

Disrupted Traditional Agricultural Practices: The Tangkhul Economy

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Abstract: It is a paper that attempts to explore the traditional agricultural practices of the Tangkhul Naga and its socio-economic significance to the tribe. Agriculture have always been and still the main source of livelihood of the Tangkhuls. The terrace and Jhum cultivation had produced sufficient to meet the basic needs of the community even though it was at the subsistence level. A village was an independent republic governed by a chief and a group of elders of the clans and all economic-social activities were governed by the traditional beliefs and practices. The centre of learning was the dormitory system through which every member has to go through to be trained the political, social and economic skills and values of the society. These ancestral practices were disrupted by various external factors which have drastically changed the socio-economic narrative of the Tangkhul especially the agricultural practices and perspectives.

Keywords: Dormitory System, Festivals, Terrace, Jhum, Bio-Indicators, Modern Education, Employment, Migration.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Every social and economic activity of a tribe revolves around the agriculture season and activity. The Tangkhul Naga tribe that inhabits the Ukhrul and Kamjong districts of Manipur and the Somrah track of Myanmar have been cultivators for centuries. They are known as earth movers for their skill and ability to carve out terraces on the hill slopes or the clear a section of the forest to prepare the ground for Jhum cultivation.

Tangkhuls are keen observers of the nature to predict the natural phenomena to successfully cultivate. All the major festivals of the tribe are agriculture centric. The first and the most important festival of the year is known as “Luira” or “Luita” festival. It is a festival in the month of February and March to welcome the new year and commence the season of cultivation. It is performed by the chief and the village priest and it is only after all the rituals are completed that the villagers are permitted to go to the farms and begin the cultivation. It is a festival to invoke the spirit to bless the year with bountiful harvest. This is followed by various other agriculture related festivals at different juncture or stages of rice cultivation. The last festival of the year is known as “Chumpha” festival. It is a festival of rituals or sacrifice to invoke the blessings of the spirit to bless the grains that is brought home into the granaries. Which is followed by the observation of the

sending off of the dead spirit into the next world “Kazeiram”, the land of the dead.

Traditionally, Tangkhul economy is a village republic economy. It produces sufficient to meet the limited basic needs of the village. The main source of employment and livelihood is agriculture. The agricultural practices of the Tangkhuls were governed by the cultural and traditional beliefs and practices based on beliefs and keen observation of the natural phenomena. The animistic belief of spirit in every element was a major determining factor in the lifestyle of the tribe. They believed that there is spirit in everything and as long as the spirit is not offended, there is blessing but calamity in the village is the result of offending the spirit of an element. Bearing collective responsibility of the action of a member, it was belief that every action of every member has positive or negative outcome on the village as whole. Therefore, concerted effort was made by every member to do good and right at all times so that the spirits would bless the village with bountiful blessings especially harvest.

The beliefs, norms, values, skills, and practices of the village is all taught to the youth in the dormitory. The dormitory was the learning centre where everything was taught practically and orally.

II. TRADITIONAL PRACTICES

There are numerous traditional agricultural practices of the Tangkhuls that were passed down by the ancestors. All such practices are part of the Tangkhul culture and it ensured the village continues to be self-sufficient at the subsistence level. Some of the prominent agro-centric traditional practices are:

A. The Dormitory System

The dormitory “Longshim” or the house of gathering of the boys and girls are the learning centre of the village. Every boy and girl after puberty lives in the dorm. The boys’ dorm is known as “Mayarlong” and the girls’ dorm are known as “Ngalalong”. Every child besides being taught by the parents are taught by the elders and experts in the dormitory. The knowledge and necessary skills are taught in the dormitory.

B. The Festivals

Every festival of the Tangkhuls is related to the different stages of rice cultivation.

- Luira festival is the New year or spring festival to invoke the blessings of the spirit and begin agricultural activities.
- Yarra festival is the festival of all age-set groups before dispersing to the season of hard labor in the fields.
- Mangkhap festival is celebration of the completion of the hard labor of ploughing and planting.
- Manei festival
- Champha festival is celebrating the bountiful harvest and invoking the blessings of God to bless the granaries and the new grain of the year.

C. Collective Cultivation

One of the prominent features of the traditional agricultural practice is collective-collaborative cultivation. The age-set groups “Yarnao” performs various agricultural activities on rotational collective basis. Besides, the clan “Meiphung” and “Shangnao” takes it as their responsibility to ensure that the field works of the clan member are successfully completed.

D. Common Village Land

Most of Tangkhul villages have common village land on which any of the villager can cultivate.

E. Dependence On The Indicators of Nature

Tangkhuls like any other tribal community are keen observers of the nature and they perform their agricultural activities based on the changes and elements of the environment. The bio-indicators are critical in the success of agricultural activities. Every agricultural activity is determined by the bio-indicators.

F. Self-Sufficient Non-Monetary Economy

Traditional Tangkhul agricultural practice is for self-consumption and any surplus due to favourable climatic condition is always shared. Commercialization and selling were never part of the culture. It was a subsistence economy

in the absence of money. Ability to produce sufficient to last out till the next harvest was always the objective and therefore surplus or saving was never a cultural practice.

