

Changing Land Relations in an Angami Village

ABSTRACT

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Abstract

1. Introduction: Studying Land Relations in a Tribal Society

This study sought to identify the changes taking place in a tribal society, namely the Angami tribe in Nagaland. The village selected for intensive study is Jakhama village in the Southern Angami area also known as Japhfūphiki meaning villages at the foot of the Japhfū peak. The Southern Angamis identify themselves as the Zuonuo-Kehoynuo and demand that this name be granted recognition as distinct from the Western Angamis called Tengima (Das 1987:133-134).

The term "land relations" refers to the relationship of people to land in an agrarian society. In short, it refers to the ownership, control and access to the use of land. By agrarian society, it means a society that depends primarily on agriculture as the principal economic activity. Land relations in an agrarian society give rise to agrarian classes and are, therefore, the foundations of social organisation of an agrarian society. This is true also in tribal societies. However, land relations and agrarian classes are not static entities but undergo changes in response to various factors.

In an agrarian society, the term "land" itself is comprehensive because it includes all types of land, agriculture and non-agriculture, as also forests and water resources. While agricultural land is use for cultivation, non-agricultural land includes house sites, grazing grounds, and land set aside for other non-agricultural activities. Forests of all type have a direct bearing on agriculture because they are essential for an.

ecological balanced use of land. Water resources may be in the form of rivers and streams, springs and wells, canals and drains.

One can understand the significance of land in an agrarian society when we compare the perspectives of an urban citizen and a villager. For an urban citizen, land is the space for building houses, offices, factories and other structures. However, for a villager, land is his most prized possession because it is the source of his livelihood. His survival depends on agriculture, and his social life revolves around it.

Ownership of land in agrarian societies can be individual or communal. Individual ownership implies that the land exclusively belongs to an individual and others have no access to it. Common ownership implies that individuals have access to the land owned in common.

It is possible that a villager does not own any land either individually or as a member of a group. In such a case, he may acquire the use of land through the institution of tenancy giving rise to a set of land relations distinct from ownership. There is also another possibility. It can happen that a villager neither owns land nor is capable of becoming a tenant. He may then work on the fields of someone else for wages. Then he becomes an agricultural labourer. It is also possible that an agricultural labourer will have some land, which he cultivates. Nevertheless, it is also possible that he has no land at all. In the latter case, he is a landless agricultural labourer.

There is a close relationship between the types of agriculture and land relations, which in turn result in the formation of different classes. Where shifting cultivation and simple sedentary cultivation predominate, communal ownership tends to be the norm. The community owns Land and an individual household is allotted a plot or selects a plot for cultivation. In such a situation, there is no question of tenancy of

any type. Hence, there are no significant economic inequalities. However, with plough cultivation, individual ownership becomes significant. Some form of tenancy can also emerge. This, in turn, leads to significant economic and social inequalities and results in class formation. As the importance of plough cultivation increases, land relations become more complex leading to greater inequalities and the emergence of other classes like that of agricultural labourers. In this study, we are concerned with land relations and agrarian classes in a tribal society in North East India. At the same time, we need to have some understanding of the land relations, agrarian classes and agrarian structure as they exist in a society. For this reason, we shall look at the situation found in India.

It is not easy to make an inventory of all the agrarian classes found in India and to arrange them in a hierarchy because not only the agrarian structure varies from region to region but chiefly because of the complex system of land relations that have emerged due to different factors. Thomer (1956 : 4-6) provided a model of agrarian class structure in India consisting of three major categories, namely, Maliks, Kisans and Mazdoors, - with sub-categories in each of them. Dhanagare (1983:15) has modified this model and identified the following agrarian classes in India:

- (1). Landlords: Holding large tracts of land, usually absentee owners.
- (2) Rich peasants: consisting of rich landowners and rich tenants, both with considerable holdings and employing labourers to carry on cultivation under their personal direct supervision. Rich tenants often sub-let land to others.

(3) Middle peasants: consisting of landowners of medium size holdings and tenants with substantial holdings with tenurial security. The middle peasants normally depend on family labour, but may hire-in seasonal labour.

(4) Poor peasants consisting of landowners of small holdings, tenants with small holdings with some tenurial security, and tenants at will and share-croppers.

