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Land Reform in Sikkim: Historical Evolution and Socio-Economic Implications

Dr. Tanka Prasad Dhungel

Abstract

Land reforms in Sikkim have considerably transformed agrarian relations by focusing inequality and improving access to land. This study studies the historical background of land ownership, reform movements, legislative intrusions, and their socio-economic impacts. It emphasizes the transition from feudal structures to a more equitable system resulting the merger of Sikkim with India. This study examines the historical evolution of land ownership patterns, reform movements, and legislative interventions, along with their socio-economic implications. It traces the transition from a feudal and theocratic system under the Chogyal regime—characterized by concentrated land ownership among Kazis, monasteries, and aristocratic elites—to a more democratic and redistributive framework following Sikkim's merger with India in 1975. The paper critically analyzes key legislative measures such as the Sikkim Cultivators Protection Act (1975) and the Sikkim Agricultural Land Ceiling and Reforms Act (1978), which aimed to abolish intermediary interests, impose ceilings on landholdings, and safeguard tenancy rights. Using historical records and statistical data, the study highlights patterns of land distribution, operational holdings, and community-wise disparities in land ownership. It also explores the challenges of implementing uniform land ceiling policies in a mountainous terrain marked by ecological and altitudinal variations. The findings reveal that while land reforms have successfully dismantled feudal structures and improved tenure security, issues such as declining per capita land availability, persistence of marginal holdings, and uneven distribution across communities continue to affect agrarian sustainability. The study concludes that future policy interventions must go beyond redistributive measures to incorporate region-specific strategies focusing on productivity enhancement, ecological balance, and sustainable land management in the Himalayan context.

Keywords: *Land Reforms, Agrarian Structure, Tenancy, Ceiling, Socio-Economic Change, Legislative interventions.*

Introduction

Changes in the land ownership is basic concept in land reform system, particularly when it embraces giving land to the people who actually get acquainted with it and taking it away from the people who occupy large areas for their benefit. Changes in the agrarian structure may broadly be of two types: first, changes in agrarian relation which may occur in an indirect manner in response to spontaneous operation of socio-economic process: second, changes brought about as a result of direct investment may assume the form of land legislation and its implementation through governmental action. All these kinds of attempts to alter the agrarian structure may be characterized as land reforms (Joshi; 1976).

Different approaches were taken for land reform during Chogyal's regime in Sikkim. But only the feudal group was enjoying the different benefits within a region. The poor people were frustrated with landlordism, and then the educated elite group came up with a mission to overcome social oppression, economic exploitation and political dictatorship as well as to improve the status of peasants, and some associations were formed. Some of the important ones were the *Praja Sudharak Samaj* led by Tashi Tshering, *Praja Sammelan* led by Gobardhan Pradhan and Dhan Bahadur Tewari, and the *Praja Mondal* led by Kazi Lendup Dorji. Tashi Tshering was the leading exponent of the peasant rights and primarily under his inspiring leadership, on December 7, 1947, these three associations formed the Sikkim State Congress which submitted to the Maharaja a charter of demands comprising of three points: abolition of landlordism, introduction of responsible government and Sikkim's accession to India. The Chogyal considered only the first and second proposals and he advised the state congress to drop the third proposal. Meanwhile, he took pains to politicize the demands with the help of orthodox traditional forces consisting of the Kazis and the hereditary landlords of Sikkim. These forces organized the Sikkim National Party in 1948. The land reforms committee has made a significant breakthrough by bringing into the public eye major aspects of land reforms in Sikkim. The suggestions were humble, but their implementation was fraught with problems.

It goes without saying that if the recommendations were given effect they were likely to bring about far-reaching changes in the traditional society of Sikkim (Dhamala & Bhowmick, 1985). If the recommendations were accepted by the Chogyal, then the scenario would have been different in Sikkim.

A brief outline of the recommendations of the committee may be discussed in three important aspects:

1. Abolition of private estates and monastery estates,
2. Tenancy reforms and
3. Ceiling on holdings.

Since 1975, the Government of Sikkim has enacted legislations such as the Sikkim Cultivators Protection Act 1975, the Sikkim Agricultural Land Ceiling and Reforms Act 1978, and the Sikkim Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act 1978. An analysis would reveal that these acts are intended to fulfill three purposes:

a. Elimination of intermediaries in the land management system,
b. Enforcement of ceiling law in respect of land holdings and distribution of surplus land, and
c. Protection of tenancy rights (Dhamala & Bhowmick, 1985).

Sikkim being agriculture-based state, land has its own meaning which acts as a source of livelihood greatly from its quantity, type and altitudes which are usually different from one another. In an agricultural society like Sikkim the farmland has been determined by a primary key like wealth, stability and governance. A good number of people mostly live in rural areas of Sikkim and most of them sustain their life through agriculture if they are to make a living at all.

While patterns vary greatly from place to place, it is generally true that where a few individuals (as it was in Sikkim) own a large share of land, the same individuals dominate local politics and through their roles as lenders, landlords and employers also control the economic lives of their neighbours (Gupta (1992).

