



Jhum: An indigenous method of cultivation and British attitude towards it in Colonial Assam

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Abstract

The paper attempts to study the Indigenous method of jhum, or shifting cultivation, and British attitude towards it. It was a popular method of cultivation not only in Colonial Assam but also in various parts of the country. Though jhum has been practiced for several millennia and found to be suitable for the climate of Assam, the British government tried to ban this form of cultivation for their interest. To meet the need of timber for railways, shipbuilding, etc., they wanted to expand plantation areas, and shifting cultivation was an obstacle to that. But the native people were not in favour of giving up their practice of jhum cultivation, and even the revenue officers demanded a mid-way to resolve the issue. This resulted in the adaptation of the taungya system of cultivation in which both cultivation and plantation could go simultaneously. The method used for the study is empirical and historical. Both primary sources such as forest administrative reports for Assam, Assam District Gazatteers and other official records collected from the National Archive of India, New Delhi and the Directorate of Assam State Archive, Guwahati and secondary sources such as books and research articles have been used for the study.

Keywords Jhum · Shifting · Cultivation · British · Taungya · Plantation

1 Introduction

Jhum, popularly known as shifting cultivation, is considered as a primitive practice. The history of shifting cultivation can be traced back to around 8000 BCE in the Neolithic period, which witnessed a remarkable and revolutionary shift of humankind's mode of food production (Pant, 2018, p. 1). In the hilly region of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura, shifting cultivation, locally known as 'jhum', continues to be a dominant mode of food production and the economic mainstay of many households (Pant, 2018). Colonial officials mentioned about the practice of jhum in Assam and through out the country in their records. B.C. Allen in Assam District Gazetteer mentioned that, "The ordinary method of cultivation, practiced in hills is the system known as jhum" (Allen, 1905, p. 42). W.W. Hunter viewed that, the jhum cultivation on the mountain slopes was the only method of agriculture pursued in hilly areas of North-East India (Hunter, 1879, p. 140).

Throughout the country, it is known by different names. In English, it is called 'slash and burn' or 'swidden cultivation'. In Assam, it is known as 'jhum' or 'jum'; Orissa, as 'podu', 'dahi' or 'kamana'; Madhya Pradesh as 'panda' and in Karnataka as 'kurmi', literal meaning 'hilly land' (Brandis, 1897, p. 26). According to E.E. Fernandez, this barbarous system of cultivation is known by various names such as 'jhum' (Assam-Bengal), 'taungya' (Burma), 'son', 'hai' (Shan country), 'kil', 'khil', 'karai' (North-West Himalayas), 'dhaya', 'bewa' (Central India), 'kutukar' (Tamil), 'punokar' (Canarese), 'kumri' (southern Maratha, Mysore, Coorge), 'tekal' (Mysore), etc. (Fernandez, 1891, p. 24). This cultivation process is also known as rotational agriculture, and fallow agriculture. All these names are closely related to the primitive method of agriculture. Shifting cultivation is, thus practiced over large parts of India, especially in hilly areas and forested tracts, where plough cultivation is not feasible (Gadgil & Guha, 2013, p. 150). In North-East India, including Tripura, Assam, Manipur, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh, most of the communities have been depending on shifting cultivation for their livelihood. Even in other parts of India, such as in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, shifting cultivation has been adopted as an indigenous method of

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cultivation. Traditionally, this method of cultivation has been providing food security to people inhabiting in remote and inaccessible areas since long back. Shifting cultivation is known as ‘jhum’ in Assam and in North-East India, and the people of this land who practice it are called ‘Jhum-mias’. The paper deals with the practice of jhum and British attitude towards it in Colonial Assam, including the present states of Assam, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland.

