



Graduate School of Development Studies

**Memories of Agrarian Reform in Bhutan:
An Exploratory study based on oral history**

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This document represents part of the author's study programme while at the Institute of Social Studies. The views stated therein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Institute.

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Dedication

To my country Bhutan

My parents: Kesang Choden and Thinley Wangdi

And to the whole family

Thank you for your love, support and inspiration.

Tasbi Yetsbo

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List of Acronyms

HDI	: Human Development Index
NA	: National Assembly
Nu	: Ngultrum
PHCB	: Population and Housing Census of Bhutan
UNDP	: United Nations Development Programme

Glossary

<i>Aring tsho</i>	: Terracing the paddy field
<i>acre zindrey</i>	: land record made through survey standard
<i>Batsep</i>	: Tax collector
<i>Boe</i>	: An attendant to the King
<i>Bolang sa</i>	: A small plot of land given to the serf for their own Use
<i>Brama</i>	: Local term for buckwheat
<i>Bung threl</i>	: Labour tax
<i>Chaktha</i>	: Chain survey
<i>Changaps</i>	: Personal Assistant to King
<i>Changla</i>	: Rice transplantation
<i>Cheta Kasbo</i>	: circular related to taxation (sometimes written in the bark of tree)
<i>Chipon</i>	: Village messenger
<i>Chipon Gom</i>	: Head of the village messenger
<i>Cho-chon</i>	: Local term for dough made from flour
<i>Choeje</i>	: A religious clan
<i>Choesi</i>	: Dual system of governance
<i>Choktham</i>	: Permission to register
<i>Danglen</i>	: Share cropping
<i>Dasho</i>	: An honorary title for a red scarf official
<i>Dalai Lama</i>	: Head of the state under Tibet
<i>Desi</i>	: Regional ruler
<i>Drap</i>	: The serf working under the monastic body
<i>Dratsang</i>	: Monastic institution
<i>Drey</i>	: A unit of measurement for grains (one drey =1.67 kg of rice)
<i>Druk Gyalpo</i>	: The King of Bhutan
<i>Dzongdag</i>	: District Administrator
<i>Dzongkha</i>	: National Language of Bhutan
<i>Dzongkhag</i>	: District administration
<i>Dzongpon</i>	: Fort governor
<i>Dung</i>	: A clan
<i>Dungkhag</i>	: Sub district administration
<i>Dungpa</i>	: Sub district administrator
<i>Genja</i>	: An agreement
<i>Gewog</i>	: Block

<i>Gungda woola</i>	: Compulsory household labour contribution to the Government
<i>Gungthrel</i>	: Household tax
<i>Gup</i>	: Village headman
<i>Jasabi</i>	: A name of the village in kurtoe
<i>Jekhenpo</i>	: Head/chief abbot of the monastic body
<i>Ju threl</i>	: Wealth tax
<i>Kamthrel</i>	: Tax paid in money
<i>Kamzhang</i>	: Dry land
<i>Kasbo</i>	: A royal decree
<i>Khaep</i>	: A tax-paying household/land holding peasant
<i>Khechen gi sa</i>	: Local term referring to a fertile land
<i>Khomteng Lhakhang</i>	: Village temple across the border
<i>Kidu</i>	: Welfare
<i>Kurim</i>	: Religious ceremony
<i>Kurtoe</i>	: A block in Lhuentse Dzongkhag
<i>Kurtoep kha</i>	: Local dialect spoken in the east
<i>Lama</i>	: An equivalence of a priest
<i>Langdo</i>	: Land measurement unit in terms of oxen(4 langdo makes 1 acre of land)
<i>Langpon</i>	: Responsible for ploughing the field
<i>Lhakhang</i>	: Religious institution
<i>Lhuentse</i>	: A District in the eastern Bhutan
<i>Lodroe Tshogde</i>	: Royal Advisory Council
<i>Lhuentsepa</i>	: Title for the District head under Lhuentse
<i>Lonthrel/ tsampa</i>	: Tax in term grains
<i>Mangi Ap</i>	: Head of the village community
<i>Mathram</i>	: Land record
<i>Mathram chen</i>	: Master Land record
<i>Mepbu threl</i>	: Fire tax
<i>Minap</i>	: Common people
<i>Nangzen</i>	: A milder term used for the serf
<i>Ngultrum/ Nu</i>	: Bhutanese currency
<i>Nyerchen</i>	: Master of store keeper for various products Such as butter, grains, meats etc
<i>National Assembly</i>	: Parliament also called as Tshogdue
<i>Palang</i>	: A wine container made out of bamboo
<i>Peljor gongphel</i>	: Socio-economic development
<i>Penlop</i>	: Regional governors
<i>Perpon</i>	: Village messenger

<i>Phatsa</i>	: Traditional bag
<i>Prew</i>	: Local festival in kurtoe gewog
<i>Pchu</i>	: Labour exchange system
<i>Remong</i>	: Share cropping
<i>Sang</i>	: A measurement unit for butter (one sang =333 gm)
<i>Satong</i>	: An empty land
<i>Shabto lemi</i>	: Labour contribution for development activity
<i>Sha nyerpa</i>	: Responsible for storing meat
<i>Shey</i>	: A measurement unit in kilograms
<i>Shingkey</i>	: Share cropping
<i>Son drey</i>	: A measurement unit of land
<i>Sumdang</i>	: Share cropping
<i>Tego</i>	: Upper blouse worn by the woman in particular
<i>Toe tha</i>	: Weaving tax
<i>Thre</i>	: Millet
<i>Threlpa</i>	: Tax payer/same as kheap above
<i>Toezepts</i>	: Associated with discipline and etiquette
<i>Tseri</i>	: Slash and burn
<i>Thrimpon</i>	: Judge
<i>Tshogdu</i>	: National Assembly/parliament
<i>Wang youn</i>	: Tax levied for receiving blessing from a lama
<i>Werza</i>	: Weeding
<i>Woola</i>	: Labour
<i>Yumbi Umling</i>	: A fertile valley in Jasabi
<i>Zab</i>	: Serf
<i>Zhime nyerpa</i>	: Tax caretaker
<i>Zimpon</i>	: Chamberlain

Abstract

The academic research on the history of agrarian reform is very limited hence very little is known in the field of agrarian history of Bhutan. This research paper is an attempt to reconstruct an understanding of the past agrarian reform in Bhutan in the 1950s and even prior. This study is based mainly on an exploratory study and limited secondary resources. Particular attention is given to understanding the inter-relationship between the agrarian reform and the political process of state modernization. This tries to connect the actual agrarian structures in the pre reform period with the political processes that had shaped the agrarian reform. This study reveals a detailed account on how agrarian reform is being remembered in the particular research area based in the eastern region while it also presents a general understanding on this particular subject.

The main discussion in this study is that agrarian reform had been an effective political strategy in state modernization breaking down the power of the landed political/landed elites. As a consequences on one hand we see relatively servile characteristics remain today imposed in the more modern context expressed in different forms but on the other hand the reform had improved the livelihoods of the people at large redistributing land to the landless and end in the 'serf' system. Indeed while reviving the traditional agrarian structure it is widely recognized the universalisation of the terms/label such as 'serfdom/feudal' is an over simplification in Bhutan context and these terms are not relevant to describe the past system. The use of indigenous term and alternative perspective is also questioned in this study. This study contributes to break down the internalization and clear understanding within the discourses so far that the past system is portrayed to legitimize current system while we have the unique elements and richness in the past agrarian structure to be more valued. The study ends with reflections on above discussions and what remains as a scope for the future researchers/scholars.

Keywords

(Agrarian reform, state modernization, politics, Land, Labour, serfdom, Feudalism)

Chapter 1

Introduction

In the early 1950s, Late His Majesty the third king (*Druk Gyalpo* here after) Jigme Dorji Wangchuk (who reigned from 1952-1972) enacted and implemented agrarian reform. This led to the redistribution of land to the landless and also resulted in the end of the so called 'serf' system that had existed since the 17th century. Alongside this changes there was also an effort to state modernization. Academic research on this subject is limited and in fact very little is known about the agrarian history of Bhutan. In the complete absence of any published literature it is important to make use of oral history sources while it is still possible to 'rescue' these important dimensions of Bhutan's past for future generations and scholarship. Those people who can still recall the 1950s agrarian reforms are now getting very old or have already passed away and so with them, important historical knowledge is disappearing.

In the absence of extensive research in this area, Bhutan's agrarian history tends to be categorized in the European terms, and relying on European stereotypes of 'feudalism' and 'serfdom'. Bhutan is not even talked about in any of the literature and debates on the Asian agrarian reforms. For this reason, this exploratory study, based on oral history and limited secondary resources attempts to reconstruct an understanding of the agrarian reform. In the literature on agrarian reform it is recognized that the politics of agrarian reform is critical, and that it is usually the politics underlying agrarian reform rather than economics issues that determines much of its outcomes, successes and failures. All authors recognize that agrarian reform is a fundamentally political process given that it involves transferring assets and power, transforming labour and tenure relations which are embedded in power relations, etc.¹(Bernstein 2004, Griffin et al. 2002, Inayatullah. 1980, Sobhan 1993, Putzel 1992)

This study therefore is an attempt to elucidate and explore this inter-relation between agrarian reform and the political process of state modernization, particularly in light of the seismic events that were taking place around Bhutan at the time. For example the communist revolution in China, the Chinese invasion of Tibet and India's independence all had strong geo-political significance for Bhutan during that time. This study involves trying to figure out what were the actual agrarian conditions and structures in the pre reform period in order to understand the starting point from which political processes shaped the agrarian reform. In turn, this also included an engagement with the discourses of Asian 'feudalism' and 'serfdom'. Given that these terms have come to be used in the present to characterize the past, even by current Bhutanese elites and scholars, despite the fact that these terms originate from Europe and that there is considerable debate as to their appropriateness in closely

¹See also (Brenner 1977, Byres 2004, Khan 2004, Kay 2002) they share the same view on politics

related fields (such as in scholarship on agrarian history of Tibet). In other words, part of our task of clarifying the past involves deciphering the terminologies that have come to be used to describe the past. While the main goal of the study is to focus on unravelling the past rather than the use of these terminologies today, it is nonetheless important to consider the relevance of language and terminology in shaping our understanding of history and events. To understand the process of reform at the local level, the study also examines how implementation of agrarian reform is remembered in one village in Eastern Bhutan.

The main argument in this paper is that the 1950s agrarian reform took place within the political system as a key element in the strategy of the Third *Druk Gyalpo* to build a modern nation state. To a large degree this required restricting power of the political and landed elites in various regions. This in turn required restructuring the traditional political administration of the state which were rooted in the land. Hence, agrarian reform became an effective tool to break down these land-based centres of power. Therefore the primary focus of the agrarian reform was state modernization and centralization of power (from the local rulers) which allowed legitimizing the state as a whole. However, even after the centralization of power, and re-distribution of land in the rural areas, there is still some existence of former servile character retained into the current period past 1950s, such as share cropping transposed into the more modern context. As such we could say that the reform had not totally changed everything. We can further postulate that the primary motivation for the reform was to establish the appearance of a modern state to assure sovereignty, given the prevailing regional geopolitics situations around Bhutan. Although not much of evidence is built, it could still be the driving force for implementing agrarian reform in the country at that particular time.

Another argument is that it is more appropriate to use the local 'indigenous' terminology to express the 'traditional' system pre reform which had its own unique elements, rather than trying to force it into a universal notion of 'serfdom/feudalism' which undermine our understanding of these traditional systems. When we actually look at the past system and notice that it can not easily be compared with European 'feudalism' (or other Asian 'feudalisms'), we can conclude that the prevailing representation of the past agrarian system is an ideological element of state modernization.

