

Role of *Jhum* in the Contemporary Thadou-Kuki Economy of Manipur

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Abstract:

The Thadou-Kukis are one of the sub-tribes of Kukis who live in the hills of Manipur state, India. Throughout history, they were largely dependent on subsistence agriculture based on the cultivation of *jhum* in the hills and mountainous regions. To date, the practice of *jhum* has been continuing in the hill tracts of Manipur inhabited by the Thadou-Kukis. However, the recent *jhum* system prevalent among the Thadou-Kukis is a modified form of the then purely traditional *jhum* practiced by their forefathers in the past several decades. They shift their attention from the cultivation of food crops for self-consumption to high-value crops for markets. The study was conducted in the hill districts of Manipur namely Senapati, Chandel, and Churachandpur where Thadou-Kukis are predominantly settled. The paper used a purposive sampling technique in the selection of the sites and villages for the study. Data were collected from the 15 villages that spread across the four cluster regions in the three hill districts of Manipur. Data analysis has highlighted that the majority of the farmers i.e. more than 90 percent of the farming households and more than 75 percent of the total households were directly engaged in *jhum*. Out of the 333 *jhum* households, 309 (92 percent) are directly engaged in cash crop production while the rest are in food crop production. *Jhum* has overwhelmingly dominated the Kukis economy in the hills of Manipur.

Keywords: *Jhum*, subsistence, cash crops, paddy.

Introduction:

Jhum or shifting cultivation is the primitive mode of food production adopted by most of the tribes in the hills and upland regions of South and South-East Asia as a means of their livelihoods (Nath et al., 2016). Until today, *jhum* system is practiced by some of the people in the regions. It involved a shift from one place to another on a regular basis after one or two years with the primary objective of regaining soil fertility. Such a *jhum* system was associated with subsistence farming in sparsely distributed populations in the upland regions. In recent decades, this

farming system is highly unsustainable both environmentally and economically mainly due to growing population pressure on land and other issues (Rasul and Thapa, 2003).

Jhum is often seen as a bridge between the life of foraging wilds and the settled agriculture practiced. It is increasingly replaced by sedentary types of agriculture in many countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Nepal, and Korea (Dejong et al., 2001; Thapa and Paudel, 2002; Seddon, 1988). Sedentary *jhum*, an improvement over the traditional mode is considered more efficient and productive

than the latter. Though not all the causes, it becomes noteworthy to mention Boserup's theory that has hinted at increasing demand for foods and other necessities due to population growth which resulted in a change agriculture system. Technological innovation and market expansions in the wake of the industrial revolution and the subsequent socio-economic and political institutions influenced are responsible for a change in agriculture practices (Van Turkelboom et al., 1996; Thapa, 1998).

Nevertheless, the Thadou-Kuki economy of Manipur which was considered dependent on *jhum* in the past several decades continues to rely on it even today. But, the current sedentary form of *jhum* system adopted by the Thadou-Kukis in the hills of Manipur widely differs from their traditional agriculture. Currently, the farmers preferred mono-crop to mixed crops; high-value crops to traditional crops; and modern farm inputs to traditional agriculture implements and techniques in the *jhum* fields.

The colonization of Manipur territory was a breakthrough in igniting socio-economics and political consciousness among the tribes of Manipur. Though tribals in the hills of Manipur were not under the direct subject of the colonial government, the British intervened indirectly in the form of the collection of taxes and introduction of a few market crops like potatoes, maize, sweet potatoes, orange, and lemon, etc. to the tribes with the objective of monopolising markets for the benefit of the later (Kipgen, 2015). The actions of extracting maximum revenue out of the hill-men had caused havoc not only on the economic front but also on the social and cultural life of the

tribes. Consequently, they were compelled to plant some commercial crops for the markets. Though the impacts were little to the tribes, it was the beginning of mainstreaming the hill economy by which the tribes gain modern market consciousness. Several other factors were also responsible for the transformation of traditional agriculture among the Thadou-Kukis in Manipur.

The paper will analyse the dynamic nature of *jhum*, its role, and the condition of *jhum* among the contemporary Thadou-Kuki tribe. The research uses data derived from both primary and secondary sources. Despite the existence of an extensive area of settled agricultural land, the paper deals exclusively with *jhum* system because majority of the farming communities grow cash crops and horticultural crops which are considered the main source of income and livelihood for the mass who share a disproportionately larger population among the Thadou-Kukis of Manipur.