(5) Landless labourers.

This inventory of agrarian classes is said to be applicable to the whole of India.

However, it may be only partially applicable to an understanding of the situation in the tribal belts of the country because of the tradition of communal ownership of land and an egalitarian ethos. There are further variations between the different tribal areas. In the case of the tribal areas of central India, the agrarian structure of the past has changed over the decades due to massive land alienation to outsiders and development induced displacement (Fernandes 1998:287). Even in North-East India, the situation varies considerably between different areas in terms of socio-economic settings and economic change. (Karna 1990 : 31).

Studies on the agrarian question in India have generated debates on the mode of production in Indian agriculture and the patterns of class formation and class alignment in Indian rural society. The present study will look at these social phenomena in tribal societies by examining and analysing the situation in the Angami society.

A proper understanding of land relations in the local understanding is essential for formulating policies for legislative and developmental interventions in the agricultural sector. They may have been egalitarian in former times and may be

upholding an egalitarian ethos. Yet, they have not been immune to factors leading to inequalities. Hence, there is a need to study land relations in tribal societies.

Aims and Objectives:

The present study is an attempt to examine, analyse and understand the changing land relations among the Angami Naga tribe by taking into account the unique features of the tribe and its history. The main objectives are:

1. To identify and describe the traditional pattern of land relations among the Angami tribe
2. To understand the pattern of land relations and its linkages with the tribal social structure.
3. To examine and analyse the nature of changes taking place in land relations and agrarian structure in Angami society.
4. Finally to identify the factors and forces of changes and the effects of these changes on Angami social organisation.

It can be seen that these are rather modest objectives, with no pretensions to building up any theory and testing any hypothesis. This is because the basic objective of this study is to grasp reality as it is and to understand the changes taking place.

Methodology:

In order to study changing land relations in a society it is necessary to take into account historical developments. Unfortunately, in the case of the Angamis historical material is scanty. Whatever material is available at the various offices like the village council office, the Block Development office and the district office has been examined. Ultimately, given the limited nature of historical material and written records, it is necessary to have recourse to oral traditions. Sanyu (1992)

has used this method in tracing the pre-British history of the Angami Nagas. Secondly, there is a tendency in portraying the past of Naga tribes as one of harmony and peace. From this perspective, the present is not always seen objectively. Hence it is necessary to examine the real situation as found in the day to day life of the villagers. This has been done through intensive field work at the village level.

Intensive field work was done in Jakhama village in the Southern Angami area. This village was selected because it is a typical Angami village. With regard to agriculture it has both terrace cultivation and shifting cultivation, a combination typical of Angami villages. The social organisation of the village is also typical of an Angami village. Until recently, Jakhama was relatively isolated. Jakhama is a very large village with an area of about 4,300 hectares and a population of more than 1000 household and 5,000 persons.

Data collection in general and interviews in particular have not been easy for various reasons. In the first place, no reliable information is available in any office. Secondly, people are not willing to give information without hesitation. This is because many are unwilling to share information about their wealth or lack of it, lest it be used against them. Hence, there was a need to constantly reassure the respondents.

2. The Angami Nagas : An Overview

The Angami Nagas have a distinct habitat and social organisation. Angami social organisation is segmentary in nature and consists of interlocking segments of patrilineal descent groups. In this segmentary structure, the village is at the apex of the pyramid and the household is the basic unit. The principle of patrilineage is so

strong and it is only through the father that a member receives his or her identity, and a female does not lose it through her marriage into a new patrilineage. In this social organisation, land is the basic factor because a patrilineage called serra is anchored to a definite territory within the residential site of the village. Thus, there is an intrinsic and necessary link between social organisation and land. Further, due to the practice of terrace cultivation, traditional Angami law recognises ownership of land by individuals, households, lineages, clans, khels and the village as a whole.

Land is the most highly valued form of property because of the agrarian nature of Angami society. However, there are different types of land. Apart from the house site and the residential area, the most important and valued types of land consist of terrace fields, especially those with assured supply of water from the stream. Next in importance are the terrace fields that depend on the rains for irrigation. Then the fields used for jhum or shifting cultivation.

