

Changing Profile of Shifting Cultivation in the Lushai Hills, North East India, 1897-1947

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Abstract: *The present study looks at the changing profile of shifting cultivation along the Inner line reserve in the Lushai Hills in the context of tribal place-making. In the case of tribal place-making, colonial rulers adopted a policy of imposing restrictions on shifting cultivation. With close observation of the landscape, this strategy was taken for the pacification of the tribal people. A specific landscape was designed for tribal people who were not developed from their 'backward agriculture'. The colonial authority gradually recognized that India's forests, hill tracts and 'tribal' people were ecologically distinct from the settled 'civilized' people of cultivated plains. With the creation of the inner line reserve, this separateness was gradually acknowledged.*

Keywords: Shifting Cultivation (*jhum*), Tribal Place Making, Inner Lines.

Shifting (*jhum*) cultivation was an important agro-ecosystem-based rotational mountain agricultural practice in North East India. To increase the fertility of soil tribal communities in the region used dried slash through cutting and burning trees just before the monsoon in this agricultural practice. After clearing the forest people used to cultivate selective crops for one to two years. After that, the land is left fallow for near about twenty years before returning to the patch. A significant body of research scrutinized the problems of shifting cultivation and its impact on the environment.¹ Bela Malik has explored the historical dynamic that made shifting cultivation a victim of inappropriate policy choices and opted for another option in the case of Garo Hills of North East India.² Shahnaz Kimi Leblhuber and H. Vanlalhruaia have focused on *jhum* cultivation about the New Land Use Policy (NLUP) introduced by the government of Mizoram in 1984.³ However, the colonial policy on shifting cultivation, as K. Sivaramakrishnan argued, has not been studied in the context of place-making.⁴ Colonial rulers sought to mitigate the exploitative influence of non-tribals on tribal society. Along with it reformulates the relationship of tribal with forests for controlling the diversified usage of forest products and management. They followed both of the policies for making tribal places.

The present study looks at the changing profile of shifting cultivation along the Inner Line reserve in the Lushai Hills, North East India in the context of tribal place-making.

British Annexation of the Lushai Hills:

The hill peoples were never located beyond the ambit of imperial expansion and consolidation. As Lalruatkima notes, 'Raids—the linear frontier's version of movement by hill peoples—into British-claimed territory met with punitive campaigns against the offending hill community.'⁵ When the British expanded their territory to the Chittagong Hill Tracts they found the Lushai. The contact between the British and the Lushai occurred as the latter organized frequent 'raids' on the British frontier during the period from 1826 up to the last decade of the nineteenth century.⁶ The 'pacification' strategy of the British in the Assam Hills was extended up to the northeastern frontier in the last decade of the nineteenth century. They also augmented their administrative control to a large extent in the Lushai Hills.⁷ In 1855, Captain Yule, Secretary to the Envoy to the court of Ava described:

'Still further in the Naga country, between 93° and 95°, a great multiple mass of mountains starts southwards from the Assam chain. Enclosing first the level alluvial valley of Manipur, at a height of 25,000 feet above the sea, it then spreads out westward of Triperah and the coast of Chittagong and Northern Arakan, a broad succession of unexplored and forest-covered spurs, inhabited by a vast variety of wild tribes of Indo-Chinese kindred known as Kukis, Nagas, Khyenes, and by many more specific names.'⁸

At that time the region was described on the maps as 'undefined' and 'unsprayed'.⁹ During the time of the Lushai Expedition Colonel A. S. Reid identified the tribe as "...the wild tribes which had been in the habit of raiding North Eastern Frontier, were generally spoken of as 'Kukis' –a Bengali word meaning hill-men or highlanders."¹⁰

With the third Anglo-Burmese War (1885-1886), the British entered into the hill country of the Zo¹¹ people. In the late 1880's through the three military expeditions from Bengal, Burma and Assam, the British annexed and categorized them into three sections such as Chin Hills, South Lushai Hills and North Lushai Hills. To determine the future administrative set-up of the newly acquired hills, the Chin-Lushai Conference was held in 1892 at Fort Williams. As they failed to make a unanimous decision, the Chin Hills were kept with Burma. After the second Chin-Lushai Conference held in 1896, South Lushai Hills and North Lushai Hills were associated with Assam and received the status of a district.¹² Thus, the Lushai country (Map1) came under the administration of Assam on 1st April 1898. It was under the charge of an officer who was known as 'Superintendent of Lushai Hills'. Though absolute non-interference was laid down in principle it was not applied in all cases.¹³ Major John Shakespeare, notes, 'I suggest the district to be formed into an independent subdivision and that Mr. Hodkins be left in

charge for some time. To make the district an executive charge would be expensive, to make it a subdivision of Cachar would be fatal. This district is too great for supervision and caused an intolerable delay when it was tried before.¹⁴