2 The process of jhum

The origin of jhum cultivation is obscure. However, a large number of tribal communities have been found depended principally upon shifting cultivation. In India, 5 million tribal families have been practicing this method on approximately 4.37 million hectares of land (Sahu et al., 2005). In those areas, shifting cultivation has been the main form of agriculture and an integral part of the tribal economy. Shifting cultivation in the humid tropics follows the same basic pattern of forest clearing, burning, and secondary growth. Local variations in shifting cultivation was usually limited to the types of crops and differences in the period of forest follow. This slightly varied from place to place depending on the climate, soils, and nature of second-growth vegetation (Popenoe, 1960, p. 4). The process of shifting cultivation in Assam and other places of North-East India begins with the selection of a plot on or near hill-side or jungle by the village elders, clan leader, and households. The selection process is mainly done from October to December. According to Brandis, in some tribal zones, the community as a whole was collectively responsible for clearing the selected jhum plots, while in others, the clearing of trees and shrubs was done by the respective family to whom the plot was allotted. The area allotted per family used to vary from half hectare to one hectare among different tribes and different states in the region (Brandis, 1897, p. 1). The practice of jhum usually involved slashing second-growth bamboo forests in January to February and then burning slash and dried vegetation in between March to April. According to W.W. Hunter, in the first step, a plot of land, generally on a hill-side, was selected for cultivation, and the jungle (local vegetation) was cut down in the cold weather from the middle of November to February. The cut trees and undergrowth were allowed to remain in the plot till the latter half of March, when they were burnt on the spot itself to make the land suitable for jhum cultivation and then after, all the crops were sown in the beginning of April (Hunter, 1879, p. 162). As for instance, the mode of jhum cultivation practiced in the Garo Hills, south of the Brahmaputra river, resembled the same. The Garo village-communities own land naturally stocked with trees, bamboo, or grass. In the month of October, they used to fell all the woody growth on areas where they wished

to cultivate and cut the herbage, reserving a few large trees, if found on that area. Sometimes, they used to remove a certain number of poles and other pieces of wood or bamboo for their own use or for sale in the plains of Sylhet, and the rest of the wood or vegetation was spread on the ground and burnt in March. The stumps were not extracted, but the land was hoed between them, and cotton or rice sown (Fisher, 1896, pp. 750–751). Sourabh Deb observed that “clearing of the forest vegetation is partial, and short tree stumps in place of large tree holes are left intact to stabilize the slope, reduce soil erosion, and be used as support for the climber crops” (Deb et al., 2013, pp. 133–148). He again viewed that, the process of clearing the plots takes over one month and is a labour-intensive work. It is undertaken almost entirely with indigenous and traditional equipments. Households remove useful biomass— big branches, trunks, and boles— for the house building, timber, and fuel wood requirements, while the remaining debris is left to get dry. The dried wood and the standing tree trunks in the cleared area are set on fire between February and March. Burning is done two or three months after slashing and clearing when the slashed vegetation gets dried (Deb et al., 2013, pp. 133–148). According to B.C. Allen, the jungle growing on the hillside was cut down, left for six weeks to dry, and burned between January and March. The larger trees’ boughs and rubbish not consumed in the first conflagration were then collected and burnt, and the ground hoed up (Allen, 1905, p. 42). In a tree jungle, all the under-growth and as many of the trees as possible were felled. Those that were too big for felling were cleared of their branches (Allen, 1906, p. 32). By the middle or end of March, the felling got over, and the hot April sun effectually dried the wood, ready for the firing of the jhums in May. Allen viewed that, “During this month the sky is hidden by dense clouds of smoke, miles of hillside often being ablaze, the fire having spread from the jhums to the jungle” (Allen, 1906, p. 32). Care was being taken to ensure that fires did not get spread out of control during firing operations (Brandis, 1897, p. 1). The Garo levied fines on a village if a fire spread from its land to that of another village (Fisher, 1896, p. 751). Before the rainy season arrives, the vegetation are set on fire. Farmers care that the fire does not get spread into the forest. The fire kills the weeds and insects, so the ashes seem very fertilizing for cultivation grounds. The ashes of vegetation are also used as manure; consequently, the farmer lightly spread the ashes all over the ground (Bose, 2014, pp. 12–13). Deb viewed that, haphazard burning was prevalent during earlier days, but now a fine line of vegetation (2.13–2.74 m) is maintained to check the spread of fire. The burning is usually carried out in the late afternoon or evening between 3 to 6 p.m. because the wind velocity is lower during this period and fire is more visible (Deb et al., 2013, pp. 133–148). When a jhummia sets fire to the forest on the hill-tops, the rainy season is supposed to be



