

Peasant Struggles in Darjeeling and Sikkim: 1940-1982

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The Peasants in the Hills

In recent social science literature the use of the word 'peasant' has become fashionable and it is often applied to different societies rather randomly. Such an unfortunate development can possibly be attributed to the lack of a clear cut definition despite sincere attempts by some European scholars, or the difficulty of having such an ubiquitously acceptable definition.¹ What is more interesting to note is that most of the scholars trying to define "peasantry", including Shanin, have used more than one criteria. These criteria often appear uneasy amongst themselves and about the societies we study even if they are 'peasant' otherwise. My immediate purpose here is, however, not to go into the definitional polemics as such but to review a few major definitions in order to provide a proper perspective for a discussion on the peasant struggles in Darjeeling and Sikkim.

The concept of peasantry as enunciated by Robert Redfield is best expressed in his own words:

The peasant, like the primitive tribesman, is indigenous. He lives where he has always lived, and the city has grown up out of a kind of life which, in fundamental custom and belief, is his too. Perhaps its influence came to him from near at hand, and he has walked to the city to sell his produce or to contribute his labor; or perhaps the nearest city is so far away that its influence has reached him only after long delay. But in either case he is long used to the existence of the city, and its ways are, in altered form, part

of his ways. The peasant is a rural native whose long established order of life takes important account of the city.²

Eric Wolf,³ regards the 'peasantry' as a group of people with a subordinate position vis-a-vis the outsiders and a unit of production as well as consumption. In a more recent work⁴ he adds some more features like self-cultivation rather than cultivation in groups (of families), agricultural operations almost throughout the year, lack of participation in decision-making beyond the village, etc.

Shanin, an equally if not more qualified scholar in this field tries to draw a coherent picture of the peasant in the following way:

The peasantry consists of small agricultural producers who, with the help of simple equipment and the labour of their families, produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfilment of obligations to the holders of political and economic power.⁵

Daniel Thorner,⁶ another important figure in peasant studies, suggests five criteria that make a peasant society: (i) roughly half of the total population must be agricultural, (ii) more than half of the working population must be engaged in agriculture, (iii) there should be an existence of state power and a ruling hierarchy in which kinship or clan order is significant, (iv) a sufficiently developed economy to feed not only themselves and the government but also the townspeople, and (v) a unit of production which grows crops primarily by the physical efforts of the family members.

Mats Lundahl⁷ has furnished seven characteristics of a peasant: (i) he must derive his main subsistence and cash income from agriculture, (ii) he somehow controls the land which he cultivates (thus, a sharecropper or a tenant is not a peasant), (iii) he produces with the help of simple capital equipment, (iv) his prominent unit of production is the small family farm, (v) his production is more consumption oriented than aimed at reinvestment and expansion of activities (a farmer, on the other hand, regards agriculture as a business

enterprise), (vi) his society is involved in a relationship with a wider world—regionally, nationally and internationally (a feature that distinguishes a peasant economy from a primitive tribal one), and (vii) he has no power of his own to determine the conditions which draw the lines within which the rural economy has to operate.

There are many similarities and dissimilarities in the above definitions of the noted scholars in this field. However, a few words may be devoted to assessment of these definitions in the context of the region under discussion to begin with Redfield, the link between the peasants and the city is very important in his definition. But if we take 'city' in its restricted sense, taking into consideration the number of non-agricultural works, density of population per square kilometre and the population as such, no "city" and therefore, no peasant society exists in Darjeeling and Sikkim. However, Redfield would probably have no objection if his "city" was taken as a town or an urban centre.

To take Wolf's definition, one cannot raise any objection, when he says that the peasant household is not only a production unit but also a consumption unit. But his concept of peasantry primarily as "self-cultivating" households which are subordinate to "outsiders", or, which have to adapt to the pressures created by outside, non-peasant forces does not include the well known superordinate-subordinate relationships within the peasant societies.

In Darjeeling and Sikkim, there are many households holding above a hundred acres of land and enjoying considerable amount of domination over, if not actually exploiting, the peasants cultivating their lands. Nor are the peasants there involved in agricultural operations throughout the year because the labour-sustenance power of this region which has an insignificant proportion of irrigated lands is very low (except in the plantation areas) and even lower in the higher altitude villages. In fact, a household with a substantial amount of land can engage its members in agricultural operation for not more than five months a year.

