

THE ECONOMIC LIFE OF THE TANGKHUL COMMUNITY CONTINUITY AND CHANGES

Dr. Gratis Yangya

Assistant Professor, Department of History, St. Joseph College, Ukhrul, Ukhrul District,
Manipur

Email: gratisyangya@gmail.com

Abstract

The Tangkhul community lived in the North-Eastern part of Manipur. Agriculture played an important role in the livelihood of the community. The Tangkhul economy is a self-sufficient economy except for salt. They cultivate mainly for self-consumption of the family and the surplus is either used for barter trade or for the livestock. The economic life in the early days primarily depended on agricultural activities, food gathering, hunting and fishing. The wealth of the family was measured by the possession of the field and cattle they possessed. Rice being the staple food for the Tangkhuls, they practiced both wet and jhum rice cultivation. The absence of irrigation facilities and adequate physical infrastructure prevented the practice of double cropping of rice. Development and growth in the transport and communication system helped the market economy of the Tangkhuls. Agricultural work is being improved through the use of high yielding variety seeds and modern machine. This paper is an attempt to revisit the early economic life of society and the changes brought by globalization and modernization and its continuity and changes from a historical perspective.

Keywords: Tangkhul, Agriculture, Economy, Market, Modernization.

INTRODUCTION:

The Tangkhul community lived in the North- Eastern part of Manipur. Agriculture was the main occupation for the people. Like any other traditional society, the Tangkhul economy is predominantly agrarian in nature. The dominant agriculture system and traditional economic activities are Jhum cultivation and sedentary terraced wet-rice cultivation (Awungshi, 2016, p. 167). The Tangkhul used simple technology for agricultural purposes, which fits well with their environment. Moreover, their economy can be said to be a subsistence economy which only aimed at producing crops for family consumption, which can be said a “production-consumption economy”. The Industrial Revolution that took place in England reached the Tangkhul village in the later part of the 20th century. Slowly and gradually the paddy machine reached the villages of the Tangkhul.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

1. To study the traditional economy of the Tangkhul community.
2. To study the changes and continuity of the economy of the Tangkhul community.

METHODOLOGY:

The study shall be based on interdisciplinary approach, including historical and social anthropological studies. The historical approach shall rely mainly on primary and secondary sources, which include historical materials such as books, published and unpublished works, archives, documents on economic studies and social anthropological approach shall be carried out by interacting with the elders of the Tangkhul community.

JHUM RICE CULTIVATION

Rice is the staple food of the Tangkhul community. Jhum cultivation system or slash and burn system is carried out mainly in the South- Eastern area of the Tangkhul village though it is practiced in the North- Western area it is only to supplement the terrace cultivation and thus, less emphasis is given to the jhumming cultivation. In the South- Eastern area, jhumming is more popular as the topographical condition compels them to do so (Ruivah, 1993, p. 69). The rice cultivated in the jhum cultivations are *Shirao*, *Meelah*, *zingmoirangphao*, *Lamyang*, *Rocket*. In the traditional jhumming system of the Tangkhul, the site once cultivated is not generally repeated for the next year's cultivation on the presumption that it has lost its fertility so it was difficult for the big village to practice this type of cultivation.

No individuals are allowed to cultivate wherever they want but the village authority along with *Awunga* (Chief) and *Hangva* (Village Councillor) selects a particular mountain and divides equally with the size of the family members. They make the daos in the month of January, cut the trees in February- March, and burn the dried leaves and small branches in April, but preserve the big trees for further use and sow the seeds in the month of May (Horam, 2016, p.144). Before the burning, the field boundaries called *Meilam* (fire path) are properly made so that the fire does not spread to other areas and cause great devastation. In case, any individual starts a fire before the fixed date for burning the jhum fields, he is fined with a Pig (Horam, 2016). So, the burning of the jhum field is done together on a particular fixed date it cannot be done anytime at the convenience of the individuals, it is more like teamwork.

After the field was burnt, they started tilling the ground and sowing the paddy in the month of May. There were no scientific tools or implements used in the sowing of seeds and other agricultural activities, other than, other tools like chopping dao, axe spade, and knife for clearing the trees, bushes, and other wild grasses. The weeding for the Jhum cultivation was done in the months of June and July before the paddy grew, they planted other crops like cucumber, chili, ginger, millet, pumpkin, maize, etc. The paddy is harvested starting from the last month of September and mostly completed in the month of October, and the land was reused for cash crops by the family while some were left fallow for more fertility. However, in modern society, certain changes were visible the villagers become more aware of ecological knowledge and utilize it better, while some become more selfish and use up many forests for their private profit and earn from the surplus of their production.

