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LAND, FEUDALISM, AND REFORM: AN AGRARIAN HISTORY OF SIKKIM.

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Abstract: *This article traces the long agrarian history of Sikkim from the feudal structures of the Namgyal monarchy through colonial reordering under British political officers, the peasant uprisings of the 1940s, and the successive waves of land legislation that followed integration into the Indian Union in 1975. Drawing on primary archival sources, census records, legislative texts, and the works authored by Subba, Chakrabarti, Vandelhelsken, and others, the article advances three critical arguments. First, Sikkim's pre-colonial agrarian order was not a simple despotism but a layered system of delegated sovereignty in which ethnic identity, religious privilege, and spatial distance from the palace capital shaped the conditions of peasant exploitation in complex ways. Second, colonial intervention under the East India Company and subsequent British political officers did not dismantle this feudalism but instrumentalized and partially reconfigured it, substituting regulated extraction for unregulated tribute while opening the territory to Nepalese migrant labour that fundamentally transformed the ethnic composition and agrarian class structure of the state. Third, post-independence and post-merger land reforms, despite their legislative ambition, remained structurally incomplete because ceiling legislation was confined to agricultural land and did not touch the vast non-agricultural holdings of the former 'kazis' (landed elites), leaving the social foundations of the old, landed elite largely intact. The article concludes by situating Sikkim's agrarian trajectory within broader debates on the relationship between colonial property regimes, ethnic pluralism, and the limits of post-colonial land reform in the South Asian Himalayan borderlands.*

Keywords: Sikkim, agrarian history, feudalism, land reform, British colonialism, peasant resistance, post-merger legislation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Few regions of South Asia present so compressed a history of agrarian transformation as the small Himalayan kingdom of Sikkim. Within the span of little more than a century, its land system passed from a monarchical order in which the Chogyal was held to own all territory in the realm, through a colonial phase of demographic and administrative reengineering, through the crucible of peasant uprisings and nationalist agitation in the 1940s, and ultimately through the successive land reform legislation of independent and later merged Sikkim. By 2016, the state had become internationally celebrated as the world's first fully organic state an irony that should not obscure the unresolved structural tensions that continue to characterize the agrarian order.

The literature on Sikkim's agrarian history is relatively sparse compared to that on the major Indian states, but several foundational works have shaped the analytical terrain. T.B. Subba's studies of agrarian social structure and the dynamics of Nepali communities in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas remain indispensable.¹ Anjan Chakrabarti's critical assessment of agrarian reforms in Sikkim, published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, offers a systematic evaluation of the gap between legislative intent and social outcome.² Melanie Vandelhelsken's work on the 1961 Sikkim Subject Regulation has illuminated the connections between property regimes, citizenship, and ethnic categorization in ways that complicate straightforward nationalist and developmentalist narratives.³ More recent contributions by Hong Tran on taxation and clan politics under the Chogyal, and by Giri, Sachdeva, and Jena on cardamom cultivation and social structure, have enriched the ethnographic texture of the field.⁴

This article engages with and extends this scholarship by offering a periodized historical argument that links the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial phases of Sikkim's agrarian history into a coherent analytical narrative. It proceeds through five sections: an account of the feudal agrarian structure under the Namgyal dynasty; an analysis of colonial transformation and the establishment of an agrarian frontier; an examination of the political landscape of the 1940s and the dismantling of landlordism; a critical evaluation of post-merger land reform legislation; and a discussion of land use, cropping patterns, and agricultural production in the contemporary period.

2. THE FEUDAL AGRARIAN ORDER UNDER THE NAMGYAL DYNASTY

2.1 *The Structure of Sovereignty and Land*

The agrarian system of pre-colonial Sikkim cannot be understood apart from its political theology. The founding of the Namgyal dynasty introduced a conception of royal sovereignty in which the Chogyal was understood to hold ultimate ownership of all land within the realm.⁵ This was not a mere ideological claim but had concrete administrative and economic consequences: it precluded the emergence of private property in the modern sense, since all land was in principle held in trust from the monarch. The kingdom was divided into twelve districts known as 'elakhas' (estates),

each administered by 'kazis' and 'dzongpens' (local rulers) drawn from affluent Bhutia-Lepcha aristocratic families. These officials were not merely administrators but regional landlords who controlled vast tracts of land, remitting a specified tribute to the Chogyal while claiming a significant share of agricultural produce from cultivators within their territories. ⁶

