SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES OF JHUMIAS IN RESUBELPARA BLOCK, MEGHALAYA, INDIA

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Abstract

Jhum (shifting cultivation) is an old-age traditional agricultural method for cultivation in the hill slopes of North-East Indian region. For the study, the area selected is the Resubelpara block of North Garo Hills district in Meghalaya, one of the states in the region. This study is an attempt to analyze the socio-economic status of jhum cultivators. For the prepare data have been collected using FGD (Focus Group Discussion) and interview using schedule method. The results indicate that majority of the people are directly involved with jhum cultivation. Jhum cultivation method is still seen at subsistence level in the block. The study also reveals that in Resubelpara block, the livelihood opportunities of the villagers are indeed limited depending mainly on jhum cultivation. However, some people are involved with dairy, poultry, piggery, goatery activities etc. Pisciculture is also carried in some villages. Recently, government has taken some alternative strategies gradually to reduce the scale of jhum cultivation. Schemes under government activities like rubber plantation, banana, orange and pineapple plantation have been implemented in the block area.

Key words: Jhum cultivation, subsistence agriculture, livelihood opportunities, jhumias, alternative strategy

1. Introduction

Jhum cultivation is a farming system in which land under natural vegetation, usually forest is cleared by slash and burn method cropped with common arable crops for a few years and then left unattended after harvesting. The procedure of jhum operation is that at first

hilly forest land area is selected, then cleared the forest tract by cutting down the jungle and burnt the dried forest into ashes. Initially the farmers perform all religious worships and sacrifices (*Bora et. al.,* 2007). After that there is dibbling of soil and sowing of various types of seeds. Farmers have to take care all jhum fields for protecting the seeds. When crops ripe, harvesting process immediately starts (*Royburman et. al.,* 1990).

In India there are ten leading states in terms of jhum cultivation. Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Orissa and Tripura (*Das et. al.,*1990). In Meghalaya, Resubelpara block is playing a significant role in terms of jhum cultivation. Economically, the people of the block mainly depend on jhum cultivation. As of the jhumias are still using traditional method for cultivation without any involvement of modern technology, the production is low and not sufficient for commercial purpose (*Goswami et. al.,* 1990). Still their agriculture is in subsistence level. So, it affects the socio-economic life of the people (*Erni et. al.,* 2015). The socio-economic condition of the families is still poor in Resubelpara block. Now-a-days only a small portion of the total population is involved in some secondary activities. The block is underdeveloped in terms of facilities like road connectivity, whole-sale market, transport and communication system and other facilities under service sector.

2. Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

1. To analyze the socio-economic status of the jhum cultivators of Resubelpara block,
2. To study the livelihood pattern presently prevalent among the jhumias,
3. To examine the livelihood opportunities and options among the jhumias of the block.

3. Study area

The study area, Resubelpara block falling in North Garo Hills district of Meghalaya state is covering a geographical area of 445.38 km^2 (2011 census). It is situated on the

western part of North Garo Hills district. The block is located between 25°42'25.56" N and 26°0'46.08" N and, 90°19'50.16" E and 90°47'14.28" E. It is bounded by Goalpara (Assam) in the north, Kharkutta Block (Meghalaya) in the east, East Garo Hills District (Meghalaya) in the south and West Garo Hills District (Meghalaya) in the west.