This study is largely based on oral history interviews with elderly persons aged 70 and above. In total 35 interviews were held, in three categories. The first category of interview was conducted among those retired senior government officials (*Ex Dasho*'s²) who had directly served both second and the third *Druk Gyalpo* in the 20th century. These *ex Dashos* (aged 85 and above) were the rich source of information for such explorative study and get their experience documented. The Second category included fourteen members who were academicians, bureaucrats, parliamentarians and some government officials.

² Dasho here refer to the red scarf official equivalent to the English title 'honorable'. In those days they were the personal attendant of the king.

The members included in this category were those who has the experience and rich knowledge about the agrarian reform, process and its change, while the third category is the mix between former land owners (aristocrats), and those who received land during reform, while some of them were with conscious memories of the total process and who has lived through those years. There were eighteen people in this category. There is also an equal representation of male and females in this sample, thus the findings from the study would not be gender biased. The respondents were selected based on purposive and snow ball sampling from among those with conscious memories, while some were based on the recommendations of government officials and supervisors. The choice of research area is based in eastern Bhutan because of the fact that the 'serf' system prevailed mostly in the eastern Bhutan. This is also indicated by most elderly respondents, government officials and reading across historical literature (Ura 1995).

Semi structured interviews were conducted with those officials while it was pure oral(history) interview with the rest of the respondents which took more than two hours with an individual in most cases. Very little secondary data was used, as no archival material was available, with the exception of the *national assembly* (parliament) resolutions from that time. No other scholarly or academic research documents were available on the agrarian reform in Bhutan. Some of the Tibet studies scholarship proved helpful as a source of ideas. The medium of conversation used in the interview was basically the local dialect (*kurtoep kha*). However, *Dzongkha* (national language) and English were used intermittently. In reporting most of the interviews the names, dates and place are anonymised for reasons of confidentiality. Only in certain cases where permission was granted are the above specification shown.

This study has intentionally been given the title an exploratory study, to underline that it was undertaken in a very limited time frame (four weeks of field research) and focuses on a single village for in-depth study. It is beyond the scope of my research to produce quantitative data on such matters as land use or land distributed before and after reform. The findings from the village case study cannot be generalized to the country as a whole.

This paper consists of five chapters. Chapter two provides the theoretical framework, based on a literature review of the politics of agrarian reform and the relationship between agrarian reform and state modernization, and the discourses on 'feudalism' and 'serfdom' (and its relationship to politics of agrarian reform). Chapter three outlines the Bhutanese context (national level) summarizing what is known or can be reconstructed about agrarian conditions prior to reform, the agrarian reform and state modernization. Chapter four, the village case study analyses how agrarian reform is remembered at the village level, to shed more light on the agrarian structure prior to the reform, the actual implementation of the reform and the possible transformations in the immediate period after. Chapter five closes the study with brief concluding reflections.

Chapter 2

Agrarian reform and state modernization: Conceptual framework

The broad theoretical framework applied to this study is the politics of agrarian reform and the inter relationships between agrarian reform and state modernization, which also involves some discussion of 'serfdom/feudalism' and its relationship to the politics of agrarian reform.

This chapter will therefore articulate on the affiliated literatures by different scholars/authors who have delved more closely in political processes of agrarian reform and state modernization. In understanding the contemporary discourses on the 'serfdom/feudalism' there doesn't seem to be much introspection by the Bhutanese scholars so this leads to exploring the Tibet studies literature.

2.1 Agrarian reform and state modernization

Agrarian reform remains a highly contested issue to policy makers and scholars alike. Many scholars as discussed in the beginning studying agrarian reform debate across economic aspects like productivity, farm size and efficiency. Regardless of the debate all author's agree to the general consensus that the success or failure that effectively transfers power/resources from elites to common people varies politically at all levels.

In particular, the generally accepted insight from the literature on the agrarian reform in Asia is that in the case of successful agrarian reform there was a serious threat to the power of the elites which induced them or forced them to relinquish power and their control over land and/or labour. This occurred either under conditions of revolution where landlords were overthrown such as China and Vietnam, or in situations of the post war occupation and major external geo political pressures, such as South Korea and Taiwan.³ On the other hand unsuccessful cases associated with stalled or failed agrarian reform are observed under socially conservative political regimes such as in various Latin American countries and the Phillipines. These failures were largely due to the fact that elites were able to subvert the process, maintain power and control over land and labour thereby able to undermine agrarian reform.

Successful agrarian reform involves the redistribution of natural resources such as arable land, water and forest. Land and resource tenure systems are embedded in power relations that structure the relationship of people to these resources and in turn the relations between people themselves. Not surprisingly, whether it is domestic or geo political concerns which play the major role in enacting and implementing reforms, these processes usually evoke tensions

³ For valuable exceptions, see (Griffin et al. 2002, Putzel 1992).

and conflict. Land is what gives rural people a sense of ‘rootedness’ and identity which define personal, social and political prestige. There are instances in north India where people kill each other for land regardless of the kinship (Agarwal 1994, Potter et al. 2008). Putzel defines agrarian reform as follows:

‘The term agrarian reform implies not only the physical redistribution of land but a transformation in rural relations. It has been adopted by the advocates of redistributive reform who realize that land redistribution must be accompanied by other changes in the agriculture production structure, such as the introduction of credit programmes, the provision of extension services, or the reform of farm input and produce markets that allow beneficiaries profitably to engage in farming’ (Putzel 1992:3)

Thus, agrarian reform includes land reform but has also a broader connotation, both reshaping agrarian structure and transforming labour regimes with varying impact on rural livelihoods. As a result it remains closely connected to state modernization whereby politically we can see varying impacts. Putzel further goes on to say that agrarian reform was at the centre of the state’s political agenda in Asia largely as a reaction to the emerging revolutionary movements supported by the peasant population. Reform can be based on either ‘revolutionary’, ‘conservative’ or ‘liberal’ principles.

In the ‘revolutionary’ approach such as in Vietnam and China, the communist party managed to involve local peasants in the process and this set an example for radical movements throughout the rest of Asia in the post war period. In the ‘conservative’ approach the state protects the individual property rights but makes some resources available through resettlement programmes and new investment in agriculture. This approach was often adopted in contexts where genuine agrarian reform failed or stalled like the Philippines and other parts of Southeast Asia, India and various Latin American countries. A ‘liberal’ approach to land reforms is reflected in the reforms initiated by the US military government in post-war South Korea and Japan aiming to achieve redistributive land reform with the larger political objective of countering the communist threat. This also led to the expropriation of land from the elites and the conversion of tenants’ rights into ownership rights through the imposition of a low land ceiling. As we see in the case of Korea (Griffin et al. 2002) there was strong popular support for communism in Korea that the Americans were trying to counteract. Therefore land reform that involved giving land to the poor peasants was one way of counteracting the support for socialist/communist revolution. In this case agrarian reform is being used as the way to create certain types of state society relations that support development projects, and the centralization and legitimation of the state, as well as undermine traditional landed elites.

Alternatively, we see in the case of Tibet (Goldstein 1991:816-818) states that between the period (1920 – 1925), His Holiness the 13th *Dalai Lama* (head of the state) had instituted ‘reforms’ and ‘innovations’ aimed to modernize the Tibetan state. This included building the military regime, however, the central government lacked resources to keep up its standing army as the ‘regular income’ was not sufficient enough and this had led to increased taxation to the ‘monasteries’ and the ‘aristocrats’. On the other hand the monasteries and the

aristocrats were preventing from this reform. The Tibetan ‘politico-religious’ system had a conflictual character and there was a lack of consensus among the political ruling elites. The monasteries continued maintaining their basis of power. As a result the state modernization was a failed attempt. In addition in 1950 -1951 the Peoples Republic of China ‘confronted’ Tibet and many aristocrats and monasteries cooperated with the Chinese. In 1959 the Chinese invasion had finally led to the collapse of the Tibetan state and the flight of the 14th His Holiness the *Dalai Lama*⁴.

These comparisons help us understand the interplay between agrarian reform and the politics of state modernization where not only the balance of power within the country, but also major external geo political threat may be the underlying concerns behind the enactment of reforms and the success or failure of their implementation. This underlines the relevance of (Brenner 1976) influential arguments on the ‘dialectical’ understanding of the classical Marxist that power equation between elites, peasants, commoners and the state plays an important role in modernization process and implementing reforms. Next we look at the ‘serfdom/feudalism’ discourses, which are an underlying element in some of the issues discussed above.

2.2 Discourse on ‘serfdom’/ ‘feudalism’ and Definitions

Many western scholars defined Bhutan in the 1950s as a ‘feudal’ society characterized by ‘serfdom’ (Mathou 2000:614, Olesen 1985:25, Sinha 1991:xix, White 2007:14)⁵ and subsequently the Bhutanese scholars started to repeat these characterizations (Dorji 2008:62, Kinga et al. 2002:18, Pain and Deki 2004:429, Tshering 1993:13). For this matter a critical assessment of these views requires an understanding of what exactly was the agrarian structure consisted of prior to the reforms.⁶ We often contrast the ‘feudal’ past with the ‘modern’ present. The discourse of ‘serfdom/feudalism’ may serve to promote an exaggerated, ideological representation of the past which in turn serves to idealize and legitimize the present system. Thus, empirical findings can hopefully help break away from the internalization of crude stereotypes and promote a better understanding of the unique features of Bhutan’s agrarian past (See chapter three and four)

One main issue is the ambiguity of the terms involved. The terms ‘feudal’ and ‘serfdom’ actually originate from medieval Europe⁷. Marxist scholarship, influenced by the study of European feudalism, tends to see serfdom as a form of economic exploitation in which elites have full authority over land and la-

⁴ More details refer to Goldstein and See also (Shakya 1999)

⁵ Refer to also (Pommaret 1984:1-175).

⁶ From my interview with Dasho Karma Ura, Director, Centre for Bhutan Studies, (CBS) on July 2010, Thimphu: According to Dasho Bhutan has a religious history and cannot be compared to European or other Asian ‘serfdom/feudalism’.

⁷ Where you have the Catholic Church, manorial lords, military structure, the serfs were tradable commodities and lords had the full authority over them.

bour. This is stated as ‘inseparable’ from ‘feudalism’ which they argued is a ‘universal’ stage in the ‘evolution’ of society. On the other hand others who see serfdom as a common element in feudal society but not necessarily tied to feudal society as in medieval Europe, and finally some see serfdom not at all linked with feudalism (Bloch 1961:441-448).

Noting that ‘Serfdom/feudalism’ is viewed through various lenses, we will look at some definitions. Bloch, the influential French historian defines feudalism broadly as:

‘A subject peasantry; widespread use of the service tenement (i.e. the fief) instead of salary, which was out of the question; the supremacy of a class of specialized warriors; ties of obedience and protection which bind man to man, within the warrior class, assume the distinctive form called vassalage; fragmentation of authority leading inevitably to disorder and in the midst of all this, the survival of other forms of association, family, state, of which the latter, during the second feudal age was to acquire renewed strength. Such then seem to be the fundamental features of European feudalism’ (Bloch 1961:446)

What we can understand from Bloch is the classic characterization of the Europe feudal that had a few ‘hegemonic’ rulers, owning all the resources and having the right to use extra economic coercion with the serfs⁸. While the differentiation of feudal and serfdom is also seen from some Marxist scholars, like (Sweezy and Hilton 1978:33) who define feudalism in terms of serfdom. Feudalism is ‘an economic system in which ‘serfdom’ is the predominant relation of production and in which production is organized in and around the manorial estate of the lord’. ‘Serfdom’ is regarded as an appropriation of peasants who are bound to the lords in feudal society. Sweezy further goes on to say that ‘serfdom has at different times and in different regions been associated with different forms of economic organization’ (*ibid.*: 33). What we can understand from the above is that while serfdom may be used to describe the certain serf type system the agrarian system may or may not be feudal wherein it can have similar characterization but need not be restricted only to Europe.

