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### ***Jhum* Cultivation versus the New Land Use Policy: Agrarian Change and Transformation in Mizoram**

The Mizo people of India have practiced *jhum* cultivation (“slash-and-burn”) for hundreds of years. However, since British colonial rule, they have increasingly lost control of communal land because of governmental development and land-use policies. The contrast between colonialism and this method of agricultural production can be seen in terms of “commodity” versus “sacred space” on the one hand, and “civilized space” versus “primitive bounded space” on the other. In post-colonial India, the practice of *jhum* cultivation is often considered an extravagant and unscientific form of land use. Pessimistic attitudes toward *jhum* cultivation practice are driven largely by the rise of liberal economic policies, and concern for potential ecological crises. This paper intends to add to current debates surrounding *jhum* cultivation, forest conservation, and agrarian change in Mizoram by looking at *jhum* cultivation in relation to the New Land Use Policy (NLUP) introduced by the government of Mizoram in 1984.

#### **Area of Study**

Mizoram is a hilly region situated in the northeastern frontier of India and inhabited by various tribal groups, such as the Mara, Lai, Paite, Hmar, Ralte, and Lusei, who together form the ethnic group of the Mizo. The people of Mizoram have been practicing *jhum* cultivation for hundreds of years. The cultural formation of Mizo community identity is strongly intertwined with *jhum* cultivation. Traditional management of the forest includes various forms of regulation, such as limited access, size restrictions, and sacred or protected areas (Vanlalhrauaia 2009). Such management was based on a strong attachment to land, customary laws, norms, belief systems, and ethical values regarding the environment. The chieftainship institution was also designed to establish a management system and to formulate customary laws regarding the forest.

#### **The Colonial Managerial System**

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a rapid shift from indigenous land management systems to a colonial managerial system. In many parts of India, strict regu-

lations to control forests were put in place, yet this was not the case in Mizoram. The British allowed the Mizo chiefs to retain control over forest resources, including the right to practice jhum cultivation. After some time, however, and for the purpose of increasing state revenue, successive policies to curb jhum cultivation were introduced. A form of land settlement popularly known as the circle system was introduced in 1901, effectively dividing Mizoram into 18 circles administered by local chiefs. The regulation limited jhum cultivation by forbidding the practice of it outside of these circles. At the same time, and in a break with the tradition of communal ownership of land, new cash crops such as coffee, cotton, potatoes, and oranges were introduced under private ownership. Wet rice cultivation was introduced in 1898 in order to gain income from taxing it (McCall 1980, 103). As Lalit Kumar Jha (1997, 27) notes, “[t]he land tenure system tended to be more and more individualistic in consonance with the nature of cultivation practices.”

### **Post Colonial State Intervention**

Following independence in 1947, the Indian constitution provided a certain degree of autonomy at either local or regional levels, including the management of natural resources. In reality, successive regulations through centralized administrative mechanisms were introduced. The Chieftainship office was abolished in 1954, and two new administrative categories—Autonomous District Councils and Village Councils—emerged (Mizoram 1989, 252, 285).

According to Sajjad Hassan (2006, 13), “[t]he abolition of Chieftainship meant that land became the property of the state and chiefs’ privileges no longer existed. Abolition of Chieftainship, consolidation of the administrative and legal framework under the state, and the bringing of tenants directly in contact with it, have helped to consolidate the state’s authority. These measures enhanced the state’s social control while weakening drastically any challenges to its authority from social forces.” More and more regulations were imposed to broaden the power of the state. For example, when Mizoram became a fully-fledged state of the Indian Union in 1987, the government declared ownership of the land and enacted laws to establish different categories of ownership within the state (Jha 1997, 28). All land became the property of the government; communal land in its true sense was therefore effectively eliminated. In villages, when the necessity arises for jhum cultivation, the Village Council is authorized to make annual jhum allotments in compact areas for a cluster of families.

### Concerns over Jhum

The practice of jhum cultivation has become the subject of debate among foresters, ecologists, economists, and policymakers. The main contention is that it is the leading cause of land degradation in the hills of Mizoram (Lianzela 1997, 785; Maithani 2005; Raman et al. 1998, 214–31; Raman 2001, 685–98). At the same time, officials are concerned about increasing state revenue: replacing the jhum economy with more liberal economic models is seen by the government as a profitable move and as a way to open the door for large-scale development projects. On the other hand, new systems are not always accepted by local populations (Ramakrishnan and Patnaik, 1992, 220; Sharma 1994, 145). Several global agencies have even intervened in the projects.

In addition, the entire northeast region is now considered part of an Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot, which ranks sixth among the top 25 hotspots in the world. Other groups are concerned about global warming; they believe that jhum burning is a large emitter of carbon-dioxide. The government therefore decided that the jhum cultivation system should be impeded at all costs, in order to protect the global environment.

### The New Land Use Policy

It was in response to this critical situation that an alternative policy called the New Land Use Policy (NLUP) was introduced by the government of Mizoram in 1984–85. According to the government, the main aim of the policy is “to put an end to the practices of shifting cultivation by giving the farmers alternative sustainable land-based activities through the New Land Use Policy” (NLUP 2009, 2). The plan was executed by the State Forest Department; 6,086 families were assisted in establishing commercial plantations. However, after the policy proved ineffective, it was terminated in 1989–90 (Lianzela 2003).