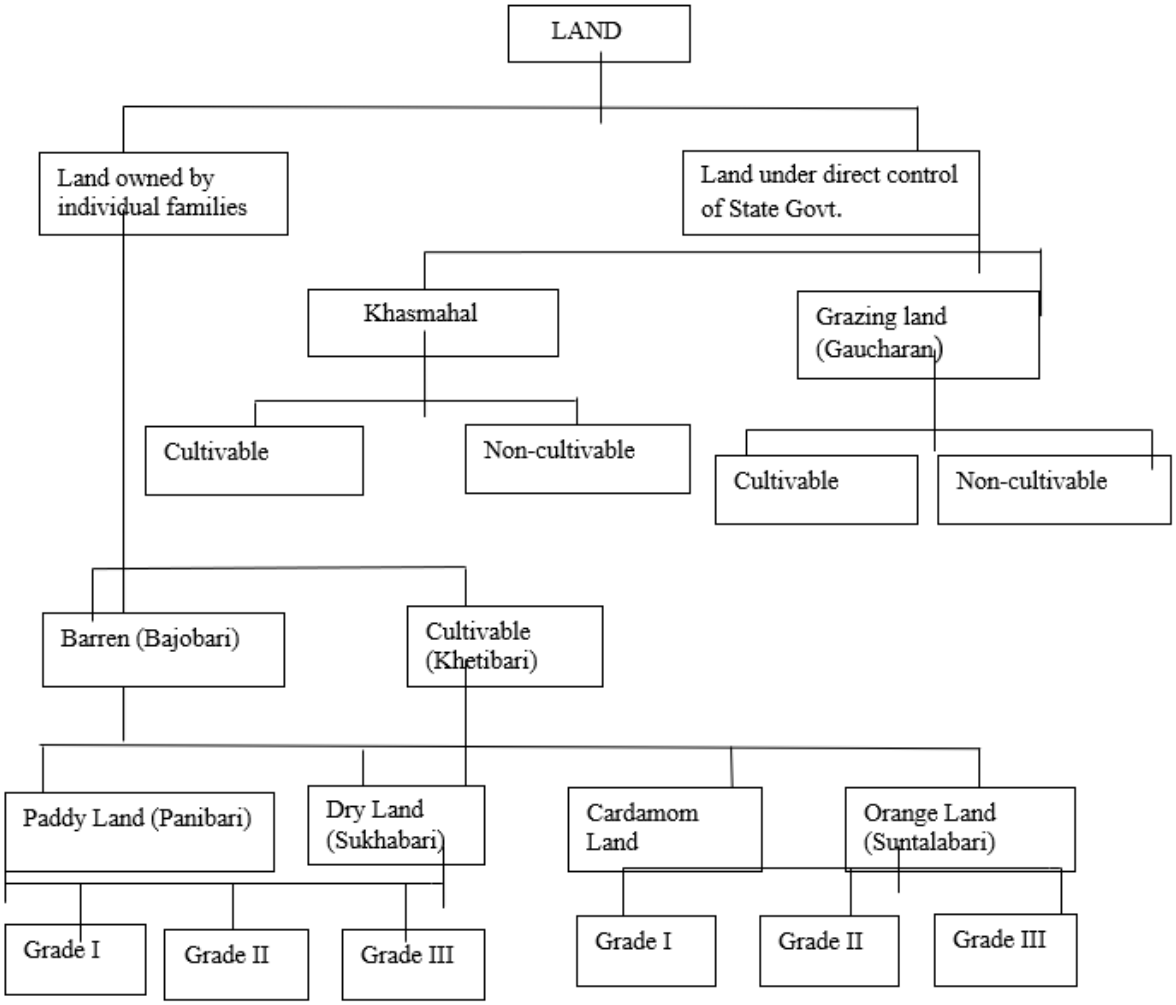
Until the merger of the state with the Indian Union it remained as a feudal state under the regime of temporal and theocratic Bhutia rulers known as Chogyals. At that time, the following land ownership/management pattern was prevalent. Traditionally all lands belonged to the Chogyal which were divided as *illakas* and entrusted under the management of landlords, the Kazis and other aristocrats (the members of the ruling families). Besides, almost half of the land was vested with Chogyals and his family as private estate which mainly consisted of cardamom growing areas and rich forests (Das, B.S.; 1938; 9). The advent of British into Sikkim and their introduction of modified lease system developed lessee landlordism in the region. As a result, there emerged a three-tier land ownership pattern: Private Estate, Land owned by the five big Monasteries; and Public Estate, i.e. land distributed to the lessee landlords. After the abolition of lessee system in 1950 the private estates and monasteries estates continued as usual while public estates came directly under the control of Land Revenue Department (Datta, 1992).

After 1951, land settlement programme was introduced and 108 estates were demarcated and designated which were divided into following three categories:

1. Government estates (90), which included the old leased land areas as well as the private estates of the Kazi and Thikadar families;
2. Monastic estates (5), and
3. Royal family estates (13).

Thus, approximately 85 percent of the land would be under government estate, 11 percent under royal family estate, and 4 percent under monastic estate. However, after the merger of Sikkim with India the land settlement pattern has changed. The classification of land which has been shown in the flow chart is an attempt to delineate the type, quality and pattern of land settlement in today's Sikkim (Datta, 1992).

Figure 1: Schematic presentation of Classification of Land



(Note: The words within the parentheses denote Nepali colloquial terms)
Source: Datta, 1992
According to the survey and settlement report of 1958, out of a total 27,694 holdings in Sikkim 3658 were within the private estate constituting 13 percent of the total number of holdings.

