AGRARIAN RELATIONS AND TRANSITION IN MEGHALAYA

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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[1] 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.[2] 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

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[1] Maurice Godelier, Emmanuel Terray and Claude Meillassoux are the most well known amongst them.

[2] In fact, Godelier has argued that in tribal societies kinship is both infrastructure and superstructure. See Maurice Godelier, Perspectives in Marxist Anthropology, Cambridge University Press, London, 1977, p. 123.

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.[3] 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'

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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 B. Datta Ray (Ed), Agriculture in the Hills - A Case Study of Meghalaya, North East India Council for Social Science Research, Shillong, 1979.

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."[4] The first form of ownership, according to Marx, is tribal ownership. Agriculture constitutes the highest stage in this underdeveloped condition of production.[5] At this stage, a

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[4] Karl Marx: Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations, edited by E.J. Hobsbawm, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1964, p. 122.

[5] Ibid., p. 122.

a rudimentary division of labour develops through co-operation.[6] When population increases, reproduction of the tribal band becomes increasingly difficult within a given territory. As a consequence, tribal wars break out. A tribe, conquired and subjugated, becomes propertyless and part of the inorganic conditions of the conquering tribe's reproduction.[7] 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."[8] In all these forms, "besides communal ownership, we ... find ... private property developing, but as an abnormal form subordinate to communal ownership.[9]" Eventhough 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.[10]

Marx's analysis of a 'tribal society' leaves many aspects of it unexplained.[11] He did not abstract the laws and

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[6] See Emmanuel Terray, Marxism and Primitive Societies, Monthly Review Press, 1972. Terray discusses two forms of co-operation in the context of Guro Socio-economic formations.

[7] Karl Marx, op cit., p. 91.

[8] Maurice Godelier, "Processes of Formation, Diversity and Bases of the State", International Social Science Journal, Vol. XXXII, No. 4, 1980.

[9] Ibid., p. 123.

[10] Lawrence Krader, The Asiatic Mode of Production, Van Gorcum and Company, B.V. - Assen, The Netherlands, 1975, p. 128.

[11] Marx's approach to the study of pre-capitalist formations was

tendencies of the tribal or primitive mode of production.[12] 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.[13] Tribal warfare has been identified as one of the chief factors that led to the formation of class societies.[14] Historically,

centred around the demonstration of the historicity of capitalism. (See Claude Meillassoux, "From Reproduction to Production: A Marxist Approach to Economic Anthropology", in Harold Wolpe (Ed), The Articulation of Modes of Production, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 192). This is why, Marx and Engels started their analysis with capitalism and proceeded through other modes of production to primitive economic formations in the reverse sequence. (See, Norire Ter-Akopyan, "Preface" in Marx-Engels, Pre-Capitalist Socio-Economic Formations Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1979, p.19).

12 Marx's major concern was the unfolding of the laws of motion of the capitalist system; and so, presumably he did not think it necessary to give many clues as to the mechanics of transformation of the anterior social formations, especially those pre-dating feudalism. (Meillassoux, 1979, op cit., p. 193). However, an attempt in this direction was made by Hindess and Hirst. See for instance, Barry Hindess and Paul Q. Hirst, Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1975. But the concept developed by them was a restricted one in the sense that while it encompasses the conditions of existence of the mode of production, it does not take care of its conditions of reproduction. See, Harold Wolpe, "Introduction", in Harold Wolpe (Ed.), op cit., p.20.

13 For a detailed discussion of the transition process, see Paul Sweezy, et al., The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism - A Symposium, Sanskrit Publication, People's Book House, Patna, 1957.

14 Karl Marx, op cit., p. 89.

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.[15] 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[16] increases, reproduction of the society can take place without such wars.[17]

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.[18] Similarly, under certain historical circumstances, a settled way of life, in turn, facilitated further increases in productivity.[19]

An increase in productivity may come through the slow accumulation of inventions, discoveries and knowledge.[20] In

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15 According to Marx, tribal warfare was the chief factor behind the transition from tribalism to slavery.