In 1987, the NLUP was replaced by the Jhum Control Project, sponsored directly by the National Development Council of India. Under the State Agricultural Department, pilot projects in Aibawk Block and Tuipang Block were introduced in 1987–88 and 1990–92 respectively. Of the 1,936 participants, 47 percent opted for horticulture, 20 percent for animal husbandry, 10 percent for wet rice cultivation, 9 percent for coffee plantation, and 5 percent for cottage industries (Mizoram 1991). This project was

also soon discontinued. Under the auspices of the Rural Development Department, the NLUP was implemented once more between 1990 and 1991, targeting mainly families that depended solely on jhum cultivation and families that did not have stable livelihoods. Mizoram was divided into various circles, and assistance (in the form of 30,000 Indian rupees) was provided to each family. The government distributed over 132 crores rupees<sup>1</sup> (approximately 24 million US dollars) to 41,000 beneficiaries (Mizoram, 2000). However, the program did not formulate specific goals to be achieved within the stipulated time. It neither improved the forest landscape nor encouraged the jhum cultivators' alternative livelihoods. The extent of the shifts in cultivation in NLUP blocks is demonstrated by the fact that, while the West Phaileng Circle showed a decline in jhum areas from 2,954 ha in 1989–90 to 2,100 ha in 1994–95 (a 29 percent decrease), other areas, such as Sairang, witnessed an increase of 72 percent (from 690 ha to 1,185 ha). Kanghmun experienced an increase of 106 percent (185 ha to 382 ha).

State statistics clearly show extensive mismanagement on the part of the government. For instance, in the West Phaileng block, there were only 3,733 houses (1991 census), but the number of recorded NLUP beneficiaries was 5,445 (Singh 2009). There were similar cases in the Khawzawl and Lungsen Blocks, where NLUP beneficiaries exceeded the number of total households.<sup>2</sup> The program was once again terminated in 2000–01 without having generated any fruitful results.

In 2000, with the formation of the new ministry (the Mizo National Front), the project was reformulated and named the Mizoram Intodelhna Project (Project for the Self-Sufficiency of the Rural Poor). Assistance was provided in the form of 50,000 Indian rupees per family (around 900 US dollars). One of the objectives was “to liberate the *jhumias* from their drudgery so that they may have a more dignified standard of life” (Lianzela 2008), yet the project gives no explanation for this negative view of jhum cultivation.

In 2008, the new government (the Congress Party) re-introduced the NLUP for a period of ten years. The Indian Central Government recently set aside 2,416 crores rupees (435 million US dollars) for the project. In the first five years of the project, the

1 One crore rupees is 10 million rupees.

2 According to the 1991 census, the number of total houses in Lungsen was 4847, while NLUP beneficiaries were recorded as 5079. The number of houses in Khawzawl was 8526, whereas NLUP beneficiaries exceeded 9096.

NLUP—with the support of the Departments of Agriculture, Horticulture, Industries, Forests, Fisheries, Sericulture, and Soil and Water Conservation—aims to support 120,000 families.

### **Mistrust of the State**

The NLUP is being promoted in Mizoram on the basis that it will improve rural livelihoods. However, we are contesting such a claim: we argue that the Indian Government's intention is to follow liberal economic policies rather than to improve the lives of rural populations. Through our fieldwork, we have discovered that the goals of the NLUP contradict themselves. The NLUP has been in place as an experiment for the past several years, but there is tremendous cause for concern, as the failure of the project would seriously erode the credibility of the government. And there are far more worrying matters.

The NLUP operates in such a way as to disrupt the well-organized system of jhum cultivation. As government roles increase, the community's role in the management of the environment is reduced. As people lose their responsibilities, they also begin to lose confidence in their communities, and thus in their ability to safeguard the traditional ethical code (or *lawmngaihna*) and to regulate their customary laws. In this way, people become increasingly dependent on government management programs. Moreover, the policy “works out to be a high-cost activity, requiring not only high investment, but also high recurring expenses” (Singh 2009, 298–315). Under the government's policy, the majority of cultivators grew cash crops (among other activities), while, paradoxically, they continued to depend on jhum cultivation for food production. Mizoram is too heterogeneous, both socially and politically, for the government's policy to be successful. During the implementation of the NLUP system, power struggles between state bureaucracy and local village councils have increased. It is difficult for the jhum cultivator to trust an administration that has yet to prove its credibility. Such distrust also arises from the historical trajectory of top-down development plans, which provided neither incentives nor opportunity for growth. A serious challenge to the regional development of Mizoram is posed by the underlying mistrust felt by local populations towards government agencies, engendered by the political favoritism and the misuse of public funds present in the system.

## Voicing Concerns

Local populations frequently raise their voices against new regulations imposed by hegemonic state projects, which indicates that their voices are “poorly reflected in the formulation of national laws and policies, [and that] they may also receive little consideration in judicial decision making” (Poffenberger 2007, 2). Others (local elites, local political party workers, NGOs, and so on) speak for them, very often misrepresenting and distorting reality to suit their respective interests.

The main contradiction is in the state’s “claiming to promote indigeneity, while blaming indigenous practices for the demise of the environment” (Kumar 2008, 139). Finally, discussions of jhum have always been led by actors outside of the jhum space, a practice that reinforces stereotypes and leads to a misunderstanding of the system. The exclusive nature of the state-sponsored policies also erases the jhum cultivators’ agency and their voices. The views of the jhum cultivators are always excluded when the discussion is conducted in the language of science; no space is reserved for them to take part in such discourses. We therefore conclude that efforts to locate jhum cultivator agency amid various power coalitions are crucial for scholars currently working on jhum cultivation.

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