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Impact of the Colonial Government of India in Sikkim: A Brief Overview of Sikkimese Feudalism during Colonial Era

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Abstract:

The peasants, throughout the globe, are the basis of agricultural production and state revenues. They have always played a crucial part for the progress of human society through their hard labour and struggle by producing agricultural items. Supplementary, by paying tax and rent of the land and agricultural products they make a greater contribution for the economic prosperity of a country. Being the nucleus of human development, the peasants who are always in a larger number have never been treated at par by the feudal society. Rather they are harassed and humiliated because of their submissive manner and scaring nature. The pricks, pains and the wounds the peasants have been subjected to in the past are simply irreparable which are very much similar throughout the globe. Their service to mankind in general and their Landlords or the Kings in particular, the burden of taxation upon them, the yoke of forced labour on their shoulders share a similar nature and feature throughout the earth.

This paper highlights the transformation in agrarian structure of Sikkim after the advent of British. The interest of British did not lay in Sikkim rather they were trying to have their upper hand in the Tibetan trade. However, a shortest and easiest way to Tibet lay via Sikkim and this is how by adopting various policies they had been able to convert Sikkim into a buffer state. With the appointment of British Political Officer, the status of Sikkimese Kings was greatly reduced and they began to be treated as the Subordinates of the Political Officers. Now, having all powers in their hands the Political Officers began to rule over the country according to their tastes and choices. The British Political Officers created estates and divided them among the lessees and encouraged Nepali settlement in the Kingdom that ultimately paved its way for a hardcore feudalism in the erstwhile Himalayan Kingdom of Sikkim.

For a comprehensive understanding this paper has been divided into six sections highlighting various aspects of Sikkimese feudalism. These sections basically deal with the adaptation of lessee by the British and creation of several Elakhas by uprooting the convention and usages of the Kingdom of Sikkim. It further deals with the new organism of taxation and ownership of land that was initiated by the British. The paper has also attempted to peep inside the administrative machineries of feudal Sikkim along with various forms of forced labourers adopted by the British and patronized by the Sikkimese feudal elites.

Keywords: *Elakhadars, Kazi, Political Officer, Thikadars, Kalo-Bhari*

1. Introduction

All the way through history, patterns of land ownership have shaped the pattern of human relations in all human societies. They have also helped in determining the possibility and velocity of economic expansion of a country. However, almost in all histories, the land ownership is based on the principles of theocracy and divine right theory out of which the real contributors of the lands i.e. the peasants have always resisted the un-proportionate distribution of land between the state and the peasants. We do not have much information about the agrarian structure of Sikkim before the establishment of Namgyal Dynasty. Whatever little information is available about the agrarian society of pre- Namgyal Sikkim, the same is not sufficient to draw a clear picture about the agrarian pattern of Sikkim of the period. Nevertheless, land grants to the celebrated families along with high ranks in the administration were in vogue after the advent of the Namgyals into Sikkim. Due to the lack of supportive documents, we do not have sufficient evidence to understand their source of revenues collected in cash till the advent of British. However, after the British, it is evident that the State began to extract revenue in a diminutive manner through various ways. If we have to believe on the account of Richard Temple even during the reign of Thotub Namgyal (1874-1914), the State was assessing revenue in kind that consisted of agricultural produce and transit duties and the ruler could hardly collect \$1,000 per year as revenue from his people. Anna Balikci writes about a significant role of the Lamas in the revenue collection before the British intervention.

