



# International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development



Volume: 2, Issue: 7, 496-500  
July 2015  
www.allsubjectjournal.com  
e-ISSN: 2349-4182  
p-ISSN: 2349-5979  
Impact Factor: 3.762

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## Farming in Mizoram: Jhumming and the role of women

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### Abstract

In Mizoram, there is less scope for occupational differentiation and about 60% of its population are still engaged in agriculture and allied activities (2001 census) for their sustenance. More than 75% of its population are still engaged in agricultural activities for their sustenance. It is, therefore, obvious that the prospect for improvement in their agricultural economy solely depended on the quality of agriculture administration in the Mizo Hills. In the traditional period, that is, before the advent of exogenous forces into the Mizo Hills, the fundamental objective of traditional agriculture administration was to prepare the villagers to be self-sufficient in food. In the traditional period, women's contribution to agriculture was praiseworthy. In spite of the fact that the role of women has considerably declined as compared to the past due to various factors like farm mechanisation, women's employment in sectors other than agriculture, urbanisation etc., women still play a major role especially in the rural areas. Jhumming continues to be a way of life for the Mizos who engage themselves in agricultural activities.

**Keywords:** agriculture, fathang, jhumming, weeding, women

### 1. Introduction

Agriculture is an essential component of human life. In Mizoram, as compared to other parts of the country, there is less scope for occupational differentiation and about 60% of its population are still engaged in agriculture and allied activities (2001 census) for their sustenance. The State whose geographical area, is 21,081 sq.kms has got a net sown area of 1, 31,230 ha and total cropped area of 1, 32, 634 ha. In 2013-14 according to the Statistical Handbook of Mizoram 2012. The potential Wet Rice Cultivation (WRC) area is 10,163 ha as of 2011. The population of the State as per 2011 census is 10, 97,206 out of which the rural population is 5, 25,435. There are 80,180 cultivator households out of the total of 2, 18,860 households, in 2010-11, that is around 36.64 percent. The cultivators comprise 54.9 percent of the population of the State in 2001. The average share of agriculture and allied sector to the economy of the State during the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan is 14 percent. There is no industry worth mentioning thus limiting the scope of employment for earnings. As compared to other parts of the country, there is less scope for occupational differentiation in Mizoram and more than 75% of its population are still engaged in agricultural activities for their sustenance. Hence, the importance of agriculture cannot be minimised in Mizoram.

### 1.2. Indigenous Agricultural System in Mizoram

From whatever known history till Indian Independence, the Mizos lived in different independent villages under the rule of its own *Lal* or Chief. While discharging his multifarious functions, the Chief was assisted by the Council of Elders known as 'Council of *Upas*.' These '*Upas*' were appointed by the Chief himself on the basis of their achievements and good performance in agriculture.

Each Mizo village was independent of the other and each laid a claim over a certain area of land for its use and cultivation. As the prospect for occupational choice was practically absent among different village communities, the most important occupation of each village community to sustain their lives was through "jhumming" or 'shifting cultivation' or 'slash-and-burn method of cultivation.' The village-based Mizo economy was completely tied down to agriculture.

Practically, jhumming can be divided into three categories:

- (a) Main jhum: Main jhum is where crops of all kinds are grown mixed with paddy as the principal crop.
- (b) Diversified jhum: Diversified jhum is the one where mono- cropping is practised in different plots such as sugarcane, plantation, ginger, soyabean, chilli cultivation etc. The main objective of cultivation of these crops is to earn cash by the jhumia families.
- (c) Vegetable jhum: In the vegetable jhum, only vegetables are grown.

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Each Chief was the '*de facto*' owner of the village land on whose shoulders rested the economic welfare of the whole village community. In return for his role, each household was duty bound to contribute a part of its harvest, to the Village Chief. This was called '*Fathang*'<sup>[1]</sup> or '*Lal Buhchhun*.'<sup>[2]</sup> The Chief was assisted by important functionaries, namely '*Ramhuals*' or Jhum Experts, '*Zalens*' or Free and '*Thirdeng*' or Blacksmith.

