

Agro-Economy in the Hills of Manipur: An Interplay of Peasants, Middlemen and Markets

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The paper examines a peasant society's interface with modernization, essentially the penetration of capitalist relations of production in the hills of Manipur. The space for labour has changed and has become commoditized. It is no longer the bonds of kinship, operative through families of clans and kindred, which govern production and distribution. Though there are a sizable population of rural poor, mostly landless labourers, who are dependent on agriculture as their primary source of livelihood, the introduction of peasants to commercial market economy have made them a vulnerable prey of the middlemen who exploit them in the business transactions. The outcome is the ensuing dwindling interest of the peasants in agriculture production as it is no longer considered to be a productive enterprise. This is despite the fact that they have no alternative vocation or source of livelihood or resource capital to fall back on. The study concludes that the peasants need to be encouraged by the state keeping in mind their important contribution to the state's economy and subsistence.

Keywords: Agrarian Studies, Middlemen, Peasantry, Markets, Landless Labourers, Migrant Labour.

Introduction

Taking up the experiences of the Kukis of Manipur, the study examines the peasantry's interface with modernization, in particular the penetration of capitalist relation of production in the hills of Manipur. It takes as its field site the economic transactions that take place at the junction intersecting the Imphal-Tamenglong road with Kangpokpi town in Manipur. Popularly called IT road by the local inhabitants, the Imphal-Tamenglong Road in Kangpokpi district of Manipur is a road that leads to Tamenglong district. There is a junction intersecting the road with Kangpokpi town, which is the meeting point of peasants from the villages of IT road and the middlemen of Kangpokpi town. Another meeting point between them is the Kangpokpi women's market locally known as *Nute Kailhang*. The peasants are dominantly from the villages of IT road like Songjang, Kotlen, Geljang, Leisang, Khomunnom, Holjang, Bollen,

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Maokot, V. Kholen, Lhungjang, Songpijang, Selsi, Tujang Vaichong, Gelnel, Joupri, Gelbung, Chalwa, Phoikon, N. Teikhang, Wakotphai, Govajang, Thenjang, Chaljang, Lhouthang, C. Chalkot, T. Khonomphai, Songpibung, Lasan, Bileijang, Haimol, Sojamphai and LC Phai. These villages were formerly located in the Sadar Hills West Sub-division of Senapati district, but now under Kangpokpi district consequent upon the reorganization of districts in Manipur in the year 2017. Majority of the households in the villages in IT road are dependent on agricultural production and rearing of live stocks.

Kangpokpi town has a population of 7,476 living in 1,437 houses as per 2011 census, and have better amenities and infrastructures like water supplies, communication systems, sewerage, roads, power supplies, schools, colleges, bigger markets and government offices. It is around 50 kilometers North of Imphal, the state capital. The National Highway 39 also runs through this town. It is not under chieftainship system but under the Kangpokpi Urban Town Committee (KUTC). It is governed under the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Council Act, 1971. The poor connectivity with the main town, the National Highway and the underdeveloped nature of these villages have contributed in obstructing the economic growth of the villages in IT road. Shortage of basic amenities, infrastructural facilities and history of conflict with neighboring Naga community are other reasons for the underdevelopment. The region witnesses the extremity of the Kuki Naga clash in the year 1993 in which many villagers were displaced and massacred. Villages like Gelnel and Joupri were severely affected to the extent of being razed to the ground, experiencing both death and displacement but they were later rebuilt. Though the conflict had happened more than two decades ago, the consequence of the violence is palpable till today; crippling the economic activity, all-round development and institutional structures of the region.

Modes and Methodology

The research will focus on the Thadou dialect speaking group amongst the Kukis. The rationale for choosing them as subjects is because majority of the peasants involved in the economic transaction in IT road junction belong to the Kuki community. The Thadous are the largest Tribe (2, 15913)¹ in Manipur as per the 2011 census. The word Kuki is a generic term, which includes a number of tribes and clans. The data supporting the arguments in the paper is based on field work conducted in Kangpokpi district, namely Tujang Vaichong village, Motbung village and Kangpokpi Town in the years 2008 to 2010. To understand the demography and details of each area, household survey is taken in one-third of the population of each area (table 1). Scheduled questionnaires on farm related questions were given to the respondents in the household surveys who were directly involved in farming.

Table 1: Details of Household Survey Conducted in 2008²

<i>Name of Village</i>	<i>Household Population</i>	<i>No. of respondent for Household survey</i>
Tujang Vaichong	194 ³	65
Motbung	609 ⁴	200
Kangpokpi	1662 ⁵	560

The paper also uses data from fieldwork conducted in July to August, 2019 in IT road junction and Kangpokpi women's market locally known as *Nute Kailhang*. The research unveils the dynamics of the relationships between the small land holding agricultural peasants and the middlemen in the context of the hill economy of Manipur. It identifies three common horticultural products (Potato, Cabbage and Brinjal) that are widely grown in the region and follow up on them via the four agencies, small landholding agricultural peasants, middlemen, greengrocers/ vendors and consumers.⁶ The goal is to find out the overall profit procured by them in the overall process of economic transaction, especially highlighting the profit made by the middleman as compared to the actual producer of the vegetables.

