



DIMINISHING SITUATION OF SHIFTING CULTIVATION IN MOKOKCHUNG DISTRICT OF NAGALAND: A SOCIOLOGICAL OBSERVATION

ABSTRACT

Shifting cultivation which is also known as slash and burn method of cultivation is the most widely practice among the hill tribes of North Eastern region of India, hence remained a dominant economy for many centuries. In the back drop of India's economic liberalization and global market situation there has been a tremendous transformation in the rural labour market in India undergoing remarkable changes over the years. Diversified opportunities for employment with increased economic growth, introduction of various employment guarantee schemes, demographic change along with expansion of universal education for all children, increased in connectivity and transport facilities, attitude towards participation of women in economic activities outside their home. For the same reasons the rural populations of Mokokchung district of Nagaland is not an isolated case. The collapse of traditional institutions and the introduction of modern market system, the rapid economic developments, the search for better living environment, growth of urbanization etc all these have impacted leading to serious diminishing situation of shifting cultivation. It was find out that only a negligible percentage still clings to such slow and low production culture. These are mostly the rural affluent families who have the control over the resources, some includes government employees who have an assured salary from the government exchequer and these people have the resources to hire rural labourers and for them jhum site are used as an outing place for which annual jhum paddy yield is not the main target. The paper concludes with some sociological observations such as, society grows in size there is also a growing social differentiation which is the formative condition of individual liberty, owing to the urbanization, education, populations growth, industrialization and advancement in technology the phase of modern society have become so heterogeneous that the needs and liking of the people have diversified extensively therefore one pick the vocation according to ones choice and capability, the opportunities in life are plenty available, needs of the people are diversified and they compete among themselves for scarce resources on the basis of their specialization.

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INTRODUCTION

Shifting cultivation which is also known as slash and burn method of cultivation is the most widely practice among the hill tribes of North Eastern region of India, hence remained a dominant economy for many centuries. It is believed to have originated in the Neolithic period around 7000 B.C.¹. The system is regarded as the first step in transition from food gathering and hunting to food production. Shifting cultivation is the most dominant method of crop production and it is being practised in highlands and sloppy lands, covering an area of 2.695 million ha in entire North East of which 0.455 million ha is brought under cultivation annually. In Nagaland, out of 16,579 sq km geographical area, 7000 sq km is subjected to shifting cultivation. The significance of this system of farming in the present day is more because of resource degradation and low productivity. Efforts have been made to eliminate the shifting cultivation by various agencies, but the cultivation system is still an integral part of the tribal life². Although shifting cultivation appears to be more sustainable in terms of forest resources and ecological balance maintenance when compared to other force of production such as industry. However, in the recent times shifting cultivation has been termed as slow and low productivity especially in the context of rapid economic growing situation when nations focuses its national economic liberalization and global markets. In the back drop of India's economic liberalization and global market situation there has been a tremendous transformation in the rural labour market in India undergoing remarkable changes over the years. Diversified opportunities for employment with increased economic growth, introduction of various employment guarantee schemes, demographic change along with expansion of universal education for all children, increased in connectivity and transport facilities, attitude towards participation of women in economic activities outside their home. All these have impacted the rural labour market in India considerably³. For the same reasons the rural populations of Mokokchung district of Nagaland is not an isolated case. The collapse of traditional institutions and the introduction of modern market system, the rapid economic developments, the search for better living environment, growth of urbanization etc all these have a direct bearing on the structure of the traditional economy system thereby leading to a major socio-economic transformation.

NOTE

¹ Borthakur, D.N (1992). *Agriculture of the North East Region*. Beecee Prakashan, Guwahati, pp-137-151.

² M.K.Singh & P.Ahmid, 2006, *shifting cultivation: status and strategies for improvement in Economic*

development in Nagaland Prospects and Constraints.

³ Uttam Deb, et all, 2014, *Dynamics of Rural Labor Markets in India: Implication for Inclusive Development Strategy paper presented at National Symposium and Dialogue on "Dynamics of Rural Labor Market: Implication for Agricultural Growth and Rural Transformation" (NAAS), New Delhi.*

AREA OF STUDY

This study covers the entire Mokokchung district of Nagaland state. Mokokchung district is one among the eleven districts in Nagaland. It has an overwhelming rural population of 137517 against the urban population of only 55654 as according to 2011 census⁴. The study area in the instant case is predominately an agrarian society, traditionally and even today larger portion of the populations engages in jhumming activities in the form of shifting cultivation. It may be noted, in the entire district there is no industry except for one i.e Tuli paper mill which is non functional. However, lately a phenomenal change in the occupational pattern of the rural population is seen especially in the periphery villages that are close to the urban centre of Mokokchung town. Today, it is witness that the rural labourer being slowly but steadily withdrawing from the traditional practice of shifting cultivations and interestingly they engage themselves in different labour market as skilled and semi-skilled workers. The urban centre of Mokokchung town is surrounded by four villages namely; Ungma village, Mokokchung village, Chuchuyimpang village and Khensa village. The villages in question have a close proximity with Mokokchung that there is a tremendous influence in both way traffic on the way of life of the people their economics and socio-cultures. It may be stated, people from these villages working in the government offices or individuals engaged in business in Mokokchung town commute from their respective villages very conveniently. More so these villages exhibits much better economic conditions when compared to those villages that are located far flung. What has essentially interested here is the fact that jhumming practice which was once the only vocation/ occupation in the entire area has been steadily withdrawing because of the availability of alternative opportunities.