Background of the study:

The Thadou-Kukis are one of the sub-groups of Kuki-Chin (Rizvi and Roy, 2006). They have been one of the recognized tribes in India as per vide Government of India Order No. S.R.O. 2477A, dated 29 October 1956. Being a part of the Kuki-Chin group, the Thadou-Kukis' origin theories are highly debated among current scholars. One commonly accepted theory about the origin of the group is the *Khul* theory. As per the *Khul* theory, *Chongthu*, the progenitor of the Thadou-Kukis come out of the subterranean region, an underground cave called *Khul*. Shaw (1983) believed the mythical *Khul* to be the 'Gun' river, which is called the Imphal River in present-day

Manipur. On the contrary, Guite (2018) opined *Khul* is the plains on the banks of the river Chindwin in Myanmar. However, in any case, the *Khul* could be possibly overlying plains beside the river or otherwise a vast expanse of the agroecological zone that was suitable for a wide range of crops and livestock that could support a large population.

The Thadou-Kukis are scattered in present-day North-East India and Myanmar. In Manipur, they are also spread across all the hill districts¹ of the state. They are the single largest tribe in Manipur as per a series of Census reports until 2011. The hills of Manipur occupied a little more than 90 percent of the total geographical area of the state and surrounded the oval-shaped valley. In the hills, a mosaic of tribes namely Kukis and Nagas are settled, while the Meitei and Pangal who compose 60 percent of the state population settled in the valley of Manipur as per the Census report of 2011. Traditionally, the Kukis are *jhumias* who sustain largely on jhum and forests for their livelihoods. Most of their social and cultural activities also revolved around the Jhum system. In other words, the socio-economic and cultural life of the Thadou-Kukis were closely connected with Jhum. However, in recent decades, due to the associated unsustainability in the traditional jhum system, it is now compelled to change the system, under which the economic significance had

subsumed the social and cultural relevance of the traditional practices.

Materials and Methods:

The research was conducted in the three hill districts- Chandel, Churachandpur, and Senapati of Manipur state in India. One sub-division each that represents a cluster region was selected from Chandel and Churachandpur districts, while two cluster regions represented Senapati because of the prevailing diverse agroecology of the district. The cluster areas and the villages were selected purposively given due importance to their locations and distances, as these have considerably influenced the socio-economic characteristics of the villages. Further, all sizes of the villages, i.e., small, medium, and large were also materialised in each cluster site to retrieve the overall economic conditions of the Thasou-Kuki villages. A total of 442 households were surveyed that spread across the 15 villages in the four cluster areas of the three districts. The number of households varies from 11 to 53, with an overall family size of 5.89 headcounts (Table 1). The Thadou-Kuki generally lived in small villages and consists of about 15 to 80 households on average (Ray, 1990). Sex ratio and literacy rate are one of the development parameters of a society. The overall sex ratio and literacy of the villages are 961 and 71.98 respectively, which lags behind the state average.

Table 1: Villages Profile

District	Cluster region	Villages	Local market	Market distance (in Km)	No. of Households	Total population	Avg. Family size	Sex ratio	Literacy rate
Senapati	Saikul	Denglen	Saikul	9	53	342	6.45	921	76.09
		Gallam	Saikul	17	33	179	5.42	864	95.54
		Phaikon	Saikul	16	45	223	4.96	1009	57.53

		Puleijang	Saikul	15	22	131	5.95	1079	66.67
		Tolthang	Saikul	19	19	114	6	868	61.54
		Walpabung	Saikul	18	27	179	6.63	826	73.97
	Tujung Waichong	Gelnel	Kangpokpi	44	54	361	6.69	920	84.47
Chandel	Chakpikar ong	Joupi	Kangpokpi	46	13	88	6.77	955	75.10
		New Keipham	Sugnu	3	16	100	6.25	1272	94.57
		Teijang	Sugnu	12	39	227	5.82	1101	81.86
Churachandpur	Henglep	Y.	Sugnu	7	42	209	4.98	882	81.32
		L.Khaopijang	Churchandpur	105	34	210	6.18	1100	52.78
		Napphou	Churchandpur	102	11	48	4.36	777	73.81
		Thinghijang	Churchandpur	96	12	70	5.83	750	71.21
		Vungmoul	Churchandpur	100	22	124	5.64	1137	76.42
All Villages					442	2605	5.89	961	71.98