Theoretical Framework

The term 'peasant' referring to small land holding farmer or landless farm labourers is used instead of 'farmer' in the paper. The American Anthropologist Robert Redfield classifies those people who make a living and have a way of life through cultivation of the land as peasants. They are those groups of people for whom agriculture is a livelihood and a way of life and not a business for profit (Redfield 1969, pp. 27-28). On the other hand, the type of agriculturists, who carry on agriculture for reinvestment and business, who looked on the land as capital and commodity, are not peasants but farmers (ibid). A peasant is, 'a man who is in effective control of a piece of land to which he has long been attached by ties of tradition and sentiment (ibid).' Alexander Chayanov's definition of pure family farm, which employs no hired wage labour, but is solely dependent on the work of the members of family is relevant to define the society in its pre-colonial state. This concept is however inadequate to define the postcolonial peasantry (as cited in Thorner et. al 1987, p. xiii).

The study also borrows heavily from Thorner who writes, the Indian economists in its policy on agriculture have an orientation towards the following goals:

- (1) To overcome the misery, squalor and illiteracy of the peasantry by transforming traditional rural society
- (2) To influence the peasants to modernize their agriculture technique and
- (3) To carry out this transformation and modernization in a manner that facilitates the development of the entire national economy (Thorner 1987, p. xi).

In the pre-British era the principal form of sustenance among the tribal communities was hunting and then pastoralism. Later on, there was a shift and a tendency for sedentarisation. A.R. Desai (1969) wrote about the meeting of Tribal Welfare Committee at the Indian Conference of Social Welfare Work at Calcutta which suggested a distinction between tribal communities and semi-tribal communities: (1) Tribal communities are those who are still confined to the original forest habitats and follow the old pattern of life, and (2) Semi-Tribal communities are those who have more or less settled down in rural areas and have taken to agriculture and allied occupations (Desai, 1969, p. 226). Therefore, anthropologists have documented processes of tribe-peasant continuum and pointed to the shift from traditional means of subsistence resulting in peasantization of tribals. D.D. Kosambi (1985) argues

that tribal elements were being fused into a general society once tribes got assimilated into the broader social structure. 'The tribal societies that got assimilated into agricultural society appear to have subsumed their tribal identity with some sort of 'caste' in the existing rural caste-based multilayered hierarchical society.'⁷ The three categories of peasants given by Daniel Thorner is relevant to the case of the hill communities in Manipur. They are: (1) *Malik*: who has ownership of land or patta in his name; (2) *Kisan*: he is the actual tiller of land. This category includes the sharecroppers also; (3) *Mazdoor*: This includes agricultural labourers who earn their livelihood by working in the field (as cited in Doshi & Jain, 1999, p. 227).

As early as the 1950s, Mc Kim Marriot argued that India's villages were not little republics (Marriot 1955). The Indian village is changing, and the degree and nature of change varies from region to region. The expression 'commercialization of agriculture' is used to describe two related processes: 'first, a shift in the agrarian economy from production for consumption to production for the market; and second, a process where land starts acquiring the features of a commodity and begins to be sold and purchased in the market, like other commodities' (Jodhka, 2003, p. 1220). In the past, agricultural production was dominated by customs and traditions. Changes taking place today are due to the interplay of various factors such as response to technological change, result of cultural contact, policy decisions in respect of forest and agricultural lands and new ideology.

In order to assess the changing nature of agro-economy of the hills of Manipur, we take a socio-historical approach to understand the mode of production through different periods of time.

Traditional Mode of Production

In order to have a better understanding of the village dynamics in the hills of Manipur, let us have a closer look at the custom, culture and traditional mode of production amongst the peasants under study. In the pre-British period, the agricultural economy of the Kukis of Manipur were characterized by closely related bonds of kinship, operative through families, clans and kindred governed production and distribution. Family was the unit of production without any division of labour except the one based on age and sex. Technology was at a very rudimentary level and production was mainly for consumption.

Jhumming

Jhumming or shifting cultivation was practiced and in this type of cultivation, the site for cultivation was never permanent. An interesting feature of their cultivation was the ritual of appeasement performed before the selection of the field. This was done as a mark of respect and acknowledgement of the spirits of the jungle as the prior owners of the forest. They also have harvesting festivals as a mark of thanksgiving for the produce they get from their fields at the end of a yearlong toil (Sitlhou, 2020). The Chief of the village and the village priest take center stage in the project. During the month of March, the Chief fixes a date for clearing the jungle in the Jhum fields by setting the jungle on fire (Sitlhou, 2011).