For a long period, scientists used the evolutionary theory for interpreting the different races of the world. Applying a similar lens the British administrators sought to understand the Indian people. They classified the communities of India in some societal terms like loyal from disloyal, respectable from criminal and *dasa*(slave) from *dasyu*(enemies). The colonial mapping of Indian society was based on the binary of tribe and caste, which created political and intellectual confusion for a long time. Social Anthropology of India documented the differences between tribe and caste. As Prathama Banerjee notes, "...it was argued that tribes were segmentary, castes were organic; tribes were isolated and self-sufficient, castes were interactive and inter-dependant; tribes 'animist', castes Hindu; tribe egalitarian, castes hierarchical and so on."¹⁵From the late eighteenth century onwards, in contrast to society, tribes were romantically viewed as non-monetised, egalitarian, primordial communities. In India, the political and economic government of tribes was marked as 'excluded' and 'non-regulated' spaces of the empire. In the case of labour and credit markets, the tribe was meant to produce and reproduce as an isolated, a-historical and pre-political entity, enabling the infinite reproduction of the 'modern' as the tribe's necessary other.¹⁶

To boost the state power in the countryside, the Colonial authority followed the way of deforestation and other kinds of environmental changes. There is thus a strong interlink between environment and resistance regarding tribe/forest situation. As David Arnold notes, 'the colonial authorities began to distinguish between India's ecological zones, identifying certain types of landscapes and associated forms of vegetation, wildlife and disease with certain kinds of human inhabitants, their ways of life and cultural characteristics.' By the 1780s the uncultivated 'wastes' (or 'jungle') became synonymous with lawlessness and primitiveness. With the development of this mentality among the Indian middle class and colonial authorities on the 'wilderness', tribes and forests became separate entities. It helped to take administrative actions and create a utopian vision to subdue, include and reformulate the tribal society. However, 'tribals' were romanticised and preserved as primitive. The colonial authority, thus, recognized that India's forests, hill tracts and 'tribal' people were ecologically distinct from the settled 'civilized' people of cultivated plains.¹⁷Enlightenment thinkers sought to perceive savagery or wildness in terms of climate and the physical environment and regarded it as the main issue for cultural difference.

Shifting Cultivation as a Strategy of Tribal Place-Making:

In the case of tribal place-making, colonial rulers adopted a policy of imposing restrictions on shifting cultivation. With close observation of the

landscape, this strategy was taken for the pacification of the tribal people. A specific landscape was designed for Tribal people who were not developed from their 'backward agriculture'. Various leading administrators, scientists, and other influential imperial agents imagined a combination of *primaeval* landscapes and their human settlement. The imperial agents criticized the *kumri* and *podu* (forms of shifting cultivation in south India) scientifically for controlling the pattern of settlement and production. In this way, control of forest management was encouraged and pacification policy was adopted through the implementation of the rule of law.¹⁸ The *jhum* was described as 'Primitive', 'irrational' and 'short-sighted' opposite to rational, scientific, long-term state management of forests. The shifting cultivation was allowed in the non-reserved areas which were identified as 'unclassed forests'.¹⁹

Forest departments and tribal communities have confronted each other over the issue of land use practices. Dietrich Brandis thought that friction was inevitable when on the one hand timbers were conserved and shifting cultivation was not controlled. According to him, for the smooth reproduction of trees, it was necessary to impose strict control over the shifting cultivation.²⁰

The British implemented the Inner Line Regulations in 1873 to control the movements of the plains people of Assam and the hill tribes who frequently engaged in confrontation.²¹ On 15th March 1877, according to the order of Major J. Shakespeare, the Inner Line Reserve (comprising an area of 1317.8 sq km) was created in Lushai Hills under the Revenue Department as a part of Cachar Forest Division. It was extended in the north up to the Tipaimukh-Chattuchera line and in the south up to the line of Lushai Hills. The superintendent of Lushai Hills restricted the *jhum* cultivation in the region from 1897. In 1902 special forest rules were proposed to be implemented in this region to protect the Lushai from the plainsman. So the Assam Forest Regulation would not be applicable in the area. This proposal came into effect with the notification and creation of Inner Line Reserve in 1904 under the jurisdiction of Superintendent, Lushai Hills. Thus, the forest department came under the superintendent of general administration and the management of the forest was also consolidated.²²

The concept of the Inner Line can be traced to the notion that categorized the hills and plains as separate and distinct economic and cultural formations. According to this concept, there would be no scope for socio-economic dealings between the hills and plains. A line was drawn along the northern and eastern foothills of Assam and the hills were viewed as inside the inner line. The social formation inside the line was perceived as beyond modern-state intervention. "While apparently", as Arupjyoti Saikia notes "primacy was accorded to the community notion of political evolution the line was ostensibly aimed at 'establishment of clear and defensible property rights' that had emerged under the new imperial regime and tea plantation." This notion grew as a stable feature of socio-political separation between people and resources in the regions of plains and hills.²³