III. DISRUPTORS

This village, self-sufficient economy was disrupted by some external factors and ever since the socio-economic shift has been tectonic. There has been a complete shift and transformation in the culture and traditions of the Tangkhuls due to some inevitable elements and factors. The disruption and changes have been drastic and impactful, the values-norms-principles that determines the culture has been deliberately ignored, forgotten, and lost. These disruptions have brought the tribe to the dilemma of cultural identity and agricultural practices

A. Western Education

With the establishment of the first school in Hunphun (Ukhrul) village in 1896 by Rev. William Pettigrew, the ancestral traditional dormitory system was completely supplanted. The demise of the dormitory system led to the decline of the knowledge and skill of many traditional practices because it was never part of the curriculum of the new centre of learning. It has exposed the younger generation to alien culture and practices at the expense of their own unique cultural. Increase in literacy rate have resulted into the decline in traditional agricultural practices because of lack of knowledge and skills, and the educated population are least interested in agriculture. Parents have not only encouraged education but in fact discouraged their children from being farmers.

B. Migration Of Labor

Earlier mobility was minimum and all activities were confined to the village economy but with the advent of education and Christianity, the practice of head hunting was discontinued. The movement of people from village to village became easier and frequent. This eventually translated into migration of labor out of the village to the nearby towns and metropolitan cities for higher education or employment. The mass migration has resulted in shortage of labor in agriculture sector in the village. Children employed in the secondary and service sector of the private and public sectors have discouraged their aged parents from cultivation but be dependent on their monetary contribution.

C. Monetary Economy

Money is a very recent introduction to the Tangkhul economy and therefore the little trade carried out in the village fair “Leingapha” was always on barter system. Villagers cultivate to produce sufficient to meet the need of the family and if any surplus production, it is shared with family, friends, fellow villagers and strangers. Tangkhul traditional economy was governed by “Sharing” and not “Selling” for money. The transition to monetary economy has transformed and shifted the economic activities of the Tangkhuls; Sharing economy to Selling economy, subsistence to commercial, need based to want based, food crop to cash crops, etc. The need and the desire for money has become one of the major determining factor in

neglecting the agriculture sector as it is perceived as a sector that does not earn high monetary income.

D. Supplanting of Dormitory System

The continuity of the cultural and traditional practices of the tribe was largely dependent on the dormitory system. It was the social, economic and political nerve centre of the village. The history, values, norms, taboos, and beliefs of the village and tribe were taught in the dorm practically but when this important institution was supplanted and discontinued, the culture and tradition of the tribe witnessed a very rapid decline in the midst of the influx of foreign culture and traditions.

E. Government Schemes

The well intended government schemes such as “NRGES” which was to supplement the traditional agricultural activities with employment and money income during off season has become the nemesis of agriculture. It is observed that many farmers have given up farming and agricultural activities and have become dependent on the money income of such schemes to purchase the required food supply from the market.

F. Employment Opportunities

With education and higher education, and exposures, the employment opportunities outside the Tangkhul economy are increasingly becoming more attractive. The lack of employment opportunities in the area and the ample opportunities in different sectors in the metropolitan cities for the literate, illiterate, skilled and unskilled, etc. have pushed and pulled labor away from the traditional agriculture sector.

IV. SUGGESTED MEASURES

A. Preserve and Supplement

Traditional agricultural practice should not be neglected nor abandoned because it is an important element of the unique cultural identity of the tribe besides being an important economic sector. Every effort must be made to promote agriculture and preserve the knowledge and skills of agriculture. Modernization and Mechanization should not be a replacement rather be supplement to the existing knowledge, skills, and practices.

B. Incorporate Knowledge and Skill as Part of Curriculum

The traditional skills and methods must be taught as part of the curriculum at every level of academics. It will be very important to document and disseminate the information so that knowledge can be built on it and bring about growth and development. It should be taught as a skill-oriented course at the Higher education level.

C. Create Opportunities

It will be critical for the farmers to have opportunities at all stages of farming. They should be provided with high yielding variety of seeds, financial assistance to modernize and mechanize, logistic support to market the produce, etc.

D. Agriculture as a Lucrative Employment Sector

One sector besides medical that will continue to flourish at all stages of economic trade cycles is agriculture because there will always be demand for it. The migration of labor to other areas and sectors is an opportunity for those who want to work hard to supply and meet the demand of the market. The migration has left much land fallow which means much land is available for cultivation. Improvisation through modernization, mechanization, and diversification will ease the tedious-laborious job, increase productivity and production, and generate higher income, etc. thus offering agriculture as a lucrative alternative sector for employment.

E. Role of Government

An impoverish and backward economy is not an attractive investment for private investors and therefore the onus of growth and development must be initiated by the government. The government must formulate policies and implement, invest, train, and educate the stakeholders. Policies such as subsidies, Minimum support price, establishment of markets, organizing expos and agri-tourism, supply of inputs, building of infrastructural facilities, etc. must be initiated by the government in the interest of the farmers.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The economy that was self-sufficient for centuries is now dependent on supplies from outside. This shortage and dependence on import is attributed to increase in demand and decrease in supply. The need and wants of the villagers were all satisfied with the supply of the village economy but with the various disruptors in the economy, the needs and wants increased and shifted whereas the supply decreased. With the increase in population, the demand for food crops have increased but the supply has decreased due to decrease in labor supply. There is a trend prominently visible in the agriculture sector of Tangkhul economy; the decrease in labor have adversely impacted the production of food crops and productivity and at the same time, the increased availability of land is utilised for cash crops or fishery.

It is true that with the change of time, all economic sector needs to adapt and change but should not be at the cost of methods and means suitable to the economy. Modernization and mechanization of the agricultural sector must take into serious consideration of the cultural significance and every concerted effort must be made to support and preserve the age-old, time tested method of production. It is an important art to make tradition and modern complement and co-exist. Want supplanting need, money over food, cash crop over food crop, modernization over tradition, etc. has posed very serious threat to the independence of agricultural produce of the Tangkhul economy. The disruptors should be the driving force to bring about sustainable development to the Tangkhul economy especially in the agricultural sector while preserving the traditional practices.

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