

Shifting Ground? State and market in the uplands of Northeast India

Landlessness and rural deprivation have historically been virtually absent in the uplands of Northeast India. Currently, due to the increasing presence of a monetarised market oriented economy, rural destitution is becoming an everyday reality. Previously, *jhum* or swidden cultivation would produce subsistence crops such as rice in abundance, but in many places that is no longer the case. Steep population growth, increasing popular demand for cash and large-scale state interventions have resulted in a growing pressure on *jhum* land. Forced by the substantial investments that the commercialization of agricultural production demands, and a need for cash more generally, *jhum* farmers are increasingly in need of credit, creating indebtedness and even alienation of land.

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Above: Rain clouds at the start of the swiddening season.

IN INDIA, shifting cultivation has been controversial for decades. To administrators, agronomists and conservationists, it has primarily been primitive, wasteful and inefficient. "(...) [A]n extravagant and unscientific form of land use", that is "degrading the environment and ecology", as some critics put it.¹ Even as policymakers point out the precarious nature of this agricultural method, anthropologists and environmentalists have identified shifting cultivation as a technique that is exceptionally well suited for the uplands climate and soil, and ecologically sustainable.² Obviously, growing population pressure, and the acquisition of land for other agricultural purposes, has reduced the viability of *jhum* cultivation. But even as the odds are against it, people make great efforts to continue the practice. Encroaching upon areas that were hitherto uncultivated, *jhum* farmers move towards steeper slopes, and less fertile plots.

How can this sustained commitment towards *jhum* farming be explained, particularly since an increasing number of studies also show that subsistence peasants are rapidly becoming landless daily wage labourers or migrant workers in urban centres across India? What can we learn from these developments regarding the radical transformations that the economies and societies of the uplands are subjected to?³

The critics of shifting cultivation continue to be vocal and well represented both among policymakers and in the public domain, and quite a few government policies are in place intended to discourage it. Large-scale programmes have been initiated aimed at the expansion of capital-intensive commercial crops, such as rubber and tea, to improve the profitability of upland agriculture. In addition, and to some extent contradictory to these measures, over the 15 years or so several initiatives to sustain and improve shifting cultivation have also gained ground in Northeast India. From the middle of the 1990s onwards, the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) has worked with the North Eastern Council in the North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project for Upland Areas, encouraging community development projects (in Meghalaya, Manipur, and parts of Assam). Comparable projects have started in Nagaland: the Canadian sponsored Nagaland Empowerment of People through Economic Development (NEPED), as well as a large program funded by the UNDP (Sustainable Land and Ecosystem

Management in Shifting Cultivation Areas of Nagaland for Ecological and Livelihood Security). In 2011, the World Bank-supported North East Rural Livelihoods Project (NERLP) started, which aims to improve rural livelihoods in Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.

These various development interventions draw our attention towards the uneasy equation between shifting cultivators and the state. For decades, contractors, traders, and agents from the Brahmaputra valley and beyond exploited the hills for timber, bamboo, sand, pebbles and other natural resources. Yet, from the perspective of the state, the hills used to be places with little economic value and its societies as self-sufficient and simple. It was only with the large-scale hydrocarbon and hydro-dam projects that the hills were pushed into visibility as a significant economic zone. For example, a huge number of hydroelectric dams are in the process of being constructed (168 dams of 25 MW or more have been scheduled for Northeast India⁴), while mining is likely to expand significantly as well (oil and gas reserves in Manipur and Nagaland). In addition, Northeast India has been and is at the centre of national policies such as earlier 'Look East' and more recently 'Act East', that propose to open up the region as a corridor to forge land-based connections (road, rail, pipelines) between South Asia and China. These developments have a great impact on the uplands in terms of economy, demography, and resource utilization.

The increasing state encapsulation of the uplands of Northeast India has many consequences. As road connectivity improves, private educational facilities develop, and the electrical grid is extended, people increasingly aspire towards modernity. The conspicuous absence of the state as a service rendering entity, notwithstanding its overwhelming visibility as a security force in the region, has resulted in a growing presence of private players. Private health care, educational institutes, loan companies, and consumer agencies have produced a debt culture and rural populations across the hill states of Northeast India are increasingly becoming indebted and are mortgaging homes, *jhum* lands and crops in order to attend to health emergencies or children's education, or to pay agents for securing jobs in urban centres across India and abroad.