Ceiling on Land Holding

The ceiling on land holdings seeks to take away unequal distribution of landed property and it hindrances the social and economic development of the state. Concentration of property in the hand of a few is bound to badly affect agricultural production and social structure as well. As per the settlement report of 1958, out of 2, 23,314 acres of agricultural land, 66,727 acres were possessed by 8 percent of the families. It is clearly seen, this small section being financially strong and socially influential were likely to exercise the power in the decision-making process of the government. In order to bring in land re-distribution, the need for imposing a ceiling on land can hardly be over-emphasized. The committee however recommended that in the early stages of land reforms the ceiling may be kept at such a level that those landowners who have been enjoying limitless area of land in contravention of government orders may be allowed to retain such an amount that they are in a position to lead a decent living from the income of the land within the ceiling. In other words, the committee did not acknowledge any drastic change. With the predominance of political power enjoyed by the landowning class of Sikkim, any drastic change is likely to frustrate the objective of land reform itself (Dhamala & Bhowmick, 1985).

After changes in land regulations were introduced in 1949, the State of Sikkim issued a Notification, No.3082/L.R. in 1954, which has some progressive elements of land reforms and provides for the maintenance of economic holdings.

The lower ceiling of land holdings is ensured by the provision of the 'sale of land in execution'. It states:

"No Court will sell or transfer a holding or any part of a holding of a primary holder in execution of a decree, whether revenue or civil, if by such sale or transfer the said holding will become less than five in acres in area… provided that sale of land to meet government dues will be excluded from the purview of this notification" (Lama, 2001).

This notification also fixed an upper ceiling through 'restrictions on purchase', according to which 'No person who already has a holding or holdings exceeding 20 acres in area may purchase land sold in execution of a revenue or civil decree.'

In a mountainous state like Sikkim, the all-India land ceiling of 12 acres, which is a blanket ceiling irrespective of topographical variations, is difficult to implement. It might be more appropriate to fix land ceiling, on a case-to-case basis using methods suitable to the terrain.

After the merger of Sikkim in 1975, the government intervened mainly to provide legislative measures against the termination of cultivation rights and for the continuity of cultivation by existing cultivators. This was done in view of the problems faced by the tillers of the soil, who cultivated land owned by others under precarious terms and conditions (Lama, 2001:45).

Ceiling on Agricultural Land

The State Government may from time to time by notification declare that with effect from the date mentioned in the notification (hereinafter in this Act referred to as the notified date) no person shall be entitled to hold any agricultural land in excess of the ceiling limit in the State of Sikkim and all lands in excess of ceiling limit shall vest in the State in accordance with and under the provisions of this Act and the rules and notifications made there under. The date mentioned in every such notification shall be the commencement of the agricultural year. Every such notification shall also be published in such manner as may be prescribed.

1. The ceiling limit shall be determined according to the following principles, namely:

- In the case of an adult unmarried person or a person who has no family or a person who is the sole surviving member of any family, six and half standard acres,
- In the case of a person having family members, twelve and half standard acres.
- In the case of a person having a family consisting of more than five members, twelve and half standard acres and further two standard acres for each member in excess of five, so, however, that the aggregate of the ceiling limit for such person shall not, in any case, exceed twenty and half standard acres.

2. For the purpose of determining the ceiling limit under clause (i), lands held individually by the person concerned and the other members of such family, shall be deemed to be held by one person having a family.
3. For the purpose of determining the ceiling limit of any person holding agricultural lands, who is a member of a joint family, the share of such a person in the joint family shall be deemed to be the extent of land which would be allotted to such person had such lands been divided or partitioned, as the case may be, on the notified date.
4. In the case of monastery or other religious institution mentioned in Group A: Sixty standard acres;

In the case of monastery or other religious institutions mentioned in Group 'B' of the Schedule: Twenty-five standard acres; provided that the STATE Government may, by notification, include any other monastery or religious institution in the Schedule.

5. In the case of tea garden, orchard, livestock and poultry farm, dairy, mill, factory, workshop, any local authority, any corporation, any educational institution or any other institution established exclusively for a charitable purpose, any co-operative society, any company registered under any law for the time being in force, so much of land as in the opinion of the State Government is required for such tea garden or orchard or livestock and poultry farm or dairy or mill or factory or workshop or local authority or corporation or institution or co-operative society or company.
6. The State Government may, in such manner as may be prescribed by notification, classify all agricultural lands in Sikkim into different Circles according to elevation and altitude and may also classify agricultural lands within each such Circle into different classes to quality, produce, productivity and the like and shall specify in such notification what quantity of land in each such class shall be treated as equivalent to one standard acre for the purpose of determining the ceiling limit under this section.'
7. Transfer of land: No person holding agricultural land in excess of the ceiling limit immediately before the notified date shall transfer any such land or part thereof by way of sale, mortgage, gift, lease or otherwise until he has furnished a statement under Section 8 and a notification regarding the excess land held by him has been published under sub-section (1) of Section II; and any such transfer in contravention of this provision shall be demand to be null and void (Law and Legislative Department, 1978).

Detection of Excess Land

It is possible to detect excess land on the basis of ceiling on land holdings. No doubt, it is very difficult task for the administrative machinery in any underdeveloped country, not to speak of the administration in Sikkim with its given level of efficiency. According to the settlement Report of 1958, the total cultivated area was 2, 23,314 acres. The pattern of distribution of cultivated land is shown below: (Dhamala & Bhowmick, 1985).