Shanin's contention is well founded and holds true in the context of Darjeeling and Sikkim also. What, however, intrigues me is the word 'small'. How small is 'small' in his sense? Unless

one finds answers to such a question one cannot really proceed ahead.

The experience in Darjeeling and Sikkim significantly bears out most of Thomer's criteria also. There are many villages in Darjeeling such as Sonada, Rangbull, Upper Johnsonhatta, Batasia and Aloorari, where hardly any of the households own more than three acres of land. The percentage of people engaged in agricultural operations is also less than fifty in most of these villages because the average size of a holding is about 33 decimals only. Almost every household has small plots of land cultivated purely by family labour but the altitude being around 7000 feet above sea level the production is so low that the crop harvested can support no family for more than three months. They cultivate cash crops as the staple crops like maize and millet do not grow well due to the high altitude. These cash crops are sold in the market or to some Bihari or Marwari shopkeepers but the income from these crops constitutes less than 30 percent of their total income per year. The fact that they sell the cash crops in the market does not mean that they produce "surplus"; they have to do so in order to meet other necessities of life. Therefore, his fourth criterion that they produce not only for themselves but also for the state and the townspeople needs to be qualified.

Lundahl's first two criteria also suffer in the context of Darjeeling and Sikkim. In Sikkim, most of the cultivators derive their main subsistence from agriculture but this in itself is not the main source of "cash" income in most Sikkimese villages. The reasons are plain: lack of adequate infrastructure, marketing facilities, etc. On the other hand, in Darjeeling, the infrastructural and marketing facilities are better but the average landholding size being many times smaller (1.0 acre average) than in Sikkim (6.0 acre average), agriculture does not serve as the main sources of subsistence in most villages. Moreover, there are many sharecroppers and gradually agricultural labourers are also occupying a conspicuous place in the agrarian society of this region, specially after 1950's. Their concentration is, however, more prominent in the lower altitudes and the irrigated areas than in the higher or non-irrigated areas. Their socio-economic activities also differ little from the "peasants" who possess small plots of land. The difference is just that the

latter "own lands". But specially in Darjeeling, there are some "registered" sharecroppers who are "owners" for all practical purposes and the "de jure" owners can do little about them. We cannot possibly exclude these sharecroppers and agricultural labourers from the category of peasants as Lundahl has done.

Agrarian situations differ spatially as well as temporally. This is probably why Redfield, Wolf, Shanin, Thorner and Lundahl have conceptualized "peasantry" in slightly different ways. Logically, any conceptualization based on the experiences of Darjeeling and Sikkim also becomes area-specific. For the purpose of this paper a peasant means any family in a rural area with direct or indirect link with land irrespective of the level of dependence on it for cash or crop income.

The Leftist View on Peasants

The Leftist view on "peasantry" holds an important place in peasant studies, especially in studies relating to the politics of peasantry. One should not expect that the Leftist view is entirely different from the views held by the so-called "bourgeoisie" sociologists or social scientists. There are certain issues where they stand together as, for example, in matters relating to the "small-holding" and the "political weakness" of the peasantry. But there are also significant differences between these two "groups". The Marxist-Leninist "group" is not satisfied in just describing the peasants as a socio-economic category of production and consumption but finds in them a vast potential for changing the system itself. However, most of them, including Mao-tse-Tung, have emphasized the necessity of an alliance of the peasants with the urban/industrial proletariat (workers) for bringing about a revolution.¹

To understand the Left's view of peasantry, a few lines from Marx's classic work, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, are important:

The small-holding peasants form a vast mass, the members of which live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with one another. Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of

bringing them into mutual inter-course. . . . Their field of production, the small holding, admits of no division of labour in its cultivation, no application of science and, therefore, no diversity of development, no variety of talent, no wealth of social relationships. Each individual peasant family is almost self-sufficient; it itself directly produces the major part of its consumption and thus acquires its means of life more through exchange with nature than in intercourse with society. . . . They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. . . . The political influence of the small-holding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power subordinating society to itself.*

