

Delivering the presidential address on the occasion of the Second Session of North East India History Association in 1981 Amalendu Guha aptly remarked 'if much remains to be done in political history ; the field of economic history remains almost barren'. The statement is not only appropriate but very nicely describes the status of contemporary historical writings on north east. We have, in fact, been fascinated more by the esoteric side of peoples' life than by their ordinary aspects. Naturally, our studies are bound to be one-sided unless we adopt 'a broader conception of peoples' organisation - one which will accommodate economic organisation as a vital dimension of it.' The historical study of agrarian systems and associated relations hold promise in this regard but has so far been little explored by the historians of north east India. By briefly showing the existing status of historical studies of agrarian systems in north east, this paper attempts to emphasize the direction in which these enquires should proceed.

Even a cursory look at the selected studies on the agrarian economy of this region brings out sharply the limitations of their scope¹. In absence of a systematic documentation of historical source materials and their proper utilization, it has not been possible to reflect upon agrarian class relations as are obtaining in the different parts of north-east.

Assam is the only territorial unit of the region which has been extensively studied by the social scientists in general and historians in particular. Guha's attempt to outline the evolution of the ryotwari land settlement in post-annexation Assam proper and its impact on the restructuring of the social classes is quite significant and fascinating². The nineteenth century Assamese society which was then undergoing a process of adaptation has received adequate attention in some of his other writings as well³. It has been appropriately suggested that the landlord economy of big landholders came directly into conflict with the peasant economy of small landholders that ultimately led to the great peasant upheaval of 1893-94⁴. We require more such inquiries covering other units of north-east because such investigations are expected to place contemporary agrarian problems in a proper perspective.

There have been some other attempts to examine the development strategies for north eastern region in historical framework

where we find some discussions on agrarian issues. For example, a study of the mode of agricultural production in the Garo Hills by Bhattacharjee shows the nature of agricultural practices during the nineteenth century⁵. However, the discussion here is more of a descriptive and ethnographic nature and lacks sufficient historical depth in its analysis that it claims to make. Any discussion of the mode of agricultural production without a reference to the nature and form of ownership, control and use of land remains peripheral as the basic problems faced by the peasantry are overlooked.

Another significant gap in research is the absence of study of the nature of peasant mobilisation during the nineteenth century which was a period of socio-political transition in north east. The hill people have always displayed a very high degree of courage and boldness. Topographical features and ecological settings of their habitat make them daring and adventurous. A vast majority of them has no doubt been shifting cultivators but their interest in and attachment with land have no less been intense than settled cultivators. They have naturally raised voice against any encroachment on their land. This dimension of tribal revolts has rarely been examined by historians of the region. There are references to these encounters between the local chiefs and common tribal-folk on the one hand and colonial agents on the other in several nineteenth century monographs but we have not found them worthy of historical consideration.

The situation with regard to the contemporary agrarian scene is not different from that of the colonial rule. Being a predominantly agricultural area the agrarian issues constitute the core of the economic problem in north east. Even the limited amount of research that has been undertaken recently find importance primarily because the question of agricultural development has acquired a political significance. Naturally, in most of such studies only physical and ecological factors associated with agricultural practices receive attention of the researchers. The institutional arrangements defined and shaped mainly by the customary rules and obligations have been kept out of the perview of these inquiries. The line of argument in these studies is similar to the one that dominated the thinking of scholars in pre-green revolution period in other parts of the country. However, some studies by researchers of diverse disciplines have attempted to throw some light on emerging agrarian questions which deserve our attention.