2. Creation of Estates or Elakhas by the British

The agrarian society witnessed a massive change after Sikkim made her initial contacts with the British. Now, with the encouragement of the latter, the Nepalese peasants began to get settled in a higher scale in Eastern, Western and Southern part of Sikkim that even had some sadistic consequences. It is worth to discuss that the earlier system of granting lands to the influential Bhutia Lepcha families was now dropped by the British that gave birth to several lessee holders. As a result, in 1867, the Sikkim Government allotted lands for a period of 20 years to Laxmi Das Pradhan and Chandra Bir Maskey, two Nepali contractors. The land of the State was given to them on contract or Thika therefore they were known as the Thikadars. The Thikadars who were later on equated with the native Kazis had given birth to a hard-hitting form of feudalism in the Kingdom. The number of such Thikadars in the Kingdom of Sikkim in 1925-26 was of 70. 13 of such Elakhas or estates were under the direct control of the State; 16 under the managers of Private Estates of His Highness; and five under different monasteries. The classification of terrace land made in the year 1915-16 covering approximately 10,000 acres were merged into these 70 Elakhas that were taken on lease by different landlords. Other 36 Elakhas were divided among the various Landlords of which 21 were Kazis, 6 Bhutias, 8 Lepchas, 10 Nepalese and 1 plainsman.

It is significant to mention that after the appointment of J.C White as the first Political Officer in 1887, 35 monasteries of Sikkim lost their land holdings with the exception of five important monasteries. In 1890, after the Anglo-Chinese Convention the Political Officer, who was executing the power of the President of State Council, approached Thotub Namgyal, the ruler, with deeds of land grants by which new landlords were created. In his move, the Political Officer had even restored the earlier confiscated estates of the families that had a strangled relation with the palace. This initiative of White resulted into the formation of many other landed aristocrats in several estates throughout Sikkim. The estates of the landlords were now begun to be known as Elakhas and the landlords as Elakhadars. Further, a Notice issued by J C White on the 2nd of January 1897 forbids the vending and subletting any land of the Bhutia-Lepcha community without the express sanction of the council. Another transformation in the existing taxation norms can be noticed after the appointment of C.A. Bell, who succeeded Mr. White as the Political Officer of Sikkim. A notice bearing Circular No. 1 dated 20th April 1916 had fixed the due date to the tenants of such Elakhas as 30th of November every year and 31st of December to the Zamindars. However, the said notice of Mr. Bell was later on rectified in 1926 that made the time of tax payment from 1st of Aug till 31st December each year. Similarly, shifting cultivation was forbidden by the Durbar in 1925 and it had also fixed 10% of the total acreage of land of a landlord as home farm. Further, the Durbar had allowed minimum 100 acres of land to a landlord and considering merit of a landlord that could be extended up to 200 acres. The lands were leased at rates varying from one anna to eight annas per acre for periods of 15 years to Bhutia-Lepcha landlords and for 10 years to Nepali landlords or the Thikadars. However, the rates were liable to revision at the end of each period.

The earlier Blon Po (Minister) were now began to be called as the Kazis and these Kazis were often referred as the Zamindars in the various administrative reports. Before the advent of British these Kazis exercised jurisdiction over specific tracts of lands had now become the masters of large estates under the British patronage. Initially, these officers collected revenue, mostly in kind, from the peasants settled in their jurisdiction and paid a certain fixed contribution to the Raja. It is interesting to note that, thence every inch of the Sikkimese territory was regarded as a property of the Kings and therefore, a cultivator did not have a claim to the soil he tilled. Although, he could settle down on the unoccupied areas without any formality and no one could uproot him except the King.

3. Taxation and Ownership of Land

To reiterate, prior to the interference of the British, the Sikkim Government used to collect taxes in kind. The system of collection of taxes in this form was adopted long back in 1747 with the appointment of Rabden Sarpa as a regent of baby King Namgyal Phuntsog thence known as Bisa Panja. However, after the appointment of J.C White the land revenues were now collected through departmental agency known as Elakhadars who were appointed on commission of 10% on the gross revenue collected from the various estates. The mode of land revenue assessment of 1/5 to the Nepalese and 1/8 of the total produced that was implemented in 1912-13 was removed by Maharaja Sidkeong Namgyal with a view to lessen the burden of taxation from the tenants and insisted to adopt a new formula of Pathi of the seed sown. After the accession of Tashi Namgyal, a new rate of assessment was fixed at a meeting of the State Council on 26th January 1915 which was bit disparate among the Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepali peasants.

