

AGRARIAN RELATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT IN SIKKIM

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Abstract

Sikkim being overwhelmingly rural with almost no ecological scope for heavy industrialisation, the development policies are and have to be heavily directed towards the agrarian sector. The present development programmes are largely stereotypes of the programmes executed or under execution elsewhere and not based on the knowledge of the region itself. This state remained unstudied all these years specially in agrarian terms.

This paper therefore seeks to depict the agrarian relations as they have evolved in Sikkim with special interest to identify the constraints to development. A few tentative suggestions for development have been added too.

Introduction

Sikkim, the 22nd State of India, has a total area of 7096 square kilometres on which 3,16,385 people live. The density of population (which is 45 per sq. kms) is perhaps one of the lowest in India. It did not have any urban area until 1951 in the sense that none of its markets had a municipality, a minimum population of 5 thousand, more than 75 percent of the male workers engaged in non-agricultural occupations and the density of population higher than 4 hundred persons per square kilometre. In 1951 only did the East district have some urban population : its North, South and West districts could grow 2.5, 2.3 and 1.9 percent urban population respectively only in 1971. The percentages of urban population in the four districts of Sikkim, as per 1981 Provisional Census, are : North : 2.96, East : 31.33, South : 7.09, and West : 2.28.

While the figures on the urban areas are not available, they are expected to be lower than the figures for population.

This shows how important it is to discuss the agrarian relations in Sikkim : to understand Sikkim, to understand the intricacies of development in the hill areas, and to envisage strategies for developing an area short of urbanization.

Agrarian society in Sikkim : a brief recapitulation

Not much is known about the agrarian society of Sikkim before the establishment of the Namgyal Dynasty (1642). Authentic records pertaining to this period are wanting and the few stray references to it do not help us to draw a comprehensive picture. During even the pre-Namgyal period of Sikkim, lands were measured in **Dhoors** or paces of land and taxes were collected from the tenants on that basis. There were lessees called **kazis** who held lands from the Maharajas as rewards for service or as inducements. Such lands could be inherited (Sikkim, Agril. Census : 8).

Until the large-scale immigration from Nepal, Sikkim had broadly three categories of people : the king and the chiefs on the **kazis**, **thikadors** (lessees) and royal councillors in the middle ; and the peasants at the bottom. The king and chiefs were ethnically either Lepchas or Bhutias with the exception of one Mangar Chief. The middle rung was also in the power of the Lepcha-Bhutias—a few Nepalis were made thikadars and even councillors but that was much later. The lowest stratum was a mix-up of the Lepchas, Bhutias, Mangars, and the Limbus.

Later, with a heavy influx from Nepal, the Nepalis dominated the bottom class while a few of them got an entry into the middle as well. But even then it is difficult to say whether the bottom class was internally stratified. There were mainly two types of tenants : **Nangzans** and **Zimchungpas**. The former referred to the constant Palace attendants and the latter, to those who served the Maharaja on tours (Namgyal and Maharani 1908 : 107). The **Nangzans** had to clean the utensils, attend to the cow-shed or the stable.

Since pork and beef used to be a part of the menu at the Palace, the high caste Nepalis and the Newars opted for Zimchungphship rather than Nangzanship despite the former being more strenuous. No status difference, however, between these two categories of tenants is known to be recorded.

Inequality among the peasants developed in the course of the Tibetan rule for about three centuries. It is written (Namgyal and Maharani op. cit : 24), for example, that each of the 'well-to-do' raiyats living in the estates of Rabdentse Palace used to pay one **pathi** (2.48 kg.) of rice and half a **seer** (450 gm.) of butter as holiday or puja offerings to the Palace. This was later raised to 9 **pathis** of paddy and 12 **pathis** of millet from each. The middle class raiyats used to contribute then 6 **pathis** of paddy and one load (about 20 kg.) of millet each. And the **kazis** paid both summer and winter tributes to the Palace in the form of a bull, a pig, loads of rice and millet.

