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Social Science

LESSEE SYSTEM OF LANDLORDISM IN SIKKIM UNDER BRITISH INFLUENCE 1889-1947

KEY WORDS: lessee, elakas, elakadars

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ABSTRACT

By the end of the nineteenth century a far reaching and significant changes were visible in the patterns of land ownership in Sikkim under the British influence. The changes were followed with the introduction of private property in land in the form of lessee system of landlordism. This paper is an attempt to understand the structure of lessee system of landlordism in Sikkim.

INTRODUCTION

Changes were made in the structure and machinery of the administrative set-up in those parts of the Himalaya which were gradually absorbed by the British in the first quarter of the nineteenth century (Rahul 2009). Sikkim situated in the eastern Himalayas witnessed changes in the patterns of land ownership under the colonial influenced by the end of nineteenth century. The British land settlement policies introduced private property in the form of lessee system of landlordism. The introduction of new structure in land was undoubtedly followed by the revenue interests. However, it is observed that before the advent of the British revenue-expenditure in Sikkim indicates mainly related to the maintenance of the king's establishment. Moreover, revenue was collected in kind not in cash (Kharel & Wangchuk, 2013). Thus in order to generate the revenue of state lessee system of landlordism was introduced. Under the lessee system the lessee worked as zamindar, like in permanent settlement in Bengal. In other word it would be more appropriate to said that, under British influence the land ownership system of Sikkim was based on that in force in Bengal rather than in force in the Punjab, Bombay, and Madras. The lessees like zamindars in Bengal made the owners of the land. Subsequently, they were responsible for the payment of revenue to the state; state was not entered into direct relations with the cultivators (Dewan, 2012).

Introduction of lessee System

Before the advent of the British, the economy of Sikkim had been purely in a primitive stage. In Sikkim, like all the primitive people's trade was irregular carried on between different sections of the community by barter, that is exchange in kind, or in addition tax used to be collected in kind (Bhattacharyya, n.d). The revenue-expenditure process prior to 1889 indicates mainly related to the maintenance of the king's establishment. The king took what he required, as he wanted from his subjects. Since, revenue was collected not in cash but in kind, therefore, the concept of rent and revenue assumed a dimension of traditional significance. Rent consisted payment such as part of the crop, butter and salt tax (Kharel & Wangchuk, 2013). The social, economical, and political scenario of Sikkim can be determined in the words of John Claude White:

Chaos reigned everywhere, there was no revenue system, the Maharaja taking what he required as he wanted it from the people, those nearest the capital having to contribute the largest share, while those more remote had toll taken from them by the local officials in the name of the Raja ... (White, 1971).

However, it was under the British Superintendence in Sikkim the earlier system of taxation was replaced and all taxes were collected in cash. Land, for the first time, was taken as a source of revenue, and in fact, it accounted for the major portion of the state revenue. To put it differently, the British authority ushered in an era of systematic land revenue system in Sikkim for the first time. The credit for the introduction of the changes in the method of revenue collection goes to the first Political Officer John Claude White (Chhetri, 2012). In order to raise the revenue of the state, White surveyed the districts which were accomplished in five years

and thus the basis for taxation and revenue was established (Kharel & Wangchuk, 2013). Meanwhile, he introduced a system of periodic land lease or lessee system of landlordism. In which the cultivable areas were divided into elakas (revenue collecting areas) and then the arable land areas were leased to the influential person on fixed annual revenues at different rates in accordance to acreage initially for a period of five to ten years (Sinha, 2008). Subsequently, with this the rights in lands were made over the lessee lords who were generally kazis, thikadars and lamas. As already mention the lessee worked as zamindars of Bengal. They monopolized their control over the agricultural land, where people simply worked. Furthermore, the durbar under Political Officer had set forth the rules regarding the rights of the lessees which clearly defined a relation between lessees and ryots. Carry out by this rule, each peasant had to pay his land rents, labour and road taxes within the 30th November every year to his lessee lords. Should anyone fail in this, the same shall be realized from him by the attachment of his properties both moveable or immovable which shall be paid or mortgaged for a period of two months at the latest and if he fails to pay up the same by the end of January every year then landlords disdain his property.