Table 1: Pattern of Distribution of Cultivated Land (Three Estates)

Sl. No.	Kind of Land	Private Estate	Monastery Estate	Regular Estate	Total Percentage
1.	Panikhet (irrigated)	5,075.80	2,696.78	20,974.56	28,747.14(13%)
2.	*Sukhabari (Unirrigated)	20,378.56	15,213.80	122,886.70	158,479.06(70%)
3.	Banjo (Barren)	4,020.45	1830.35	16.787.19	22,637.99(10%)
4.	Cardamom	2,369.61	2,254.18	8,826.85	13,450.64(7%)

	Total	31,844.42	21,995.11	169,475.30	22, 3314.83(100%)

Source: Dhamala & Bhowmick, 1985.

*Sukhabari (unirrigated) included orange groves, which had 221.20 acres in holding in the private estates, 106.23 acres in monastery estates and 1,483.14 acres in regular estates)

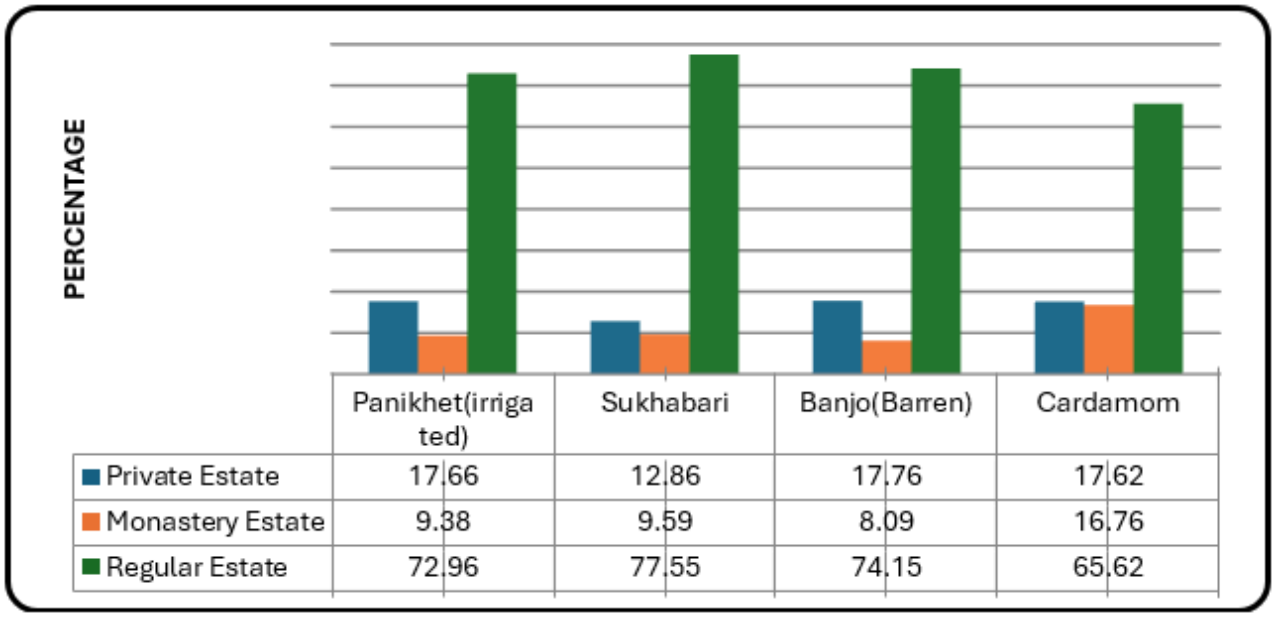


Figure 1: Percentage wise Distribution of Cultivated Land among three Estates

Table 2: Pattern of Distribution of Cultivated Land

Sl. No.	Kind of Land	Total Land Mean ± S.D.	Standard Error
1.	Panikhet (irrigated)	28,747.14±23.5287	9.6055
2.	Sukhabari (Unirrigated)	158,479.06±33.1481	13.5326
3.	Banjo (Barren)	22,637.99±23.1516	9.4516
4.	Cardamom	13,450.64±19.4010	7.9204
	Total	22, 3314.83±21.1471	8.6332

Source: Dhamala & Bhowmick, 1985.

The table 2 shows the pattern of distribution of total cultivated land during 1958 in Sikkim and the mean± S.D. and standard error are also indicated. The highest is available sukhabari (unirrigated) land with significant mean ± S.D. of 158,479.06±33.1481 and its corresponding error calculated as 9.6055. The second highest available land is the panikhet (irrigated) land with mean ±S.D. of 28,747.14±23.5287 whereas the corresponding error calculated is 9.6055. After sukhabari (unirrigated) and panikhet (irrigated) comes banjo (barren) land with a significant mean ± S.D. is 22,637.99±23.1516 and the corresponding error calculated as 9.4516. The lowest available is that of cardamom land in Sikkim which has the mean ±S.D. 13,450.64±19.4010.

In the past, the government of Sikkim has been engaged in detection of excess land which may be distributed among the landless people. There had been no settlement reform after 1958. Hence, the Land Revenue Department has faced difficulties in carrying out the task of detecting excess land above the ceiling. Nevertheless, the land revenue department has given a tentative estimate of the excess land likely to be acquired for distribution among landless peasants (Dhamala & Bhowmick, 1985).

Regarding the size of holdings in Sikkim, the Government of Sikkim would have to depend on the settlement Report of 1958. The average area of holding is 8.06 acres. The holdings are still larger in comparison with those in India which are less than 2 acres. (Dhamala & Bhowmick, 1985).

