

Agrarian structure and agrarian land relation in Nagaon District of Assam

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Abstract:

The term 'Agrarian Structure' in a broader sense, denotes all of the existing and lasting production and living conditions found in a rural region and covers all the structural conditions for production in agriculture and for the livelihood and social situation of the rural population. The agrarian structure includes the system of land tenure (social agrarian structure) and the system of land management (technical and economic agrarian structure). The agrarian social structure differs from one region to another. There are many diverse groups and classes that occupy certain positions in order to control and manage the affairs of the land. Thus, it is very difficult to distinguish these groups and organize them into one category.

Key words: 1. Agrarian 2. Agrarian Structure 3. Agricultural Labourer 4. Landholding

Introduction:

'Agrarian Structure' should cover two aspects: one relating to the distribution pattern of land owned and operated according to the size of holdings and the second relating to the agrarian relationships. The agrarian relationships are largely determined by the structure of land ownership, but they also reflect several historical, political and social factors (Dantwala, 1986). Thus, agrarian structure is dependent upon the structure of land use and cropping, the pattern of tenurial relationships, size distribution of operational holdings and lastly upon non-agrarian structure. Variation in any one of these constituent structures thus causes variation in the agrarian structure, thereby resulting in variation in agricultural productivity (Pal and Pal, 2006; Appu, 1974; Momin, 1989). The agrarian structure plays a crucial role in shaping the speed and spread of rural development of rural economy (Appu, 1974). Thorner (1956) defined that, agrarian structure as network of relation among various groups of person who draw their livelihood from the soil. According to Thorner, agrarian structure is the sum total of the agrarian relations in which each group operates in relation to the other groups.

Objective: The major objective of this article is to assess the overall agrarian structure of the study area in Nagaon district of Assam.

Methods and Materials:

The study is based on six villages of the district of Nagaon. The villages were selected with the help of multi-stage sampling. On the basis of pilot study and in interaction with the village headman and panchayat members of the respective villages total 240 numbers of agricultural labourer's households were selected for the present study.

Analysis and Discussion:

The agrarian structure of India as well as Assam was one of the important dimensions in context of agrarian study. Being one of the most backward economies of India, the present agrarian structure of Assam unfolds a host of fundamental issues. One of the most prominent features of agrarian structure in Assam is the legacies of the colonial and pre-colonial social formations. This includes at the very outset, dependence of the overwhelming majority of the total population of Assam primarily upon the agricultural sector to earn their livelihood. Another important aspect is that pattern of distribution of land. The high growth rate of population in Assam is definitely an important factor which has influenced the pattern of land resource distribution in the state.

Agrarian Structure during Pre-colonial Era:

In context, the pre-colonial Assam witnessed a social formation which could be broadly characterized as semi-tribal and semi-feudal in nature. And, such a social formation was marked by more or less, a self-sufficient rural economy, and it allowed only a marginal accumulation of cultivated land by a few royal families and religious institutions.

During the Mughal periods King is the not owner of the land. Numerous *mughal* government documents refer to private persons (called *maliks*) as owners. In fact, there was general recognition of the peasant's title to permanent and hereditary occupancy of the land he tilled. In cases, if the peasant holding the title to the land was found incapable of cultivating land (or had abandoned it altogether), then this land was given to another peasant for cultivation. But if at any time, the original owner recovered his ability to cultivate it (or came back), the land was to be restored to him. On the other hand, there was no question of real free alienation (i.e. the peasant had no right to sell the land), which is an essential feature of modern proprietary right. In fact, the rights which in essence constitute ownership, were not as a rule vested in one person, but were distributed among the various parties (like tenant, land owner, share cropper, etc.) connected with the land.

In pre-colonial period the land relation was basically depend upon on ownership of the land. That's why land revenue system was also plays an important role in land relationship. During the *mughal* period, the land revenue system mainly depended on the crops grown and its assessed value in quantified terms. The value of the production of each crop was estimated based on the 'yield per unit of land at the current harvest' multiplied by the 'quantity of area under that crop'. Land revenue was then calculated on the basis of a proportion fixed for the purpose. Since this method left some discretion with the officials, the system was modified to a method of notifying a standard schedule for different crops.

The revenue was collected through intermediaries system; those are of two type's viz. the *jagirdars* and the *zamindars*.

Agrarian structure of colonial period: Before the Britisher's occupied India, the village community was a self-contained place with a mix of agriculture and manufacturing activities. During the British rule there was widespread destruction of village industries leading to shifting of artisans to agriculture mostly to work as agricultural labourers. Some of its immediate consequences were: (i) formation of land market, (ii) rising rents, (iii) indebtedness, (iv) formation of layers of intermediaries, (v) frequent famines, (vi) impoverishment of a section of the population, etc. We shall, in this section, take a look at the major impact of British rule on some selected areas of economic importance to the agricultural development of India.