Land Problems and Land Reforms in Assam by Narendra Chandra

Dutta, *Shifting Cultivation in North East India* by NEICSSR and *Agriculture in the Hills : A Case Study of Meghalaya* edited by B. Datta Ray are pioneering attempts to highlight some institutional and structural problems of hill agriculture of the area⁶. Dutta provides a clear idea about agrarian structure, land systems land reform legislations and the consequences of land reform measures on the agrarian economy of Assam⁷. The study is based on the available published materials and the findings of the field investigations carried out by the author himself in the fifteen villages in the Zamindari areas of Goalpara and Cachar districts. The work no doubt lacks a perceptive research design that is usually required in such inquiries, one has to appreciate the way specificities of the Assamese agrarian structure get their treatment. Similarly studies included in NEICSSR and Datta Ray's volumes⁸ also provide us with glimpses of the changing agrarian relations in Northeast. Among them Lahiri's note on the patterns of landownership and control in the Khasi Hills and so also an inquiry into the emerging features of land ownership as associated with the growth of alternatives of jhuming in Garo Hills by Kar give clue to the economic hardships of small peasants, sharecroppers, and agricultural labourers.⁹ These crucial issues have rarely been debated by the scholars. It is important to emphasize here that the problems of land monopoly, proliferation of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers, land alienation and indebtedness are no longer unknown to the region and constitute the central part of the socio-economic reality.

How the nature of ownership can enrich our understanding is further evident from Misra's study¹⁰. By describing the actual functioning of the system of land tenure in the Syiemship of the territory of Maharam in the Khasi Hills he has examined some aspects of the patterns of landownership and agrarian relations as have been obtaining in the area. His evaluation of the prevailing situation is not only forthright but also indicates the direction in which agrarian relations may proceed in the Khasi villages. He suggests that 'the increasing destitution of the Khasi poor cannot be laid at the door of the traditional law of female ultimogeniture, for an archaic matrilineal inheritance could never have survived if it had gone against Khasi nobility'¹¹. Misra identifies the roots of such destitution in 'the traditions, laws and practices that govern the control and ownership of land'¹.

Some researches of late have been undertaken on medieval Tripura but most of them fail to do justice with the facts available

to them. D. N. Goswami, for example, has attempted to reconstruct the history of land system during the period of Govinda Manikya with the help of land grant records.¹³ Similarly, J. B. Ganguly has analysed the economic content of the state formation process in medieval Tripura which highlights some crucial agrarian issues of the period.¹⁴

It is thus obvious that agrarian system that constitutes a prominent component of economic history has consistently been ignored by researchers. Some studies have no doubt been taken up but they are yet to recognise the direction and nature of change in agrarian social structure of the region. The situation is quite baffling because both the tribal and non-tribal scholars fail to unravel the true nature of emerging agrarian relations, the former due to their so-called accountability to the customary systems and the latter for fear of the controversy that may be generated in course of such a discussion. Consequently, the approaches to the study of agrarian systems remain peripheral in the writings of historians, sociologists, economists and anthropologists alike. Their statements are always well-guarded to keep themselves at a safer distance and that too on the safer side. As a result, the historicity of the basic issues that perpetuate poverty and accelerate the process of emerging inequality are yet to be highlighted.

What I am trying to emphasize here is that we have ignored so far the most significant area of economic history which in our own admission is the primary objective of research in the history of the region. We have not even questioned the colonist and conservative assumptions about the society and culture of the northeast in general and tribal societies in particular. Studies undertaken by the British officials continue to guide our understanding of the problem. Most of these writings on northeastern India had used conceptual categories which were Eurocentric in value terms. Some of these, in fact, tended to distort history and imputed specific meanings to the social reality in a historical sense. It is mainly due to this approach that no systematic records of agrarian relations, peasant organisation and unrest are found in these earlier writings. The contemporary portrayal of the northeast's country side has followed almost the similar pattern. These societies have thus been projected as being static, timeless and spaceless in character. The tribal folks have been treated as hordes of sterile and wild creatures devoid of any virtue. The levels of social conservatism and religious orthodoxy have been exaggerated beyond limit.