Allocation of land by the Chief

The allocation of all lands in the village is at the jurisdiction of the chief or headman of that village. The chief opens some areas every year to the villagers for *jhumming* or *thinghang lei* and for cutting woods in the mountains. The villagers have to seek the chief's permission to lease out the land to them. They have to bring with them a rooster as a token or this is also done through the traditional *cha-omna* (where tea is served to the chief before a request is put forward). The land is reverted back to the chief in case the occupant migrates to another village. The permission of the chief is essential for procuring land for cultivation, taking woods from the forests, cultivating in the mountain region. In Tujang Vaichong village, the permission granted is valid for a year and have to be renewed every year. For cutting of woods, the chief opens the forest for the public for about 2-3 months (mainly in the month of December, January and February). During that period, the villagers have to collect enough woods to last for their consumption throughout the year. In exceptional cases, a new settler can get access to the woods to build his house (Sithou, 2011). However, the restriction is against using these woods for commercial purposes. Allocations of forest land and forest produce are done by the chief without encroaching the 'Reserved Forest' of the Indian government in accordance with the Forest Act of 1878.

Social Organisation of Labour

In the Kuki society, labour is divided on the basis of gender. Women predominate in seed selection and planting, weeding and other operations, while men are engaged in activities which require greater physical strength such as cutting of the jungle, clearing, burning of the cut undergrowth, etc. Both men and women participate in harvesting. Agricultural related activities like cutting and clearing of bush, and later the initial hoeing up of the cleared ground into mounds, may involve a collective work-party of kin and neighbours (Turner 1996, p. 22).

Lom is the organisational set-up for the purpose of agricultural activity. It is a form of social arrangement of labour. The functions of the *lom* are concerned mainly with the economic life of the village. When cultivation in the hills is about to start, the people in the village under the leadership of the village headmen will arrange themselves in groupings of many types usually based on the age group they belong to. In village life in the past, the only and central activity or occupation was agriculture, and the whole village evolved around it. Accordingly, each section of the society, whether it is the women, the youth, married folks, the children and the older populace, each section has a different set of alliance mainly based on the commonality of agricultural related work that concerns them.⁸ The able-bodied men and women of the village are obliged to join this organisation irrespective of age and sex. Any household of the village can acquire the services of the *Lom*, that is, the collective group labour plays an important part in the village economy and contributed to agricultural productivity (Gangte 1993, p. 132). The goal is to make the *lom* members reciprocate in helping each other to keep the village self-sufficient in the matter of physical labour (ibid). Any villager in the village has as much right to hire the *lom* as the Chief of the village.

An Agrarian Society in Transition

A Shift Towards Contractual Labour

According to Chayanov, 'the essential characteristic of business firms or capitalist enterprises was that they operated with hired workers in order to earn profits. By contrast, peasant family farms, as Chayanov defines them, normally employed no hired wage labour—none whatsoever (Thorner 1987, p. xiii)'. The agriculture system that was a collective enterprise characterised by self-sufficiency and communal and family labour has become more individualistic in the Kuki villages. So, the new *theka* system has become more popular. This system is still functional to a marginal rich landowner who have more lands and agricultural fields than he can handle. Labour therefore gradually becomes increasingly commodified. *Lom kijoh* means selling of one's *lom* or group of labourers. If the allotted work is completed before the contract time, the owner can sell off the *lom* to another landowner. Labour has attained a monetary value in this instance. Karl Marx in his 'Capital: A Critique of Political Economy (vol.1)' looks at how individual acts of useful labour are transformed into commodities (Marx 1954). He writes, '...peasant who produces with his own means of production will either gradually be transformed into a small capitalist who also exploit the labour of others, or he will suffer the loss of his means of production...and be transformed into a wage worker' (Marx 1951, pp. 193-194). Useful labour is therefore transformed into commodities only in a society in which the products of labour take the form of the commodity (Morrison 1995, p. 66).

This practice is common among the Meiteis of the valley in Manipur. The fact that it is widely practiced today among the hill tribes of Manipur could be attributed to the result of cross-cultural contact. Moreover, it can be considered an indicator of the monetization of the labour system in the hills. In many villages, the type of tenancy practice is *loushan* and *tangkhai chabi*, the latter is in Manipuri Meiteilon, language of the majority Meitei community in Manipur. In the case of *loushan*, the labourer takes whatever is left after the landowner has taken his share. In *tangkhai chabi*, the landowner and the labourer shares the produce into equal halves. There is another mode of leasing out of land, viz., *theka* and *nikhotha*. *Theka* is the term used for the existing contract form of arrangement where the labourers are engaged for a period, for instance, during the harvesting season or the weeding season in wet-rice cultivation. *Theka* can be called a 'contract system of labour'. The period of contract continues until the work assigned is completed. It is made between a landowner and a group of labourers, who share the payment among themselves. The payment whether in cash or in kind is made only after the completion of the work allotted. *Nikhotha* on the other hand is on a daily basis and payment is ideally made at the end of the day. This practice is still continued today. In *nikhotha*, the landowner has to provide refreshment like tea and snacks to the labourer during lunchtime. In the case of the *theka* system, the cultivators are to provide refreshments for their own consumption.

