

# Ethnoarchaeological Study of Jhum Cultivation Among the Chakhesang Tribe of Nagaland

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## Introduction

Shifting or *jhum* cultivation is a primitive form of agricultural system characterised by rotation of fields from one place to another in the form of mixed cropping cultivation. In India, shifting cultivation is known by different local names, in Northeast India it is called *jhum* cultivation. Vidyarthi (1986, p. 78) describe this aged-old practice of agriculture and listed different terms used in different regions of the world. The other alternate names listed by him include 'slash-and-burn cultivation', 'nomadic agriculture', 'migratory primitive agriculture', 'primitive horticulture', 'brand village', 'hoe-and-burn cultivation', 'swidden agriculture'. This type of cultivation in Northeast India is widely known as '*jhum*' and the cultivators as '*jhumia*'. *Jhum* cultivation is considered important historically for its significant source in the evolution of agriculture. It constitutes and holds important social and economic factors in the life of the hill people and region. It is subsistence form of agricultural practices for most cultivators with no surplus production for market use but only meeting the needs of the household as a self-contained economy. It is a year round occupation which keeps the cultivators engaged throughout the year upon different stages of agricultural operations. Among the *Chakhesang* Nagas, the plots of the field for shifting cultivation are of either joint clan or individual property. Throughout the year, the progress of *jhum* cultivation is closely attached with different social, cultural and religious rituals among the Nagas.

There are two common contradictory views when it comes to the study of *jhum* cultivation, first as the anthropologists would see the need of this practice as a way of life for the hill and tribal region dwellers which should not be disturbed. On the other hand, it is also subjected to many criticisms on ecological ground with the rapid pressure on population growth leading to scarcity of forest land for cultivation, shortening of *jhum* cycles and soil erosion. However apart from the above two common views, today it has become an important subject from an ethnoarchaeological point of view to know our past history of economy, social and cultural life by studying the living culture, methods and artefacts to make analogy between the past and present. Shifting cultivation is commonly practiced and found among the hill dwellers and it is not bounded or confined to any particular region of a country but are found in other countries as well (Haimendorf 1971) in his comparative study among the mountain peoples in Asia reported 'notwithstanding the great distance separating the mountain peoples of northern Luzon and such hill-tribes of north-east India as the Nagas, the ecology and material culture of these populations are of remarkable similarity'. He further stretches the importance of the presence of archaic cultural similarity between the two regions whose ecology are believed and confront to a style of the Neolithic period and how despite of rapid improvement of iron implements continue to see the old

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