It was a separation from the nomadic people from the sedentary cultivators and also from non-arable forests to arable areas. As this was not rigid, the imaginary lines were repeatedly redrawn because of the incorporation of plantation capital, security issues of the colonial state and for making adjustments to internally variegated tribal people.²⁴ This inner line measures limited the travels from the plains to the hills and sharpened the differences between the two. The earlier mode of exchanging commodities and contacts gradually vanished. As the revenue collections from the hills were very low the colonial government took charge of the basic administration. However, the responsibilities for health, education and general welfare were vested with the Christian Missionaries.²⁵ As Major J. Shakespeare notes, 'The people have not yet reached the stage when one Sahib is much the same as another and for sometime after a change of Superintendant, the people are shy of approaching the new man so that changes retard the district more than they do in regulation one. I am aware that it is generally thought that a hill district is a comparatively unimportant charge. I venture to point out that in a regulation district, governments carried on so much by regulation and, what with the press and the pleader committees, have little chance of much harm being done without the Chief Commissioner becoming aware of it, whereas, in a hill district, much more has to be left out to the officer in charge. I would not counsel the hands of officers in the hills being too tightly tied, because with wild tribes the rule must be personal, but plead that the importance of the hill districts should not be made.'²⁶ According to the Inner Line Regulations, the entry and residency of the outsiders were regulated. Personal surcharges and house taxes were imposed so that outsiders would not be interested in living. Though the entry of Chakmas and Tripuris was restricted, there was an exception for the Nepali policemen who had been in long service, the milk sellers and traders of Assam and Bengal.²⁷

In the non-regulation provinces (like the western frontier districts of Bengal), civil and criminal laws had not been applied like other areas. Even the colonial administration sought to implement the special tenancy law to prevent land alienation from the tribal people to non-tribals. In these provinces, the district officers exercised enormous discretion as local specialists who acted as 'man dominant machine' to administer 'localities or races having peculiarities, especially those reputed backwards, such as, for instance, the western frontier districts of Bengal'.²⁸ K. Sivaramakrishnan observes that with the creation of the South Western Frontier Agency 'an enduring pattern of exceptionalism' in the political administration of a certain region of woodland, Bengal was created. This region has multiple differences from the other parts of Bengal. The zone of anomaly was defined by the unique combination of tribal people and forested landscape. This place was less legible than the others surrounding it in the context of colonial governance. In this way, the 'zone of anomaly' expressed the limits of colonial knowledge.²⁹

'Modern discourse of mapping' in the case of Siam, as Winichakul

argues, 'was the ultimate of the conqueror in the production of territoriality and the ultimate victim was the indigenous cosmography.'³⁰ The New 'Geobody' of Imperial British India replaced the traditional Zo idea of space, geography and territoriality. The colonial administration absorbed the village as the lowest level of administrative unit but they transformed the power and functions of the chiefs and became representatives of colonial authority.³¹ In the Lushai language the term '*Ram*' means land which also expresses their spiritual ethics. Among the two types of land, *khua* implies a settled place like a village while the *ram* indicates countryside. The Lushai community used the natural resources under the leadership of their Chiefs. They held all the land through community ownership. However, a small family held a small patch of land where they cultivate. There was an old saying: '*sem sem dam dam*'. This implies one who would distribute would live longer and one who was unwilling to do this and selfish would must die.³² There were two types of forests, i.e. sacred protected forest and *ramak*(reserve forest for their use) between the village (*khua*) and *jhum* field (*zo lo*). Beyond the *jhum* field there was free land or the land belonged to another group. The sacred protected forest acted as a safeguard from their *jhum* fire and also from the enemy.³³ The colonial government adopted the policy of restricting the shifting cultivation through close observation of the landscape.

In 1897, The Superintendent of Lushai Hills adopted a policy of restriction on shifting cultivation along the river banks because Lushai people preferred to do that in bamboo and higher lands to low low-lying jungle. The forest Officials of Lushai Hills provided necessary instruction to the tribals for limiting the shifting cultivation. In the Inner Line Reserve, there existed four main villages, such as Saihum, Mauchar, Tinghmun and Sakordai. In 1923, W. L. Scotts allowed forty houses in Saihum village. In 1933, as the Hmar Chief Mangliana possessed forty-three houses he was instructed to maintain the limit. Also, he was given a punishment of a hundred days of labour.³⁴ The extension of boundary and *jhum* cultivation was not allowed without the permission of the Forest Department.³⁵ According to Major Kenedy's order of 20th January 1912, the Chief Zalala of Mauchar was restricted to fifty-eight houses in the bamboo jungles. In 1932, he started a *Khawper* of eleven houses in the Zote *Ram* without permission. He was also ordered to recall all houses by Pawltlak 1933-34. According to Major Kennedy's order of 19th January 1912, chief Kaihleia of Tinghmun village was allowed to remain in forty-five houses. Similar restrictions were imposed as in Mauchar village. On 13 October 1912, Colonel Loch allowed the chief Sawla of Sakordai village to thirty *jhum* in the bamboo *jhum* areas. In order of 31st January 1929, Mr Helme issued an order that 'Neither Zalala nor Sangliana Sawia's ward. Lalbuaanga's deceased son was allowed to cut for *jhum* in the Sunglawn *Ram*. A colonial official advised Sawla that he had been able to keep Sakordai *ram* for his nephew Sangliana, son of late Lalbuaanga. The Suanglawn had not been cultivated since Lalbuaanga abandoned it in 1914. The Palsang village was not situated in the reserve

