

# FEUDALISM IN SIKKIM

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## ABSTRACT

*The initial feudalism, which was called as theocratic feudalism, began in Sikkim with the installation of Phuntsog Namgyal as the first king Chogyal in 1642. Right after this the first ever centralized feudal bureaucracy was established in Sikkim. The feudal structure of Sikkim was much like a pyramid, at top there was Chogyal, second there was the feudal lords and the commoners at the bottom. Moreover, the feudal structure which developed in Sikkim seems to be greatly influenced from Tibet. Like Tibet the Chogyal was the secular and religious head of the state. Below him were the powerful feudal lords who control both the land and the lives of the common people. Moreover, the condition of the commoners was miserable as they have to pay revenue and taxes besides free services like kalobhari, kuruwa, theki-bethi, and jharlangi to their lords.*

**Keywords:** *Feudalism, bottom, feudal lords, tax, labour.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

With the establishment of Namgyal dynasty in 1642 the initial feudalism visible in Sikkim based on Tibetan lamaist patterns. Its structure was much like a pyramid. Under this the king or *Chogyal* were at the top and he was the temporal and spiritual head of the country [Sinha, 2008]. Below *Chogyal* there were the feudal lords who held land and collect revenue. As feudal lords they enjoyed authority and privileges so long as they were not in conflict with the *Chogyal's* authority. The feudal lords' kazis, had some kind of hereditary title to their office. They exercised some authority over their jurisdiction, adjudicated minor disputes within their territories, and assessed the revenue payable by the ryots settled within their jurisdiction. Next to kazis were thikadars who held land on contract [Debnath, 2009]. Furthermore, they leased out their lands to intermediaries called mandals and karabaris under different exploitative term [Gupta, 1992]. Besides, kazis and thikadars lamas also held lands as lords. Further they held important position in the administration and function judicial powers. Along with it they collect the land revenue and house tax, try civil and criminal cases. Moreover, it was the lamas who managed the affairs of the state in collaboration with the kazis [Tran, 2012]. Thus like in European feudalism the lamas of Sikkim need not to do labor for the *Chogyal* and paid no dues of any kind no matter how much land cultivated by them. Moreover, certain monasteries were also exempted from the payment of rents as well. In addition, similar to clergy and bishops of European feudalism they managed the monastery estates, delivered justice, and even helped the laity fighting against the enemy [Sinha, 2008]. At last, the bottom classes were composed by the commoners like Bhutia, Lepcha, and Nepalese communities. Similar to any other feudal society the condition of the commoners was miserable. The commoner was a subject to a hierarchy of authorities, from the *Chogyal* to the lords of the land to the intermediary fee collectors. The authorities not only extract revenue but use the free labor of the commoners [Tran, 2012]. Consequently, they had to provide free labour services like *kalobhari*, *kuruw*, *jharlangi*, and *thekibeti*. These labour services can be compared with the *visti* of Indian feudalism where the peasants had to render labour services to their king [Sharma, 1965]. Thus the exploitation of the commoners was beyond its limits hence, their condition was miserable.

## II. EMERGENCE OF FEUDALISM IN SIKKIM

On the variations in the nature of feudal society, R S Sharma has stated, “There could be enormous variations in the nature of feudal society. But certain universal features remain the same. It is not possible to have any neat, cut and dried formula about feudalism. But in spite of all variations the basic factor, namely the presence of a controlling class of landlords and a subject peasantry, remained the same at least in early medieval times” [Sharma, 1999]. For instance, the European experience suggest that the political essence of feudalisms lay in the organization of the whole administrative structure on the basis of land: its economic essence lay in the institution of serfdom in which peasants were attached to the soil held by landed intermediaries placed between the king and the actual tiller, who had to pay rent in kind and labour to them. The system was based on a self-sufficient economy in which things were mainly produced for the local use of the peasants and their lords and not for market. Indian feudalism, however, passed through several distinct stages, but the origin and development of feudalism is to be sought in the land grants made to Brahmans from the first centuries A.D. onwards [Sharma, 1965]. However, with regard to the civilization of European feudalism, Bloch assumed that the network of ties of dependence, extended from top to bottom of the social scale [Bloch, 1962]. Thus on the basis of above statements and the variations in the nature of feudalism, it can say that the feudalism which developed in Sikkim where greatly influenced by the Tibetan feudalism. The nature of Sikkimese feudalism represents typically Himalayan theocratic feudalism parallel to the Tibetan lamaist pattern with monarch at the top and was the secular as well as the religious head of the country [Sinha, 2008].

