CHAPTER 15

Peasants of Manipur: Agrarian Change, Land Tenure and Emerging Patterns of Re-peasantization in India

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Introduction

The economies of the north-eastern region of India that are in the periphery of developmental processes in the post-independence period are some of the most backward in the country.[1] In the absence of industrialization and the strengthening of the agrarian base, fast population growths have led to land hunger, agricultural involution, and massive occupational diversification into the tertiary sector, which has been fed by huge

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investments in the unproductive sectors. As the tertiary sector has not commensurately absorbed incremental population growths, increasing dependence on land and agriculture for pathways out of poverty are still persistent, as amply reflected in the marginalization of holdings and insignificant emergence of entrepreneurial and capitalist farming.

However, there seems to be a qualitative shift in the way that peasants conduct their production and reproduction in the face of limited resources and alternative employment opportunities. Adjusting to changing demand patterns through changed cropping patterns; minimizing overdependence on external resource inputs; bringing down the costs of production; innovating and fine-tuning the institutional framework of land, labour, and credit markets—these are some of the qualitative changes in the peasant's world that are re-ordering the very structure of production, distribution and appropriation.

This article attempts to highlight some critical agrarian changes that are taking place in the fertile valley region of the state of Manipur, in north-eastern India, which has a history of being the most agriculturally advanced state in the entire region. The focus is on how peasants are seeking survival autonomies through farming intensification and diversification that are crucially grounded on mutual trust and co-operation at the community level; and how age-old tenurial systems are giving way to new ones that serve community purposes, leading to value addition at the community level with very little room for undue private expropriation. 'Back to the farm' as a neo-idiom seems to be re-emerging among the peasantry, which until recently appeared to have given up farming as a primary occupation.

The study is based primarily on recent findings of village-level surveys in the most productive district of the Manipur Valley. The first part examines the land ownership and holding pattern, which, along with the structure of occupations, suggests the non-emergence of land-based polarization among the peasantry. The second part looks into the emerging nature of land tenure and how it is symbiotically linked with village- and State-level structural changes in the economy. The final part makes some tentative conclusions on some emerging dimensions of re-peasantization and the importance of culture and values in the re-shaping of institutions that are favourable to re-peasantization.

Land and Non-polarized Resource Control Structures

The peasant mode of production (van der Ploeg 2008) is defined by a constant search for value addition and employment in the context of limited resources and by social and material resources being processed and controlled by those in the labour process. Interrelations among actors are essentially governed by 'local cultural repertoire' and gender relations. Ownership and land holding structures in the village of Wabagai show how land is both private as well as communal, in the sense that ownership control over land has visibly become subservient to the use of land by the community.

The village is located in the most agriculturally advanced district of the valley. The river Sekmai runs through the village, and has been the main reason for favourable crop culture. The village had a population of 5268 persons and 1027 households when the survey was conducted in 2010. The village has a high literacy rate of 81.18 per cent and is well-connected by a state highway on its southern boundaries. A wetland and lake, the Kharung Pat, is contiguous to its northern boundaries. The lake and the wet lands with their rich aqua and vegetative resources along with some 755 acres of paddy land have historically been the basis of village sustenance and development. However, fixity of land, population growth, and land hunger has led to only 37.49 per cent of households owning paddy land and 46.25 per cent of households having operational holdings (Tables 15.1 and 15.2) in paddy land. The rapidly growing productive base of the

Table 15.1 Land ownership in Wabagai village by size class

Size-class (in acres)	*Number*	*Area*	*Avg. area*	*Gini coefficient*
0–1	116 (30.13)	70.98 (10.63)	0.61	0.367
1–1.5	120 (31.17)	148.8 (22.28)	1.24	
1.5–2	33 (8.57)	61.38 (9.19)	1.86	
2–3.5	77 (20.00)	198.77 (29.77)	2.58	
3.5–5	34 (8.83)	150.80 (22.58)	4.44	
5+	5 (1.30)	37 (5.55)	7.4	
Total	385 (100.00)	667.73 (100.00)		

Source: Census survey

Note: Figure in parentheses indicates percentage

Table 15.2 Operational holding in Wabagai village by size class

Size class (in acres)	*Number*	*Area*	*Avg. size*	*Gini coefficient*
0–1	148 (31.16)	91.70 (12.14)	0.62	0.348
1–1.5	160 (33.68)	198.40 (26.27)	1.24	
1.5–2	58 (12.21)	105.42 (13.96)	1.82	
2–3.5	73 (15.37)	188.03 (24.90)	2.56	
3.5–5	29 (6.11)	125.76 (16.66)	4.34	
5+	7 (1.47)	45.84 (6.07)	6.55	
All size class	475 (100)	755.15 (100)		

Source: Census survey

Note: Figure in parentheses indicates percentage

village consists in cash cropping on paddy land and other non-paddy land and fisheries on colonized land in the wetlands or village land.

