

Immigration and Exploitation: A Critical Analysis of Sikkimese Labour History

Anup Sharma

Masters in history, Lovely Professional University

Abstract

Migration has traditionally been viewed as a beneficial characteristic for the growth of a society. Without migration, the society remains stagnant. It cannot grow as there is no exchange of cultures. For Sikkim, the migration of Nepali peasants from Nepal resulted in the exploration of virgin lands due to low population. Also, it resulted in the rampant growth of different forms of bonded Labour such as Kalobhari, Jharlangi, Kuruwa, and Theki-bethi. This paper presents a critical analysis of Sikkimese labour history, with a focus on migration and exploitation. Further, it highlights the impact of the migration of Nepali peasants from Nepal on Sikkim's economy, the introduction of new forms of taxation, and the transition of power from the monarchy to the political officer.

Keywords: Labour, migration, Sikkim, Nepal, Kalobhari.

Introduction

Labour has been the driving force behind the development of any society throughout history. Migration is a dynamic process of population change; it provides an important information factor which indicates the cause of social and economic change and also considers the adjustment to the new economic environmental & and social problems.¹ However, the labour history of Sikkim in the latter half of the 19th century was characterised by the rampant growth of bonded labour like Kalobhari, Jharlangi, Kuruwa, and Theki-bethi.

John Claude White was a British civil servant who played a significant role in the history of Sikkim. He served as the Political Officer in Sikkim from 1889 to 1908 and initiated the migration of Nepali peasants from Nepal to Sikkim.² Before serving as the Political Officer in Sikkim, White spent almost six years in Nepal as a British Resident in Kathmandu, where he developed a deep understanding of the Nepalese people. He recognized their hardworking and industrious nature and believed that they could help drive the development of Sikkim, which was then a small and underdeveloped kingdom.³ White's vision was to bring Nepali peasants to Sikkim and encourage them to settle in the virgin lands of the kingdom.⁴ He

¹ Demko G.J, Ross H.M Schnell, G.A. (1970), *Population Geography: A Reader*, McGraw hill book company, New York.

² Risley, H.H. 1894. *Gazetteer Of Sikkim*. Delhi: Oriental Publishers.

³ White, J. Claude. *Sikkim and Bhutan Twenty-One Years in The North-East Frontier 1887-1908*. New Delhi: Asian Education Services, 2000

⁴ Upadhyay, Rajen. *Peasants' Resentments and Resistance: A Glimpse on Rural Past of Sikkim 1914-1950*. Delhi: Kalpaz Publication, 2017.

believed that this would not only help Sikkim's economic development but also provide a new opportunity for the Nepali peasants to improve their lives.

However, White's vision was exploited by the feudal lords of Sikkim, who forced the Nepali peasants to provide free labour and other forms of bonded labour. Despite White's efforts to mitigate the exploitation of the peasants, the feudal lords continued to exploit the workers. The forced labour system continued for years, leading to the growth of different forms of bonded labour, including Kalobhari, Jharlangi, Kuruwa, and Theki-bethi. Today, White is remembered as a key figure in Sikkim's labour history and his vision of bringing Nepali peasants to Sikkim still resonates with many. However, his efforts were tarnished by the exploitative practices of the feudal lords, which led to the suffering of thousands of workers.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the different types of labour practices in 19th-20th century Sikkim
2. To investigate the impact of migration on labour practices in Sikkim.
3. To analyse the socio-economic changes due to migration.
4. To observe the hardships faced by the labourers.

Research Methodology

I used the historical research method for my study. This method involves using primary sources, such as archival material, and secondary sources, such as literature, to reconstruct events from the past and draw conclusions about historical phenomena. By using archival material as a primary source, I was able to gather first-hand accounts and information that helped me understand the historical context of Sikkimese labour.

My research comprises of exploratory and descriptive research, as it aims to analyse the history of Sikkimese labour, with a focus on migration and exploitation, and investigate the impact of migration on labour practices in Sikkim. Furthermore, the study has future aspects to unfold other aspects of migration. Additionally, I have also incorporated quantitative research methods such as statistical analysis to provide more accurate data and statistical evidence to support my findings.

