the following passage: "(1) the supply of productive services in land yielding agricultural produce is highly elastic historically in response to population pressure; (2) the gradual adaptation to harder and more regular work in agriculture made necessary by population pressure 'raises the efficiency of labour in both agricultural and non-agricultural activities'; (3) 'increasing density of population opens up opportunities for a more intricate division of labour'; (4) it also spreads 'communications and education'; (5) developments (2) through (4) are essential pre-conditions for a rise in the productivity of labour in agriculture; and (6) 'primitive communities with sustained population growth have a better chance to get into a process of genuine economic development than primitive communities with stagnant or declining population'."<sup>27</sup> The medieval origin of the common fields and the enclosure movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were essentially the consequences of the pressure created by population growth.<sup>28</sup> Certain economic historians have attempted to incorporate population as an important element in their theoretical structure. Parker, for instance, goes to the extent of describing population growth as a 'given' in agrarian history and the consequent adjustments in field systems, demand patterns, techniques of production, etc. as 'partial equilibrium analysis'.<sup>29</sup>

Against this background of the role of population increases in social change, if we take a look at the socio-economic formation in Meghalaya, we find here too, a determinant role being played by population as an agent of change. Concerning other parts of India, we know how, in the context of colonial market penetration and monetization, population increases

destroyed the traditional peasant economy and its associated set of communal and family structures, rights and practices.<sup>30</sup> However, in Meghalaya, in spite of the introduction of markets and increasing monetization, no fundamental change has occurred in its socio-economic structure. The rural economy is still largely characterised by the predominance of communal ownership of the relatively plentiful supply of land. But, one may notice a gradual, though not a very significant, emergence of private property in land. It seems to us that, on general grounds, we should expect this to be the major long term dynamic in the economy. Here, the problem is to work out a proper connection between these opposing forces, *viz.*, communal ownership of land and its private appropriation. It could be seen that the link between these forces is provided through the mediation of the population factor. Increasing population pressure alters the land-man ratio. Then the relative scarcity of land brings about changes in village practices, *viz.*, a transition from shifting to settled agriculture. This shift has become even more apparent in recent years. Nevertheless, such shifts need not produce any spectacular transformation of the agrarian scene. But it has important consequences. In so far as it may strengthen the property element in the social structure, it works as a lever of change. In course of time, increasing population pressure, through such changes, may completely destroy the collective element in the social formation; this may create conditions for the growth of a land market and peasant differentiation. We cannot therefore, ignore the importance of the population question in understanding the dynamics of the economy of Meghalaya.

However, population is not the only factor that can bring about changes in this kind of an economy. It is a historical fact that the economy of Meghalaya which was partially integrated with that of the rest of India during the British days<sup>31</sup> became more pronouncedly so after independence. Given this datum, one can consider, theoretically at least, a range of other possibilities of transformation of the economy. As we shall see later, the colonial market penetration exerted enormous influence on the cropping pattern in Meghalaya; this led to a fairly high degree of commercialization in agriculture. This, one might say, could have brought about radical changes in the

economic structure. When money becomes a universally acceptable medium of exchange, it is natural that producers think in terms of accumulating wealth in the form of money. Such accumulations might lead to capitalist development in agriculture, growth of towns and even, probably, industrialisation. Even the observed technical changes (behind the transition from shifting to settled agriculture in Meghalaya) which we wholly ascribe to population growth, could take place on a totally different basis: they could be the outcome of commercialisation and monetisation. It may even be the case that these give rise to a significant growth of exchange relations through which changes in production relations may come about.

The logic behind this argument concerning the impact of such exogenous factors may be properly assessed only in the light of developments internal to the economy. The available evidence strongly suggests that there are powerful endogenous forces at work in Meghalaya that prevent the type of changes described above. As may be seen, apart from land abundance and its communal ownership and the prevalence of unilineal inheritance practices, the barring of non-tribals in the land market (a policy followed by the British and Indian Governments alike) is also a significant factor in preserving the tribal nature of the economy. A reservation system of this type, it may be argued, need not stifle the growth of a land market for a long time to come. However, it might play a crucial role till the land-man ratio becomes less favourable. Once such a situation arises, given the limiting factor mentioned above, the immediate consequence one can perceive is a transition from shifting to settled agriculture. When this transition is more or less completed, other tendencies might crop up as well, *viz.*, the emergence of a land-lease market to begin with, and subsequently land alienation, growth of agricultural labourers as a dispossessed class, peasant differentiation, etc. Keeping these factors in mind, one might legitimately conclude that the empirical reality of Meghalaya sufficiently underlines the significance of population growth more than anything else in interpreting the long-term tendencies of the economy.

It is with these considerations as highly relevant to our analysis that we approach our study of the socio-economic formation in Meghalaya. The study is arranged as follows.

Chapter 2 surveys the historical evolution of the land tenure system. It is seen that the colonial rule over Meghalaya for nearly a century and the introduction of a commodity market from outside did not produce any profound change on the agrarian social structure. Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the survey conducted in 60 villages of Meghalaya covering 487 households in all, for the purposes of the study.

In Chapter 4, we discuss the type of cultivation prevalent in the State, the relative inter-temporal stability in the size distribution of land holdings and the implications of the limited development of a land-lease market for peasant differentiation. Chapter 5 attempts to evaluate the impact of a fairly high degree of commercialization of agriculture on the economic structure. Chapter 6 goes into some details about the precise nature of the 'hired labour' employed in agriculture. It also traces the factors primarily responsible for the gradual decline of exchange labour and the rise of 'hired labour'.

We have carried out an analysis of production, consumption and surplus across holdings of varying sizes in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 tries to provide a framework for understanding the dynamics of the process of agrarian transition in Meghalaya. The relative efficiency and socio-economic characteristics of shifting and settled agriculture are examined, and the key determining factor in the process is identified.

The final chapter gives a summary of the discussion and the major conclusions of the study. It also comes up with a number of questions concerning the salient features of the process of agrarian transition in Meghalaya.

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3. See, for instance, North-East India Council for Social Science Research, *Shifting Cultivation in North-East India*, Shillong, 1976 and

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