

Shifting cultivation in north-east India

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Abstract - Shifting cultivation (locally known as jhum cultivation) is also the main form of agriculture in the north-eastern states of India such as, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Assam. Shifting cultivation is described as slash or burn or swidden agriculture and is widely practised by the hill tribes. It is the predominant form of agriculture where the hill tribes are dependent for their livelihood. This system of farming is regarded as the first stage in the evolution of agriculture-the transitional stage from hunting and gathering to settled cultivation. The implements used in this cultivation are primitive and is a labour intensive form with an extensive use of land. The study will examines the practice of shifting cultivation by the hill tribes and reflect on the various rituals and practices link to this method of cultivation. This paper attempts to understand shifting cultivation as a source of livelihood to the hill tribes and how it has direct bearing to their socio- cultural system which is linked to their religious rites and festivals. The sources used for the purpose are both primary and secondary. It includes Proceedings of Revenue Department, Forest Department, Progress Report of Forest Administration in Assam, journals and relevant related books.

keywords - shifting cultivation, hill tribes, livelihood.

I. INTRODUCTION

The north-eastern states are mainly inhabited by the tribals. The zigzag area, hilly terrain and highlands are totally occupied by the tribals. In Northeast India many ethnic groups occupied the land, their appearance no doubt is one and the same but having different dialects, customs and cultures. The system of cultivation of these tribes is shifting cultivation or jhuming. They cultivate the land by cutting the forest and burnt to ashes sowing seeds of different food items. When the soil lose its fertility they shifted to another place and continue the same process of cultivation. The hills of Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh and Assam are occupied by local tribes who are dependent on shifting cultivation for their livelihood. The Naga Hills and part of Manipur Hills are occupied by the Naga tribes. These people also practices shifting cultivation in the hilly terrain alongside with terraced cultivation. The Khasis and Jaintias who occupy the Khasi and Jiantia Hills Practised a different form of cultivation where the trees are not cut down or burnt but weeds and bushes are simply cleared without cutting down the bigger trees and the land is cultivated. They practices gardening for food items. In parts of Lower and Upper Assam the local tribes engaged in jhum cultivation by cutting the forest. Thus trees were fell in large number which led to forest deterioration in parts of these region. Though the whole tribes of north-east India resort to shifting cultivation for their livelihood, the pattern of cultivation and technique differed among each tribes in all regions.

II. THE PRACTICES UNDER SHIFTING CULTIVATION

Shifting cultivation or slash or burn cultivation is prepared by cutting down the natural vegetations, letting it dry and burning it off. The origin of shifting cultivation could be traced back to the Neolithic period dated to c.7000 B.C on the basis of archaeological data. Shifting cultivation is primitive as well as labour intensive. It is regarded as the first stage of purposeful use of soil for crop production. The cultivators use very simple agricultural tools such as digging stick, hoe and iron knives. It is labour intensive form with extensive use of land. The land is common property and is controlled by social groups, usually tribes. The chieftains or land priest designates land to the individual families for their use. As this cultivation is prevalent among the hill tribes it is clan ownership of land. There are varieties of traditions of land use but as it is community based use of land is tenure free. In shifting cultivation the farmers rotate land rather than crops to sustain livelihood. In this pattern of cultivation after the land looses its fertility the farmers shift to a new virgin land and thus cycle of cropping and fallow continues. It is therefore an extensive method of land use in the form of land rotation. There is no permanent field for cultivation, a plot of land is cleared and cropped once or twice and then abandoned under forest fallow. With the increase population shifting cultivation became unsustainable as demand increases. In order to meet the demands more virgin land was brought under cultivation which shortened the jhumming cycles.

III. STAGES OF SHIFTING CULTIVATION

The stages involved in shifting cultivation are:

- ✓ Selecting the forested hilly land.
- ✓ Cutting down the jungle.
- ✓ Burning the dried forest.
- ✓ Worship and sacrifice.
- ✓ Sowing of seeds.
- ✓ Weeding.
- ✓ Harvesting and Thrashing.
- ✓ Ceremony and merry making.

✓ Following.

Some of the crops grown by the tribes are food grains, millets, maize, vegetables such as potatoes, taro, Job's tears, yams, beans, pumpkins, chillies, cucumbers etc. Besides these they also grow cash crops such as cotton, sesamum, jute, ginger, tobacco etc. They follow mixed cropping where they aimed at growing everything to meet the needs of their family. They mainly grow crops for consumption purpose. After abandoning the land to recuperate some crops are collected from the abandoned fields.

