

DOWN TO EARTH
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Shillong meet declares shifting cultivation environment-friendly

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So the so-called 'primitive' hill farmers were right after all. At the Regional Shifting Cultivation Policy Dialogue Workshop for Eastern Himalayas, held October 8-10, 2004 in Shillong, Jhum (shifting) cultivation was pronounced "good for the environment, livelihoods, biodiversity conservation and food and social security." Hill farmers knew this all along. Struggling under misconceived policies that pronounced them perpetrators of the worst kind of environmental degradation in the hills, for them it was sweet music to hear international experts and government officials agreeing that *jhum* was the "best possible practice" for mountainous regions of the world.

The workshop ended with a resolution termed the Shillong Declaration. It urges governments and policymakers to recognise *jhum*'s immense utility and so shift policy from its current emphasis on "weaning away" hill farmers from a "primitive" style of cultivation. Policy could now turn supportive, the declaration argued, also demanding that the tenurial rights of *jhum* cultivators be recognised.

The meet was the culmination of three years of work to document "Good Practices of Farmers' Innovations in

Shifting Cultivation", which began in 2002 in Shillong at a workshop designed by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and its partners in India, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Nepal. The initiative was supported by the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) and the North Eastern Council (NEC; the Centre's nodal agency through which money for development-related works in the northeast is channelled). 30 researchers

and farmers from these countries were brought together to focus on 20 case studies covering farmers' innovations and adaptations, long marginalised by tough terrain but also mis-perception. According to ICIMOD, case studies provided ample examples of good practices in terms of farming, forestry, soil and water conservation and biodiversity management. Farmers were cultivating a variety of commercial and home-consumed crops and products, it emerged. What also emerged was that current

4 themes

What the Shillong Declaration says

- **Jhum** (shifting) cultivators conserve forests and make it productive at the same time. Said researcher Drupad Choudhury of the G B Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development, "*Jhumias* nurse and nurture forests back into their *jhum* fields, while conventional farmers banish the forest from their fields". He felt it was also a way of forest management at the landscape level. V T Darlong, senior scientist at the Union ministry of environment and forests, forcefully argued that "the basic philosophy of shifting cultivation has been to create forests and not to destroy forests, for without forests the next *jhum* cannot be cultivated."
- **Jhum** cultivation conserves biodiversity
- **Jhum** cultivation systems are a storehouse of innovative organic farming practices and crop species of commercial value, such as the method of pollarding alders in Khonoma, Nagaland, a innovated tree management system
- **Jhum** cultivation supports the continuity of social institutions in hill societies, as also traditional institutions, customs and tenure systems.

Don't blame it on *Jhum*

A Bangladesh scientist sets the country's *jhum* record straight

The 13, 295 sq km Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, about 52 per cent of its forest land, are hot spots for *jhum* practice. Land degradation in the area has, as in India, very often been blamed on it. But Golam Rasul,

environment scientist from Bangladesh, set the record straight at the meeting in Shillong.

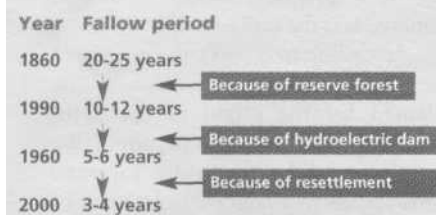
He shows that *jhum* began to get marginalised, and degradation of land & forest set in, with the creation of reserve forests by the colonial government. The situation became worse after the nationalisation of lands and forests, and aggravated by the construction of the Kaptai Hydroelectric dam in Rangamati in 1960: the best

agricultural land of the area went under the waters of the artificially created 655 sq km lake; as many as 100,000 people were uprooted from their ancestral homes. Rasul notes that past and present policies failed to create a conducive environment for *jhum*, quite as in India.

However, there remain some exceptions. In a few areas where farmers still have land titles and access to market and support services, they have adopted horticulture, agroforestry, tree farming and other locally suitable land use systems.

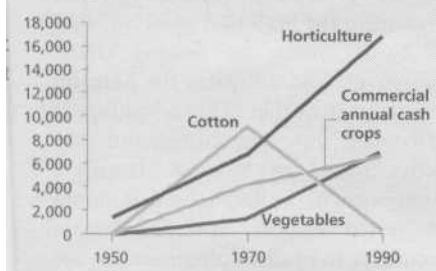
Where to shift to?

How *jhum* cycles in the hill tracts shrunk over time



Who's interested in *jhum*?

Settled agriculture is today the norm



Marginalised

Why *jhum* is disappearing from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh

Major policy changes	impact on <i>jhum</i> (shifting cultivation)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1960 Hydroelectric project <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inundated 40 per cent of valley land Displaced 20,000 families, 50 per cent of them plough cultivators Abolishing special status of Chittagong Hill Tracts Jhumia Rehabilitation Program Industrial use of forest products Planned resettlement of plain land people into the Chittagong Hill Tracts Expanding reserve forest. In 1992, government declared 50,000 ha as reserve forest More than 4000 ha allocated for rubber plantations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number of <i>jhumia</i> increased <i>Jhum</i> expanded to marginal land and reserve forests Industrialisation provided little employment opportunities to <i>jhumia</i> Pressure on land increased severely <i>Jhum</i> yield declined Plain land people increased heavily Pressure on land increased severely Most migrants are settled in government 'khash' land, community land previously used for shifting cultivation Many shifting cultivators forced to move further uphill

problems related to *jhum* were equally due to inappropriate land use practices.

Jhum vs settled farming

According to workshop panelist Sanat K Chakraborty, editor, *Grassroots Options*, what's most important about *jhum* cultivation is that it protects and supports collective ownership of natural resources, so also preventing land from being privatised. Encouraging 'settled agriculture' in its place — the endeavour of current government policies — would only hasten the end of community ownership. Experts also pointed out that current policy fails to recognise that the land left fallow is actually part of the whole *jhum* cycle and needs to be protected as *jhum* land: government classifies *jhum* fallow lands as 'wastelands' or degraded forest.

The tenor of the discussions at the meet foxed Paty Ripple Kyndiah, Union minister, Department for Development

At issue is a clash of two systems: small-scale traditional societies versus market imperatives

of North East Region and Tribal Affairs. He could only promise to convince the Centre of the urgent need to operationalise the Shillong Declaration.

However

To many observers, the focus of the workshop seemed compartmentalised. Global experts and governments could jaw about the sustainability or otherwise of shifting cultivation, but did this provide a full understanding of how hill people the world over were increasingly marginalised?

At issue was the clash of two very different systems. On the one hand,

diverse small-scale traditional societies based on traditional technology and low consumption; on the other, a world-system based on global mass production and markets, high consumerism, accumulation of wealth and profit. The meeting's emphasis on "commercialisation" of small *jhum* plots on dwindling forest slopes, without bringing about more pressure to bear on the fragile mountain systems, deserved more study, observers felt. Growing one's own food was one thing; commercial cropping quite another.

Two *jhum* farmers from Nagaland attended the conference. Said one of them, Lanusungkum: "After all is said and done, whatever new scheme is brought to us, it is only *jhum* cultivation which can sustain us and our family as we live in the steep mountain areas where terraced or settled cultivation is just not possible."

A lesson worth noting? •