In Tujang Vaichong, an almost negligible percentage of the population thrives mainly as agricultural labourers on others' farms. An informant Jangsat narrates how he works in different lands based on *nikhotha*⁹ in which payment ranges from person to person. The agreement for the amount is fixed by word of mouth and does not

require paper work. The rate for the *nikhotha* is rupees fifty per day for females and rupees sixty per day for males in the year 2008. Theka system of labour arrangement is also practiced by some people. Land is usually leased out to the Nepalis based on half-share of the produce also called the *tangkhai chabi* system. Payment is made both in kind and cash according to the convenience of the remunerator. Another respondent Nengpi¹⁰ narrates her mother's work experience as a labourer in others' farms. She works along with other fellow workers on contract basis via *theka* system during harvest time. If the rain wets the rice before it is properly stacked in the barn, then this affects the quality of the rice. So, the idea is to finish it within the least possible time. The field owner pays them a thousand rupees to be shared among themselves in 2008 (Sitlhou 2011).

Migrants Spaces for Labour

Another change is on the basis for recruitment of labour in the hills. The question of who cultivates the land in tribal societies brings out another aspect unique to tribal societies. In the past, clanship and kinship network had played an important role in the space for labour, but this is slowly changing today. Bond of kinship operative through families, clans and kindred governs production and distribution. However, there have been remarkable changes in this area, where migrants are recruited in the case of shortage of farm hands in the family. Another reason is that there is lesser dependence on agriculture as the primary occupation. Another factor leading to labour shortages is created by highly educated younger generations who prefer tertiary sector employment opportunities (Singh, 2009, p. 124).

Today when a landowner recruits labourers, selection is based mainly on availability. This is because of the lesser dependence on agriculture (and on land) as a means of livelihood and other alternative means of income like government jobs and business enterprises. Of the criteria for recruitment, the landowner considers the following:

- A person of one's relations
- Availability
- Mostly non-tribals or Nepalis¹¹ (because they charge cheaper rates)
- Character or accountability like hard worker, honesty, self-sufficiency.

In the case where families do not lease out their land, the adult members usually go to work in farms. Most of the villagers in Tujung Vaichong are cultivators; part time or full time and even those who are employed in government services are either directly or indirectly involved in it. Nevertheless, many of them have either partly or fully leased out their lands to neighbouring non-tribals or Nepali migrants through the system of *tangkhai chabi* (half share of the produce).

In Tujung Vaichong, the concept of 'out-sider', referring to the Nepalis, have lessened as they prove to be an indispensable part of the village economy. There is, however, lesser case of intermarriage amongst them as compared to the neighbouring Kuki villages. In Motbung¹², the concept of the 'other' is clearly defined and the chief assisted by the village authority members has very strict rules against the transfer

of land from a tribal to a non-tribal as per the constitution. The village council spearheaded by the Chief is very effective in Motbung and stringent rules are laid down by the council. Any person selling land to a non-tribal is severely dealt with. The Nepalis are more skilled and knowledgeable in entrepreneurship and have set up many thriving shops in the village centres. The majority of the migrants in Motbung are classified under two cultural communities—the Deshwalis and the Nepalis. The 2001 census records a separate Motbung for Nepali with 79 households and 384 populations.¹³ The population has increased to 114 household with 683 population as per the 2011 census. Kangpokpi being an urban town, the concept of ‘out-sider’ and ‘in-sider’ is not very vivid. There are many cases of intermarriage. Business transactions and partnerships are done at a rapid rate. Since the law of not transferring land to non-tribals also applies here, there has been some cases (though negligible) in which a Nepali male married to a Kuki woman has taken the surname of the wife, going against the patriarchal societal norms for personal benefit.

Thus, there is a replacement of family labour by hired labour. Since the sale of agricultural products is not sufficient, the peasants also sell their labour as subsidiary sources of income (Banaji 1976, p. 5). Banaji writes on Kautsky’s Agrarian question:

The growth of capitalism in the towns is by itself sufficient to transform completely the peasantry’s established way of life, even before capital has itself entered agricultural production and independently of the antagonism between big and small holdings. But capital does not confine itself to industry. When it is strong enough, it invades agriculture (Banaji 1976, p. 5).

