



RISING ASIA
JOURNAL



RISING ASIA
FOUNDATION

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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WEANING HILL TRIBES OFF THE POPPY **“Shifting Cultivation” in the Hill Areas of** **the State of Manipur**

ABSTRACT

The Manipur government’s intense drive to destroy poppy plantations under its ‘War on Drugs’ campaign since 2018 has, to an extent, borne some good results. The proximity of the state to the Golden Triangle, the 398 km porous border that the state shares with Myanmar and accounts for the illicit cultivation of poppy. The transformation of the state from a hotspot on the drug trafficking route to a drug producing state is highly alarming. An effective measure to prevent the illicit cultivation of poppy is to enable the hill tribes to earn adequate income from the centuries old practice of “shifting cultivation” (jhum or slash and burn) by modernizing this ancient practice. The state government’s development programs in the hill areas need to be sincerely implemented. This can become away of weaning the hill tribes off poppy cultivation.

KEYWORDS

Poppy Cultivation, War on Drugs, Golden Triangle, Jhum Cultivation

RISING ASIA JOURNAL.

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 1 (WINTER/SPRING) JANUARY TO APRIL 2025.

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In the Saikul sub-division of Kangpokpi district of Manipur, an anonymous source declared in an informal interview with the author in June 2023 that poppy cultivation was rampant in this part of the district but it had now halted due to the prevailing ethnic violence in the state.¹ He further stated that the widespread illicit cultivation of poppy had the approval of the chiefs and the involvement of the militants. It is the same case in other hill regions of Churachandpur district as well, where the large-scale cultivation of poppy has halted in the present ongoing ethnic conflict in the state of Manipur, according to another anonymous source.²



Figure 1. A poppy field in a hill area of Manipur in 2023.

¹ Note, at the request of the interviewees, the author conducted her interviews anonymously. Author's telephonic interview with an anonymous source on June 12, 2023.

² Author's telephonic interview with an anonymous source on June 17, 2023.

1. The Worrying Facts of Poppy Cultivation

It is to be noted that the state shares a 398-kilometer porous border with Myanmar which is the world's second largest producer of opium. The state is close to the 'Golden Triangle' of drug production—Laos, Thailand and Myanmar. The northern tip of Myanmar's Chin state is some 60 kilometers from Moreh, a border town located on the Indo-Myanmar border, and Churachandpur district of Manipur, is just 65 kilometers from the Chin state border of Myanmar. With the presence of a conducive climate, a fertile soil, and the required topography, it is not surprising that poppy cultivation by hill farmers has been on the rise. Shifting cultivation, or jhum cultivation, has failed to give them an adequate income for a better standard of living, and there is inadequate support or no support from the state machinery with regard to developmental schemes and programs reaching them. Poppy cultivation which assures buyback, where the opium extracted is taken back by the financiers or the middlemen who invest in the poppy cultivation, and the unmatched returns have encouraged many of the tribal farmers to carry on this illicit cultivation. "If farmers grow fruits and vegetables, they make Rs. 200,000 a year, when they grow poppy, they make Rs. 1,000,000," as told by a senior police official (Matharu 2022).

According to the state government's estimate, one acre of land can yield poppy worth Rs. 1 million to Rs. 1.2 million. For most villagers, such huge margins make the risk worth it (Matharu 2022). The extent of land used to grow poppy has increased from 1,853 acres to 67,428 acres in five years (2017-2022) according to state data (Matharu 2022). Besides the ecological destruction that it brings, there is also an alarming increase in the setting up of makeshift processing factories for the conversion of opium into brown sugar and heroin. These substances are pumped into towns and villages of the state where children as young

as ten are exposed to them. The alarming gravity of poppy cultivation is that the extraction of opium is no longer the ultimate goal; instead, the further processing of opium into brown sugar and heroin is taking place within the state itself.

The state which was initially a transit route, from and to other states and regions, has now transformed itself into a producing state. The porous border has led to the free movement of people to and from Myanmar. Manipur and the northeast Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh share a long international border with Kachin state, Sagaing region, and Chin state of Myanmar which are all opium producing areas. While poppy cultivation has declined in Myanmar, it has significantly increased in Manipur over the last fifteen years (Bobichand 2022). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found “very high poppy cultivation density of more than 6 acres per square kilometer at the northern tip of Myanmar’s Chin state which is some 60 kilometers from Moreh, a border town located on the Indo Myanmar border in Tengnoupal district of Manipur. Churachandpur district, too, is just 65 kilometers from the Chin state border, where there is a dense concentration of poppy fields.