The Chief would make fair distribution of the village lands among the villagers in accordance with "the advice of the expert jhum-cultivators who were called *Ramhuals*."<sup>[3]</sup> The *Ramhuals* were "expert jhum cultivators" from whom the Chief took advice for the correct determination of making selection of jhum-lands for the whole village and allotment of those jhum plots to the village folk. After these experts fixed up the various plots of lands for good 'jhuming,' the Chief had the primary right to select the best for his own jhum. Thereafter, the *Ramhuals* were allowed first choice of field to cultivate<sup>[4]</sup>. It is commonly known among the Mizos that the size of suitable land chosen by a *Ramhual* for cultivation was significantly bigger than those that went to the ordinary villagers. In consideration of their getting first choice of jhums, the *Ramhuals* "have to pay heavier *fathang* to the Chief than ordinary villagers"<sup>[5]</sup>. As a rule, the payment of *Fathang* often varied according to the productivity of the jhum-lands and similarly, the rate of *Fathang* payable by the *Ramhuals* was also different in different villages.

The *Ramhuals* were recognised as "men of possession" in the village, and were often approached by the Chief to stand by the poor and the needy. In this connection, the President of the Lushai Chiefs' Council stated: "It is, therefore, no exaggeration to say that the *Ramhuals* are the store from which the poor are fed"<sup>[6]</sup>.

The *Zalens* or Free, as the name implies, were free from payment of *Fathang* to the Chief. But, due to their exemption from payment of *Fathang*, the Chief could ask them to supply paddy in times of famine or other natural calamities like drought. N.E. Parry also clearly stated thus: "The *Zalens* is a person who is exempted from paying *Fathang* to the Chief in consideration of his helping the Chief if he runs short of paddy or falls into any kind of difficulty"<sup>[7]</sup>. It is true to say that the *Zalens* were the rich in the village, who "were approached by the Chief to come to his aid to give succour to the poor, or even to the Chief himself when he was in want"<sup>[8]</sup>. The institution of *Ramhuals* and *Zalens* was "the backbone of the economic structure of the Lushai Hills through the ages"<sup>[9]</sup>.

When the *Ramhuals* and the *Zalens* completed selection of suitable lands for their cultivation, all the villagers would be allowed to select the plots of land allotted to them on the basis of lottery system. A unique feature of the distribution of jhum plots was that widows and widowers were usually allotted lands nearest to the village to enable them to fulfil their family obligations while taking care of their jhum.

In addition to the above important functionaries, *Thirdeng* or Blacksmith occupied an important and lofty position in the village by virtue of his specialised skill in blacksmithy. Being the village blacksmith, he was responsible to "repair or sometimes to make agricultural implements at the demands of the villagers"<sup>[10]</sup>. Sometimes, when the village was engaged in war with the neighbouring villages, he was also required to "make the implements of war like daggers and spears"<sup>[11]</sup>. The Chief usually selected the village Blacksmith from among those who were adept in blacksmithy. By way of his remuneration, the village blacksmith used to get "a basketful

of paddy from each household in the village after the harvest"<sup>[12]</sup>. In addition to paddy, the village blacksmith was also entitled to Blacksmith's tax called *Thirdengsa*<sup>[13]</sup> which consisted of "the spine and three ribs"<sup>[14]</sup> of any animal killed or trapped in the village.

The above village officials were appointed by the Chief from among his subjects who could make outstanding performance in the field of agriculture.

The Mizo claim that they have been practising jhum cutting since the days they descended from the Far East to the Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) across Burma. In earlier days, when population pressure was minimal, the jhum cycle was 15 years whereas, at present, it is said to have narrowed down to 5-10 years. Due to the ever-increasing population with no simultaneous increase in the available land for cultivation, it has become difficult to have a long cycle. The following year, jhum has to be abandoned and fresh areas are cut for the next year's cultivation. In the jhum, only annual and seasonal crops are raised. Forests are cut for jhum for the ensuing year. Jhum cutting starts in the early part of September and is completed in mid-November in the eastern and southern belts of Mizoram, while it is done from early January to the end of February in the North and North West. Different timings are observed in view of the relative duration required for drying of the felled trees and bamboos. Being cooler in climate, the eastern and southern belt requires longer periods of exposure to the sun to dry for complete burning.