The Middleperson or Khutpha

Khutpha, similar to the concept of ‘middlemen’, is operational in these regions. Most cultivators have a link with a *Khutpha* (or middlemen). On those days when they are unable to sell the produce in Kangpokpi, they would leave the produce with their *Khutpha*, who is an inhabitant of Kangpokpi. The *Khutpha* may hold on to the produce for some time if the price is too low. He sells the produce on behalf of the cultivators, when the price is right. The right price is decided in consultation with the cultivators over phone. Sometimes, the cultivators send their produce with transporters without personally going to Kangpokpi. The transporter hands over the produce to the *Khutpha* at Kangpokpi, who in turn sell the produce and pay the fare. The *Khutpha* may remit the cultivators’ share through the transporter. So, there exists a level of trust among the cultivator, the transporter and the *Khutpha* in this whole process.¹⁴

Another respondent, 65 years old Vumkhomang Sitlhou¹⁵ also dwelled on the merits and demerits of *Khutpha*.¹⁶

1. During times of hardships, the cultivators could borrow Rs. 1000/- to 2000/- from their *Khutphas*.
2. Even requirements such as weed killers could be sent by the *Khutphas* without the necessity of sending money beforehand. The money owed by the cultivators are settled at the time of selling the produce at the end of the year.
3. Not only weed killers, the cultivators can also ask the *Khutphas* for other things they need which may not be necessarily related to farming.

4. If the cultivators happen to take a loan from the *Khutpha* or owe him some money, they cannot give their produce to any other person. Because doing so would jeopardize the relationship between the two.
5. The *Khutpha* would offer them only the normal rates.
6. The cultivators usually don't measure their produce before sending to the *Khutpha*. The two have mutual trust in each other. The cultivators sometimes depend on the bus drivers/ transporters for weighing their produce.
7. The *Khutphas* write the weights on the empty gunny bags which are sent back after the produce is sold. The unsold leftovers are sent back.

Nearness to the National Highway

Gupta pictures the rural villages in India as one in which the villagers are desperately seeking a way out of the contemporary agrarian situation (Gupta 2005, p. 751). 'The village landholding structure is such that there are few jobs available in the fields that can engage the rural population on a sustained, albeit, sub-optimal, basis (ibid).' Besides fostering greater fluidity in occupational choices, agricultural stagnation has ensured the constant march, in increasing numbers, of employable people in the villages towards urban areas (ibid). The close proximity to national highway 39 is an important indicator to development and an important cause of differentiation of the three villages. Nearness to the highway means better roads connecting villages to town, more motorised vehicles, and better infrastructures like communication systems, electrification, and educational institutions, health and market sector. Better means of transport means greater dependence on the market (Banaji 1976, p. 9). According to Oomen, the advent of transport and communication and the spread of science and technology have ushered in urban characteristics into rural areas (Oomen 1984, p. 19), and thus lead to social change. He continues to argue that it is change in the center and not the periphery that will alter the essential structure of the society (ibid).

Raymond Firth's criteria for describing the Polynesian society in Tikopia as primitive in terms of culture and economy were lack of modern equipment and of the knowledge of the techniques for using it and non-monetary character (Firth 1959, p. 31). Oomen (1984) has also agreed that transport and communication ushers in urban characters in a rural area. The nearness of the National Highway 39 to Kangpokpi enables better means of transport and communication which means seeping in of the rubrics of globalisation like marketization, commercialisation and monetization. This is evident in the way Tujang Vaichong, compared to Kangpokpi, is more grounded in traditional values and has lesser access to facilities of development. The village is far away from the National Highway and is another 40 kilometres away from it.

Contextualizing Peasantry in Manipur Hills

The peasants who sell their produce to the middlemen at IT road - Kangpokpi intersection are mostly women who are at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid, and wholly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. They are engaged either or in both of *thinglhang lei* (jhumming) and *joulei* (planting vegetables in and around the mountain ridges). Rice being the staple food, *thinglhang lei* is where it is being planted. In *joulei*, maize, arum, chillies, cucumber, pumpkin, ginger, cabbage, brinjal,

potatoes, mustard leaves, tomatoes, beans, peas, taro, yam etc. are grown. Many of the peasants have an interesting relationship with land when one positions their case in the broader framework of the Indian society. The villages of IT road are all under the Kuki custom of chieftainship system.

In relation to land, there are five types of people to be found in villages under chieftainship system in the hills of Manipur:

- 1) Landlord or village chief,
- 2) Landless labourers,
- 3) Those who cultivate their own land,
- 4) Those who lease out their land and
- 5) Absentee landowners.

It would be pertinent to highlight here the exceptionality of the definition of term 'landless labourer' in the context of the hill economy of Manipur. Landless agricultural labourers comprise of those engaging in agricultural fields which do not belong to them; however, they obtain a share from the total agricultural produce. Agricultural landowners are the ones who own at least a plot of land either for wet rice cultivation known as *phailei* or jhuming which is also called *thinglhang lei*. Chongthang Khongsai,¹⁷ a landless labourer, narrates how his family cultivated other peoples' fields and shared the produce with the owners. When they are not cultivating other peoples' field, they survive by growing vegetables such as ginger and beans in the common land allocated by the chief. They also work as daily wage labourers either during the seed sowing or harvesting seasons.