The land ownership pattern shows that intergeneration transfers and subdivisions have resulted in extremely small landholdings without any visible sign of capitalistic land accumulation or polarization. Sale of land has been historically rare as reported by the villagers. Almost 90 per cent of landholdings are no more than one hectare. Only five families owned land above two hectares. Land ownership of an average size of 0.61 acres constitutes 30.13 per cent of landholdings, while another 31.17 per cent is composed of landholdings of 1.24 acres. Families owning about one hectare of land, the institutionally determined pre-colonial subsistence holding size, constitute 20 per cent of landowners. The Gini coefficient is 0.367.

The problem of utilization of land for productive purposes has to be seen as an historically evolved phenomenon and also as having material and non-material components. There are different modes of productive organization in different contexts that give rise to differing rights, duties, and obligations, leading to a particular pattern of property rights. The most important basis for inequality is the distribution of land with which leisure and enjoyment of status and authority are associated (Myrdal 1968). Historical dynamics and the structural evolution of the economy have led to agricultural involution and marginalization of ownership as well as operational holdings, without any visible rise of an agrarian capitalist class thriving on economies of scale or on pure feudal extraction based on landownership and interlocking markets.

The land ownership structure in the village exhibits the virtual absence, if not complete absence, of the conditions for the emergence of exploitative production relations based on the control over land and the land lease market or through the interlocking of land, labour, credit, and product markets. This will become clearer in a later section which will refer to the structure of operational holdings and the nature of tenancy.

In India, unlike trends in the developed countries, landholding households have increased while the average area operated by them has decreased steadily since the 1950s. The relative share of marginal landholdings has increased dramatically and that of large and medium declined, while the size groups located in the middle (small and semi-medium) have more or less remained constant (Thorat 1997). In Manipur, small and marginal holders dominate, and the medium and large landholders are virtually disappearing.

In Wabagai village, only 7.58 per cent of operational holdings are above one hectare, as compared to about 10 per cent in terms of land ownership in the same size class. In other words, about 92 per cent of landholdings are marginal and small in terms of average size. Marginal holders constitute 31.16 per cent of operational holders with average holding size of 0.62 acres, and small holders constitute 33.68 per cent with average size of 1.24 acres. There are only seven households (1.47 per cent) operating on an average size of 6.55 acres (2.64 hectares), classified as semi-medium holders. The Gini coefficient is 0.348. The village does not therefore even have medium and large holders, as seen in the rest of India. The village therefore shows no signs of consolidation and expansion of operational holdings, the rise of big farms and the commoditization of agriculture.

The occupational structure of the village, reflecting macroeconomic structures in the state, provides insight into the nature of the change that is taking place in village agriculture and how re-peasantization seems to be emerging in the village. Occupational profiles of heads of households (Table 15.3) show that 60.76 per cent consider agriculture as their primary occupation (excluding the old and disabled), while 40.59 per cent had secondary occupations, of which 82.22 per cent considered agriculture as a secondary occupation. In other words, among the bulk of agricultural household heads with secondary occupations, agriculture continued to provide a part of their livelihood.

Among those who considered agriculture as a primary occupation, 27.46 per cent were in paddy cultivation, 9.74 per cent in fisheries, and 7.26 per cent in cash cropping. Animal husbandry as a primary occupation

Table 15.3 Primary occupation of head of the household in Wabagai

Occupation	*Male*	*Female*	*Total*
Agriculture			
Paddy cropping	282 (27.46)	0	282 (27.46)
Cash cropping	74 (7.21)	0	74 (7.21)
Animal husbandry	10 (0.91)	0	10 (0.97)
Fish farmer	100 (9.74)	0	100 (9.74)
Agri. labourer	73 (7.11)	2 (0.19)	75 (7.30)
Subtotal (Agriculture)	539 (52.43)	2 (0.19)	541 (52.68)
Non-agriculture			
Construction and manufacturing	94 (9.15)	3 (0.29)	97 (9.44)
Govt. services	97 (9.44)	1 (0.10)	98 (9.54)
Other services	130 (12.67)	21 (2.04)	151 (14.71)
Subtotal (Non-agriculture)	321 (31.26)	25 (2.43)	346 (33.69)
Old and disabled	130 (12.66)	10 (0.97)	140 (13.63)
Total	990 (96.40)	37 (3.60)	1027 (100)

Source: Field survey

Note: Figure in parentheses indicates percentage

was insignificant, at 0.97 per cent, and agricultural wage labour accounted for a comparatively low 7.3 per cent. Crop diversification into high-value commodities is catching on fast in the village, as 34.14 per cent of household heads with agriculture as primary occupation are into cash cropping, fisheries, and animal husbandry. This is further evident from the fact that members of the households who are economically active are more into non-cereal agriculture, both for primary as well as secondary occupations. Among family members, 53.37 per cent have non-paddy agriculture as primary occupation and 69.9 per cent as secondary occupation. The younger generation are obviously entering into high-value crops more than the older generation and also finding casual jobs as agriculture labourers (21.44 per cent), which is much higher than the village average of 7.3 per cent.

Given the limited land resources of the village, vertical and horizontal occupational diversification within village families are but inevitable. Main occupations of household heads show that 33.69 per cent are into non-agricultural activities. However, in the overall portfolio of multiple occupations among the villagers, agriculture still takes priority. How this has been made possible in the limited land resources of the village can be seen

from the nature and structure of tenancy in the village and the change that has taken place towards more intensive utilization of land, based on both rent and non-rent community relationship structures.

