

Agrarian Social Structure and Land-People Relationship: A Study on the Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh

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I. Introduction:

The term 'agrarian' means anything related to agricultural land, its management and distribution. Sociologists and economists have stressed the aspect of rural agrarian structure with a focus on land tenure system, land ceiling, land reforms, land control and land management. These studies have also included the problems of peasant and peasant movement. In this paper I want to focus on some of the issues which are related to agriculture, agricultural pattern, land, land holding pattern, land ownership system, land reform programme in Arunachal Pradesh. Arunachal Pradesh is one of the important states of India's Eastern Himalayan region. Geographically, it is lying in the Southern slopes of the Eastern Himalayas and is surrounded by Bhutan to the West, China to the North and North- East, Burma to the East and the plains of Assam to the South. The state has an area of 84,000 sq. Km. Arunachal Pradesh is the homeland of near about 26 major tribal groups with distinct and varied culture, language, customs and religion. Here, the tribal population constitutes 63.66 per cent of the total population. Interestingly, the state has the lowest density of population in the country having only eight persons per sq. km. the main tribes of this state are- Adis, Nishas, Tagins, Apatamis, Akas, Mompas, Khowas, Daflas and Sher- dukpens, Khanptis, Singphos, Tangsas. Arunachal Pradesh has a predominant agrarian economy. There are mainly two types of cultivation practices prevalent in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. They are — Settled Cultivation and Jhum or shifting Cultivation. Another aspect of the agrarian structure of the state of Arunachal Pradesh assumes much significance as it has great share of holding operated by the Scheduled Tribes. There has been a marginal decline in the share of ST operated holdings, both in number of holdings and area operated, during 1970-71 to 1995-96². However, among the various size classes, the relative share of ST operated holdings within the marginal category of holdings has seen the sharpest decline. As the operational holdings belonging to the Scheduled Tribes accounts for around 93 per cent of the holdings in the state, the size class wise distribution of ST operated holdings, by and large, follows the same line as that of the total holdings.

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II. Characteristics of Agriculture in Arunachal Pradesh:

The agriculture in Arunachal Pradesh is an underdeveloped one. At this, the state administration, since independence, in order to develop agriculture, started supplying tools and equipments along with High Yield Varieties (HYV) seeds, fertilizers, pests at a subsidized rate. However, the use of improved seeds, fertilizers and equipments are mainly limited to the government firms which are organized for the purpose of demonstration and research. Thus, in the absence of suitable agricultural implements conducive to local agricultural practices, at reasonable price, lack of proper improvisation as to how the benefits of scientific and technical innovations can be induced, lack of market incentives etc. the agriculture in Arunachal Pradesh is characterized with the following features-

- a. *Primitive methods of cultivation:* - Dominance of Jhum cultivation which doesn't show the requirement of animal or machine energy, irrigation, chemical fertilizer etc. Even, in case of settled cultivation, the farmers, in most cases do not use ploughs and animals.
- b. *Non-commercial mode of production:* - In many areas of the state, crop production is carried out on the basis of household requirement because of the reason that the fragmented local market has very negligible influence on agricultural sector.
- c. *Traditional cropping pattern:* - Here, in Arunachal Pradesh the use of improved seeds, fertilizers and equipments at reasonable price is not seen. Again, lack of proper improvisation as to how the benefits of scientific and technical innovations can be induced, lack of market incentives etc. have fueled to adopt the traditional cropping pattern.
- d. *Low rate of yield:* - Again, the low productivity in agriculture is yet another feature of Arunachal Pradesh. The average yield rate of rice, maize, wheat, millet, sugarcane and potato in the state is accounted to 1.13, 1.17, 1.48, 0.54, 19.16 and 8.59 tons per hectare respectively³.
- e. *Lower use of modern agricultural inputs:* - So far the use of inputs are concerned, the village artisans generally supply the tools and implement to the cultivators. In some cases, the cultivators themselves make their tools. Here, the use of improved seeds, fertilizers and equipments lack of proper improvisation as to how the benefits of scientific and technical innovations can be induced is yet to see.