WET RICE CULTIVATION

According to the local traditions, the Angami terrace system is as old as the tribe itself, the system is believed to have been brought from its ancient home (H. Bareh, 1970). The Angami system similar with the Tangkhuls is an elaborate form of terracing and irrigation, for which bunds are raised across the terrace for the purpose of irrigation. The terraces are cut up along the rugged hills sometimes high upto over 6,000 ft. terraces leaned up against the stone retaining walls at the different levels get themselves protected from the soil erosion and help regularise distribution of irrigation. Terrace cultivation is more practiced in the Northern and Western Tangkhul villages. The populations are higher compared to the South and East so it was difficult for them to practice the jhum cultivation to shift every year from one place to another.

The village from the time immemorial has been growing rice and its accounts for more the 80 percent of the crop area. Method of cultivation is concerned in case of rice cultivation; seedling is done at the onset of pre-monsoon rain, normally in the month of March. Seedling is done in a separate higher area, not in the cultivatable land. The area for seedling is dug by spade after which the soil is burn with the help of firewood and dry leaves. It is waited for 2-3 days to let the fire be off and followed by sowing the seed. Transplantation starts in the month of July till August. Harvesting season starts from the October and sometimes till November (Singha, 2011).

Available water from streamlets and rivers, far and near are collected and brought to the field. Fairwater distribution is regulated, and overflowing water of the upper field is made available to those who cultivate below. This process led the villagers to cultivate their paddy in wet cultivation, so the name is given wet cultivation and remains wet throughout the year. Stone boulders are used as retaining walls of the terrace field, and they are constructed in such a way that they withstand rain and flood for ages. Therefore, T.C. Hodson remarked: The Tangkhul have earned and very deservedly, a reputation as earth workers.....such as trenches to drain wet fields or embankments for protection against floods. They are well able to protect themselves against the rapacity of the Manipuri, measure up their work and take out rates in a style that a Civil Engineer would approve and appreciate (Hodson, 2014, p. 49).

Weeding of the paddy was carried out twice, once in July for those families who planted early and the second one in the month of August. No fertilizers were used in the olden days, only natural fertilizers like cow dung and dry paddy plants, and some would carry the husk of the paddy to the field from home. The use of organic fertilizers ensures better health, allowing them to remain strong and fit throughout the entire agricultural season. With the increase in the manufactured factories of agricultural implements in the latter part of the 20th century, they upgraded their tools with better ones.

Thus, the changes were visible with the used of high yielding variety of seeds which resulted in better harvest for the Tangkhuls. Human and animal labour were also supplemented by the help of machines and equipment to assist farmers. Traditional agricultural practices are gradually being replaced by the use of chemicals and fertilizers to enhance productivity and control pests.

HUNTING AND FISHING

The tribals of the hills spent most of their time in hunting and fishing apart from their agricultural work. They used primitive types of weapons for the hunting game. Whereas in fishing, they are done by poisoning the roots, hush, and leaves of some poisonous tree grown in their forest another method of catching the fish is diverting the small tunnel of the river and by blogging with either stone or mud from the field. The village dwellers mostly knew the forest products and wild animals as they spent most of their time going around for the trapped animals. In India, many of the tribes have been living in the forest in different states. They were found practicing hunting and other means of collecting food (Kumar, 2002).

Hunting continues into the present day much as it did in the past and the same enthusiasm for it still persists. When compared to earlier days, the extend of killing has been considerably reduced influenced by the enforcement of state laws and regulations. Hunting is permitted from October to March whereas the period from April to September is reserved as

the breeding season for animals and birds. Once the breeding season ends, hunting activities continue. As money culture developed and the cost of air-gun bullets increased, some hunters began selling meat to afford the bullets. Although certain changes have occurred over time, hunting continues to this day as long-standing cultural tradition. The practice of male feasting after hunting of big animals has declined, but giving shares of the animals to the *safa* (Hunting Dog) owner and gun owners continues.

HANDICRAFT

The Tangkhuls loved to make handicrafts of different designs as the raw materials for this were easily available in the forest of each village. Natural resources such as wood, bamboo, cane, and other products were used in the making of handicrafts (Shimray, 2001, p. 94). They have a rich culture in handicrafts such as wood-carving, basketry, mat weaving, and other domestic works. Wooden drums for storing water, rice, and rice beer; wooden boxes for keeping cloths, tables, wooden stools, cane baskets, and cane tables, etc. of different shapes and sizes, etc. were made.

Giant pounding tables of four feet by ten feet were made of huge wood logs and carried home from far distant forests. The Tangkhul attained excellence in making wooden plates of various sizes and designs. The woodcrafts are so perfect that the only improvement they need is painting and colouring. Since there were no industrially manufactured goods available to the Tangkhuls, most of the domestic articles for their daily use were made of wood and bamboo. The spoon and cups were also made with wood and bamboo.

POTTERY

Pottery is an important asset of human civilization. Whether earthen pot, utensil, or whether the case may be, without cooking food, no human culture and civilization can progress and develop. The art of pottery was developed in Tangkhul in the remote past, although no definite date can be ascertained regarding its origin. However, it is beyond doubt and argument that Tangkhul pottery is one of the oldest industries of the people, which is still continuing and improving.