Land Tenure and Structural Changes

There is a large lease market in the village with an incidence of tenancy standing at 34.95 per cent, as against 9.9 per cent in India (Vaidyanathan 2010), reflecting high levels of land hunger in the absence of alternative employment opportunities. The tenure groups in Table 15.4 have been divided into four. Pure owners are those who cultivate on their own land and do not lease in or out. Combined owners cultivate on their own land, but lease out some land. Combined tenants cultivate both on own and leased in land. Pure tenants cultivate only on leased in land. Pure owners constitute 48.41 per cent, pure tenants 27.09 per cent, combined owners 13.15 per cent, and combined tenants 6.33 per cent. There are only 26 pure non-cultivating landlords in the village, 57.7 per cent of which are in the land ownership size class of less than 1.5 acres. The land market in the village is obviously heterogeneous, and sharply polarized categories of landlords and tenants do not exist, as is the case in many parts of India (Rao 1974).

The macro characteristics of the lease market is that over one-third (34.95 per cent) of the cultivators are leasing in land and among landowners, 23.9 per cent are leasing out land and only 8.05 per cent leased in

Table 15.4 Size class and pattern of agricultural tenancy

Size class (in acres)	*Tenure group*					*Rent receiver*
	Pure owner	*Combined owner*	*Combined tenant*	*Pure tenant*	*Total*	
0–1	78 (32.10)	23 (34.84)	1 (3.23)	46 (34.07)	148 (31.16)	9 (34.62)
1–1.5	84 (34.57)	15 (22.73)	5 (16.13)	56 (41.48)	160 (33.68)	6 (23.08)
1.5–2	20 (8.23)	9 (13.64)	10 (32.26)	19 (14.07)	58 (12.21)	0
2–3.5	42 (17.28)	12 (18.18)	9 (29.03)	10 (7.42)	73 (15.37)	7 (26.92)
3.5–5	16 (6.58)	6 (9.09)	4 (12.90)	3 (2.22)	29 (6.11)	4 (15.38)
5+	3 (1.24)	1 (1.52)	2 (6.45)	1 (0.74)	7(1.47)	0
Total	243 (100)	66 (100)	31 (100)	135 (100)	475 (100)	26 (100)

Source: Census survey

Note: Figure in parentheses indicates percentage

land. There is clearly a preference among land owners to lease out land rather than lease in. In this village of marginal and small landowners, all size classes seem to be interested in the lease market on the supply side, irrespective of the size of their land. In fact, 57.7 per cent of the pure landlords that lease out land are in the size class of 1.5 acres and below, with the upper size classes accounting for a lower 42.3 per cent. An almost equal 57.56 per cent of owner cultivators lease out land in the same size class. Also, in the relatively larger uppermost size class, 10.61 per cent of the owner cultivators lease out land, in spite of their meagre land. In this village, therefore, it is not necessarily the case of the larger land owners renting out more land, but it is more a case of land owners of all types and sizes being interested in the land lease market rather than cultivating themselves.

Preferences for leasing out land among smallholders in Asia and Africa has been attributed to inherent difficulties in the enforcement of hired labour, especially in operations covering widely scattered parcels of land. Thus, smallholders find it more profitable to lease out land because of scale diseconomies arising from the use of hired labour (Binswanger and Rosenweig 1986), so that family farms become most effective. The persistence of small family farms in Asia and Africa has also been attributed to these reasons. Some of the major reasons given by the villagers for leasing out are rising costs of cultivation, investment opportunities in agriculture and non-agricultural activities, cultural obligation to help out a near one with subsistence land, debt servicing, consumption emergencies arising out of health, and other ceremonial events.

On the demand side, the reasons are clearer, although some 30 reasons have been identified in the Indian context (Jodha 1981). First, as 62.51 per cent of the households do not own land, there is huge competition among the landless to lease in even the smallest piece of paddy land at least to provide for subsistence paddy and create the safety net for the extreme levels of uncertainties in other casual employment. A Sangam (0.64 acres) of paddy land, at the productivity level in the village, provides just the bare rice consumption needs of a family of five members,[2] the average family size in the village. A Marak (1.24 acres) of land on the other hand leaves some surplus paddy to meet extreme cash needs in health and other emergencies. This is the reason why 75.55 per cent of pure tenants are concentrated in the lowest land size classes of 0–1 and 1–1.5 acres, being essentially subsistence holders. Second, there is an upsurge in cash cropping on paddy land, as irrigation has become more efficient in the village

and as community norms are fast shifting away from mono-cropping of paddy on paddy land only and cash cropping on other land. Use-right of paddy land is thus providing the opportunities to produce three to four crops annually and offering high degrees of employment and income to the younger generations which are being confronted by ever tightening job markets in the state. The forces working on the demand and supply sides of the land market and determining the structure of land tenure are visible from the contractual arrangements in the village, which has caught on in other villages though at varying degrees.