In the scholarly discourses around Tibet, the use of the term ‘serfdom/feudal’ is largely rejected. In fact many authors (Aziz 1978, Coleman 1998, Goldstein (1971a, 1971b), Miller, 1988) argued extensively against the use of this characterization⁹. Even those who use the term ‘serfdom’ often agree that ‘feudalism’ is not the right term in the Tibetan context. For instance, Goldstein defines serfdom as follows:

⁸ Even the European literature exaggerates the oppression of regular serfdom in Europe. (Brenner 1976) argued that in the later part of the 13th century in Europe upon the ‘Black death’ which led to decrease in population whereby the peasant had better deal with the landlord and later this change in condition led to the end of serfdom in Europe.

⁹ Refer to (Dargyay 1982, Goldstein 1986). The main argument among most authors and common understanding is that the traditional system in Tibet is not appropriate to be called serfdom as used in the west Europe. This is the start point.

‘Serfdom therefore is a system of economic production in which elite controls both land resources and the critical labour force (serfs) it needs to produce foodstuffs from the land. serfdom guarantees this labour force without burdening the lord with the need to either provide direct food and housing for the laborers (as would be the case [of] slavery) or compete for labour in a market context. It may exist as one alternative system of production in a society or as the only one’ (Goldstein 1986:82-83)

Goldstein’s definition above holds that ‘serfdom’ is the appropriate term for the particular type of relationship between the aristocrats, land lords and the peasant but that ‘feudalism’ has larger dimensions in terms of the social structure, which do not apply in this case. He goes on to say that serfdom can have varied meanings across space and time but not necessarily all the characteristics of classical European feudalism. He feels that serfdom is fairly accurate term for lack of a better word. Every one disagrees with the term feudal, while serfdom is also rejected by some authors.¹⁰This is mainly due to the recognition of specific features such as relative mobility of the peasants, which are obscured in (for example) official Chinese discourse on the Tibetan past. The use of indigenous words for agrarian relations and their traditional meaning/elements gets lost in this universalisation of the term.

Conversely, in Bhutan there doesn’t seem to be much introspection or debate on the use of these terms that scholars apparently accept and use to describe history. They may not have been aware of the debates and political connotations surrounding these terms. For example (Wangchuk 2000) argued that these were not relevant terms for Bhutan, but he was not able to assert his arguments and went on considering the use of the term even mentioning the word ‘slave’ (*ibid.*: 1) to describe the peasants.

‘Another compelling explanation for Bhutan to be labeled feudal may be that the western scholars who study Bhutan have been trained as Tibetologists. They look to Tibet for causal explanation of not [only] historical events in Bhutan but also the countries entire socio-cultural systems in general’ (Wangchuk 2000:4).

As the earlier discussions show this was actually the most contested term in Tibet and possibly the Tibetologist are aware on the discourses. Thus we cannot conclude the origin of the term in Bhutan. This needs more exploration and careful study.¹¹ Wangchuk goes on to say that

‘The vast majority of peasants were freemen (to use a ‘feudal’ term), either own[ing] private lands or ‘sharecropping’ for wealthier families, monasteries and other elite[s]. They are even today referred to as *‘minap’*, loosely translated as ‘igno-

¹⁰ See (Aziz 1978, Coleman 1998, Miller 1988, Dargyay 1982).

¹¹ From my interview with Ms. Francoise Pommaret, She shared her opinion that Bhutan cannot be termed as feudal. Bhutan has a religious history and culturally it is a different country. (Anthropologist, Institute of Language and Cultural studies, Simtokha also a (Tibetologist) interview held on July 2010, Thimphu).

rant people' or 'people in the dark' but nevertheless free. Some were '*drap*' or 'serfs' in the true 'feudal' sense' (*ibid.*: 7)

This would imply that while servile status and relationships were found, they involved a minority of the population and therefore it would be incorrect to characterize the entire system as built on the foundation of 'serfdom'. As we will see in Chapters three and four, empirical research largely supports this view, although the local terminologies for the different agrarian statuses and relationships may differ from those used by Wangchuk.

Chapter 3

Agrarian reform and state modernisation

This chapter consists of three sections. The first section will provide a very brief general overview of Bhutan. Section two gives a more detailed overview on the agrarian structure and agrarian conditions prior to the 1950s, in order to understand the pre-reform structure and pressures for reform. Section three then discusses the political processes of state modernization and its relationship to agrarian reform followed by section four and five on the reform political processes of reform implementation and outlining brief overview post reform

Basically the main argument in this chapter is as stated earlier that agrarian reform in Bhutan had been an effective political tool for state modernization setting up strong administration of the state by and by redistribution of land to the landless and abolition of 'serf'-like status and relationships. Agrarian reform and the improvement of conditions of those who worked on the land were not in themselves the primary objective, while we also see the persistence of relatively servile or pre-modern characteristics transposed in the post-reform phase.

Map 3.1
Administrative Map of Bhutan



Source: (Bhutan Portal: www.bhutan.gov.bt.)

3.1 General overview of Bhutan

Bhutan is a small Buddhist Himalayan kingdom buffered between China in the north and India in the south. Bhutan has an area is 38,394 sq km with a total population of 671,083. With the annual growth rate of 1.8 % (National Statis-

tics Bureau 2009:1-166), it is an agrarian society with 69.1% of the population still residing in rural areas (PHCB 2005). Bhutan is ranked at 132 out of 174 countries in terms of Human Development Index (HDI) (UNDP 2009)

From the beginning of the 20th century onwards the rule was formalized under the series of hereditary rulers under the monarchy system which began with King Ugyen Wangchuck. (Ardussi 2000, Ardussi and Ura 2000, Hasrat 1990:55). According to (Kinga 2009 :7), state legitimacy had been established since the inception of monarch and the legitimacy is drawn from the contract (*genja*) signed in 1907 by the first king and continues today¹². The first king abolished the dual system of administration but the position of *Jekhenpo* (religious and spiritual head) still remained. The reign of the first two monarchs' show that Bhutan was able to defend its sovereignty having fought lots of wars and negotiations with the British. The third king's reign from (1952-1972) marked the beginning of processes of modernization in Bhutan which we will discuss more later. Today Bhutan has parliamentary democracy under the rule of King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck beginning 2008 (*Ibid*: 1-259)

3.2 Agrarian conditions and Agrarian structure

In the 1950s, Bhutan's political structure may be summarized as follows. The *Druk Gyalpo* was the head of the state. For religious affairs *Jekhenpo* was the head (equivalent to the *Druk Gyalpo*). Because of the physical location (Himalayan range) there was separation of one region from another, hence the political administration and the agrarian structure which will be discussed below were rooted in the control of land and of people. From the oral history account, it was understood that during the 1950s the country was divided under three different regions; western, central and eastern under the rule of regional governors (*penlops*)¹³ and fort – governor (*Dzongpons*) who were in charge of the provincial administration.¹⁴ For the sub-district administration (*Dungpa*) had been appointed¹⁵. At the lowest level of the administration was the *Gup* (village head man)¹⁶. We should also know that besides the above there are other various positions known as *Nerchen*¹⁷, *zimpon*¹⁸, *Changaps*¹⁹, *Toezepts*²⁰, and *Boe*²¹. Their

¹² See also (Aris, 1979)

¹³ Thimphu penlop was responsible for (main capital city), Dagana penlop was responsible for (south west regions), Trongsa penlop for the (central and eastern region) and Paro penlop for (western region)

¹⁴ Punakha and Wangdue Phodrang, Lhuentse, Mongar, Tashigang (central and eastern Districts)

¹⁵ In Haa (central District)

¹⁶ who were the ones to administer a group of villages which is known as a Gewog today

¹⁷ Store master for various products such as butter, grains, meat etc

¹⁸ Chamberlain

¹⁹ Personal assistant to the king

²⁰ Associated with discipline and etiquette

recruitments were done based on ability, strength and physical stature. We know that although there is the central government held by the king. In those regions as seen earlier the regional/local authority held lot of power. It was like another decentralized administration although they were held directly accountable to the *Druk Gyalpo*.

The agrarian structure was based on landholding and the ability to cultivate land or to claim a part of its produce. The land distribution system in those years was highly unequal. Most of the land was owned by landed elites, the state and monastic institutions. Tax paying peasants did have their own land and very minimal amount belonged to the 'serfs'.²² Land was also the main source of livelihood and power. The land record (*marthram chen*) consisted of a list of all those who owned land (aristocrats/taxpayers); this was later replaced by survey standard (*acre zindrey*). Control of labour also remained very vital (see chapter four). The agrarian structure was dominated by a handful of aristocratic families such as *dung, choeji and lamas*, who often had the religious prominence and played a dominant role in the social as well as political arenas of the Bhutanese polity, while the great majority of households were the taxpayers (*khrelpa*) and those of the 'serf' class were known by varying indigenous names across regions (see chapter four for details).

The study confirmed that most of the serf families served the aristocrats by working on their land but not necessarily doing only agricultural work, they also had to do other labour services to the state. The conditions of the serf category also varied according to regions. The number of serfs differed according to the size of land their aristocrats owned. There are some serfs who worked on the monastic land on tenancy basis. Some serfs chose to work under specific aristocrats as they find the nature of state taxation was more penalizing than the predictable nature of taxation under the aristocrats.²³

As indicated above we see that although there is a central government led by the king, the political administration at the regional and local level was highly decentralized. The regional governors and the *dzongpons* and the other aristocrats in their own jurisdictions, although formally accountable to the King, remained very powerful. They enjoyed power in daily administration, controlled resources including land, and they did the tax collection, keeping part of the tax while submitting the rest to the king. The main function of the State was to support the religious order while the emerging regional and local administrative organization was to facilitate imposition and collection of the taxes paid in kind²⁴, management, redistribution and imposition of the labour taxes (See

²¹ Man in waiting to the king, he should be at the door and ready for any kind of commands

²² According to a senior government official

²³ From my interview finding but needs more research as this was not prevalent in my village study

²⁴ Kind taxes known as *lonthrel* such as grains, butter, meat etc

chapter four). Most of my respondents²⁵ noted the heavy tax burden. Although peasants complained about the tax burden it functioned to some extent as a redistributive mechanism, when the taxes were used for the religious purposes and every peasant family had their children in the monastery. This differed in various regions. During those years there was no standard system of taxation and besides the taxes were collected at any time of year. The economy in 1950s was totally based on in-kind transactions and the introduction of monetization (cash) came after the reform, when the taxation system rather become more consistent and reduced the burden on tax payers including the peasants (see chapter four).

3.3 State modernisation and its relationship to agrarian reform

As discussed earlier modernization of the state required consolidating the central power which was concentrated in the hands of various regional governors and local tiers under the District headed by *Dzongpons* and landed aristocrats. The third King deemed it politically necessary to break the decentralized power system and strengthen the state centralization. To do this required restricting the power of the political and landed elites.

Similarly as suggested in (chapter two), we know that there were some geo political concerns for Bhutan during the 1950s being located closely to China and India. Around Asia many countries were also implementing agrarian reform. Although this did not come up during my interviews, we can suggest that these were underlying concerns. For instance the communist party in China coming to power close to 1950s and the invasion of Tibet; India gaining its independence in 1947; agrarian reform both on revolutionary model (China and North Vietnam) and as counter-revolutionary strategy (South Korea and Taiwan). Another example we saw is the failed attempt of His holiness the 13th Dalai Lama in modernizing the Tibetan state in the 1920s.

As (Ura 1994:31(cited in M. Aris and M. Hutt (eds): 7-216) mentions that “there was no domestic political compulsion or pressure for reforms. The impulse for reform originated in the monarchy itself” this being said we understand that in Bhutan’s agrarian reform we see that the threat from within Bhutan remained low. We can also understand that the threat was coming from a different source. (Kinga 2009) shares similar argument, while (Gallenkamp 2010) argues that ‘communism/socialism’ did not have any impact in Bhutanese polity, while there must be an influence of ‘decolonization’ of south Asia. What is notable is both authors point to underlying ‘geo political’ concerns that provoked the reforms, and probably this can be the reason that elites acquiesced to with the reforms. This is what we understand while we cannot draw any conclusions and needs further verification.