Land Holding Pattern

Agricultural holdings are disseminated in altitude between 300 to 3000 meters. The largest parts of the cultivable lands are terraced and farmers have inhabited on these holdings while practicing regular cropping system. Both marginal and small holdings put together comprise about 50% of all operational holdings and 41% of the total cultivated area.

Table 3: Area in Operation Holding and Under Tenure and Tenancy Status in Sikkim

Sl. No.	Operational Holdings of Land (Ha)	1980-1981		1990-1991	
		Mean ± S.D.	Standard Error	Mean ± S.D.	Standard Error
1.	Individual Holdings	102975±42.6808	17.1794	106996±36.9323	15.0775
2.	Joint Holdings	4120±44.4162	18.1328	3027±19.5550	7.9833
3.	Institutional Holdings	1973±40.0050	16.3319	1297±41.6653	17.0098
	Total	109068±28.0499	11.4513	111302±47.4046	19.3528

Source: H.R Pradhan, 1998.

The above table shows that there is significant increase in total land in ha under individual operational holdings in the year 1990-1991 (significant Mean ± S.D 106996±36.9323) compared to 1980-1981 (significant Mean ± S.D.102975±42.6808), but the area under joint and institutional holdings decreased substantially.

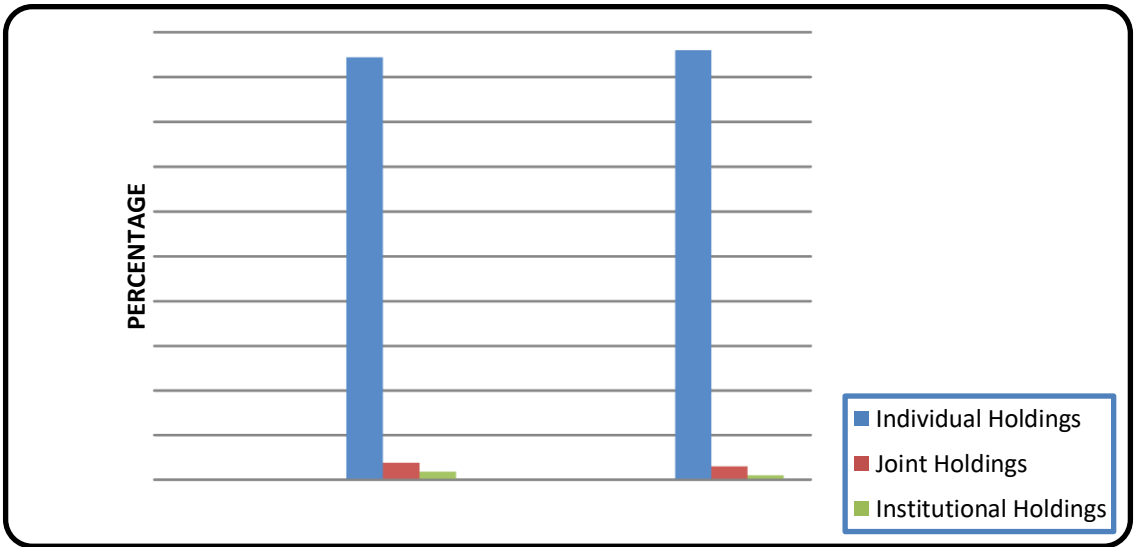


Figure 2: Area in Operation Holding and Under Tenure and Tendency Status (in Percentage)

The figure 4.9 illustrates areas under operation holding and tenancy status of Sikkim during 1980-81 & 1990-91. It is seen that in both 1980-81 & 1990-91, individual holdings far ahead of joint and institutional holdings in terms of area. The individual holdings contributed 2400 times than joint holdings and 5200 times than institutional holdings in 1980-81 while in 1990-91 individual holdings contributed 3400 times of joint holdings and around 8000 times of institutional holdings. Individual holdings pay substantial amount of land revenue to the government every year.

Table 4: Community-wise Distribution of Land in Sikkim, 1976-83 (in Percent)

Community	Total Paddy Field	Total Dry Land	Waste Land	Cardamom	Total cultivated Land
Bhutia	27.12	16.13	24.18	27.05	20.32
Lepcha	14.97	00.00	17.53	32.72	20.38
Nepali	57.19	64.95	62.00	22.37	58.66
Total Public	99.28	99.56	99.60	82.15	99.36
GrandTotal (ha)	11,727.10	6,47,39.80	11,734.40	2,1761.70	1,09,963.00

Source*:* Lama, 2001.