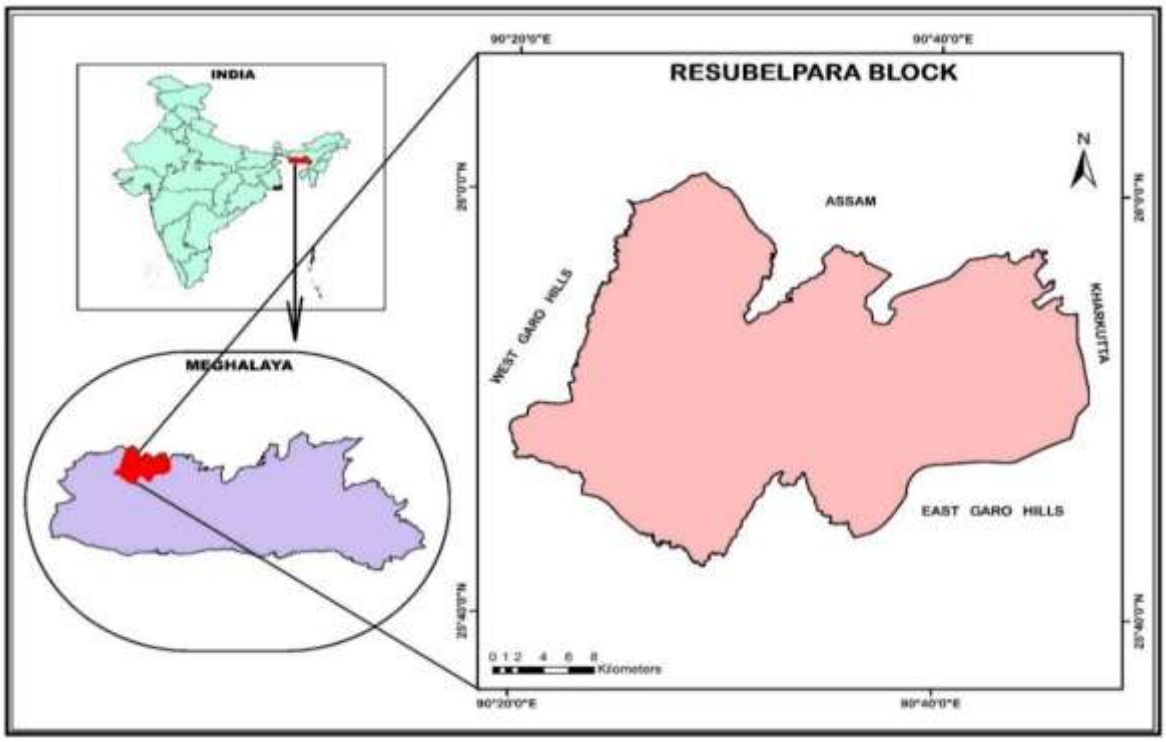

Fig. 1: Locational map of study area

4. Materials and methods

In order to carry out the research problem both primary and secondary data have been used. The whole task of database generation and analysis is divided into three parts - pre-field work, during- field work and post-field work method.

In the pre-field work, literature review has been done from the secondary sources like published as well as unpublished official and non-official documents such as books, articles and research papers published in various journals, magazines, newspapers, government reports, published and unpublished dissertations etc. During- field work period for household survey, as many as 100 (hundred) households from 10 (ten) randomly selected villages of the entire block. After preparing schedules, data are collected from the random villages of the block are taken. During data collection, group discussions and personal interviews are also held. In the post-field period, collected primary and secondary data

analysis process is being conducted and carried out along with necessary interpretations to arrive at meaningful conclusions.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Brief information of the surveyed villages

The villages surveyed for the present study are namely Nokatgre, Songmegap, Dalmanggre, Kagrakgre, Mendal, Gabil Agalgre, Konchikol, Wakso Songital, Koksi Songma and Malchapara. The villages are predominately habited by the tribal communities. Most of the people belong to Garo community. In all the ten villages mainly jhum or shifting cultivation method is practised rather than other methods for cultivation. The crops grown under jhum cultivation in the villages are paddy, various types of millets, corn (maize), sweet potato, watermelon, tapioca, cotton, beans, brinjal, gourd, chilli, turmeric, zinger, and various types of leafy vegetables. Paddy is the principal crop in all the surveyed villages. Rubber, pineapple, orange etc. are the common plantations seen in the villages. During survey time, villagers have admitted that for the jhum cultivation they do not get irrigation facilities. They still have to depend on the rainfall. The villages visited during the survey are located at various distances from the nearest town and block headquarter. About 40 percent of villages are situated within the distance of 30 kms and 60 percent villages are situated beyond 30 km from the block headquarter. There are two national highways, i.e. NH51 and NH 62 which are linked with the village roads for communication.

5.2 Socio-Economic Status of Jhum Cultivators

An attempt has been made to analyze the present status of jhum cultivators in the surveyed sample villages. To study the status of the jhum cultivators, a field survey was conducted at household level among the jhumias. It is a fact that an important indicator of the economic status of a household is the type of house. The survey findings on the type of houses revel that the predominant house type of the jhumias in the sample villages are tin-roofed house. From the table 1, it can be seen that 18% of the sample households have

Table 1: Different types of houses and family types in the sample villages

Type of house	Percentage of total household	Family type	Percentage of total families
Thatched	18	Nuclear	83
Asbestos	Nil	Joint	17
Tin roofed	78		
R.C.C.	4		

Source: Field sample survey, 2020

their thatched houses, 78% households have tin roofed houses and 4% have R.C.C houses. So far, the family type is concerned in the sample households, about 83% of the households enjoy nuclear family type while 17% of the households enjoy joint family types.

