



Impact of cash crop cultivation on gender relations dynamics in Khasi community, a matrilineal tribe of Meghalaya, India

B.K. Tiwari, H. Tynsong, S. Phanbuh

Centre for Environmental Studies
North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong 793022, India

Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a study on the impact of cash crop cultivation on the gender relations in Khasi community, a matrilineal tribe of Meghalaya, India.. The study was conducted in the three contiguous villages viz., Nongryngkoh, Nohron and Wahlakhait using standard social science research methods. The study revealed that in shifting cultivation men and women are equally and actively involved in the on-farm activity while the responsibility of men in on-farm activity increases with the shift to cash crop cultivation. Unlike patriarchal societies the income from the cash crop goes to the women who are also responsible for shopping and management of house, a tradition of matrilineal society. Fuel wood collection, mainly the responsibility of women among the shifting cultivators, has reduced with the introduction of cash crops as the same is generally purchased from the market. With the introduction of cash crops, children's responsibilities of sibling care have decreased and the same has been taken over by the mothers. There is a significant drop in on-farm labour requirement with the shift in cultivation system which has led to reduction in overall workload of women particularly the on-farm productive work but there is considerable increase in their household responsibilities i.e. reproductive works. The tradition of community festivities and communal sharing of labour associated with shifting cultivation has steadily faded away as cash crop cultivation is a family based activity. In conclusion, it can be said that the economic and social condition of Khasi women has improved with the introduction of cash crops.

1 Introduction

The term gender refers to the socially determined and culturally- specific differences between women and men as opposed to the biologically determined differences. It is often associated with women and activities related to 'women and development'. It also refers to the learned social differences between women and men which are changeable over time, and which vary both geographically and culturally (Gebert 1997). In different parts of the world there are different laws and customs regarding women-men rights and controls. In the matrilineal Khasi community of Meghalaya, inheritance and descent are traced through the female line, but customary practices are not gender- democratic, as authority is vested in the mother's brothers. Nongbri (1994) has very aptly described gender relations in Khasi community by saying that 'war and politics for men', 'property for women'. In the interiors of the state, shifting cultivation is still the primary source of meeting livelihood needs but in most villages people are slowly switching over to of cash crops (Tiwari, 2003). During recent years the Khasi society has experienced a variety of extraneous interventions in terms of technologies, development programmes and market forces, which have led to change in their occupation, resource use pattern and life style. One significant change noticed is the shift from traditional shifting cultivation to cash crop cultivation. As a result, over the years Meghalaya has emerged as an important cash crop growing state of India. Large areas of shifting cultivation fields have been converted to potato,

ginger, turmeric, pineapple, cashew nut, rubber, tea, broom grass, betel nut and betel leaf farms. Introduction of cash crops has significantly reduced the area under shifting cultivation (GOI, 2005). Impact of cash crops on gender relations have been studied by several workers (Zweifel, 1995, Newlin, 2000). However, there has been very little effort on understanding the impact of cash crops on gender relations in matrilineal tribal communities practicing shifting cultivation. The present paper presents findings of a study on the impact of introduction of cash crops on gender relations on the in Khasi community, a matrilineal tribe of Meghalaya, India

2 Study area

The state of Meghalaya is situated in the north-eastern region of India. It is a land locked territory lying between the latitudes of 25°47'N and 26°10'N and longitudes of 89°45'E and 92°47'E. The state is made up of three hills namely, Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, and Garo Hills. The altitude of the state varies between 100 to 1900 m from m.s.l. With an area of 22,429 sq km, it is predominantly inhabited by tribal people who account for 89 percent of the population of 23, 06,069 persons (Census of India, 2001). The study was conducted in the three contiguous villages viz. Wahlahkhat, Nohron, and Nongryngkoh. The location of the three villages is shown in the map of Meghalaya (Fig. 1). All the three villages are located at about 65 km east of Shillong. The activity profile of the people of all three villages is similar as a majority of the inhabitants are farmers. The important crops of the area include betel leaf, broom grass, earthnut, sweet potato, orange, earthnut, maize, corm and vegetables. The dominant forest tree species are: *Eurya*, *Quercus*, *Calicarpa*, *Litsea*, *Macaranga*, *Toona*, and *Artocarpus*.

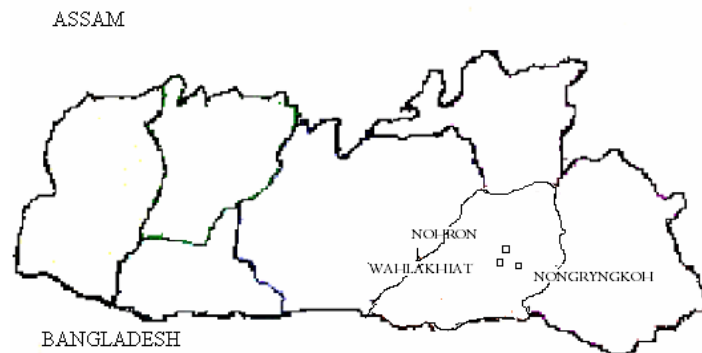


Figure 1: MAP OF MEGHALAYA SHOWING STUDY AREA

From the social point of view, in Khasi community the property is in the mother's name and the youngest daughter is the keeper of ancestral property whose duty is to take care of the family. While the village assembly or *Dorbar* comprising of the *Sordar* or the Chieftain together with the *Bakhrav* or council of village elders and adult male members of the village act as an important and effective body for the governance of the village. Women are not allowed to participate in the deliberations of the village assembly; however they can attend the same as audience. At times they can only give suggestions to their husbands at home before the general body meeting of the *Dorbar*. Hence, women can be considered as passive participants in the decision making process.