16 Here productivity is defined as output per worker per day.

17 Marx himself concedes of such a possibility. See, Karl Marx, op cit., p. 93.

18 Earnest Mandel presents a wealth of historical materials to support this hypothesis. See, Earnest Mandel, Marxist Economic Theory, Vol. I, translated by Brian Pearce, Merlin Press, London, 1968.

19 Ibid, p.28.

20 Ibid, p.26.

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.[21] As a result, the production of foodgrains goes up. Thus an increased supply of foodgrains may lead to further population growth in a given territory.[22] 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 emphasized 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 utilization 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

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[21] Nicholas Kaldor, "Foreword", in Ester Boserup, The Conditions of Agricultural Growth, Aldine Publishing Company, Chicago, 1965.

[22] Earnest Mandel, op cit., p.28.

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".[23] Reproduction in a society with a growing population necessitates increasing material production to provide for the subsistence of the growing population.[24] 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.[25] As we show subsequently, we would be justified in attributing decisive weight to this factor in the agrarian transition of Meghalaya.

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[23] F. Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p.6.

[24] Vinod K. Jairath, "Production Relations and Population: Ramdua", The Journal of Development Studies, Vol. 14, No. 4, July 1978.

[25] This point is illustrated in the following pages. Although population plays a major role in the evolution of pre-capitalist societies, as capitalist development proceeds, "the structure of reproduction of the productive enterprise is not related any more to human reproduction but to the reproduction of capital, as a means of perpetuating and enlarging the relations of production." (Claude Meillassoux, "Social Organization of the Peasantry: The Economic Basis of Kinship", in David Seddon (Ed), Relations of Production, translated by Helen Lackner, Frank Cass, London, 1978, p. 168). Perhaps for this reason, though it is implicitly recognised, the population variable has not found its key role in Marxist political economy.

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."[26] 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 'communcations 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

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[26] Ester Boserup, op cit., p. 16.

than primitive communities with stagnant or declining population'."[27] 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.[28] 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'.[29]

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

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[27] Theodore W. Schultz, Economic Growth and Agriculture, TMH Edition, Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing Company Ltd., Bombay, New Delhi, 1968, pp.56-57.

[28] Richard C. Hoffmann, "Medieval Origins of the Common Fields" in William N. Parker and Eric L. Jones (Ed), European Peasants and Their Markets, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1975, p.43, and 51; and Joan Robinson, Freedom and Necessity, George Allen and Unwin, 1970, p.57.

[29] W.N. Parker, "Introduction" in Parker and Jones (Ed.) op cit., p.10.

practices.[30] However, in Meghalaya, in spite of the introduction of a market and increasing monetization, no fundamental change has occured 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 tillage 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.

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[30] See Bipan Chandra, The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1966.

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[31] 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

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[31] See Chapter 2 below.

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 communcal 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 disposessed 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.

We began our study with a short review of the evolution of the agrarian structure in Meghalaya. And our analysis has shown that despite a century of British colonial administration and despite Meghalaya's trade involvement with other regions of India for nearly two centuries, its socio-economic structure does not seem to have undergone any significant change. This relative lack of change stands in sharp contrast with the experiences of a number of Asian, African and Latin American countries and regions whose social fabrics were torn asunder by colonial penetration. The processes of depeasantisation and deindustrialization, these countries have gone through, are well documented. But these processes did not seem to have found a place in Meghalaya's history. Their unfolding was impeded by a number of constraints. These constraits, as we have argued at considerable length earlier, are the following: (1) the relative abundance of land; (2) predominance of communal ownership of land; (3) the matrilineal system of inheritance accompanied by the practice of ultimogeniture; and (4) state intervention by legislative and other policy measures which consciously helped to preserve the traditional way of life.

