

Deforestation in Ukhrul District: Traditional Agricultural Practices or Commercialization

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Abstract:

The objective of the article is to lay bare the truth that traditional agricultural practices and the traditional means of livelihood are the main causes of environmental havoc, disaster, and destruction. There have been too many research papers published that solely blame one of the most common methods of cultivation, the “Jhum cultivation” as the main reason for the deforestation but could this be a biased perspective without really understanding the basics of the practices? Has anyone asked the basic question of how the environment and the tribals co-exist in harmony for thousands of years practicing the same traditional methods of cultivation and then suddenly in the last century, the practice became the culprit for the massive environmental destruction and deforestation? It is not an article to justify the practice but maybe, there can be a paradigm shift in the way we see reality. Could it be selling practices over Shifting practices, could it be commercialization over self-sufficiency, could it be Modern machinery over traditional implements, or could it be the love of money over respect for nature?

Keywords— Jhum cultivation, terrace cultivation, Commercialization, Urbanization, logging, Deforestation, Traditional, monetization.

Introduction

The sub-Himalyan Patkai hills have been the home of the Nagas from time immemorial. One of the largest sub-tribes of the Nagas is the Tangkhuls that reside in the Ukhrul and Kamjong districts of Manipur and the Somrah tracks of Myanmar. The history of migration and settlement has been a mystery as there were no written records, but the folklores and folktales all indicate that they migrated to this region from a distant land and settled in the thickly forested Naga hills in harmony with the environment. They are truly the original and indigenous settlers on the territory and there is reason to contest about it.

The Tangkhuls are agriculturists by profession. They are well known for their skill in terrace farming and Jhum cultivation. Their staple food is rice, meat, and vegetables. Thus, every effort is made to cut out beautiful terraces on the slopes of the Himalayan hills for cultivation. Along with it, various allied horticultural cultivation is practiced meeting the basic needs of the family.

Jhum cultivation is a method of slash and burn a section of the identified forest for cultivation purposes. This method of cultivation is practiced mostly by the Southern Tangkhuls but also in other areas depending on the topography of the land. Much care is taken to identify the section of forest to be slashed and burnt for cultivation by performing various rituals such as rituals of chicken legs, rituals of eggs, rituals of axe or tao, rituals of dreams, etc. It is only if the outcome of the ritual is positive that the site is selected and cultivated for a year or two. The site selected then is divided among all the households in the village. It is more of a corporate cultivation of the entire village.

The Tangkhul Naga tribe revered and worshiped the nature “Animist” until the arrival and conversion to Christianity in the 19th century. Their folklore and folksongs, the dependence on the natural environment as bio-indicators, etc. are a strong indication that they lived in harmony with the natural environment. Forests were the source

of life, food, and sustenance for the Tangkhul Nagas, thus, until the late 20th century the Tangkhul territory and hills were thickly forested in spite of dotted villages across the hilltops from time immemorial.

Deforestation in the 20th Century and onward:

In the second half of the 20th century and onwards there was rapid deforestation for various factors but much of it unfortunately has been attributed to the traditional practices of using firewood and coal for fuel and Jhum cultivation. Could these traditional practices be the major factor for the deforestation knowing well that for centuries the demand and practices of the Tangkhul tribe have remained unchanged and the forest and the natural environment had been well protected and replenished? How can people destroy the very essence and source of livelihood? So, then what happened?

The Traditional Farming Practices

The forest-man relationship in the Tangkhul culture is reciprocal. Culturally and traditionally, the flora and fauna are highly respected and worshipped. It is believed that mother-nature must be cared for and pleased in order not to suffer the wrath of the spirits of nature. Even though they have no scientific explanation to the natural phenomenal events, they respect, love, depend on bio-indicators, and live in complete harmony with nature.