approaching, and with the first shower of rain, the ashes are washed by water stream down and help to enrich the fields of the lowland farmers. In April, when the first rains come after a long gap, jhum is followed by seed sowing of one or more varieties of paddy, vegetables, maize, tuber crops, etc. So, it would not be wrong to assume that they (jhumias) had great knowledge about seasons and, accordingly, they used to fix the timing of various steps of jhum cultivation.

3 Shifting cultivation, a part of indigenous culture

For the tribal people of Colonial Assam, shifting cultivation was a way of life closely related to the economic, social, and cultural sphere. According to Gadgil and Guha, "...it was usually practised (practiced) by 'tribal' groups for whom jhum was a way of life encompassing, beyond the narrowly economic, the social and cultural spheres as well" (2013, p. 151). Hence, the jhumias mostly depended on shifting cultivation for their livelihood, and many indigenous rituals were linked to this practice (Changsan, 2017, pp. 84–89). In Meghalaya, almost all the tribes practiced shifting cultivation for their livelihood and as a part of their culture. In the interior of the province, particularly in Garo Hills, it is still considered as a part of life, culture, and practice (Deb et al., 2013). In North-East India, about 85% of total cultivated land was under shifting cultivation (Singh & Singh, 1992, p. 294). The majority of the rural people of this area are involved in shifting cultivation. In Mizoram, shifting cultivation has been the main occupation of the populace and a major source of economy (Maithani, 2005). The land under shifting cultivation may be used for only one or two seasons; in some cases, it has been used for three seasons and then left for a number of years, allowing the vegetation and soil to recoup and recover lost nutrients (Gadgil & Guha, 2013, p. 132) (Bose, 2014, p. 13). In Garo Hill communities, in the second year, a crop of yams, chilies, tapioca, etc. was collected from the land, and then the land was left to grow back naturally with woody plants like coppice-shoots, seedlings, etc. The operation was repeated in about ten years or less, according to total area of lands possessed by the village (Fisher, 1896, p. 751). Earlier, it was 20–25 years duration. It, therefore, permitted the land to return to its natural condition (Patro & Panda, 1994). Jhum was sustainable. However, the increasing population and usurpation of forest by the British government led to a shortened jhum cycle and land degradation. Bose viewed that, the period of recoup may vary from three or four to ten or twenty years. It all depends upon the farmer's needs and the population pressure of the locality (Bose, 2014, p. 13). Even continuous felling of trees could harm the land. In the words of B.C. Allen, "Tree jungle, if continually felled

and burned, gives place to coarse grass and the land, according to Lushai ideas, it is then useless for cultivation, for they consider the manuring of the ground by burning of a heavy mass of felled jungle absolutely necessary" (Allen, 1906, p. 32). However, "Bamboo used as soil binder facilitates soil nutrient recovery and creates microhabitats for regeneration of shade-loving species" (Deb et al., 2013). District Gazetteer states, "In parts where the jungle is bamboo, the work is comparatively light, but the crop is not generally so good; on the other hand, bamboo land can be cultivated every four or five years without the bamboo being exterminated. So, that if a chief has two village sites some miles apart, he can be moved backward and forward from one to the other all his lifetime" (Allen, 1906, p. 32). All of the recoup processes have their own technic, it has been used for ages. Jhum cultivation is a diversified, ingenious system of organic cropping that is well-suited for the heavy rainfall areas of the hill tracts of North-East India (Raman, 2000). Gadgil and Guha has viewed that wherever the jhum is practiced, like as in all parts of Assam, Keonjhar in Orissa, and Abujhmar Plateau in Bastar in Madhya Pradesh, where capacity of soil and rainfall vary conspicuously but the technique of jhum cultivation is not very different and can be looked upon as uniform, though the environmental condition is different in these areas (Gadgil and Guha, 2013, p. 16).