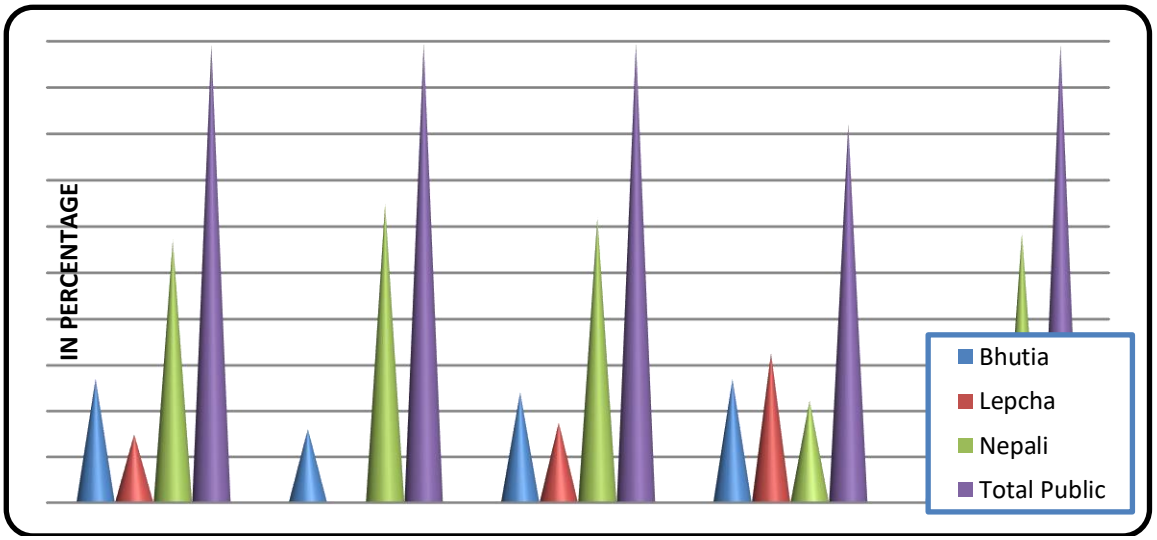


Figure 3: Community-wise Distribution of Land in Sikkim (1976-83) (ha)

The table 4 and the figure 3 depict the community-wise distribution of paddy field, dry land, waste land, cardamom and total cultivated land during 1976-83 in Sikkim amongst Bhutia, Lepcha, Nepali and all communities put together. The Nepali community came first in all sectors of land except cardamom. Nepali people are settled mostly in lower belt where cardamom is not well-suited due to scarcity of water. The Bhutia community comes second with moderate share in paddy and cardamom lands. The Lepchas have comparatively larger share of cardamom land but they do not have much dry land holdings due to their settlements in higher and moist areas.

It is worthwhile to take stock of the community-wise distribution of households possessing dry land in Sikkim. The table 4 makes an assessment of household that do have or do not have dry land. The mean S.D. values and standard errors are shown in the table.

Table 5: Community-wise Distribution of Households Possessing Dry Land

Community	HHs having dry land Mean ± S.D.	Standard Error	HHs not having dry land Mean ± S.D.	Standard Error
Bhutia	8163±28.1638	11.4978	6606 ±31.3942	12.8166
Lepcha	6213±16.8641	6.8847	1828 ±18.1659	7.4162
Tamang	3697±29.3052	11.9638	4021±13.6088	5.5557
Limboo	7701±27.0924	11.0604	2971±25.6046	10.4530
Bahun	5031±37.6669	15.3774	2649±30.6463	12.5113
Chettri	7885±33.6689	13.7453	5624±15.8113	6.4549
Pradhan	2149±28.0642	11.4571	2292±43.2111	17.6408
Rai	10547±30.4499	12.4311	4883±29.7523	12.1463
Manger	1796±28.5587	11.6590	1219±26.0537	10.6364
Gurung	4226±25.7992	10.5324	2263±31.8310	14.2197
Sunuwar/Mukhia	271±42.6286	17.4030	324±16.9587	6.9231
Thami	30±19.0473	7.7760	62±29.6445	12.1023
Jogi	76±25.0918	10.2437	18±10.7144	4.3741
Dewan	6±3.7416	1.5275	38±24.2074	9.8826
Bhujel	367±26.6308	10.8719	334±28.0356	11.1455
Kami	2244±37.9420	15.4897	2471±34.1467	13.9403
Damai	800±36.3483	14.8391	1545±30.2787	12.3612
Sarki	116±28.4464	11.6132	100±25.3456	10.3473
Majhi	25±17.2046	7.0237	75±29.6513	12.1051
Sanyasi/Giri	155±28.3619	11.5787	108±23.5966	9.6332
Others	180±30.2588	12.3531	10721±22.7947	9.3059
Total	61678±38.4915	15.7141	50152±28.3760	11.5844

Source: Socio-economic 2006.

Among different communities, the Rai community has highest number of households possessing dry land in Sikkim and it has significant mean ± S.D. is 10547±30.4499 and corresponding error is calculated as 12.4311. The community which does not have dry land has a significant mean ± S.D. of 10721±22.7947 and its corresponding error is calculated as 9.3059. The second highest position is occupied by the Bhutia community in both having dry land and not having dry land, the

significant mean ± S.D. is 8163±28.1638 & 6606 ±31.3942 and it has corresponding error calculated as 11.4978 & 12.8166. The Chettri community comes third in possessing both dry land and not having dry land and their significant mean ± S.D. are 7885±33.6689 & 5624±15.8113 and corresponding error of 13.7453 & 6.4549. The lowest number of households which have dry land and do not have dry land belongs to Dewan and Jogi communities and their significant mean ± S.D. are 6±3.7416 &18±10.7144 and corresponding errors are calculated 1.5275 & 4.3741.