Before one discusses the above views on peasants, one must remember three things—the country (France), the dominant social system (feudalism), and the period (end of the eighteenth century or early nineteenth century)—which shaped the ideas reflected above. Given the insight and experience of Marx with the world of affairs, one cannot challenge his ideas *per se*. But if his idea of peasantry is applied to the prevailing situation in this region, one is bound to be rather disappointed, which however does not belittle his contribution on the subject as such. It just shows that a particular idea on some aspect of the society or even the whole of it, however scientific and refined, does not stand true in all times and places. One cannot, however, preclude the possibility of his having overlooked certain aspects of the peasantry in his attempt to give a grand theory of social transformation.

Marx talks of "small-holding" but nowhere in the text mentioned above has he defined, objectively, what it means. It is but clear that it has the dimension of space and understandably the size is "satisfactory" because such household is "almost self-sufficient" and "produce the major part of its consumption".

In Darjeeling and Sikkim, the Himalayas and, in fact, in India as a whole, it is really difficult to determine a size which can be called a "small-holding" because the quality of land differs significantly according to variation in altitude, slant and the nature of soil. Holding one acre of irrigated land at an altitude of 3000 feet above sea level and in a favourable aspect

(i.e., either on east or west facing slopes) is better than holding 10 acres of dry land at 7000 feet altitude and on north or south facing slopes. If the "size" depends on "self-sufficiency" then only a negligible percentage of households in this region can be called "peasant" in the Marxist sense. And if we take into consideration the "income" from land instead of the "size," the question of "small-holding" does not hold any meaning.

The "mode of production" is also not uniform throughout the region. While in some villages like Rangbull and Batasia the mode of production isolates the peasant households from one another, the same in other villages like Tanek, Purbong and Dunga involves them in mutual intercourse based on effective labour exchange systems like "parma" and "hoori" (a "parma" is a direct form of labour exchange between two or three persons while a "hoori" is a cyclical or indirect form of labour exchange involving a large number of persons at times numbering as many as forty). Caste and religious affiliations also result in meaningful interaction in these villages. This is true of the villages Rangbull and Batasia as well.

Thus, Marx's idea of a lack of "manifold relations" in a peasant society seems more like the contention of a classical economist than that of a veritable sociologist. His idea of a peasant society as "static" or without any inherent potential either of political or economic development is also subjective. This is apparently more true in the political than in an economic sense for there is ample evidence of economic development in peasant societies. It has also been pointed out above that the "self-sufficiency" of the peasants is, by and large, a myth in this region due to ecological and demographic factors. Since a peasant, therefore, has less to gain with the "nature" his intercourse with "society" becomes necessary and inevitable.

In this context, the limitations of Marx given by Rudolph and Rudolph may also be mentioned. They state¹⁰ that the Indian peasants, instead of surrendering themselves to some political master (as Marx opines) in the hope of some benefits, have made arrangements to represent and rule themselves. Caste, which has adapted itself to the changing political and economic environment, has also helped the peasants to represent and rule themselves by enabling them to participate meaningfully and effectively in political democracy.

Marxist views on peasantry is reported to have failed yet in another way—the strategic—in India. For example, Sunil Sen¹¹ writes that the “worker-peasant”, alliance of Marxist thinkers does not hold true of the Bakasht Movement in Bihar, Tebhaga Movement in Bengal and the Telengana Revolution in Andhra, where the peasants hardly received the support of the working class. Sen is wrong here at least in the case of Tebhaga movement in which the peasants had the support of the workers in the tea gardens. In Assam also, the workers have often aligned themselves with the peasants in the latter’s movements. Nevertheless, despite their due recognition of the importance of peasant participation in any movement, the Marxists underestimated their inherent potential for revolution slightly. The experience in Sikkim, related in this paper, also shows that the “worker-peasant” alliance is not always a necessity.

The Politics of Peasantry—Some Semantic Problems

Before going into the main part of this paper—the peasant struggles in Darjeeling and Sikkim—I have felt it necessary to dwell briefly on the semantic problem in peasant politics. This has been overlooked by the scholars in the field but has an important bearing on any study. Some confusion seems to have crept into the minds of younger students working in this field. So it is desirable that somebody started the debate: it is upto others to continue it or not.