The practices of jhum include many techniques for conserving soil erosion by jhumias. After the burning, the short tree stumps and logs of trees that are not fully burned or the half-burned woods are collected and brought home for fuel wood. The Khasi people of Meghalaya lay wood logs across slopes in a staggered manner to control soil erosion. The slashed branches of pine trees brought from the nearby pine stands are also arranged together with slash (Deb et al., 2013). Clearing of the forest vegetation was also partially done, and short tree stumps in place of large tree boles were left intact to stabilize the slope, reduce soil erosion, and support the climber crops (Deb et al., 2013). In various districts of Assam, such as the Khasi and Jaintia, the Garo, and the Lushai Hills, after the fire, any charred trunks that remained were dragged to the edge of the jhum and built into a close fence. It not only save the land from soil erosion but also from animals such as rats, jungle fowl, pheasant, deer etc. These animals could harm the crop if this precaution is not taken. Openings are left in the fence every now and then in which snares were set to catch unwary intruders. Despite utmost care, they used to lose heavily from the onslaughts of these pests (Allen, 1906, pp. 32–33). The Garo lopped off most of the branches of their reserved trees so as not to overshadow the crops, and temporary bamboo huts were built in the forked boughs of these trees where the cultivators could sleep without fear of elephants and other beasts (Fisher, 1896, p. 751). These reserved trees also helped against soil erosion. The superiority of jhum cultivation



over other cultivations can be partly explained by the persistence of this form of agriculture in Colonial Assam. It is attributed to the economic security provided by jhum and its cultural importance to indigenous people.

4 Debate on shifting cultivation

Various scholars have different opinions about shifting cultivation, especially about its good and harmful environmental effects. P.D. Stracey listed many problems caused by shifting cultivation. According to him, this primitive form of agriculture resulted in serious environmental problems, like loss of forest cover, topsoil erosion, desertification, and decline in productivity (Stracey, 1967, pp. 440–446). Ravi Rajan viewed that shifting cultivation was rusticated by the British Government for introducing scientific forestry in various provinces of India (Rajan, 2006, p. ii). The British administrators criticized the jhum cultivation for introducing commercial cultivation and to get more revenue out of it. Sajal Nag has argued that the vast agricultural pursuit in India could not generate more profit than it would in Europe. The British wanted to ultimately commercialize agriculture so that it could produce the commodities suited for the international market and to meet the spiraling revenue demand of the colonial Government (Nag, 2016, p. 145). On the other hand, J. R. Ainslie, a forest officer of Nigeria, referred to shifting cultivation as ‘real cultivation’ that caused immense destruction (Rajan, 2006, p. 172). Fredrick Beadan Bryant also argued that the shifting cultivation did great harm in any country, and this become more pronounced on steep hillsides with unstable soil (Bryant, 2011, pp. 232–233). However, many studies considered that the shifting cultivation does not harm the environment. Scholars have tended favorably toward shifting cultivation, which is well suited to the local conditions in moist forests and hilly tracts (Guha, 1994, pp. 20–37) (Eden, 1987, pp. 340–343). M. Poul and P. P. Poul critically argued that this method of cultivation provided food security to the people of remote areas and helped in the conservation of soil, moisture enrichment of soil texture and structure (Paul, 2009, p. 10). Ramkrishnan argued that the weed ground cover helps to conserve soil nutrients (Ramkrishnan, 1994, pp. 39–63). Weed management is a process to improve the soil’s nutrients and retain moisture content. During the rainy season, weeds control soil erosion. Deb viewed that, the management of weeds is aimed at a more efficient recycling of nutrients within the system and helps in soil and moisture conservation (Deb et al., 2013). D. Singh critically argued that soil erosion under jhum cultivation is lesser than the other forms of settled cultivation. (Singh, 1996). He also explained that jhum does not harm any wild bird or animal because in jhum cultivation, the burned land recovers rapidly, and many species might survive if jhum