Here, the agrarian structure continues to be dominated by owner- cultivators, although the areas under tenancy as well as percentage share of both partly leased-in and entirely leased in holdings are increasing. In some areas, sharecropping is also practiced, but this is not a common practice. The factors which have brought this new type of contractual arrangement are the insufficiency of family labour

3 Statistical abstract of Arunachal Pradesh- 1998, Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Arunachal Pradesh, pg. 25.

and non-availability of wage labour. So far as the size class wise distribution of leased-in holdings belong to the marginal and small categories of holdings.

III. Agrarian Social Structure— A Theoretical Perspective:

Agrarian social structure is one of the central themes of rural sociology. On a broader perspective, the agrarian system is related to (a) land and its utilization; and (b) productive purposes. According to Andre Beteille, the agrarian social structure revolves round two major issues like— (a) technological arrangements and (b) social arrangements. Technological arrangements include ecological condition along with the new agriculture technology, such as water pumps, chemical manure, improved seeds, etc. Another aspect of agrarian system is that of social arrangement. It includes land control and landownership. Agrarian system varies from one region to another. Theoretically, the agrarian structure has been analyzed by various sociologists' economists like A.R. Desai, Yogendra Singh, K.L.Sarma, Sir Daniel Thorner and D.N. Dhanagre.

III. I. Sir Daniel Thorner Model:

Sir Daniel Thorner has attempted to reduce them into well defined and precise social categories on the basis of the three following criteria: -

- (1) Types of income from the soil: (i) *rent*; (ii) *fruits of own cultivation*; or (iii) *wages*.
- (2) The nature of rights: (i) *proprietary or ownership*; (ii) *tenancy (with a varying degree of tenurial security)*; (iii) *share cropping rights*, or (d) *no rights at all*.
- (3) The extent of fieldwork actually performed: (i) *absentee who doesn't work at all*; (ii) *those who perform partial work*; (iii) *total work done by actual cultivator with family labour and (iv) where work is done entirely for others to earn wages* (Thorner 1956:4).

Taking these criteria Thorner has outlined the following model of agrarian class structure in India:

1. Maliks – (a) big landlords, (b) rich landowners,
2. Kisans- (a) small landowners, (b) substantial tenants &
3. Mazdoors- (a) poor tenants, (b) sharecroppers, and (c) landless labourers

He is working upon the issues as who owns the land, who works it, what is the product and who gets what share of that product noticed that in a particular form of land system it served to confirm the right of one group of holders to a share in the produce of the land, whether or not they have participated personally in the productive process. He also held whether this right (i.e., the privilege of receiving agricultural income without necessarily performing agricultural labour) was retained by the descendants of the original holder, or, as happened even more frequently, purchased and enjoyed by others, it tended to become increasingly separated from the actual tilling of the soil, and even from residence in the village. They found it more profitable to rent out their holdings to sub-tenants and retire

from the active practice of agriculture or else they sell out completely newcomers, typically merchants, moneylenders or other non-agriculturists interested less in cultivation than in collection of rents.

III. II. Dhanagare Model:

This model is an extension of the Daniel Thorner. According to him, while using this model of agrarian classes given by Sir Daniel Thorner, in the Indian context some caution is necessary. *Firstly*, all five class situations and their sub-categories are regionally specific. *Secondly*, more often 'rich', 'middle', and 'poor' peasant categories can be distinguished from each other only in qualitative rather than in quantitative terms. Adjectives like 'substantial', 'medium', or 'small' that are often used to differentiate between landholdings, cannot be defined with precision and accuracy in terms of acreage, etc., partly because of regional variations and partly because of lack of uniform data and statistics on different regions of India in different periods. At this, what one could possibly do is to take into account the comparability of relative positions of agrarian classes in different regional structures. Finally, although the class categories of the model are analytically separable, their boundaries are sometimes blurred in reality. Again, there is considerable overlapping between categories III and IV, and also between IV and V, but there is no satisfactory way of resolving this problem, particularly at macro level analysis. All that an analyst can do is broadly identify the class situations from which the leaders and principal participants of the peasant movements comes in question.

IV. Agrarian Structure of Arunachal Pradesh:

Agrarian structure of a region basically depends upon several matters like-property rights, distribution of operational holdings, and the extent and types of tenancy.