### 1.3. Manpower Contribution of Women in Agricultural Activities

The Mizo's agricultural activity, in most cases, implies jhum activity. The successive jhum activity consists of cutting and felling of trees, bamboos etc., burning, dribbling of paddy seeds, weeding, harvesting, threshing and transportation to the villages. While men folks were the main workforce to cut thick forests for jhuming in the earlier days, women were in most cases exempted from this hard work. It was an exceptional case that the widows were compelled by circumstances to engage themselves in the activities of jhum cutting. As time passed by, womenfolk were also not spared and had to do the same nature of work with their male counterparts in cutting forests for jhum.

The women worked the whole day with the men in the jhum and during the afternoon break, they collected vegetables and prepared the noon meal. In addition to this activity, the women collected vegetables for family consumption as well as food for their livestock, which they carried home on their back with bamboo baskets<sup>[15]</sup>. Further, the rearing of the domestic animals with those vegetables was the sole responsibility of the women.

When the felled trees and bamboos become dry, they are burnt for sowing the seeds. The next step is to remove the left over ballies and unburnt debris lying on the plot by stacking and re-burning it which is known as '*Mangkhawh*.' Though women are usually exempted from the burning of jhum plots, they have ever made good contribution in removing those unburnt debris during '*Mangkhawh*.' Side by side, along with the removal work, the women are busy sowing the vegetable seeds which they carry in a small bag attached to their waist. The women carry the seeds and other requirements as they proceed to the jhum and carry back firewood from the Jhum as they return. The firewood requirement of each family in traditional Mizo homes without LPG provision is very high as the fire is kept burning for lighting purpose even when they are not cooking.

Mixed cropping is being practised in jhum cultivation in Mizoram even till today. Men and women are equally involved in sowing of paddy seeds which is done by dibbling with the help of a small hand hoe at appropriate intervals. Besides, women are involved in dibbling maize seeds and turmeric rhizomes are planted in March itself well before the onset of monsoon rains. Paddy seeds are dibbled in the month of April after the first monsoon rain sets in. Bird's eye chillies are also sown in March by broadcasting. Soya seeds are sown in July and August. Potatoes are planted in the same month. The spacing from crop to crop is decided on the spot by thumb rule. Even today, most of the Mizo women in the rural areas understand all these dibbling and sowing techniques.

The Mizo traditional paddy seed sowing is done together with the neighbours following the system of '*Lawmruai*,' which means joining hands to sow seeds so as to finish in a few days' time. Ten to twelve persons, both men and women, can approximately sow paddy seeds in one-acre plot in a day. The Mizo farmers usually go by the date of 'Good Friday' for sowing paddy seeds, as it always coincides with the full moon night around which it has been found that the insect pests are keeping lull and inactive. The seedling work is largely left to the women while the building of jhum shack called '*thlam*' was men's work <sup>[16]</sup>

Usually three to four weedings that is, clearing of the undergrowth of weeds are done in one year from the time of sowing the paddy seeds to harvesting. By this process, all the noxious weeds are removed with the help of small hand hoes by the womenfolk and curved daos by the men. The women figure predominantly in this arduous but essential need. Days on end are spent bending down snipping out threatening weeds with their small hoe, until the whole hill-sides are fairly well cleared <sup>[17]</sup>.

In the past, parents were helped in weeding operations by their daughters. While explaining the multifarious role played by a Mizo girl, L.D. Baveja also said: "She...works on the jhum land together with the other members of the family <sup>[18]</sup>." Sometimes, boys and girls worked together in different jhums in rotation and ate together in the jhum huts. This is a means of helping out each other in the cultivation process and is known as '*Inlawm*.' A boy is called '*Lawmpa*' and a girl is called '*Lawmnu*.' This often led to courtship in the subsequent days even to the extent of marriage. This practice is still alive among boys and girls in the countryside. After coming back home from her jhum work, a girl's task again begins in the evenings when she has to help the family cook and roll innumerable Mizo cigarettes for the visitors <sup>[19]</sup>. When the jhum plots are far-off from the villages, they often spend the night in the jhum huts almost for a week. In the villages, cultivators take three square meals a day- in the morning, at noon and in the evening. Fresh vegetables from the jhum are collected and cooked in the jhum mostly by women.

