

Agrarian social structure and change in Sikkim*

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Agrarian social structure of Sikkim and change in it in terms of allocation of time and resources during three phases—pre-British, British and post-British—has been discussed.

Introduction : Scope and methodology

I have chosen to discuss, in this paper, the agrarian social structure and change in Sikkim, for the following five reasons :

- a. Sikkim, the 22nd State of India, was under hereditary monarchy for over three centuries—until 1975 since when an accelerated change is occurring in every field.
- b. It touches three international boundaries with Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan without any formidable physical barriers in between except with Tibet. It is worthwhile to see its demographic and other interaction with the neighbouring countries and the impact on its agrarian social structure.
- c. In spite of the fact that 'land' is not as productive in Sikkim as in the plains of India, 83.8 percent of its total population live in the rural areas and depend primarily on agriculture. In fact, the rural population in its north and west districts is as high as 97 percent.

- d. Though the average size of landholding in this State is still 2.56 hectares, only 81.23 thousand hectares (or 11.2 percent of total geographical area in the State) are actually available for cultivation as per 1958-60 Survey Operations.
- e. In the absence of a viable alternative to agriculture till today, proper understanding of this sector becomes necessary for planning and development.

'Agrarian structure' as defined by Folke Dovring is "a somewhat vague but generally used term for the whole institutional framework within which agriculture does its work"¹. To Daniel Thorner, it means... "the network of relations among the various groups of persons who draw their livelihood from the soil"².

These two definitions may perhaps be easily extended to define 'agrarian social structure' by qualifying, for the purpose of clarity, the 'institutional framework' of Dovring and 'relations' of Thorner with the term 'social'. Beteille, who first used this concept in 1974,

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1. F. Dovring, *Land and Labour in Europe 1900-1950: A Comparative Survey of Recent Agrarian History* (The Hague : Martinus Nijhoff, 1956), p. 7.
 2. D. Thorner, *The Agrarian Prospect in India* (New Delhi : Allied, 1976), p. 8.

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has chosen not to define it. His book, *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure* (1974) merely concerns with "patterns of inequality and conflict as these arise from the ownership, control and use of land"³. He adds that his concept is related to "kinship, caste and locality"⁴ because "it is not merely that social life in agricultural communities is organized on the basis of personal relations but such relations are invested with a high social value"⁵. For the purpose of this paper 'agrarian social structure' has been understood in the sense Beteille has used it. Now, the methodology of studying this concept may be briefly discussed. In this context, I should first like to deal with the method suggested by Beteille himself. His method includes "examining the native categories of the people, or the ways in which they perceive their own social universe as being divided into groups playing different roles in the productive system"⁶.

He elaborates it :

In a country like India the native categories are themselves complex and heterogeneous and it is doubtful if they can all be comprehended within a single, unitary framework. But clearly any study of rural social stratification should give an important place to the different ways in which people themselves represent their social hierarchies.⁷

In this context, Ramkrishna Mukherjee's 'inductive-inferential orientation' method seems more helpful for studying 'change' in agrarian social structure. He says :

...the prime mover of change in the

contemporary relational matrix in agriculture must be ascertained probabilistically on an inductive-inferential base. For, ..., the latency in contradiction, which goes on changing the relational matrix, can neither be observed nor deduced; it can only be inferred on a probability.⁸

He further claims :

...if we adopt the inductive-inferential orientation and the corresponding methodology, we shall move toward bridging the gap between theory and research and, thus, resolve the perennial controversy between the two schools of thought posited now by the viewpoints of Marx and Weber.⁹

The methods suggested above by Beteille and Mukherjee cannot be really compared and thereby choose the better one. They are just two different methods. However, both these methods seem to ignore an important aspect of the study of 'change', that is, the 'measurement' of it. While 'understanding' change is important 'measuring' it is desirable. This shortcoming seems to have been overcome by Fredrick Barth's method of 'allocation of time and resources'. He says :

Traditional anthropological description in terms of pattern and custom, convenient as it is for certain purposes, results essentially in accounts that do not adequately portray change. Change is more easily handled if one looks at social behaviour as allocations of time and resources.¹⁰

3. A. Beteille, *Studies in Agrarian Social Structure* (Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 1.

4. Beteille, p. 56.

5. Beteille, p. 95.

6. Beteille, p. 3.

7. Beteille, p. 35.

8. Ramkrishna Mukherjee, Realities of Agrarian Relations in India, *Economic. & Political Weekly*, 16(4), 1981, pp. 109-16.