- **IV. I. Structure of Property Right in Arunachal Pradesh:** The property rights formations in Arunachal Pradesh have undergone substantial changes over the last five decades. The traditional form of land ownership was collective, although animals, tools and implements were privately owned. The collective or common property rights have diverse context- specific operational meanings. In practice, there were considerable local variations in the rule governing access to land. The land under shifting cultivation, generally described as under ownerships by the whole village community over which the individuals are supposed to have used rights alone, are owned by specific clans and by individual households. Most of the villages had some institutional mechanism like village councils to manage and safeguard property rights in land and forest⁴. The traditional shifting cultivation

4 Deepak K. Mishra: Institutional specifications and agrarian Transformation in Aunachal Pradesh: Changing Realities and Emerging challenges; Indian Journal of Agricultural Economy; Vol. 61, No.3, July- Sept. 2006.

system was based on the elaborate networks of informal contracts, co-operation, resource pooling, risk sharing and mutual insurance mechanisms. However, because of several internal dynamics, e.g. absence of fairness in the distribution of agricultural land in terms of quality, lack of sufficient surplus generation and demographic changes as well as the mutually reinforcing interventions by the state and market forces, private property rights over land have been emerged in many parts of the state (Mishra, 1987; 2001; Roy and Kuri, 2001, pp 53- 59).

- **IV. II. Nature of Distribution of Operational Holdings:** The nature of distribution of operational holding is an important indicator of the access to one of the most important means of production in predominantly agrarian economies. As per the Agricultural Census, 1995- 96, the marginal holding was 19.26 per cent, operating on only 3.03 per cent of the total operated area while, small holding constituted 19.37 per cent having 7.62 per cent of the total operated area; semi-medium holding was 28.97 per cent covering 22.36 per cent of the total operated area. Again, the medium holding in Arunachal Pradesh was 26.65 per cent having an operated area 43.32 per cent and the large holding was 5.75 per cent having an operated area 23.67 per cent⁵. Thus, one of the prominent features of the agrarian structure of Arunachal Pradesh is the fragmentation of holding. The reasons for such fragmentation of holdings are— family/ clan partition, partial or complete abandonment of large Jhum plots in favour of smaller permanent holdings might have caused the decline in the number of large size holdings. In addition to these, the shift of manpower from rural/ agricultural occupations to urban/ non- agricultural occupations, increasing population pressure of fertile plain land which is scanty and the resultant demographic differentiation, the influx of migrant labourers as tenants have also acted as a catalyst of differentiation.

- **IV. III. Extent and Types of Tenancy:** In Arunachal Pradesh, there is no formal land tenure system and system of 'Patta', as we see in the state of West Bengal, in existence. The people exercise customary rights on land for jhuming, hunting, fishing etc. they tend to exercise customary rights even in Unclassified State Forests (USF). In the absence of 'Patta' system, they receive from the state government "the Land Possession Certificate (LPC)" which is issued by the Deputy Commissioner for land up to 5 hectare.

V. Pattern of Land-People Relationship in Arunachal Pradesh:

In Arunachal Pradesh, the ownership of land and the individual right to use it are determined by the traditions and customs of the people. Here, the property rights in land have undergone substantial changes since independence in 1947. Even if they differ from one tribe to other, or sometimes even from clan to clan in their details, a study of these traditional laws of land ownership may be

5 Agricultural Census, Government of Arunachal Pradesh 1995- 96.

classified⁶ as— (a) Village ownership; (b) Community ownership; (c) Clan ownership; (d) Individual or private ownership and (e) Mixed type of ownership. Among these, the community ownership is the most common type of ownership and is the result of Jhum system of cultivation which warrants frequent collective efforts.

- The community ownership is the most common type of ownership and is the result of Jhum system of cultivation which warrants frequent collective efforts. This is however more theoretical in nature as every community land is divided among the individual family and the right of a family to operate the same plot again and again is well recognized. Beside, in certain areas there are some land mainly forest area which are owned by the whole community. Any member of the village may use these lands for hunting or fishing purposes or even for gathering materials for construction purposes. In any cases, however, women are not allowed to own land. The collective or common property rights have diverse context- specific operational meanings. In practice, there were considerable local variations in the rule governing access to land.