Harvesting is normally done by cutting the paddy with the dao or sickle, in which the women take part alongside the men. They carry the paddy home in two or more stages by storing in successive temporary huts called '*Chhekin*.' From there, it is transported to the village by head load. Usually a man carries a load of 30-40 kgs, while a woman carries 20-30 kgs. From these storing-bins the women carry up through the year load after load to meet the needs of the family's daily consumption in the homes. The loaded bamboo baskets are steadied on the backs and held up by a plaited bandeau pressing against the foreheads of the women <sup>[20]</sup>. As per village calculations, it is estimated that 10 '*phur*' of paddy (3 tins = 1 *phur*) is sufficient to meet an individual's requirement

for one year <sup>[21]</sup>. On an average, a Mizo family is estimated to consist of five members, thus, 50 *phur* is estimated to be sufficient for a small family for one year.

Both men and women are involved in the threshing of the paddy. There are two ways of threshing paddy among the Mizo, one is on the growing land '*Hruih*' where the paddy grain is removed from the stalk either by beating with a stick or by beating the paddy stalk bundle themselves, after the sheaves are left to dry in the fields for some days. Another is a structure in open space '*Fasuar*.' The '*Fasuar*' is a platform made of bamboo with rough bamboo mat flooring with provisions that the paddy grains can pass down, six to eight feet high, for the purpose of separating the grains from the ear/straws. This is done by stamping over it with the swift movement of the feet till the grains are separated from the straw. The grains drop and fall onto the floor beneath in a pyramidal shape, the lightweight husk is blown away by the wind and the grain gets collected underneath, while the chopped husk and straw are thrown beyond the thrashing floor. From the threshing floor the collected grains are measured in tins (empty kerosene oil tin) and stored in a temporary round shaped barn, made of bamboo, called '*zem*.' Where there is no rice mill, completion of the threshing work brings in the role of the women again. Pounding of the threshed rice on large wooden mortar and pestle by hand is left to the women. After pounding, they further clean the rice with large plates made of bamboo called '*Thlangra*.' The more the harvest of the family the more is the work for the women.

During the post-harvest period, women are busy in collecting firewoods so that they would be able to spare more of their time for next year's agricultural activities. They dry the vegetables and pulses for their family consumption. Besides, processing of the produces of jhum is also left to the womenfolk. It is also a fact that in the traditional Mizo society, the community could not survive without the indispensable role of women in production and sustenance of life. Women were the ones who provided the basic necessities of life such as rice and vegetables for their daily sustenance, cooking, carrying water and firewood and providing clothing. Mizo women managed to carve out a space for their active participation in the socio-economic life of the people <sup>[22]</sup>.

On occasions when the location of the jhums is too far from the village, a subsidiary jhum called '*Leipui*' is resorted to near the village where the principal subsidiary food crops like maize, arum, sweet potato and other vegetables of daily necessity are grown. These '*Leipui*' are normally looked after by women folk.

It has become crystal clear from the preceding lines of discussion that jhumming is a way of life for the Mizos in the North-East India. It will not be an exaggeration to maintain that most of the full-grown Mizos of today are still psychologically attached to their jhumming culture. Even with the advent of applied scientific cultivation, jhumming cannot be stopped overnight. It remains conspicuously as a means to their survival till today.

#### 1.4. Gradual Transformation of Agriculture

The annexation of the present Mizoram by the British in 1890 had brought about transformation of the Mizo's age-old Agriculture Administration in a small way. When the Lushai Hills became one of the administrative Districts of Assam, Major H.W.C Cole (popularly known among the Mizos as 'Kawl Sap') had taken the *first* concrete step for transformation of agriculture in the area by initiating rubber

plantation at Chite in Aizawl during the year 1908-1909. *Secondly*, he introduced modern method of cultivation of Orange, Pineapple and other fruit crops with vegetables like mustard, cabbage, turnip etc. *Thirdly*, he developed a vegetable demonstration farm at a place called Hmuifang. In fact, this was the beginning of introduction of settled cultivation among the people in the then Lushai Hills.