The Different Forms of Forced Labour

In addition to paying taxes, the Sikkimese peasants had to offer unpaid services or coerced labour to the rulers, landowners, and other intermediaries. The feudal lords imposed different forms of coerced labour on the tenants and sub-tenants, such as Kalobhari, Jharlangi, Kuruwa, and Theki-bethi. These are some of the types of forced labour that existed in Sikkim:

Kalobhari

Kalobhari, which means black load in Nepali, was a harsh form of labour tax imposed on the Nepalese settlers in Sikkim. It is believed that Kalobhari originated when the British started trading with Tibet and needed to transport various goods, including weapons and ammunition. The goods were packed in cardboard boxes and then covered with tar-coated gunny bags to protect them from the snow and rain. The tar gave the bags a black appearance, which led to the local name of Kalobhari or black load⁵. The British

⁵ Gaunley, Gopal. *History of Democratic Movement*. Gangtok: Department of IPR, Government of Sikkim, 2002

authorities instructed the Kazis and Thikadars (feudal lords) to provide labourers for carrying these loads, who in turn demanded porters from the village officials, such as mandals and karbaris. As a result, the peasants were forced to perform this manual labour service. After delivering the British goods, the bags were refilled with other items that had to be taken back to Sikkim⁶. Sometimes, the load was so large that it required the peasants from more than one village to carry it.

Except for the north Sikkim, which was likely a restricted area in the kingdom, all the peasants had to provide these labour services. The British made a deal with the Kazis and Thikadars to arrange labourers for Kalobhari and set the porter rate at two Rupees per day. However, the Kazis and Thikadars only paid the labourers six Annas per day or sometimes nothing and kept the rest of the money they received from the British⁷. Therefore, it is fair to say that the Kazis and Thikadars profited from Kalobhari and exploited the peasants to the fullest. Kalobhari affected all the peasants from different ethnic groups; there was no discrimination based on ethnicity.

The Bhutias, with few exceptional cases, and the Lepchas also equally suffered with the system. Some scholars claim that the Nepali peasants suffered the most from the system. This may reflect their perspective and the reality that Nepalese were often exploited under such conditions. However, another reason for the high proportion of Nepali peasants among the porters was that they made up 75% of the total population and it was natural that they had more victims. Thus, besides some unfair cases, the rest were not deliberate as other scholars argued, but they were a rule of the Kazi-Thikadars that everyone had to obey, regardless of their community. The Kazis and Thikadars carried out Kalobhari in the name of the durbar, and they only cared about their gain, not the peasant's identity. The number of Nepalese peasants involved in Kalobhari was higher because of the demographic factor.

Jharlangi

The British had a friendly relationship with the Sikkim kingdom because of the Tibetan trade. Sikkim offered a convenient and shortest way to the Tibetan plateau. The British built roads and trade routes to Tibet after gaining easy access to it through Sikkim. They needed labourers for the construction and maintenance of these roads and routes, and they asked the Sikkimese Kazis, Thikadars and Mukhtiyars to supply them. The greedy feudal lords demanded labour from the villages through their mandals. The British paid the local feudal lords for the labourers, but they likely kept the money for themselves and made the peasants work without any wages⁸. This type of forced labour service by the peasants was called Jharlangi in Nepali. The peasants had to leave their homes for at least a few weeks for the Jharlangi labour, and they had to bring their warm clothes, food and other essentials. The peasants were punished severely if they refused to do Jharlangi. The greedy landlords did not care about the peasant's suffering and used only a few peasants even though the work required twice as many men⁹. The Jharlangi system also had another purpose: the labourers had to carry the beddings and luggage of the government officials and the English sahib during their transfers.

⁶ Rajalim, D. P. *Atit Ra Vartaman*. Gangtok, 1993.

⁷ Subba J. R., *Yumaism, the Limboo Way of Life a Philosophical Analysis*, 2012.

⁸ Gaunley, Gopal. *History of Democratic Movement*. Gangtok: Department of IPR, Government of Sikkim, 2002.

⁹ Basnet, L.B. *Sikkim A Short Political History*. New Delhi: S Chand & CO. Pvt. Ltd, 1974.