Plot sizes are not at the discretion of the villagers as the chief whose duty as the overseer has to see it to that everyone gets land equally. However, the chief and his ministers take into consideration the number of family members and their ability to obtain additional labour. Newcomers to a village are at a disadvantage because the most desirable fields have already been taken. The relatives of the individual who had done the original clearing (forest) also inherit fields. In the case of Tujang Vaichong, the permission to make small vegetable garden in the vacant mountainside requires the permission of the village chief. Special provisions is made for those refugees who had come to reside in the village due to the 1993 Kuki-Naga clashes because they are not in possession of paddy field for wet rice cultivation. The permission is valid for a year and has to be renewed every year. Due to continuing growth and pressure from the population, the chief does not always grant the site for cultivation to the same family every year. The gap may range from one year to five years. The name of the new locality is called *Lhanghoi Veng*. This type of locality is prevalent in other Kuki villages also. In Motbung village, the locality marked out by the chief for displaced victims of ethnic conflict is called *Lhungjang Veng*. This is an example of how in a village, members come together as a community to act as a redressal mechanism to social disorder.

The chief opens up certain areas of the forest for any villager who wants to use it for vegetable cultivation. However, prior permission of the village chief is required. Scientific technology is not so popular, but tractors, fertilizers, herbicides, weed killers and pesticides are used in cautious quantity. Agricultural tools like axe and hoe are

still popular. In the family land transmission, the eldest son is the potential or likely inheritor. The co-relation between changes from joint or extended families to nuclear and single unit families today to the changes in the structure of land and land rights is that there are smaller land holding but the eldest son usually inherits the biggest land.¹⁸

Middlemen versus Peasantry: Findings of the Survey

This section unveils the dynamics of the relationships between the small land holding agricultural peasants and the middlemen in the context of the hill economy of Manipur. It traces the trail of three common horticultural products (Potato, Cabbage and Brinjal) that are widely grown in the region and follow up on them via the four agencies, small landholding agricultural peasants, middlemen, greengrocers/ vendors and consumers.¹⁹ When potatoes were sold for 20 rupees per kilogram by the peasant, the middleperson (as the respondents were all women) sells the best quality potatoes at 30 rupees per kilogram to buyers who can afford it. The rest is sold by her to the greengrocer who is seated at the market for a price ranging from 23 to 25 per kilogram. A sack containing 50 kilogram of potatoes is purchased for rupees 1000 by the middleperson from the actual cultivator. The greengrocer sells it at rupees 30 per kilogram. The respondents (greengrocers) confess that in order to increase their profit, they would manipulate the weighing scales. Some potatoes would rot before they could sell them, this is their way of making up for the loss.

In the transaction over cabbage (s), the peasant sells it to the middleperson at a price ranging between rupees 10 to 20 per kilogram depending on seasonal availability. When the fieldwork was conducted in July-August (2019), the cabbages were sold at rupees 10 per kilogram. The middleperson sells it to the grocer for 15 rupees per kilogram. The price of the cabbages often fluctuates and the middleperson told the researcher that it is sold at different prices (13- 30 rupees) per kilogram by the middleperson to the greengrocer depending on the season. The cabbages bought for 15 rupees from the middleperson is sold for 20 rupees per kilogram by the greengrocer. Worm eaten cabbages are preferred by the clients of the greengrocer as it prove they are organic and no fertilizers or pesticides have been used during cultivation.

Brinjals were sold by the peasant at a price ranging between 10 to 15 rupees per kilogram. It is sold by the middleperson to others (including the greengrocers) at rupees 16- 40 per kilogram depending on the season and availability. The greengrocer usually tries to get it at the cheapest possible price, even if it means compromising the quality. She earns about 5 to 10 rupees per kilogram as profit. At the time of the fieldwork, brinjals were sold at rupees 10 per kilogram by the peasant producer. The middleperson sells them to the greengrocer and others at rupees 12 -15 per kilogram. The greengrocer at the market sells it for rupees 20 per kilogram.

The data reflects the plight of the poor peasants who are not getting their due in the economic transaction. Many of the respondents from the category of peasants or actual agricultural cultivators are distraught because the profits they procure are almost marginal. 30 years old informant Joycy Kipgen²⁰ grows potato, cabbage, ginger, pumpkin, cucumber and maize in her jhum field. The expenditure disbursed in the process of farming to selling it in the market are:

- 1) Purchasing of seeds and manures
- 2) Payment of labour services (Rs. 300/-) for employing farm hands for ploughing, weeding etc.
- 3) Transportation charges of vegetables from village to market (Rs. 30/- per bag).