9. Mukherjee, p. 115.

10. F. Barth, "On the Study of Social Change", *American. Anthropologist*, 69 (6), 1967, pp. 661-69.

To quote him further :

I feel that we need rather to use concepts that enable us to depict the pattern itself as a statistical thing, as a set of frequencies of alternatives. If we, for example, look at social behaviour as an allocation of time and resources, we can depict the pattern whereby people allocate their time and resources. Changes in the proportions of these allocations are observable, in the sense that they are measurable.¹¹

This paper is a humble attempt to see change in the agrarian social structure of Sikkim in terms of 'allocation of time and resources'. It is divided into five main sections : a) agrarian social structure during the pre-British phase, b) the British phase, c) the post-British phase, d) analytical overview of the changes, and e) conclusion. It is obvious that the spectrum of time taken is very broad. This is usually not advised by senior sociologists, more so by historians, for it is indeed difficult to pick up a thread in the present society and trace it back to two or three hundred years, or, to go the other way round. The above classification into three phases, however, do not mean that the agrarian society of Sikkim remained unchanged throughout the period before the British phase and there was a sudden, however slight, change after this phase began, and again there was no change until Independence, and subsequently the annexation (or 'merger', if you like), which opened the floodgates of change. The broad phases taken here are just to see if they

represent some broad patterns of change and nothing more.

The pre-British phase (1642-1888)

The pre-British history of Sikkim is rather obscure for those who have little access to the Tibetan sources. The *History of Sikkim*, written in 1908, by Sir Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Yeshe Drolma of Sikkim, is perhaps the most authentic record of Sikkimese history ever written in English, though a faint bias can be seen. Other books written by the British or Indian officials and scholars are plenty but most of them have presented a superficial history of Sikkim.

One of the misconceptions widely held about the pre-British Sikkimese history is the absence of the Nepalis, who are considered to have been brought there by the British.¹² This cannot be denied totally but it is also not true that all Nepalis had come because of the British policy. Risley's *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, based on the census taken in February 1891, gives the following figures for some Nepali groups : Limbus=3356, Gurung=2921, Murmi (Tamang)=2867, Khambu (Rai)=1963 and Mangar=901. He calls these groups 'allied' and excludes them from the group of 'immigrants' from Nepal such as Kami, Brahman, Chhetri, Newar, slaves and Dirji.¹³ This shows that there were some Nepali castes even before J. C. White went there in 1888. Of the various groups included in the 'allied' group of Risley, the Limbus (who are also known as Chongs or Tsongs) are known to have lived in Sikkim from very ancient times.¹⁴

11. Barth, p. 662.

12. P.P. Karan and W.M. Jenkins, *The Himalayan Kingdoms : Bhutan, Sikkim and Nepal* (Princeton : D. Van Nostrand, 1963), p. 69; P.K. Rao, *Indian and Sikkim 1814-1870* (New Delhi : Sterling, 1972), p. 65; J.S. Lall, ed., *The Himalaya : Aspect of Change* (Delhi : Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), p. 218.

13. H.H. Risley, *The Gazetteer of Sikkim* (rpt. New Delhi : Manjushri, 1972), p. 27.

14. S.K. Chatterjee, *Kirata Janakriti : Indo-Mongoloids, Their Contribution to the History and Culture of India* (Calcutta : Royal Asiatic Society, 1951), p. 52; I.S. Chemjong, *History and Culture of the Kirat People*, 3rd edition, (Nepal : Tumeng Hang, 1966), p. 8; D.R. Regmi, *Ancient Nepal* (Calcutta : Firma KLM, 1969), p. 16.