In Bhutan, while there were no direct external influences or pressures on the king to initiate reforms, all these ‘geo political’ events and threats must have indirectly influenced the decision to enact reforms. So agrarian reform in

²⁵ Ex Dasho’s

that sense becomes a critical element towards modernizing the state creating a centralized state authority and the appearance of the modern state structure, to strengthen the claim to national sovereignty and independence in between the two giant states of India and China with their different political systems and frequent tensions around their borders. So we can reasonably assume there was an urgent need to create a strong state identity in the faces of all these changes that were happening in and around the “Tibeto Buddhist” world.

It should be noted that almost all my respondents told a different story, giving the impression that the agrarian reforms were enacted out of the king’s compassion for the peasants and serfs, rather than as a complex political process that was guided and shaped by strong motives for political centralization and legitimation of the emerging modern Bhutanese state in the context of geo political turbulence in the region. My respondents were not comfortable to talk about the political background to the reforms, and these issues require further research before firm conclusions can be drawn.

In addition we also understand that while taking up this modernization process the king used the indigenous terms such as ‘*nangzen*’ which are unique to Bhutan unlike the other cases of reform which were influenced by Marxist discourse on feudalism and serfdom. It was only subsequently that the western scholars and others adopted the European labels ‘serfdom’ and ‘feudalism’, which then got repeated in political discourse. Even the elites use the term ‘serfdom’ today, for instance in this interview excerpt:

“If it was only for a group of aristocrats, the subsistence or below-subsistence peasants did not want to work on the aristocratic lands on an exchange basis, it would not have resulted in the practice of serfdom”

(Interview held in August 2010)²⁶

Probably many people who use this term do not have a clear idea of its meaning or the many debates around it. It is simply used because it is said or mentioned else where, and has become internalized as part of normal political discourse, with its rather exaggerated ideological representation of the contrasts between the old (pre-reform) and modern agrarian conditions.

3.4 Process of agrarian reform and state modernisation

As we have seen, reform of the state structure with its strong roots in the control of land and people by regional and local elites required restricting the power of the landed elites. The agrarian reform therefore aimed to bring an end to servile relations in rural areas and to redistribute land to the landless as the major political strategy for restricting the power of local elites.

The king established the national assembly as part of state centralization (Wangchuk 2004:838) says the king “initiated key processes of democratic in-

²⁶Quote from my interview in English language. Name, Date and place are kept anonymous for confidentiality

stitutionalization". According to (Pommaret 1984:19) the establishment of National Assembly was making Bhutan a Constitutional Monarchy by establishing National Assembly (*Tshogdu*) in 1953, creating a legislative body. The body consists of 150 members: 100 people's representatives elected for three years, 10 clergy representatives elected by the State Monastic community, and 40 representatives of the government, appointed by the King and consisting of members of the cabinet and various officials. Presided over by the King, this democratically designed body met twice a year to generate national awareness relating to the people and the country. All the decisions had to be passed by two-thirds majority, which was assented by the King before it became a law. The separation of the judiciary from the executive was another major landmark in reform of the political system. This was followed by establishment of the Royal Advisory Council (*Lodroe Tshogde*) that consisted of eight members. This body served as the coordinating link between the legislature and the executive, advised the King and his council of ministers on key issues of policy and ensured the implementation of the resolutions passed by the National Assembly. The institution of the *Tshogdu* and *Lodroe Tshogde* guaranteed that the people's voice was heard through their representatives. From 1960s, modernization and development were formalized through country's beginning five year plan. In 1968, the King voluntarily surrendered his veto power on the decisions of the *Tshogdu*²⁷. The King also vested the *Tshogdu* with sovereign power. Political reform thus can be seen as a step by step process.

The implementation of the agrarian reform was handled very strategically by the king. According to my respondents and following the NA resolution It was announced that the 'serfs' should be referred to with a milder term (*nangzen*). This was followed by freeing of the 'serfs'. The NA resolution mentioned that:

'Material Relating to 'serfs' [*nangzen*]: 'It was resolved that henceforth all the serfs under any landlord should be allowed to cultivate the land on contract basis as per the following arrangement. If the total produce from the land is 20 *pathis*, the serf should pay 12 *pathis* and retain 8 *pathis*. However, the landlord should not provide the yearly livery as done earlier. If the serfs do not desire to undertake cultivation on contract basis but still desire to continue to stay with their landlord, the landlords must keep them as their servants and not as serfs. Serfs who are neither willing to undertake cultivation on contract basis nor to stay with their landlords should be taken over by the Government' (Source: Bhutan National Assembly Resolution. 1953, First session held on the 15th day of the 12th month of the water snake year)

However the National Assembly resolution stated above, does not necessarily mean that the 'serfs' were granted land immediately. It was aimed at

²⁷ With the inception of the Tshogdu various resolutions were passed and these can be used to fix the dates of the different stages of reform. My respondents recalled only the 1950s. They years they mentioned varied from each person to another.

achieving social equality by narrowing down the differentiation between the 'haves' and the 'haves nots' by way of redistributing the land to those landless 'serfs'. Gradually few years after there was redistribution of land to the landless 'serfs'. This will be discussed shortly. The study revealed that the freeing of 'serfs' meant that the 'serf' were asked to settle in the same block but in different villages away from their previous landlords, the reason being to do away with the social stigma having been working their land for generations. And also to ensure the aristocrats would no longer have superior feelings that would otherwise again be a constant source of social tension and conflicts. While the 'serfs' were freed they could leave if they want but if they wished to stay with the landlord they had the choice to do so. At the same time in the same year the first national assembly resolutions passed in the same year confirms the above:

[...]... landless people of the eastern province to settle in the western province. Despite the existence of a bond agreement restricting the people of the eastern province to migrate to the west, His Majesty the King was pleased to observe that, whereas the eastern province was suffering from scarcity of land, there were large areas of uncultivated land in the western province. As such, the existing restriction on the migration of eastern people to the western province had now been lifted and they were hereafter permitted to migrate to the western province and settle at Punakha, Thimphu and Wangdiphodrang....[...]...they would be exempted from the payment of taxes for certain years during their settlement....necessary assistance required for house construction and land development would be made available to them.,... the Assembly suggested that the issue of a circular (Kasho) to this effect had to be considered by His Majesty the King' (Source: Bhutan National Assembly Resolution.1953,First session held on the 15th day of the 12th month of the water snake year)

The above resolution passed confirms that the freed serfs were granted land as well as exempted from tax and were ensured liability by the state. However, we must not forget that the redistributive land reform as one part of agrarian reform did not happen in the same year. I took long to figure this out only after having read the NA resolutions and then linking them with the field findings. In 1953 while the 'serfs' were freed there was some redistribution of land but the redistributed lands were either government land, newly cleared forest or in some cases land which the tax payers in the western and central regions had abandoned (known as satong)²⁸ because they were unable to pay off the tax. Those lands were giving to the landless 'serfs'. The study validated this there were lots of freed serfs which difficult for the state allocate land for each of those serf. It became very critical with many 'serfs' for the central region as well and the government sometimes had to clear forests to give them land. However, he also indicated that there were instances where the serfs from

²⁸ Some tax payers left the land not able to pay the tax. we don't have details for this

the east could not make it to the land they were granted because of the distance factor.²⁹

The next stage of the land reform came only in 1958 after the end of the 'serf' system. The 11th session of the NA session indicated that:

'A household possessing 25 acres of land or land yielding 400 x 40 des or more annually or registered in the land records would neither be permitted to purchase more land nor to receive additional land as gift. In case of households with a single son or daughter possessing more than 25 acres, all the land in excess of 25 acres would be confiscated by the government after the decease of the parents' (Source: Bhutan National Assembly Resolution: 1958, 11th Session held on the 14th Day of the 9th Month of the Earth Dog Year.)

Thus, land ceiling was imposed at 25 acres and any excess land found was claimed by the government to redistribute to the landless peasants. This had a lot of variations across the region. In my case study village (see chapter 4) it is clear that the land owners did lose all their excess holdings beyond 25 acres. However freeing of serfs and the redistribution of land had been the central and eastern region phenomenon. Because of the distance factor involved (see above) some peasants from the east did not even opt to have land, while those who were able and willing to move to the central regions received the land. (See chapter four)

3.5 Brief overview post reform

We understand from the above that the third *Druk Gyalpo* deemed it politically necessary to break down the very (centralized) power system of the landed/political elites both within the regions and the local tier which were rooted in land (see above session 3.2). With this the power of the landed elites were weakened as they lost their labour to work the land.

At the same time in the process of state modernization, *penlop* and *Dzongpons* along with many other similar posts such as *boe*,³⁰ *Nyerchen*, *zimpon* etc ³¹(see earlier section) were (reduced and replaced). Most of the former posts got replaced by formal government officials such as *Thrimpon*³² and *Dzongdags*³³ etc, which was necessary (politically or administratively) for modernization processes. Thus traditional political elites lost power.

In addition our empirical evidence proves there had been no resistance on the part of the landed elites. We can suggest that the political elites acquiescence with the *Druk Gyalpo* could be possibly due to the geo political situation and the other failed attempts as indicated in the earlier sections. It was also

²⁹ My respondents mentioned that it took 30 days to reach the capital city (Thimphu) and central regions those days by foot.

³⁰ Man in waiting

³¹ Today these titles don't exist anymore

³² Judge in the high court

³³ Responsible for the entire District

demonstrated how the reform process was handled strategically without provoking the elites. As we see with the initiation of National assembly there was equal representation of the monk body and the religion. Besides the religious head is also the head of the state.

It is known that there are shared beliefs before the third *Druk Gyalpo* could fulfill his aim of 'decentralization' process he passed away. Thus it was taken up by the fourth *Druk Gyalpo* who further enhanced 'decentralization' policy with the setting up of written constitution which lies beyond the scope of this study. Here we must understand that there was not the same 'hegemonic' consensual perception of urgency as there was in the 1950s. The land grant (*kidu* land) is a continued process. However this takes us back to our earlier argument that agrarian reform was mainly instituted as a means to reduce the land-based power of political/landed elites in the advent of state modernization, rather than redistributing land to all the rural cultivators'. By breaking down the various locus's of power there was gradual reorganization of the administrative structure. At the same time we see from the next chapter this did not mean to exclude the *peljor gongphel* (socio economic development) in particular such as redistribution of resources such as arable land to the serfs and landless.

Chapter 4

Remembering Agrarian reform *in Jasabi Village*

The chapter revives the memories of elderly respondents to understand how the reform took place at local level, in *Jasabi* village, *Lhuentse* District. The analysis in this chapter supports two main conclusions. Firstly, when we examine the Bhutanese ‘serf’ system as it existed in this study area, while recognizing that servile ‘unfree’ relations of production are incompatible with the modern world, and have the potential to become oppressive, the agrarian relations prevalent in the pre-reform period were relatively benign compared to what we read in the literature on other forms of European and other Asian feudalism. Therefore it is an over-simplification to call the pre reform agrarian structure as ‘serfdom’ or ‘feudal’ for Bhutan.

Secondly, there are legacies which persisted from the pre reform era to the present, including some old elements of the relatively servile relations, transposed into the more modern context.