Table 6: Community-wise Distribution of Households Possessing Dry Land by Size (in percent)

Communities	>1 acre	1 acre - 2.5 acre	2.5 acre - 5 acre	5 acre - 10 acre	10 acre -25 acre	<25 acre	Grand Total
Bhutia	63.25	25.35	7.46	2.60	1.09	0.26	100.00
Lepcha	59.58	28.50	8.61	2.53	0.58	0.19	100.00
Tamang	69.84	22.37	5.57	1.70	0.46	0.05	100.00
Limboo	70.73	21.67	5.39	1.70	0.43	0.08	100.00
Bahun	70.74	22.10	5.29	1.47	0.34	0.06	100.00
Chettri	71.38	21.24	5.34	1.56	0.37	0.11	100.00
Pradhan	71.34	21.08	5.21	1.40	0.74	0.23	100.00
Rai	61.55	26.34	8.69	2.54	0.76	0.11	100.00
Manger	61.41	26.56	9.52	1.84	0.67	0.00	100.00
Gurung	65.55	24.63	6.96	2.44	0.31	0.12	100.00
Sunuwar/Mukhia	74.17	18.45	6.27	0.74	0.37	0.00	100.00
Thami	83.33	13.33	3.33	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
Jogi	73.68	18.42	6.58	0.00	1.32	0.00	100.00
Dewan	83.33	16.67	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
Bhujel	75.20	20.16	3.81	0.27	0.54	0.00	100.00
Kami	78.34	17.51	3.03	0.71	0.31	0.09	100.00
Damai	82.88	13.25	2.88	0.63	0.38	0.00	100.00
Sarki	80.17	13.79	4.31	0.86	0.86	0.00	100.00
Majhi	80.00	16.00	4.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	100.00
Sanyasi/Giri	72.90	20.65	1.94	3.87	0.00	0.65	100.00
Others	85.00	10.00	1.11	1.11	1.67	1.11	100.00
Total (%)	67.03	23.65	6.62	1.99	0.58	0.13	100.00

Source: Socio-economic 2006.

The table 6 shows the percentagewise distribution of households possessing dry land within communities by land size such as less than 1 acre, more than 1 acre to less than 2.5 acres, more than 2.5 acres to less than 5 acres, more than 5 acres to less than 10 acre, more than 10 acre to less than 25 acre, and more than 25 acre in Sikkim.

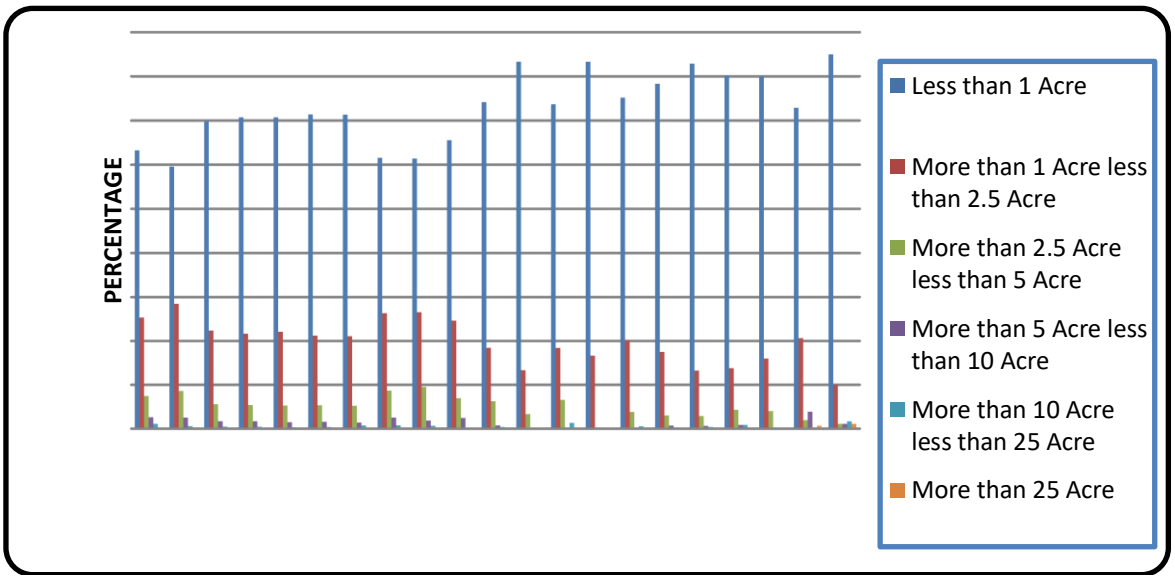


Figure 4: Community-wise Distribution of Dry Land by Size (in) Percentage

The figure no. 4 indicates that the Lepchas have least amount of dry land in possession followed by Rais, Pradhans and Bhutias, whereas the Thami and Dewan communities' own substantial dry lands.

Table 7: Per Capita Land Availability in Sikkim, 1971 & 1981 (in Ha)

Sl. No.	Type of Land	1971 Hectares Mean ± S.D.	Standard Error	1981 Hectares Mean ± S.D.	Standard Error
1.	Net Cultivable Land	0.31±.1357	0.5544	0.27±.1346	.0549
2.	Operated Area for Agricultural Use	0.41±.1740	.0710	0.36±.1513	.0618
3.	Land for Non-Agricultural use	0.33±.1296	.0529	0.28±.0946	.0886
4.	Pasture & Cultivable Waste Land	0.40±.1662	.0678	0.24±.0907	.0370
5.	Forest	0.12±.0641	.0252	0.10±.6681	.0278

Source: H.R Pradhan, 1998 and Gazetteer of Sikkim, 2013.