Land Revenue System: A number of modifications were introduced in the land revenue system during the British Period. To realize higher land revenue, the *zamindaris* were auctioned to the highest bidders. This policy greatly altered the composition of landed society as many old *zamindars* could not compete in the new system. The highest bidders at the auction were invariably people having association with the new administration through participation in trade and commerce. The peasants were thus kept totally out of this change and were also literally robbed by the unscrupulous *zamindars*. This reckless process, which continued till the *permanent settlement in 1793*, resulted in frequent famines and loss of human life. Large areas of land were rendered waste.

Permanent Settlement of 1793: The main features of the settlement were as follows:

1. The Zamindars were made hereditary owners of the land under their possession. They and their successors exercised total control over lands.
2. The Zamindars could sell and purchase lands.
3. The state had no direct contact with the peasants.
4. The company's share in the revenue was fixed permanently with the Zamindars.

Thus the Permanent Land Revenue settlement involved three parties, the government, the Zamindar and the 'ryot' or the cultivator. As per this settlement, the role of the government and the Zamindar is fixed but the role of the ryot is not at all defined and the ryot is put at the mercy of the Zamindar and thus ryot is the worst effected due to this settlement.

Under the permanent land settlement act it recognized the landlords as the proprietors of the land. It also recognized the rights of hereditary succession for the heirs or lawful successors of the landlords. The Government believed that these landlords would remain faithful to the British government.

Agrarian Structure Post-Independence: Independence from the colonial rule marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of agrarian structure. The main objective of the Indian state was to transform the stagnant and backward economy and to make sure that the benefits of transformation and growth were not monopolized by a particular section of the society.

Keeping this in background the government of India introduced various measures. Significant ones are following:

Land Reforms: Land reforms in independent India finds its raison in the constitution which begins with the Preamble that is based on the four cornerstones of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity, and further strengthened by certain specific provisions, particularly the directive principles of state policy, which set out that the state shall, in particular, direct its policies such that:

1. The citizens, men and women equally, have the right to an adequate means of livelihood;
2. The ownership and control of the resources of the community are so distributed as to sub serve the common good;
3. The operation of the economic system does not result in the concentration of wealth and other means of production to the common detriment.

Land reforms measures were among the most significant efforts of the state to achieve these goals. The Government of India directed its states to abolish intermediary tenures, regulate rent and tenancy rights, confer ownership rights on tenants, impose ceilings on holdings, distribute the surplus land among the rural poor, and facilitate consolidation of holdings. A large number of legislations were passed by the state governments over a short period of time.

The actual implementation of these legislations and their impact on the agrarian structure is, however, an entirely different story. Most of these legislations had loopholes that allowed the landlords to tamper with the land records, evicting their tenants, and using other means to escape the legislations (Radhakrishnan, 1989).

Provisions for institutional Credit: The government of India introduced various provisions of Institutional credit to weaken the hold of traditional moneylenders over the peasantry. It asked cooperative credit societies and commercial banks to lend to the agricultural sector on priority basis. However, the studies showed that much of their credit went to the relatively better off sections of agrarian society and the poor continued to depend on the servile exploitative sources (Jodhka, 1995).

The Community Development Programme (CDP): This programme, which was patterned on American experiences, was launched on 2 October 1952, and its objective was to provide the substantial increase in agricultural production and improvement in basic services, which would ultimately lead to overall development of the all sections of agrarian society. However, it failed in its objective and resulted in helping only those who were already powerful in the village.

The Green Revolution: Green Revolution is an agricultural development project that includes higher yielding variety seeds (HYV) and other fertility enhancing inputs i.e. chemical fertilizer, controlled irrigation facilities and pesticides. The components of the project consisted of providing cheap institutional price incentives, marketing and research facilities.

The Green Revolution led to a substantial increase in the agricultural production. However, it did not mean same thing to all sections of the agrarian society. While bigger farmers had enough surplus of their own to invest in the new capital-intensive farming, for smaller farmers it meant additional dependence on borrowing, generally from informal sectors (Jodhka, 1995). The Green Revolution also resulted into a totally new kind of mobilization of surplus producing farmers who demanded a better deal for the agricultural sector (Dhanagare, 1991).

Agrarian relations are the mutual relations among men as a class who exchange their activities in the process of production and exchange. Assam agrarian situation is characterized by great unevenness in terms of landholding, land distribution, land and labour relation. The majority of the Assam population depends on agriculture as the main source of subsistence. It continues to dominate the economic scene of Assam (Saikia, 2013).