Historically, most tenure contracts in Manipur have been of the straightforward fixed-kind rent type between the lessor and the lessee, with terms being highly favourable to the lessee (Singh 2005a). Share cropping tenure had virtually disappeared on the advent of colonial rule with the introduction of private property in land. In the post-colonial period, while the bulk of the tenure arrangements had remained the fixed-kind rent type, agricultural census data began to record usufruct mortgage types of tenure arrangements. In the mortgage tenancy arrangement, the mortgagee pays no interest on cash given to the landowner during the pendency of the debt, but has the use rights over the land and does not pay rent. The mortgagee can cultivate the land or lease it out to others and receive rent from the cultivator. Once the debt is settled, the land reverts to the owner. This type of tenure is now significantly emerging in many villages. Share cropping is very rare in the State, as this arrangement is socially considered exploitative and against the cultural core of avoiding taking advantage of the weaknesses of the other (Singh 2005b).

Agricultural tenancy is one of the oldest institutional arrangements of the rural economy, evolved in order to facilitate adjustments in agricultural factor markets. In post-green revolution India, improvements in irrigation and factor markets and technological change have drastically changed the implications and the nature of tenancy. Commercial tenancy, what Lenin called 'entrepreneurial renting', is on the rise in advanced agricultural areas such as Punjab and Haryana, and subsistence tenancy is still widespread throughout the country. Commercial tenancy is viewed as promoting allocative efficiency, whereas subsistence tenancy consists in compulsive and involuntary participation in the transaction, as the returns from tenanted land are hardly commensurate with the effort that the tenant invests due to high rent (Swain 1999).

There is a large amount of literature in India on which types prevail, where, and for what reasons (Iqbal Singh 1989; Narayana and Nair 1989;

Swain 1999). Share cropping has been found to be the dominant mode of tenancy in backward regions, as a means of risk hedging under conditions of high uncertainty, especially in low irrigation density areas. On the contrary, fixed rent types of tenancy are found in developed agricultural regions where technological advancements have reduced uncertainties and new classes of entrepreneurial tenants, who are themselves a new product of technology, are capable of bearing risk and are able to pay rent in advance, as in the Punjab (Singh 1989). Subsistence tenancy and renting, as well as entrepreneurial tenancy and renting, both exist in the village, but their cultural and economic moorings are indeed certainly peculiar.

The structure of tenancy contracts in the village (Table 15.5) shows that share cropping is hardly acceptable in the scheme of things in the village, as only three peasants (1.8 per cent) sharecrop. The traditional fixed rent tenure, at 41.57 per cent, is still holding ground but usufruct mortgage tenure, at 56.63 per cent, has come to hold sway in the village, which has strong implication for agriculture and agrarian relations in Manipur valley.

Fixed rent contracts are an age-old land tenure type in the state that existed mainly between the absentee landlords settled in the capital and the peasants in the villages. As populations grew and the economy diversified, rent-receiving landowners also emerged faster in the villages during the colonial and post-colonial agrarian scene. Rent rates of 12 Pots a Paree (12 sacks a hectare) during the pre-colonial days endured right up to the late 1970s, when the green revolution had started setting foot in many parts of the valley region. The rent rate was on average roughly 20 per

Table 15.5 Nature of tenancy in Wabagai village (in numbers)

Size class (in acres)	*Cash mortgage*	*Kind*	*Share cropping*	*Total*
0–1	26 (55.53)	21 (54.47)	0	47 (100)
1–1.5	40 (65.57)	20 (32.79)	1 (1.64)	61 (100)
1.5–2	14 (48.28)	13 (44.83)	2 (6.89)	29 (100)
2–3.5	10 (52.63)	9 (47.37)	0	19 (100)
3.5–5	3 (42.85)	4 (57.15)	0	7 (100)
5+	1 (33.33)	2 (66.67)	0	3 (100)
Total	94 (56.63)	69 (41.57)	3 (1.80)	166 (100)

Source: Field survey

Note: Figure in parentheses indicates percentage

cent of produce. After the 1980s, rents have steadily risen, either in tune with yield growths, the ratio remaining more or less constant, or in the case of subsistence tenancy on inferior land, higher rent-to-produce ratios. Rents have risen to as high as 30 Pots a Paree in intra-village transactions in pockets of the valley, where better irrigation facilities have made multiple cropping possible. Land owners do not receive rent on crops other than paddy that is grown by the lessee, a social norm that favours the tiller of the soil rather than the owner of the land. In case of absentee landowners of the urban area, rent has stabilized at 20 Pots a Paree. This is one of the reasons why peasants in the State try to sell land to urbanites who care more for capital appreciation rather than kind rent. Urban lessors also rarely evict tenants, whereas rural ones can assume self-cultivation in any season. The rent rates are, however, not enforced in times of less than normal production, as cultural and village norms takeover and fair rent reductions are accepted by both parties.

Mortgaging in land by providing cash credit to the owner and its rise is a recent phenomenon underscoring the degree of land hunger and lack of institutional credit in the state. The bargaining normally starts from the owner's side for consumption credit, investments, or for pure usury. Sickness, children's education, and social ceremonies, like marriages and mortuary rites, are some of the prime reasons for mortgaging out. Seed money for cash cropping or other non-agricultural activities, including petty contract work in the state's booming infrastructure sector, or outright bribes for government jobs, are some of the areas of investment. At the ruling five per cent per mensum rate of interest in the rural informal credit market, usury has also been a great attraction to many landowners who lack the stomach for physical work and desire to taste the waters of the highly lucrative rural credit market, without losing land.

