Harvesting the Half: The Persistence of Sharecropping in Samcholing, Bhutan

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Abstract

This dissertation is an anthropological inquiry into why sharecropping of paddy persists in Samcholing village, Bhutan, when it has largely disappeared from other villages in the country. It presents a detailed ethnographic discussion of the phenomenon of sharecropping as an agricultural technology, as a type of social organization and as a central focus of social and cultural life of Samcholing. It is an observation and analysis of sharecropping as it has developed historically over the centuries and how it has persisted to the present in Samcholing.

The study is placed within the general criticism of sharecropping as an inefficient agricultural organization that is incongruous with capitalism. The general consensus until recently has thus been that sharecropping is bound to disappear once the transition to capitalism is completed. Similarly destined for the disappearance is the peasant or family farm as a result of capitalist transformations of agriculture.

Based on one-year of fieldwork and a household survey, the study shows that landlessness, a common reason for sharecropping, partly explains the persistence of sharecropping in Samcholing, which is confined to cultivating wetland paddy, as an important subsistence strategy in the household economy, since absentee landowners own more than half of the village’s paddy fields. However, the bigger and the more complex reasons are embedded, far beneath the topsoil that the sharecroppers till every agricultural season, in the subsoil of Samcholing’s history, social structure, and geography. While the study locates the immediate causes for institutionalizing sharecropping in the social reform of the 1960s during which an underclass of people – the ancestors of people in Samcholing – was abolished and sharecropping introduced as a progressive tenancy, the complex history of land tenure in the village and the emergence of a locally distinctive system provides the essential context for understanding agrarian relation in the village.