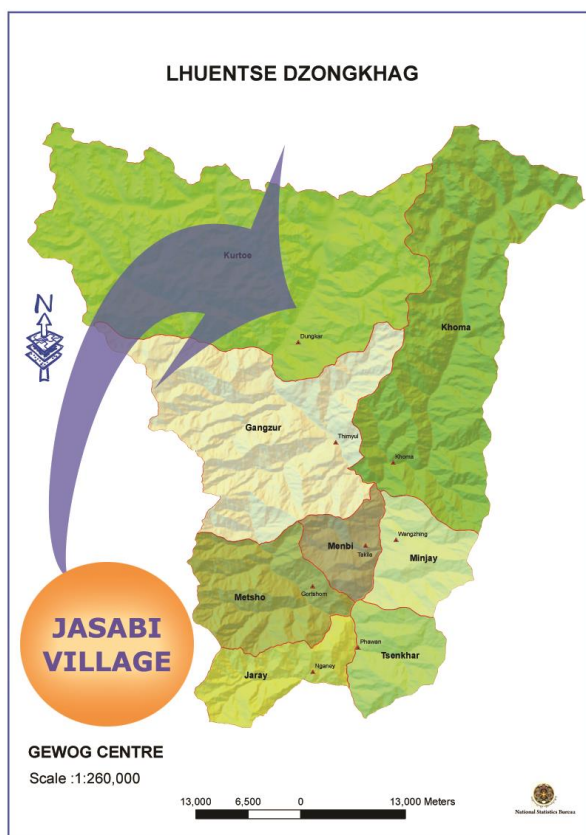
The chapter contains six sections: section one present a note on setting of the district, section two analyses the agrarian structure prior to the reform, section three covers the taxation and labour contribution system, section four deals with the method of mobilizing household and community labour contributions, section five focuses on the actual implementation of the reform and section six analyses the post-reform situation.

4.1 Background

Lhuentse District is located in far eastern Bhutan encompassing an area of 2,888 sq km. It consists of eight *Gewogs* (blocks) with a total population of 22,650. It has an estimate of 3,512 acres of dry land and 2,514 acres of wetland.

During the 18th and 19th century, *Lhuentse* District was administered by *Trongsa Penlop* (regional governors) and the *Lhuentse Dzongpon* (Fort- governors). *Kurtoe Gewog* located in the northern border currently has the population of 2,111 people inhabiting the area of 1,074 square km. There are 42 villages with 163 registered households (Bhutan Portal, 2010) *Jasabi* is one of these villages with rugged terrain that makes the village less accessible to market, centre of administration and other services. *Jasabi* village is administered by *Gup* (village head man) of *Kurtoe Gewog*. People walk about 2 hours to reach the district headquarter, crossing a river by a suspension bridge. At present, the village has 10 households with an estimated population of people of 30. It is known that the village consisted of 20 households and about 240 people before the reform in the 1950s.

Map 4.1
Administrative Map of Lhuentse District



Source: (National Statistics Bureau, 2010)

Land continues to be an important asset for the people in this village and agriculture is the main source of livelihood. The other sources of income are traditional carpentry, pottery, bamboo weaving and weaving keshuthara³⁴. Prior to the reform, the people also practiced rather a primitive agriculture and particularly shifting cultivation known as *tseri* (slash and burn) . The farm land in this village is considered to be fertile and can yield multiple crops³⁵. Most of the farmers in this village have learnt the art of farming right from the age of 13 to 15 years. Land has other social and cultural significance. Every year, the people would celebrate a local festival or cult known as '*preu*'³⁶. This is a collective event but organized by the local aristocratic family. This festival marks peace, happiness and prosperity in the village. The available literature and local oral sources establish the fact that most agrarian reforms were Initiated in the

³⁴ Kishu thara is a reputable and colorful Bhutanese textile popularly woven and worn by the ladies in Khoma (Another village in the same District), Kurtoe. Today the price of a silk kishu thara ranges from Nu 30,000 to Nu 60,000.

³⁵ Crops such as Wheat, buckwheat, millet, rye, oat, rice, barley, maize and sorghum

³⁶ Local indigenous name for the ceremony held

eastern region, and especially In Lhuentse that was once dominated by the presence of local aristocrats. Even In the early 1970s, the fourth king's attention was drawn to the prevailing landholding system in Lhuentse. Many farmers worked for their landlords who normally were in Bumthang³⁷.

4.2 Agrarian structure and agrarian relations pre reform

In the 1950s the king remained as the head of the state, the *Penlops* (regional governors) and the *Dzongbons* (fort governors) were also powerful political entities. They controlled all the labour and tax collection done by the state. They were the key players in running the administration of the state. The landed aristocrats owned most of the land but they had to pay huge amount of tax in kind to the state. For this reason labour remained critical to work their land. Land distribution was unequal in this village. In a sparsely populated agrarian society, access to and control of 'labour' is a key to maintaining wealth and status among the agrarian elites. If the 'serfs' are mistreated by one landlord they always have the option of flight, moving to another who will treat them better. In such conditions it is reasonable to expect that landed elites will take care to treat their dependents relatively well. At the same time there are sayings from villages across in other eastern districts which do indicate that peasants had a clear sense of injustice in the system, which kept them living in 'poverty in the midst of abundance' because of the heavy demands of taxation³⁸.

In Jasabi, there were a few aristocratic families who owned large acreage of land. There was another category of land holding peasants and regular tax payers known as (*threlpa*) which constitutes the larger segment of community population of subsistence peasants who had enough land or negligible ownership of land to support their livelihood. And lastly there were a large number of 'serf' who had very minimal amount of land (*half langdor*)³⁹ or were even landless and therefore had to work under the aristocrats. The presence of this differentiation in the social structure created the division of labour which characterized the society, based on dependence on the elites.

In addition, the peasant also had to borrow grain from the landed elites, creating a non monetized borrowing and lending schemes based of their own interest, capital and terms of payment. As a matter of fact, one producing less

³⁷ District in the eastern Bhutan

³⁸ Excerpt from my interview: An example of peasant resistance not through violence but literary devises such as folklores, sayings and aphorisms. An old saying from Tashigang (district in the eastern region, in its local dialect known as sharchop) which alludes to the heavy taxation both in kind and labour during that time: "Merak Sakteng si Sakteng; Waktsa sokpey si mala": Translation: Merak and Sakteng are butter plenty, but not even enough to apply on baby's body as lotion "Radi Phongmey to phongmey, Waktsa bilay to mala": Translation:Radi and Phongmey are rice bowl, but not a morsel to feed the child's bowl. "Galing Changmey yu changmey, Serkem phubey yu mala": Translation:Galing and Changmey are wine plenty, but not a pint for libation (wine offering to God).

³⁹ Four langdor makes up one acre. Therefore one langdor is less than half an acre

and another producing more created a dependent relationship leading to exercising of authority one over another or the relationship due to this economic compulsion translated into a local power dynamics. This dependence again was not based on purely modern market sense where borrowing was totally on economic interest but here it created a social relationship in which the elites had certain degree of control.

On the other hand, there was also the prevalence of interdependent relationship between the landlords and the peasants in terms of labour and productivity. The local demography exercised a certain compulsion. For instance the landed aristocrats did not have enough labour to work their land and the subsistence or below subsistence peasants mentioned earlier did not have enough land to work in order to meet their living. An excerpt from the interview states:

“I was married at the age of 25 and I have no children. I worked for the land lord for three years, who gave me land to settle because I was landless. I had to clear forest, till the land and then sow maize and *thre* (millet). I had to do this because I stay in their land working hard” (Source: Interview held on August 2010).

However, it was found that the peasants who worked for the landed elites were satisfied with what they had although they faced hard times while contributing labour tax to the state. The ‘unfree’ labour relationship was therefore relatively benign as both the political/landed elites had to depend on the labour of the ‘serf’ to keep the state running as well as meet the demands of taxation. Labour was the key element. There were different terminologies used to describe ‘serfs’ varying across the regions. It is clear from this study that there were two kinds of ‘serfs’ in existence, one known as the ‘*zab*’ and the other ‘*drap*’. ‘*Zabs*’ were those who lived below subsistence or mere subsistence level, they could not make their livelihood out of their land holding so worked under the landed aristocrats and they were hereditary ‘serf’. The *draps* were those who worked under the monastic (choeje) land⁴⁰. They had subsistence amount of land themselves and were better off than the *zabs*. The *draps* worked on tenure contract which forbade them from working for the other landed elites. They were only responsible for the monastic body. Both *zabs* and the *draps* however do not belong to the category of tax paying households (*threlpa*). Servile labour relationships were entered into by men, women and children.

In addition it is known that if a *zab* was married to a *drap*, their children had the preference to work under any landlord of their parents but normally children opt to work under the landlord of their mother. Whereas if both parents were *zab* to the same landlord then their children also worked with their parents’. The children work as soon as they attained twelve years of age. The ‘serfs’ were called by *nangsen*. The *nanzangsens* were not only entitled to fooding, clothing and shelter from their landlords but they were also given small plot of land for their own agriculture work. Conversely the *draps* were usually provid-

⁴⁰ Those belonging to religious head or the state

ed with the land they can own if they were landless unlike the zab.⁴¹ However, there were certain understandings and rules to bind with their land lord, as indicated by the two excerpts from interviews below.

‘In the past I had five *zab* families working under me. They worked three days for me and one day for themselves on the land that my grandparents had given to them. Sometimes they grow crops on their own land but if they don’t, they would work for others during that one day off. I even did not have to go for *woola*⁴² myself, because *zabs* would go for me. But I would provide them food, shelter and in fact, I was equally responsible to ensure their living. However, if they were occupied I have to contribute the *woola* for the dzong myself’ (Source: Interview held on August 2010)⁴³

‘In the past, we had about 300 to 400 acres of land. There were *drap* families (six men and eight women) working on our land, and all of them were given some land to cultivate for their self-consumption. We also helped them build their house with some provision of rations like rice, maize etc. When they worked for us we provided them with meals. While they worked for themselves we provided with flour for *cho-chon* (dough made from flour). But in case if they did not want to work on our land, we used to send them away. For this matter my grandfather was strict at supervising people working on his farm. However, after my father, situation became little simpler. I also worked equally with those people. When I remember the system in its entirety it was sort of like *re-mong* in which they worked three days for us and two days for themselves. But later the number of working days changed and it was two days for us, and two days for themselves. In those days in my family man was usually head of the family and his attendance and participation was important during the household festival’⁴⁴ (Source: Interview held on August 2010)

Further, to elaborate the ‘serf’ systems, it indicated that the zabs sometimes have to perform non agriculture work (household chores) to their landlord. They also have to attend to the labour tax of their landlord besides their own labour tax contribution to the state. It becomes much easier and clearer to capture the historical memory of the traditional system which has its own unique features/elements and richness, with the use of indigenous terms. So we further assert that trying to force the pre reform agrarian structure into a universal notion of ‘serfdom/feudalism’ hides all of the above.

⁴¹ In some cases it happened that the draps already owned some share of land hereditarily but otherwise they were provided land

⁴² Labour tax under the Dzong(Dzongkhag Administration)

⁴³ Name, place and date are confidential

⁴⁴This excerpt contributes in building up our understanding of *drap* relationship. This was a family narration while we also get an understanding of inheritance. However the respondent was not from the study village but belonging to the same block/district.

4.3 Taxation and Labour contribution system

*Dasho*⁴⁵ *Lhuentsepa* as a *Dzongpon* was responsible for all taxes in *Lhuentse Dzongkhag*. He reported and updated all the status of tax collection to the regional governors under *Trongsa*. There were instances when attendant to the king who were called as 'boe' would also be sent to the village to ensure that taxes are being paid.⁴⁶ It was sometimes the *nyerchen* (store keeper) and *sha nerpa* (responsible for meat stuff) or the *Zhime nyerpa* who would come to the villages. Majority of the taxes collected were used for the *dratsbang* (monastic), 'kurim' religious ceremonies and other purposes.