This shows that there were categories of raiyats with unequal status but what was the nature of relationship between them is not known except the relationship between the raiyats on the one hand and the tax collectors, landlord lessees on the other. The raiyats, irrespective of differentiation within, had to render free services of labour to their landlords, headmen and the account-assistants of the headmen. The landlords had unlimited powers over civil and criminal matters and could easily dispossess a raiyat if they chose to (Basnet 1974 : 73). With such powers in hand, they made unscrupulous uses of the raiyats in the form of free and forced labour like **kalo-bhari**, **zharlangi** and **kuruwa**. It is pertinent here to briefly dwell upon these.

The **kalo-bhari** (lexically black-load) was the symbol of movement against forced labour in Sikkim led by Sonam Tshering Lepcha and Tashi Tshering Bhuttia. The raiyats had to carry loads wrapped with tarpaulin across the border to Tibet. The British political officer stationed at Gangtok requisitioned coolies from the Maharaja and the landlords'

duty was to collect them through the village headmen. Such coolies were paid very low wage, often not even as much as the official rate; on top of that the risk of life, while carrying a load of about a **maund** (37.5 kg. approx.) across the snow-bound border, was high indeed. Many of them died on the way for which there was no compensation. When they failed to comply, they would be whipped, jailed or fined depending on the capacity and whims of the **kazis** and **thikadars**.

Under **zharlangi** system, the raiyats had to carry loads within the country for the tourists and officers without any payment. The incoming tourists and officers came into Gelkhola by train, where they were picked up by coolies. Coolies in groups would be waiting for the loads to come at different places like Gangtok, Singtam, Gelkhola, Melli and Rangpo. They—the **Khruwas** as they were called—had to wait in such stations, with their own arrangement of food and clothes, for at least 15 days after which another batch of villagers would come and replace them.

Besides, they had to render free labour to their respective landlords, headmen and the account-assistants. This system was lifted up 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 areas, however, the earlier system continued.

Lack of education, communication facilities and political consciousness favoured the feudal lords to make the most of their power for a long time. The feudalism in Sikkim had taken the ugliest form during the fag-end of its life, throwing the peasants to the limits of endurance.

Peasant resistance against feudalism

Resistances to such appropriations by the landlords and other power holders were rather mild compared to the magnitude of the problem. The protest against **kalo-bhari** which took place in the summer of 1942 was almost confined

to Gangtok and accompanied by little violence. The raiyats gathered at the Palace for loads and shouted and destroyed the records and files of the Palace. They finally withdrew after 5 days with a verbal assurance that the **kalo-bhari** would be abolished.

The following three peasant organizations sprouted immediately after that : **Praja Sudharak Samaj**, **Praja Sammelan** and **Praja Mandal**. Later Tashi Tshering who had established the **Parja Sudharak Samaj** brought all the three organizations together and formed the first ever political party in Sikkim—the Sikkim State Congress—on December 7, 1947. The objectives were : abolition of landlordism, introduction of a responsible government, and Sikkim's accession to India. The Maharaja of Sikkim accepted the first two demands in 'principle' but categorically denounced the third demand and even organized, with the help of other **kazis**, the Sikkim National Party to counteract the activities of the Sikkim State Congress.

By August, 1948 the **zharlangi** and **kalo-bhari** were abolished by a notification issued by the Palace.

In 1949 started the 'No-Rent Movement' under the prominent leadership of Nayan Tshering Lepcha and Chandra Das Rai. The peasants till then had to pay their taxes through the intermediaries like **kazis** who collected taxes whimsically as there was no proper measurement of land. They demanded that they would pay the revenue directly to the Palace and not through the intermediaries. The landlords reportedly twisted it to mean 'no-rent at all' which the Palace believed and arrested as many as 35 people in February, 1949. Finally, the Palace issued a notification on 20th August, 1949 announcing that the land revenue previously paid to the agents of the estates could be paid directly to the Government. This notification, however, did not include the revenue administration in 15 private estates of the Maharaja and 5 monastery estates, which together comprised of about 53 thousand acres.