The nature of landownership and control in Sikkim before 1642 is not known properly. Whether the landownership was based on clan, lineage or the individual is also not confirmed. But it is more or less certain that the shifting cultivation was the only mode of cultivation throughout Sikkim then. Three types of land management or control are found in the pre-British agrarian society of Sikkim : (i) under the private estates of the Maharaja, (ii) the monastery estates, and (iii) managed by the government. It is written, for example, that "there were 104 *elakas* (or estates) in Sikkim out of which 11 *elakas* were managed by State Government, 15 by the private estate of the Maharaja of Sikkim and 5 by the respective monastery's management"¹⁵. But we do not know how the rest of the *elakas* were managed nor do we know how these *elakas* were actually utilised at the village level. Available literature indicates that the *mandals* or headmen were the chief instruments of control over the tenants.

The British phase (1888-1947)

Sikkim was virtually under the British control for about 30 years after the appointment of J. C. White as the political officer.¹⁶ However, the British had a "great say in any matter that affected their interests in Sikkim" after the 1861 Treaty itself.¹⁷ The most notable change during the British phase was the settling of many high and low caste Nepalis in southern Sikkim, while in its North district they were not allowed to settle. As a result, the nature of the agrarian social structure also changed from homogeneous, to heterogeneous, not only in terms of the ethnic composition but also with

regard to caste and class relations. With the coming of the Hindus from Nepal the concept of ritual hierarchy was automatically introduced and since most of them had to settle as tenants, a sizeable class of tenants emerged requiring further classification into categories like *adhiadars*, *kutiadars*, *pakhureys* and *chakureys*.¹⁸ The Census of 1891 had also noted 326 (about 1 percent of the total population then) persons as slaves.¹⁹ The slaves and *chakureys* were probably the same class of people but it is not certain.

The following passage may be quoted to bear upon the legalities of the zamindari system as obtained in Sikkim during the British phase :

The distinctive feature of a zamindari system was that the landholder was bound to the land and for payment of the revenue amount for the whole term of settlement. He could not at his option relinquish the Estate and there was, in fact, a contract between him and the State by which the landholder was required to pay a fixed sum as land revenue and was not accountable for the collection made in the Estate.²⁰

The other distinctive feature of the zamindari system in Sikkim is brought out in the passage given below :

While the 20th century moved on at a pace unprecedented in history, time almost stood still in Sikkim for the common man. His lot, always hard, continue very much as before, a bad feudal landlord making life a little harder, and good one allowing him some respite.

15. *Report on Agricultural Census 1976-77* (Gangtok : Agril. Census Unit, 1977), p. 13.

16. Lall, ed., 1981, p. 218.

17. L.B. Basnet, 1974, *Sikkim : A Short Political History* (New Delhi : S. Chand), p. 41.

18. *Report on Agril. Census*, p. 9.

19. Riskey, p. 27.

20. *Report on Agril. Census*, p. 9.

Removed far away from the mainstream of human progress, the Sikkim peasant plodded along bearing the yoke of feudal tyranny.²¹

In the same phase, the numerical preponderance of the Nepalis (including here the 'indigenous' Nepalis) over the Lepchas and Bhutias and the gradual passing over of lands belonging earlier, notionally or legally, to the latter groups to the former sowed the seed of ethnic tension so rampant today in Sikkim. (The process of land alienation was perhaps slightly accelerated by the land ceiling laws fixed vide Notification No. 8545/G dated 16.10.1924 though such laws are usually, as elsewhere in India then and now, ineffective.) In any case, the implementation of land reforms is obstructed due to ethnic differences for acquisition of excess land and redistribution means depriving the Lepcha-Bhutias of their traditional rights and benefitting the later settlers from Nepal.