The mortgage land market works favourably in many ways for both the lessor and the lessee. The lessor gets instant credit that can be used at will and the lessor gets land to cultivate for a minimum of two years and employment and income for the family without having to buy scarce land at exorbitant prices, if at all land is on sale, which is rare.[3] A hectare of land is mortgaged for '80,000, and petty peasants lease in the smaller parcels of land with smaller amounts (0.64 acre at '20,000 for lucrative cash cropping, e.g.) which they are able to save from cash income from casual daily work, into which most families have vertically and horizontally diversified in the village or outside.[4]

All Manipuri villages and professions have the informal institution of mutual chit funds known as Marup, wherein monthly savings are pooled in by members, the total monthly collection going to members according to needs or by lot. Even the poorest of the poor subscribe to these funds and are the source of bulk funds/credit for the peasantry. The recent implementation of institutional credit to even non-land owning peasants through the Kishan Credit Cards is also feeding the mortgage lease market in the villages, where the scheme has hit the ground and where multiple cropping practices are encouraging banks to be liberal.

In the village lease market in Wabagai, 70.21 per cent of the mortgage tenants are in the size range 0–1.5 acres, having invested between ‘20,000 and ‘40,000 for use rights for a minimum of two years and up to the date of repayment of the original mortgage amount. Thus, in the largest segment of the lease market (56.63 per cent), in the 0–1.5 acres size class, it is the small parcels of land and their rapid circulation which are feeding both the demand and supply sides of the market. Comparatively bigger landowners are also mortgaging out land instead of cultivating it themselves, as perceived advantages of farm and non-farm activities differ across size class of land ownership.

The important issue here is why, in the emerging structural change in land tenure from fixed rent to mortgage types, peasants as well as landowners are exhibiting preferences for a vitiated mortgage tenure system in place of the time-tested fixed-kind rent tenure system. The motivations are varied yet rooted in risky rational choices. For the more enterprising landowners, the prime motivator is obtaining immediate cash for higher return investments in fisheries and cash cropping, without permanent land alienation. Many have colonized the wetlands as fisheries at low costs by constructing earthen ring bunds, or dug small-scale fishery ponds on homestead land, with handsome returns that pay off debts in a short time and without losing the mortgaged land. Income from fisheries range from ‘60,000 to ‘200,000 per annum on farms ranging from 0.60 acres to five acres, which is far above the income that a farmer gets from equivalent areas of paddy land (the gross paddy income from the best land of 0.60 acres was less than ‘20,000). Some 9.74 per cent of the village households have fisheries as the main occupation and another 11.94 as secondary occupation. In other words, over one-fifth of the village households have diversified into fisheries. Data on indebtedness among the households shows that 12.65 per cent of the borrowings were for fisheries and another 49.65 per cent for agriculture, including leasing in land and other inputs.

There is thus a strong indication that credit through mortgaging out land for investments in fisheries was one of the prime factors for the emergence of a mortgage lease market in the village in the face of low returns on paddy cultivation, especially in the case of the comparatively bigger landholders.

Many, especially among the younger generation, also reported mortgaging out parcels of land in order to finance cash cropping on remaining paddy and other land. As the mortgage debts are of small amounts, even if the new ventures fail, as it often does in a volatile cash crop vegetable market, most landowners are able to pay off, being more economically sound than the landless.

On the demand side, the marginal mortgage tenants are motivated mainly by food and employment security and the availability of low interest agricultural credit, formal self-help group funds, or the more widespread informal mutual funds. Community based efficient irrigation has enabled them to raise three crops per season and motivated them to mortgage in land and seek survival autonomies, rather than face the highly uncertain casual labour market in the state.

The emergence of mortgage tenancy has led to intensification in agriculture and higher value addition to village income, based on the fundamental community resource of land. In the absence of institutional credit, larger landowners have used mortgage credit to colonize the wetlands with fisheries in areas adjacent to the village, which are fast drying up due to ecological disturbances. These wetland fisheries of larger scale, of up to five acres, are the commercial farms that provide employment to villagers round the year in the gathering of grass feeds from the wetlands that are highly suitable for the variety of 'Grass Carps' that are mainly reared. Villagers on canoes provided by the farm receive half the daily wage in gathering grass from the wetlands. The farm thus depends mainly on cheap local resources rather than factory feeds, to reduce costs and compete with imports from far away fisheries in Andhra Pradesh that are flooding the local fish market. Many smaller farmers have also raised fish farms of smaller scale on homestead land. Thus, mortgage tenancy on the one hand has ensured access to land to the landless; it has at the same time enabled the landowners to branch out to more lucrative agriculture on under-utilized land resources in the village, thereby expanding the productive base of the village and increasing value addition.

The intensification of land use in the village has been helped by another type of innovative land tenure in the village, which is not based on direct

payment of rent but on mutual benefits, community principles of co-operation and a primal sense of pride in having helped out a fellow villager, governed by what van der Ploeg (2008) calls the 'local cultural repertoire'. This type of production and land relation was observed on over one-fourth of cash cropped land in the village.