The feudalism emerged in Sikkim however not all of a sudden. Before the establishment of Namgyal dynasty Sikkim was ruled by the tribal chiefs followed by their simple primitive mode of production. Since the mode of production proves to be the primary movers of historical development and the transformation of society from one stage of human development to another. According to Anderson “the genesis of feudalism in Europe derived from a ‘catastrophic’, convergent collapse of two distinct anterior modes of production, the *recombination* of whose disintegrated elements released the feudal synthesis proper, which therefore always retained a hybrid character. The dual predecessors of the feudal mode of production were, of course, the decomposing slave mode of production on whose foundations the whole enormous edifice of the Roman Empire had once been constructed, and the distended and deformed primitive modes of production of the Germanic invaders which survived in their new homelands, after the barbarian conquests. These two radically distinct worlds had undergone a slow disintegration and creeping interpenetration in the last centuries of Antiquity”. Simply stated, he argued that after the final cataclysmic collision and fusion of two dissolving anterior modes of production-Germanic primitive mode with Roman slave that feudalism was ultimately to be born and feudal order spread through medieval Europe [Anderson, 1996]. Similarly, with regard to the transformation of Sikkimese society from primitive communities to theocratic feudalism, there were the clash between the two modes of production. Before the establishment of Namgyal dynasty the society of Sikkim was semi-nomadic and tribal in character owing all primitive mode of acquisition of food. However, after the establishment of dynasty, they superimpose a Tibetan type feudal society with monarch at the top who was having both temporal and spiritual powers. Meanwhile, on feudalism in Europe, Bloch argued that the European feudalism should be seen as the outcome of the violent dissolution of older society. The great upheavals of the Germanic invasions which, by forcibly uniting two societies originally at very different stages of development, disrupted both of them and brought to the surface a great many mode of thought and social practices of an extremely primitive character [Bloch, 1989]. Perhaps, the transitional of feudalism in Sikkim unlike other feudalism developed out the artificial kinship of sworn-brotherhood. As A.C Sinha mentioned that, “there is the artificial kinship of ‘sworn-brotherhood’ in which each sworn brother becomes by the power of oath, as if born into each other’s clan and is bound to honour his ancestors. Then there is a collective submission of the kin-group to the service and protection of an un-related kin-group where the subordinate group retains its own chiefs, through fall to the status of headman [Sinha, 2008].

## III. COMPARING THE FEUDALISM OF SIKKIM

The practice of making land grants to religious institutions ‘monasteries’ in Sikkim. The process of land grants to the monasteries which went on in Sikkim also occurred in India. R.S Sharma identified certain features of feudalism which was clearly noticeable from the Gupta, and more so from the post-Gupta period onwards. According to him, from the Post-Mauryan period, and especially from Gupta times, certain political land administrative developments tended to feudalise the state apparatus. The most striking development was the practice of making land grants to the Brahmans. Surprisingly enough, administrative rights were perhaps given up for the first time in the grants made to

Buddhist monks by the Satavahana ruler. Similarly in later grants, the ruler gave up his control over almost all sources of revenue, including pasturage, hides and charcoal, mines for the production of salt, forced labor, and all hidden treasures and deposits. This meant the transfer of royal ownership over mines, which was an important sign of the king's sovereignty [Sharma, 1965]. The feature of land grants in Sikkim to monasteries with powers and privileges was similar to the Indian feudalism as Jha has stated, "Feudalism in India, unlike in Europe, began with the land grants made to Brahmans, temple, and monasteries for which the epigraphic evidence begins from the first centuries BC and multiplies by Gupta times when village together with their fields and inhabitants, with fiscal, administrative and judicial rights (with the right to enjoy fines received) and with exemption from the interference of royal officials were given to religious beneficiaries" [Jha, 1995]. In European feudal society as well the use of the word 'benefit' describe the land granted to a noble, Bishop or monastery for limited use of services [Bloch, 1962]. Hence, from the above statements it is clear that the grants of land to the religious institutions were existed not only in Sikkim, but it were practices in both European and Indian feudalism. Along with the land grants the feudal lords were asserted with the right to collect taxes and also exercised judicial power within their own locality is one of the notable features of feudalism in Sikkim. Moreover the monks of Sikkim were bestowed with the judicial and criminal powers similar to Bishops and monasteries of European feudalism who exercised their judicial powers over their dependents, on the same basis as so many lay lords [Bloch, 1989]. Like the fiefs of European feudalism, the *Chogyal* used to grant the land to feudal lords and monastery along with the rights to collect taxes where they also exercised judicial powers.