The post-British phase (1948-1974)

The nationalist movement in India culminating in her Independence in 1947 had some influence on the political climate of Sikkim as well²². The Sikkim State Congress, the first political party in the history of Sikkim formed on December 7, 1947 succeeded in abolishing, among others, landlordism although vestiges of it remain even today. The lands under the private estates of the Maharaja and the monasteries were also abolished vide Notification No. 2627/2727 dated 6.7.1948 but like any other notification, this was also not properly carried out. It should however be pointed out that the differential taxation on the basis of ethnic groups, introduced by Charles Bell

in 1915, was stopped after the First Settlement Operation and proclamation of the Maharaja in August, 1956.²³

The most notable change that occurred in this phase of Sikkim's history was in the North district. The people there were basically traders and herdsmen who took their sheep and cattle across the Tibetan border for grazing. There was practically no restriction on such movements of man or cattle till 1959 when, following the Chinese occupation of Tibet, restrictions were imposed on such movement. But such movements had to stop totally after 1962 when war broke out between China and India.²⁴

The people were as a result forced to take up cultivation in the barren and infertile lands for they had no alternative to it for quite some time. Thus the founding of the agrarian society in the North, the area of which comprises 59.6 percent of the total area of Sikkim was recent and forcible. On the other hand, the people there had little knowledge of cultivation. The consequences, specially with regard to land alienation, would perhaps be drastic if the Sikkim Rural Indebtedness Act was not adopted in 1966. (This Act made the pledging of land illegal and punishable with fine and imprisonment.) The whirlwind of change in Sikkim, however, came only after 1975. The following landmarks were seen in the field of land legislations : The Sikkim Cultivators' Protection Act, 1975; The Sikkim Agricultural Land Ceiling and Reforms Act, 1978; and The Sikkim Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act, 1978. These Acts were mainly aimed at : (i) eliminating the intermediaries in the land management systems, (ii) enforcing ceiling laws in respect

21. Basnet, p. 65.

22. T.B. Subba, "Peasant Struggles in Darjeeling and Sikkim : 1940-1981", *National Seminar on Peasant and Peasant Resistance in Eastern India*, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Oct 16-18, 1984.

23. *Report on Agril. Census*, p. 11.

24. Lall, ed., p. 226.

of landholding and distribution of surplus land, and (iii) protection of tenancy rights.²⁵

With heavy financial assistance from the Centre, the development activities in Sikkim were accelerated in all possible fields. Thousands of people from Darjeeling, other parts of West Bengal, north and south India, were employed there between 1975 and 1980 after which heavy recruitment stopped. No local citizen with school pass certificate was left unemployed. There were jobs for every possible category of people—school teachers, engineers, technicians, bureaucrats, politicians, contractors and menial workers. In some areas like Yoksum and Pelling in the West district, portering grew prominent with hundreds of foreign tourists passing through those places for trekking and mountaineering. Portering was prominent also in its East and North districts during the Indo-Tibetan trade (or the British phase). The only difference is that in the latter case labour was exacted with little or no payment while in the former the porters got Rs. 25 per day.

As a consequence, agriculture has been neglected like anything though it never held much attraction. But the various developmental activities initiated and financed by the Centre drew all the literate, semi-literate and able-bodied persons away from the agrarian society the way rats were drawn away by the Pied Piper from the town of Hamelin.

Such a change meant less dependence of the tenants on their landlords, as borne out from my study of Takuthang and Chuchen villages in West Sikkim in 1981.²⁶ But this had not reduced the landlords' anxieties arising out of the tenancy Acts. Thus they try to change their tenants as frequently as

possible but this practice has met with limited success due to two simple reasons: lack of competition among the sharecroppers or tenants except in irrigated areas and availability of land for sharecropping.