Rivulets and streams are also important forms of property because they are the primary source of water for the fields. Similarly, water channels that carry water to the fields are also important forms of property. The importance of forest as a form of property is due the fact that the forest is the source of timber, firewood, medicinal plants, various edible fruits, green fodder for the cattle, and so on.

Two aspects of immovable property, particularly of land, must be noted. The first is that every field, plot of land, or at least an area of the village, has a name. Usually the name indicates the type of field or plot and its use. However, much more importantly, the name of a field or plot indicates that it has an owner because the very fact of naming implies the establishment of ownership. The second aspect is that every field or plot or area, and even the village itself, has a clearly demarcated

boundary. The traditional demarcation of boundary is very simple and convenient and it is continue. Rivulets, streams, stones, trees, ridges and any other identifiable feature are means for boundary demarcation. These objects may be movable or stationary but it is an offence to remove them.

The origin of the patterns of land holding and ownership system may be trace back to the history of the establishment of a village. It was customary for the Angamis to have members from different clans while establishing a village due to the practice of exogamy as well as for the purpose of defence against aggressions. Plots of land were allotted to each clan and families to construct their residential house. Similarly, arable land was distributed among them and portions of other types of land and forests were allotted to them. As terrace cultivation requires permanent fields and intensive labour, it is likely that individual ownership in terrace fields came to be recognised in course of time. This acceptance of individual ownership must have been extended to other types of land wherever it was found useful or necessary. Thus over the centuries a distinctive pattern of land ownership emerged (Goswami 1985: 96). A consequence of such a distribution of land every Angami household had some land, and at the same time no land was without an owner.

3. Jakhama Village and its Agriculture

There is no written document about the origin of Jakhama village. However, there are oral traditions passed on from one generation to another. It is the second largest village in the Southern Angami area also known as Japhföhiki or villages at the foot of the Japfü peak. Originally, Jakhama was known as Zhokhami meaning the land of the people who blocked the Mezhomi the Zeliang headhunters

Until the coming of the British, each Angami village was autonomous or even independent. Each village had its own self-sufficient subsistence economy, political organisation and social relations. The isolation of Jakhama and other southern Angami villages ended in January 1832 when two British officers, Captains Jenkins and Pemberton, along with 700 soldiers and 800 porters marched through their area from Manipur to Assam. Their objective was to find a route from the kingdom of Manipur to the British territory in Assam. It is said, that the Angamis harassed them along the way. In order to prevent such raids, the British decided to exercise control over the Angami area and regularly sent punitive expeditions. The most common form of punishment was the burning of villages. In the case of Jakhama, the British burnt down the village on two or three occasions. At the same time, the British offered protection to those villages who subjected themselves to the British. Through such punitive and friendly measures, the British gradually established their control over the Angami area. Eventually, in 1878, the British set up their headquarters at Kohima. Ultimately, British subdued all the villages and established control over them. They also decided to collect house taxes and revenue from each village.

The end of the Second World War ushered in a new period of political unrest in the form of Naga movement. Jakhama was actively involved in the movement and Mr Visarü Angami of Jakhama was elected President of the Naga National Council. In 1950 he was succeeded by Mr Z. A. Phizo. In the armed struggle that followed in later years, Jakhama was one of the villages that came under the control of the Indian security forces. This culminated in the establishment of the Zakhama Military

Station, which became the Headquarters of the 8th Mountain Division of the Indian Army.

In addition to the Military Station, Jakhama assumed some importance in recent years as a centre for civil administration. It became the headquarters of the Jakhama Circle, and at present, there is a Civil S.D.O. There are also other Government establishments like the Primary Health Centre, Veterinary Dispensary, Rural Development Block Office and Offices of Social Welfare Department. These developments have affected the rural character of Jakhama as we shall see later. The coming of Christianity and education are of considerable importance. At present Jakhama is a fairly well known place. In addition to the old village, there is a township called Jakha Town. The development of the town was gradual. It began as the Headquarters of the Rural Development Block. The establishment of St Joseph's College also affected the village since it began to attract a large number of students from different parts of Nagaland.