Moreover, the Kazis and Thikadars sometimes asked the peasants to do free Jharlangi service for their private construction and carry items for their children who studied in Darjeeling and Kalimpong¹⁰ It can be argued that the Jharlangi system existed in the kingdom before the British trade in Tibet started, as it was similar to the traditional Tibetan “free porterage” system called ula.

According to Rose's book, the Nepalese migrants who moved to the region were subject to the Jharlangi system, while the original inhabitants, the Bhutia-Lepcha, were subject to the ula system.¹¹ Interestingly, the peasants had to do both the Jharlangi and Kalobhari systems simultaneously. As a result, they hired sub-tenants, known as Pakhureys and Chakhureys, to do the labour on their behalf due to the burden of providing free labour services.

Theki-Bethi

There was another kind of unpaid labour service in the feudal Sikkim. This type was different from the forced labour mentioned above, as it was related to agriculture. The peasants had to provide free labour services during cultivation. The Kazis and Thikadars appointed subordinate officials like Mukhtiyar, Mandals and Karbaris at the village levels. They were loyal to the Kazis and Thikadars and helped them collect taxes. These officials exploited the peasants as middlemen. The peasants had to give gifts to the village officials in a special container called Theki (theki is a Nepali term, it is a wooden utensil used by the peasants to keep and preserve curd) during festive occasions. The Theki contained meat, curd, rice, local beer (chang) and other items. The village officials also demanded such gifts in a Theki on occasions like the king's birthdays, the birth of princes, and marriages¹².

The peasants also had to work in the fields of the Mandals and the Kazi-Thikadars whenever they asked. This free labour was called Bethi, which involved ploughing, terracing of lands and other field works. A remarkable feature of this labour was that women also participated in it. These two free labour services together were known as Theki-Bethi.

Kuruwa

Another type of manual service that the peasants had to provide was Kuruwa, which means a long wait in Nepali. The peasants had to wait many days for the cargo to come because of the road conditions and natural issues when they did the Kalobhari services. They had to live on their resources during this wait. Kuruwa was not a tax itself, but it added to the peasants' hardship of low means. The way of doing Kuruwa was the same as Jharlangi and Kalobhari. The British made a deal with the Kazis and Thikadars to get the porters and paid them well.¹³

Demographic Expansion

The first population census of Sikkim was undertaken in 1891 during the British Raj. Sikkim during this period was a protectorate state of the British. The State at that period was sparsely populated and most of

¹⁰ Gaunley, Gopal. *History of Democratic Movement*. Gangtok: Department of IPR, Government of Sikkim, 2002

¹¹ Rose, Leo E. 'Modernizing a Traditional Administrative System: Sikkim 1890-1973'

¹² & ¹³ Tran, Hong. *Chogyal's Sikkim: Tax, Land & Clan Politics*. SIT Digital Collections. http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1446.

the area was under forest cover. During those periods Bhutia were 4894, Lepcha 5762, Limboo 3356 and Nepalese 15,458 numbers.

Table1.1. Shows the Comparative Population, Sex ratio, Density, Growth Rate of Migration in Sikkim.¹⁴

Year	Population	Sex Ratio	Density	Growth Rate
1891	30458	938	4	-
1901	59014	916	8	93.76
1911	87920	951	12	48.98
1921	81721	970	12	-7.05
1931	109808	967	15	34.37
1941	121520	920	17	10.67

This increase in population shows the percentage growth in migration that happened after the appointment of J.C. White as the political officer in 1889. The cheap labour that the British wanted was available to them and they grabbed it with both hands by exploiting the migrated Ryots.

However, The Nepalese migration to Sikkim was mainly influenced by the emergence of the Gorkha Kingdom in Western Nepal, led by the dynamic Maharaja Prithivi Narayan Shah. He unified the diverse tribes of Nepal under the Gorkha flag and created a new Kingdom of Nepal. He also launched a surprise attack on Rabdentse, the capital of Sikkim, in 1788-89. After that, for some time, Nepal collected rent from Pemiongchi and the whole South Teesta region, until they were driven out by the British Government in 1815. The Nepali population in Sikkim increased significantly after the Treaty of Tumlong in 1861. It seems that the East India Company or the British Indian Empire needed cheap workers to boost their economy and they found them in neighbouring Nepal. The original inhabitants of Sikkim were mostly traders and herders and did not want to work for the British in their new projects. Therefore, the British invited the Nepalese from Nepal to settle in their territories in India.¹⁵ Thus, we can conclude that the Migration process catalysed the bonded Labour which remained in Sikkim even after the withdrawal of the British from Sikkim.