An analytical overview

Viewed from Barth's method of 'allocation of time and resources' the changes, especially those that have occurred after 1975, are significant. In the pre-British phase, the people allocated their time and resources almost entirely to agricultural cultivation, whether pastoral as in the North or settled in the rest of Sikkim. The 'alternatives' were almost absent and the occasional domestic trade was also consumption oriented. Along with the inception of the Namgyal Dynasty, their allocation of time and resources shifted from the tribal kings or chiefs to the district chiefs or *dzongpens* and headmen or *mandals* appointed by the government. The allocation of time and resources, in terms of free labour till 1924 was a system of cash payment called *bethi* introduced in lieu of free labour, which continued till 1947, differing little among the various communities living there. Even the frequency in the allocation of time and resources to agricultural production remained unchanged.

The main difference between the pre-British and British phases was that, in the latter, the local people were more dependent on the secular rulers than the religious heads who earlier held considerable power and influence. Secondly, the British phase added one more condition of living for the masses, that is, forced and free labour for carrying loads of the incoming officials or across the snow-covered border to Tibet. The common masses, whether Lepchas, Bhutias or Nepalis, had to allocate at least a part of

25. R.R. Dhamala and D.J. Bhowmick, Land Reforms in Sikkim, *The Himalayas : Profiles of Modernization and Adaptation*, ed, S.K. Chaube (New Delhi : Sterling, 1985), pp. 113-26.

26. T.B. Subba, Caste, Class and Agrarian Relations in the Nepalese Society of Darjeeling and Sikkim, *Disser.* North Bengal University, 1986.

their time and resources not only to their landlords and headmen but also the *karbaris* or accounts assistants of the headmen. And they had to do all this for mere survival for most of them had no right whatsoever over the lands they tilled.

The post-British phase upto 1974 had, in general, an air of economic and political uncertainty. The conflict situation between the landlords and tenants had developed sufficiently as to have no mutual trust. This created a confusing state in which the tenants did not know whom to go for help. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, this mistrust was not only confined to the landlords and tenants as classes but had very much seeped in between the ethnic groups also. The falling apart of the Lepcha-Bhutias on the one side and the Nepalīs on the other was one of the most unfortunate events of the post-British phase though the process had begun much earlier.

In the economic field, the free border with Tibet sustained a large population directly or indirectly in such a climatically hostile area as the North. This had to stop after Independence. As a result, there were drastic changes in the allocation of time and resources by the people there. The women had to leave their looms and come-out in the field for agricultural work though the males automatically took care of the heavier works. The males had then no reason to leave home for long periods, which put an end to polyandry too. They had also begun raising oxen which they now needed for ploughing while earlier they reared yaks or mules for carrying loads across the border. After 1975, Sikkim was geared for all-round development. Within a span of five-years or so, the 'service' and 'business' sectors expanded so rapidly and abruptly that one is compelled to rethink on the available theories on the development of secondary and tertiary sectors. The landlords and educated youth (they are often coterminus)

no longer chose to allocate their time and resources to agricultural supervision, which they had been doing traditionally. There is also a drastic change in the way females engage themselves today : they work in schools, hospitals and government offices, shoulder to shoulder with the males, and their education is no longer looked down upon.

But it must be noted that there is a nagging difficulty in analysing the Sikkimese society due to the existence of a blurred class structure. Was the society ever purely feudal? An answer is difficult because slavery and serfdom, or, in Marx's words, the ancient and feudal modes of production, seem to have existed side by side. Though capitalism is making its inroads fast after 1975 both slavery and serfdom still persist and the ex-feudal lords have shown commendable adaptability by becoming today's capitalists and bureaucrats. Sikkim, therefore, bears testimony to all the three major modes of production found in Europe by Marx.

Conclusion

This paper has concerned itself with 'change' in agrarian social structure in Sikkim but not all aspects of change could possible be discussed here. I have here, in my mind, the dialectical aspect of change which would perhaps be more meaningful given the broad spectrum of time taken here. The only reason for avoiding the Marxist approach to the study of change in this paper is my own diffidence to handle Marx's tools. However, studies with the Marxian approach to change are many in India and Africa though not all of them seem to have done full justice to Marx. □