

A STUDY OF PRACTICES OF JHUM (HUK) CULTIVATION AMONG THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF TRIPURA

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Abstract

This study examines the practice of Jhum cultivation (shifting cultivation) as the foundational socio-cultural and economic pillar of the indigenous Borok (Tipra) communities in Tripura. For tribes like the Debbarma, Reang, and Jamatia, Jhum is an ancestral institution governing their rituals, diet, and social structure. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research documents traditional practices from site selection to the mixed-cropping of rice, oilseeds, and vegetables. However, the research shows that while Jhum preserves high agrobiodiversity, the modern reduction of the fallow cycle to 2–3 years has caused severe soil degradation and decreased food security. The paper analyses the tension between state-driven rubber plantation transitions and the preservation of tribal heritage. It concludes that a "scientific Jhum" model, integrating indigenous ecological knowledge with modern agroforestry, is essential to sustain the livelihoods and cultural identity of Tripura's indigenous people in a changing climate.

Keywords: Jhum Cultivation, Tripura, Borok People, Indigenous Knowledge, Tiprasa Livelihood.

Introduction

Tripura is the name of a state located in the northeastern region of India. Among the many tribes of this land, the Tipra tribe (also known as the Tiprasa) is the son of soil. The Tiprasa people are an ancient indigenous tribe. The sub-groups within the Tipra community who speak the Kokborok language include the Tripura, Debbarma, Jamatia, Noatia, Murasing, Reang, Kalai, Rupini, and Uchoi.

According to the 2011 Census, it is estimated that a total of 880,537 people speak the Kokborok language.

Jhum is intrinsically tied to the Kokborok cultural calendar. Every stage of the farming cycle is marked by specific ceremonies:

- **Huk-mung (Site Selection):** Elders select the hill slopes based on soil colour and forest density.
- **Huk-chengmani (Clearing & Burning):** Usually done in February–March. The ash acts as a natural fertilizer.
- **Mai-colmani (Sowing):** After the first rains, seeds are sown in small holes made with a *da* (chopper) or *khurpi*.
- **Mamita (Harvest Festival):** The most important festival, where the first crop is offered to the deities before the community consumes it.

Research objective of the study

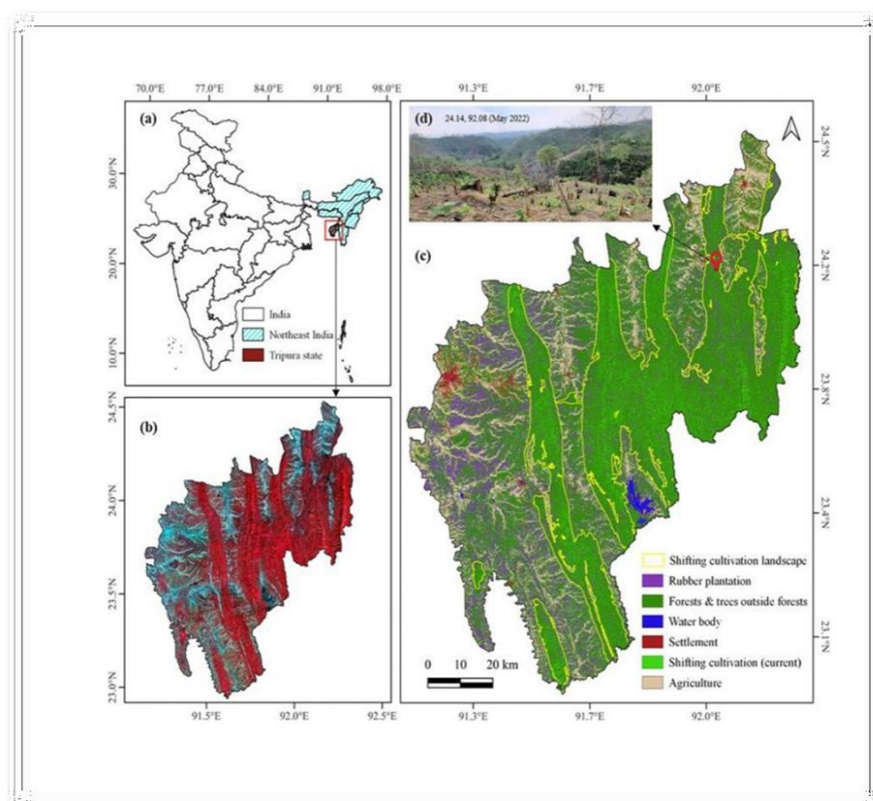
To study the document of the traditional practices and indigenous ecological knowledge of Tripura.

Discussion

1. Jhum (HUK)

- Huk is the traditional heritage (culture) of the Tipra community.
- Since the creation of the Tipra race, through the hard work and struggles of their ancestors, Huk has been their primary way of securing a livelihood (food).
- The life and survival of the Tipra people revolve entirely around Huk.
- Huk is the path through which they sustain their existence.

