



Short Review Paper

A review of agrarian relations and changes in state Sikkim, India

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Abstract

It is the state Sikkim where De Facto control was ruled by the British from 1861-1947. A comprehensive picture of agrarian relations in Sikkim was evolved after the establishment of the Namgyal Dynasty (1642). The agrarian structure of Sikkim was monarchy based. In subsequent periods, migrant Bhutias were the ruling class over the indigenous Lepcha tribes & migrant Nepalese. Nepalese had to pay higher amount of rent which was abolished by the king in 1956. But when increased migrant Nepalese outnumbered the Lepcha-Bhutia population, they were prohibited from acquiring land especially in North Sikkim. Generally, three types of tenancy were formed in Sikkim—*adhia*, *kudd* and *masikatta*. After Sikkim becomes the 22nd Indian state in 1975, land reforms were an important step in the state of Sikkim which play an important role on agriculture sustenance.

Keywords: Agrarian relations, Indigenous community, Land reforms, Agriculture, Sikkim.

Introduction

As Sikkim is no longer fit for heavy industry, an attempt of studying agrarian relations has been an important concern for its structural change. Sikkim, the 22nd state of India having 610577 population (Census, 2011) covers 7096 sq km geographical area. Until 1951, it did not come under urban criteria except some part of its East District¹. Its North, South, and West Districts could grow with urban population only in 1971. So, agrarian relations have been also an important means of livelihood in Sikkim since long back. This article is an intensive review from two substantial works cited here: i. Subba, T. B. (1988). *Agrarian Relations and Development in Sikkim*, In Madhu S. Mishra (ed.), *Rural Development in Eastern India*, Calcutta: Indian Institute of Management, pp. 311-333. ii. Chakrabarti, A. (2010). A Critical Review of Agrarian Reforms in Sikkim. *Economic & Political Weekly*, (January 30), Vol XLV, NO. 5, pp. 23-26.

Sikkim, a North-Eastern state is naturally endowed and holds a fragile ecosystem which lies in the eastern Himalaya at elevation of 300 to 7000 meters above mean sea level (MSL)². Based on regional division (census of India), the north-eastern Himalaya is divided into four micro regions. The state of Sikkim is one of the four micro regions of the north-eastern Himalaya and besides, others are Darjeeling, Doors areas of West Bengal, and Arunachal Pradesh (HDR-2001)². The agriculture, animal husbandry and tourism are the main sources for sustaining livelihood in Sikkim. Agriculture of Sikkim is basically characterized by family farming. In many parts of the world, women play a major role in intensive farming practices. The indigenous communities have such valuable characteristics in managing agricultural biodiversity and maintaining this

knowledge³. The indigenous women of Sikkim have also played an important role in farming practices.

A Brief History of Agrarian Society in Sikkim

It was Namgyal Dynasty in 1642 to stray some references pertaining to the agrarian society in Sikkim. It has been known that during pre-Namgyal period, lands were measured in *Dhoors* or paces of land. The agrarian structure of Sikkim was monarchy based. All lands were belonged to the Maharajas. There were leesees called *Kazis* who held lands from the Maharajas as rewards for good service. Sikkim had broadly three categories of people: In the top-the king, the chiefs on *kazis*, *thikadars* (leesees); royal councillors in the middle; and the peasants at the bottom. Generally, king and chiefs were belonged to Lepchas and Bhutias. Lowest stratum was a mix-up of Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese. With the heavy influx from Nepal, they dominated at bottom level and few of them got an entry to the middle as well. A bottom layer was divided into two types of tenants- *Nangzans* (palace attendant) and *Zimchungpas* (served the Maharajas on tours).

Inequality among the peasants had developed in the course of Tibetan rule for about three centuries. Upper class raiyats used to pay one *pathi* (2.48 kg) of rice and half a *seer* (450 gram) to the palace during puja offering. The middle class raiyats used to pay 6 *pathis* of rice and 12 *pathis* of millet. *Kazis* paid both summer and winter tributes to the palace in the form of bull, pigs, loads of rice and millet. The land lord had ultimate power to the civil and criminals matter. They made some unscrupulous uses of raiyats in the form of free and forced labours like *kalo-bhari*, *zharlangi* and *khruwas*. The *kalo-bhari* (black load) had to carry loads of a *mound* (37.5 kg) with tarpaulin across the

border to Tibet. *Zharlangi* used to carry the loads of tourists and officer at various stations like Gangtok, Singtom, Milli etc. *Khruwās* had to wait at various stations with their own arrangement of food and clothes at least 15 days and replaced by the next batch.