The revenue mechanism that sustained this system was distinctive in its reliance on person-based rather than land-based assessment. Taxes were levied on individuals within households, on slaves, and on cattle rather than on land ownership or measured acreage. Since land had not been surveyed or assessed, the amount owed by any cultivator was determined partly by the proximity of their fields to the capital and partly by the personal discretion of the local lord. This created conditions of chronic uncertainty and arbitrary extraction that bore heavily on the raiyats the peasant cultivators who occupied the lowest rung of the agrarian hierarchy.

Within this hierarchy, a further distinction existed between two categories of raiyat: the 'Nangjens' (private servants), who were Palace attendants under the direct jurisdiction of the royal household, and the 'Zimchungpens', who accompanied the king on his journeys and were managed by mandals. Neither category enjoyed legal ownership of the land they cultivated. As J. Edgar, the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling who visited Sikkim in 1873, observed, while a cultivator who had built terraces on a hillside was permitted to sell the right to use those terraces, the underlying land itself could not be alienated only the Rajah possessed the authority to evict a settled cultivator. ⁷

2.2 The Four-Tier Hierarchy and Forms of Peasant Labour

The full hierarchy of Sikkim's agrarian order ran from the Raja at the apex through the 'kazis', the mandals, and the 'thikadars' (Nepali landlords), down to the raiyats at the base. The mandals functioned

as crucial intermediaries: they not only collected revenue with the assistance of 'karbaris' (intermediaries) but also demanded labour services from tenants, a system formalized through the institution of 'bethi' compulsory labour for the landlord.⁸ This was supplemented by additional forms of exploitative service: the 'kalobhari', 'jharlangi', and 'kuruwa', which required tenants to provide transport, portage, and other forms of unpaid work on pain of punishment.

The four main categories of peasant cultivators further illuminate the complexity of the social relations embedded in this system. The 'adhiawal' or 'adhiadar' was a sharecropper obligated to surrender half of the harvest as rent. The 'kutdar' was required to deliver a fixed quantity of grain on the completion of the harvest. Under the 'tanam' arrangement, rent was paid in cash for annually renewable tenancies at the landowner's discretion. Finally, the 'pakhurey' or 'sukumbasi' was a landless labourer who paid rent through a combination of labour and gifts.⁹ This taxonomy of dependent labour reveals a system in which surplus extraction was organized not through a single mechanism but through overlapping and mutually reinforcing forms of obligation that bound peasant households to landed elites across multiple dimensions of their lives.

Critically, the monastery lands occupied a position of exceptional privilege within this order. Exempt from all taxation and possessed of the right to levy dues on both villagers and cultivators, the monasteries represented a second axis of institutional power that ran parallel to and intertwined with secular feudalism. As Subba has noted, the collusion of religious and secular authority in this manner not only oppressed the peasantry but also undermined the egalitarian ideals formally enshrined in Buddhist teachings on dharma.¹⁰

3. COLONIAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE AGRARIAN FRONTIER

3.1 *British Strategic Interest and Administrative Reorganization*

The East India Company's interest in Sikkim developed during the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814–1816, when the kingdom's location on the route to Tibet and its familial ties to Tibetan princely houses made it a valuable diplomatic asset. Three considerations shaped British policy toward Sikkim: the desire for a convenient route to Tibet; the need to forestall potential political maneuvers by Nepal and Bhutan against Company interests; and the strategic value of a buffer state between the Indian plains and the Tibetan plateau.¹¹ The appointment of J.C. White as Political Officer brought these strategic imperatives into sustained administrative practice, inaugurating a period of profound transformation in the social and economic organization of the kingdom.