Traditionally, vegetables are planted on small parcels of homestead land or on non-paddy land known as Inkhols, specifically devoted to vegetables. As land is becoming scarce, irrigation is improving, and demand for high-value vegetables is on the rise, cash cropping on paddy land has been on the rise. As vegetable cropping has boomed in the village, 78.22 per cent of vegetable cash cropping is carried out on paddy land (Table 15.6). About one-third of the paddy land vegetable cropping is carried out by landless and marginal farmers who had worked as agriculture labourers on those lands during the Kharif paddy season.

These farmers do not pay rent, and their obligation is only to carry out the first preparatory tillage for paddy cultivation, just after reaping their last crop, which can be done with comparative ease, as the soil is still loose. The landowner gains in that crop rotation improves the fertility of the soil and garners social capital as a benevolent person, though there is a bit of quasi-rent involved in the transaction in terms of costs of preparatory tillage. The average size of the this type of land being only 0.62 acres or the traditional measure of a Sangam, the cost of preparatory tillage for the average farm would be about one tractor hour or five man days. At the prevailing daily wage rate of '100, and the lower range of cash crop income being '60,000 to '70,000, the quasi-rent involved is quite nominal. Obviously strong traditional and social norms underpin this tenure system, rather than pure economic considerations of rent or other forms of expropriation.

Table 15.6 Land utilization pattern of cash cropping in Wabagai

Type of Land		*Number of Households*	*Area (acres)*
Paddy	Own	53	41.85
	Others'	47	20.10
Non-paddy		30	17.25
Total		130	79.20

Source: Field survey

The social norm of not paying additional rent to the landowner on non-paddy crops has also enabled tenants (holding 34.95 per cent of land) to offer their fallow paddy landholdings, under the nose of actual landowners, to fellow peasants and landless labours, while gaining in the cost of preparatory tillage. This social norm and tradition has also worked on the landowners to offer fallow paddy land in return for preparatory tillage. As the proportion of landless agricultural labour is quite low in the village at 7.3, elements of labour tying are involved in the transaction, whereas labour tying as an institution has not historically existed in Manipur in any significant form. The form of labour tying during the pre-colonial period, in the form of the King's sharecropper, abruptly ended with monarchy in the advent of colonial rule, being exogenous to the general peasantry. Another form of labour tying is indeed emerging in Manipur, whereby the employer buys labour in advance in a debt contract which is highly risky and more favourable to the labourer. Exchange labour is the main form of labour through which rice cultivation is conducted, and the underlying principle is that one should put in one's labour in the process, thereby blurring the hierarchical distinction between the master and the serf, one of the cultural cores of the Manipuries. Thus, if a rich peasant does not himself participate in the labour process, he finds it hard to get labour and suffers greatly in production and productivity. The essential point here is that co-operative and communitarian value systems strongly dictate crucial aspects of production, distribution, and expropriation among the Manipuri peasantry.

The quasi-tenurial mechanism in cash cropping is increasingly leading to more intensive use of paddy lands which are otherwise left fallow after one crop, thereby giving access to land to the landless and marginal peasants with very little rent obligations. This type of tenure accounts for one-fourth of cash cropped land in the village. Vegetable cropping on seasonal fallow paddy land with nominal rent obligations but with high returns have enabled many towards self-employment and more dignified survival autonomies, especially among the landless. It is in this sense that we had earlier suggested that land is private as well as communal and that ownership control of land has visibly become subservient to the use of land by the community in a given context. Cultures and values indeed provide many safety valves to those at the margins and help communities to regenerate themselves in times of stress. 'Back to the farm' neo-idioms seem to be re-emerging not only because of favourable conditions as well as

compulsions, but also because of community actions based on co-operative behaviour and the suppression of undue private expropriation.

Search for Survival Autonomies in a Peasant's World

Wabagai village is experiencing rapid expansion and growth in agricultural activities. These have been labour driven and achieved through farming intensification on formerly underutilized land resources and innovative expansion into wetland. In the process, new resources are being created or expanded at the individual as well as community levels. Growth and development is not based on takeovers of land and scale expansion, but on running efficient small farms under co-operative behaviour and collective action. In a context where the gains from labour process are not significantly being appropriated by any distinct social category, incentives for farming are on the rise in the village. Some of the important reasons can be identified in a preliminary way.

Assuring efficient irrigation through collective community action has been at the core of cropping intensity and crop diversification in the village. A barrage on the river Sekmai was built in 1983, and double cropping in paddy was a distinction in the village. As maintenance and the canal system deteriorated and as demand far outstripped supply, the village had stopped double cropping of paddy. But in the last decade or so, the village has found its own alternative way in water management and resource conservation and expansion. In the lean winter season, villagers dammed up the Sekmai River and ensured irrigation to the vital cash crops. The local Member of Legislative Assembly recently built a small concrete dam there. Local clubs and NGOs have also stepped in to help provide lift and pump irrigation. Besides, the community maintains complex traditional diversion canal and channel irrigation systems. Damming up the river at strategic points and maintaining the complex irrigation channels is a collective community affair, and contributions are irrespective of farm or family size or types of crops. The result has been total irrigation in all the farms of the village (Table 15.7). The village does not double crop paddy anymore and has diversified into more lucrative cash crops after the first crop of paddy.