In order to demonstrate the salience of this analysis, we shall examine the above mentioned factors in some detail below. Economic and anthropological investigations have shown that some of these factors have existed in different parts of the world in varying degrees under different historical circumstances; and yet they failed to protect the traditional

property relations from breaking down. For instance, most of the Latin American countries are still land abundant. Yet one finds relations of production existing there generally described as feudal, semi-feudal or capitalist. In medieval Europe, the practice of primogeniture - which implies that only the eldest son has the right to inherit property - co-existed with feudalism. Similarly, communal ownership of land existed in pre-British Punjab; but it did not prevent the development of differentiation of the peasantry. In all these cases, we notice the presence of a few of the factors and the absence of certain others mentioned above. But in Meghalaya we find all these factors co-existing. Just as we have argued above, land abundance, unilineal inheritance and communal ownership are not sufficient conditions to maintain the age-old social structure. But, as we have seen (chapter 2), when in addition to these, there is a policy intervention which prevents the entry of non-tribals into the land market, it is possible to preserve the traditional property relations, unless population increases intervene in a big way. Thus, it is the interplay of <u>all</u> these factors as if in an ensemble that reinforces the traditional social structure in Meghalaya.

Thus, the agrarian structure displays a high degree of stability. Our analysis of land distribution in chapter 4 also broadly confirms this view. Land is distributed much less unequally in Meghalaya than that in the rest of the country. There has been a considerable inter-temporal stability in the distribution of land even after independence. The pattern of

land distribution which has evolved in the context of the factors mentioned above shows that a land market has not yet developed in Meghalaya.

However, land distribution alone does not suffice to establish the hypothesis that peasant differentiation has not developed to any significant extent in the state. We also need to analyse the labour process for this purpose and also to touch upon commercialization of agriculture to understand the implications of the labour process.

Now, we discuss here the penetration of commodity markets into Meghalaya and the subsequent monetization of the economy. These may certainly be portrayed as elements which could have changed the agrarian structure. We have seen in chapter 5 that there is a high degree of commercialization of agriculture in Meghalaya. But, as we have argued, commercialization has not, in any sense, marked the advent of capital intensive farming. Neither has it been associated with 'forced commerce'. What accounts for such a high commercialization are the availability of markets and monetization, favourable geophysical conditions for the growth of cash crops and a relative labour shortage in the economy. However, commercialization and monetisation have had certain consequences on the labour process.

The pattern of labour use in the farm sector indicates that the extent of hired labour employment is nearly 30 percent.

What one expects in a socio-economic formation dominated by kinship relations, is family labour to be supplemented by exchange labour rather than by hired labour. Besides, in an economy where a land market and a labour market have not yet developed, it is unlikely that a high proportion of labour employed in agriculture is hired labour. Therefore, one will not be very much off the mark, if one were to argue that the hired labour employed in Meghalaya agriculture is but a modified form of the reciprocal exchange labour. The spread of monetization, problems involved in labour exchange transactions and accounting, weakening of the inter-personal contact subsequent to population increases, changes in tillage practices and other factors have made labour exchange on a reciprocal basis increasingly difficult. When money came in as a universal medium of exchange, it helped to sort out most of these difficulties. The fact that households, irrespective of their farm size, hire out almost as much labour as they hire in, lends further support to our hypothesis. In a differentiated agrarian structure, hiring out of labour by large holdings is not generally found. Thus commercialization and monetization have promoted a transition from the traditional exchange labour to a kind of 'hired' labour which cannot be characterised as wage labour. From our analysis of land distribution and labour process, it is clear that middle peasantry (whose disintegration leads to differentiation) as a specific category does not exist in Meghalaya agriculture.

However, one may notice certain economic differences among the Meghalaya peasantry in terms of landholdings, income, consumption, investment etc. These differences are largely accounted for by the following factors:

(1) the relative labour availability within the households under certain conditions;

(2) commercialisation of agriculture and the subsequent economic capacity engendered by the surplus generated to clear additional land for cultivation;

(3) people's preference to stay in villages closer to urban areas rather than in the interior-parts of the state; and

(4) appropriation of communal land by influential tribal people in violation of the customary laws.

Even though some households make a surplus of income over expenditure, the surplus has not got invested in agriculture for expanded reproduction. Much of it appears to be siphoned off into religious or social festivals or the non-formal sectors of the economy. Thus the utilization pattern of surplus has not impinged sufficiently on the economic structure and consequently these economic differences have not been able to generate class differences so far. The low levels of development of productive forces and the non-institutionalization of private property relations act as a brake on differentiation of the peasantry.