Jhum as a Total Way of Life." In Tripura, the term "Huk" refers not just to a plot of land but to the entire ecological and spiritual relationship the Debbarma, Reang, and other tribes have with the hills.



2. The Jhum Cultivation advise

If you start the Jhum field in Agun (Nov-Dec) and clear the forest by Push (Dec-Jan), you will understand the land's nature by Magok (Jan-Feb).

If the Jhum forest isn't cleared by Push, the insects (Warengsa) won't die; if the field isn't burned by Choitor (Mar-Apr), those insects won't perish in the fire.

If rice isn't sown by Boisak (Apr-May), the harvest will fail; listen to this wisdom passed down from ancient times.

Truly, look at it this way: you must clear the Jhum in Push, burn it in Choitor, and plant the rice in Boisak.

3. The Process of Jhum Cultivation (Huk Khwlaimani Raida)

1. Site Selection/Observation (Huk Naimung)

During the month of Agun (November), the villagers head out to observe and select a dense forest area for the Jhum field.

They perform a sacred ritual by planting a bamboo pole (Wathop), offering a pair of fresh water pots, and cutting a pair of wild leaves (Laiswk) as an offering to 'Laoua' (the deity of the land).

The final selection of the site is confirmed only after observing dreams (interpreting them as good or bad omens) following the ritual.

The community elders and family members gather at the village head/leader's courtyard to discuss, share advice, and eat together to finalize the plan.

2. Clearing the Forest (Huk Hokmung)

The forest clearing begins during the months of Push and Magh (December to February).

Large trees are felled using an axe (Rua), while bamboo, smaller shrubs, and creepers are cleared using a traditional chopper (Da).

During this labor-intensive work, the men and women shout "E-ho-ho-ho-ho" in unison (a rhythmic work-cry) and sing Jadu songs to boost morale and maintain the rhythm of the work.

3. Burning the Field (Huk Sokmung)

The month of Choitor (March/April) is the time for setting the Jhum fields on fire.

The dried trees and bamboo that were previously cleared are set ablaze to clear the land.

Parts of the wood or bamboo that do not burn completely are gathered together and re-burnt; this secondary clearing process is also known as Huk Ara Rukmung.

While the fire burns, the cultivators stand on the ridges and emit the "Checherma" sound (a high-pitched traditional shout/call) that echoes through the hills.

4. Construction of the Watch-Tower/Hut (Gairing Tangmung)

A Gairing (a traditional small hut or watchtower) is built within the Jhum field to provide shelter from the sun (Satung), rain (Watwi), and wind (Nobar).

It serves as a place to store vegetables and crops and as a spot for the cultivators to rest (Lenglana).

The Gairing is traditionally constructed on a raised platform, usually three to four stories high (Muktham-Mukbwrwi), to keep the occupants safe and provide a clear view of the crops.

5. Sowing of Rice and Vegetables (Mai tei Muikwthwng Kaimung)

Sowing begins in the month of Baisak (April/May).

Cultivators wake up early, eat their morning meal (Phungni mai), and carry essential tools and supplies: Maichu-muichu (packed food), Duma-Daba (hookah/tobacco), Twi-tilok (water gourd), Da (chopper), Damra (pouch), and Chempai (basket), all tied securely with Kaiseleng (creeper/fiber) ropes.

Traditional Rice Varieties: The diverse seeds sown include Mai Aduma, Garu kwchak, Garu kosom, Mai kwchak, Gaburi, Mamihangar, Mamitakhuk, Mamitoksa, Mamibangdaru, Mamiatolok, Kalakwpra, and Mamihari.

Vegetables and Crops: Along with rice, they plant Kokeleng (teasel gourd), Gangla (bitter), Milok (bottle gourds), Jinga (ridge gourd), Kangrong (spiny gourd), Muiphwrai (spinach), Sobai (beans), Chakumura (pumpkin), Baikang (eggplant), Khakluborok (gourd), Kosoi, Lubiya, Mosok (chillies), and Puitha.

6. Weeding and Tending the Field (Huk Tangmung)

Once the rice has been sown and the young plants begin to sprout, weeds (sam) and wild grasses (jabrarog) also start growing among them. It is essential to weed the field to ensure the crops grow properly. The traditional process of weeding is divided into specific stages or types, known as Mai Yalukulu Tangpagla Tang yasku

7. Harvesting and (Storage) Mai Ramung tei Nakmung)

Once the rice in the Jhum field has ripened fully (turning a golden hue), the harvesting process begins.

The peak harvesting season arrives in the month of Bador (August/September).