On the surface, the traditional agricultural practices may seem like an exploitation of the natural surroundings but an in-depth understanding of the Tangkhul traditional practices reveals the contrary. These eco-friendly practices ensure the continuity of life and livelihood for centuries. Amid such an eco-friendly environment, the flora and fauna of Tangkhul territory thrived and continued to supply every basic need of the community.

1. Terrace farming:

Beautiful terraces are cut out in the hill slopes for paddy fields. These fields can be classified into two broad categories, namely,

a. Perennial wet paddy fields

These are the fields that have a continual supply of water from the nearby streams. They are at the riverbanks or on the hill slopes with easy irrigational systems through canals from the streams and rivers. They are called “Chihui” and supposedly more fertile, cultivated, planted, and harvested earlier than the one dependent on monsoon.

b. Monsoon-dependent paddy fields

These are terraces cut out on hill slopes and have no perennial supply of water but are purely dependent on the timely and sufficient monsoon. They are called “Akang” or dry fields. During the monsoon, the runoff water is channeled into the fields through numerous canals on the hillslopes and from the streams. This method of cultivation is heavily dependent on the mercy of monsoon and traditionally they are able to predict the natural phenomena very well through experiences of keen observation of the changes in the environment.

2. Jhum cultivation

It is the prominent tribal practice of clearing a section of the forest and then burning it for the purpose of cultivation. Among the Tangkhuls, the site for Jhum is selected after performing traditional rituals by the village priest. The site selected is then divided among the villagers or cultivated collectively and the produce is shared. After a season or two, a new site is selected. The period of cycle to a particular site is long enough for the forest to revegetate.

3. Forest as a source of fuel:

a. Firewood

The Tangkhuls use firewood as the main source of fuel. The required domestic firewood is either supplied from individually owned forested areas or the common village land “Khamaram”. There is a specific season to cut down trees and store them up for a year’s fuel supply.

b. Charcoal

Another common fuel supply is in the form of charcoal. Trees are cut into logs and burnt in a pit. The pit is then covered in

mud and allowed to be burnt for days until the logs turn to charcoal.

In all these traditional practices, large-scale destruction of the environment is not practiced neither practical because it is only to meet the necessities. The terrace rice field is permanent, the cycle of Jhum cultivation gives enough time for the forest to revegetate, and the supply of fuel is just enough to meet the necessities. So, then what causes large-scale deforestation and environmental degradation?

Commercialization, Monetization, and Modernization

1. The decline of customary practices

One factor that could be attributed to environmental degradation would be the decline of customary practices and beliefs. The Tangkhuls by custom believe that the spirit is in nature and thereby all forms of nature must be treated with care and love. These animistic beliefs and fear of offending the spirit made the Tangkhuls perform all sorts of rituals. But with formal education, exposure to foreign cultures, and change in religious beliefs and orientation, there was no respect or fear of destroying the natural environment.

2. Development and Urbanization

It is an accepted fact that the development of infrastructural facilities such as the building of highways, urbanization, the construction of dams, etc. have significantly contributed to environmental destruction.

Exp. The construction of the Nongtam dam and the submersion of villages and large areas of forest and agricultural land.

Ukhrul (Hunphun) village was confined to Awungtang/Kasomtang/Khararphung/Ngayaina o khels or locality while the rest of the southern Hunphun village territory comprising Alungtang to Viewland and beyond was thickly forested and uninhabited until the 1950s & 60s, but today the whole town is thickly populated,

urbanized, and deprived of all forest in a span of 60 odd years.

3. Commercialization and Monetization

The introduction of Money and commercial activities become a boon and a bane to flora and fauna. The traditional knife and axe to clear the forest and transport it home for fuel is seasonal and only to meet the family's needs. But with commercialization and the intent to earn money, the traditional baskets, axes, and knives were replaced with Lorries/Shaktiman and modern mass destructive types of machinery. Deforestation was rapid and there was no time for reforestation. The ancient source of domestic fuel is now exported to meet the commercial needs of industries. Exp. The deforestation and commercialization of the pine wood of Kharasom village to meet the demand for “Sleepers” for the Indian railways in 1980s. Another classic example is the massive deforestation of the famous “Uningtho” of Shiroi village which used to be home of the famous migratory bird from Siberia, the “Shiri” in winter.