After a study was conducted on sixty households from three hill districts in Manipur—Kangpokpi, Churachandpur, and Tengnoupal that engage in illegal poppy cultivation, the major finding was that poverty, food security, and material needs are the drivers of illegal cultivation of poppy (Kipgen 2019). An anonymous source from Changoubung village in Kangpokpi district of Manipur who is a poppy cultivator states that poppy cultivation is prohibited in the village (based on an informal interview conducted by the author for the purpose of post-doctoral research work on poppy cultivation).



Figure 2. Poppy plants at the budding stage in a hill area Manipur in 2023.

The anonymous source reveals that the villagers earlier engaged in charcoal making, but they stopped doing so due to environmental concerns, adding that charcoal making is considered illegal now. Many youngsters like her have been engaged by certain individuals on some poppy fields in other villages which fall within the Kangpokpi district to cut the poppy pods and scrape the dried latex from the pods. She was lured into this because she needed some money to buy her essentials as her parents could not afford her expenses. She was able to earn a daily wage of Rs. 400. She also stated that there were others who could earn more than her. And there were still others who were involved in sowing

and other phases of poppy cultivation. There is a supervisor who looks after the whole cultivation and earns way more than any of the cultivators. There is no steady source of income for the family and she is not aware of the developmental schemes implemented by the state government. Her parents are involved with the village community in shifting cultivation and her father also works as a construction laborer in another village.



Figure 3. Poppy plants at the flowering stage in a hill area of Manipur in 2023.

2. Recent Manipur Government Initiatives in Developing the Hill Districts

The impediments to hill development in the state are manifold. Much has been planned by every state government in power from time to time, and efforts have been made as well, but the real impact of all these measures still needs to be seen. The hill districts essentially require adequate infrastructural facilities such as road, transportation, market, post-harvest handling, and electricity with respect to the agriculture sector. The successive governments' developmental schemes and programs have failed spectacularly to reach the scattered population in the far-flung hill regions of the state for many decades. This has contributed to the poverty of the hill people of the state. However, the recent initiatives of the present government in the form of "Go to Hills" and "Go to Village" are the laudable ones.

"Go to Hills 2.0" is a second round of the state government's initiative to further strengthen and intensify the effective implementation of the developmental schemes and programs in the remote and far-flung areas of the hill districts of Manipur. The primary objective of "Go to Hills" is to deliver the welfare schemes under different departments of the state such as PMAY (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana), PMJAY (Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana), and livelihood support schemes for those affected by COVID-19, besides the state government health scheme such as CMHT whose full title is Chief Minister's Health Takselgi Tengbang (Samom, 2021). A big question hovers over the effective implementation of the developmental schemes at the ground level. For this, the governmental machinery at the grassroots levels—district, sub-division, and village—have to efficiently perform their allotted tasks to bring all the initiatives to fruition.



The government's 'War on Drugs' is a laudable effort involving massive ongoing eradication drives undertaken from time to time to end the thriving illicit plantation of poppy. As per government statistics, 14,315 acres of illicit poppy cultivated mostly in the hills were destroyed by security forces during 2017–2021, in the previous term of the Bharatiya Janata Party government under the 'War on Drugs' campaign (Zahan, 2021). The chief minister, N. Biren Singh, has allocated a team of at least 100 police personnel in each district to uproot and destroy poppy plants. The government has roped in the Narcotics and Affairs of Border (NAB), Anti-Narcotics Department, Manipur Police, Assam Rifles, non-profit organizations like Coalition Against Drugs and Alcohol (CADA) and various tribal groups to destroy poppy cultivations. In September 2023 the state government reconstituted an Anti-Narcotic Task Force (ANTF) adding more teeth to it for survey, verification, and destruction of illegal poppy cultivation in the state. The move was prompted by advice from the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), the nodal agency for drug law enforcement in the country. The new team includes agriculture, forensics, and cybercrime experts ("Manipur Adds Teeth to Anti-Narc Force to battle 'Golden Triangle,'" 2023).