IV. SHIFTING CULTIVATION AS A SOURCE OF LIVELIHOOD

The hill tribes of north-east India are agriculturist. Shifting cultivation was a complete economic system for the hill tribes. Cultivating the soil is the beginning and end of his life's work. The method of cultivation is known as 'jhuming' where a piece of jungle is cut and burnt and cultivated for a year or two. Then the land is abandoned and a new site is selected for cultivation. In this system of cultivation farmers rotate the land rather than crops to sustain livelihoods. Land is free and there was no investment of capital. The main capital input of this cultivation is seeds which is home produced. A large variety of crops are grown which was self-sufficient for the tribes. Rice is the staple food and is the most important crop grown. Besides food the hill tribes were self sufficient in clothes, implements and housing materials. They also engaged in hunting, fishing and gathering from forest. Timber, canes and bamboos for house-building and household tools are collected from forest. The whole economy revolving around jhum is based on self-subsistence. Under jhum economy nobody offers labour for hire rather they adopted non-traditional occupation in the form of wage labour.

In the Garo Hills the most important crops grown is the rice. Other grains such as millet and vegetables such as maize, Job's tears, chillies, melons, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, ginger and indigo are grown. They also grow yams, sweet potatoes, ginger and indigo. They also gave important to the cultivation of cotton next to rice. This is because there was a great demand of cotton in the markets. The Lotha Nagas cultivated varieties of crops. They cultivated both white and red grained rice, maize, chillies, giant millet, Job's tears and taro. After rice, cotton is the most important crop grown by the Lhota. Several varieties of lentil, stinking- dal and gourds are grown, cucumber, water-melon, black sesame and white oil seed are sown. They also grow tobacco, indigo, a large number of oranges and bitter oranges, pomegranate, betel nut palms and pan.

All the tribes engaged in shifting cultivation harvest somewhat common crops which is mainly edibles food. They are dependent on their fields and beside from the jhum crops they collected forest products which are edibles. Besides vegetables for meat they depends on the wild animals and hunting was some sort of sport for this cultivators.

V. SOCIO- POLITICAL AND CULTURAL LIFE OF THE HILL TRIBES

The socio- cultural life of the tribes of north-eastern India is woven in such a way that it corresponds to the practice of shifting or jhum cultivation. Almost their socio-cultural life is regulated according to the jhum or shifting cycle. Most of the festivals of these regions are celebrated in accordance with the timings of jhuming operations. Even the social and religions pursuits and calculation of times centre round the operation of shifting cultivation. Some of the tribes rituals practices are disussed as follows:

The tribes of Thado Kukis of Manipur practice shifting cultivation as a source of their livelihood. The Thadous believe that life is given to everything by Pathen who rules the universe. He has the power to subdue the evil influences of the Thilhas and it is to Him that they do sacrifices in order to regain health or escape any adversity they may happen to have fallen into. In each house there is an in-doi, a house-god which serves the whole family as long as all the members live in one house. But with the separation of the family anew in- doi may be made. For making a new in-doi the thempu plays an important role where a piece of shething and thinghi tree, gopi(bamboo), vomgui(creeper), goat, pig fowl and egg, gourd, khaopi, hailhi, sword and spear and a woman's brass wristlet called chao were used by the thempu in blessing the new house.

In the village different feast were performed such as Chang Ai, Sha Ai and Chon. In the ceremony of Chang Ai it is woman who plays the leading part. As is it very expensive for performing this ceremony only the wives of chiefs and wealthy men performed it. The Sha Ai feast is performed by men and this implies a feast for a day to the entire village. This ceremony is performed by those men who is known to killed a dangerous animals. On the day of the ceremony the thempu with ju in his hand calls upon the Pathen to permit the Y-shaped post to be erected. Accordingly, the Pathen is supposed to tell the thempu that He has left the charge of the earth to Noimangpa where the latter tell the thempu where to erect the post. Wherever the thempu spills the ju the young men of the village digs of small piece of earth and done the actual erection of the post. The post which was of shething tree a mithun which was to be slaughter was tied up. The thempu killed the mithun by piercing it with spear or bamboo and performed the Sha Ai by blessing the man. During this ceremony Saipi Khupsu and Sagol Pheikhai and Theiphit are danced by the villagers. The Chon ceremony is the most important feast which could be performed by those only who performed the Sha Ai three times. In this ceremony everything has to be done seven times.