White's most consequential intervention in the agrarian sphere was his promotion of large-scale Nepalese migration to Sikkim and his encouragement of settled, plough-based cultivation as the dominant agricultural system. For European colonial administrators, as Subba has emphasized, large settled populations producing stable food surpluses were understood as the precondition of both revenue extraction and territorial control.¹² The earlier practice of shifting cultivation (jhum), which had been the primary agricultural technology in much of Sikkim and which the early Bhutia migrants had not significantly displaced given their predominant reliance on trade and herding was progressively marginalized through forest reservations, the allocation of land for tea cultivation, and active promotion of plough farming among incoming Nepali settlers.

The demographic consequences of this policy were dramatic. The census of 1891 recorded a total Sikkimese population of 30,458; by 1931 this figure had reached 109,808, an increase of more than 260 percent over four decades, driven overwhelmingly by Nepalese immigration.¹³ By the time of the first census, Nepalese migrants already comprised approximately 70 percent of the state's population. This demographic revolution fundamentally altered the ethnic composition of the agricultural labour force and set the terms for a long-running tension between 'indigenous' Bhutia-Lepcha communities and 'settler' Nepalese populations that would shape land legislation throughout the twentieth century.

3.2 The Revenue Order of 1917 and the Codification of Ethnic Difference

The British response to the potential displacement of indigenous communities by Nepalese settlers took the form of Revenue Order No. 1, promulgated by Political Officer C.A. Bell on 17 May 1917. This order prohibited the transfer of land owned by Bhutias and Lepchas to non-hereditary subjects without the express permission of the Durbar or state government.¹⁴ On its face, the order represented a protective measure for indigenous land rights. Melanie Vandelhelsken's critical reading of the legislation suggests, however, that its function was more complex: the order served not only to protect indigenous landholdings but to fix a system of categorization upon the population of Sikkim that encoded ethnic, religious, and functional distinctions into the structure of land tenure, thereby stabilizing the revenue base of the state by preventing the conversion of taxable cultivated land to non-taxable indigenous tenure.¹⁵

The 1917 Revenue Order thus exemplifies a broader dynamic in the colonial transformation of Himalayan agrarian systems: the conversion of fluid, custom-based social relations into codified, bureaucratically enforced property categories that served colonial administrative purposes while generating new forms of ethnic inequality. This dynamic is visible across the north-eastern borderlands the imposition of tribal land protections in Assam, Meghalaya, and Nagaland followed analogous logics but in Sikkim's case it was further complicated by the presence of a hereditary monarchy whose interests were partially aligned with and partially in tension with those of the colonial power.

The colonial period also produced significant infrastructure development that integrated Sikkim into wider regional commercial networks. The construction of roads connecting Gangtok to Bengal, the building of the Teesta Bridge, and the establishment of trade routes to Tibet through Sikkimese territory transformed the kingdom from a relatively isolated Himalayan polity into a node in a trans-regional commercial system. The export of cardamom, apples, and oranges to Calcutta, and the use of state forests for the extraction of Sal and pine timber for railway construction in Darjeeling, expanded state revenue while intensifying pressure on land and forest resources.¹⁶

4. PEASANT RESISTANCE, POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION, AND THE END OF LANDLORDISM

4.1 The Political Landscape of the 1940s

The Indian nationalist movement that culminated in independence in August 1947 exerted a transformative influence on Sikkimese political life. Three political parties emerged in rapid succession during 1947 the Praja Sudharak Samaj, the Rajya Praja Sammelan, and the Praja Mandal each committed to dismantling the dominance of the Lepcha-Bhutia ruling class and the power of the 'kazis'. On 5 December 1947, the Sikkim State Congress was formally established, articulating a programme centered on three demands: the abolition of the lessee landlord system, the establishment

of an interim administration with parliamentary representation, and integration with India.¹⁷

The political mobilization of the 1940s drew on accumulated grievances rooted in generations of feudal exploitation. Field testimony collected from communities in West Sikkim reveals the visceral character of that exploitation: 'karbaris' and mandals, acting as intermediaries for the 'kazis', would patrol villages carrying sticks, moving from house to house to intimidate residents and enforce tribute obligations.¹⁸ Ethnic inequalities between the Nepalese majority and the Bhutia-Lepcha aristocracy added a further dimension of grievance, as did the persistence of slavery the historical archives record instances of Bhutia raids on Lepcha villages to capture children for forced labour, a memory that circulated through the oral culture of communities long after formal abolition.¹⁹