Both the central and local government was fully supported by taxes collected in kind and services from the people including those of aristocrats. Thus the taxation system across the country had a very close connection with the labour contribution system. The socio economic and political conditions during that time was totally dependent on implicit remuneration of labour and various forms of taxation paid usually in kind in proportion to the resources or wealth they owned especially such as (land and cattle). For example, taxes in kind were known as (*lonthrel*) such as *bung-threl* (labour), *ju-threl* (wealth), *wangyon* (blessing), *mephu-threl* (fire)⁴⁷ and so forth. In terms of labour contribution, every household had to contribute their labour for any developmental activities under the state. This was however on the condition that on an average there were twelve people living in a household. But if there were more people, more labour has to be contributed from that particular household. This was the system between the state, local elites, aristocrats and the peasants. They needed each other because of harsh reality and scarcity of labour those days, and that their relationship was based on trust, reciprocity and mutuality rather than on oppression or domination.

Irrespective of economic position in the community, every household was levied taxes except for those *zab* and *drab*. But it was found that there was no uniformity in the taxation⁴⁸. This heterogeneity in tax collection proved very burdensome for both the taxpaying household and those landed elites. Few families and households were however, spared by royal *kasbo* (decree) from paying the taxes⁴⁹. The tax regime therefore had forced appropriation and extraction of surpluses including the elites, 'threlpa' and 'serp'. It is clear that each region had maintained a record (*mathram*) of their households according to

⁴⁵ Honorific term to address an official who wears a red scarf today

⁴⁶ My discussion with the *Ex Dasho*

⁴⁷ Mephu thre known as fire tax had also been paid. Every small hut that makes fire was also levied tax.

⁴⁸ According to official A: The measure of tax imposition was in langdo (size of a land an oxen bullock can plough in a day) in the east and *sondrey* (son=seed, *drey*=measure unit) in the west. Some landlords shared their land with the peasants to share the tax burden. But I did not find this in the study village.

⁴⁹ '*Cheta kasbo*' written on the bark of the tree contained detailed information on the reduced tax liabilities in terms of both labour and goods. This status granted by the King to households with special problems (e.g. disability, death etc)

their asset ownership and the taxes were paid accordingly. Those who do not own anything were not in the record and do not have to pay any taxes.

Similarly, the memories of the elderly confirm that at the regional level, collection of taxes in kind (*lonthrel*) was so much that they have to pay almost all their farm produce. A periodic *batsep* (tax collector) from the central government would come to monitor this tax collection. The tax collection was sometimes fearsome too, because when an order of batseps visit would come, whole of the community would be mobilized to clear and widen the footpath he would travel. This was literally the gesture to welcome and to show their hospitality to the batsep. If anyone failed at his command or would not comply by, he had the authority to flog them. The *batsep* also had the privilege and guest's right to halt the night with the host he desired. Upon his arrival, each tax-paying household (*threlpa*) in the region would submissively come at his feet with a *palang* of locally brewed wine (a cylindrical container to carry local brew). On the following day, he along with an interpreter would visit the households, and inspect the milking cows tied securely. Depending on the number of cattle in a household, he would severely impose the annual butter tax: it was 5 sangs (1 kg 666 gram) for a healthy milking cow, but for those households with huge number of milking cows, they would be slapped with amount as heavy as 15 *sheys* (75 *sangs*). He would set the order the deadline and wait in the Dzong for the collections to arrive accordingly.

The taxed households would start to weave a bamboo basket to secure the tax butter and start carrying the consignment to the Dzong for final weighing. It was this same group of people who had to relay the loads to butter depot in Bumthang. All the collections would finally be pooled in the hands of the Dzongpons. At the local level, each household was also levied kamthrel (entitlement of Gup for his duty), which was paid between 40-60 dreys (20 dreys = 33.3 kg) of cereals. Another form of tax in existent was nyarikado (fish tax) for which each tax-paying household (*threlpa*) had to pay about 10 dreys of wheat grains in lieu of fish. People related the imposition of nyarikado tax to a popular anecdote where Zhabdrung was known to have bartered the fish with some amount of rice. However, this gesture was later registered as a form of regular tax. Another form of tax was *wangyon* (tax levied for receiving blessings (literally) but generally understood as taxes) for which it was levied 10 dreys of rice. Indeed every household also had to pay 'meh-phu' thre - this is if anybody was found to put up a small hut and build fire, it was a taxable act. For this even the 'zabs' and the 'draps' had to pay a minimal amount of tax in kind.

The taxes paid in those days were mainly in kind (*lonthrel/tsampa*), stored in the Dzong, and normally distributed to the monastic body. Besides the taxes it was mandatory for every household to contribute labour (*woola*) tax in the form of labour contribution such as '*gungda woola*' where every household would have to contribute labour force for at least fifteen days in a year⁵⁰. Another form of

⁵⁰In earlier times, according to informants, people were not paid at all but later during the third king's reign there was payment in kind of Nu. One per day rising much later to Nu. 30 per day. Today this system is abolished.

labour tax was *shapto-lemi* which had no fixed number of days and it is still continued today⁵¹. This woola system was applied by the government for all kinds of developmental activities like construction of *Dzongs*, bridges, roads and carrying loads for administrative purposes, postal services, taking horses for transporting loads and so forth. In addition to this, the peasants had to contribute corvee labour such as delivering the official luggage's including annual tax goods accumulated and delivered from one region to another. An elderly aristocrat demonstrates on holdings and production in the past system as illustrated below⁵².

Table 4.1
An illustration from an elderly aristocrat

Sl.No	Land	Cattle	Approximate quantity Annually	labour	Translations
1	45 acres kamzhing (dry land) and chuzhing (wet land).	Five cows, one ox, Two horses	Maize:400 dre Unhusked rice: 5000 drey. Millet:400 dre Buck wheat:400 drey	5 serf families	1 drey=1.67 kg Thre(local term for millet) Brama(local term for Buck wheat)
2	Z owns reduced amount today		Unhusked rice:920 drey (Approximate amount produced today)		

(Source: Primary data from field)

The above chart indicates that today the amount of land owned is less than compared to before which is further demonstrated by the quantity of produce. It is also very interesting how well those quantities and very detailed elements were remembered. From what we see above that is linked to the next table we see below on how those were taxed. The same elderly aristocrat demonstrates how the taxation system was functioning and what was remembered. After the tax payment the remaining produce is kept for self consumption which is also shared with the serf. This production depended largely on good harvest and bad harvest year. The table below represents the type and kind of taxes paid by the same aristocrat above.

⁵¹ This is unpaid labour contribution for development activities. This is paid in most cases today

⁵² This illustration is used for understanding the asset owned pre reform period and the tax system. The identification of the person is confidential

Table 4.2
Types of Tax

Sl.No	Tax kind	Amount (annually)	Translation
1	Cattle tax	1 milking cow= 5 sangs of butter	(1 sang = 333.3 gm)
2	Porterage tax	2 - 3 days	Every household was imposed porterage tax Porterage tax is known for a labour tax to move district consignments
3	Weaving tax (toe-tha)	1 piece of "pha-tsa"	Pha-tsa is a (traditional cotton bag) material to weave is provided from the District and in return one 'tego' piece is provided Tego is a national dress
4	Unhusked rice.	400 dre	1 dre = 1.67 kg
5	Horse tax	1-2 days	1 horse needs to transport load 2 -3 times
6	Gung thre (grade one house tax)	Free labour contribution for the state	For the construction/maintenance of road, dzong, bridge etc. In the past every household is had grade I, ii, and iii depending on the status of the family. And tax is levied.

(Source: Primary data from the field)

The taxes paid however varied even among the aristocratic families. As illustrated in the table above, while some aristocratic family paid all of those taxes, there were some who paid just the 'wang-youn' 53 which was paid in the form of rice. They paid 'mra-nisho-thie' or 400 dreys of rice to Lhuentse Dzong. Besides that the community had to ensure that for every ritual conducted⁵⁴, they have to contribute 'mar sang khe dey' (20 sang of butter). Having illustrated the tax payments levied on the aristocrats, we should note that the taxes paid by the ordinary taxpaying household (khrelpa) also differed to a large extent. The kind of taxes they paid depended on their land holdings, and the number of cattle they owned. Based on the account of those interviewed, it is safe to say that there were around 10% of aristocratic families

⁵³ Wangyon: it literally means levy for blessings, but generally understood as taxes (wang=blessing, yon=tax). The monastic body performed rituals for the wellbeing and happiness of the community, people and the country. The people paid in kind taxes (food grains, meat and butter) to the monastic institutes/schools (Dratshang) in return.

⁵⁴ One such example was the '*sungchoe-bumdey*' the annual puja which is still continued.

paying taxes, and 20% tax paying households while the rest were the non tax-paying households

4.4 Method of mobilising household and community labour contribution

This section will analyse the pattern of land holdings among the state, aristocrats, monastic body and peasants. *Yumbi Umling*, a place in Jasabi was well known for its fertility. It was locally called as, *kebechen ge sa*⁵⁵ which meant that all *duna gu* (the nine cereal crops) could be cultivated. To present insights into the size of land ownership, it was found that aristocrats owned approximately of 80% of the total arable land, where as 19% was owned by the full-fledged taxpaying households and only 1% belonged to serfs⁵⁶. For example an average taxpaying household owned at least four *langdos* of land. Most ‘serfs’ were landless. Only few serfs owned half *langdos*⁵⁷.

To illustrate the distribution of the population in Jasabi village before the reform, it was found that on an average each household had a family size of 12 members as discussed in the previous section. It is also clear that there existed around 20 households with approximately 240 people living there. The interview data suggest that out of 240 people 70% were serfs⁵⁸, 20% were ‘threlpa’ (taxpaying household)⁵⁹ and remaining 10% constituted the landed aristocrats⁶⁰

Those people who were serving as serf (*zab*) had to work under the ‘shingke’ system. Under this system the serf worked for two days for their landlord, while they were given one day free (thus 2/3 of his and his family’s labour time was meant for the landlord). During those two working days, they would be served meals, but on the whole they were given some food ration and clothes to wear. They were also given a small plot of land known as ‘bo-lang sa’ on which he could cultivate and grow some farm produce, but they could not own that land for themselves. The housing materials were provided to build their own house on that given plot of land. Thus the relationship of the serf with the aristocratic family remained hereditary.

55 Indigenous term used to call fertile land

56 80% of the land belonging to aristocrats had been the hereditary. later when the division of property started the eldest daughter had more choice in terms of having serf and also land share. Later the eldest daughter’s family will own the same and have the same power. This is all belonging to one household.

57 Langdo is the local measurement for land used in those years. 4 langdo makes up 1 acre of land.

58 (*Drap* constituted at least 5% and the rest *zab*. some *Drap*s owned a ‘langdo’ of land) 14 households out of 20 were serfs, which means there were 168 serfs (12 average household members x 14 serf households = 168 serfs).

59 constituting 4 households (12 household members x 4 threlpa households = 48 threlpa people)

60 Which are 2 households with 24 members

The work that serf did included terracing (*aring tsho*) and transplantation (*changla*) to grow rice, and weeding (*werza*)⁶¹. The most difficult fieldwork would be weeding and chilly plantation which remained time consuming. However, during off season, they would be engaged in collecting firewood and doing household chores at landlord's house and estate. Sometimes they serve as *adung* (stable boy/riding assistant) for their landlord. This meant taking his horse to the Lhuentse Dzong for load transportation, especially if the landlord owned so many horses. They had clear understanding with their landlord and did not face much difficulty. Sometimes they were *langpon*⁶². This is how they would bring up their children and support family.

The one day off time of those 'serfs' were spent in a myriad ways.⁶³ There were instances where they would go and work for others if they think their family does not have enough to eat. Sometimes they would collect enough harvest from the small plot of land given to them by their landlord, and if so they wouldn't choose to go to work for others.⁶⁴ On the other hand, the annual yield from their landlord had to account to 400 dreys⁶⁵. This was paid as tax to the state, therefore, they have to make sure that this was produced. But the yield highly depended on the labour force and monsoonal rain. There were instances where there would be shortfalls, and in this case the tax payment was accumulated for the succeeding next year. But if there were surpluses, the landlord would share it with their serf. The serf were not levied any punishment if the yield has not been met or tax was accumulated at the end of the year. However, this was not the same case for the entire serf system across the regions.

