

LOCATING GENDER IN BETWEEN PALM OIL AND NEO-LIBERAL AGRICULTURE : EXPERIENCES FROM KOLASIB, MIZORAM

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ABSTRACT

Life, livelihood and culture in a geographical space are closely dependent or rather formed under the pattern of production practised in that space. In the hilly terrains of Mizoram, a shifting form of agriculture is a dominant way of livelihood which the present modernist discourses of the State and Development label as a 'Disorderly form of Agriculture'. On environmental & developmental grounds, the Neo-liberal State mechanism engineered several invasions and modifications to the agricultural practices of the Mizo Hills promising better and sustainable livelihood opportunities. The recently emerged Palm Oil landscape of the Mizo Hills is an extension of such invasion of the State and market institutions into the local agricultural practices. The present study will attempt to uncover the changing gender relations in Mizo society in the context of the Neo-liberal State, Market institutions & the Oil Palm plantation of Mizoram.

Keywords: State, Agriculture, Development, Gender, Mizoram.

Introduction

Shifting cultivation locally known as *jhum* is exceptionally complex yet very crucial for people's livelihood and remains the base of the 'Social Capital' of the Hill communities of north-east India. However, the sustainability of *jhum* is increasingly in question for its detrimental effects on Hill ecology. Hence, the search for a sustainable alternative to *jhum* is an urgent call of the time. At the same time, it is expected that the alternative for *jhum* to be not only environmentally sustainable but also by people's unique needs and with the positive elements of their previous way of life. In the northeastern State of Mizoram, to date, Jhum or shifting form of agriculture is one of the dominant modes of production. However, the State Government of Mizoram is currently implementing policies to eradicate the practice of jhum and expand industrial forms of agriculture in the State. Under such efforts, cash crops like Jatropha, Rubber & Oil Palm have been introduced among the farmers of the State under the New Land Use Policy (NLUP). However, the current developments in the Mizoram State indicate several intended and unintended outcomes due to such agricultural transformations. The rapid privatization of land due to the introduction of Cash Crops like Oil Palm has sparked the processes of class formation and unequal gendered divisions within the Mizo society. In the jhum-based agricultural societies of northeast India, the existence of a gendered division of work was almost negligible in the past. Men and women both play almost equal roles in the productive activities inside the household and the jhum fields. However, the rapid expansion of industrial agriculture such as Palm oil is changing the gender dynamics within the Mizo society. Further, the rapid privatization also sparked the process of unequal land distribution not just between rich & poor but also between men & women. In such context, the present article will attempt to analyze the new emerging gender dynamics in Mizo society after the arrival of 'Neo-liberal agriculture'.

The Objectives of the Paper include an analysis of the consequences of the new Agricultural policies of Mizoram on the life & livelihood opportunities of

women and an examination of the effects of Palm Oil plantations on Gender relations within Mizo society. The methodology of the present study is analytical. The data used in the paper are collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were collected from field visits to the Kolasib District of Mizoram in January 2023. The secondary data were collected from books, journals and newspapers. The collected data are analyzed qualitatively.

The Arrival of Neo-Liberal Agriculture in Mizo Hills

The concept of ‘Neo-liberal Agriculture’ is one of the latest inventions of Capitalism that attempts to mould and manipulate people’s agricultural habits and practices in a way to smooth the functioning of surplus extraction. In the public domain, neo-liberal agriculture is always portrayed as eco-friendly and therefore, must be implemented for the sake of global ecological catastrophe. Neo-liberal agriculture in the Hills of North-East India is dominantly pushed forward by the agencies of the State with an aggressively active contribution of the elites of the respective communities. In the Mizo Hills, the transition from shifting cultivation to industrial agricultural plantation started long back. But, it has become more and more influential in recent days.