cycles are kept long enough to allow substantial forest regeneration. A recent study emphasizes the need to maintain mature forest and late successional vegetation for conserving several arboreal mammal species (Raman, 1996, p. 741). In the case of Colonial Assam, the climate and the rainforest made the jhum cultivation more suitable for the region. Thus, the traditional shifting cultivation has been found suitable to the climate of Assam. The traditional practice of shifting cultivation was not as much destructive as modern forest.

5 British attitude towards shifting cultivation

According to British foresters, shifting cultivation was extensively practiced in various provinces of India, including North-East India, which resulted in thousands of square miles became barren year after year. But by the early seventies, this agricultural system ceased and was replaced by the massive growth of young forests (Ribbentrop, 1900, p. 49). The British Government was not in favour of this system of cultivation mainly for two reasons namely, for the establishment of plantations to meet the need for timber and, secondly, for bringing the forest areas under British monopoly. To restrict the practice of shifting cultivation, the British Government put certain regulations and extra tax on the jhummers. The jhummers were restricted from changing their site of cultivation by imposition of extra tax, which is an important part of shifting cultivation. An extract of the proceedings of the Forest Conference held at Allahabad in January 1874 was circulated by order of the Chief Commissioner to all the Deputy Commissioners and the Educational and Public Works Departments referring to the Jhum cultivation. The order issued the following regulations:-(i) whenever a house, hoe or poll tax paying village, or the family of such a village changes its residence and its cultivation, that village or family must pay double the annual tax for the year of migration. (ii) whenever such a village or family entirely changed its site of cultivation without abandoning its site of residence, the village or family must pay an additional tax of 50 percent on the ordinary annual tax prescribed for the year of such change (Mann, 1876, p. 19). This shows an attempt by the British government to restrict the practice of jhum.

The forest officers also felt that vigilance was needed to prevent jhum cultivation in various forests of Assam. The Forest Report of Assam, 1876–77, mentioned that the Gola-ghat forest division needed to prevent the extension of jhumming in Nambor forest (Mann, 1877, pp. 5–6). It further notes that, Golaghat forest division remained in danger from the jhumming tribes. For this reason, the Assistant Conservator in charge visited all the villages located in the Rengmah Hills and warned people against trespassing along the western boundary of Nambor reserves. He did the same in the