The politics of peasantry has been variously described in an already vast body of literature. A number of expressions used in research work are: movement, struggle, rebellion, revolution, unrest, uprising, resistance, disturbance, insurgence, insurrection, etc. These are used more or less as synonyms and no attempt, to my knowledge, has been hitherto made by any scholar to give specific meanings to each of these expressions. Nobody would deny that this proposition which otherwise sounds trivial needs a serious consideration. What follows here is, however, merely an attempt, to tackle the problem.

Movement is derived from the Latin word “*movere*” meaning “to move”.¹² It signifies “a series of organized activities by people working concertedly toward some goal: often called the

'movement' by those involved in it". Gough defines a social movement as "the attempt of a group to effect change in the face of resistance". The term "struggle" implies a resistance to some bondage from above or a fight for survival. For example, a struggle against feudalism or against the landlords. The Marxists have most often used 'struggle' referring to the process of resistance by the proletariat and peasants against a system dominated by "feudal lords" or the "bourgeoisie". Comparing these two expressions, "struggle" appears more subjective in the sense that it seems biased towards those who are struggling.

"Rebellion" from the Latin "rebellio" means a renewed war—an act or state of armed, open resistance to authority, government, etc. This expression is understandably slightly milder than the expression 'revolution' which involves a large mass of militant people and bloodshed to achieve its goal such as the Bolshevik Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, etc. Similarly, "unrest" and "uprising" are expressions used in socially "abnormal" situations. They mean a disturbed state, restlessness and at times a condition of angry discontent verging on revolt. "Disturbance" or "resistance" is also a mild term referring to excitement or an interruption of peace. "Insurgence" and "insurrection" also mean an uprising against the authority or government.

In the above lot, the expressions like "unrest", "disturbance", "insurgence" and "insurrection" appear biased—as if such phenomena are not desirable. These are, to be true, the expressions of the "administration" which, by nature, does not welcome such phenomena in the state or nations, as the case may be. Any group action, however justified it may otherwise be, that threatens the internal peace is attributed with the various names mentioned above. It is upto the scholars to choose between the words of the "administration" and those which actually represent the situation. In any case, it is clear that a random use of these terms is not only risky, for the chances of confusion are high, but also rather unscientific and therefore undesirable.

Peasant Struggles in Darjeeling and Sikkim: the Roots

The roots of peasant struggles in Sikkim reach back as far as its

history before the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty in 1642. The pre-1642 history of Sikkim is not properly documented but the agrarian history after that will suffice to show the roots of the peasant struggles since the 1940s. The Tibetan population in Sikkim before that was insignificant and so was their political power. There were Lepchas, Limbus and Mangars inhabiting different parts of Sikkim and ruled by chiefs or elders.

Phuntsog Namgyal, the first king of Sikkim, had divided the whole of Sikkim into 12 districts or "dzongs" under 12 "dzongpens" or district chiefs and 12 Bhutia "kahlons" or councillors.⁴ Tensung Namgyal succeeded the throne after his death and reduced the number of councillors to eight, chosen from the highest Lepcha and Bhutia families, who eventually became the powerful "kazis".⁵

Meanwhile, considerable changes occurred in Sikkim's demography. The British wanted to trade with Tibet. This led them to encourage the Nepalese settlers. Initially they did it half-heartedly because the ruling Tibetan families were against Nepalese immigration. Of all the rulers, Tunghod Namgyal and Thutob Namgyal hated the Nepalese most. So despite the provision under the Treaty of 1861 which had allowed the British more powers in the affairs of Sikkim than they actually utilized, they followed a persuasive approach. Incidentally, some of the councillors, the Khangsarpa Dewan to be specific, were in favour of Nepalese immigration though with some vested interests of their own like a large share of profit in the Indo-Tibet trade, the revenue from the lands they had taken on lease from the Maharaja, and above all more people to exploit. The conflict between the pro-immigration faction led by the Khangsarpa Dewan and the anti-immigration faction led by Dala Athing Densappa and Tarching Lama of Pemiongchi was eventually resolved in favour of the former, which led to the first ever grant of lease to Laxmi Das Pradhan and his brother at Rhenock. In 1880, however, Tarching Lama came to Rhenock with his followers to evict the Laxmi brothers and other Nepalese settlers. However, the tide once again turned in favour of the settlers and Phodang Lama, which led to an increased Nepalese settlement but only in the uninhabited areas as per the order of Ashley Eden, the British Governor, issued at the request of