The outcome of better irrigation has been the widespread adoption of modern inputs and time-saving machinery and the acquiring of knowledge. High-yielding seed varieties are used by 78.11 per cent of farmers, the rest using flood resistant local varieties on farms located in

Table 15.7 Irrigation by source in Wabagai (in numbers)

Size class (in acres)	*Canal*	*Lift/Pumpset*	*Traditional diversion channels*	*Total*
0–1	83 (56.08)	51 (34.96)	14 (9.46)	148 (100)
1–1.5	94 (58.75)	46 (28.75)	20 (12.50)	160 (100)
1.5–2	39 (67.24)	13 (22.42)	6 (10.34)	58 (100)
2–3.5	42 (57.54)	27 (36.98)	4 (5.48)	73 (100)
3.5–5	19 (65.52)	6 (20.69)	4 (13.79)	29 (100)
5+	4 (57.14)	2 (28.57)	1 (14.28)	7 (100)
Total	281 (59.16)	145 (30.53)	49 (10.31)	475 (100)

Source: Field survey

Note: Figure in parentheses indicates percentage

flood prone areas. Because of high maintenance costs, bullock power has been mostly substituted by farm machinery that are owned mainly for hiring out, as requirements on small own farms are far less than the capacity of the machinery. Competition among owners has ensured that the cost of hiring-in is lesser than the maintenance cost of plough cattle.

Growth, however, has been fuelled by easier formal credit flows, self-help group funds, and informal mutual funds. For all households, 69.44 per cent of borrowings were institutional. Farmers were making good use of credit, as only 31.62 per cent of credit was for consumption while 68.38 per cent was invested into crops, fisheries, and industries.

The overall result was high levels of employment, as 42.49 per cent of the entire population is economically active, with 70.35 per cent being self-employed and 17.23 per cent being casual workers. The rest had salaried jobs. The high degree of self-employment only shows how villagers are striving towards survival autonomies, mainly within agriculture and to a lesser extent in industry. The low level of agricultural labour, at 7.3 per cent, indicates such survival autonomies. Industry is limited to barely 59 households, mainly in rice milling and handloom and handicrafts, but out of these households, 82.75 per cent are engaged in farm activities for over six months. Interestingly, only 8.06 per cent of these industries were financed formally, whereas 45.16 per cent were self-financed.

The most important factor contributing to agricultural development is perhaps the institutional framework in land and labour in the village and the favourable ways in which the community adepts.

In developing countries, communities are defined by groups of people tied by mutual trust, based on intense personal relationships, and take forms like tribes and villages tied by blood and locational affinities. In these communities, especially of the Southeast Asian types, principles of mutual help, income, and work-sharing for generating subsistence to all members are strong and 'economic rationality in terms of individual profit and utility maximization does not operate in a community of this definition' (Hayami and Yoshihisa 2003: 328). In such traditional communities, the contractual forms of labour and land utilization governing resource utilization have historically obtained deep-rooted social codes of income and work sharing. Where there are strong sanctions or losses upon violating these social norms, the community guides the individual to co-operate voluntarily and to increase efficiency and reduce cost associated with the division of labour. In other words, landlord and tenant relationships are 'solidified within the total community relationship' (Hayami and Yoshihisa 2003: 328).

Land is not a means of extraction in the village, it is rather a means of community welfare. Larger landowners rent out small parcels of land rather than accumulate holdings. In spite of unequal distribution of landownership, tenure mechanisms have been evolved to create and maintain an agrarian structure that is fundamentally based on family-based farms. Traditional norms in developing countries of helping out the landless, as underscored by Hayami and Yoshihisa (2003), as well as scarcity of labour in peak labour cycles, have led to the emergence of the new tenure form of quasi-rentals to the landless for cash cropping during the fallow season on paddy land. In this seasonal contract, the landless labourer does not suffer any wage reduction on the labour obligation on the landlords' land, but has some claim on the landlords' land at nominal rent obligation. In this new form of clientalization, 'a special case of dyadic ties' (Scott 1972: 8), both gain, with labour appropriating almost the entire produce. Exploitative labour tying has not been historically a social norm among the Manipuri peasantry. As such, this quasi-rental tenure constitutes a fine-tuning of the institutional framework of land that offer access to unused land of the landowner to the landless at highly favourable terms that are non-exploitative and are based upon cultural cores and social norms of co-operative behaviour. The result has been a structural shift in production towards higher income and employment-generating cash crops and higher farming intensification on fixed village land.

The rise of mortgage tenancy is another example of adaptive institutional change in land tenure where conflicts between community principles of income and work-sharing and individual profit motives are being ironed out. Mortgaging out small parcels of land has enabled landowners to mobilize village savings outside of scarce formal credit for agricultural diversification into high-value cash crops on fallow paddy land and fisheries in the wetlands, thereby expanding the productive base of the village and value addition at the individual and community levels. Cash cropping and fisheries considered as main occupation account for 16.95 per cent of agricultural households, and 47.22 per cent as secondary occupation.