Jakhama is the fourth largest village in Nagaland in terms of population. There has been a steep increase in the number of households and population between 1981 and 1991. This was the period when Jakha Town began to grow rapidly due to the establishment of St Joseph's College and several Government offices leading to a large influx of students and others. Sex ratio seems to have deteriorated rapidly and also adverse to females. But if we take the village alone, we find that in 1991, sex ratio in the village alone was 878, and in 2001 it was 1041. This is definitely an indication that there were many more males in the town than in the village, most of them being students.

In 1971, as many as 88.38% of the main workers were cultivators, and among females 97.90% were cultivators. There were no agricultural labourers. Already in 1981 the percentage of cultivators declined sharply to 58.54%. There was a further sharp decline in 2001 with only 19.82% working as cultivators. This decline in the percentage of cultivators is accompanied by a corresponding rise in the workers in other occupations, but not in the percentage of agricultural labourers. Another feature is that In 2001, there was a significant percentage of workers, namely, 25.81%, who were marginal cultivators. Thus, there was a shift from being full time cultivators, to part time cultivators, and to other professions. The most obvious explanation is that the economy of Jakhama has been changing from being purely agricultural to a non-agricultural economy. Nevertheless, agriculture continues to be an important economic activity.

According to Hutton (1969 : 72) the most striking difference between the Angami and other Naga tribes is that Angami practise terrace cultivation and grow rice in wet fields while other tribes practise shifting cultivation. . Hutton (1969: 72-73) has described the preparation of terrace fields in the following words.

The method of preparing land for wet cultivation is to dig and build the side of the hill into terraces from 2 to 20 feet broad, even 200 feet broad if the ground is level enough. The stones taken out of the soil are used to bank up the walls of the terraces. These terraces are irrigated by channels which carry water from some stream or torrent for a distance that may sometimes be measured in miles, some fields being fed on the way. Each terrace, of course, cannot have its own channel, but usually obtains water either from the next terrace above it, or from one of the terraces in the same row, the terraces being so carefully graduated that the water may

flow from terrace to terrace round a whole spur and back again to a point little below that from which it started

Manure in the form of cow dung collected by the owners of the cows is frequently applied to the terrace fields, and cattle are often turned into the terraces to graze in the cold weather with the same end. In addition to manuring, the only other preparation of the fields for the crop consists of digging them over and puddling them when the fields have been flooded.... Meanwhile the seed paddy has been sown thickly on a patch of dry ground late in March or early in April, and the seedlings are ready for transplantation about the beginning of June. After transplantation, the fields need cleaning two or three times. The harvest is usually ready about the end of October and the first half of November.

The practice of terrace cultivation described by Hutton has not changed, except in some minor details such as the occasional application of artificial manure like urea and a rare use of power till.

4. Agrarian Structure of Jakhama

The traditional agrarian structure of Jakhama village is made of cultivators alone and today inspite of their decrease in number and proportion, the cultivators continue to exist as the only agrarian class in Jakhama.

There are three basic types of land in an Angami village, namely, 1) terrace fields, 2) jhum fields, and 3) forest. A household can individually own all the three types. In any case, it must own some terrace fields, because the ownership of terrace fields goes with the membership of the village. A household that does not own some terrace fields is an anomaly. In addition to the terrace fields, a household may or

may not individually hold jhum fields and forest. If it does not individually hold jhum fields and forest, it still has access to such land owned by their lineage, clan or khel. Here we are interested in ownership rather than mere access. Considering this situation, there are four possibilities with regard to the ownership of land by a household.

1. A household may own only terrace fields.
2. A household may own terrace fields and jhum fields.
3. A household may own terrace fields and forest.
4. A household may own terrace fields, jhum fields and forest.

Though the extent of land varies from household to household, no household is landless. However, this is a diversified class of cultivators because of inequalities of ownership of land in general, and of terrace fields in particular. They are:

1. Cultivators depending on daily wages: This group of cultivators depends on daily wages to supplement their income.
2. Cultivators with low interest in cultivation: Their interest is marginal because they have other sources of income or government jobs with a reasonable pay.
3. Marginal cultivators: This category is the largest but not uniform. Some are marginal cultivators with other sources of income while some can be considered as self-sufficient cultivators.
4. Self-sufficient cultivators: Their yield is between 61 and 90 baskets of paddy and most of them are either employed or running hostels for college students.
5. Prosperous cultivators: Their yield is between 91 to 120. They are prosperous because some of them own all types of land but like other categories, this class of cultivator is not uniform.