Respondents recalled the frustrations of their difficult life thus getting 'worried', 'tired', and 'thirsty' and 'hungry' ('*eu gam*' '*hudu*' '*kha kham*' '*tokay*'). Not having enough to wear and eat were their constant worries as some serf had a big family. Sometimes they did 'corvee' labour such as becoming head of the village community (*mangiap*) and messenger (*perpon*) but without much benefit for themselves. In these positions, they would be responsible for mobilizing peasants for various developmental activities such as in the construction of the bridges and delivering messages across the households. They were paid a minimal amount in kind (such as butter and granaries) for the service they would render considering the number of working days.

⁶¹ Weeding mainly for maize (know as *bachupa* in local dialect), wheat, potato and chilly. Maize was planted twice or thrice in a year

⁶² Ploughing the oxen

⁶³(An excerpt in local dialect from interview held on July 2010)

"*ner shang nang ta ta ke chey la. Ner sang mu ne chey la tag ko ge to go chey la. Phey chey ge brmra, hoto rey be la. 'bolag sa' ge ne maparang me lang ta. bra ba to khorga blang rata. ber br to jola bleng ya merata la. Nema, they phe thong nga le sun ra sun shang la*" Translation "I have to check my kitchen. When I go to work on others land I get paid in grains. My 'bolang' land is not enough for my family. Sometimes I get bag full of rice. I get fed up with the taste of wheat soup all the time"

⁶⁴ Working on others land also includes tilling the field with oxen

⁶⁵ One dre is equal to 1.67 kg

Similarly the other category of serf known as *Drap* worked to the monastic land. Draps were responsible to a particular *dratshang*. The kind of labour they contributed included working on the monastic land, and also carrying food items (*dre-tang*), weighing 40 kgs (such as salt and loads of butter) three to four times in a year to the monastery they were affiliated to. Aside from working the monastic land, the draps also worked on their own land and on ‘*dang-len*’⁶⁶. They grew crops (such as maize and rice), but when their harvest was not enough, they would borrow from others and paid back when their harvest is good. Also when they needed help to work on their land, they would go for labour exchange (known as *pchu* system), which means if a person comes to work on ones land for three days, the same number of working days is returned. For instance an excerpt for an interview where an elderly who remembers his experience in this system.

“I carried food items (*dre-tang*), about 40 kgs of salt and loads of butter three to four times a year to *Khomtey* lhakhang I have to cross the bridge and do extensive walk”⁶⁷ I own six langdo⁶⁸ of land including the wet (*chushing*) and dry (*kamsbing*) land which was inherited. Aside from working the monastic land field I worked in my own land and also did ‘*dang-len*’⁶⁹ I grew maize and rice. When the harvest was not enough, I borrow from others and paid back when the harvest is good from my own. When I needed help on my land, we go for labour exchange system (*pchu*)” (Source: Interview held on July 2010)

The *Lhuntse* Dzong (*lhakhang*⁷⁰) had a separate land approximately 16 - 17 acres both dry land (*kamsbing*) and wet land (*chushing*). This was exclusively for religious purposes for annual *tshachus*⁷¹ and ceremonies which takes place for eight days in a year. For this the host family concerned with the *lhakhang* organizes the event. Some of the ‘draps’ were working on this lands. The ordinary tax payer households (*kbrealpa*), they were paying their regular taxes to the state and to work on their land they do ‘*pchu* system’. They also have to make unpaid labour (*Woola*) contribution to the state which will be discussed briefly below.

Generally, all households (*Mepbu*) members (both male and female) had to contribute labour tax (*woola*) to the state from the age 16 and onward to 50 years. This burden varied among different categories. The aristocrats had to contribute only 30 days in a year, whereas there are some family who did not have to do it at all and the normal tax payer had to contribute 10 days. The

⁶⁶ Share cropping

⁶⁷ Khomteng lhakhang is a Tibetan settlement across the border. An elderly shared his experience in the barter exchange with Tibet in 1950s. That use to be exchange of clothes like silk, woolen clothes (known as *hota*, *jalo* and *namboo*), salt and oil exchanged mainly with rice and maize.

⁶⁸ Approximately 1.5 acres

⁶⁹ Share cropping

⁷⁰ Religious institution

⁷¹ Religious festivals held annually

'*zabs*' also had to do woola while the 'drap' were wholly responsible for the monastic land labour. This unpaid labour was known as '*goonda woola*'.⁷² Some households with the '*cheta kasho*'⁷³ they were exempted from tax in labour and in kind. The other kind of free labour was known as '*shabto lami*'.⁷⁴ This is free labour from every household for every kind of developmental activities which was discussed in the previous section

4.5 The reform process

As indicated in chapter three the first stage of the agrarian reform was implemented in 1953 under the leadership of the third *Druk Gyalpo*. We now understand that the implementation and agrarian change at the village level had been part of larger strategy led by the king. Having stated this it is important to emphasize that the agrarian reform was also brought in social change.

The reform Implementation in Jasabi village began only after the establishment of National Assembly⁷⁵ *Dasbo Dzongdag* was the focal person for implementation the reform. The *Gup* (*gewog* head) and the *Chipons* (messenger) were responsible for relaying the order to the community households. The *gup* appointed *Chipon Gom* (head messenger) to represent him in his absence at local and regional levels. All my respondents remember that the reform implementation had taken place in the 1950s but from their memories no one was able to recall the exact year. The national assembly resolutions were therefore used to pinpoint about the year.

Although lands were granted to those landless, the recipients had to register themselves in *Thimphu* (capital city) to receive the land. During that time although there was road construction going on but still there was no road between the eastern region and the capital city⁷⁶ so it was understood that most of the 'serp' in this village could not go and most preferred to stay in the village and continue working the land of their landlord, but as of this time they were no more considered as 'serp' and also had clear terms with the land lord (see chapter three). While some people say that the land they owned today was inherited from their parents and not received as grant from the state.

Today from my observation in the village, peasant land owning is at least they owned one acre (four langdo) of land. All land owning peasants had become tax paying households. There are however few share tenancy households who do not pay tax. It was their choice to live and farm the land of the land-

⁷² This includes, carrying of tax which in kind to be carried in the central monastic and central region, postal services, loading of official luggage's, carry load, cooking utensils from one place to another, goods for barter with Tibet and so forth.

⁷³ Royal decree from the king

⁷⁴ Development work like building of road, bridges, monastery and so forth. The meals were served in this labour contribution.

⁷⁵ Refer to chapter 3 on starting up of National Assembly

⁷⁶ In order to reach the capital city would be more than a month by foot.⁷⁶So they could not reach there and chose to stay in village.

lords on share cropping basis. The system was based on 'danglen' or shared tenancy (the produce is shared equally)⁷⁷ and later known as 'sumdang' which is where the land lord gets 1/3 of the share and rest owned by the peasants. That was the agrarian relationship which still exists today. While I also see there are lots of incentives from the government like seeds, techniques for farming, water facilities, sanitation, and health, provided to the people. So they are satisfied with their livelihood.

My respondents indicated that many households in this village lost their excess land holdings to the government. They surrendered without resistance. It was also evident that when the 'serfs' were freed, the landed elites lost people working on their land. As a result land remained empty and turned into thickets and forests⁷⁸. For instance Landlord A mentioned that when the land ceiling was imposed most of the land already reverted to and was therefore considered as government land. It was said that because of the labour shortage even prior to the reform most of the land belonging to landlord A were unused thus remained forested. It was a rule set that unused land/forested belonged to the government. But there were some instances where some landlords could retain their landholdings by transferring some of them to their children's name. This remained very rare. Similar cases were shared by few others but not from this village.

Furthermore it appears that the third Druk Gyalpo was very strategic and careful with the threat of social upheaval among the aristocrats, local elites and the peasants. There are clues that indicated resistance from traditionalist and monk communities but we cannot conclude as it remains unclear. We can only confirm the whole process was non revolutionary and without any major social upheaval (see chapter three)

4.6 The post reform and transition

To discuss about the post reform period we will now look at the situation how gradual changes had been happening after the agrarian reform had been implemented from 1953 onwards in this village. While we see there is modernization of the state which led to more strong bureaucratic institutions, the change at the village level happened differently. As indicated earlier the agriculture practice is still in a very traditional way (*langdo*) as people call it. This is due to the geographical terrain while the people are also comfortable with this practice. The 'danglen' and 'sumdang' known as share cropping are still prevalent in another form (no longer linked to the serf system) but still there retaining some of the former servile character. The *pchu* known as labour exchange system is one of the common agriculture practice.

This is due to the scarcity of labour supply on the farms. Today from my observation in the field there are very few who don't own land and work on

⁷⁷ This is also known as 50-50 basis. 50 % of the share the land lord can own and the rest 50% by the other peasant working the land.

⁷⁸ Due to lack of labour most of the land remained forested even prior to reform.

other farms on wage and share cropping while majority of the people have land on their own. At the same time the state has established schools, health clinic, water supply and sanitation facilities, bridges, agriculture centre and rural credit although these are based at the district level but not very far from the village. Overall people today seem to be very much satisfied with their livelihoods and those who did not have land they are satisfied with the way they are, they do not want to get grant. But in future some say if they can afford to buy machineries for their agriculture that would be very much useful for them.

4.7 Agrarian structure and agrarian relations

In discussing the changes in the agrarian system and the shift from unfree to free labour from 1953 onwards, it would be very risky to generalize all across the villages and districts since things happened differently in each location. So we will now look into this specific case. In 1953 after the resolution had been passed by the national assembly, firstly the 'serf' were not called by various indigenous terms and they were all called as '*nangsen*'. The 'serfs' were free to leave the landlord but without taking away any property such as the shelter they were allocated while they worked the land or continue to stay with the landlord. If they wish to stay they had to farm their land but this time they had a better deal. They could keep certain amount of the produce from the total harvest as said earlier. With this they did not get the annual livery such as food and clothing.

For those who left there was land grant by the state in other villages and districts whereby they had to register for the land grant (*Choktham*)⁷⁹ in the central district in Thimphu. The minimal holding of land grant⁸⁰ was two to three *langdos*.⁸¹ With this the national assembly first resolutions also indicated that the people from eastern districts were permitted to migrate to the western provinces (see chapter three) Thus every serf had been transformed as a full tax payer household which is discussed below.

My respondents from this village indicated that even prior to 1953 the serf were always called as '*nangsen*' (see earlier section) and this term is actually a dialect used in this district and in this village too. In 1953 while it was announced from the state that the 'serfs' were to be called as *nangsen* the deal between the 'serf' and the land lord changed. The *shingkebey* and the *remong* system of working the land with the land lord had changed. Earlier the serf worked three days for the lord and one day was off. From my understanding the serf did get some amount of the produce if the harvest was good for the year. Now the 'serf' had to work three days for the landlord and two days they were set free from working the land. Whatever produces remained after paying off the tax was shared

⁷⁹ According to the present land commissioner each one had to do land registration known as *choktham*

⁸⁰ (a plot of land that an oxen bullock can plough in 2-3 days)

⁸¹ My interview with Dasho sangay Dorji in August 2010, he mentioned that this *kasho* was from third Druk Gyalpo

equally between the 'serf' and the landlord. But this time they were not paid food and clothes. Much of the land they owned remained empty even while the 'serf' was there because of shortage of labour. While the system changed much more land remained still empty.