During the British rule, the Superintendents, in-charge of the then Lushai Hills District at different points of time, took a lot of interests in agricultural experiments. In order to make those experiments a success, the Provincial Government of Assam had posted one Agricultural Inspector to take care of the entire District. In 1933-34, the District Superintendent set up two vegetable Demonstration Farms for the local residents at Chite in Aizawl and at Dhobinala in Lunglei. Trials of different varieties of paddy were taken up in the demonstration garden near Aizawl, and seedlings, suckers and seeds were distributed to the farmers from here. Terrace cultivation was introduced as one of the main items of their programme and, as Government Subsidy, an amount of Rs.89/- was paid to the cultivators. With the appointment of an Assistant Deputy Director (Excluded Area) by the State Government of Assam, the hold of the Superintendent over this sector was gradually on the wane.

The Lushai Hills District was "inaugurated on 25 April, 1952, by the Assam Chief Minister, Bishnuram Medhi at Aizawl [23]." The first democratic election of the District Council was held on 4th April, 1952 [24]. In 1954, after the installation of a new democratic institution, the Lushai Hills District was renamed Mizo District by an Act of Parliament, and this Act, called the Lushai Hills District (Change of name) Act, 1954 (18 of 1954), received the assent of the President of India on 20<sup>th</sup> April, 1954 [25].

The Mizo Autonomous District Council took over regulation of jhumming as well as control and allotment of lands for other agricultural purposes. '*Fathang*' previously paid to the Chiefs was reduced and was paid to the District Council as land revenue [26]. Also, the sequence followed in the allotment of jhum lands was changed as follows [27]:

Chief's Writer (*Khawchhiar*) and Headman  
President of the Village Council  
Vice-President of the Village Council  
Members of the Village Council  
Other village members

In addition to the above change, the priority given to the Chief in the selection of Jhum came to an end in 1955 [28]. Moreover, the institution of Chieftainship was abolished in 1955-56 and democratically elected Village Councils were set up in their places. The newly established Village Councils took over the village lands from the Village Chiefs and made allotment of lands to the village members for cultivation within their respective village jurisdictions.

Immediately after the installation of an Autonomous District Council in the Mizo district, three new Agricultural Schemes were introduced in the district by the Government of Assam. These Schemes were divided into three categories - Normal Scheme, Development Scheme under Art.275 of the Constitution and Grow More Food Scheme. Agricultural tools and implements were issued to Primary Schools on loans; Demonstration-cum- Experimental Farms were set up. Agriculture subsidies were given to the cultivators for growing cash crops and for extension of wet paddy cultivation as well as for starting Model Farms.

Ever since Independence, agriculture was given the prime place of attention in all development plans in the Mizo Hills.

Unfortunately, there was a big jolt in Agriculture Administration due to the dreadful famine caused by bamboo-flowering, called '*Mautam*,' which broke out in 1959. Another factor which adversely affected the development of agriculture was insurgency which broke out in 1966. During insurgency, the Civil Administration was given prior importance over any other subject like agriculture.

In 1969, a team of agricultural experts of the Government of India visited the Mizo Hills and prepared a comprehensive programme of intensive agricultural development for the entire District. It was planned that, throughout the District, terrace cultivation would be introduced and medium farms started [29].

The implementation of the North Eastern Reorganization Act, 1971, had led to the elevation of the Mizo District into a Union Territory and was renamed 'Mizoram' on 21.1.1972. Eventually, the first popular Ministry was installed in Mizoram and the Mizo District Council stood abolished on the constitution of the Mizoram Legislative Assembly. With the elevation of the Mizo District into a Union Territory, some new schemes were introduced in the agriculture sector.