Educational level of the population in the surveyed villages under study area indicates low level of literacy. A revealed from the table 2, the majority of the respondents have lower level of education, i.e. up to primary level (63%). As much as 11% of the total population are illiterate. Against this, 16% people have education up to middle level, while 7% people have secondary level education. Higher education, i.e. college/university level education is being taken by 3% of the population.

Table 2: Education qualification of the respondents in the surveyed villages

Educational level	Percentage of persons
Illiterate	11
Primary level	63
Middle level	16
Secondary level	7
College/University level	3

Source: Field sample survey, 2020

As regards to household assets of the jhumias, about 14% of the households do not have any assets like by-cycle, motorcycle, T.V., radio, mobile phone etc. But 67% households have by-cycle, 64% have motorcycle, 73% have T.V., 58% have radio and 53 % households are having mobile phone facility.

5.3 Jhum cultivation as a source of livelihood

An analysis has been made to examine the viability of jhum cultivation as source of livelihood in the sample villages of the block. The jhumias were interviewed whether the earning from jhum cultivation fulfil their economic needs or not? In response, it has been

known that 23% of the respondents are of the opinion that the earning from jhum cultivation fulfil the economic needs of the households, whereas 77% of the households do not agree that the earning from jhumming can fulfil their economic needs. The jhumias were also again asked whether the production from Jhum cultivation feeds the family for the whole year or not. The response received from 62% of the respondents was that the yields from jhum fields can feed their families for the whole year, whereas 38% respondents (households) said that the production from the jhumlands is sufficient for them to run their families for the whole year. The sufficiency of food crops grown in the jhum plots depends on the area under jhum cultivation or landholding size of jhumlands for each of the families. As regards the land holding size owned by the families it is found that 57% households are holding jhum plots within the range of 0-5 bighas, 23% households have 5-10 bighas, 14% households have 10-15 bighas and 6% households have 10-15 bighas of jhumlands (Table 3). The size of jhumland holding is found in accordance with the family size.

Table 3: Distribution of households by jhumland holding size

Size of jhumland (Bighas)	Percentage of the total households
0-5	57
5-10	23
10-15	14
15 and above	6

Source: Field sample survey, 2020

The jhum cultivators of the surveyed villages of the block basically follow the subsistence method of agriculture with little or no surplus. It seems to be a one-sided assessment of the situation as it does not take into account the 'secondary' produces from jhum fields and fallow forests. While farmers may not have surplus of the rice crop, it is observed that in almost 80% of cases, farmers often have surplus of a variety of secondary crops but in small quantities. Such surpluses together with leafy vegetables, tubers, fruits and other plants obtained from fields and fallows ensure that farmers meet their food and nutritional requirements as well as for sell. According to the jhum cultivators, paddy is the principal food crop under jhum cultivation in the surveyed villages. After paddy, millet is considered as a second highest crops from production point of view. Corn (maize), sweet

potato, melon, tapioca, cotton, beans, brinjal, gourd, chilli, turmeric, zinger, and various types of leafy vegetables are also grown in the jhum fields.

From interviews held with the villagers and farmers, it is found that they are basically consuming rice as a main food. Some of the people are using finger millets mixing with rice for better taste. Villagers are also consuming corn (maize), sweet potato, melon, tapioca, beans, brinjal, gourd, chilli, turmeric, zinger and various types of leafy vegetables like cabbage, cauliflower, lettuce, kale, broccoli, spinach etc.

In terms of market, jhum cultivators are of the view that majority of them are doing cultivation for their own families using subsistence method for agriculture. But some of the families are practising cultivation with little surplus. They sell the products in the local markets. There is no shortage of market opportunities for local products from their fields and so they not just gather but cultivate such products for local urban markets. There are some daily and weekly market places found in almost every villages in the block. Saturday is the weekly market day for all villages in Resubelpara block. The leading markets of the block are located in Resu, Bajengdoba and Mendi. There are also some small market places like Deka Chang, Raja Apal, Gokul, Rare, Gabil etc.