The growing demand for cash is gradually drawing subsistence cultivators from the uplands deeper into a money

and market oriented economy. In this new economy, they are becoming visible as the poor, dispossessed, and the landless. It is within this context that the ongoing state interventions to integrate the *jhum* uplands need to be examined. Particularly measures aimed at the promotion of plantation economy and the commercialization of crops in the uplands appear to be dangerous since these undermine the political texture of local communities.

Jhum in the uplands

The uplands of the eastern Himalayas and its hilly southward extensions have over the last decades been subject to extensive 'state-making'.⁵ This region, a single ecological zone, is criss-crossed by the international borders of India, China, Bangladesh and Burma/Myanmar. These states are actively consolidating their borders, and expanding their political and economic presence in the once semi or 'lightly' administered uplands. Throughout these uplands, shifting cultivation has historically been an important economic activity.

Shifting cultivation, as the name suggests, is a method of farming on temporary fields. Throughout a growth season, which lasts for about six to eight months, the rain-fed fields carry both subsistence crops (such as maize, vegetables, pulses, rice, tubers) and cash crops (such as cotton, ginger, turmeric). The sheer diversity of these crops, and their ripening over a period of several months, spreads the risk of a failed harvest. The seeds are derived from previous harvests (no dependency on seed merchants), and many are unique varieties, that are well attuned to the specificities of soil and climate. The fields are abandoned after one or two years of cultivation, allowing shrubs and trees to grow back. People then cultivate a next plot. The alternation between periods of 'cultivation' and 'fallow' ensures the continuation of a jungle cover that helps to maintain biodiversity.⁶ The longer the rotational cycle, the better the harvest. But where this cycle would previously encompass ten to fifteen years, increased population pressure in many places has brought it down to three to four years, or even less. As a result, harvests are becoming less prosperous, and the pressure on the environment is increasing.

A major trend in the region is the creation of small-scale plantations that are permanently cultivated. This triggers the break up of communal land tenure, replacing it by individual

ownership. The privatization of land titles provides individual upland cultivators with a valuable asset (land) that can be mortgaged, sold and bought. Growing income disparities, land alienation, and out-migration are a consequence. On a different note, the growing popularity of new religious groups weakens the redistributive mechanisms embedded in society, resulting in communities becoming increasingly stratified along economic lines.

Although the distribution of resources such as land continues to be based on preceding social patterns, the current economic developments result in a redefinition of terms of entitlement. This is best articulated in those parts of Northeast India that are exposed to a substantial in-flow of capital, be it as part of large scale territorialized resource exploitation (hydroelectric dams, mining), the in-flow of development related money, or the increasing importance of plantation crops such as tea, coffee and rubber. While the initiatives aimed to increase the sustainability and profitability of shifting cultivation mentioned above intend to specifically benefit the rural poor, recent research suggests that even these projects inevitably contribute to the growth of income disparities.⁷

Towards a trans-regional perspective

Compared to Northeast India, shifting cultivators of the Chittagong Hill Tracts have very limited access to capital and markets, resulting in the perseverance of prior social and economic arrangements. The same holds for the Chin Hills of Burma/Myanmar, reputedly one of the most deprived regions of that country. There, people who depend entirely on swidden cultivation tend to be poor, but can nevertheless have a high level of food security (as among the Konyak Naga, or in parts of the Chittagong Hills tracts), due to the variety of crops that can be harvested spread across many months. Does this explain the remarkable commitment of shifting cultivators to absorb 'statist' efforts aimed at controlling their 'traditional' practices, and to continue with these against many odds?

Upland communities, as 'state evaders', have a history of self-governance.⁸ Their encapsulation by the states of which they have become part in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries has resulted in complex legal configurations that encompass both customary laws as well as state laws. The extent to which localized customary arrangements are recognized at the state level differ significantly. For instance, official land records exist only for certain parts of the uplands. Where there are no land records, as in most of Arunachal Pradesh, but also in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Chin Hills, the state informally recognizes customary arrangements. Such arrangements are vulnerable, since they can easily be challenged when competing claims to land are advanced by commercial companies or the state. The contiguous uplands of Northeast India, Burma/Myanmar and the Chittagong Hills Tracts constitute the 'last enclosure':⁹ perhaps the last area in the world that due to its earlier impenetrable terrain has remained outside the realm of state administrations, national laws, and the commercialization of natural resources. Bringing development to the uplands implies their integration in lowland oriented political and administrative schemes, and an opening up of their resources for national if not global extraction.