The Ao Naga built their village on the summits of big hills or on ridges. They have the intense love for the ancestral village site and their village are surrounded by the village lands with definite boundaries. They built their villages on high places with village gates for defensive purposes when head-chopping was honourable pursuit in olden days. Houses are arranged in some order along the streets. Bamboo is the principal material for construction the house used together with some posts and thatch grass. The house are divided into two rooms viz, living-room and the other is where the keep the wood, implements for husking rice, the pigs, chickens and even the cattle. Rice is the staple food of the Ao Nagas, they also have cucumbers, pumpkins, beans, peepers, corn, Job's tears, millet, yams and various jungle fruits are used. They also consume a large amount of rice beer which is used both as food and drink. The Ao Nagas are agriculturists which was the main source of livelihood. They cultivate their land in the most primitive method of cultivation known as shifting cultivation or jhum cultivation. In this system of cultivation jungle is cut down during the last three months of the year and is allowed to dry until March and is burned off. The burnt ashes is mixed with soil with the help of hoe and seed are sown broadcast lightly covered over. The growing crops are guarded against wild animals such as elephant, boar, monkey and birds. About five times a year weeds are to be weeded

where all the members of the family take part in it. The Nagas are very diligent in attending to their crops, for on that depends their subsistence. The social life of the Ao Nagas centres about the great festivals, the majority of which are religious, or about the feasts given to the village by rich men; and in these events the village as a whole takes part. Even though the Aos must work hard to wring a bare subsistence from a stubborn soil, they are by no means melancholy or morose and enter into the festivities with considerable merriment. At the "seed-time" and "harvest-home" festivities the blood of pigs and cows flows freely, and there seems to be no limit to the supply of mirth-giving rice beer. Some of the ceremony of the Aos related to agriculture was that after clearing the jungle for cultivation there was the first man to burn the jungle was Lutaba, a man from the Lutabachar sub-clan of the Mongsen Yimchenchar clan.

The next after burning the field was to build the fire-house for shelter and resting place. According to the Chongli custom the day after field burning, any man who is not unclean for any reason goes down and sacrifices a fowl of either sex at his field-house site and sets up one post. The Mongsen on the other hand within the five or six days of the field burning, sacrifice a fowl of either sex at their field house sites with a prayer from the evil influences of any animals or snakes burnt to be powerless and to grant a good health and bumper crops. During this time no strangers will enter his house and he will not speak to a man from another village. He is not to leave his village land and refrain from unclean meats. At the end of the six days he goes down to his field and offer an egg, set up one post of his field house and sows near it chillies, tobacco and lentils. This building of the field house was first done by the rich man of the village and then follows the other members of the village. After the building the field house the Ao impart for cultivation.

In the Phuchung ceremony the place of the sacrifice in front of the field house is to be prepared where throughout the year family offerings was to be made for good crops. According to the Mongsen custom the year's work begin with little family feast where a little pig of either sex, a fowl of the opposite sex and an egg were taken to the field. The Metsuwaluk ceremony is a ritual carried out before cultivating the old fields for the second time, the following year. This is usually done just before clearing up the rubbish left by the fire of the newly cut and burnt fields.

The Khasis celebrates Shad Nongrem and Ka Nongrem as the thanks giving after harvesting time. One of the most important ceremonies here is Pomblang or the goat beheading ritual. Here a full goat is offered to the Goddess Ka Synshas as a sign of gratitude for the good harvest and a prosperous season ahead. Another important event is the dance of Nongkrem perform by young boys and girls dressed up in silk robes.

The hill tribes practice shifting cultivation which is interwoven with their cultural and religious ceremony. Depending on the stages of cultivation they performed ritual ceremony for the better growth of the crops and good harvest.

VI. CONCLUSION

Throughout the work it is observed that shifting cultivation which is widely practised in north-east India is to meet the demand for food grains of the household. One of the important feature of this cultivation is that almost all the varieties of crops, cereals and vegetables are grown in one jhum field to meet all the needs of the cultivator. And apart from being the source of livelihood, Shifting cultivation plays a major role in shaping, developing and preserving the cultures and traditions of the practising tribes.

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