They all were under various exploitative terms. The protest against *kalo-bhari* took place in 1942. Then a verbal assurance was given that *kalo-bhari* would be abolished. Tashi Tshering, the leader of *kalo-bhari* movement established the *Parja Sudharak Samaj* with the association of three peasants and then formed the first ever political party in Sikkim- “the Sikkim State Congress” on 7 December, 1947. The objectives were (i) abolition of landlordism (ii) introduction of responsible government and (iii) Sikkim’s association to India. The first two demands were accepted and in 1948 *zhanlangi* and *kalo-bhari* were abolished. In 1949, ‘No Rent Movement’ for direct pay of rent to the palace was raised and in 1949, it was allowed to do so.

By a notification issued in 1950, raiyats were classified into two broad categories.

Primary holders- referring to the lessors in their home farms area and *bastiwālas* in their holdings.

Secondary holders- referring to the *kutiadars* and *adhiadars*. The former meant a person engaged in cultivation by giving a stipulated amount of cash or crops to the primary holders. The later one engaged in cultivation by giving half of the produce to the primary holder.

Inequality was practised on the basis of ethnicity too. *Nepalese*, for example, paid Rs 2 for class-I land as a rent and *Lepchas-Bhutias* paid 1.8 anas (1 anas= 6 paisa) for the same amount of land. For the class-II land, *Nepalese* and *Lepcha-Bhutias* paid 1.8 anas and 1.2 anas respectively. This was in vogue from 1915-1956. It was the year 1974 when a land ceiling was imposed. A *bastiwāla* could hold up to 30 acres and *mandal* also the same but *kazis/ thikadar* could hold up to 100 acres even some times more up to 200 acres by government approval and subject to pay Rs. 5 per every 20 acres excess area.

Agrarian class relations

There are mainly two significant agrarian classes in the state of Sikkim- the *pattadars* who own possessed land and *pakhureys* (landless) corresponding to the primary and secondary land holders. Generally, three types of tenancy were formed in Sikkim-*adhia*, *kudd* and *masikatta*. In the *adhia* system the major crops and subsidiary crops were equally divided between lessor and lessee. *Kudd* had to pay a stipulated amount of food gains and not subsidiary crops. A *masaika* had to pay a fix rent in encashment for cultivating land usually a time period of 5-10 years. This kind of tenancy were agreed to in writing form and former two were verbal. Besides this, another form of tenancy to some extent difference from *masaika* named *tanam* used to pay

the same like *masaika*, but had to renew lands in every year and it was verbal contract. Non-cultivators also had come into relations to exploit poor peasants. At the time of peak agricultural season, they used to give advance loans to the poor peasants at the rate of Rs 60-80 per *muri* (48.77 kg) of unhusked paddy as pay off which after husked sold at least Rs 240. When the loaners could not pay off due to failure of crops they were added to the bulk of debt and have to pay off by wage labourers.

This type of exploitation was random and even the relationships also differed among lessees to the lessors. Like *adhiwal* and *pakhureys* relations varied irrespective of amount of land leased. *Pakhureys* were suffered from a greater sense of insecurity than *adhiwals*. The typical hill labour exchange system like *parma* (reciprocal and direct exchange) and *hoori* (cyclic and indirect exchange) also played an important role when labourers get back to the non-agricultural sectors. As a consequence, villagers manage agricultural operation with the help of these systems. During ‘No Rent Movement’ of 1949 which shaped the movement of 1973 in a wider spreading, conquest of the low land among sharecroppers was more than the high land. Generally, *adhiwala* compelled *pakhureys* to leave low lands.

Land Reforms in Sikkim

Land is a prerequisite asset in agrarian system. Land reform means reallocation of rights over land to establish a more equitable distribution of farm land³. The ‘Occupancy right’ to cultivate land and tenure security are most important dimensions among varieties of land reforms. Land reforms measures are to remove the impediments to agricultural development and to eliminate exploitation and social justice within the agrarian system. This is the relation which is favorable to the tillers and raise the size of units of cultivation to make them operationally viable. Hence, these measures encompass two types of structural changes- one is related to agrarian relations and other- to the size of cultivation. Changes brought about the utilization of land in the agrarian system have not taken only through direct intervention of government but also by the non-government agencies. Land reforms generally reflect the public policy of land distribution for the benefit of landless, the tenants and the small farmers. It aims at diffusion of wealth, increase in income and productivity⁴.