Agrarian structure in the study area:

Landholding Pattern:

In context of Assam the agrarian structure is one of the important dimensions in agrarian study. Being one of the most backward economies of India, the present agrarian structure of Assam unfolds a host of fundamental issues. One of the most prominent features of the agrarian structure in Assam is the legacies of the colonial and pre-colonial social formations (Saikia, 2013). Assam agrarian situation is characterized by great unevenness in terms of landholding, land distribution, land and labour relation. The majority of the Assam population depends on agriculture as the main source of subsistence. It continues to dominate the economic scene of Assam (Saikia, 2013).

Changes in the agrarian structure, viewed through changes in the size distribution of ownership or operational holdings at different points of time, do not give a precise idea of the dynamics of the change process (Dantwala, 1986). The broad highly skewed nature of size distribution of ownership holdings have, by and large, remained unchanged over time, notwithstanding the progressively downward shift in the distribution (NSSO).

With increasing pressure on land, the operating land base of many working cultivators is further reduced. The land is divided into small fragments, each owned or leased by cultivators whose objective is subsistence. The size distribution of land holding, cultivation practices, and product sharing, operated concertedly to hold down farm income. Over time, a large number of farms have become disincentive-ridden due to size disability. A substantial portion of such cultivators seeks to supplement their farm income by working as hired labour competition with even poor landless workers.

In the study area exhibits a diversified land use pattern with considerable spatiotemporal variations. Marginalization in the ownership of land holdings and small-scale agricultural operation has been observed in the sample villages which indicate the inequality and sub-division and fragmentation of ownership and operational holdings.

Table
Total agricultural land distribution pattern in six villages:

Land distribution pattern	Villages						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Forest	0.2	-	0.5	1.2	-	-	1-Borsungjar
Non-agricultural land	22.5	28.4	33.7	33.4	15.6	76.2	2-Ghilalati Gaon
Land under miscellaneous tree crops	12.7	14.7	1.3	33.5	18.9	12.4	3-Sham Gaon
Cultivable west land	8.9	0.7	0.6	20.2	7.6	10.3	4-Sonari Gaon
All total villages' land	315.6	331.5	389	165.9	259.7	305.9	5-Deori Gaon
							6-Silandha Gaon

Sources: District census of India, 2011

In the present times, there has been observed significant changes in land use of various categories of the district due to the pressure of population. In the study area, there is a majority of the landholder by the rich person of the society. The following table presents the village wise land distribution pattern among the six villages.

Table
Total agricultural labourers and their own land
(In Bigha)

Land distribution	villages						Total agricultural labourers
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
0-2	3	5	2	4	3	2	19
2-4	3	-	2	-	1	2	8
4-6	1	-	-	2	-	-	3
6-8	-	1	-	1	-	-	2

Sources: primary survey data

The table shows that out of the 240 agricultural labourers only 32 numbers of respondents have their own land. Out of the 32 respondents the highest, i.e. 19 respondents have 0- 2 bighas of their own land, followed by 8 numbers of have 2- 4 bighas, and 3 numbers of respondents have 4- 6 bighas of their own land.

Cropping Pattern:

Cropping patterns of a region are the level to which the arable land under different agricultural activities can be put to use. Cropping pattern is, however, a dynamic concept as it variations over space and through time. The cropping patterns of a region are closely influenced by geo-

climatic, socio-economic and technological factors. According to district census report (2011) in Nagaon district, the 3, 69,862-hectare land is used for crop production and 1, 9,036-hectare other uncultivated lands excluding unplanted land. In the study area of Nagaon district, basically, three types of cropping pattern is privileged i.e., autumn, paddy (Ahu), winter paddy (Sali), summer paddy (Boro).

The cropping pattern in all the periods is predominantly rice based. The other food grains like wheat, potato, small millets etc. are also produced in the study area. In other parts of Nagaon district also the major cropping pattern is rice. Instated of the rice; jute, sugarcane, mustard seed, vegetables etc. are other important agricultural products of the area. There also available irrigation facilities and HYV (high yielding varieties) seeds in crop production in the study area. Some agricultural labourer's adopting the HYV in their paddy field. The varieties which were found to be popular among sample farmers were Masuri, Pankaj, Bahadur, and Ranjit, Monohar Sali for the Sali paddy and Krishna, Kaveri, Luit, Lachit for the Ahu paddy. They have also interested to use other high yielding rice varieties like IR-8, IR-36, and Prasad etc. for Sali paddy and Chilarai, Jaya etc for Ahu paddy, and Arize for the summer paddy. The extent of adoption of mechanized plugging method and the use of some other types of machinery and implements by agricultural labourers in the study area were also observed. Some agricultural labourers actually used a combination of mechanized and manual plugging in the production activity.