Thutob Namgyal.¹⁶

J.C. White, the first political officer of Sikkim, made drastic changes in the prevailing land revenue and taxation systems and in 1916, a judicial court called the Chief Court was established with a legally qualified judge. It had supervisory powers over the courts of the landlords. Earlier, the "kazis" had all civil, judicial and criminal powers with regard to the raiyats of their respective lease holdings. But even after 1916, the unscrupulous activities of the "kazis" continued in all matters.¹⁷

It is noted that the land tax was very high and was still higher for the Nepalese. Besides land tax they had to render free services to their landlords, headmen and the account assistants of headmen of the respective blocks. The "kazis" and "thikadars", with the enormous powers in their hands could easily dispossess a raiyat if they wanted to do so. They could also utilize the various forms of free and forced labour like "kalo bhari", "zharlangi," and "kuruwa," for their personal benefits.

The name "kalo bhari" (literally, black load) became the symbol of forced labour in Sikkim because the raiyats there had to carry loads wrapped with black tarpaulin across the border to Tibet. Nobody could tell me exactly when it started but it might have begun during the later half of the 19th century. There were two British camps at Faridzong and Gyangtshe of Tibet where utensils, textiles, medicines and other such articles used to be supplied by the Indian political officer stationed at Gangtok, with the help of the "kazis", "thikadars" and the Marwari businessmen, all of whom had private investments except the political officer. The labourers were forcibly recruited for carrying loads, and paid a very low wage. The risk to life, while carrying a load of about one maund (37.0 kg, approx.) across the snow-bound border, was very high. Many coolies died on the way for which there was no compensation. On top of that, if they failed to comply, they would be whipped, jailed or fined depending on the power and whim of the landlord. After 1943, the landlords started rearing mules to carry the loads but the mule charge had to be borne by the raiyats. The coolies found this a better situation though it was economically disastrous.

The raiyats in Sikkim not only had to carry the loads across the border but also within the country. The "zharlangi" system made it obligatory to them to carry loads for the tourists

and officers on tour, free of charge. The incoming tourists came upto Gelkhola by train, where they used to be picked by the coolies. There were some reserved coolies in places like Gangtok, Singtam, Melli and Rangpo. They had to wait in groups, with their own clothes, food and utensils. After fifteen days, another batch of villagers would replace them. This system was known as "kuruwa".

Besides all this, the raiyats had to render free labour services to their landlords, headmen and their assistants. This was officially stopped vide Notification No. 5874/G dated 15.8.24 and in lieu of it a system of cash payment called "bethi" was introduced. In some remote villages, however, the earlier system continued till the Independence of India.

A look at a few excerpts from the document entitled 'A few Facts About Sikkim' prepared by Tashi Tshering Bhutia, the peasant leader, in 1947 and printed in Basnet's book referred here, is a worthwhile task:

. . . His Highness has a State Council consisting entirely of landlords and a Secretariat which is largely controlled by the landlords. . . . The subject people or ryots have no voice in the administration and they have long groaned under the pernicious yoke of landlordism. Landlordism, as obtaining in Sikkim, has proved the curse of the ryots. It has enabled the landlords, through coercion and intimidation, to acquire for themselves the best holdings of the ryots. . . . The landlords are vested with magisterial powers in both civil and criminal matters. They are also empowered to register documents for the sale or transfer of landed properties. . . . A grabbing landlord has no difficulty in dispossessing an uncompromising ryot of his cherished possession, be it a paddy field or a herd of cattle. Forced labour with minimum, often without any, compensation is usually enacted by the landlords when cultivating their extensive, mostly ill-gotten, private fields and when harvesting their crops. Most of the influential landlords, who held important posts in the administration, live at Gangtok. Their estates may be two or three days journey away. From there ryots have to come all the way to Gangtok and serve their landlords in turn in various menial capacities.

