

Book Review

Devi, Jonali. 2020. *Shifting Cultivation: Local Government, Indigenous Knowledge and Natural Resources Management – An Anthropological Investigation in Nagaland.*

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Shifting cultivation (locally known as *jhum*), an age-old farming tradition has attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines resulting in a plethora of literature on its various aspects. It is a dominant mode of food production in all the hill states of Northeast India even today. Noted scholar P.S. Ramakrishnan (1992) asserts that there prevailed hundred different types of shifting cultivation in the north-eastern parts of India. Therefore, to understand this unique adaptation to hilly eco-system in terms of its relation with ecology, culture and habitat, there is a need for conducting micro level studies in different geographical locations and landscape. In the book under review, the author has systematically carried out a village level study in Nagaland. The significance of a village level study lies on the fact that a village in Nagaland is considered as a social, economic, religious and political unit.

The book emphasises the role of local government in the management of natural resources under this traditional method of cultivation. Nagaland in this context exemplifies a unique situation as constitution of Village Council – the local government is mandatory for the formation of a Naga village. With anthropological insight, the author has tried to focus on multiple issues connected with the sustenance and management of this upland agriculture. The content of the book is structured into seven chapters with maps, tables, genealogies and appendices.

The first chapter provides a review of existing literature and the aims, objectives and the methodology adopted in the study. It provides a comprehensive understanding of the existence, distribution, characteristics, productivity and debates on shifting cultivation in global context focusing India and its Northeast states. Discussions on the history and formation of traditional local government in the context of Northeast India have been incorporated in review of literature.

The second chapter elaborates the geography and ecology of Nagaland and an ethnographic account of the two communities namely the Angami and Rengma Nagas and culture of two Naga villages namely Medziphema and Tseminyu, the focus area of the study. Medziphema is one of the oldest Angami Naga village in *chakro* (lower) area, whereas Tseminyu is one of the original abode of western section of southern Rengmas. Based on generational list as per the oral history, the author has traced back the history of the Tseminyu village to be more than 1300 years old. As both the villages are located in the hill top and occupying a large area (16 square km in Medziphema and 20 square km in Tseminyu approximately), the author has adopted Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) technique for drawing sketch map of the two study villages showing *khel*-wise distributions of the households and other infrastructure facilities within the village including road connectivity.

Chapter three reflects the history and evolution of the Village Council constituted under the Nagaland Village Council Act, 1978, a unique organisation, a statutory apex level village body, that existed today for each of the Naga villages in Nagaland. While taking a historical perspective, the study reflects how the village council gained strength and rooted in the traditional local government. Besides detail description of its formation process as per legal provision, it's functioning in the village, how it touches almost every aspect of the village life is depicted clearly through a good number of case studies and genealogical references. The genealogical method is used to study the generational change of authorship for the post of hereditary *Gaon Burha* (GB), the Village Headman.

Land is the most valued resource for the *jhum* cultivator (*jhumia*). There are customary laws to govern the land resources. Chapter four examines the traditional way of identification, allocation, use, maintenance of this valued resource and the provisions under customary laws of the Angami and Rengma societies.

The prime focus of the book, i.e. shifting cultivation is discussed in the chapter five. Deriving the insider's views (emic perspective) and providing a thorough and detailed description of each of the sequential steps in the farming method is the core of the chapter. Management of shifting cycle and its retention – the basic component for the continuity of shifting cultivation is clearly discussed. Various case studies and genealogies to trace the history of land distribution among the cultivators have been used by the author for cross verifying the data.

The chapter elaborates on the crop diversity and associated indigenous knowledge system in the *jhum* field. It is a complex agricultural practise where issues like local knowledge of fertility status of the soil; friendly and incompatible behaviour of certain crops; local belief systems; rules, regulations and planning for the entire agricultural practise; solar energy and soil fertility management are discussed in-depth in the case of two Naga communities. The labour involved in the entire process and number of man-

days involved in different sequential steps of the farming method and the tools and technology adopted in the method are also discussed in detail.

The managerial role played by various social units and Village Council and Area Council (Tseminyu union in Tseminyu village) form the content of the sixth chapter. The author has identified two categories of role – operational and regulatory. The various operational role played by the social units such as family, lineage, clan and *khels* in the management of natural resources as well as the whole method of cultivation reflecting its sustainability is discussed thoroughly. The Village Council which plays a regulatory role as decision maker as well as decision administrator and justice provider observed in the study area.

In her concluding chapter, the author summarises the outcome of the research and elaborates on what people know (indigenous/ local knowledge) and what people actually practice (guided by the village authority) in managing their most valued resources (basically land), as well as activities, technologies and labour with respect to shifting cultivation. This has far reaching implications towards the concept and practice of sustainable development. Prevalence of a prominent social structure in the form of village council in Nagaland takes a crucial role in the sustainable management of shifting cultivation. Based on the study the author defined shifting cultivation as “a forest based mixed and multi-storeyed crop production practice, wherein the forest within the village environment is used in patches for a brief period by cutting/ felling, drying and burning and fallowing the same patch for forest to be re-grown till such time that the fertility of the soil is re-established and it becomes ready to use for succeeding cycle of cultivation.”

Overall, the setup of the book is good; however, the photographs could have been more distinct. Strength of the book lies on the in-depth data and emic perspective on this widely prevalent method of livelihood in Northeast Indian hilly landscape. The book is an important contribution towards anthropological literature and also it will serve as a good source material for policy makers, researches and interested readers in general.

Reference

Ramakrishnan, P.S. 1992. *Shifting Agriculture and Sustainable Development: An Interdisciplinary Study from North-Eastern India*. New York: Oxford University Press.