Under the given circumstances and opportunities the current study attempts to understand the dynamics of rural labour market on the one hand and diminishing situation of shifting cultivation with relevant arguments and also modestly present a sociological observations to the emerging phenomena. The current paper under consideration has its data collected from Ungma village which plays as catalyst of change in many respect. Ungma village is the oldest and biggest in size

and population. Historically, all villages under Mokokchung district have its root in this village. Aos tribe is the dominant group and generally considered by fellow Naga tribe as most advance in all walks of life.

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(⁴Census of India 2011, Provisional Population Totals Nagaland, Series-14. Government of India.)

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Since the attainment of Nagaland statehood under the union of India on 1st December 1963, there has been social transformation and economic changes in many respects be it education, transportation, urbanization, health care etc, indeed this may be termed as the beginning of modernization. Nagaland also witnesses mushrooming of institutions like schools and colleges in the past decades, the establishment of Army cantonment and Nagaland Armed Police Battalions within the urban periphery, the establishment of government offices, and immigration of people to this part of the world in search of job opportunities or for business purposes all these adds in the making of Mokokchung an urban centre. Admittedly the pace of development may not be moving at a desired speed but what little occurs has a direct ramification on the people, culture and society and this results are manifested on the way of life of the people their living standard, their choice of occupation and economic conditions.

It is sufficient to mention that urbanization has a direct bearing on the people and their diversified occupation, what only need to clear our mind here is that occupation of the people was simple and undifferentiated prior to establishment of urban centre some 130 years ago during the British colonial period. Social life was small and homogeneous that people have similar aspiration and vocation.

The dawn of modernity has ushered with many alternatives vocation such as construction workers, stone quarry, taxi drivers, tea farming in small scale, small scale handloom, piggery, vegetable vendors, carpentries, shop keeping, garage workers, small scale saw mills etc, (the list may add on) and any other petty works that makes one every day a small earning, increased in all these vocations led a significant decreased in the traditional system of agriculture/shifting cultivation. This argument can be substantiated by the fact that the comparative statement of wage earning of the various types of labour shows jhum field labourer earns the least. The withdrawal of this rural labour from shifting cultivation sector and engaging themselves in alternative vocation appears many reasons; the immediate monetary needs for children's education and to meet other daily nitty-gritty requirements including two square meals a day are few important examples among many.

The production structure of rural India has changed substantially over the years. Agriculture is no longer the dominant sector of the economy⁵. In the recent past there has been a change in the agricultural labour force. What is crucial in this argument is that the wage earning in jhumming sector is comparatively much lesser than working in other sectors as stated above. More so one does not need a specialized skill to work in such jhum sector.

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(⁵ Reddy, D.N 2014, *Emerging Trends in Rural Employment Structure and Rural Labor Market in India* paper presented at National Symposium and Dialogue on "Dynamics of Rural Labor Market: Implication for Agricultural Growth and Rural Transformation" (NAAS), New Delhi.)

The table below shows the existing wage structure in and around Mokokchung district.

Jhum labour	Stone quarry worker	Carpentry works	Building Construction worker
Rs.200(female) Rs. 300(male)	Rs.300(female) Rs.400(semi skilled) Rs.500(Skilled)	Rs.500(without machine) Rs.700(with machine)	Rs.300 (unskilled) Rs.400 (semi killed) Rs. 600(skilled)

Field data source collected during May 2015 in mokokchung town and Ungma village.

The comparative wage statement is based on the current market rate including Mokokchung urban centre. Today, shifting cultivation is seen not only unproductive in terms of crop yield (as we shall see later) but even in wage earning it is very slow. On the other hand, the labour demands in other sectors are growing

rapidly with increased in wages. It may be noted, our data confirms that there are more than hundred and fifty (150) households engaged in stone quarry that attract hundreds of labourers who are looking for better wage in Ungma village itself. Besides this, carpentry works and building constructing workers are at the rising level as it gives a good opportunity to earn better wages. It is also important to know that these jobs need specialized skills in their work.

My earlier assertion that shifting cultivation in the peripheral villages of Mokokchung town is declining is proved by our data. The table below shows the status of

harvest/crop yield in two consecutive years in Ungma village and the number of house hold engaged in jhumming.

SI No	Year	Total No. of house hold in the village	House hold Practicing shifting cultivation	Jhum Paddy yield (Measurement in Tin/basket)	Total No. of Population living in the village
1.	2013	1389	90	2167	5346
2.	2014	1414(+25)	70(-20)	1998 (-169)	5370 (+24)

Source: Ungma Baptist Church census report⁶.

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⁶ The ungma baptist church conduct population census report as well as audit of the jhum paddy yield per annum of the village.