The ryots get no wages or compensations for such services, and they are lucky if they escape cruelties. . . .

A similar picture could probably have been found in Darjeeling too but for some historical accidents. Kalimpong was wrested away from Sikkim by Bhutan as early as 1706 and roughly the present Sadar and Kurseong subdivisions were annexed by the British in 1835 and Siliguri in 1850. Of these four subdivisions, chances of the Sikkim episode being repeated existed only in Kalimpong and Siliguri, one of the routes to Tibet being through Kalimpong and Siliguri. The Bhutanese rule brought no relief for the people of Kalimpong: the raiyats had to satisfy the annual visitors from Bhutan consisting of the "Dahsos" (counterparts of the "kazis") and "dzongdas" (district chiefs) not only with revenue but also with wine and women till they left after about a month. This, however, does not seem to have affected the people as much as the feudal system in Sikkim did it to its citizens.

The Peasant Struggles: Nature, Outcome and Trends

Lack of education, communication facilities and political consciousness had enabled the feudal lords to enjoy the free labour of thousands of peasants for such a long time. Marx has written that the capitalist system generates the seeds of its own destruction. This seems true of the feudal system too. The feudal system in Sikkim had taken the ugliest form during the fag-end of its term, throwing the peasants beyond any capacity to tolerate further. Again in Marxian terms, they had nothing to lose but their chains.

Incidentally, and not surprisingly, the "kalo bhari" movement did not take a very militant shape. The first agitation of the peasants took place in June-July, 1942. The "thikadars" had asked 120 coolies to be present in Gangtok but the actual number of coolies requisitioned was only 60. The remaining coolies asked for loads which could not be provided then. They became angry because they had to go to Gangtok in the peak of the agricultural season. They began to shout for loads and soon about 500 people gathered there and gheraoed the Palace. The

files of the Palace were brought out and used as seats. They stayed there for 5 days and returned home with verbal assurance to fulfil their demands.

Meanwhile three peasant associations cropped up to fight for the cause of the peasants. They were: the Praja Sudharak Samaj based in Gangtok and led by Tashi Tshering Bhutia, the Praja Sammelan based in Temi Tarku, south Sikkim and led by Gobar Dhan Pradhan and Dhan Bahadur Tiwari, and the Praja Mandal based in Chyakung and led by Kazi Lhendup Dorjee. Tashi Tshering, the most important leader amongst them later brought all the three associations together and formed the Sikkim State Congress on December 7, 1947, with three immediate demands—the abolition of landlordism, introduction of responsible government and Sikkim's accession to India. The Maharaja accepted the first two in "principle" but refused the last and instead organized the landlords to form the Sikkim National Party to counteract the demands of the Sikkim State Congress.

The Sikkim State Congress with a ladder as its symbol had other demands too: opening of schools for the common masses and taxation on the basis of proper measurement of land. The previous practice was on the basis of "nazar" (sight), "mana" (500 gm) or "pathi" (8 kg) of seeds used, which gave the landlords wide scope to act arbitrarily. In August, 1948, the "zharlangi" and "kalo bhari" were abolished by a notification issued by the Palace. Sonam Tshering Lepcha, the then speaker of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly was the chief force behind this achievement after the death of Tashi Tshering Bhutia. Sonam Tshering, a matriculate office clerk, not only wrote on behalf of the peasants but also organized them for which he had to bear physical assaults too. He was once whipped 12 times and expelled from the job in 1941.

In 1949, the 'No-Rent Movement' started under the prominent leadership of Nayan Tshering Lepcha and Chandra Das Rai. This was started initially at Namchi, in the east of Sikkim, but gradually spread over many parts of it. In February 1949, 35 people including the leaders were arrested. The government servicemen also took part. For this, some of them were sacked while others were denied promotion. The peasants demanded the payment of taxes directly to the Palace and not through

intermediaries. But the landlords twisted this demand so it meant 'no-rent' at all. The Palace therefore took serious steps to curb the movement. Some of the leaders had, of course, urged the peasants not to pay any rent till the intermediaries were abolished.