After deducting all the expenditures above, she gets about 200 to 300 rupees profit per each bag of vegetables she sells. Similarly, 55-years-old Chongkeng Haolai gets about rupees 500 profit in a day, whereas 60 years old Hoikhoneng Chongloi gets about rupees 15000 as annual profit. This is discouraging farming activity in the hills as farming is no longer seen as a rewarding enterprise. The middlemen who have better networking, connection or capital are able to gain in a day (or half a day), the same amount as the peasant who had committed months of labour and capital in the production of the vegetables.

Conclusion

The Chanyonavian classical model of peasant society of pure peasant family farms is no longer relevant today. The space for labour has changed. It becomes a buyable commodity and is 'commoditised' to use the Marxian term. It is no longer the bonds of kinship, operative through families of clans and kindred, which govern production and distribution. There is a replacement of family or communal labour for hired or waged labour. It is no longer an activity done through group cooperation, but more of an individualistic activity. The geographical location of the village as in its close proximity to national highways, availability of modern infrastructures and technologies also makes a great difference to the modernization of agricultural practices.

There is a shift towards non-farm enterprises in villages, including villagers moving out of the villages to urban towns to seek for better employment prospects. But this does not apply to the rural poor (or landless labourers) who are wholly dependent on farming as their primary source of livelihood. Based on my observation of the field, the simple-minded rural peasants are ill equipped to negotiate with the crafty middlemen who are well-versed in business tact. The peasants easily give in to the middlemen's bargain over their produce, undermining the fact that it was the yield of their one year of labour. The dependency now becomes unbalanced as the transaction is not at all profitable for them. As they are unskilled for any other trade or profession and lack capital of any kind, they have no alternative option other than to continue farming and be content with the meager outcome of their agricultural production. The production for market and the introduction of the illiterate peasants to commercial market economy have made them a vulnerable prey of the middlemen who exploit them in the business transaction. Thus, one reason behind the dwindling interest of the peasants in agriculture could be because it is no longer considered a remunerative enterprise. This is despite the fact that they have no alternative career or source of livelihood to fall back on.

The Left Democratic Front (LDF) government of Kerala has announced its Draft Labour Policy in 2017. The policy seeks to ensure the welfare and social security of workers along with the comprehensive development of Kerala's economy and society.

The State's labour policy seeks to raise minimum wages to Rs. 600 per day. It includes a provision for creating a woman-friendly environment in work places with maternity benefits and facilities, while also being sensitive to migrant workers.²¹ It is pertinent that Manipur has a similar policy to ensure 'fair wages' be given to the landless labourers of all gender and social categories whose only income comes from working on other people's farm. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is successful to a certain extent in elevating the minimum wages given in the villages of Manipur.²²

The study concludes that the peasants need to be encouraged and protected by the state, keeping in mind their important contribution to the state's economy and subsistence. It is important to take initiative in making them take pride in the farming profession. One suggestion could be the constitution of a farmer's market like the Hyderabad *Rythu* bazaar model. *Rythu* bazaar, or *raithu* bazaar, or *raitu* bazar, is a type of farmers' market in Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. It is run by the Governments of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana for small scale farmers with small landholdings. The Telangana *Rythu* Bazar Information system managed by the agricultural marketing department give information about the prices of vegetables in the market.²³ There are different types of *Rythu* bazars: Mobile *Rythu* bazars which are seated at different locations or localities in Telangana on a fixed day of the week;²⁴ *Rythu* bazars in open space at fixed locations; and those inside closed building like the recently built 'Modern *Rythu* Bazar' (Kukatpally, Hyderabad) with 447 stalls for which the state government had spent rupees 15 crore in 2022.²⁵ In the same way, farmers' market could be built at strategic locations in the hills of Manipur where the farmers can directly sell their produce to the consumer, thus eliminating the role of the middlemen.

Acknowledgment: The essay is a chapter from my PhD thesis titled, 'Land and Identity: A Sociological Study of the Thadou Kukis of Manipur' that was submitted in 2011 at the Centre for Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University and New Delhi. The data has been updated by another fieldwork that was conducted between July to August of 2019 via the UGC-SAP, Department of Sociology funded project 'Agro-Economy in the hills of Manipur: An interplay of Peasants, Middlemen and Markets'.

Endnotes

¹ Manipur Population. <https://www.populationu.com/in/manipur-population> (accessed date 29th June, 2023).

² Household survey conducted has been documented in PhD thesis 'Land and Identity: A Sociological Study of the Thadou Kukis of Manipur' that was submitted in 2011 to the Centre for Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi).

³ Chief's of Tujang Vaichong Record, 2008.

⁴ Motbung Village, Hill House Counting, Population Census 2008.

⁵ The ward wise hill house counting for the year 2008 by SDC Kangpokpi, Kangpokpi Urban Town Committee, Under Sadar Hills Autonomous District Council Administration, Kangpokpi.