- The mixed type of ownership is found in areas where there is both Jhum cultivation and permanent cultivation here Jhum plots are held by individual families within the framework of community ownership and permanent plots are held individually. Among the Sherdulpens and Monpas of Kanseng, the mixed type of agriculture is practiced. In the valley, where annual rainfall measures upto 30 degrees, land is under permanent cultivation. On the exposed slopes swept by rain, shifting cultivation is the rule.

- The private ownership is common for all permanent cultivation plots and is held by a person or a family with all the rights of inheritance and transfer. When a member of a particular clan puts his efforts to make a piece of land operational, and inhabits the area for a sufficiently long period, the ownership right of the land passes to him and his descendants. The inheritance of individual land also varies from tribe to tribe. However, normally the eldest son of the family inherits the parental property. In some other tribes, land is equally distributed among the sons and no land is inherited. The traditional form of land ownership was collective, although animals, tools and implements were privately owned. The outsiders in a village are not given land ownership right. However, in Apatani areas, only the eldest son is allowed to inherit land, it led to rise in number of landless people⁷. Again, the system of ownership of Jhum plots varies from tribe to tribe. Among the Adis of Siang region, a land cleared by a particular Jhum cultivator and the members of his family is customarily retained by him and his family for successive

6 Maitreyee Choudhury: Land and Forest in the Eastern Himalayas: A critique on Agriculture and agroforestry in Arunachal Pradesh; Dialogue, Vol- 10 No. 4 at pg. 139.

7 A. C. Talukdar: Land Tenures and Land use pattern in Arunachal Pradesh: A Review: at pg. 173.

returns to the same plot. However, a different system of land ownership is followed by the Nyishis of Lower Subansiri and east Kameng districts who also practice shifting cultivation. In such case, the individual, who clears a patch of forest for Jhum and cultivates the plot in the opening year, may not return back to the same plot. Any other member from his clan or community may take up the land for cultivation in the second phase. The Wanchos of Tirap district enjoy a kind of non-transferable ownership right of Jhum plots. The Monpas practice both terrace cultivation and Jhum cultivation. They recognise individual ownership right as well as common village ownership right. However, the forests and pastures are controlled by the village council called Mong-pa. Allotment of land to the individuals in exchange of taxes is also done by the village council. In some areas, sharecropping is also practiced, but this is not a common practice.

- The Clan Ownership over land consists of meadowland near the village used as pastures and burial ground and tract of forest, where only the members of the owner clan have the right to hunt and trap. Members of outside the clan borrow the land from the village council and settle in the area, but he can not pass it to his descendants.

- The common village ownership of land is featured with one or two usually not extensive stretches of pasture and to forest tracts on the periphery. Most of the villages had some institutional mechanism like village councils to manage and safeguard property rights in land and forest. The land under shifting cultivation, generally described as under ownerships by the whole village community over which the individuals are supposed to have used rights alone, are owned by specific clans and by individual households.

VI. Landlessness:

The establishment of individual property rights in land under settled cultivation has tended to concentrate the ownership of lands leading to landlessness. Plain land in Arunachal Pradesh is scarce. Even if some people living in plains have no land for settled cultivation. Since these people are to depend only on Jhumming featured with low productivity, they are unlikely to accumulate sufficient savings to purchase the permanently cultivable land. In this connection, the case of Lower Subansiri district may be referred where in some Apatani villages around 30 per cent of peasants have been reduced to landlessness.

VII. Land Reform:

Agriculture, the mainstay of life in Arunachal Pradesh is yet to develop into a remunerative economic pursuit. Jhum and shifting cultivation which is labour consuming and uneconomic practice still dominated the agricultural scene. At this, the Indian Planning Commission, in the 7th Five Year Plan document stated that the land reform measures should include the issues like— (a) abolition of intermediary tenure, (b) tenancy should aim at the security of tenure, regulation of

rent and conferment of ownership rights on tenants, (c) ceiling on land holdings and the distribution of surplus land, (d) consolidation of holdings and the distribution of surplus land and (e) compilation and updating of land records⁸. Again, the approach of Prof. B.K. Roy Barman, to land reform in the tribal areas of North-East India suggests the critical appreciation⁹ of — (a) concepts of land tenure and land reform system, (b) method of determination of existing status of rights and obligations in respect of land, (c) diverse perceptions about land relations, (d) nature of problems arising out of approaches based on diverse perception, and (e) emerging perspective.