This stage represents the culmination of a year's worth of hard labor performed amidst the intense sun (Satung) and heavy rains (Watwi). Cultivators harvest the rice using a Chekhra (sickle) and carry the grains in a Chempai (basket) secured with Kaiseleng (creeper) ropes.

8. The Harvest Festival (Mamita Ter)

Ritual offerings are made to the deities Mailuma, Khuluma, Chumulai, Longdorai, and Twima, seeking their blessings.

The celebration of consuming the first newly harvested rice from the Jhum field is famously known as 'Mamita Ter.'

The festival is marked by the Mamita dance, where people dance to celebrate the new grain, and the singing of Mamita songs, which are a vital part of the Tipra cultural identity.

9. Preservation and Collection of Produce (Hapingni Samung)

Produce such as Tha (Yam), Thaktwi, Thaburchuk, and Batima must be carefully dug up and gathered from the Jhum field.

To ensure future harvests, cultivators collect and preserve seeds from flowers and vegetables grown along the ridges of the hills, such as Khumchak, Khetra, Akuru, Agunthu, Lokbana, Banta, Khundrupui, and Khum Beraigi.

Matured seeds from Milok (bottle gourd), Tilok (gourd), Jinga (ridge gourd), Mukpe, Mokphol (watermelon), Masinga, and Mogodam (corn) are dried and seeds stored carefully (Bwchwlwi Narwkmung) to be sown in the Jhum field during the following year.

However, they bring back aged forest materials and wild varieties to the home to ensure the continuity of these species.

4. Culture (Hukumu)

The term "Hukumu" is synonymous with the Sanskrit word "Sanskriti" or the English word "culture."

The origin of the word "culture" is derived from the Latin root Colere (or Cultus), which relates to tilling the earth or cultivation.

The core meaning of Hukumu encompasses two pillars: the worship of deities/spirituality (Mwtai rimung) and the labor of the Jhum field/agriculture (Hukbarni samung).

Many scholars and thinkers equate culture with cultivation, viewing the work done in the Jhum fields as the very foundation of human civilization and social development.

‘Traditional Knowledge is essentially culturally oriented or culturally based, and it is integral to the cultural identity of social group in which it operates and is preserved’ (Verkey 2007)

‘These knowledge systems have been variously described as people’s knowledge; ethnoscience, and ‘folk-ecology’ (Barker 1977)

5. The Foundations of Borok Culture (Borok Bosongni Hukumu Gwrwng)

1. The Life of the Individual (Borokni Langma): Hukumu shapes the character, discipline, and identity of every Borok person. From the songs they sing to the skills they learn, an individual's life is rooted in the traditions of the land.

2. Family Life (Nukhungni Langma): The family unit operates around the Jhum cycle. Rituals, daily meals, and the passing of indigenous knowledge from elders to children occur within the household, making the family the primary keeper of culture.

3. Community/Social Life (Hodani Langma): Hukumu fosters social cohesion. Activities like clearing the forest or celebrating Mamita are collective efforts that bind the village together, ensuring mutual support and tribal unity.

4. Traditional Beliefs and Customs (Luku Puitu tei Bithi Bwrai): This refers to the spiritual world—the deep-seated faith in deities like Mailuma, the observance of taboos, and the ancient customs that govern how the Borok people interact with nature and the divine.

6. The Principles/Framework of Culture (Hukumuni Raida)

The Harmony of Land, Time, and Space (Ha, Jora tei Tongkhorni Tongthokmung): This represents the balanced coexistence between the soil (Ha), the seasonal cycles or timing (Jora), and the environment or space where one lives (Tongkhor). It suggests that true culture thrives when humans live in sync with nature's rhythm.

Pathways through the Past, Present, and Future (Laibuma, Wngtong tei Thinangno Twiwi Bwskang Lam Rio): Culture is the bridge that carries the community forward by connecting their history and heritage (Laibuma), their current existence (Wngtong), and their visions for the future (Thinang).

Preservation Through Adaptation (Swlaijakmungni Bising Twi Mwthangma Narwknai): This principle acknowledges that while change (Swlaijakmung) is inevitable, the core essence of the culture must be protected and preserved (Mwthangma Narwknai) through that very process of evolution.

Conclusion

Through the practice of Jhum cultivation, the distinct identity and culture (Hukumu) of a community are intricately preserved and showcased. However, in the era of the 21st century, as the Tipra people embrace modern education and professional paths, they are gradually moving away from traditional Jhum practices. Furthermore, due to modern administrative regulations and stricter forest conservation laws, the traditional form and scale of Jhum are undergoing significant transformations. Since the very essence of Tipra culture has historically revolved around Huk (Jhum), it is now essential to share and integrate our cultural heritage with other communities. We must strive to recognize, learn, and actively preserve the Tipra Hukumu to ensure it remains alive for future generations.

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