Consequent upon the breaking out of '*Thingam*' famine in 1978-79, two approaches were approved by the new U.T Government, viz. (1) cultivation of subsidiary crops and (2) settlement of Jhumias in permanent cultivation [30]. Apart from these, the U.T Government had given priority to power and agriculture sectors in the annual plans. In agriculture sector, besides curbing jhum cultivation, pockets of flat lands were proposed to be developed for double cropping and suitable irrigation linkages were also envisaged to be developed for the purpose. Upgrading of land records, survey training, cadastral survey, survey for terracing and Wet Rice Cultivation and horticulture were some of the programmes proposed to be taken up for land reforms [31].

Unlike before, mechanisation had been introduced in Wet Rice Cultivation (WRC) in the form of tractors, power tillers and other improved implements coupled with irrigational facilities. Besides, seeds of various food grain crops, oil seeds, pulses etc., of latest varieties were introduced and accepted by farmers in many areas.

The signing of an epoch-making Memorandum of Settlement by the Government of India and the Mizo National Front on 10<sup>th</sup> June, 1986, was significant not only for the attainment of higher political status but also for the development of agriculture in Mizoram. After the passing of the State of Mizoram Bill by the Indian Parliament on 7<sup>th</sup> August, 1986, Mizoram ultimately became a full-fledged State on 20<sup>th</sup> February, 1987 [32]. However, even after the advent of applied scientific cultivation, jhumming cannot be stopped overnight due to the psychological and cultural attachment of the farmers to shifting cultivation. Hence, jhumming continues to be a way of life for the Mizos who engage themselves in agricultural activities.

To improve hillside cultivation, contour farming system has been introduced in Mizoram since 1995, which is expected to ultimately wean away shifting cultivation. Jhumming is considered as a means to the survival of the Mizo and has to go alongside of modernisation of agriculture in Mizoram till today.

## 2. Conclusion

In the traditional Mizo society, there was no scope for occupational choice and almost hundred percent of the people engaged themselves in agricultural activities to sustain their lives. It is, therefore, obvious that the prospect for

improvement in their agricultural economy solely depended on the quality of agriculture administration in the Mizo Hills. In the traditional period, that is, before the advent of exogenous forces into the Mizo Hills, the fundamental objective of traditional agriculture administration was to prepare the villagers to be self-sufficient in food.

The people in Mizoram began to experience modern type of agriculture administration with the introduction of terrace cultivation in their lands by the British rulers. The Superintendent of Lushai Hills carried out demonstration works with improved seeds of vegetables and fruits in the Demonstration Farms. When India attained independence, regulation of jhumming as well as control and allotment of lands for other agricultural purposes had passed into the hands of the Mizo Autonomous District Council.

Owing to the State Government's boost on mechanisation of farming, there has been a considerable expansion of wet rice cultivation while the area of jhum cultivation has remarkably decreased in Mizoram. This mechanisation of agriculture has, in fact, contributed to increase rice production. With the introduction of NLUP as its flagship programme by the State Government, beneficiaries under agriculture trade have been provided with highly subsidised power tillers, tractors as well as free irrigation facilities. It is pertinent to note that, while the State Government has been encouraging mechanisation, jhumming cannot be stopped overnight due to the psychological and cultural attachment of the farmers to shifting cultivation.

Hence, jhumming continues to be a way of life for about 80 per cent of the farmers in Mizoram who still depend on jhum cultivation. It is, therefore, necessary on the part of the State Government to explore reliable alternatives for shifting cultivation so that the psychological attachment of the farmers to shifting cultivation could be weakened for the better.

In the traditional period, women's contribution to agriculture was praiseworthy. In spite of the fact that the role of women has considerably declined as compared to the past due to various factors like farm mechanisation, women's employment in sectors other than agriculture, urbanisation etc., women still play a major role especially in the rural areas. Today, women also participate in the clearing of jhum for cultivation while still continuing the traditional role of dibbling of seeds, weeding and harvesting. With the coming of market economy, women who had always been in charge of vegetables in the traditional society naturally take over the process of vending the produces of their farms. This is evident from the fact that the vegetable vendors in various markets as well as roadside throughout the State are mostly women. Moreover, women are involved in processing of their produces mainly by drying and fermenting so that they can be stored for later use as well as for earning an income for the family. It is, therefore, evident that the Mizo women have been playing an increasing role in agriculture sector in the countryside till today.

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