It was the period of Mughal before the arrival of British when the assessment of revenue was systemised and the measurement of land depending on survey of productivity was introduced. Tax in kind was permuted into cash in the agrarian system. A system of “revenue farming” was grown up. The task of collecting revenue was assigned to a class of agents called zamindars. With the arrival of the East India Company in 17th century, the agrarian structure in India underwent radical changes. The British made use of intermediaries and proprietary interest was attributed to them. This was the shake of the policy to gain political support in order to new British administration.

In India, land reforms were a major thrust during post-independence period. The first five year plan stated "This (Land reforms) is a fundamental issue of national importance." Land reforms, therefore, became one of the vital aspects for the development of agriculture especially when five year plan came to stay. Land reforms in India were not only due to peasants' movement but it was also a political setting by Central government and implementation was asserted by the states government relied on the support and mobilization of the affected rural people.

It is the state Sikkim where *De Facto* control was ruled by the British from 1861-1947. In subsequent periods, migrant Bhutias were the ruling class over the indigenous Lepcha tribes and migrant Nepalese. Though Nepalese were in majority but did not have any land rights. Nepalese had to pay higher amount of rent which was abolished by the king in 1956. But when increased migrant Nepalese outnumbered the Lepcha-Bhutia population they were prohibited from acquiring land especially in North Sikkim⁵.

After Sikkim becomes an Indian state in 1975, land reforms were an important step in Sikkim. The Sikkim *Cultivator Protection Act* (1975), Sikkim *Agricultural Land Ceiling and Reform Act* (1978) and the Sikkim Land (*reacquisition and acquisition*) Act in 1978 were formed. These acts are mainly aimed at i) eliminating the intermediaries between tenants and landlords ii) enforcing ceiling on landholdings and distribution of surplus land iii) protection of tenancy rights⁶. So, land rights of indigenous Lepchas and Bhutias had been protected. The ceiling on agricultural land was applied, but no ceiling on non-agricultural land was imposed. In 1996, the Sikkim government introduced '*land bank scheme*' where landless labourers were free to choose up to 1000 to 2000 sq metres plot of land at a minimum cost of 52,500. But how would landless labourers accumulate money and what would be prompt action of landowner to surrender lands, and most important was non-transferable land of Lepchas and Bhutias fall under a matter of concern⁵. So, land reforms remain an unfinished agenda at least in the distributive sense in Sikkim.

Agrarian Status

In Sikkim 70% of the total working force is engaged in agriculture and other allied activities⁵. They cultivated around 16% of total land area (97096 sq km). Food grains and major crops have shown a rising trend up to 1997-98 and from 2000-2001 the major crops has stagnant and down fall. In 2005-06, marginal increase for most food grains has been observed. The state depends on import behaviour for food grains. For example, per capita availability of rice is just 158 grams/day where in case of country it is 417 grams/day in an average. Though maize has never been staple food in Sikkim but has steady increased over the period. Increased dependency on agriculture where gross state domestic product has declined. The share has declined from 48.7% in 1980-81 to just 18.8% in 2006-07.

Sikkim has registered the highest per capita public distribution system (PDS) purchase in the country⁵. The work participation rate has decreased which was 53.2% in 1997 and in 2001 came down to 39.4%. With increasing commercial and residential area, the gross area sown has also declined. It is adversely affecting the growth of yield of food grains. Growth rate of population has outweighed, and even public expenditure on agriculture become very low, as a result food security becomes natural corollary.

Conclusion

It did take a long time to abolish the slavery system and forced labourers through various acts in Sikkim. Even semi feudal agrarian system still exists in the state of Sikkim. However, Infrastructure, fertilizers, technology rendered to improve for the agriculture development. The agrarian relations in Sikkim instead of inhibiting the progress are keeping pace with the changing social and political situation. Moreover, land reform has great impact on changing agrarian relations which is also found in some other states of India too. Sikkim has bright future if agro-ecosystem has to be followed. So, sustenance approach on agriculture with special attention to the farmers' interest should be adopted. As a result major obstacles of the agrarian sector may be removed and agriculture will provide sustenance to the majority of people in the state.

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