In Arunachal Pradesh, the land reform is yet to take place. A bill on land record and settlement was introduced in the Assembly in 1988 but it could not be enacted because of strong opposition. This is indicative of the fact that the demand for land reform is not yet strong. However, the inequality, landlessness and global breakdown of traditional risk-coping mechanism based on mutual insurance appear to form the rationale of undertaking measures aimed at the reduction of negative effects of new property rights regime in land. Hence it is widely felt that the land use pattern must change to relieve these helpless people from this situation and make room for increased productivity of land. So far as distribution of land among different holdings categories is concerned, certain unhealthy trends are noticed. While the number of marginal holders (below 1 hectare and above) has increased by 272.27 per cent from 1970-71 to 1990-91, the number of large holders (10 hectares and above) has been decreased by 29.45 per cent during the same period¹⁰. The report of various censuses exposes the tendency of fragmented holding in scattered parcels in addition to the followings-

- (a) Individual holdings are increasing over the years and this increase is mainly due to increase in the number of small and marginal holdings;
- (b) More than 50 per cent holdings are small holdings of the size of 1 hectare to 4 hectares;
- (c) Size of average holdings are gradually decreasing;
- (d) Number of large holdings is decreasing both in numbers as well as in percentage of total holdings.

At this, the Census report hopes that this trend can be effectively checked if there is a proper system of land ownership and land records which is possible through a comprehensive land reform policy of the government. At the followings may be submitted-

- The state must start a cadastral survey of the state and introduce proper

8 Seventh Five Year Plan, Planning Commission, Government of India, 1985- 90, Vol.- I. pg 62.

9 Roy Barman, B.K.: "Issues in Land Reforms in N.E. Tribal India," Published in *Mainstream*, August 1 and 8, 1987.

10 A. C. Talukdar: *Land Tenures and Land use pattern in Arunachal Pradesh: A Review*: at pg. 173.

- land records;
- Uniform Land ownership laws for all areas of the state recognizing the right of all the family members including women so the issue of landlessness may be properly addressed;
- Land transfer and land transaction should be officially recorded;
- Jhum lands suitable for conversion into settled cultivation land should be surveyed and identified and its owners should be encouraged to convert them into settled cultivation land;
- Efforts should be made to find alternative use of Jhum land and on the legislative front, the Jhum Land Regulation, 1947 may be amended to extend recognition to private holdings.
- Finally, all the changes should be brought keeping in mind the existing tribal customary practices so that the changes are acceptable to the people and may not disturb the age old harmony in the society.

Land reform also involves the land development. However, since independence, the administration has undertaken several programmes of land development in order to achieve the followings-

- a.* to reduce the imports of food grains in this food deficient land locked state and to achieve food self- sufficiency
- b.* to stabilize the local Jhumias who were then led nomadic life which is the precondition for any developmental work in the territory;
- c.* to progressively substitute the jhum cultivation, which is thought to be subsistence in nature and detrimental to ecology, by settled cultivation;
- d.* to protect the rich natural forests from the destructive method of slash and burn followed by the local tribals in course of preparation of their Jhum land.

VIII. Changing Aspects in Agrarian Structure of Arunachal Pradesh:

Change is the law of nature. Some changes have taken place in the agrarian structure in Arunachal Pradesh i.e. in the nature of cultivation, in land use pattern, in land ownership pattern, in land holding pattern and overall the productivity of agriculture in recent times. Now, let's have a glance over the changes-

- **VIII. I. Decline in Shifting Cultivation:** In recent decades, Arunachal Pradesh has experienced the process of gradual modernization with the relative decline of Jhum or shifting cultivation which has resulted into the overall growth of agriculture. This has been possible due to the induction of new technology, subsidized provision of capital and migration of labour from outside the state.