The leaders in general were educated and came from relatively wealthier classes. Some of them had drawn their inspiration from leaders of the National Movement in India but perhaps none of them, except C.D. Rai, had links with the Indian leaders. C.D. Rai had his basic political orientation from Jaya Prakash Narayan and Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia, during his postgraduate studies in Banaras Hindu University. Soram Tshering is also reputed to have met Gandhi once. Under their leadership the peasants did not pay any rent for two years (1948-49). They paid the rent with a 25 percent subsidy after a government notification dated 20 August, 1949, announcing that the land revenue previously paid to the agents of the estates could be directly paid to the government. This notification, however, did not include the revenue administration in 15 private estates of the Maharaja and 5 monastery estates. It may be noted here that the total area under private estates was 31,844.42 acres, under monasteries was 21,995.11 acres and under regular estates was 169,475.30 acres. Therefore, the exclusion of 53 thousand acres of land from the direct payment was a significant point to note.

The "kalo bhari" movement was more or less confined to Gangtok. The 1949 'No-Rent Movement' did not make much of an impact on Sikkim. But the 1973 movement, after the fall of the "29 Day Ministry" formed on 9 May 1949, under the leadership of Tashi Tshering, Captain Dimik Singh and C.D. Rai with Dorjee Dadul and R.P. Aley as Palace nominees, was not only statewide in the real sense but also took a slightly different slant. It made the people politically much more conscious but at the time it divided Sikkim into two ethnic groups with the Lepshas and Bhutias on the one side and the Nepalese on the other.

It all started with the arrogant remark of the pro-Palace people who threatened the Nepalese saying that they should adopt Buddhism or quit Sikkim." The Nepalese sentiment was hurt and they started coming to Gangtok from all over. They

were not allowed to enter Gangtok. The burning and capturing of police stations and other administrative centres took place and finally the angry mob reached Gantok. Food used to be cooked at Singtam and brought to Gangtok for the people involved in the movement. Their food was poisoned by pro-Chogyal men and 65 people had to be admitted to hospital on a single day. On 4 April, the mob led by Kazi Lhendup Dorjee and R.C. Poudyal clashed with the police. They were lathi charged and fired at.

Apparently, the 1973 movement was a political movement in so far as the issue was political and that the people wanted democracy and not autocracy. But the people involved in this movement were only peasants and even otherwise the issue proves very peasant like in character if analysed more carefully. Some of the peasants and specially the leaders knew very well that whatever changes were made on the agrarian front were more in "principle", in the form of notifications and not in practice. They were convinced that the agrarian situation which was heavily feudal till then was not going to change unless a democracy existed. In this sense, the 1973 movement could be considered as a peasant struggle.

A cursory look into the socio-economic background of the leaders of the peasant struggles in Sikkim reveals that they were relatively educated and well-off. The peasants on the other hand had joined them en masse, as a single community, and the question of 'rich', 'middle', and 'poor' peasants in this context seemed superficial. Given the ecological and socio-economic background of the people and the State, these struggles are commendable. However, the "feudal way of life" continues almost as before. The way the landlords or their descendants behave in the community draws the attention of a researcher. Separate cremation grounds still exist for the different communities of sikkim: Loksoma for the royal family members, Chandegon for the "kazis", Decheling for the common Lepchas and Bhutias and Ranipul for the Nepalese. Geographically, Loksoma is at the highest altitude, followed by Chandegon, Decheling and finally Ranipul.

In Darjeeling, on the other hand, there has been no such development till now though the labourers in the tea gardens have agitated intermittently. In fact, the Sadar and Kurseong

subdivisions of Darjeeling have hardly any agricultural land; most of the land being covered with tea bushes. There are some agricultural villages in these subdivisions also but these villages are at high altitudes, with a very small land holding size and hardly any sharecropping. The Kalimpong subdivision, on the other hand, has vast expanses of agricultural land, large scale sharecropping and more recently, agricultural labour also.

Even in Kalimpong, however, nothing like the movement in Sikkim has ever happened despite the spread of the Leftist ideology in many of its villages. There are "Kisan Sabhas" in many villages—forest or khasmahal—under the leadership of the CPI(M) but these associations have remained silent throughout and more so after the party came in power in 1977. The "Kisan Sabhas" actively participated in "Operation Barga" and made it quite a success wherever those associations existed. The membership of these associations have a large number of landowners who are often small cultivators and the representation of the sharecroppers and agricultural labourers is insignificant. Ethnically, they have not been able to include the Lepchas and Bhutias in a significant number, which may be due to a heavy inclination of these communities towards the Congress (I).