Viewed from this angle my contention is that the study of

agrarian systems is one such area which needs our immediate attention. The mode of agricultural production and the nature of ownership and control over land determine the relations among various classes and individuals who are dependent on land. It is from this perspective that the inquiry into the nature of agrarian systems and peasant mobilisation has to be initiated to highlight crucial issues involved in the life of the people. However, it may not be an easy task in every society to identify and locate the position and role of different classes in the organisation of production because of the prevailing agrarian situation. The society that is traditionally less differentiated and has relatively more homogenous structure due to the primitive mode of agricultural production, it is very difficult to show the nature of agrarian relations in a well defined class terms. For example, the agrarian situation obtaining in tribal areas of north east India cannot be analysed easily in terms of relations between two sets of classes. The process of class formation has not followed a uniform pattern on account of the historicity of the situation. Among the factors responsible for such a development important ones are relative geographical isolation, continuance of shifting cultivation as a dominant mode of production, limited penetration of outside capital and persistence of primordial loyalties. What is being emphasised here is that in absence of a pronounced class division, the emerging agrarian situation in north eastern tribal areas cannot be adequately analysed strictly in 'class' terms. This problem can be examined properly by highlighting underlying processes through which new relations of production are growing in agrarian sector. By indicating the direction and specifying the tenor of the situation it is possible to reflect upon the emerging class relations. Such an exercise is possible only through a historical inquiry. Methodologically, the study of a process and dynamics of change requires a historical framework that goes beyond a mere sociological generalisation.

Some of these processes can be easily identified in the light of overall matrix in which they are located. Changing agricultural practices, fast emerging system of sharecropping, growing privatisation, increasing influence of modern market economy and role of the state in transforming land relations are some of the significant processes through which qualitative changes are taking place in the tribal economy of the north east.

The transition from shifting to settled cultivation in the hill areas is the most dominant trend today. While factors like population pressure, reduction in jhum cycle and overall socio-economic

changes have made the people themselves conscious of impending crisis involved in shifting cultivation, the government has also taken special steps to stop the practice. Since the conversion of jhum fields into settled one presupposes the grant of permanent, heritable and transferable rights to individuals, the process of privatisation is taking a firm root in these areas. Such a process is not only manifested in the transition in mode of agricultural production but it is evident in almost every aspect of economic life.

Similarly, the system of sharecropping which has been a rampant practice in the plains throughout the country but almost unknown in hill areas is now gradually becoming a widespread practice. Introduction of such an exploitative system where the sharecroppers are always deprived of their rightful claims is obviously creating a class division in the society that has traditionally been undifferentiated.

Another important process operating in the agrarian economy is the extension of modern market system to which almost all major tribal communities are now linked. The entire traditional economy is coming under the control of dominant market system. Consequently, changes are evident in every aspect of the economic life such as resources, activities and relationships. Impact of the free market mechanism of competition, accumulation and growing differentiation has already led to the growth of a class from among the tribals that has started questioning the traditional virtues of reciprocity and obligatory relationships.

The changing role of the state is another dimension which requires our attention in this context. During the colonial rule the state interfered in the tribal areas only to serve the interests of the British merchantile colonialism. However, the role of the state substantially changed with the advent of independence. While the colonial state served mainly the needs of its collaborators - customary landlords and rich peasants - the new state had to think in terms of the exploited and deprived classes of peasantry. It is this compulsion that has now increased the role of the state in agrarian sector. No government in independent India can ignore the problems of small peasants, sharecroppers and landless agricultural labourers. It is in this context that a historical analysis of the development of agrarian policy of government and its character has to be undertaken. Such an enquiry may provide a valuable insight into the process of change particularly in hill areas of the region which is also predominantly tribal.

Some of the processes identified above, if adequately studied

may give us a tremendous insight into the nature of transformation taking place in the north-east.

Notes & References

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10. Bani Prasanna Misra, 'Agrarian Relations in a Khasi State', *Economic and Political Weekly*, XIV No. 20, 1979, 888-892.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. See *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, Sixth Session, Agartala 1985, p. 77.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 146.