4. Narcotic plantation

Tangkhul territory bordering the “Golden Triangle” is not devoid of the influence of the possibility of earning good income from narcotics. An economy devoid of industries and dependent on agriculture that gives minimum revenue, any opportunity to earn high income easily attracts attention. Once, beautiful blue hills covered with tropical forests have gone bald with some plantations across the deforested landscape from a distance. The practice of narcotic plantation is the same as that of traditional Jhum cultivation with the exception that it is not abandoned after a year or two nor given time to revegetate. The intention is not to produce food crops but to grow and produce narcotics; opium and ganja (grass). It is not to produce food for survival but to produce drugs and narcotics for money. Narcotism has generated huge revenue at an expensive price of loss of lives and the environment.

Impact on the Flora and Fauna: Traditional and Commercial

Particulars	Traditional	Commercial
Size of deforestation	Insignificant	Recklessly significant
Consumer	Domestic	Capitalistic market
Means of transportation	Manually using baskets	Trucks/Shaktiman
The end objective	To meet the basic need for fuel or food	To satisfy the want for money and wealth
Satisfy	The need for fuel and food	The want of money
Environment	Fully aware of the ecosystem and eco-balance	No respect or regard for the ecosystem. It is indiscriminate exploitation of the environment.
Instruments	It is eco dependent and friendly: Axe, knife	Modern machines built for mass destruction
Sustainability	Sustainable	Not sustainable because it is profit oriented
Types of crops planted	Food crops	Cash crops
Extend of deforestation	Limited and seasonal	Mass deforestation all seasons
Methods of hunting	Spear/bow & arrow/sling/traps	Guns/explosives
Perspective towards nature	Worship and respect nature	No regard for nature

The perspective of viewing Jhum cultivation as the main cause of deforestation need to change and the reality of the factors responsible should be accepted. Such factors responsible for the rapid and massive deforestation should be address with policy formulation and implementation. The traditional Jhum cultivation should not be discouraged but rather introduce more efficient and effective method.

- Forest policy and empowerment
Formulate policy to protect the forest and implement it. One of the best means to protect forest will be educating and empowering the village authorities.

Conclusions

Traditional as well as modern commercial activities derive their resources from the environment to satisfy their needs and want. But the traditional approach to nature is to satisfy the needs and thereby nature is worshipped and revered because, without it, existence and continuity are endangered. This fact of depending on nature for survival, sustainability is the hallmark in the usage of resources. While the

Remedies or Solutions

- Awareness programs
The government, the CSOs, and the student union bodies need to make a concerted effort to organize awareness programs of importance and benefits of forest and the adverse consequences of reckless deforestation.
- Tree plantation drive
Get the stakeholders; the villagers and the land owner to undertake tree plantation. The tree plantation can be very effective and efficiently implemented if saplings are provided and native exotic plants are provided.
- Horticultural development
The need for agriculture and farming is not contested because that has and will continue to be a significant sector in the economy. Farming can be diversified into horticulture or orchards. The forest areas cleared can be turned into orchards of fruit trees such as plums, peaches, long beans (Yongchak), guava, Oranges, lemon, etc.
- Paradigm shift in the perspective

commercial approach to nature is generating monetary revenue and so it is recklessly exploited with no regard for sustainable development.

Thus, sustainability should be the mantra in the approach to deforestation in the tribal belt. Tribal traditional practices should not be just discounted, projected, and looked upon from tainted glass as the cause of deforestation and environmental devastation. It is prudent to understand traditional practices and adopt methods for sustainable ecological development rather than just paint it as the cause of deforestation when it is the victim and the actual culprit to the environmental devastation is the commercial activities for the want of Money. Remember, the want of money can never be satisfied while the need for food and fuel can be.

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