The newly introduced cash crops like Palm Oil exposed the previous *jhum* cultivators to the precariousness of the Market; thereby, people are dispossessed of the security and sovereignty of food as people’s agricultural choices are limited to the wills of State and Market. In the Mizo Hills, the legalization of individual land-holding along with the spread of cash crop cultivation led the way for the transformation of the *jhum-dominated* agricultural landscape. Previously, several *Jhum* hot spots were bought under the authority of the State by cutting people’s access. In 1955, the Agricultural Land Act of Mizo Hills legalized private land-holding. Thereby, the State put forward the crucial one step towards a pro-capitalist society to systematically erase community spaces of forests and rivers; which are otherwise impossible to accumulate with the community tags. Underneath this legal framework, huge areas of previous *jhum* plots or forests were transformed

into individual land holdings of the many elite families. A sizable amount of land was also leased by the State Government through Memorandums of Understanding in 2006 with industrial houses in western India. Food processing companies such as Godrej Agrovet, Ruchi Soya and 3F Oil PalmAgroTech are actively participating in promoting the plantation of cash crops like Oil Palm and rubber. These plantation crops are mostly centred around the Kolasib and Mamit districts of Mizoram. Even the Kolasib district was declared as the Oil Palm District of Mizoram in 2014 (Mridula Chari; 2014). However, the consequences of such agricultural policies are still under consideration or rather a confusion as the transformation of agricultural practices in the Mizo Hills exposed both the fragile ecology and pro-egalitarian socio-cultural life of these communities into the precariousness of several economic and political authorities.

The Dilemmas of New Land Use Policy

More recently, the New Land Use Policy (NLUP) was introduced in the State of Mizoram which plays a crucial role in transforming the *jhum* dominated agricultural landscape. The NLUP with its mottos "*For better Mizoram*" & "*Green Mizoram*" provided monetary assistance to shifting cultivators to fix their livelihood other than *jhum*. Under this policy, crops like oil palm, and rubber are advertised by State authorities as superior, profitable and ecologically sustainable than *jhum*. In reality, agricultural policies in the Hills of North-East India necessarily demonize *jhum* environmentally & economically which James Scott argues is a political strategy of the State to undermine *jhum* as it escapes State control and produces rare or no economic outputs to the GDP of the State (James C. Scott, 2009). Hence, the State is promoting Palm Oil plantations in Mizoram where fostering agricultural production is the prime aim to provide raw materials for industrial houses of Western India located far from Mizoram. Yet, the Neo-liberal State provides layers and layers of statistics justifying these projects as success. The New Land Use Policy (NLUP) is the most important cornerstone in the agricultural transformation of Mizoram. From the late 80s and early 90s, the

Congress-led State Government of Mizoram tried to implement similar policies to reform the land use pattern. However, the present NLUP in Mizoram was implemented in 2011. In the act, it was clearly stated that the NLUP aimed to wean away the *jhum* cultivators of Mizo Hills from *jhum* and thereby settle them in an economically and ecologically sustainable form of cultivation. The present NLUP was implemented with a budget of 2800 crores where 1.30 lakh families were selected. Each of the selected families was paid approximately 1 lakh Rupees in instalments for adopting an alternative form of agriculture or livelihood (Gurvinder Singh, 2018). These alternative livelihoods were mainly the cultivation of cash crops, especially oil palm and rubber. According to the government-provided data, the number of *jhum-practicing* families has decreased from 68,433 during 2010-11 to 48,417 in 2015-16. In the same period, areas under *jhum* cultivation also decreased from 40,792 hectares to 19,851 hectares. The issues of ecological conservation were also merged into this agricultural program to have a smooth implementation.

Though the NLUP sounds to have a strong argument for transforming the life of the Hill communities; yet, the program has several difficulties in implementation. Corruption of government officials along with beneficiaries' uneconomic use of funds resulted in diversion from the actual goals and objectives of the program. Lalkhama, a retired IAS officer and former State Chief Secretary argue that *"the Project was envisaged to help farmers and save the environment and everything looked so good on the papers but the implementation has been unsatisfactory. The farmers would certainly switch off from jhum if the funds were given on time. There has been a gross misuse of funds as people used money to buy vehicles and other items. In some cases, beneficiaries were paid based on their political affiliations and lack of market made the farmers unenthusiastic towards it."* It was broadly visible that the opportunities provided under NLUP were not gender-neutral. Most of the funds under NLUP were allocated through the male Head of the families. Thus, the male members got the upper hand in the use of allocated funds. Further, the newly emerged Palm

Oil & rubber plantations under NLUP in Mizoram are individual-centric rather than communitarian. These have led to a process of class formation within the previously flat social pyramid of Mizo society. There lie several examples in the entire North-East India where previous communitarian spaces like *jhum* plots, community forests and rivers are being transformed into individual properties of the handful of political and economic elites of the respective communities. Thereby, the larger section of the community who were crucially dependent on these resources is systematically dispossessed.