The estates possessed by the Kazis and Thikadars would have several other sub-divisions. The land at the block level was distributed among some people who became intermediaries between the Kazis and the Raiyats or peasants. These intermediaries were called Bustiwallas and Mandals according to the amount of land they possessed. If a Raiyat wanted land for self cultivation, he had to pay Char Dam (Four Anna) to a local Mandal and had to clear the forest land to make it suitable for cultivation. It appears that till 1930-31, the State had not followed the policy of the sale of State lands instead the State was allotting them in a lease. A free grant of such land was allowed to all Paharia who wanted to settle in the Kingdom. The Char Dam peasants or the Bustiwallas were the direct tax payers to the State yet they also did not have a right of vast possession of land. Ordinarily, a Raiyat was not permitted to acquire more than twenty acres of cultivable land. In a case of Mandals of the various blocks of an Elakha, maximum could go up to thirty acres, whilst, the "Lessees" could not acquire more than one hundred acres. The Raiyats who could afford to pay Char Dam got a plot of land for self cultivation. They had to pay their land tax along with house tax to their Mandals in cash fixed by the latter through Nazar Janch yearly. The Raiyats who could not afford to pay the Char Dam created a new tenancy system in Sikkim which was officially known as Adhiyadars and Kutdars.

4. The Feudal Chain of Command

4.1. King

With the appointment of J.C. White, the position of the Sikkimese Chogyal was greatly reduced to a subordinate of the Political Officer. Unlike other feudal societies, the Sikkimese King had not a major role to play in their everyday affairs and hence remained mostly as the figurehead of the feudal edifice. After Thotub Namgyal, the other Sikkimese Kings too preferred to remain as the subordinates to the Political Officer than to object and strangle their relations.

4.2. Kazis

The State Council headed by the Political Officer was consisted of the trusted Kazis and Zamindars. These officials along with their kith and kin were highly responsible for the exploitation of Sikkimese peasantry. During the first half of 20th century every peasant was made to pay Rs.6 as the rent for their dwelling space known as Dhurikhajana which was unreasonable to the peasants who usually had a poor income. Besides such exorbitant rate of taxation, the farmers had to carry Kalo Bhari or Black Load on the orders of the Kazis. If they failed to do so, even on the account of their health, the Kazis put them behind the bars, which they maintained in their houses. The prisons which were maintained by the Kazis in their houses were known as Thinguro.

4.3. Thikadars

In the administrative hierarchy, the Thikadars were enjoying the position just below to the Zamindars or Kazis. The main function of the Thikadars or the contractors was to supply the labourers for the construction purpose initiated by the British Government for exploring trade avenues. Under this comes the construction of roads, carrying luggage of the British Officials and the contractors also had to supply labourers for carrying Kalo Bhari, Jharlangi and Kuruwa for the British. While doing so, they made extensive profit by taking advantage of the innocence and scaring attitude of the labourers. Forced labour without any compensation was usually extracted by the Thikadars from the browbeaten peasants while cultivating and harvesting their crops. So far, the peasants had grudgingly to this kind of exaction through fear of punishment.

4.4. Mukhtiyars

In the ladder of feudal administration, the Mukhtiyars enjoyed position next to the Kazi/Thikadars. Their duty was akin to today's District Magistrate and was with a few hereditary exceptions, appointed on merit. From the pictures collected from the erstwhile Mukhtiyar family of Namchi in South Sikkim, it can be stated that they had a comfortable and a reverential life. The Kazis usually gave charges to trusted persons residing in their estates. In another word, the Mukhtiyars were to serve the Kazis as a bridge between the peasants and the Landlords. They also had to maintain the land records related to the peasants of his Elakah. As the trusted persons of the Kazis, the Mukhtiyars too possessed a vast tract of land for their personal use and the same was distributed among the landless tenants. However, these officials were not prevalent in every estate hold by the lessee holders like the Kazis and Thikadars. The estates in the proximity of the Kingdom's capital did not have any office related to the Mukhtiyars.