forest but on some occasions, it performed *jhuming* in reserved areas. Though the Kawithruilian village was outside the reserve forest the *ram* included part of the forest. In 1932, as A.G. McCall notes, 'I would not allow *jhuming* either while the policy of Government is to preserve trees on the high hills even when not near the navigable rivers.'³⁶ Some of the villages, such as Vaitin, Khawpuar, and Vairengte were not actually within the forest reserve but were also accustomed to *jhum*. According to Mr. Parry's order of 1908-09, thirty-nine houses were sanctioned for Bilkhawthlir village but in 1930, the number increased to sixty. In Kolasib, though both bamboo and tree *jhuming* were allowed government was anxious about whether tree *jhuming* had been stopped or not. *Jhuming* were also restricted in Dairep, near Boirabi and Boilum villages.³⁷

In 1933, the Conservator of Forests, Assam instructed to avoid *jhuming* near areas of the river banks.³⁸ N. N. Das, Extra Assistant Conservator of Forests, observed the condition of forests in the Karnaphuli River: 'As most of the forests met with are very irregular nature, varying from entire areas under *jhum* cultivation without any tree growth, old *jhums* overgrown with almost pure bamboos, partly worked out forests, heavily worked out forests and forests fairly well stocked with tree growth..' There were vast forest resources in the Tullenpui Valley in the Lushai Hills. Though the forests in the Tullenpui Valley and elsewhere were proposed for reservation, the superintendent, I/C Forest, Lushai Hills was interested in exploiting the resources. The *jhuming* was confined to the bamboo areas only and the forest officer did not mark the trees through the silviculture method before they fell by wood-cutters.³⁹ The Conservator of Forests, Assam instructed to abolish the levy imposed on transit pass fees.⁴⁰ Two different drift and Sunken Timber Mahals were created for the exploitation of timber. The first one was for timber exclusively belonging to the Lushai Hills, especially in the areas of Karnaphuli and its tributaries which were situated between the areas on the eastern side of the mouth of the Tullenpui River and the areas up to the mouth of the Baraharina river. The second was the common Mahal for Bengal and Assam. It comprised the Thengakhal, the Baraharina, the Tullenpui and the portion of the Karnaphuli from the mouth of Tullenpui and down to the mouth of the Baraharina River.⁴¹ In 1935, at Aijal establishment, there was neither Deputy Ranger nor Forester as Via Lushai was transferred to Goalpara in 1934. Though Hmrtawnphunga Sailo had joined in his place he was also transferred to Cachar Division in 1935.⁴²

In 1947, sealed tenders were invited to work out timber and bamboo for five years.⁴³ Those wood traders who had not renewed their permit for the disposal of timber were requested to do so.⁴⁴ In 1950-51, there were six villages consisting of 403 houses in the Lushai Hills Inner Line Reserve of which 392 houses were assessed for house tax. After the partition of India, the forest department reported illegal felling of trees and the department earned more revenue than the previous years through regular checks of forest produce removed to Pakistan.⁴⁵

The hill tribes were treated as lazy people because they practised

shifting cultivation. From the forest, the colonial state extracted a large amount of revenue. As a result of commercial timber extraction, the diverse biological species of the region were devastated. Colonial authority regularly observed the landscape through restriction of jhuming and control over forests was strengthened. When jhuming activities were confined to the bamboo forest areas, the rat population increased during bamboo flowering and the risk of the devastation of crops increased. The colonial authority gradually recognized that India's forests, hill tracts and 'tribal' people were ecologically distinct from the settled 'civilized' people of cultivated plains. Thus, with the creation of the inner line reserve, this separateness was gradually acknowledged through a colonial scheme of making tribal places. The discourse of tribal protection resulted in the establishment of the Backward Tract by the Government of India Act, of 1915, and Excluded Area by the Government of India Act, of 1935. This notion emerged as a stable feature of socio-political separation between people and resources in the plains and hills.

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