A former chief minister of Manipur, O. Ibobi Singh, delivered a speech at the 57th meeting of the National Development Council on December 27, 2012, emphasizing the large potential for horticulture in the North Eastern Region generally and Manipur specifically. The viability of orchards and plantations in the hill areas of the North Eastern Region was stressed, and so the desire was put forth to provide a thrust to this important sector in a draft paper. The present government of Manipur also launched "Alternative Farming System for Tribal Jhumias/Poppy Planters" in December 2022 in ten districts of the state (Churachandpur, Pherzawl, Noney, Tamenglong, Senapati, Kangpokpi,



Ukhrul, Kamjong, Tengnoupal and Chandel). It was organized by the Eastern Border Areas Development Authority (EBDA) of the government of Manipur, under the funding of the North Eastern Council (NEC) in Shillong that comes under the government of India (Salle, 2022). It aims to provide training to the tribal communities on organic farming, mixed crop farming, and seed management to promote sustainable farming. It also distributed Rabi crops seeds, nursery items, tools and equipment to seventeen registered farmers' societies from the hill districts in December 2022. However, it still needs to be seen as to whether these initiatives will ultimately lead to the desired positive outcome in the years to come.

It is important to cite an example of Peh village in Ukhrul district which has successfully planted ginger and maize as alternatives to poppy cultivation and are reaping an abundant harvest. The potential for apple and kiwi plantations has also been identified. The village was awarded Rs. 1 million in February 2021 by the chief minister in appreciation of its efforts in completely destroying poppy plantations. A new scheme called "Cultivation of Horticulture Crops as an Alternative to Poppy Cultivation in Hill Areas" was launched under the "War on Drugs 2.0" (June, 2022). It aims to provide financial assistance, farm inputs, and marketing assistance to farmers to produce these crops. The brand "Manifresh" was launched under which organic produce from the hills will be marketed. A sum of Rs. 40 million has been sanctioned for this scheme. With the TRIFED (the Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India) initiative which is committed to transform the lives of tribals in India, more than 400 Self Help Groups have been formed in the state employing around 50,000 tribal women mainly in food processing. The chief minister also stated that many outlets for selling

the products have been formed outside the state. (“Manipur Government launches Cultivation of Horticulture Crops,” 2022).

3. A Look into the Centuries-old Jhum Cultivation or Shifting Cultivation

After independence, the central government embarked on a policy to commercialize Indian agriculture and weed out all forms of self-subsistence farming including “jhum” (Das, 2006). The problem of “shifting cultivation” as developed by the official discourse received adequate attention, and in the 1950s the first attempts were made by the then Assam government through the introduction of plantation crops of rubber, coffee, black pepper, and cashew nut. Additional programs were introduced in the Fifth Five-year Plan—Soil Conservation Scheme in the state plan, Centrally Sponsored Schemes for controlling “shifting cultivation,” and Regional River Basin schemes under the North Eastern Council. There were shortcomings in the approaches or the policies adopted by the government and its agencies to control “shifting Cultivation” since the beginning as these were generated by a policy directive that presupposed “jhum” to be a “necessary evil” and an impediment to the “development” of the hill people. The researchers presupposed that the tribal system of subsistence was always inferior to the modern system of agronomy developed in agricultural research institutions. This assumption clearly showed lack of consideration for the tribal way of life: their attachment to land, their customs, and code of conduct of the community (Das 2006).

The tribals in the hill districts of Manipur have been practicing “jhum cultivation” which has been their main source of sustenance for a very long time. Jhum cultivation or “Pam Lou” which is a vital part of the way of life of the tribals is the most primitive, labor intensive, rainfed

system. It is a cyclic cultivation in which a patch of land is cleared off trees and other vegetation, the debris is burned, and seeds are broadcast or dibbled in minimum tillage conditions without using plough or animal power (Hiamguanglung, 2014). Also, varieties of cereals and vegetables together with tree crops are grown in a single field. After cultivation of crops for a shorter period, the land remains fallow for a longer period for regeneration of vegetation and soil nutrients until the cycle repeats itself. Due to more demand for food because of increase in population, the fallow period has been shortened, thereby affecting productivity of the crops.

But the fact of the matter is that jhum cultivation can no longer be ascribed as the main source of livelihood in modern times. It cannot be sustained further without adverse effects on the ecology and economy of the hill region because of increased population pressure on land, the shorter fallow period, the loss of the fertility of the soil, and the declining per capita availability of land. Nonetheless, anthropologists and sociologists emphasize the close symbiotic relationship between shifting cultivation and the tribal life and culture. Instead, they advocate adapting it to the changing environment. There is an ongoing debate between those in support of it and those against it. The difficulty is that although jhum cultivation needs to be replaced by scientific settled cultivation for sustaining the jhum cultivators at a desirable standard of life, settled cultivation is considered to be a costly and a time-consuming process. Settled cultivation has no clear advantage over jhum in terms of returns and also it requires large investment (Ninan 1992).