This does not mean that the economy has been stagnant. Population-induced technical changes of a certain type have been well under way for quite some time in Meghalaya agriculture. By the turn of the century, population density began to increase. As a consequence, the jhum economy found it increasingly difficult to reproduce itself. This brought about changes in the intensity of landuse. We have discussed in chapter 8 the processes which started off a gradual transition from shifting to settled agriculture. We can expect this process to gain momentum because of population increases and active encouragement by the state. This has been instrumental in slowly bringing about institutionalization of private property relations. This process could be considered the dominant dynamic of the economy of Meghalaya in the long run.

The above discussion has made a number of related points. In areas, where the process of transition (from Jhum to settled cultivation) made some headway, signs of other changes have started appearing. The emergence of a land-lease market has become one of the significant changes in such areas. We have attempted to illustrate this aspect in chapter 4. Among the factors that account for the emergence of certain types of land lease transactions, the two most important are increasing population pressure in villages closer to urban areas and the presence of immigrant non-tribals (without having any ownership right to land). It has been noticed that the terms of lease are quite stringent with respect to the non-tribal peasants. This

is also in conformity with the logic of the situation.[1] However, the leasing activities (which are quite limited in terms of the area and the number of people involved) of the non-tribals are not organically linked with the internal structure of the tribal system; they may have only marginal implications for the traditional property relations.

In any case, it is useful to ask: to what extent will the development of a land market be able to usher in capitalist production relations in agriculture? Even if we were to assume for a moment that a land market and, as a sequel to it, a labour market develop, full-blown capitalist relations may not strike roots in agriculture, "until a major portion of the released labour force can be employed in capitalist enterprises in other sectors."[2] In this regard, of great significance is the

[1] Non-tribals do not have any ownership right to land. They can only lease in land. Once such leased in land has been made cultivable, either the rent is raised to exorbitant levels or the land is reclaimed. Benoy Lahiri has observed that jungle lands are leased out to non-Khasi cultivators in the War areas of the Khasi Hills. "After reclamation of land when it is found that the land is yielding good harvest, eviction notice is served upon the poor cultivators to vacate the land. Various harassment methods are resorted to such as increase in rent or house tax, tax on cattle heads, communal frenzy etc." B. Lahiri, op cit., p. 87. Similar instances are reported from Arunachal Pradesh also where the Nepali peasants are treated in such a fashion. Further, according to the Land Reforms Commission, "... the landless people have been rack-rented by Ri Kynti owners who collect 30 or 40 percent of the produce of the land if taken in kind or an equivalent if in cash". See Report of the Land Reforms Commission for Khasi Hills, op cit., p.23.

relatively small size of the manufacturing sector in Meghalaya.[3] Furthermore, the process of urbanization has been very slow in the state.[4] It may also be seen that a large part of the state income originates in public administration, and military and paramilitary establishments.[5]

Finally, we may address the question of how the social structure in Meghalaya may evolve in the future. It is arguable that after independence, the status of Meghalaya as an island in isolation could not any more be preserved; the tribal society got increasingly integrated with the rest of the country, although state policies[6] have intervened, to some extent, to stem this trend. As a result, the traditional tribal laws - unwritten and uncodified - came, to a certain degree, in conflict with the laws governing property relations in other parts of the country. This opportunity was seized by the cleverer and more influential among the tribals themselves to

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[2] A.K. Bagchi, "Reinforcing and Offsetting Constraints in Indian Industry", in Amiya Bagchi and Nirmala Banerjee, Change and Choice in Indian Industry, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1981, p.38.

[3] The manufacturing and household sectors together account for only 2.35 percent of the labour force and 4.6 percent of the state domestic product in Meghalaya for the year 1973-74; the corresponding figures for the country as a whole are 9.46 percent and 20.5 percent.

[4] There are only three towns in the state, viz., Shillong, Tura and Jowai. Tura and Jowai attained their status as towns only after 1961.

[5] Public administration alone accounts for 18.5 percent of the state income. Though no official estimates of income for the military and paramilitary establishments are available, it is likely to be quite large in Meghalaya given the size of the armed forces stationed in the state.

[6] As we discussed at length in chapter 2, state policies have been oriented towards reinforcing the basic structure of the economy rather than disintegrating it.

circumvent the customary law and to grab as much land as possible.[7] This practice seems to have picked up quite fast in villages adjacent to urban areas.

