Chapter 8

The Socio-Economic Condition of the Peasantry in Arsiland (1941–1974)

Introduction

In this chapter, I will examine further the socio-economic structure of the society by focusing on the landlord-tenant economic relations and resultant peasant pauperization and alienation. Based on facts and figures, I will bring to light the nature of Ethiopian feudal-colonial system and center-periphery relations, demographic change as a result of natural growth and government induced immigration en masse after 1941 and the extent to which it altered the traditional settlement patterns, social morphology, and interethnic relations. Particular emphasis will be placed on the condition of landless peasants and small land owners and the extent to which the system exposed them to exploitation, arbitrary eviction and dehumanization. Land alienation and the deterioration of the condition of farmers took on a new dimension with the introduction of modern/mechanized agriculture. In fact, development appeared to mean displacement for many landless peasants or small landowners. The data are based on oral information gathered from fieldwork as well as relevant written material and official documents. Also, I was born and grew up in the province and pertinently know the impacts of mechanization on peasants in Chilalo province.

As was examined in Chapter VI, in its economic aspect, the outcome of the conquest of 1880s was the “initial expropriation of land and continuous alienation of land.” The expropriation of land from the local people and its reallocation to the new comers took place for various reasons. First and foremost, to reward soldiers and administrators for the service they had rendered during the wars of expansion and the ensuring administration through the attribution of gult and rist land. Secondly, it was argued that unless the subject people

---

1 The period we are discussing is relatively recent. Therefore many informants have closely observed or taken part in the events we are addressing. They give us invaluable information emanating from their [fresh] memories. But, although I talked to many of them formally or informally, in order to give them privacy their names are not mentioned throughout the paper.

2 Markakis, p. 137.

3 Richard Pankhurst, Land and State in Ethiopian History, p. 137.
were dispossessed no effective control could be exercised over them.\textsuperscript{4} Thirdly, the need to quarter soldiers, the speed of conquest, the distance from the capital and the difference in culture between the new comers and the local people necessitated this development.\textsuperscript{5}

With the exception of the Balabbat holdings mentioned above some of the expropriated land was divided among soldiers, nobles, the Church and the emperor’s friends and favorites. During Menelik’s reign the share of each soldier depended upon the military rank he had achieved. According to Brotto, in Arsi the division was as follows. A soldier received one to two gashas, Ye hamsa Aleqa (commander of 50) five gashas, Yemeto Aleqa (Lieutenant) 10 gashas and shambles (captain) 20 gasha.\textsuperscript{6} The remaining land was retained under different tenure systems. A detailed discussion of these complex systems of land tenure is beyond the scope of this paper. However, as far as Arsi region is concerned, the Gabbar, Semon, Church gult, rist gult, Siso, Maderia, Mengist, Gebertel and Yeketema Bota (urban) were the most prevalent tenure systems.\textsuperscript{7}

As a consequence, the majority of the peasantry was reduced to the status of Gabbar. In this condition, the lands they inhabited were subject to various dues, different taxes and the people were forced to render personal services to government officials. In addition to this, the Gabbar provided the soldiers’ family with water, fire wood; they also built their grainary and errands for them.\textsuperscript{8} As indicated above, F. Rey, an English traveler who observed the Gabbar system at work in Arsi says that the governors were not paid any salary, but had to derive the income from the people they administered. The number of Gabber each governor controlled depended upon his rank and a sub governor having 200–300 Gabbar. He concludes that the Gabbar system was not different from slavery.\textsuperscript{9} Cerulli also witnessed that between the Albaso plain (a very wide plain south of Assalla) and the Awash River, each soldier had an Oromo family who was expected to cultivate his land free of charge.\textsuperscript{10}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{4} Rexford Henry Kofi Darkwah, \textit{Shewa, Menelik and the Ethiopian Empire}, p. 37.
\item \textsuperscript{6} E. Brotto, op. cit., p. 96.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Mahteme Sellassie, op. cit., p. 284; Charles W. McCellan, \textit{Perspective on the Neftenya Gabbar System. The example of Darasa.}
\item \textsuperscript{9} Rey, op. cit., pp. 52, 189–190.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Cited in Pankhrurst, \textit{Economic History of Ethiopia}, p. 156.
\end{itemize}