4.5. Mandals

Mandals were the village officials of feudal Sikkim who were appointed by the Kazis or in some cases by the Mukhtiyars. Their machinery role was to work as a village headman and to collect taxes from the peasants of their respective villages. A peasant had to deposit his taxes in time, which included house tax and land tax known as Dhurikhajana and Jamin Khajana. If he fails to pay his taxes on time, he would be given a chance to pay his taxes the following year. But, during his payment the peasant had to pay his tax with a huge interest. However, some provisions were maintained by the Kingdom to rebate interests of the past year's dues if a peasant made a full payment to his landlord. 25% of reimbursements were to be made by the landlords to the peasants. But, it appears that the feudal officials never implemented these provisions in a sincere manner. The Mandals had to issue a receipt confirming the payment of land tax and house tax to the peasant. Counterfoils of such receipts would be recorded in a register of demand and collection. The Mandals also had the litigation rights and were appointed to provide justice to the needy in the village. However, few cases related to land and taxation of the villagers was forwarded to the Durbar by the Mandals through written complaints. They too exploited the peasants due to their proximity to power and forced the peasants to work as a forced labour in their fields.

4.6. Karbari

The term Karbari is probably derived from a Nepali word Karobar which basically means dealing. The designation of the Karbaris itself refers to their duty in the feudal Sikkim. They were appointed by the Kazis or Thikadars on the recommendation of the local Mandals to work as a dealer between the peasants and the higher authority. Their appointment was made through the official process by issuing an order of appointment. The nature of appointment varies from Karbari to Karbari. In some cases, they were appointed on hereditary basis and in some other cases; they were replaced by the new ones. The major duty of the appointed Karbaris was to deliver messages to the peasants from the higher authorities about the schedule of tax payments. They had to give prior information to the villagers about the visit of Kazi or Mukhtiyar to their respective villages.

The Sikkimese administration had branded all these lower level administrators particularly the Mandals and Karbaris as Kamdaris. As per to the Administration Report of 1926-27, the Kamdaris were exempted from the payment of House Tax. Further, they were also exempted from carrying any sort of load like Kalo Bhari, Jharlangi and so on. The other peasants who would be exempted from this carriage were the family members of the army men.

5. Feudal Practice in the form of Forced Labour

Forced labour, is an idiom for a variety of work relations in which peasants are employed against their will under the threat of destitution, detention or violence by their landlords. In the case of feudal Sikkim, we have noticed that the peasants had to pay their taxes out of the money which they earned with a great toil to the feudal lords and were cheated in parallel by their masters from time to time. Their lives were miserable; but, neither the authorities nor any organization prevalent in Sikkim initiated deeds to heal their wounds. Further, the prevalent forced labour had made the lives of a commoner much shoddier. The various forms of forced labours prevalent in feudal Sikkim were as under:

5.1. Kalo Bhari

The literary meaning of the term Kalo Bhari in Nepali is a Black Load. The evolution of this practice was started in Sikkim after the latter's contact with the British. After securing a superior position in her Himalayan strategy, particularly after the Anglo Chinese Convention of 1890, the British had been able to gain a lucrative Tibetan trade. Hence, to undertake her trade in the snowy Tibetan terrain she needed labourers from the neighbouring areas and to fulfil the British aims Sikkimese peasants were forced to jump into the capitalist conflagration of trade and commerce in the form of forced labour called Kalo Bhari. To carry their transport, porters were fixed by the British depending upon the supply made by Kazi- Thikadars. For the transport of each bag, they paid Rs.2/- per labour per day. But, the labourers were cheated by their masters and they would only get 6 Annas per day to their toils.

The exploitation of the Sikkimese peasants reached its highest watermark during the last phase of the Second World War. During the time, huge quantities of these loads were transported to China via Tibet. The Kazis and Thikadars falsely requisitioned forced labour on the authority of the state to carry these loads. A large number of these loads belonged to private concerns which transported them to Tibet in collusion with the landlords.