Sikkimese feudalism however represents the features of feudalism from below. According to D.D. Kosambi, "Feudalism from below means the stage where a class of land owner developed within the village between the state and the peasantry. This class was subjected to military service, hence claimed a direct relationship with the state power, without the intervention of any other stratum. Taxes were collected by small intermediaries who passed on a fraction to the feudal hierarchy in contrast to direct collection by royal officers" [Kosambi, 1956]. Similarly, in Sikkim kazis and thikadars classes of land owner were developed within the village between the state and the peasantry. They had direct relationship with the *Durbar*, without the intervention of any other stratum and the land revenue was raised from the ryots not directly by the government but through the middlemen [Sengupta, 1985]. The mandals and karbaris were the middlemen or intermediaries worked under kazis and thikadars hence, they had to collect taxes on behalf of them. This dominant class mainly lived on the labour of other men similar to European and Indian lords. Meanwhile, the peasantry of Sikkim can compare with the peasants of Western Europe.

Coming to the peasantry, the peasants of Europe who occupied and tilled the land were not its owners. Agrarian property was privately controlled by a class of feudal lords, who extracted a surplus form the peasants by politico-legal relations of compulsion in the form of labour services, rent in kind or customary dues owed to the individual lords by the peasant, was exercised both on the manorial demesne attached directly to the person of the lords, and on the strip tenancies cultivated by the peasant [Anderson, 1996]. Similarly, the peasantry of the Sikkim had to carry out the obligations, as such the payment of revenues along with furnishing various free labour services. However, with regard to the question of serfdom in Sikkim, it appears that the peasants of Sikkim were not tied to the land by any laws. As Edger has observed that "the cultivators have no title to the soil, and a man may settle down on and cultivate any land he may find unoccupied without going through any formality whatever, and when once he has occupied the land, no one but the Rajah can turn him out. But the Rajah can eject him at any time; and if he should cease to occupy the land, he would not retain any lien upon it. There is a kind of tenant right" [Edger, 1969]. Hence, it is clear from Edger's statement that, the Sikkimese custom was such that anybody could cultivate any unoccupied piece of land and besides king, nobody could forcefully throw the peasants. In other words, it observed that the peasants of Sikkim were 'free'. Since, peasant's land in Sikkim was held from the *Chogyal* his intermediate feudal lords could not tie the peasants to the land of the monarch and could not turn them out. However, the peasants were taxed heavily by the feudal lords. Nevertheless, we cannot compare the 'free' peasants of Sikkim in a similar manner as what Mukhia has explained about 'free peasants' in Feudalism Debate, according to him 'free peasants' denotes, "a peasants who, quite independently of his social or juridical status, earns his and his family's subsistence off own (including his family's material resources and labour). In order words, he (or his family) does not render labour to anyone else either in performance of labour service (for purposes of production) or for wages. This does not, of course, exempt him from the obligation to part with his surplus produce in the form of taxes to the state, or, its behalf, to its officials. None the less, he retains complete control over the process of production on his land through his (and his family's) labour and is assured of a relatively more certain, through perhaps no higher level of, subsistence than peasants who are 'unfree'" [Mukhia, 1999]. The peasants of Sikkim although were not bounded by the laws of the land but they were not independent of his social or juridical status just opposite to Mukhai's 'free

peasants'. The peasantry of Sikkim not only had to pay rent but they had to render various free labour services like *kalobhari*, *kuruw*, *jarlangi*, and *thekibeti* to their landlords. Further, the labour products of peasantry also belonged to their lords including the services of their families. In short the labour of peasant's children was also taken into account as *kamara* and *gothala*.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

On the basis of explanations, facts, and comparisons we can say the initial feudalism began in Sikkim with the establishment of Namgyal dynasty. Of course, land was the grand pillar of the socio-economic structure of Sikkimese feudalism. Based on the grants of land to feudal lords like kazis, thikadars, and royal lamas rise or emerged. The feudal lords of Sikkim may be compared to the vassals of European feudalism who receives fiefs. These feudal lords provided the administrative machinery by performing regulatory functions like the right to collect land revenues and taxes and exercised judicial power within their own locality. In the feudal society of Sikkim suffered the most, the subjection of commoners carried out by the different forms of exploitation including free or forced labor. They had to provide various free labour services to their lords. Eventually, unable to bear suppression and exploitation of feudal lords the common people 'peasants' rose up against to end the feudal regime.

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