⁶ Sitlhou, H. & Haokip. T. S. (2019, Nov. 8). Plight of the peasants in the hills of Manipur, *The Sangai Express*. <https://www.thesangaiexpress.com/Encyc/2019/11/8/It-is-easy-to-take-for-granted-the-section-of-the-populace-who-are-responsible-for-putting-food-on-our-table-every-day-of-the-year-Sadly-they-are-a-fast-dwindling-population-as-farming-for-them-is-.amp.html> (accessed 29th June, 2023).

⁷ History Notes. (2021, March 27). Peasantization of Tribes and their place in the Varna Order. <https://historynotesbook.wordpress.com/2021/03/27/peasantization-of-tribes-and-their-place-in-the-varna-order/> (accessed on 14th July, 2023).

⁸ Kilong, Helthang was a cultural specialist of Motbung Village and was interviewed on 14th October, 2008.

⁹ Where payment is made on a daily basis. The rate was rupees fifty per day in 2008.

¹⁰ Nengpi, 21st November 2007 (interviewed by the author inside the bus between Kangpokpi and Imphal).

¹¹ The definition of migrants will differ according to the person defining it. For some, the term ‘migrants’ applies to all the non-Manipuris especially the Biharis working as laborers or businesspersons in Manipur. However, according to the Chief of Motbung village (S.L. Kaikhosei), ‘technically the non-tribals like Deshwalis and Nepalis or Gorkhas who have been residing with them in their villages are to be considered migrants. But the Nepalis and Gorkhas have been living in Manipur for decades, and many are affiliated to them via inter-community marriages while also contributing to the village economy in small scale business like dairy farming and grocery stores, so they are sometimes as influential as the local population’.

¹² A village dominated by Thadou Tribe with 3,601 population as per the 2011 census. It was previously located in Saitu-Gamphazol subdivision of Senapati district. It is now under Kangpokpi district and is governed by chieftainship system. This village is, however not located in IT road.

¹³ Census of India, 2001, District Census Handbook, Record Structure: Village Directory.

¹⁴ Chongthang Khongsai is a 65 years old man from Gelnel village in IT road of Kangpokpi District. He was interviewed in July of 2019.

¹⁵ Vumkhothang Sitlhou is a 65 years old cultivator from Gelnel Village in IT road of Kangpokpi District. He was interviewed in July of 2019.

¹⁶ Discussion on Khutpha or Middlemen was earlier documented in Sitlhou, H. & Haokip. T. S. (2019, Nov. 8). Plight of the Peasants in the Hills of Manipur. *The Sangai Express*. <https://www.thesangaiexpress.com/Encyc/2019/11/8/It-is-easy-to-take-for-granted-the-section-of-the-populace-who-are-responsible-for-putting-food-on-our-table-every-day-of-the-year-Sadly-they-are-a-fast-dwindling-population-as-farming-for-them-is-.amp.html> (accessed 29th June, 2023).

¹⁷ Chongthang Khongsai is a 65 years old man from Gelnel village in IT road of Kangpokpi District. He was interviewed in July of 2019.

¹⁸ Questions are asked on technology and agricultural implements used for farming, potential heir in family land transmission and co-relation between types of family and the structure of land.

¹⁹ Sitlhou, H. & Haokip. T. S. (2019, Nov. 8). Plight of the Peasants in the Hills of Manipur. *The Sangai Express*. <https://www.thesangaiexpress.com/Encyc/2019/11/8/>

It-is-easy-to-take-for-granted-the-section-of-the-populace-who-are-responsible-for-putting-food-on-our-table-every-day-of-the-year-Sadly-they-are-a-fast-dwindling-population-as-farming-for-them-is-.amp.html (accessed 29th June, 2023).

²⁰ Joycy Kipgen (30 years), Chongkeng Haolai (55 years) and Hoikhoneng Chongloi (60 years) were all respondents that the researcher interacted with at *Nupi Kailhang* or Kangpokpi Women's Market in august, 2019.

²¹ Kerala announces labour policy; Minimum wage to be Rs 600 per day (2017, July 14). <https://www.newsclick.in/kerala-announces-labour-policy-minimum-wage-be-rs-600-day> (accessed on 14th July, 2023).

²² Discussion with the local populace in the three field areas of Motbung village, Kangpokpi town and Tujang Vaichong village in the years from 2008 to 2010.

²³ Telangana Rythu Bazar Information system. <http://183.82.5.184/rbzts/HomePage.aspx> (accessed on 14th July, 2023).

²⁴ Details of mobile Rythu Bazars and Locations. <https://www.ghmc.gov.in/announcements/Details%20of%20Mobile%20Rythu%20Bazars%2028-03-20.pdf> (accessed on 14th July, 2023).

²⁵ Bommala, Nabinder. (2022, April 3rd). Hyderabad: This swanky Rythu Bazaar, boon for vendors. *Telangana Today*. <https://telanganatoday.com/hyderabad-this-swanky-rythu-bazaar-boon-for-vendors>. (Accessed date 14th July, 2023).

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