Source: Field Survey

The role of jhum in the traditional Thadou-Kuki economy

In the case of the Thadou-Kukis village is the seat of socio-economic and political administration headed by the chief. To them, economic functions cannot be separated from social and political institutions (Gangte, 2012). The chief of the village is the guardian of the land, forest, and other natural resources within the village territory and he has appropriated these resources among the villagers with the help of the village council. All the villagers have the right to access these resources freely in accordance with the procedure established by the chief and his council. But, no household can be denied from accessing land for cultivation. In return, the villagers gave *changseo* (a kind of paddy tax) and other taxes to the chief. The land relations that existed among the Thadou-Kukis tribe are closely related to feudalist characters.

Traditionally, jhum is a way of life for the Thadou-Kukis since olden times. The socio-economic and political life of the Thadou-Kukis revolved around the jhum

system. Every year, the chief and his council convened a meeting of all the heads of the households and discuss the jhum site for the coming year, probably close to the end of the year or in the early part of the next year. The selected site was distributed among them and no want can be left out in the process. It was followed by ritual performance and if the omen turns bad, the household seeks a new site. After site selection, clearing bushes and canopies began, and cultivation can be initiated following all procedures and processes.

Rice was the staple diet for the majority of the hill-men including the Kukis. In jhum, a mix of crops such as paddy, maize, millets, taro, sweet potatoes etc., were grown in the same field. However, the prime focus was made on the production of enough rice for their yearly sustenance. They were not receptive to other crops imposed by the colonial government. In this context, Scott (2017) noted the choice of crops was thereof to evade outside control, and such crops were described as political crops.

The traditional Thadou-Kuki lived in a closed economy and outside contact barely existed. They were disinclined to produce surplus goods and extensively depend on a subsistence economy based on jhum. In the case of surplus food production by a person, it was redistributed or trade-off with social status by organising a feast for the villagers.

In the subsistence-based economy, almost every economic need ranging from food to clothes was derived from the jhum fields. The food needs were supplemented with foraging wilds. They rely on the crude mode of production by using simple tools for husbandry and hunting games. The art of salt and gun-powder making was also known to them. They were also skillful in manufacturing handicrafts and a variety of arts. They have a self-sufficient economy and almost everything they need was produced by them. The subsistence natures were notional to the objective of environmental sustainability; avoiding outside control; and ensuring social equality as well as they were instinctive to the strategies of such livelihood (Guite, 2018).

Current Agricultural Profile in the Hills of Manipur

Even after several decades of India's independence, the agriculture sector is considered to be the primary source of income and employment for the hills of Manipur. Structurally, in terms of employment, the economy of the hills showed about 71 percent of the worker in the agriculture sector, while the manufacturing and service sectors provided about 2 and 25 percent respectively as per the Census report of 2011. However, the hills' NSDP structure

revealed a distorted picture where agriculture share a disproportionately lower share of 34 percent, while the manufacturing and service sector share a larger percentage of 38 and 26 respectively (GoM, 2006).

The agrarian economy in the hills of Manipur is heavily burdened by the consistent stagnation in agriculture growth over the years and the bare existence of manufacturing industries especially agro-industries which fail to upkeep forward-and-backward linkage with the former sector. Agriculture growth is also constrained by demographic pressure, marginal land holdings, poor market networks, low productivity, and overdependence on seasonal rain. Jhum, terrace (paddy), and other sedentary agriculture are commonly practiced by farmers in the hills of Manipur. However, large parts of the agroecological zones are formed by rugged topography, naturally preventing heavy mechanisation in the farming process and suffering from inherent inefficiency.

Jhum in the contemporary Thadou-Kuki society

The erstwhile jhum is increasingly replaced with sedentary agriculture among the Thadou-Kukis in the hills of Manipur. In most of the agroecological regions and more so in regions that are close to urban areas, when once jungle fields are cleared up for cultivation, the farmers cultivated the fields continuously running for years. This has been made possible by the application of chemicals and using other innovative techniques in husbandry. Commercial crops and horticultural crops are the dominant crops in sedentary agriculture other than terrace fields.