The 1973 Movement spread much wider than the earlier two movements, and was marked by violence, arson, loot lathi-charge and firing. Apparently, this movement was 'political' as one of their demands—the immediate installation of democracy—caught maximum attention. But it was 'peasant' in spirit because not only the participants were peasants but the whole thing arose from the conviction that their lot would not change if autocracy continued. In their experience, the land reforms made so far were only in 'principle' or in the form of notifications while in practice nothing has changed for good in the rural areas. Ruling the peasants in Sikkim on the basis of notification, nonetheless, continued till 1975.

Built-in inequality : some scratches

One such notification issued in 1950 classifies the raiyats into the following two broad heads :

1. **Primary holders**—referring to the lessees in their home farm areas and **bustiwallas** in their holdings. The latter referred to a person with rights to possess, use, sell, mortgage and inherit the land.
2. **Secondary holders**—referring to the **kutiadars** and **adhiadars**. The former meant a person engaged in cultivation by giving a stipulated amount of cash or crop to the primary holders and the latter, one who was engaged in cultivation by giving half of the produce to the primary holders.

These secondary holders had rights to till the land for one agricultural year only and thereafter depended on the will of the primary holders. They did not have any legal protection of tenure till the Sikkim Cultivators' (Protection) Act ; 1975 was enacted (Sikkim Agril. Census : 9-10). But since the Government did not maintain any tenurial records the execution of the above hardly took place.

There were mainly three types of holdigs till Independence : (i) owned by the Government, (ii) under the

Private Estate of the Maharaja and (iii) Managed by the monasteries. The latter two types of holdings were abolished vide Notification No. 2627/2727 dated 6. 7. 1948 but like other notifications this one too went unheeded.

Until recently, the landlords and village headmen held large chunks of land. It was only in 1974 that a land ceiling was imposed vide Notification No. 8545/G maintaining that a **bustiwalla** could not hold more than 30 acres, **mandals** not above 30 and the **kazis/thikadars** not above 100 acres. However, the last category of people were allowed to hold lands upto 200 acres with the Government's approval and subject to the payment of Rs. 5/- per every 20 excess acres. There was also no limitation on their holdings of cardamom fields, orchards, homesteads, fodder and fuel forests, etc. (ibid : 14). Reports of the villagers however belie this : there are still some **kazis** who own as much as 15 hundred acres of land.

Inequality was practised on the basis of ethnicity too. The Nepalis, for example, paid Rs. 2 per acre ; of Class I paddy field but for the same amount of land the Lepchas and Bhutias paid only Rs. 1.8 **annas** (1 anna = 6 paise). For Class II paddy field the revenue per acre was Rs. 1.8 **annas** for the Nepalis and Re. 1.2 **annas** for the Lepcha-Bhutias. This system, introduced by Bell in 1915, was in vogue till the First Settlement Operation and proclamation of the Maharaja in August, 1956 (ibid : 11).

On the other hand, the average excess land per holding is much more among the Lepcha-Bhutias than among the Nepalis. For example, it is 14.9 acres among the Bhutias, 10.8 acres among the Lepchas and 6.7 acres among the Nepalis (Bhandari : 1958). Attempts to acquire excess lands have met with partial success : those who carry out this duty being mostly those who hold excess lands.

Agrarian relations in Sikkim : the present state of art

Over the years, the agrarian relations have taken different turns in different villages and it is difficult to find two villages where such relations are uniform. If the altitude, span and aspect of the villages (which influence the agrarian relations to a great extent) are same the nature of land is different. And if all these forces are equally operative in two villages, the impact of the forces of modernization varies in degree. Nevertheless some broad patterns can be delineated.