The existence of different classes with inequalities in the possession of land implies that there have been transactions in land. In Jakhama, such transactions have taken place through:

1. Inheritance: Possession of ancestral land implies membership of clan, khel and privileges. Every male member inherits some portion of land.
2. Giving and receiving land as a gift: The practise of giving and receiving land is embedded in the Angami tradition. For instance, land received by the mother is transmitted to the daughter.
3. Renting out and renting in land for cultivation: This is usually practise between persons who are closely related with some form of rent either cash or kind. Now this is quite common since many are employed and stay outside the village
4. Selling and buying land: This has been practised even in former time, though there are various aspects that need to be examined.
5. Acquisition of land for public purposes: Another important form of land transaction is in the form land acquisition for public purposes.
6. Other forms of land acquisition is such as gambling: There are cases of loss of land through gambling. What is significant is that land is gambled away as any piece of commodity.

These forms of land transaction indicate that like any other valuable or commodity, fields or land can be bought and sold, gifted or received as gift, and even gambled with. This is actually the commodification of land.

5. Change and Continuity in Land Relations

Jakhama was a typical Angami tribal village till about 1971 with a subsistence economy based on agriculture. Terrace cultivation was the main mode of production while shifting cultivation was practiced to some extent to supplement food production. However, The importance of agriculture as the mainstay of the economy of the village began to decrease. Non-agricultural occupations gradually became the mainstay of the economy. Simultaneously, despite the growth in population, the number and proportion of cultivators began to decrease to a significant extent.

As already seen, the only agrarian class that existed was that of cultivators. However, this class has become internally diversified into different segments. This is a disturbing trend in a tribal society that was characterised by a basic sense of equality. The lowest segment is made up of those cultivators who depend largely on daily wages and the highest segment is made up of those who are cultivators only in name. This situation implies a transition from a society noted for economic and social equality to a society marked by internal economic and social stratification.

This transition has been accompanied a change in land relations. The following are the major changes in land relations.

1. Emergence of absolute ownership by individuals,
2. Transition from communal ownership to individual ownership
3. Emergence of tenancy

Several factors have been at work to give rise to the present situation in Jakhama.

These are:



1. Demographic factors, chiefly a steep rise in population, mean more mouths to feed and more children to educate. This has led to extension of cultivation and a need for more cultivable land among the agricultural households.
2. Political factors like insurgency and recent peace movements, the establishment of new political institutions, administrative structures and developmental activities. This has resulted in a significant rise in government employment and a regular flow of government funds as salaries of government servants and for developmental activities. This has affected the occupational structure with a shift away from agriculture.
3. Cultural factors are chiefly conversion to Christianity and education. Christianity has weakened traditional animist beliefs and made it possible to think of fields and forests as nothing more than material things and to treat land as commodity. Education has introduced ideas that consider land and agriculture from a purely economic perspective.
4. Economic factors came on the scene with the coming of British colonialism and the integration of even the remotest village into the colonial Indian economic system. This process has continued even after India's independence in spite of the Naga movement. Consequently, the processes of liberalization and globalizations have affected all the Naga villages. The traditional self-sufficient subsistence economy of the village has been incorporated into the national and even global economy.

6. General Conclusions

As indicated the present study is an attempt to examine, analyze and understand the changing land relations among the Angami Naga tribe by taking into account the unique features of the tribe and its history. Based on this study it is possible to draw some general conclusions.

In the first place, though this study has dealt with the unique nature of agrarian changes in Angami society, such changes may be found in other Naga tribal societies as well. This is because the same forces of changes are at work also in other tribal societies in Nagaland.

Secondly, the changes in land relations observed in Angami society may be found in other tribal societies in the North-East because of the common features shared by them. In particular, it is possible that in most tribal societies of the North-East a change is taking place from communal ownership to individual ownership even where individual ownership was not recognised by traditional law. Similarly, it is likely that tenancy as a new form of land relations may also be emerging in such tribal societies.

Finally, it can be presumed that these changes will seriously affect the communitarian dimension of tribal life and lead to the emergence of sharpened economic and social inequalities in the tribal societies of the Northeast.

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