This is evident from the outcome of a project launched as far back in 1987. It was a Rs. 750 million-project of the government of India to wean tribals away from shifting cultivation. It was called “the Jhum Control Scheme” and covered thirteen states and union territories



including the North Eastern States. Each family was given 2 acres of land for agriculture or horticulture, a share in the community fuel, fodder, social forestry and other plantations. Ownership rights were vested in the tribals. About Rs. 30,000 was spent on the rehabilitation of every family. To resettle all the families, it would take 20 years and a sum of Rs. 30 billion at 1983 prices. Also, technology upgradation for hill agriculture should be such that it is suitable to the region. Thus, it is a misplaced conception that settled cultivation, be it terrace cultivation etc., offers a ray of hope for the development of the hill areas and the tribals.

The development of the hill regions and its people is intrinsically linked to the pace with which there is economic diversification of economic activities in the hill regions. However, jhum cultivation cannot be ascribed as the main source of livelihood. This is substantiated by a case study in Tamenglong district of Manipur where it was found that with jhum cultivation, about 550 kg of paddy per acre of land was produced while in the valley with mechanization, production of rice rose two times, and in the terraces, production was one-half times more than that of jhum cultivation (Hiamguanglung 2014). So, the hill tribals engaged in other economic activities such as farm diversification in the form of growing of cash crops (fruits and non-fruit crops), keeping livestock, and other non-farm activities such as weaving, carpentry, and handicraft to supplement their income and maintain their standard of living. However, to reiterate a strong point in favor of jhum cultivation, it must be recognized that it is not just an economic activity, but it also has a social dimension where communitarian spirit is maintained (Pou, 2011). It has a religious dimension as well where the relationships with Gods and Spirits are maintained. Complete eradication of jhum cultivation is not possible, but upgradation and modernization of jhum cultivation is desirable. Research has to be built on a strong relationship

between social actors and the pooling of age-old local technical knowledge with new knowledge from science and technology.

Daman Singh, in her book, *The Last Frontier: People and Forests in Mizoram*, points out that

the jhum system in which the land is cultivated for a year causes less soil and water erosion than modern systems of agriculture or horticulture. The relatively low extent and intensity of cultivation together with rapid regeneration does not result in any climatic change due to deforestation in the jhum. The use of burnt vegetation makes far more economic and financial sense than the application of chemical fertilizer. The act of burning has many benefits other than building up soil fertility and is an operation normally carried out with reasonable care (Pou 2021).

A study conducted as a part of the project “Mapping of Socio-economic and Livelihood Patterns of Jhumi as in North Eastern Hill Region of India,” funded by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), New Delhi, found that poverty leads to strong dependency on forest activities which sustain shifting cultivation. Also, tribals continue to practice shifting cultivation due to the lack of other opportunities to ensure food security of their households and the absence of off-farm employment opportunities in the villages.

The nature-man connection is rooted in the tribal lifestyle and culture. People of Garo hills have used their traditional ecological knowledge to manage their lands with the long fallow system. Such practice of shifting cultivation is generally sustainable. In 2005, a seminar on Shifting Cultivation held at the Indian Council of Agriculture Research Complex, Barapani emphasized that alternative systems of

agricultural practice have to be adopted by the tribal communities dependent on jhum cultivation. However, the alternatives suggested were not 'culture specific' as these do not suit the needs of a particular region and were too expensive to be adopted by the poor farmers. In certain villages of Meghalaya, the state policies to free farmers from this age-old practice were not successful. According to P.S. Ramakrishna, a strong critic of the development of alternative settled farming system in the North East, "any development strategy for the region has necessarily to be centred on jhum in the absence of a viable alternative" (Das 2006, p. 4915). Jhum cultivation is inseparably linked with the socio-economic and socio-cultural aspect of the life of the tribal population (Ibid). The solution is not a complete end of jhum cultivation and adoption of an alternative farming system, but the solution has to be based on incremental build up of traditional ecological knowledge. The organized farming on terraced hill slopes, suggested as solution, has not been able to take off for ecological, economic, and socio-cultural reasons (Ibid).