There are mainly two significant agrarian classes in the State : the **pattadars** or those who own land and **pakhureys** or those who are landless, roughly corresponding with the above classification of 'primary' and 'secondary' holders. Economically, the difference between these two classes is often obscure and the intra-class difference becomes prominent. The political affiliations also, wherever they are found, cut across the class boundaries. However, socially the difference is clear and is maintained mainly in respect of marriage negotiations.

There are many categories in such of these classes but all of them are not found in all the villages or in equal strength. But the owner cultivators constitute the largest percentage in almost every village.

In Sikkim, there are mainly three types of tenancies : **adhia**, **kudd** and **masikatta**. In the **adhia** system, the harvest is equally divided between the lessor and the lessee and at times even the subsidiary crops are equally divided. Under **kudd**, a stipulated amount of a particular grain is taken by the lessor as rent, irrespective of the amount of production. The subsidiary crops are usually left to the sharecroppers. A **masikatta** system demands that a fixed amount of cash be deposited with the landowner to cultivate his land for a fixed period of time which is usually for 5 to 10 years. This form of tenancy is agreed to in writing while the earlier two are verbal.

There is one more form of tenancy in Sikkim known as **tanam**. It is a system of tenure in which a family cultivates the land belonging to the landowner and takes away the total produce after paying a mutually decided amount of money. Thus, it is quite like **masikatta** system described above. But there are some differences between the two : while in a **masikatta** a piece of land is leased-in for a number of years, say five or ten, at a time, a **tanam** has to be renewed every year. Secondly, the former contract is written but a **tanam** is verbal. The rent for the land **tanam** may keep fluctuating every year depending on the nature of relationship between the lessor and the lessee or the pressure on land. While the area under **tanam** is not much in Sikkim almost half of such tenancies are under **tanam** only.

In the production process, the role of the various agrarian categories is not always equally important. A particular category is not often important landwise or tenancywise but not so when it comes to the question of labour or capital. The non-cultivators' category, for sample, is important from the point of view of tenancy but its role is often confined to contributing 50 percent of the seeds required for the next season. If seen deeper, some other aspects may be found important. For instance, the non-cultivators advance loans during peak agricultural seasons at the rate of Rs. 60-80/- per **muri** (48.77 kg,) of unhusked paddy to be returned at the time of harvest. The same amount of paddy when husked and sold in the market fetches at least Rs. 240/-. The loanees cannot always return the amount of paddy worth the amount of loan especially when crops fail. (And crop failure is rather often these days due to ecological degeneration). Thus, they become indebted to the non-cultivators or the village rich and have to pay off by working as wage-labourers or add on to their bulk of debt. This is how the poor peasants are tied to the richer peasants and moneylenders.

The most important relationship in Sikkim's agrarian sector is perhaps the one between the lessors and the lessees.

I do not mean here that the relationship between other categories is less important. But the relationship between these two is most direct as such a relationship is based not only on land and labour but capital as well. The intensity of such a relationship depends partly on the amount of land or its quality and nature or on their personal relations.

The relationship between a lessor and a landowning lessee (*adhiawal*) on the one hand and a landless lessee (*pakhurey*) on the other, varies. One finds a wider distance between a lessor and a **pakhurey** than between a lessor and an **adhiawal**, irrespective of the amount of land leased. Such distances do not manifest themselves in day to day life. Only when the matter relates to matrimony does the above distance hold meaning.

But, the **pakhureys** suffer from a greater sense of insecurity than the **adhiawals** vis-a-vis their landowners. It is this socioeconomic insecurity perhaps which make the **pakhureys** produce as much as they can, for they cannot afford to disappoint the lessors. On the other hand, the **adhiawals** can, if they want to, take it easy. The **pakhureys** are therefore more exploited than the **adhiawals** : exceptions arise when the lessor is an absentee landowner staying away from the village. Though every village does not have such landowners, the amount of land under them, wherever they are, is usually much more than the number of their households.