Based on this data the house hold engaged in jhumming during 2013 was only 6.47 percent while during 2014 it has further declined to 4.95 percent. We have no available data for 2015 as yet⁷ however without any amusement one can draw conclusion that percentage would be even smaller. Data indicates that there is a significant fall in the total number of house hold engaged in shifting cultivation. Had jhumming or shifting cultivating remained the only vocation in this part of the region, as it was before; this finding would have been a point of worrisome. However, the other side of the coin is, the steep fall in terms of percentage in shifting cultivation also indicates availability of alternative avenues and a comfortable increases in the dynamics of rural labour and wage market. Therefore, one can safely understand that north east region of India in general and Nagaland in particular still employs the traditional methods of cultivation however there has been a diminishing results in the area coverage, production as well as labour participation.

One of the drawbacks of shifting cultivation is that it is confined to a village boundary and after two to three years the cultivated area is abandoned and a new site is selected to repeat the same process. Indeed many cultivator themselves expressed this as time consuming process whereas production is slow and low. It was found out further in the process of study that these shifting cultivators cultivate hardly two to three acres of land while majority of them cultivate only one acre therefore production is expected to be low. An interesting finding of the study is that as one of the cultivators pointed out, once the monsoon starts the paddy field is filled with green vegetables these are sufficient for the family to consume for six to seven months, our excess production though small in scale make small money out it⁸.

Shifting cultivation in its traditional and cultural integrated form was ecologically and economically viable system of agriculture as long as population densities were

low and jhum cycle was long enough to maintain soil fertility. However, due to time factor and the systems responsiveness to changing requirement of high population pressure, jhum cultivation has caused drastic decline in crop yield, loss of forest wealth, soil fertility, biodiversity and environmental degradation⁹. On the other hand with the growth of urban centre and population increases, forests of the nearby villages are almost destroyed for firewood, huge chunk of space are also destroyed for purpose of stone quarry while trying to cater to the needs and demands of the urban populations. It may be noted Ungma village has a rich deposit of stone therefore all developmental works pertaining to road construction or building constructions generally stones are supplied from this village thereby people make a good money out of it.

The theme of this paper ‘diminishing situation of shifting cultivation in Mokokechung district’ seems to have justified its contentions. What ponders me on sociological front is that, in-spite of the significant fall in the jhumming sector, who are these negligible percentage still cling to the unproductive activities? This remains an important question that need to address. Our data point to this finding that this negligible percentage of shifting cultivators are mostly the rural affluent families who have the control over the resources, some of them are government employees who have an assured salary from the government exchequer and these people have the resources to hire rural labourers and for them jhum site are used as an outing place for which annual jhum paddy yield is not the main target. These people have the resources to buy food grains brought from the neighbouring state like Assam. This people make big money by supplying firewood to the urban dwellers. This conclusion extrapolates further questions to a sociologist as to who is rich and affluent. In the context of an urban dweller owning a small garage who hardly earns to meet two square meals a day and who struggle to afford his



children's education one the one hand and on the other a rural dweller who has an assured salary and perhaps some land for farming with a comfortable living but still lives in a rural village.

Having said this, what is sociologically interested in this theme is that traditionally a person having enough stock of grains and owning few cattle were considered rich and had social standing, in this context the standardized medium of exchange in modern times called "money" was insignificant. Therefore everyone worked hard in their jhum field to meet all ends. Indeed, jhumming was everything and only vocation for a person where he/she produce rice, vegetable, firewood etc all for their simple sustenance, the only item that could not produced in the jhum was common salt which they walk down to Mariani (Assam) only to barter with some local produced. However, in modern times, as society grows in size there is also a growing social differentiation which is the formative condition of individual liberty¹⁰, owing to the urbanization, education, populations growth, industrialization and advancement in technology the phase of modern society have become so heterogeneous that the needs and liking of the people have diversified extensively therefore one pick the vocation according to ones choice and capability, the opportunities in life are plenty available, needs of the people are diversified and they compete among themselves for scarce resources on the basis of their specialization. Therefore a skilled labour working in the stone quarry will not compete with a building construction labour or a tea farmer for instance. The ultimate purpose of every person working in different sector is to earn a living; if his needs are met then one is contented. Complex division of labour and specialization of work is therefore a peaceful means of solving problems of modern society. What is key and essential in life today is to be skilled in the profession one chooses. Therefore, if there is a diminishing situation of shifting cultivation on the one hand then on the other hand there is a growing diversification of labour market and new vocations all these are signs of social dynamism in modern days.

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⁷ data collection was carried out before the census report for 2015 was conducted.

⁸ Mr. Mayang a cultivator from ungma village age about 65 years, expresses his experience and opinion about the practice of shifting cultivation. Interviewed on 7-10-2015.

⁹ Bhatt, B.P (2006) *Role of agriculture in the economic development of Nagaland: Issues, Challenges and opportunities in Economic Development in Nagaland: Prospects and Constraints.* a NUTA Publication, Printed at N.V Press, Kohima, Nagaland.

¹⁰ Durkheim, Emile (1893) *Division of Labour in Society in Sociological Thought* by Francis Abraham & John Henry Morgan, pp-106. MACMILLAN India Limited, 1994.)

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