Commercialisation of the agrarian economy of the Thadou-Kukis is mainly due to population increase and modern market expansion.

The current land ownership system existing among the Thadou-Kukis can be broadly classified into two types—community-owned land; and privately owned land. Firstly, community-owned lands are those land brought under the purview of jhum consisting of both traditional jhum (production for self-consumption) and sedentary jhum (for high-value crops) that are legally owned and supervised by the chief. Secondly, private land includes such as terrace and settle agricultural land, which is exclusively owned and controlled by individual households. Only a few households owned private land in the villages.

Agriculture has occupied an important place in the Thadou-Kukis' economy as they are farming communities that depend on it for generations. Until today, agriculture has been a major source of income and livelihood for the Thadou-Kukis. Out of 442 households, 83 percent of households were engaged in agriculture and allied activities (Table 1 & 2). As per the field observation the present decades' jhum can be broadly classified into—traditional jhum system and sedentary jhum. The traditional jhum is shifted annually or bi-annually which is now scarcely practiced by the jhmias, while the

latter took several years to shift the fields. In the traditional jhum, as mentioned earlier, a mix of crops was planted purely for self-consumption, while commercial crops wholly dominated the latter for generating income. Sedentary agriculture is dominantly practiced by farmers (Table 4).

Farming households engaged either in only jhum or in only settled agriculture account for about 36 and 11 percent of the total households (Table 1). Only a few households were engaged exclusively in settled agriculture (permanent land) which shows the availability of inadequate terrace and permanent agriculture land that is owned by private households. The low availability of permanent lands compelled farming households to go for jhum cultivation for securing their livelihoods. There are only about 34 percent of the total households engaged in both jhum and settled agriculture for their livelihoods and incomes (Table 2). They are usually those households who settled beside the foothills endowed with gentle slopes that can be used for terrace and other settled farming. The settled land consists of a terrace and gentle slope lands. On the terrace, paddy is grown mainly for self-consumption, while in the latter case, crops are cultivated for income. Out of 368 cultivating households, 54 percent have a terrace while only 4 percent have settled land for cash crops. Nevertheless, they are merely marginal farmers toiling to meet their subsistence needs.

Table 2: Households either engaged only in Jhum or Settled agriculture

Villages	jhum	Settled land	Total
Denglen	27(50.94)	1(1.89)	28(52.83)
Gallam	12(36.36)	2(6.06)	14(42.42)
Gelnel	6(11.11)	3(5.56)	9(16.67)
Joupi	3(23.08)	1(7.69)	4(30.77)
Khaopijang	18(52.94)	(0)	18(52.94)
Naphou	5(45.45)	3(27.27)	8(72.73)
New Keipham	5(31.25)	(0)	5(31.25)
Phaikon	17(37.78)	(0)	17(37.78)
Puleijang	13(59.09)	(0)	13(59.09)
Teijang	(0)	27(69.23)	27(69.23)
Thinghijang	10(83.33)	1(8.33)	11(91.67)
Tolthang	10(52.63)	(0)	10(52.63)
Vungmoul	7(31.82)	1(4.55)	8(36.36)
Walpabung	28(103.7)	(0)	28(103.7)
Y. Thingkangphai	2(4.76)	12(28.57)	14(33.33)
Total	163(36.88)	51(11.54)	214(48.42)

Source: Field survey; figures in the parenthesis indicate the percentage against the total households of the village.

Table 3: Households engaged in both Jhum and Settled agriculture

Villages	Combined jhum & settled land
Denglen	17(32.08)
Gallam	18(54.55)
Gelnel	38(70.37)
Joupi	9(69.23)
Khaopijang	14(41.18)
Naphou	(0)
New Keipham	(0)
Phaikon	27(60)
Puleijang	8(36.36)
Teijang	(0)
Thinghijang	1(8.33)
Tolthang	14(73.68)
Vungmoul	4(18.18)
Walpabung	4(14.81)
Y. Thingkangphai	(0)
Total	154(34.84)

Source: Same as above table

Table 4: All households cultivating Cash and Paddy Crops in Jhum and Settled land

