

**IMPACT OF INSURGENCY ON AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITIES IN MIZORAM****Laltanpui Ralte****Assistant Professor****Mizoram University****Abstract**

*Insurgency in any country or State, adversely affects all aspects of human life including their social, economic and political life. Insurgency broke out in Mizoram on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1966. Mizoram, is an agricultural State where the primitive method of shifting cultivation known as 'jhuming' is still practised. 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. insurgency had practically affected all aspects of the Mizo life in general and their agricultural activities in particular. As the agriculturalists could not effectively devote themselves to their agricultural activities in the face of MNF insurgency and the various anti-insurgency measures taken by the government and the security forces, it greatly affected their agricultural economy. As the Mizo economy at that time was practically an agricultural economy, their inability to engage themselves in agricultural activities as they did before the insurgency, had a great impact on their economic life.*

**Keywords :** agriculture, insurgency, jhum, weeding.

**I. Introduction**

Insurgency may be understood as a rebellion against a constituted authority functioning either at the National or the State level. In other word, insurgency is an organized movement rising in forcible opposition to lawful authority through the use of subversion and armed conflict in resistance to a government or to execution of its laws. When insurgency breaks out in any country or State, it adversely affects all aspects of human life including their social, economic and political life.

**II. Agriculture Activities in Mizoram**

Agriculture is an essential component of human life as long as it provides food, employment and earns foreign exchange for enhancing the purchasing power of the people especially those living in the rural areas.

Mizoram is an agricultural State where the primitive method of shifting cultivation known as 'jhuming' is still practised. As compared to other parts of the country, there is less scope for occupational differentiation in Mizoram and more than 75% of its population even today are still engaged in agricultural activities for their sustenance. 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. By and large, the modus operandi of jhuming cultivation is what is called 'the slash and burn method' of cultivation for crop production.

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Jhum cutting normally 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. In the earlier days, men folks were the main workforce to cut thick forests for jhuming. In most cases, women were 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.

When the felled trees and bamboos become dry, they were burnt for sowing the seeds. Normally, any suitable day before 15th March will be fixed for burning of the dry felled trees and, on the appointed day, the burning of plots of land will usually start at 1-2 p.m. when the sun is scorching. The process of burning takes one or two hours to complete. After burning, the plots of land are called '*Kangvar*' as white potash appears on the surface. Incidentally, the burning may be interrupted by the vibrating whirlwind and some unburnt trees and bamboos may be left behind. 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*.' Thus, the plot of land is prepared and ready for sowing. 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.

Men and women are equally involved in sowing of paddy seeds. 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 of jhum land in a day.

Usually three to four weeding, 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>1</sup> The *first* weeding is done after a month of dibbling paddy seeds which is sometime in the first part of May. The *second* weeding is done in June, the *third* in July/August and *last* weeding in early part of September. The weeds, which harbour harmful insects should be removed by hand and stacked in a safe place. While cutting off the weeds, the soil around paddy tillers should be mulched to preserve moisture. At this stage, care should be taken not to injure the crop during weeding operations and weeds interfering with the young crops should be pulled out by hand scrupulously with the roots intact.

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>2</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. This reciprocal engagement of boys and girls in group follows a meaningful process. After the morning meal, boys and girls go together to the jhum for weeding and back home in the evening after toiling the whole day with only a short break at noon for mid-day meal. 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>3</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.

With winter setting in comes the harvesting season in late November and December. The paddy ears have ripened with full-grown grains. During the harvest season, if the Jhum is far from the village all the grown-ups would move to the jhum for work. Two or more families camp together from one plot to

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<sup>1</sup> McCall, A.G., *Lushai Chrysalis*, (Luzac & Co., London, 1949), p. 169.

<sup>2</sup> Baveja, J.D. *The Land Where the Bamboo Flowers*, (Publication Board, Assam, Gauhati, 1970), p.19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

another. They rise at dawn to work and come back to the jhum huts at dusk to retire. The aged and young children would be left behind to look after their home affairs. Those in the jhum would return home on Saturday and attend church services on Sunday.

If the distance from a village is far they erect makeshift barn, called '*Chhekin*,' on the roadside mid-way for transshipment. 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 out 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>4</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>5</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.

It has become crystal clear from the preceding lines of discussion that jhuming is a way of life for the Mizos living in the extreme corner of 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 jhuming culture. Even with the advent of applied scientific cultivation, jhuming cannot be stopped overnight in spite of the attempts made by the government to replace it by settled cultivation. It remains conspicuously a means to their survival till today.

### III. Insurgency and Its Impacts

Insurgency broke out in Mizoram on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1966. The young volunteers of the Mizo National Front (MNF) under the leadership of Laldenga seized and held the capital of Aizawl. The 1000-odd fighters also captured control of other key towns in the Mizo hills and raided government treasuries and arms depots. By the end of the year, military control was secured over the major towns and road links although many villages remained under the MNF control.<sup>6</sup> The main reasons responsible for outbreak of insurgency are:

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<sup>4</sup> McCall, A.G. *Op.cit.*, p. 171.

<sup>5</sup> As narrated by R.Thansanga, while serving as the Director of Agriculture, Government of Mizoram.

<sup>6</sup> (Ali 1993, 38).