An exception in the history of Darjeeling was the emergence of the "Pakhurey Sangh" or "Sharecroppers' Association" in Kalimpong, following a number of evictions in villages like Pudung and Echchay. The first meeting of this Association was held in June 1979 in Echchay village at the initiative of some of the CPI and a school teacher of the village. About forty tenants and agricultural labourers had gathered there from the surrounding villages. Most of them looked scared though some of them were courageous enough to voice their grievances. The meeting continued for a long time during which the leaders sympathized with the victims and denounced the landlords concerned. It seemed as if a new era had begun in the history of Darjeeling.

Unfortunately, this Association had an early end. The meeting held after the first had a thinner attendance and the last attempt to hold one during the end of 1980 was a failure as hardly any of the members turned up. A member of the Association and also the CPI staying in Purbong village of Kalimpong

tried to open a branch of this Association in his village but he too failed miserably despite his prestige as a school headmaster.

Darjeeling has a higher percentage of literacy and also a higher level of political consciousness than Sikkim. The infra-structural facilities are also relatively better there. Why has it remained dormant then? Certain reasons may be identified tentatively to explain the quiet agrarian scene in the Darjeeling hills compared to Sikkim. The answer probably lies in the nature of the agrarian structure as obtained in these two regions. The agrarian society of Darjeeling has a large number of small cultivators who are socially in the landowning class but economically in the landless. It does not have a feudal history though there are some big landowners even now. The scope for an income from non-agricultural sources is also higher there than in Sikkim which, on the other hand, has a long history of feudal exploitation. I have discussed some of the differences between these two regions in a recent article.¹⁹

Comparison and Conclusion

According to Wolf²⁰ the peasant rebellions precede three crises: the demographic crisis, the ecological crisis, and the crisis in power and authority. Though he has drawn his conclusions from his study in Mexico and these may have been found untrue in many places, in Sikkim particularly, his theses seems to hold good. A cursory glance at the agrarian history of Sikkim is enough to establish it. The case of Sikkim also supports the contention of Thorner that the peasant uprisings in Europe grew out of the 'characteristic subjection of the peasantry.'²¹

Sukhbir Choudhury, talking about peasants' and workers' movements in India, says that they had been considerably influenced by a number of historical developments: the October Revolution in Russia (1917), the Independence movement led by Gandhi and the emergence of the CPI.²² The preceding discussion shows that the situation in Sikkim does little to support his contention, nor does it lend support to the contention of Zagoria that a peasant revolution cannot take place only when there is a large scale family-size tenancy system, it also depends on their socio-economic status, the perception of their own situation, the

weakness of the State and elites, and above all the presence of a revolutionary party such as the Communist Party.²³ The same stands true of the peasant uprisings in Punjab due to the alienation of lands to the urban moneylenders,²⁴ or the upper stratum of tenants acquiring landownership, hiring labourers and the mass eviction of tenants.²⁵

The findings in Sikkim support the contentions of Gough that the peasant revolution is due to the relative deprivation of economic gains, heavy brutality and ethnic persecutions.²⁶ They also support those of Pande that it is due to heavy taxes levied on the peasants by the local kings, jagirdars, and zamindars;²⁷ and of Sen that it is due to enhancement of rent, evictions and exactions of landlords or moneylenders under the feudal system.²⁸

Therefore, it is clear that the peasant struggles cannot be explained entirely in economic terms as is believed by many. Though the basic grievances may be economic—whether against the landlords or feudal lords, moneylenders, jagirdars, or the State itself—such grievances in themselves have not resulted in a revolution. The leadership, whatever may be the personal interests of the leaders themselves, has been found to be important. Above all, the political mobilization of the peasantry, whether by individual leaders or political parties, has been found a necessary factor in any peasant movement. However influential it may otherwise have been in the recent years, this conclusion may seem to contradict the subaltern school of thought on peasant movements but it has the strong support of the incidents in Sikkim.

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