5.2. Jharlangi

It is a well known fact that the real interest of the British Government did not lay on Sikkim therefore they utilized the Kingdom for their Tibetan trade. Keeping this view in mind, the British Government had to construct roads and trade routes. Here, they had to depend on the Kazi-Thikadars and Mukhtiyars to get labour supply from the villages. The British Imperialists paid those Kazis-Thikadars; but, the latter used their peasants to work for them without paying their wages. There was no fixed time or place for carrying such tasks. The peasants were called by the Kazis any time and the former had to reach the Kothi of Kazi in time. The Kazi could order any of his peasants to offer their free unpaid labour according to their convenience. Once ordered, the labour had no choice but to obey and disobedience invited severe punishment and confiscation of landed property. Apart from such works, the Sikkimese peasants were even sometimes called by the Kazis and Thikadars to render free services for the construction works. The same peasants had to work as both Kalo Bhari and Jharlangi labourers without any concession. However, during emergencies, they could send a substitute by paying 50 Paise (Aath Anna) per day.

5.3. Bethi

The peasants of Sikkim also had to offer the Mandals and the Zamindars, their wage less labour called Bethi. Five Khetala to a Mandal or Kazi was compulsory from a family which was known as Gharlauri Khetala. The main tasks that were to be performed by a peasant were to plough the field of his Zamindar, to construct channel for cultivation for his lord, to carry load of his Zamindar etc. It has to be noted here that under such ridiculous circumstances, only a peasant had to suffer both physically and financially. He had to till the fields of his Zamindar (who never paid tax to the Government nor would he ever work in his field) in the hectic season of Ashar –Sawan (June- July) of which the peasant was not getting any wages. Not only this, he himself had to do his own cultivation at the very same time and further he had to pay the taxes to the Zamindar after the crops were harvested. Thus a perplex situation stands before the peasants; if they obeyed the orders of their Zamindars and worked for them, they had a fear of loosing the monsoon rain for their own cultivation. If they lost the monsoon rain, it was also not less than a punishment as in any case, they had to pay tax for their land, and they also had to feed their children.

5.4. Kuruwa

Literally 'Kuruwa' means a long wait in Nepali. Sometimes, on account of the road condition and other issues, people sent to transport the Kalo Bhari had to wait for several days for the arrival of the commodities. The process of serving as a Kuruwa labour was very much similar with the process of Jharlangi. For this labour also, the British Officials offered contracts to the local Kazis and Thikadars for the supply of the labourers. For such contracts the Kazi- Thikadars were handsomely paid. During the entire wait for the Kalo Bhari, the Raiyat himself had to manage his resources.

6. Conclusion

The calm and unruffled relation between the rulers and the ruled was heavily transfusion in Sikkim after the arrival of the British. The initial state-peasant relationship was severely throttled when the British eliminated the concept of pre eminence of State in the agricultural lands. The coming of the Nepalese peasants proved to be a boom to the Elakhadars as they secured the former in the form of tax payers as well as labourers. The British policy of division of the entire territory into estates profited none other than the feudal lords and the lot were thrown at the mercy of their Elakhadars. The earlier system of taxation was also replaced by the cash payment that naturally brought havoc among the peasantry as the house tax of Rs 6/-was even more expensive than a pair of oxen.

The entire feudalistic phase (1887-1949) appears to have been a monopolistic era of the Elakhadars, Thikadars, and Zamindars who were actively backed by the British. They could frame a code as per to their convenience and forced the peasants to follow the unethical and lawless codes to fulfil their selfish motives. They could appoint officials for tax collection in their estates, dispense justice to the peasants, eject the peasants from their lands, forced the peasants to serve free and so on. If we compare British Imperialism in India with the native feudalism of Sikkim, then, one can notice Sikkimese feudal system was much tougher and crueller. The Indians in the plains were directly exploited by the British authorities, who were foreigners and were concentrated upon a profit making process. Of course, the pricks and pains which the Indian masses received from the colonial rule were also incomparable. However, it is evident that, the Sikkimese peasants were exploited by their very own masters in a much harsher manner than what the British did in the Indian States. The imperial era in India got liquidated after the withdrawal of British from the Indian soil. But, the Sikkimese feudalism which was the brain child of the colonial British Government remained firm for two more years. Ultimately, it was eliminated in 1949 due to a recurrent pressure made by Sikkim State Congress, a political party instituted to uproot feudalism and its associated vices.

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