Socio-Economic Impacts

With the migration of the Nepalis, the society underwent various changes for instance the cultivation of Cotton in Sikkim was introduced by the Nepalis. Also, the Minting of the coins was done by Nepali Traders. As, before the coming of the Nepalis there was a superstition among the people that mining would result in sickness or death among the workers but since the Nepalis did not believe in this superstition, they got the contracts from the Chogyal for the minting.¹⁶ The migrant Nepalis entered into every sphere of the life of the inhabitants of Sikkim. Soon they outnumbered the original inhabitants of Sikkim, making Sikkim a Nepali-dominated kingdom. The influx of Nepali peasants resulted in the exploration of virgin lands which had yet to be explored due to the low population, this helped in the expansion of agricultural activities.

¹⁴ Source: 1891 census, 1991 census, and SSES 2006.

¹⁵ Upadhyay, Rajen. *Peasants' Resentments and Resistance: A Glimpse on Rural Past of Sikkim 1914-1950*. Delhi: Kalpaz Publication, 2017.

¹⁶ Kharel, Sunita; Wangchuk, Jigme. *Gazetteer of Sikkim*. Gangtok: Home Department of Sikkim, 2013.

However, the labourers were on the suffering side, and the introduction of new forms of taxation had a significant impact on the economic condition of the peasants. The feudal lords used these taxes as a means to exploit the peasants, which led to widespread poverty and underdevelopment.¹⁷ The transition of power from the monarchy to the political officer also had a significant impact on Sikkim's socio-economic condition.

The political officer introduced a new system of governance, which focused on the centralisation of power and the consolidation of British influence. This system had far-reaching consequences for the peasants, who were subjected to greater levels of exploitation and oppression. The socio-economic impact of the migration of Nepali peasants from Nepal on Sikkim is a complex issue that requires further analysis and study.

Conclusion

One can argue that before the British came to Sikkim, there was already a system of unpaid labour that forced the peasants to work for free. However, this system was not very severe or widespread. The peasants were at will to choose to do work. Although the economy was stagnant the peasants were free from exploitation. But the British presence and their contribution to the migration of Nepali Peasants, as well as their trade with Tibet made the system of forced labour more entrenched, extensive and harsh, as well as they made it conscripted.

The peasants suffered from the unpredictable and excessive demands of the king, the landlords and the intermediaries for taxes, produce and labour. The peasants had to deal with multiple layers of authority that imposed various kinds of taxes on them. Most of these taxes had nothing to do with the actual agricultural output from the land but were simply ways of exploiting the peasants. Furthermore, the quality of work provided by the Nepali people helped the British in achieving their goal of developing Sikkim to better their trade relations with Tibet.

There were frequent complaints regarding the hardships faced by the labourers as well as the peasants.¹⁸ Hardly any measures were taken by the colonial government as well as the Chogyal until the reign of Tashi Namgyal (1914-1964) which is often considered the brightest period of Sikkimese History as he mitigated many social evils including that of Forced labour.

In 1942, a historic protest shook the foundations of Sikkim's social system. The people rose against the oppressive Kalo-bhari system and other forms of forced labour. After much struggle, a verbal assurance was given that Kalo-bhari would be abolished. But it took six long years of tireless efforts and perseverance to finally witness the end of this inhumane system. In 1947, the Kuruwa was abolished.¹⁹ In 1948, both Jharlangi and Kalo-bhari were officially abolished. The powers of the landlords were curtailed and the position of the peasants improved significantly thereafter.

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¹⁷ Basnet, L.B. *Sikkim A Short Political History*. New Delhi: S Chand & CO. Pvt. Ltd, 1974.

¹⁸ Land Revenue. *Complaints of peasants of Sikkim*. File No. 37. Dated: 21/1/1911. Sikkim State Archives, 1911.

¹⁹ *Notification for the abolition of Kuruwa (forced labour)*. 31/01/1947. Ram Gauri Sangrahalaya. Private Archive. Rhenock. East Sikkim, 1947

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