India, Bangladesh and Burma/Myanmar are advancing hegemonic claims over the uplands that have triggered the emergence of ethnic movements that counter these claims. In turn, this has resulted in (frequently violent) counter reactions from the various states. States have also confronted upland ethnicity in other ways. In India, government policies distribute large amounts of subsidies along 'ethnic' lines (in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Chin Hills, ethnicity has not become a vehicle for preferential discrimination). This has resulted in political appreciation for local cultural practices, languages, and social institutions. On the flip side, ethnic politics have contributed to the reification of differences and the reiteration of exclusionary visions and political claims. These have also set the stage for developmentalist interventions in which ethnic elites play a central role.¹⁰ Significantly, the impact of ethnic policies on state-regulated development and capitalist interventions still goes largely unacknowledged, and the political dimensions of ethnicity are urgently in need of being explored.



Above: Bringing in cotton that has been harvested from the swiddens.

Below: Producers selling ginger to merchants at a local market.

All photos by Erik de Maaker.

Conclusions

Jhum farmers in Northeast India face increasing economic pressure, which challenges existing social and political textures. The increasing presence of the modern state in Northeast India and the growth of market oriented monetarised economic activities marginalizes jhum agriculture. Yet, people go to great lengths to continue to cultivate swiddens. One reason for this seems to lie in the fact that this long-proven agricultural technique keeps them – at least partly – outside the realm of the market. While market prices fluctuate, subsistence jhum crops retain their food-value. In addition, jhum cultivation seems to provide much more than a subsistence base, since it also allows for the anchoring of social and political configurations that connect the present to the past. Particularly in this latter respect, the relevance of jhum cultivation has so far remained ill-understood. Gaining better insights in its continuing, yet changing, social and economic relevance is a requirement for a better appreciation of the radical transformations that the Northeast Indian uplands are currently subjected to.

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References

- 1 Ranjan, R. & V.P. Upadhyay. 1999. "Ecological problems due to shifting cultivation", *Current Science* 77(10):1246-1250.
- 2 Ramakrishnan, P.S. 2007. "Traditional forest knowledge and sustainable forestry: A north-east India perspective", *Forest Ecology and Management* 249(1-2):91-99.
- 3 In November 2014 a group of concerned social scientists, NGO-related policymakers and journalists committed to the uplands met at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Guwahati, in an attempt to trace the impact of current developments

on the uplands. Pooling expertise and knowledge beyond the boundaries of discipline and profession, the workshop aimed to locate gaps in the current perspectives on the uplands, and identify themes that demand urgent academic attention. Whereas most of the participants are involved with Northeast India, the presence of scholars working on the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Bangladesh) and the Chin Hills (Burma/Myanmar) allowed for an extension of the canvas to encompass the larger zone that these contiguous uplands constitute. The Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the Netherlands Research Council (NWO) sponsored the workshop under the 'Social Science Scholar Exchange scheme'.

- 4 Sahgal, B. (ed.) 2003. "Large dams in Northeast India rivers, forests, people and power", *The Ecologist Asia* 11(1).
- 5 'State-making' in peripheral and disputed border zones such as Northeast India can be understood as 'nationalizing space': political, administrative and economic integration achieved through the extension of state institutions, legal frameworks and developmental programs (Baruah, S. 2005. *Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India*, Oxford University Press, p.38).
- 6 Northeast India is included in the *Eastern Himalaya Biodiversity Hotspot*, as defined by the influential US based NGO Conservation International (<http://www.conservation.org/how/pages/hotspots.aspx>)
- 7 International Fund for Agricultural Development. 2006 (June). *Interim Evaluation, North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project for Upland Areas*, (No. 1730-IN).
- 8 The peripheral position of upland communities in relation to 'states' need not be seen as a being 'left out' of lowland based civilizations, but rather as the result of a conscious effort to remain as much as possible outside the sphere of influence of such states (Scott, J. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, Yale University Press)
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 For capitalist development in the uplands of Northeast India see Karlsson, B.G. 2011. *Unruly Hills: a Political Ecology of India's Northeast*, New York: Berghahn Books. For Burma/Myanmar see Woods, K. 2011. "Ceasefire Capitalism: Military-Private Partnerships, Resource Concessions and Military-State Building in The Burma-China Borderlands", *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38(4):747-770.