Villages	Cash crops			Paddy crops		
	Jhum	Settled land	Total	Jhum	Settled/terrace land	Total
Denglen	44(83.02)	(0)	44(83.02)	(0)	18(33.96)	18(33.96)
Gallam	30(90.91)	(0)	30(90.91)	(0)	20(60.61)	20(60.61)
Gelnel	44(81.48)	(0)	44(81.48)	(0)	41(75.93)	41(75.93)
Joupi	12(92.31)	(0)	12(92.31)	(0)	10(76.92)	10(76.92)
Khaopijang	32(94.12)	(0)	32(94.12)	(0)	14(41.18)	14(41.18)
Naphou	9(81.82)	(0)	9(81.82)	4(36.36)	3(27.27)	7(63.64)
New Keipham	1(6.25)	(0)	1(6.25)	(0)	(0)	(0)
Phaikon	44(97.78)	(0)	44(97.78)	(0)	27(60)	27(60)
Puleijang	21(95.45)	(0)	21(95.45)	(0)	8(36.36)	8(36.36)
Teijang	(0)	16(41.03)	16(41.03)	(0)	23(58.97)	23(58.97)
Thinghijang	11(91.67)	(0)	11(91.67)	6(50)	1(8.33)	7(58.33)
Tolthang	18(94.74)	(0)	18(94.74)	(0)	14(73.68)	14(73.68)

Vungmoul	17(77.27)	(0)	17(77.27)	12(54.55)	5(22.73)	17(77.27)
Walpabung	26(96.3)	(0)	26(96.3)	2(7.41)	4(14.81)	6(22.22)
Y. Thingkangphai	(0)	(0)	(0)	(0)	12(28.57)	12(28.57)
Total	309(69.91)	16(3.62)	325(73.53)	24(5.43)	200(45.25)	224(50.68)

Source: Same as the above table

Cash crops and paddy are cultivated on both jhum and settled land. But cash crops are widely grown in sedentary jhum while paddy is in terrace fields. Major cash crops include poppy in the Saikul cluster, beans, king chilly ginger, and sesame in Henglep and Tuijang Waichong clusters. Chakpikarong cluster has no significant cash crop production and is mainly carried out for self-consumption. As per Table 3, jhum has the overriding importance among the Kukis for earning income. Out of 333 jhum households, more than 92 percent were directly engaged in cash crop farming, while the rest were in paddy crop production. In total, 73 percent of the households were engaged in cash crop production for generating income. While about 50 percent of the total households were engaged in the production of foods for self-consumption.

Despite the growing importance of both cash crops and food crops among the Thadou-Kukis, a large number of the farmers produce for meeting their subsistence needs. The farmers cultivated marginal lands and wholly depend on seasonal rains for the cultivation. One interesting feature observed among them is that despite commercialisation of agriculture, there is an absence of capitalist farmers among the Thadou-Kukis.

The increasing importance of commercialisation agriculture among the Thadou-Kukis is the result of the growing population, market expansion, and the prevailing chieftainship institution that is conducive to the expansion of agricultural

land at ease. The prevailing low literacy rate among the Thadou-Kukis is also one of the most important factors which prevent a shift from the agriculture sector. These factors compelled the poor and low-educated households to go for agricultural activities. The underlying importance of cash crops coupled with its undue emphasis by the farmers in the hills posed a serious burden on the traditional jhum system that was considered sustainable and eco-friendly.

Conclusion:

The Thadou-Kukis are one of the jhumias who continue to adopt jhum system for their livelihoods in the hills of Manipur. A purely traditional jhum lost its importance because of the associated unsustainable practices in it. Commercial crops are increasingly important in the Thadou-Kukis economy but due to lack of proper marketing channels and other institutional factors farmers are yet to reap dividends. Rampant poppy cultivation in some parts of the Thadou-Kuki inhabited area is a cause of concern as it is an illegal activity. Though sedentary jhum practices are more efficient and more productive than the traditional jhum system, the current deviation from the old system is not a time-tested practice and is yet to show how sustainable and environmentally friendly. However, the paper recommends the introduction of agro-forestry, the plantation of fast-growing trees during the fallow period, and land management at the community level. This is likely to bring efficiency to farm activities and bring

quick resilience against the subsistence-

based economy.

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¹ Districts referred to the then Chandel, Churachandpur, Senapati, Tamenglong, and Ukhurul districts of Manipur that existed before the creation of new districts by the Government of Manipur in 2012.