The abolition of the leasehold landlord system in 1949 was both a direct response to this organized popular resistance and an outcome of negotiations between the State Congress, the monarch, and the Indian government, which had assumed a protective relationship with Sikkim through the Indo-Sikkimese Treaty signed on 5 December 1950. The treaty rendered Sikkim an Indian protectorate with responsibility for external affairs, defense, and communications vested in New Delhi, while committing both parties to 'progressive association of the people of the state with their government' and the establishment of village panchayats.²⁰ The eradication of the formal structures of feudalism the 'elakhas', the power of the 'kazis' to demand labour service, the systems of 'jharlangi' and 'kalobhari' was thus achieved not through revolutionary rupture but through negotiated reform within a framework of continued inequality.

4.2 The Limits of Early Reform

The abolition of landlordism in 1949 was followed by a series of supplementary reforms that incrementally redefined the terms of land access and tenure. The 1951 land settlement granted property rights to cultivators who had been continuously using land for a period of not less than fourteen years. A separate notification in 1950 formally dissolved the King's private estates and monastery lands. The discriminatory rent system introduced by Charles Bell in 1915, under which Nepalese cultivators had been charged higher rents than Lepchas and Bhutias, was abolished by royal proclamation in 1956 in favour of a uniform rent structure.²¹

These reforms, however, did not resolve the fundamental question of land distribution. The 1951 Act permitted former landlords to retain up to 100 acres as non-taxable freehold (a provision that was not abolished until 1967), while ceiling restrictions on tax collectors' holdings and the holdings of 'bustiwallas' (village men) Nepalese tenant leaseholders established in the 1924 circular at 30 and 20 acres respectively, were not effectively enforced. Vandelhelsken's analysis demonstrates that the transfer of control over land use from landlords to the state did not produce equitable redistribution but instead entailed a redefinition of who was entitled to access land resources a redefinition that systematically disadvantaged Nepalese settlers who had arrived after 1946 and those who had cultivated without formal tilling or property rights under the landlord

system.²²

The consequence was an early crystallization of land inequality that subsequent reforms would prove unable to dissolve. As Vandelhelsken argues, the 1951 reforms allowed both the prophetization and the privatization of all land: tenancy and ownership rights were converted into property rights, and land became available for private acquisition, use, and transfer. This process entrenched the advantages of the former landlords, who retained the largest shares of the kingdom's land as durable private property, regardless of ethnicity.²³ The structural foundations of agrarian inequality thus survived the formal abolition of feudalism, relocated into the apparatus of private property law.

5. POST-MERGER LAND REFORM AND ITS CONTRADICTIONS

5.1 Legislative Architecture After 1975

Sikkim's merger with India in April 1975 following the popular movement that had eroded the Chogyal's authority through the third and fourth electoral cycles of the 1960s and early 1970s, culminating in the establishment of a cabinet government under Chief Minister L.D. Kazi in July 1974 inaugurated a new phase of land legislation.²⁴ The first act of the merged state government was the removal of intermediaries, followed by a sequence of legislation aimed at securing tenants' rights, establishing land ceilings, and enabling the redistribution of surplus land: the Sikkim Cultivators Protection Act (1975), the Sikkim Agricultural Land Ceiling and Reforms Act (1977, amended 1978), the Sikkim Land Requisition and Acquisition Act (1977, amended 1978), and the Sikkim Rural Indebtedness Act (1966, which had prohibited land pledging and imposed penalties of fine and imprisonment).²⁵

The Sikkim Cultivators Protection Act of 1975 was the most directly protective of these measures, providing legal security against arbitrary eviction for sitting cultivators and establishing procedures for reinstatement in cases of unlawful termination. Its provisions specified that an owner could not terminate a cultivator's occupation except on the ground that the cultivator had, without reasonable cause, failed to cultivate the land; that any order of ejection must be executed by the prescribed authority with payment of proper compensation; and that land illegally repossessed must be immediately restored to the cultivator, with 40 percent of any produce during the period of wrongful occupation forfeited to the state government.²⁶ These provisions represented a significant formal advance in tenancy protection, though their enforcement depended on an administrative apparatus that remained structurally limited.