Table 4: Household-wise yearly income from jhum cultivation

Yearly income (INR)	Percentage of households
0- 50,000	48
50,000-1,00,000	31
1,00,000- 1,50,000	11
1,50,000-2,00,000	6
2,00,000 and above	4

Source: Field sample survey, 2020

Annual income from the jhum cultivation reveals that as many as 48% of households come under the yearly income range INR 0-50,000. 31% households are in the INR 50,000-1,00,000 category, 11% households are in the INR 1,00,000- 1,50,000 category, 6% households are in the INR 11,50,000-2,00,000 category and 4% households are in the INR 2,00,000 and above category (Table 4). Thus, the average yearly income has been found to be low, due to low average annual income of the households primarily from the jhumlands.

A focus group discussion was held and therefrom it is found that the production from jhumming is totally uncertain; it depends on some uncertain factors such as likely good rainfall, the jhum site and its cycle. The villagers revealed that if the rainfall is even and if the jhum cycle is long enough the production from jhum cultivation will be sufficient enough to feed the family for the whole year. The field survey regarding jhum cycle shows that the average cycle in the surveyed villages is under the category of less or equal to 3 years. The villagers also told that the wild elephants destroy the crops to a great extent, which affects the production from jhum. So, it is found that the threat of wild elephants destroying the crops has always been there. It is also known from the jhum cultivators that during the last 8-10 years because of the uncertainty of good rainfall and reducing soil fertility, the production from jhumming has declined to a great extent. When production is not good enough, they took loan and also work within and outside the village as wage labour, sell raw bamboos and their products made from bamboos, fir woods etc. in the nearby market to fulfil the economic requirement of the families for their livelihood. They had also told that most of the crops grown in the jhumlands were meant for household consumption purposes. But, in the year when the production was good the surplus crops except paddy were sold in the nearby market. During the time of financial need they sell the crops that were kept in stock for consumption in future. They also expressed that they also earn by selling rice beer in the nearby weekly market to meet the expenditure of the households. Now-a-days, rubber plantation is practised in almost all the villages of Resubelpara block. It is a scheme from the government. So, cultivators can earn money from the plantation also.

5.4 Alternative Strategy of Jhum Cultivation

A field survey was carried out to examine whether the people like to adopt some strategies alternative to jhum cultivation or not. In this regard same data were obtained which are presented in table 5. As revealed from table the majority of farmers, which is 58% of the respondents disagree and 42% of the respondents agree to adopt alternative strategy to jhum cultivation.

Table 5: Distribution of respondents by opinion on alternative strategies to jhum cultivation

Statement made	Percentage of the total respondents
Agree	42
Disagree	58

Source: Field sample survey, 2020

During the focus group discussion (FGD) it has been revealed from the jhum cultivators that, because of the hilly terrain, the hill people cannot stop practicing cultivation without jhum method. Jhum cultivation is the way of their life and culture. But government has been trying to change their habits and methods of cultivation by inducing plantation agriculture like rubber plantation, banana and pineapple plantation etc.

It has been found from the field survey that the jhumias in the block do not use fertilizers and pesticides in their jhumlands. Jhum cultivators abandon their lands when the fertility of the land is depleted, and when weeds and pests attack. Therefore, if the productivity of jhumland be improved with the use of modern technology it would help maintain or enhance the land fertility, so that the jhumland is not abandoned after one or two cultivation seasons.

The villagers in the block were found to have skill in making bamboo handicrafts. But it has been found that the handicrafts are made only for household use and a very small number of such handicraft items are sold in the market (*Verma et. al.,* 2017). The skill of making bamboo handicrafts of the jhumia families could be well tapped if the rich bamboo treasures of the block are well exploited for the income of the jhumias.

The Jhumias particularly the women were found to have expertise in weaving, but it is found that weaving is done only to meet the requirements of cloths of the family and not yet commercialized. However, their skill of weaving could be well exploited as an income generating source and may be an alternative to jhum cultivation.

The Jhumias in surveyed villages of the block are illiterate in general, especially in respect of modern scientific and technological development. This has become a great handicap and setback in trying to push through various innovative and important schemes

and programmes that bring all round development for the people themselves. Therefore, proper steps to increase the capacity of understanding and knowledge of the changing landscape of the region should be taken.

6. Concussion

The study area Resubelpara is an economically backward block. Jhum cultivation is still prevalent as a dominant agricultural practice for subsistence living. Though jhum cultivation is the mainstay of the tribal people in the block, the district is lagging behind in the adoption of improved practices and development of infrastructure which is required for modernization of agriculture. Lack of basic services and low literacy are also the matter of concern for economic development. Thus, there is the pressing need for strategic government intervention to uplift the economy of Resubelpara block of North Garo Hills district of Meghalaya.

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