Mikir Hills reserve. However, the cases of trespassing were common by the villagers in search of plot for jhumming and for the destruction of plantation. The British Government made every attempts to restrict the Jhummers such as imposing fines, appointing forest gourds etc. In the Golaghat forest division, the inhabitants of a village four miles away attempted to trespass, but the forest guards were alerted to the situation and stopped immediately (Mann, 1878, p. 4). The Mikirs of these hills moved to the edge of the forest but the situation was such that they had to emigrate or return to their old jhums (Mann, 1878, p. 4). Even in the Garo hills, where Sal forests containing valuable timber were limited, the forest department needed to save as much of the remnant as possible before the Jhummers could destroy it (McKee, 1892, p. 2). Jhumming was supposed to be the biggest threat even to the forests of the Cachar division as it was carried out by Kuki tribe. Since these people always used to fall in the best forest they get, instead of returning to their old jhum, and for this reason, shifting cultivation proved most destructive for the British forest administrators. Later, however, the tribes were restricted and allowed nothing more than permanent cultivation within marked areas. If they wanted to jhum, they had to do it outside the reserves; this is how the Lower Jiri reserve (Cachar) was saved from the Jhummas (Mann, 1877, pp. 25–26). Sometimes, the mauzadars and the trespassers were also punished in case of extension of jhum cultivation. The Forest department also adopted various steps such as convincing jhummers to go for plantation, distribution of seeds etc. to reduce the jhum cultivation. In the Kamrup Division, the teak seed was distributed among jhum cultivators for plantation in the Pantan reserve and to sow on their jhums (Home, 1898). But not everywhere people easily accepted to go for plantation. People mostly expressed their aversion to the imposition of restrictions on jhumming. In fact, villagers in the Lakhimpur district objected sowing or planting timber trees since they would not be allowed to jhum again, once those fields planted, which would take seven or ten years, if they did so. British officers also recognized the extreme waste in jhumming as compared with permanent cultivation, and that the government had a perfect right to check such waste. It was also argued that the number of Jhummers were handful of men, as compared with the rest of the population, but their mode of cultivation was equivalent to requiring seven or ten times as much land as people who carried on permanent cultivation. In spite of that they only used to pay a poll-tax, or in other words, mere nominal sum, as compared with the ordinary land tax fixed by the British government (Mann, 1886, p. 15). Attempts were also made to induce Jhummers to sow and plant valuable trees such as sal on their fields.¹

It may be noted here that an important regulation called the Sylhet Jhum Regulation of 1891 was enacted, through which the rights of jhum, gurkati, tipper etc. to all

shifting lands and all defined forests were claimed. The practice of jhum cultivation became a subject of control, restriction, and abolition by the State Government. In many cases, large areas of forest land in the district were used in such a way that confusion arose as to whether the land should be reserved or should be given for cultivation (McKee, 1892, p. 8). In the Langai and Singla “open” forests (an area of about 290 square miles in the Sylhet district) the cutting of jhums or the carrying on of any other form of cultivation was restricted by the Chief Commissioner of Assam by an order notified in the Assam Gazette of the 22nd of September 1877, page 323 (Mann, 1878, p. 32). Towards the end of 1914, an imperial officer was appointed to examine the forests north of the Khasi and Jaintia hills. He advised the Deputy Commissioner of the district and two other officials about the possibility of protecting the more valuable sal-bearing areas of the locality. As a result of the Chief Commissioner’s visit to the Garo hills in February 1914, cutting of sal trees by the Jhummas was prohibited. However, that was not considered enough by the British administrator. Sir Archdale Earle, Chief Commissioner of Assam Province, desired to check and ultimately end what he called the wasteful system of jhum cultivation. But at the same time, he viewed the system as dear to the rude and ignorant tribes who practiced it, and it was not easy to induce them to abandon it for the plough (Allen, 1914, p. 1). However, government reserved forest areas were better demarcated, hence jhumming was rare in these areas.² In the Sylhet district, the chief commissioner had rendered the strictest conservancy possible. In Lakhimpur district too the Jhumming was supposed to be the main threat of forest destruction, and attempts were made to stop it. But these steps by the British government to restrict the shifting cultivation could not succeed as the native people were not ready to give up their traditional practice of jhum. Gradually, after various experiments and criticism by the native people and the revenue officers, a new system named ‘taungya’ was introduced, in which both plantation and jhumming was possible (Mann, 1886, p. 15). Taungya is a Burmese word mainly used for shifting cultivation in Burma. It was also agreed that through the implementation of taungya system, it would be possible for the British foresters to induce villagers to plant timber trees on their jhums (Mann, 1886, p.15). It was agreed that some form of intensive cultivation under a system of controlled jhumming (taungya) was the only method through which this conflict could be resolved, but the major issue with this system was that the labour required to implement

¹ ASA, Progress Report of Forest Administration in Assam for the year 1888–89, 1889, p. 10.