The Sikkim Agricultural Land Ceiling and Reforms Act aimed to prevent the accumulation of agricultural land in a small number of hands by establishing maximum holding limits and providing for the transfer of surplus land to landless cultivators. The 'Katiwara' Committee, which prepared the initial recommendations for the legislation, proposed a ceiling of 16 standard acres under all circumstances, with provisions for protecting traditional tenure arrangements in areas like Dzongu

and for abolishing both private state and monastery estates.²⁷ The enacted legislation deviated from these recommendations in significant respects: monastery estates were not abolished; the ceiling applied only to agricultural holdings, leaving non-agricultural land unconstrained; and the provisions for the actual redistribution of surplus land proved difficult to implement in the face of elite resistance and administrative incapacity.

5.2 The Incompleteness of Reform: A Critical Assessment

The fundamental critique of Sikkim's land reform program advanced by Chakrabarti, Subba, and others focuses on the structural gap between legislative ambition and social outcome produced by the restriction of ceiling law to agricultural land.²⁸ Former 'kazis' who had converted portions of their holdings to non-agricultural use, or who held large tracts of land formally classified as such, were unaffected by the ceiling legislation. Reports in the scholarly literature indicate that individual 'kazis' continue to possess landholdings of up to 1,500 acres in the contemporary period, a figure that exposes the limits of reform in stark terms.²⁹ The Sixth Five- Year Plan itself acknowledged in retrospect that key tasks under land reform—the conferment of ownership rights on renters, scheduled for completion by 1981–82, and the distribution of ceiling surplus land, due by 1982–83 remained unachieved.³⁰

The 1996 land bank initiative, which invited large landowners to voluntarily surrender excess land to be allocated to landless families at a subsidized cost of up to Rs 52,500 including registration and stamp duty, represented an attempt to address residual redistribution needs through incentivized voluntarism rather than compulsory acquisition. The results were modest: only 114 families received land under the program during 2004–05 and 2005–06.³¹ Chakrabarti's observation that the program lacked transparency, and that the voluntary intentions of the landowning elite would predictably diverge significantly from the extent of their excess holdings, identifies a systemic failure that reflects the limits of reform strategies that rely on the cooperation of beneficiaries of the existing order.³²

The question of which ethnic group benefited from the land reforms of the 1950s is, as Vandelhelsken notes, not susceptible to a simple answer. The Revenue Order of 1917 and the Sikkim Subject Regulation of 1961, which defined the conditions of legal membership in the kingdom and the corresponding rights to land, voting, and scholarships, operated through a logic of ancestry and ethnicity that differentially advantaged Bhutia and Lepcha communities over Nepalese settlers while simultaneously leaving room for Nepali landlords who had aligned themselves with the colonial political apparatus to retain significant holdings.³³ The agrarian legacy of these unresolved tensions is visible in the persistent land inequality documented in the Agricultural Census data: in the northern district, approximately 22 percent of the population controls 66 percent of the land, a concentration that reflects the persistence of Bhutia and Lepcha large landholding under the protection of non-transferable tribal tenure.³⁴

6. LAND USE, CROPPING PATTERNS, AND THE AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY

6.1 *The Contours of Agricultural Production*

Sikkim's physical geography imposes severe constraints on agricultural land availability: only 12.3 percent of the state's territory is available for cultivation, while forest cover accounts for 41.9 percent and barren or uncultivated land for a further 25.4 percent.³⁵ Within this limited cultivable area, the cropping system has been shaped by altitude, ethnic food culture, and market opportunity. Maize is the dominant cereal crop, occupying approximately 50 percent of the total planted area, followed by paddy concentrated in the eastern district, which accounts for approximately 50 percent of total paddy cultivation and wheat. Large cardamom, cultivated under traditional agroforestry systems in the northern districts, has historically provided the most significant cash crop income, contributing more than 80 percent of total gross agricultural income in 1975–76, a share that declined to approximately 38 percent by 1995–96 as diversification and cereal expansion altered the cropping mix.³⁶