Locating Gender in Between Neo-Liberal Agriculture & Palm Oil

There is no confusion that the NLUP along with the other agricultural transformations in the Mizo Hills changed the lives of a large number of people be it positively or negatively is a different matter of consideration. Though the statistical data provided by the government sources enormously portray a positive view; yet within these positive statistical data lies distorted realities of gender discrimination and subjugation unexposed & unquestioned.

In the field visit to the Kolasib district of Mizoram, it was noticed that from all the Palm Oil farmers interviewed Lalnunziri (name changed) stands alone as the only female Palm Oil farmer in the whole district. Lalnunziri, a mother of two & wife of a Government employee handles her farm near Kolasib town with 400 Palm Oil plants. She anticipated that she alone make all the decisions in the handling of her Palm oil fields. She regularly transports the fresh fruit branches (FFBs) to the collecting centres using wage labourers. Lalnunziri also expressed her uneasiness/awkwardness as a single lady Palm Oil farmer in the District. She has to attend all the agricultural training sessions & meetings all alone in a men-dominated gathering. However, she satisfactorily expressed her happiness about her farm- "*Oil Palm is very good*". She continued- "*Oil palm is better than jhum cultivation. Previously, they had to cut parts of bamboo forests every year which is not good for the environment*". Lalnunziri produces 20-30 quintals of Fresh fruit branches every month with twenty to thirty thousand profits per month. Unlike, Lalnunziri many women seem unhappy with all the changes brought by Palm Oil and the neo-liberal agricultural mechanism. Purobi Bose in her article

'No Country for Women: The Dark Side of Palm Oil Production in Mizoram' provides us with the dark side of palm oil plantations in the region. The article shows how palm oil is becoming a men's business in the State where women have no say (Purobi Bose; 2018). Previously in *jhum* or shifting cultivation, women are equal partners of men in the entire agricultural activities. Women took part in the decision-making process of what to produce in *jhum*, and when to collect the produce from the *jhum* fields. In the neo-liberal agricultural landscape, palm oil plantations provide nothing to women. The women's space of action as well as their decision-making capabilities is further declined. Mizo women are becoming limited within the household activities. The condition that emerged under the neo-liberal agricultural landscape is easily understandable in the narrative of a Mizo woman as mentioned in Purobi Bose's article- "*The plantation agriculture is squeezing blood both from my land and from my body*" (Purobi Bose; 2018). After Palm Oil, the traditional farming systems along with all the social norms & values associated with it are disrupted permanently. Land tenure within Palm oil plantations is often solidified and handed over to exclusively the heads of the household. Thereby, women's access to land & other natural resources is certainly limited.

Further, the diversity of crops in the newer agricultural practices of Palm oil plantations in Mizoram is limited to two or three crops. Most emphasis is given to the cultivation of cash crops to be sold in the market to contribute to the economy of the State. Thus, the new agricultural landscapes of Palm oil plantations dispossess the communities from their crucially important self-sufficient form of economic production. They become more and more vulnerable to the demand & supply chains of the Markets. The food security & food sovereignty of the communities are also in question. The people's cultural food habits are on the edge of extinction as they are increasingly unable to continue the cultivation of their indigenous crops. The loss of self-sustainability directly affects women. It increases women's household work burdens. With the loss of *jhum* fields, women have to spend more time & energy collecting household diets.

Conclusions :

The communities of Mizo Hills live in a distinct mode of life that severely contradicts with modern discourse of development. Unlike the densely populated urban industrial centres, the lives of the Hills run on villages with agriculture as the popular strategy of sustenance. However, the present development mechanism that is essentially based on the discourses of modernity and capitalism negates such a way of life and cultivation as both anti-environmental and anti-developmental. The development discourse in Mizoram completely ignores the people's dependency factor on the practice of indigenous forms of cultivation. Such kind of disconnection between indigenous practices of life and the development strategy is contributing to dispossessions be it culture or positive gender identities. The largely accepted 'strong & egalitarian gender relations of the Hill societies' are increasingly in danger with the interventions from neo-liberal agricultural mechanisms in Mizoram. Hence, Monirul Hussain argues that the present development model is not based on people's aspirations and has both its beneficiaries and victims (Monirul Hussain; 2008). The mode of development followed in Mizoram is so exclusionary that it tends to fulfil only some specific human necessities of specific sections of society. Whereas, the larger sections of the community's sustainable life are being washed away through transforming them into objects neo-liberal development model.

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