The typical hill labour exchange systems like **parma** (reciprocal and direct exchange) and **hoori** (cyclical and indirect exchange) also play an important role in the production relations of Sikkim. Since more and more villagers are today attracted toward non-agricultural works getting labourers for agricultural work is becoming difficult. Nor is it easy to get labourers on hire as the wage is still very low (Rs. 4—5 per day for males and Rs. 3—4 per day for females). The non-agricultural works, on the other hand, fetch them at least double the amount. Even though such

employers do not provide the workers with food and drink as in the agricultural works, the workers are more attracted by the higher amount of cash. As a consequence, the villagers manage agricultural operations with the help of such exchange systems as mentioned above. Almost every agrarian category, except of course the absentee and non-cultivating owners, participates in these labour exchange systems.

This does not, however, mean that **parma** and **hoori** are of recent origin or which developed only after the people began to go for non-agricultural occupations. These systems are, on the contrary, as old as the villagers can remember. The new trends toward secondary and tertiary occupations have only contributed to their continuity. These otherwise would wither away under a stronger trend of capitalist formation characterised by wage-labouring.

The systems of tenure have their own share in the production relations. In this respect, the **adhia** system has the most important role to play. This system operates more commonly in the irrigated and otherwise productive areas than in the higher altitudes where land holds less attraction. Whenever a plot of land is leased-out on **adhia** cropping, the landowner keeps a close watch over how sincerely his lessee is cultivating, how much manure he is putting, and how much he is weeding, etc. He may even volunteer supervision at times or give a rebuff should the lessee scrimshank. The lessee is, on the other hand, never as keen on such tenures as he is in other forms like **masikatta**, **kudd** or **tanam**. For he knows that whatever be the amount of production has to be equally divided between him and the lessor when the latter practically has no investment on production.

In a **masikatta** system, on the other hand, the lessee is always interested to produce as much as he can and there is practically no control of the landowner over him. Unlike a **tanam** which is usually initiated by the lessees themselves,

a **masikatta** or **kudd** is, more often than not, initiated by the lessors. When a landowner needs a big amount of money and has no other way of getting it, he mortgages off his land on **masikatta**. Even under this system, the lessee usually invests little on cultivation in the year which terminates the contract. Even the **kudd** holders cannot always be very enthusiastic about it for the lessors may at times impose stricter terms of contract, thereby diminishing the share of the lessees.

The **adhia** tenure has, therefore, more scope to bring the lessors and the lessees into a closer interaction. The chances of an agrarian conflict are also, predictably, more pronounced under such tenures.

The land too has an important role in production relations. For example, the irrigated and low altitude lands have more of sharecroppers than the non-irrigated and high altitude lands. Consequently, there is more competition on such lands among them. It is in such areas mainly that the 'No-rent movement' of 1949 and the 1973 Movement had a wider support. This is probably because such areas are more prone to the exploitative tendencies of the landowners.

It is also noted that the migration of sharecroppers from the lower altitude, more fertile and urbanized areas to higher altitude, less fertile and less urbanized areas is taking place after 1950s. The richer peasants, with one or the other non-agricultural sources of income, are moving towards the opposite direction—towards more fertile and urban areas. The movement of the poorer section of people from areas with high to low land value and of the richer people from low to high land value is conspicuous throughout the State. The weakest among the weak are compelled by the situations to leave as they cannot face the competition in such areas. It is generally the **pakhureys** who are thrown out by the **adhiawals**.

It is partly this migration of the poorer people that is responsible for the quiet agrarian scene. It is only when the conditions were too bad that they have fought for survival.

The tension, before it is built up properly, finds a release through the movement of the oppressed. It is also perhaps responsible for the slow change into capitalist relations of production or the perpetuation of semi-feudal production relations.