² ASA, Progress Report of Forest Administration in Assam for the year 1888–89, 1889, p. 6.



it was almost entirely absent (Webster, 1917, p. 8). However, the taungya cultivation was accepted. The term “taungya”, as applied in Assam and referred to in some provinces as Agri-Silviculture, means plantations between the lines of which food crops are grown. This not only provided a living for the cultivators but also made the cost of the plantations far less, as weeding costs got reduced.³ “The taungya cultivator clears-fells a patch of forest, perhaps leaving a few big tall trees—or only gridling them and as soon as the felled material has been dried enough to burn, he fires it; he then broadcasts or dibbles in his field crop with a minimum of soil working” (Champion & Griffith, 1960, p. 203). Taungya was thus, accepted as the method of cultivation in colonial Assam. In Nowgong, the Divisional Forest Officer reported that there were areas where land hunger was not acute, but the surrounding population was accustomed to jhuming. There, an intermediate method between regular taungya (cultivation) and plantation was introduced. After departmental planting, villagers were allowed to take a free crop off the land between the planted lines, and this eliminated the cost of the first year of weeding.⁴ Gadgil & Guha also agreed that “...the state found a novel way of pursuing commercial forestry without further alienating tribal cultivators. This was the ‘taungya’ method of agro-silviculture-developed in Burma in the nineteenth century-where jhum cultivators were allowed to grow food crops in the forest provided they grew timber trees alongside. Thus, after a few years, when the cultivator moved on to clear the next patch, a forest crop had been established on the vacated ground” (Gadgil and Guha, 2013, p. 158). Taungya was then accepted as mode of cultivation, however unrestricted jhuming was practiced in the unclassified State Forests by the local habitants (Jacob, 1940, p. 46). It also led to a new conflict between the villagers and the foresters. Sometimes the villagers were induced to grow valuable trees in the first year, which could affect their cultivation and from the forest point of view the timber trees would not grow vigorously, if planted with the second or last year crops, because of weeds.

The British rulers were confused about the status of shifting cultivation. The forest officials were of the view that shifting cultivation was the principal cause of forest destruction, landslide, silting up and drying up of springs and rivers and causing floods, etc., so it should be banned, while revenue officers favoured the shifting cultivation for obvious reason of revenue generation. They were also of the view that the cultivators should not suffer. As a result of their confusion between choosing forestry or agriculture, a

new system emerged in which both would continue without harming the forest wealth, and that was taungya system. Under this system, the cultivators were encouraged to clear the forests and replace the cleared tracts with more or less uniform forest crops. The introduction of taungya was supposed to be the success of Colonial forestry in turning jhum as a method of regeneration at a comparatively low cost. However, ironically enough the success of taungya led to the reintroduction of jhum in tracts where it had died out or been put down at an earlier stage (Champion & Griffith, 1960, p. 202-3). Even the adaptation of mixed plantations proves the acceptance of indigenous methods by the British forester. Thus, jhum continues to be the dominant mode of cultivation in the Colonial Assam.

6 Conclusion

Thus, jhum cultivation has been an indigenous method of cultivation and mode of food production for the people of Assam since long back. It’s been closely related with the social, economic and cultural sphere of the tribal life. Though the colonial forester criticized it as it led to many serious environmental problems but various scholars agreed that jhum cultivation was well suited for the climate of Colonial Assam. The jhum cycle was an important part of the cultivation as it took time for the soil to recover the lost nutrient. However, the increasing population and usurpation of forest by the British government led to a shortened jhum cycle and it resulted in land degradation. Colonial administrator wanted to ultimately commercialize agriculture so that it would produce the commodities suited for the international market. Artificial forestry in form of plantation system was also a part of their imperialist expansion. However, with the intervention of revenue officers a mid way was found in Taungya, a form of agroforestry system.

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³ ASA, Progress Report of Forest in the Province of Assam for the year 1940–41, p. 9.

⁴ ASA, Progress Report of Forest Administration in the Province of Assam for the year 1939–40, 1940, p. 10.



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