Almost all the villages of the Tangkhuls had pottery. But Hodson, the chief authority of the Naga tribes of Manipur, remarked (Hodson, 2014) "Three clans of Hundung and the village of Nungbi make earthen pots from beds to clay close to their village." He continued further: they make vessels of all sizes. These vessels are devoid of any but the simplest ornamentation but are, nevertheless, strong and well-suited to the requirements of the purchasers and command a large scale over the whole of Tangkhul country.

The method of making jars, pots, and vessels is very simple and primitive. From the early days till today, no improvement in technology has been developed so far. They do not use wheels and other advanced tools for making pots. They simply collect two kinds of earth materials- one is clay and the other is a kind of pottery stone. Both the clay and stone are ground to powder, mixed together, and applying water, moulded the earth with hands into any form and size they require. Finally, they are tempered in a furnace outside the village. The pot is then ready to use (Shimray, 2001, p.96).

WEAVING

Weaving is an important industry of the Tangkhuls. They make varieties of clothes, shawls, loin cloth for both men and women, cloth fit for the use of *Awunga*, married men and

women, unmarried boys and girls. The most important Tangkhul cloth are *Leirum*, *Haora*, *Thangan*, *Changkhom*, *Yangrei*, etc. They are speckled with white, black, red, and green colours. Single-color cloths are also made by the Tangkhuls. No machine-made cloths and textiles have been able to match the fitness and quality of the Tangkhul cloth. Their age-old handloom has, therefore, been retained even today, although, it is a rather painstaking and time-consuming process to produce even a single cloth. This is because the designs and fashions of their cloth bear the identity and culture of the people and its popularity increases with the awareness of national and communal identities in the world today. Again, no fashion of cloths and textiles, however, costly they may be, can replace the ceremonial cloth of the *Awunga* and those who perform fest of merit and heroes of war, this makes the Tangkhuls and other Naga tribes retain their traditional method of making tribal cloth.

Whatever different types and fashions of Tangkhul cloths may be, they have a pattern of design known as *Aphor*, which is distinctly different from all kinds of Naga cloths. This pattern is used by the Tangkhuls only, and therefore it bears the identity of the Tangkhul tribe. The *Aphor* is designed at the edge of the border of the cloth where “the stripes of the decorative border are pointed like the pattern on a backgammon board, and when these cloths are new and in good condition, they are very handsome.” Hodson described it “as trademarks, possibly as ‘luck’ marks, and therefore possessing a magical value, and as ornaments, their presence adding to the price” (Hodson, 2014) No doubt, the quality and designs of Tangkhul cloths remain unbeaten and he described them in the following way. It is hardly necessary to say that this process is slow and laborious and Manipuri competition is beginning to be felt. Manchester goods find no market here because no attempt is made to study and understand native requirements, customs, and desires. Indeed, the beauty of Tangkhul cloths was so rich that even Verrier Elwind remarked (Varrier Elwin, 1969, p. 490). “Their women make cloths superior to any of other tribes excepting the Murrings.”

TRADE AND COMMERCE

A Tangkhul village was a self-sufficient state. A village could exist by itself from its economic resources and products. However, all Tangkhul villages did not produce the same goods and commodities. One village may be rich in certain goods and commodities but poor in other areas which were found abundantly in other villages. Hence the need for the exchange of goods arose. It led to an exchange of goods and services among them. This could be achieved through trade and commerce, and therefore, inter-village trade and commerce had been in practice since time immemorial. This strengthened the economy of the people and improved their living conditions.

The ancient Tangkhuls, including those who were living in the Naga Hills of Burma, had intensive trade relations with the Shans and Avas (Burmans). The Tangkhuls, being largely an agrarian society, imported iron pieces for making agricultural implements and tools. But their supply consisted of agricultural products and precious stones etc. A large amount of precious stones and gold was found in the Tangkhul areas of Burma, particularly in the river of Chindwin River valley and its tributaries. Regarding the trade of the Tangkhuls with Burma, Grant Brown, an authority of Upper Chindwin District, remarked (G. E. R. Grant Brown, 1913).

Conclusion:

The economy in the Tangkhul community have been following the ancient culture of wet rice and jhum rice cultivation as their main source of livelihood in the present day. With the upgradation of the agricultural tools and implements and machines in the cultivation and used of better seeds and fertilizers in the cultivation the farmers have reduce their human labour. The source of economy apart from rice cultivation are still functioning with the upgradations of the tools and resources like handicraft, weaving, pottery making and hunting and fishing. Trade and commerce have open up a way to supply the surplus of their produce to the neighbouring town and villages. The Tangkhuls no longer depend solely on agriculture for their livelihood; significant changes are visible in the economic sphere with people engaging in skills such as weaving, handicraft production, pottery making and trade in village produce, supported by better-functioning market system in the district and neighbouring states.

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