4. The Government's Efforts for Jhum Improvement in the North East

An improved or upgraded shifting cultivation is one way to enable the tribals of the hill districts of the state to harness a viable or a sustainable income for supporting the needs of their families. There are many success stories of improved or reformed practice of shifting cultivation in the state of Nagaland with the combined efforts of both the Central and the State governments. Jhum cultivation has socio-cultural importance in the lives of the tribals. Thus, the need of the hour is to modify and improve it in a scientific way by using modern agricultural technology in order to enhance productivity and meet the necessities of the jhumias. Some important measures/approaches that can improve

shifting cultivation, which were taken up in the state of Nagaland with positive outcomes, are: Integrated farming system, agroforestry, contour bunding/bench terracing/contour drenching, use of high yielding variety, better fallow management, crop rotation which is the introduction of non-traditional crops (wheat, barley, peas, etc) after the traditional crops (rice, maize, millet, etc), use of high value, low-volume crops, retention of valuable and immature crops/pruning of trees, etc (Rajkhowa, et al. 2017).

Some other suggestions that have come up in studies on the hill regions of the state of Manipur are the use of legumes to replace rice from jhum areas as they restored nitrogen in the soil, improved the soil health, reduced the soil loss, conserved the soil and water, and suppressed weed growth through smothering effects (Rajkhowa, et al. 2017). The diversification into rice mixed farming with legumes and pulses needs to be promoted among the jhumi for jhum improvement. Suggestions were made for location-specific, suitable livelihood activities to be promoted in order to increase the fallow period. A strong need for social participation of the jhumias through the setting up of social groups like Self Help Groups was also observed. The focus of the state governments of the North Eastern Region, with the support of the central government, must be on methods to upgrade and develop jhum through the role of agro forestry, sericulture, and horticulture as supplementary activities.

5. Conclusion

There is the common apprehension that the Golden Triangle has shifted to the state of Manipur as it undergoes transformation from a transit route to a producing and a manufacturing state. In this context, it is logical that the state adopts an effective law to tackle the drug menace as



the law has to be formulated in accordance with the specific needs and challenges faced by the state. The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substance, NDPS Act (1985) may not be appropriate for the state. If required, the act may be altered for its adequate implementation in the state. These were some of the suggestions highlighted by experts in the panel discussions held by the state news channel on December 25, 2022 (Laishram, et al., “How Can We Stop Poppy Cultivation”). As for the replacement of poppy plants, the Horticulture Department of the state has to bring in certain high-value crops in its place. It will be the main duty of the Horticulture and the Agriculture Departments to get their acts together to decide upon certain high value crops to be grown in the hills.

It is important to cite here the experience of Arunachal Pradesh with regard to the efforts of the government of Arunachal Pradesh in curtailing the cultivation of poppy plants. In Medo village, 27 km from Tezu, located over 300 km from Itanagar, pumpkin cultivation has replaced the illicit growing of poppy seeds. The state government encouraged the farmers to cultivate other lucrative crops including ginger, mustard and tea. Developmental schemes in the form of the “Atma Nirbhar Krishi Yojana” and “Atma Nirbhar Bagwani Yojana” were introduced in 2021 by the state government. The government thereby allocated Rs. 600 million to each cultivation (“Grow Pumpkin to End Illegal Poppy Cultivation”, 2022). The Arunachal state Deputy Chief Minister, Chowna Mein, also suggested a “drastic” policy of contract farming with buy-back provision, so that farmers can sell their produce easily without depending on potential buyers. This needs to be adopted to eliminate opium cultivation.

The state government of Manipur also needs to come out with similar policies and programs for which there is a need for budgetary

allocations to bring all the efforts to fruition. A mere campaign of “War on Drugs” with the continuous cycle of destruction of poppy plants and its cultivation coming up somewhere else again, will only make the cycle continue. This will not bring about the desired outcome to end poppy cultivation in the hills of Manipur. A budget on the “War on Drugs” campaign has to be in place. The administrative machinery has to be strengthened with the creation of a separate task force specifically for the purpose. In this case the reconstitution of the Anti-Narcotics Task Force by the government of Manipur on September 23, 2023 is worth applauding. But it still has to be seen how effective the role of this force will be on the ground in the coming days (“Manipur Adds Teeth to Anti-Narc force,” 2023).

The hill development in the state of Manipur is possible with improved or reformed shifting cultivation and other schemes and programs of the state government with the support of the central government to provide additional opportunities for income generation. This can bring about the engagement of more hill farmers with it, and help in weaning away many of them from illicit poppy cultivation. As discussed, there are many field studies carried out in the North East Region where the viability of improved and sustainable shifting cultivation, supplemented by various rural development schemes and programs, can mitigate to a great extent the adverse ecological consequences as well as the inconsistency and the insufficiency in income generation from it. The lack of effective action on the part of the government of the state for so many years on these issues is one of the important factors that explain why illegal poppy cultivation started and became rampant in the hill areas of the state of Manipur.



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