In 1958 when land reform had been introduced the aristocrats had to give away the excess land beyond 25 acres to the government⁸². Either the excess land was all those land which had been forested or otherwise they had transferred the land ownership to their sons and daughters. Both ways had prevailed. The land they surrendered was forested and it was included into the state forest land, which then was indicated as national property. The state did redistribute the excess land to the landless in other districts. There were some peasants who came in from other districts as resettlement in this village. It seems clear then, that former serfs were suppose to settle in different areas. With the introduction of land reform the 'serf' could make a shift from servile to (relatively) free labour, in the sense now they could now operate a farm on a shared cropping basis whereby they could keep 50% of the produce and 50% they had to hand over to the landlord. Most of the landlord had then been migrating to the city in Thimphu while their land had been continuously farmed by the peasants but they were not called as *nangsen* anymore. They get half of their share annually. Two excerpts from the interview illustrating the transition:

“As a young girl, I remember eating dough made from flour, thuk-pa (porridge) and chili. Unlike past, I can eat good food, tea, aara (local brew) boiled egg, paa (meat) (Source: Interview held in July 2010)

“Now life is much better I can afford to eat good food, wear good clothes and manage to live properly. In the past only rich people had sufficient food, poor had not much choice and hardly managed to meet ends. I practiced the same agricultural tradition like my parents had done in the past. In the past, I worked very hard to meet our needs. There was little food to eat and wear nice clothes. I use to wear jute gho and kera. Women mostly stayed home and wove clothes. Later I managed to wear cotton ghos bought from *Gudam*⁸³”. (Source: Interview held in July 2010)

While I was doing my research I met some former 'serf' (from the same district but not from this particular village) in the central region where they had received land grant. The first one was very happy with his farming work and also able to sell the produce in the market. The agriculture system was much

⁸² While I communicated with the senior land commissioner land measurement had been a complex issue. Earlier the standard measurement was evolved from langdo (size of a land an oxen bullock can plough in a day) in the east and sondrey (son means seed and drey means measuring container) in the west. This being replace later to chaktha (the chain survey) to plane table survey. Today it is done by cadastral survey. When the equipments were replaced the land owners had to further give away their land and there had been land excess issues.

⁸³ Place in India

more mechanized using power tiller track, rice mill and improved seeds that the government made available for purchase. His rice mill was also used by the neighbouring households and he could get extra income from that. I met another former 'serf' who actually originated from Jasabi village in Thimphu who shared the same experience and had better opportunities in the city than living in the farm in village. I met with most of the aristocrats in the capital city while their farm had been cultivated still. Some still remained empty. They had migrated out with various circumstances but wished to move back to village in future.

4.8 Taxation and labour contribution

The first monetization of tax (from kind (*longtbrel*) to (*kamtbre*) cash) began in Tashi gang District in the east in 1955 followed by *Haa* District in the central region and process of monetization was completed in 1968. Hence, this removed one dimension of the social hierarchy that existed earlier as every peasant now had to pay tax in cash and became equal to a taxpayer. Gradually the taxation system had been standardized and made uniform and consistent all across the country. The tax burdens on the people were drastically reduced. While at the national level there was merging of the sub districts(*dungkebags*) which reduced certain positions this also saved lot of labour because earlier their salary had to be paid in tax(kind) by the state(see earlier sections). From the national assembly resolution in 1960 an example of monetization can be seen as below:

Table 4.3
Transition in Tax from Kind to cash (1960)

No	Type of Tax	Annual tax rate	Translation
1	Wet land	It varied from Nu six to Nu four per langdo according to the standard of the house.	Nu indicates Ngultrum(national currency in Bhutan) 1 Nu is equivalent to one rupee Indian currency Four Langdo makes one acre
2	Dry land	Nu. Four per langdo of maize and millet field, Nu. Two per langdo of wheat field at high altitudes and Nu. Three per langdo of wheat field at low altitudes.	
3	Shifting cultivation land	Chetrum 0.75/- per langdo.	This is not prevalent any longer
4	Tax on kitchen garden	Nu. 1/- per langdo.	
5	Tax on domestic animals (as soon as they attain three years)	Nu. Three per (Jatsha, Jatsham and Mule), Nu. Two per (male Horse), Mare, Donkey, Yanku, Yangum, Thabum, Oxen and Bajo Nu. Two and 50 chetrum per yak.	Jatsha and Jatsham are high breed cows Mare(adult female horse) (Yangku, Yangbum, Thabum, Bajo (different cattle breeds)

(Source: Compilation by author from National assembly resolutions: held on the 13th of the 4th month of the iron mouse year corresponding to 1960)

We understand from the above table how the various taxes had been imposed in cash. From 1961 onwards with the inception of the first five year plan there was gradual change and integration with other neighboring countries and opening up of economy such as trade had started with India and there was

also the establishment of motorable roads.⁸⁴In the earlier system tax were collected in kind and mainly used to fulfill the needs of the state and the monastic system. There now seems to be more focus on the livelihoods and welfare such as the socio economic development had started then. Peasants with minimal land holding (less than an acre) were totally exempted from tax.⁸⁵

Furthermore with this transition the labour mobilization for the state had also changed. Peasants did not have to contribute regular labour tax for the state as indicated earlier. My respondents confirmed that whatever labour they contributed for any kinds of developmental activities such as road construction, renovation of temples, dzongs, and water supply schemes was now compensated. The state also ensured that they should be involved only in activities that directly benefited them. Accordingly *gungda woola* (compulsory labour) contribution to those activities was changed, while *zhapto lemi* (voluntary labour contribution) still continues today. From my own experience while working with the communities on developmental projects like water supply, sanitation, community schools and so forth for the maintenance purposes the communities have to depend on labour from households in the village. This can be paid or unpaid labour. For major construction activities labour is always outsourced.

⁸⁴The current tax today as stated in the (Ministry of Finance 1996)the wet land tax is Nu 24/- per acre and dry land tax is Nu 12/- per acre.

⁸⁵ Today the current land act 2007 which replaced the earlier 1979 makes things more valid and legitimate.

Chapter 5

Concluding Reflections

This research paper has attempted to fill gaps in our knowledge regarding the agrarian conditions and structures pre-reform in Bhutan. The research engages an exploratory study of the inter-relationship between agrarian reform and the political processes of state modernization in order to identify if and how political processes and geo political events shaped and influenced Bhutanese agrarian reform efforts and implementation in the 1950's. This study has also importantly reflected on the discourses surrounding 'serfdom' and 'feudal' in order to understand how the current and previous systems have been reflected, represented and thus shaped. As there is no introspection of these terms in Bhutan, the research refers to literature from Tibet scholarship. Through in-depth analysis of a case example from one village, the research was able to illustrate some of the nuances of agrarian reform in terms of both tangible outcomes as well as the perception of individual village members. The village study provided an opportunity to shed more light and meaning on our understanding of agrarian reform.

This paper demonstrates that agrarian reform was an effective political strategy for state modernization and legitimization by reducing and weakening the power of the political/ landed elites whose power remained rooted in land and land ownership in their respective jurisdictions. With the restructuring of the administrative structure, power was decentralized through the creation of District administrations run by Dzongdags. The empirical findings from this study did not indicate any resistance from the people except in the pre-reform period when there was heavy taxation from the state to keep administration functioning. However those were the times when the region was controlled or regulated more by the regional and local tier. This system was later standardized after consolidating the central power and strengthening the state system. The revised taxation system has reduced the burden on the people and also the transaction of taxation changed from being in kind (grains, butter etc) earlier to monetary (coins and paper money was introduced). Previously the regional and local rulers were also paid in kind as for their salary. When their positions were reduced and changed, the whole taxation system was transformed and became more efficient. Gradually we could see the serf system was abolished and followed by agrarian reform that also led to the redistributions of land to the landless. This transformed peasants into ordinary tax paying households. Nonetheless, we see the system of *danglen* and *pchu* are common still today.

Based on the case study of the village and my field observations, there is an overall improvement in livelihoods (in rural Bhutan). Today we see that the state has established facilities such as free and safe drinking water and improved sanitation, while at the district level there are schools, free health services, agriculture and livestock support centers and so forth. Coming back to the discourses on 'serfdom/feudal' I want to clarify that the pre reform agrarian structure was labeled or characterized as such based on the western typology or otherwise heavily influenced by the Marxist discourses. This had labeled

the past system in various ways so we refer to these discourses only as a means to dig deeper into the layers of understanding. For instance, the discourses in Tibetan scholarship demonstrate how political the whole process of labeling is. This can help us understand the dynamics involved in defining and labeling and their subsequent impact on politics, perception and ultimately, representation. This explains why the terms serf and feudal have become so sensitive and shed light on why a precise definition is less relevant. There is also the deeper question of whether serfdom - even in Europe was as exploitative as it is often made out to be. As derived from the analysis of this research, terms such as 'serfdom/feudal' for Bhutan are an over simplification. Hence, the use of indigenous terms should be considered more appropriate.

Similarly, in the case of Bhutan it has not very common phenomenon as we saw in chapter two on the cases of other agrarian reforms. Thus, Bhutan refers to a unique case neither without post war occupation nor without any revolution as far as from the empirical findings illustrates. There is a discourse that the past system is pre modern and today we live in the modern period. This is partly ideological in the sense that the past system is used as a way to legitimize the present system. Perhaps this study helps to break down this internalization by reviving the memories of the past. Finally I acknowledge that this research paper is exploratory and certainly incomplete and immature on many issues. As many questions it answers as much questions it leaves open. Simultaneously, the satisfaction I experienced with every modest theoretical grasp and with every contact I had with elderly village participants, the senior government officials and many others, has left me with the sense that there is a need for more empirical research and analysis on this little studied and important period in Bhutan's agrarian history.

Appendix I

List of Interviews conducted during the field research between the period of
(Mid July to mid August 2010)

SI.No	Name	Designation
1	Dasho Shingkar Lam	Retired senior government official (Ex Dasho)
2	Dasho Gaza	Retired senior government official(Ex Dasho)
3	Dasho Dzongpon Dreb Kado	Retired Senior government official(Ex Dasho)
4	H.E. Lyonpo Dr. Pema Gyamtsho	Minister, Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Thimphu Bhutan
5	Dasho Nima Tshering	Secretary, National Assembly Secretariat, Thimphu
6	Dasho Serub Gyeltshen	Secretary, Dzongkhag Development Commission, Thimphu Bhutan
7	Dasho Karma Ura	Director, Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS), Thimphu
8	Dasho Sonam Kinga	Deputy Chairperson, Member of Parliament, National Council of Bhutan
9	Dasho Chang Ugyen	Retired Gup, Councilor and chairperson of the District Development Meeting
10	Dasho Sangay Dorji	Dzongkha Specialist, Dzongkha Development Commission, Thimphu Bhutan
11	Mr. Dorji Thinley	Dean of Academic Affairs, Paro College of Education, Royal University of Bhutan
12	Mr. Tshewang	Deputy Secretary, National Land Commission, Thimphu
13	Mr. Kunzang Thinley	KMT printing, Thimphu
14	Dr. Tandin	Institute of Management studies, Thimphu.
15	Mr. Tshering	Retired Gup, Kurtoe Geog, Lhuntse District
16	Ms. Françoise Pommaret	Anthropologist, Institute of Language and Cultural studies, Simtokha
17	Melvy C. Goldstein	Melvyn C. Goldstein, Ph.D. John Reynolds Harkness Professor in Anthropology Co-Director, Center for Research on Tibet, Cleveland, Ohio

List of participants under Lhuntse District and few under Central District

SI.No	Name
1	Aum Choney
2	Aum Kesang Chhoden
3	Ap Thinley Wangdi
4	Ap Gongala
5	Tashi
6	Pema Wangchuk
7	Konchomo
8	Aum Karma Lhajey
9	Aie Penden, Jasab
10	Phuntsho Tshewang
11	Sonam
12	Aie Namgay
13	Ap Nuentela
14	Aum Tshering Tshomo
15	Zomba
16	Aum Sonam Uden
17	Ap Tshechula,
18	Ap Chophela

Appendix II



Photo taken by author in July 2010

Ap Tshechula one of the most interesting elderly farmer who was filled with excitement to share his lived experiences. He feels that agrarian system had drastically changed today while he tried to recollect back his memory of the old system.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ This photo is included with his permission

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