Agrarian development in Sikkim : conclusion

If we look back at the history of Sikkim, considerable changes (which may be called development) have occurred in the agrarian relations of Sikkim. The slavery system, forced and free labour, vast inequality in landholding, etc. have been abolished through various legislations. It is true, that a sort of disguised slavery continues still but there is no institutionalised form of forced and free labour today. Inequality of holdings still continues but it is not as crude and stark as it used to be during the feudal Sikkim. And all this happened after the 1940s, i.e., within the last four decades or so.

Development with respect to infra-structure of Sikkim has also been noteworthy, especially after mid 70s. With the expansion of communication facilities and administrative machineries, the remote villagers today can earn some cash by selling their produce. It is true that it has not been an unmixed blessing in the sense that the intermediaries have increased in number. But earlier, the villagers in many areas had considerable difficulty in earning any cash. A major share of the manpower would be engaged in procuring food-staff and water from far-off places, Today, with the help of motor vehicles they can get things home much easily and at a much shorter time.

The introduction of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and insecticides, high yielding variety seeds, etc. is another important step in agrarian development. Though use of these innovations has not been very widespread, the production of agricultural crops has gone up wherever they have been used.

Education has been spreading rapidly in the last decade and the rate of literacy going up steadily. This has not only reduced the dependence on land (therefore on the big landowners for many) but also made the caste relations more lax. Rare, a few decades back, intercaste marriages are frequently taking place in its more dense and urbanized districts, East and South.

All this has an impact on agrarian relations. Such relations are gradually shifting from reciprocal to market-oriented. Wage-labouring is becoming more popular and the traditional control of the bigger landowners over the smaller ones is gradually loosening. Thus, the agrarian relations in Sikkim, instead of inhibiting the progress, are keeping pace with the changing social and political situations, however slow the pace may be.

More would come forth in this sphere had the existing bureaucrats not drawn heavily from the previous feudal class. Even those few other who could join them by virtue of their education and training have forgotten their brethren in the villages. And it is they who are largely responsible for making the land reforms measures a farce. The Land Reforms Department of Sikkim does not exist for all practical purposes. Even the election manifestoes of the political parties of Sikkim have ignored this.

Things would perhaps be a little better if Sikkim's peasants were politically more conscious (Such a lack of politicization of the peasants in Sikkim has been noted by Dhamala and Bhowmik 1985 : 124). Most of them support the Sikkim Sangram Parishad, whole heartedly. Despite enormous scope for the left parties to spread in Sikkim, there has not been any attempt so far towards it.

The ethnic division of the peasants in Sikkim has been another obstacle to the agrarian development. Such ethnic differences were initially fanned by the new middle class in Sikkim as competition for limited resources and avenues for employment became tougher day by day. Today the

Lepcha-Bhutias are jointly fighting against the domination by the Nepalis and all these three communities against the plainsmen. Even the villagers in remote corners of Sikkim are today aware of the growing ethnic tension. As a consequence the agrarian problems have been overshadowed by the ethnic problems.

It is difficult to guess till when the agrarian issues will remain dormant in Sikkim. The indications are that it will take quite some time. For the question of land has been deeply connected with the ethnic issues and if the ruling party led by a Nepali takes up this issue the Lepcha-Bhutias will raise hue and cry against it. The Lepcha-Bhutias being the larger holders still and having some constitutional safeguards will have their say in the State Assembly. The Nepalis will benefit more if the land reforms are implemented properly but they, despite being numerically dominant, cannot ignore the ethos of these Scheduled Tribes.

Finally, it should be pointed out that there is not much use following the beaten track : development through land reforms or agrarian reforms as it is suitable in many parts of India like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. What is required immediately is not really a change in the class relations but the modernization of the hill economy of Sikkim. Emphasis should be shifted, as far as possible, from agriculture to horticulture, silviculture, forest farming and other such occupations : more so because nothing is in its more dangerous state in Sikkim than its eco-system. Sikkim cannot be self-sufficient even if it proves to be a state with unequalled agrarian reforms and land relations. Its future is perhaps brighter if it starts restoring its ecology now : squabbles about land and ethnicity may only jeopardise it.

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