Seen from this perspective, perhaps one could argue that accumulation of land without social sanction, coupled with fairly large surpluses (of income over consumption) - made possible by commercialization of agriculture - may gain enough strength in course of time to weaken the traditional property relations. All in all, it seems fair to say that the ultimate outcome depends upon the relative strength of the forces of 'conservation' and 'dissolution' embedded in the social structure. Marx's comment concerning the Russian commune appears to be quite appropriate here: "either the property element in it will overcome the collective element, or the other way round. Everything depends on the historical environment in which it occurs."[8] We are bound to observe a number of developments if the legal restrictions on land transfer to non-tribals are lifted.

[7] "In Bhoi area it is reported by the Khasi villagers of Mynsain village under Mylliem Syiemship that the customary land tenure 'Ka Riti'-'Ka Dustur' are being allowed to be violated so that rich people could grab more land and the Syiem is not taking any step to protect the poor villagers' rights and privileges." in Binoy Lahiri, op cit., p.87. The Land Reforms Commission has noted that "... there appears to have been some Ri Raid lands which have been converted into Ri Kynti lands by some Khasis themselves by issuing leases and pattas not only to non-Khasis but to fellow Khasis as well." See Report of the Land Reforms Commission for Khasi Hills op cit., p.9. Further, "The Commission have been told for instance that, when government proposed to acquire land for certain public purposes, people from the towns, who naturally come to know earlier about such themes or projects were the first to rush to the proposed area, to demarcate their picks and take pattas from the headmen of the village, the Syiem or Sirdar Raid, or even from the chief of the elaka himself to establish their rights when the time for claiming compensation would come." op cit., p.18.

[8] Marx to Zasulich, March 8, 1881, in E.J. Hobsbawm (Ed.) op cit., p.145.

Assuming that such restrictions might continue, the question now confronts us is whether communal ties of reciprocity and the apparent lack of differentiation will protect the tribal economy for all time to come from the onslaught of capitalism.

There is an opinion that the traditional property relations could be preserved provided the customary tribal laws governing land relations are codified and the necessary legislations to this effect passed.[9] A question arises here: even if the necessary measures are taken in this direction, will the primitive tribal socio-economic system (in the context of population increases) be able to maintain the present levels of living, if not to achieve a higher living standard? In this context, we may recall our earlier discussion that the jhum economy has not been able to survive on the same scale as before. As a corollary to the above question, one may ask: will not capitalist social relations be needed for a rapid growth of the economy?

To find answers to these questions is certainly not an easy task. History has proved in no uncertain terms that capitalist development is not a necessary condition for the achievement of higher growth rates of an economy. One may also point out that the social cost of capitalist development will be

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[9] One of the terms of references of the Land Reforms Commission for Khasi Hills, was "codification of the customary land laws and usages." But no move has been made in this direction till now.

too heavy for the tribal economy to bear. On the contrary, given the nature of the tribal ethoes, it may be argued that a socialist transformation of the economy appears to hold a better promise. One would pause here and wonder whether Meghalaya would be in a position to bring about this transformation, considering the fact that it is a part of the general capitalist framework of India. In this context, it appears that the population induced technical change of the type discussed in Chapter 8, will continue to be the dynamic factor in the economy for some time to come. Once settled farming becomes a predominant feature, one can imagine the various alternative courses the economy might take. However, at present it seems to us that, in some key respects, 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 an active partner in it.[10]

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[10] A similar argument is given by T. Mathew. According to him, "... one could visualise the utilization of the resources of the region for its economic development as a partnership effort between the government and the community. The government could contribute capital, mechanical equipment, skilled direction and marketing facilities; and the community could contribute land ... and labour, the produce being shared between the two partners in a ratio adjusted to the interests involved." See T. Mathew, "Introduction", in T. Mathew (Ed.), North Eastern Hill Regions of India - Problems and Prospects of Development, op cit.,p(xi) A scheme broadly conforming to this was initiated in Tanzania by Neyrere in the late 'sixties. For details see Norman Long, op cit., p. 164.