- (1) Fear of Assimilation by the plains people of Assam,
- (2) Concentration of economic and economic development in the plains areas of Assam,
- (3) Proposed imposition of Assamese as the State Official Language even in the hill areas of Assam and its introduction as a medium of instruction in all the educational institutions in those hill areas,
- (4) Alleged indifference of the Assam Government to the plight of the famine-stricken Mizos during *Mautam* famine

With a view to preventing the possible escalation of insurgency, both the Union and the Assam Government had started taking various anti-insurgency measures which had far-reaching impacts on the life of the people in Mizoram in general and their agricultural activities in particular.

During insurgency it was difficult for the jhumias to maintain Jhums as curfew was imposed most of the time by the security forces. This restriction of movement resulted in a decline in the economy of the erstwhile Mizo District as a number of Mizos, whose main source of livelihood was Jhumming, could not move to and fro from their jhum lands as per the farming requirements.

2) The Mizos who were Jhumias could not perform their weeding operations on time, which were usually done three to four times in a year in their jhums. Their inability to complete the weeding on time resulted in low productivity, thereby, the food-security of the villagers could no longer be ensured.

3. The Mizos often carried packed food and passed it to the insurgents in the Jhums, therefore, the military personnel often visited, sought and harassed the farmers who were in the jhum. Some of the insurgents often spent the nights in the jhum huts called '*thlam*'. Both the insurgents as well as the military often hunted for each other in the jhum lands. Thus, the farmers, who often spent the nights in the jhum huts in times of peace in order to save the time required for travelling to and fro from their villages to jhums could no longer do so for their safety.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, they had to spend considerable time for travelling to and from their residences to the jhums. This tremendously reduced the time they would have otherwise utilised for their jhumming works. Moreover, the jhumias were always worrying about

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Mr.C.Rokhuma at his residence in September, 2014.

the old and young who were left at home because of which they wanted to return home earlier than usual which further reduced the time spent in the jhum.

5. During the grouping and regrouping of villages in the countryside, the Mizos could not properly maintain their jhums as they were shifted to the grouping centres. Consequently, the army burnt down many of the temporary storage huts '*Chhekin*' constructed by the farmers for the storage of their grains, mid-way between their jhum and their residence, for later transportation to their homes. This was done so that the insurgents would not be able to take the rice for their consumption. This was done especially to those '*Chhekin*' belonging to the people they suspected of co-operating with and helping the MNF insurgents. This burning of the grain storages was one of the factors which contributed to the outbreak of the famine. The system of storing paddy mid-way from the jhums could not be avoided all the more, as there was lack of available land that could be used for farming in the vicinity of the grouping centres for all the village members residing in the grouping centres.

6. All the grouping centres were barricaded with bamboo fences and spikes. The inhabitants of the different villages were made to compulsorily perform the construction of the barricading works without any remuneration. This activity caused the villagers to spend a number of days in the construction works because of which they could not tend to their farm works as required. Moreover, as a consequence of the re-grouping, many of the villagers had to abandon their farms regardless of all the efforts they had put in. As a result, rendering a lot of manpower of the jhumias futile.

7. The barricaded grouping centres had a main gate where all the inhabitants of the village who were moving in and out of the centres were checked by the security personnel on duty. To be more specific, token numbers which were registered against the names of all the villagers crossing the main gate were handed out every time they moved in and out with set timings for their return. In every grouping centre, there were time schedules laid down by the security forces beyond which the villagers would not be allowed to easily enter their grouping centres. In case of loss of their tokens, the villagers would not be allowed to enter the centres without facing different types of punishment ranging from cleaning of the compound of the military camp to carrying of water from the water supply to the camp of security force for the consumption of the latter. This greatly restricted the time that the jhumias could use to tend to their farming works. On the other hand, jhumming is that type of farming where the farmers have to perform various farming activities regularly and at the correct time in order to have

good produces. At times, the Village Councils were given the responsibility to maintain the timings for going to jhums<sup>8</sup>.

8. The village grouping centres were at least a few kilometres away from the original villages of the people. Thus, much of the paddy they had harvested got spoilt in course of shifting as there were no proper means of transport and people had to transport their harvest by head-load. Another cause of spoilage was the inclemency of weather as seasonal considerations could not have a bearing and people had to move as and when they were asked to.

9. Those newly shifted to the grouping centres had to reconstruct their own houses and settle in the newly assigned centres. This activity too took up much of the precious time of the farmers, which could have been used for tending to their farms.

10. Another activity that was a hurdle to the maintenance of their farms/jhums was the coolie system imposed by the army. The local inhabitants were employed as coolies free of cost whenever the security personnel had any goods that they need to move, and, at times, they were used days on end. A lucky person who had carried goods under the escort of lenient security personnel might at times get a cup of milk powder in return for his coolie work.

11. Under the horror of insurgency, the women-folk did not dare to move around on their own, even for their farming activities. This was mainly to avoid the possibilities of rape and harassment. This was a grave situation as all the vegetable farming, harvesting and preparation for storage were mainly performed by the womenfolk.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

To conclude, insurgency had practically affected all aspects of the Mizo life in general and their agricultural activities in particular. As the agriculturalists could not effectively devote themselves to their agricultural activities in the face of MNF insurgency and the various anti-insurgency measures taken by the government and the security forces, it greatly affected their agricultural economy. As the Mizo economy at that time was practically an agricultural economy, their inability to engage themselves in agricultural activities as they did before the insurgency, had a great impact on their economic life. This

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Prof. Lalrintluanga, Chanmari.



was evidenced by the deplorable conditions underwent by the Mizos during the *Thingtam* famine of 1967-70.

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