The colonization of common property land resources by private individuals, mainly by the landed on the wetlands, is not being objected to by the villagers. Direct employment on the farm, indirect employment in the gathering of fish feeds and marketing of fish are some of the reasons given for not objecting. Besides, none is restricted from colonizing on the wetlands, and growth of these larger commercial farms has helped the growth of lower-scale homestead farms within the village. Fish farming paddy landowners have further helped the colonizers by letting out small parcels of land under mortgage or quasi-rental tenures to the landless under community sharing principles. This, perhaps, has weighed politically upon landowners to be more liberal in giving marginal peasants use rights to fallow paddy land for cash cropping with nominal quasi-rent, thereby giving birth to a new tenure arrangement. In some sort of quid-pro-quo understanding and co-operation at the community level, this is leading to farming intensification and expansion in paddy land as well, as the wetlands.

The village still relies mainly on the pool of village labour, with rare intrusion by the recently emerging gang labour culture in the state. Family and exchange labour are the two main forms of labour in the village. Labour exchange takes place mainly within the cultivating households, and hired labour occurs only when exchange balances are not achieved due to differing family or farm sizes, or for other reasons. However, due to labour scarcity in peak labour cycles, a nascent type of labourer seems to be emerging in the village. These are the landless labourers who are given access to fallow paddy land for cash cropping by landowners and landholders. In a reverse case of expropriation, labour power seems to be exacting access to land at highly favourable terms and returns, in exchange for assured labour services to the land owner without any wage rate concession. In the net, farming intensification has gained and labour is better off.

The village seems to have achieved certain degrees of institutional change in land and labour relations that has enabled the peasantry to respond productively to changing demand patterns by transforming cropping patterns and farm diversification. More interestingly, this has been brought about by minimizing overdependence on external resource inputs and bringing down the costs of production. For example, the fishery feeds are based on cheap local produce and labour rather than costly factory feeds, and vital irrigation is based on communal labour and mutual co-operative behaviour rather than paid formal irrigation.

A comment is necessary regarding the traditional banking and credit institution of Marup. Historically, these were village level material funds, based on mutual trusts and co-operation, provided to member households to meet costly requirements of life cycle events, like birth, death, and marriage. For example, the Singel Marup to meet the material requirements of mortuary rites—such as firewood for cremation, bamboos to erect Pandals or covered ceremonial space, rice for ceremonial feasts and other needs—was provided to the beneficiary by the members of the Marup, irrespective of inequity in the number of deaths in member families. Eventually, the institution became monetized and adapted to various economic needs. Run mainly by women, the emergence of various forms of this institution as a savings and indigenous banking mechanism through mutual trust and co-operation has been responsible for the impetus given to agriculture in the village as well as in the State, especially in the absence of formal credit. In spite of moral hazards leading to breakdowns, the institution in various forms has endured through strong social sanctions and isolation of defaulters at the village level. The village community has thus found its own ways out of formal credit market failures by evolving various institutional forms through mutual trust and co-operation, although these institutions are far from being able to meet the rising credit needs of the village. The essential issue here is that the rise of these mutual funds and informal banking system has marginalized the role of professional money lenders; and that through these mutual funds the peasants themselves have become both lenders as well as a borrowers, thereby largely doing away with credit linked market interlinking that empowers the landed or the rich for undue appropriation.

Though the emerging dominance of mortgage tenancy in the village as well as quasi-labour rental tenancy needs more rigorous examination on the matter of efficiency and real impacts on village agriculture, one can

only conclude that the emerging land system is more pro-peasant than pro-profits. There has been a massive marginalization of the workforce in the post-liberalization phase: marginal workers increased by 329 per cent during the census years 1991–2001, from 66,621 to 285,849 during the decade. Underemployment and casualization of rural labour, therefore, had grave consequences on the survival autonomies of the rural poor. Survey data from an adjacent Tezpur village show that 45 per cent of agricultural labour households had four to five occupations (Lisam 2010). Increasing access to land through quasi-rentals or mortgage tenancy has had the impact of greater stability in income and employment, and, as such, on survival autonomies. On the other hand, the landed in the villages had little options for accumulation through the tertiary and secondary sectors. New opportunities in the farm sectors are being successfully exploited by both landowners and the landless for value addition at the individual as well as at the community levels, thereby creating conditions that are favourable to re-peasantization.

While data needs to be generated more rigorously in defining the nature of agrarian change in the village, some tentative conclusions can be drawn from the village level dynamics on issues relating to re-peasantization. In situations of food and employment stress, culture and social norms are capable of innovating and fine-tuning the institutional frameworks of land, labour, and credit markets that re-order the very structure of production, distribution, and appropriation. Mutual trust and co-operation at the community level can lead to survival autonomies through intensification and diversification in farming. Resource expansion with increasing output and employment that add to value at the community and individual levels is possible in smallholder-based peasantries.

Notes

1. According to the Ministry of DONER and NEC (2008), the region has to grow at 11.8 per cent on average to come into parity with the national average by 2020.
2. As per NSS norms, a person requires 207 kg of rice per annum.
3. The price of paddy land ranges from about six to eight lakhs per hectare in the village.
4. Survey data from a neighbouring village show that 45 per cent of agricultural labour households had four to five occupations; see Lisam (2010).

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