- **VIII. II. Decline in the Proportion of Working Population Engaged in Agriculture:** In last two decades or more, a noticeable change can be perceived that the pattern of total main working population engaged in agriculture. According to the census report, while during the 1971 census, the people in non-farm sector was only 19.70 per cent, during the 1991 census the people involved in non-farm

sector increased to 35.95 per cent. So far as the reasons for this fall are concerned one plausible reason is the presence of under employment. Another important reason is the increase in stress on land reflected by the gradual fall in the average size of operational holding. According to the census report, while during the 1971 census, the size of operational holdings was 6.19 per cent, while during the 1991 census the size of operational holdings was decreased to 3.62 per cent.

- **VIII. III. Rise in the Percentage of Agricultural Labour:** There is a sharp rise in the percentage of agricultural labourers in the total workforce engaged in agriculture of Arunachal Pradesh just like in other states. Agricultural labour as a percentage of total work forces has been increased from 2.44 per cent in 1971 to 3.37 per cent in 1981 and to 7.83 per cent in 1991¹¹.

- **VIII. IV. Increase in the Net Area Sown Under Permanent Cultivation:** Another significant change in the agriculture of Arunachal Pradesh is the continuous rise both in absolute terms and percentage terms in the net area sown under the permanent cultivation vis a vis shifting cultivation. Shifting cultivation which has been the way of life of tribal people is gradually being discouraged. While, in 1971- 72, the net area under permanent cultivation was only 24.31 per cent in 1985- 86, the net area under permanent cultivation was increased to 51.41 per cent¹².

- **VIII. V. Increase in Food grain Production:** Since the beginning of the fourth plan, considerable importance has been attached to increase crop production especially food grains production. It is noticed that food grains production has been increased over the past two decades from a level of 75915 MT to 226050 MT in 1992- 93¹³.

- **VIII. VI. Changing Property Rights Structure:** The property rights formations in Arunachal Pradesh have undergone substantial changes over the last five decades. The traditional form of land ownership was collective, although animals, tools and implements were privately owned. Most of the villages had some institutional mechanism like village councils to manage and safeguard property rights in land and forest¹⁴. However, because of several internal dynamics, e.g. absence of fairness in the distribution of agricultural land in terms of quality, lack of sufficient surplus generation and demographic changes as well as the mutually reinforcing interventions by the state and market forces, private property rights over land have been emerged in many parts of the state. (Mishra, 1987; 2001;

11 Computed from different Census Reports.

12 Computed from the Annual Plan, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh, 1995- 96.

13 Economic Review of Arunachal Pradesh, 1994. Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh.

14 Deepak K. Mishra: Institutional specifications and agrarian Transformation in Aunachal Pradesh: Changing Realities and Emerging challenges; Indian Journal of Agricultural Economy; Vol. 61, No.3, July- Sept. 2006

Roy and Kuri, 2001, pp 53- 59).

IX. Conclusion and Suggestion:

Thus, in brief, the institutional specificities of agriculture in Arunachal Pradesh lie in the informal but rapidly changing property rights regime, the preponderance of small- holder agriculture as well as the legal restrictions on the land market transactions and also labour mobility. One of the worrying aspects of this growth in agriculture is the extremely low levels of productivity as well as regional variations in growth performance. Again, due to the lack of availability / adoption of new technology, which is suitable for high altitude and hill agriculture, has emerged as a main constraint for technological transformation. Land reforms programme and land demarcation programme are yet to be introduced in the state. There is also deficiencies in proper extension services, training of farmers, subsidies, incentives, etc. which add the hardships to the farmers over there. The state should check the Jhum cultivation through a proper system of land ownership and land records and a comprehensive land reform policy of the government. Here, the state must keep in mind the existing customary practices and which includes the recognition of the rights of all the family members including women on land as in the agricultural sector the contribution of women is great and thus, derecognizing the women's right over land will definitely be an injustice to them. However, in the midst of these, agriculture in Arunachal Pradesh has grown rapidly in last few decades. To sustain the income from agriculture, new crops have been introduced, chemical fertilizers are distributed at normal prices and, moreover, an institute for training village level workers (VLWs) has been established. The trained VLWs are assigned with the role of acting as agents of change in the agriculture sector of the state. They are also responsible to provide various extension services to the cultivators and disseminate information as regards to better seeds, chemical fertilizers and improved methods of farming.