The food production data for the period 1975–2002 reveals a pattern of initial growth followed by decline. Total food grain production rose from 31,850 tonnes in 1975–76 to a peak of approximately 107,520 tonnes in 1995–96, before falling sharply to 76,900 tonnes in 2001–02. This decline reflects the combined effects of demographic pressure, environmental constraints, the reduction in budgetary allocations to the agricultural sector, and the structural shift of labour out of agriculture into the service sector following the post-merger influx of government employment and development funding.³⁷ Chakrabarti's analysis demonstrates that the compound annual growth rate of population since the 1980s has consistently exceeded the growth of food grain production, transforming Sikkim from a food surplus to a food deficit state a paradox that sits uneasily alongside the state's celebrated organic brand.³⁸

6.2 *The Post-Merger Development Paradox*

India's investment in Sikkim's development infrastructure following the Indo-Sikkimese Treaty of 1950, and accelerating after the merger of 1975, was substantial: beginning in 1954, Sikkim received Rs 20.37 crores from India for three consecutive plans ending in 1971, while state revenue grew from Rs 60,000 in 1947 to Rs 40 million in the early 1970s, subsequently doubling by the end of the decade.³⁹ This developmental influx, while transformative in sectors such as education, health, and infrastructure, produced a paradoxical effect on agriculture: by creating new employment opportunities in the service sector, it drew literate and able-bodied workers away from farming, accelerating the labour shortage that was already being produced by demographic shifts. Subba captures the irony with characteristic directness: '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.'⁴⁰ This observation points to a structural tension at the heart of post-merger development policy: the same

investment that was intended to raise living standards and integrate Sikkim into the Indian Union simultaneously undermined the agricultural base that had historically sustained the rural population. The budgetary allocation to agriculture, which stood at 3.91 percent of total state expenditure in 1985–86, had declined to 0.77 percent by 1995–96, a trajectory that reflects the prioritization of service sector and infrastructure development over agricultural investment.⁴¹

The ex-feudal lords who survived the land reforms found, as capitalism expanded in the post-merger period, that they were well positioned to convert their residual land wealth, social capital, and administrative connections into economic advantage in the new order. Subba's observation that 'the feudal parts of the past remain in other forms as the ex-feudal lords have become today's capitalists and bureaucrats' points to the continuity of elite advantage across the transition from monarchy to democratic state a continuity that formal land reform legislation, confined as it was to agricultural holdings and dependent on voluntary compliance, was structurally unable to interrupt.⁴²

7. CONCLUSION

The agrarian history of Sikkim from the feudal structures of the Namgyal monarchy to the organic certification of 2016 is, in the deepest sense, a history of the persistence of inequality through structural transformation. Each major transition from shifting to plough cultivation, from pre-colonial monarchy to colonial protectorate, from landlordism to tenancy protection, from monarchy to Indian statehood altered the form and vocabulary of agrarian relations while leaving their essential asymmetries substantially intact. The 'kazis' who collected tribute under the Chogyal became the landlords who collected rent under colonial administration, the freeholders who retained the largest post-reform holdings after 1951, and ultimately the landowners who continue to hold disproportionate shares of the state's agricultural and non-agricultural land in the present day.

This is not to deny the significance of the reforms that were achieved. The abolition of 'jharlangi' and forced labour, the introduction of tenancy protection legislations, the formal equalization of rent obligations across ethnic communities, and the redistribution however partial of surplus land to landless cultivators represented genuine improvements in the conditions of the Sikkimese peasantry. But, as both Chakrabarti and Vandelhelsken have argued from different analytical vantage points, the incompleteness of reform was not accidental: it was the product of political negotiations in which the landed elite, the colonial state, and the post-colonial governments each had reasons to prefer a settlement that preserved the basic structure of private property while modifying its surface conditions.

The challenge for future scholarship lies in deepening the archival and ethnographic foundations of Sikkimese agrarian history particularly for the crucial decades of the 1950s and 1960s when the legal architecture of the present land system was constructed while situating that history within the comparative framework of Himalayan borderland studies and broader debates on the political economy of land reform in post-colonial Asia. Sikkim's experience offers lessons not only

for Himalayan historians but for all those concerned with the conditions under which formal legal change does and does not translate into substantive social transformation.

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