Table 8: Per Capita Land Availability in Sikkim, 1991 & 2001 (in Ha)

Sl. No.	Type of Land	1991 Hectares Mean ± S.D.	Standard Error	2001 Hectares Mean ± S.D.	Standard Error
1.	Net Cultivable Land	0.17±.0864	.0353	0.12±.0641	.0252
2.	Operated Area for Agricultural Use	0.28±.0946	.0386	0.21±1019	1019
3.	Land for Non-Agricultural use	0.21±.1019	1019	0.01±.0028	.6011
4.	Pasture & Cultivable Waste Land	0.18±.1056	.0431	0.17±.0864	.0353
5.	Forest	0.65±.2490	.1016	0.20±.1056	.0431

Source: Pradhan, 1998 and Gazetteer of Sikkim, 2013.

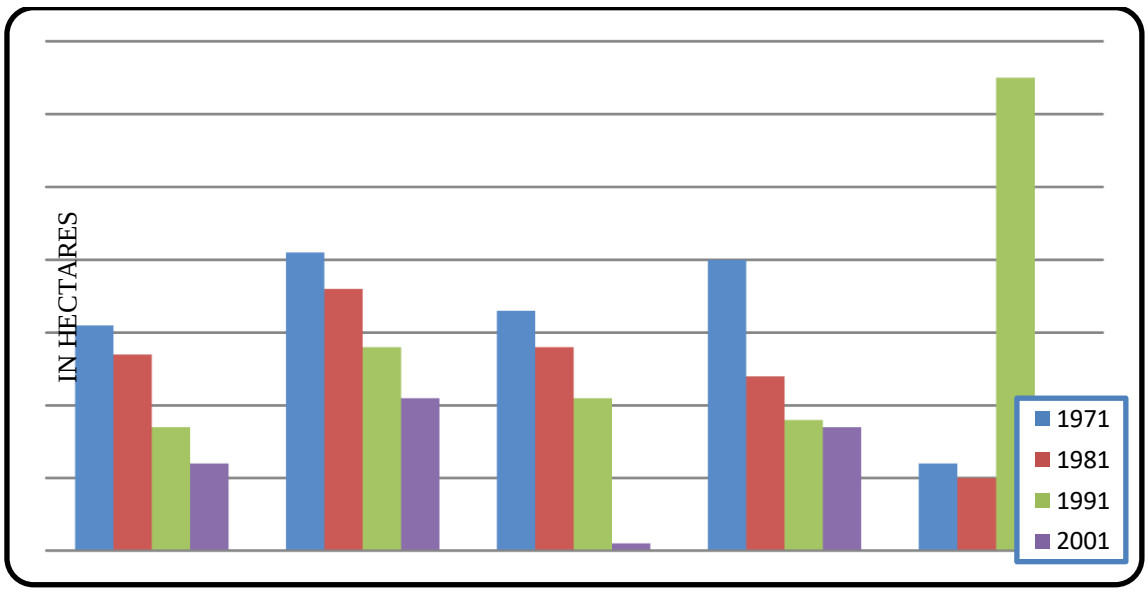


Figure 5: Per Capita Land Availability in Sikkim in Different Years (in Ha)

In the case of land availability in Net Cultivable Land, a decreasing tendency is seen from 1971 to 2001. Land availability in the case of Operated Area for Agricultural Use has been decreasing from 1971 to 2001. Land for non-agriculture became almost nil in 2001. Pasture & Cultivable Waste Land also started decreasing between the years 1971 to 1981, and from 1991 to 2001 it is almost in the same position. In 1991, it is seen that the per capita land availability of Forest has suddenly increased. Per capita availability of all types of land except forest land in Sikkim had decreased from 1971 to 2001.

Conclusion

The land reform trace in Sikkim represents a fundamental shift from a theocratic, feudal structure to a democratic, equity-based agrarian system. Historically, land was concentrated within three estates- Private, Monastic, and Leasehold—which left the majority of the peasantry in a state of precarious tenancy.

The transition began in earnest with the formation of the Sikkim State Congress and its 1947 charter of demands. However, the most significant changes occurred post-1975 following Sikkim's merger with India. Key legislations, such as the Sikkim Agricultural Land Ceiling and Reforms Act 1978, were instrumental in:

- Eliminating exploitative intermediaries.
- Establishing standardized land ceilings (ranging from 6.5 to 12.5 standard acres).
- Protecting the rights of actual cultivators (tillers).

Despite these reforms, the data reveals persistent challenges unique to the Himalayan terrain:

- The all-India land ceiling is difficult to apply uniformly in Sikkim due to extreme variations in altitude and soil quality.

- While individual holdings have increased (as seen in the 1990-91 data), a significant portion of the population remains without dry land. The Rai community holds the highest number of dry land households, while the Bhutia and Lepcha communities maintain a significant share of paddy and cardamom lands, often in higher, moist elevations.
- There is a stark and consistent decline in per capita land availability across almost all categories (Net Cultivable Land, Agricultural Area, and Pasture) from 1971 to 2001. This is likely driven by population growth and the diversion of land for non-agricultural purposes.

The study emphasizes that while the "abolition of landlordism" has been legally achieved, the economic holding size in Sikkim (averaging 8.06 acres) remains higher than the Indian national average, yet the actual "net cultivable area" per person is decreasing. The high percentage of marginal and small holdings (50% of all holdings) indicates that most Sikkimese farmers operate on a subsistence level.

Ultimately, land in Sikkim has evolved from a tool of political and feudal control into a scarce socio-economic resource. Future reforms must move beyond mere "ceiling limits" to address productivity, altitude-specific land management, and the ecological consequences of urban growth to ensure the sustainability of the Sikkimese agrarian economy.

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Conflicts of interest
The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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