Powers of lessee lords or elakadars

The lessees were also known as elakadars accountable for the revenue, public work, justice, law and orders in their respective elakas. It means they had extra-economic coercive powers in their elakas (Sinha, 2008). Initially, the rights of elakadars over their elakas, were not clearly defined. However, Council Order of 1906 defined permanent nature of their rights over the elakas. The elakadars could retain their sanad for endlessly. Or they could claim over their elakas, unless and until, they served the state faithfully and not involved in rebellion and traitors against the state. Secondly, the ryots were prosecuted if they intentionally purposed false charges against their landlords. At the same time, elakadars were allowed to make an annual janch of their own elakas if they wished. Further as already mention before, each ryots had to pay his land rents, exercise labour and road taxes within the 30th November every year to his land lords. If, they failed then their attached properties both moveable and immovable were pawned or mortgaged for a period of two months. In short, the landlords could seize the property if ryots failed to pay up the same by the end of January. They had to keep the records of the peasant's settlement every year. Moreover, elakadars were invested with both the administrative and judicial powers. Under the administrative powers, they were responsible for the collection of revenue with the help of mandals of their elakas which include a fixed sum on account of land rent and household tax. Further, they had responsibility to maintain the register of birth and death within their elakas. They also acted as a link between the government and the peasants or agent of government at the local level (Chhetri, 2012). With regard to their judicial powers, the lessee landlords were granted with the powers to try petty cases, cattle trespass, petty land disputes, and debt cases of value not more than rupees ten with the power to fine up to rupees five only was given to elakadars. Furthermore, they were divided into four different categories as far as their judicial powers were concerned. Some of them were invested with high judicial

powers and were divided into four classes as follows;

- The first class had judicial powers to try ordinary civil and criminal cases and fine up to rupees one hundred or imprison for one month, if the sentences of imprisonment is passed the prisoner to be confined in the jail at Gangtok.
- The Second class was conferred with powers to try ordinary civil and criminal cases and fine upto rupees fifty.
- Third and fourth classes were invested with powers to try ordinary civil cases and fine upto rupees twenty five and fifteen rupees respectively. These powers were granted to the kazis, thikadars and lamas each within their own elakas.

Management of the elakas

By 1917 onwards, more land was brought under the lease system. At that time, land was leased out at rates varying from one anna to eight annas per acre for a period of five years to the ten years. However, in some cases leases were given for fifteen years to the Bhutia and Lepcha landlords and for ten years to the Nepali landlords. Although, a few of the older Bhutia and Lepcha landlords were granted leases for thirty years but the rent was liable to revision every ten years (Debnath, 2009). Moreover, the elakas were divided into three classes based on their management they were:

- Class one Elakas leased out elakadars.
- Class two Elakas under direct management of the durbar.
- Class three Elakas leased out to monasteries.
- Class one elakas consisted of those elakas which were leased out to various elakadars on fixed annual rent at various acres rates. There were seventy-one elakas under this class and elakadars were 21 kazis, 37 thikadars, and 13 Lamas. Class two elakas under management of durbar consisted of eleven elakas under different managers. Finally, class three elakas were monasteries estates. There were seven elakas under this class (Sinha, 2008).

Conclusion

The processes of changes taken place pertinently in land tenure system in Sikkim under British. The creation of a new structure in land ownership with defined permanent nature of rights in land benefited the state in terms of collecting revenue. On the other hand, it bestowed immense wealth, power, and position to lessees. Moreover, they could tax, confiscate, mortgage, and seize the lands of peasants. Consequently, the peasants of Sikkim like the peasants of Bengal under permanent settlement suffered. Their condition deteriorated due to the exploitation of their labour and imposition of various taxes by lessee lords in presence of intermediaries.

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