Tenancy and Land Relations:

Tenancy is a significant agrarian aspect in the State of Assam. During the last few decades, several changes have been taken place in the agrarian economy of the State together with the changes in its institutional field. In spite of the great changes, the agrarian institution of tenancy in Assam has remained largely understudied. This is either due to the scarcity of any systematic records of land tenure or due to the prevalence of concealed tenancy, which might have restricted to undertake any extensive empirical research based on the primary survey (Kuri, 2004).

In present time, the nature and extent of tenancy relations prevailing in different parts of India as well as in Assam are changing in terms of tenancy relations. Specifically, the issue of tenancy is linked to an exploration of the development of capitalist relations in Indian agriculture. But the links of tenancy with the capitalist development in Indian agriculture has been the subject of an intense debate (Srivastava, 2000).

Table
The percentage distribution of leased-out area by terms of lease

State	For fixed money	for fixed produce	for share of produce	other terms	all
Assam	20.47	0.00	38.71	40.82	100.00
Arunachal Pradesh	0.00	0.00	53.51	10.49	100.00
Mizoram	0.00	0.00	100	0.00	100.00

Haryana	84.95	2.10	12.75	0.20	100.00
Karnataka	34.73	1.77	34.90	28.60	100.00
Meghalaya	44.07	7.42	43.69	4.82	100.00
Tripura	6.25	7.05	71.71	14.99	100.00
Maharashtra	34.44	3.32	53.97	8.27	100.00
Madhya Pradesh	10.85	25.15	53.51	10.49	100.00
Rajasthan	17.62	14.79	44.21	23.38	100.00
Punjab	91.69	1.73	1.98	4.60	100.00
Orissa	11.52	10.65	71.13	6.70	100.00
Tamil Nadu	47.19	14.70	26.33	11.78	100.00
Kerala	33.52	0.00	28.64	37.84	100.00
Uttaranchal	77.39	5.96	10.29	6.36	100.00
Uttar Pradesh	14.84	21.18	51.98	12.00	100.00
All-India	31.04	15.30	39.55	14.11	100.00

Source: Government of India (2011), Household Ownership Holdings in India, 2011. NSS Report No. 491

A specific land relationship pattern is currently privileged in the district of Nagaon. The tenancy was usually temporary in the Nagaon study area, usually for one to four or five years, and also completely informal. The land relation, dependency, and utilization of power are significant elements in terms of land. Generally, the agricultural labourers try to maintain a good relationship with the landlord because of the future utilization of land. Those who are permanently involved continue to maintain their respectable relationship with the landlord. Sometimes they offer their jobs without any payment and sometimes they also help the landlord in their non-farming activity. The landlord has also occasionally used the power to rent or lease his land. There is also a practice of sharecropping and land mortgage (called Bandhaki) in the study area.

The existence of tenancy in the study area is explained in terms of risk and uncertainty, cropping pattern, managerial skills. The terms of lease are fixed money, fixed produce, the share of produce, service contract, for both of fixed rent & share tenancy and others. The mode of payment of rent was not found to be uniform in all situations. In most of the cases, the practice was to share the output between the landlord and the tenant farmer, usually at 50:50 ratios. In some cases, the term of the lease is for fixed produce, e.g. say 4 to 5 mounds of paddy per 'bigha' land etc. The landlords usually provide the land and seeds only, and after harvesting the amount of the seeds is to be returned to the landlord.

The practice of rent payment in a fixed quantity of cash or kind, such as a fixed quantity of paddy was also found to be widely prevalent. The existence of cash rents may indicate a higher level of monetization of the agricultural economy. Under the rainfed situation, sharecropping seems to be a preferred arrangement; the risk of crop loss gets distributed among the landowner and the tenant. There is some kind of terms of lease land among the landholders and tenants.

The specific terms of lease on which data were collected by the NSSO in the survey are fixed money, fixed produce, share of produce, service contracted and share of produce together with other terms.

Conclusion:

It is revealed from the discussion that agriculture and agricultural land are miserable facts in an agricultural structure that are sources of economic growth. Transformation of agriculture is essentially an investment problem. In a traditional agrarian society, the distribution of landholdings is far more unequal than the distribution of labour endowments. The land rental market typically works with tracts of land leased from landlords to tenants in exchange for rent or perhaps a share of the crop. Thus, in almost all agrarian societies, we can observe a fair amount of land rentals and activity in the labour market, as well as the economy, can react to an unequal distribution of land in a variety of ways. The size distribution of land holdings or the distribution of ownership holdings gets modified due to tenancy arrangement of leasing-in and leasing-out of land and evolves over time. It is an important aspect of agrarian relationships. The notion of risk and uncertainty is central to the concept of agricultural organization in developing countries.

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