3 Methodology

Selection of villages was done taking the criteria of presence of households practicing shifting cultivation and cash crop cultivation. Three contiguous villages namely Nongryngkoh, Nohron

and Wahlakhait were selected for the study. The three categories of households were grouped namely those exclusively practicing shifting cultivation or cash crop cultivation and those practicing both shifting cultivation as well as cash crop cultivation. Stratified random sampling on 15 % of the total households in each village was carried out for household survey. Household schedules were used and interviews of key informants, were conducted which among other knowledgeable persons included the village head-men and village elders. After a macro-level study in all the three villages, detailed and in-depth study was conducted in Nohron village. Participatory Research Appraisal tools as described by Mukherjee, (1993) were utilized for collection of data. A Focus Group Discussion was held in which the men and women were divided into two groups. The members of each group included the shifting cultivators, cash crop cultivators, the landowners and the landless. A time line was prepared with the help of village elders. A transect walk across the village with village community was undertaken to make the biophysical resource map of the village and to discuss the gender relation issues in the context of agricultural activities in the field. The data was analyzed using standard statistical methods.

4 Results

The study revealed that a few decades back all households were practicing shifting cultivation which was main stay of livelihood. However, cash crops are becoming increasingly popular to the extent that at present less than 10 per cent households practice only shifting cultivation. The distribution of occupation in the three villages is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of occupation in the three study villages.

Occupation	Nongryngkoh (percent)	Wahlakhait (percent)	Nohron (percent)
Shifting cultivation (sc)	4.9	9.28	9.83
Cash crop (cc)	27.86	42.85	40.98
Both (sc+cc)	49.18	35.71	36.88
Non-Agrarian.	18.08	12.14	12.29

4.1 Land Use

The soil on the hilltop and majority of the upper hill slopes are shallow, gravelly to sandy with poor drainage and exposed bedrocks. These areas are characterized with impermeable lithology and high runoff mainly covered by grasslands. The isolated mounds on the lower parts of the hills have moderately deep soils with moderate drainage, permeable lithology, less rocky and moderate vegetation cover. The soil in the foothills is moderately shallow to very deep with good vegetation cover. Therefore people practice cultivation mostly on these isolated mounds and at lower elevation on the foothills. Cultivation of broom grass (*Thysanolaena maxima*), an important cash crop of the region, is mostly concentrated on the top of the mounds and betel nut and betel leaves (*Piper* sp) are cultivated on the foothills of the mounds. The land use and land cover analysis revealed that about 20 percent of the village area is grassland; 10-12 percent settlement, 44.66 percent under cash crop and 26.66 percent is under shifting cultivation. (Fig. 2).

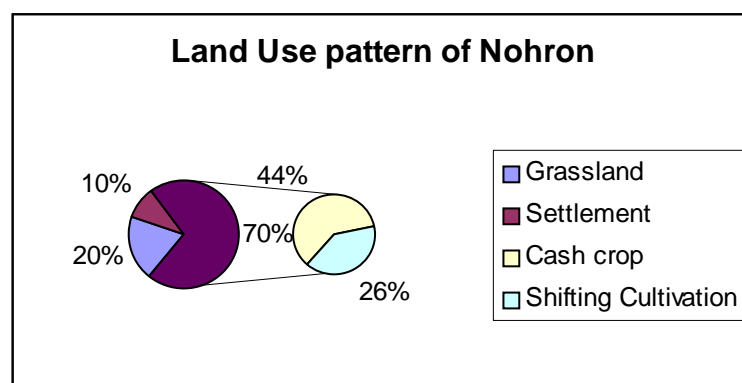


Figure 2: Land use of Nohron village

The activity profile of men and women of Nohron village are given in Table 2. It is seen that the responses of women groups and men groups for same questions are mostly similar except for a few where men appear to claim doing more activities.

Table 2. Activity profile of men and women in Nohron village of Meghalaya

Location	Activity	Men interviewee		Women interviewee		Time
		Shifting Cultivation HH	Cash crop HH	Shifting Cultivation HH	Cash crop HH	
Homestead	Carrying water	Predominantly Women	Predominantly Women	Women	Women	Daily
	Cooking	Women. Men take for a period after childbirth.	Women. Men take for a period after childbirth	Women. Men take for a period after childbirth	Women. Men take for a period after childbirth	Daily
	Child Care	Children	Women	Children	Women	Daily
	Washing Clothes	Women with few exception	Women with few exception	Women	Women	Daily
	House Cleaning	Women	Women	Women	Women	Daily
	Wood Splitting	Men	Men	Men and Women	Men and Women	As required
Activities in the field	Decision in land selection	Men	Men	Men and Women	Men and Women	As required
	Field preparation	Men and Women	Men and Women	Men	Men and Women	As required
	Sowing	Men	Men	Men and women	Men and women	As required
	Management of crops	Men and women	Men and women	Men and women	Men and women	As required
	Harvesting	Men and women	Men and women	Men and women	Men and women	As required
Off Farm	Fire wood collection	Men and Women	Men and Women	Men and Women	Buy at Rs.1100/ bundle (sustain for 4-5 months)	
	Cattle herding	Male child	Male child	Male child	Male child	Daily
	Manual Labour	Men and Women	Men and Women	Men and Women	Men and Women	Daily
	Marketing	Women	Women	Women	Women	Market day

4.2 Cultivation Responsibilities, access and control over resources

The population of the area consists of farmers practicing shifting cultivation and cash crop cultivation. Cash crops include betel leaf, betel nut, orange, broom grass, corm, millet, sweet potatoes etc. Men plough the field and women help in weeding. Both men and women are equally and actively involved during the harvesting time. In shifting cultivation, women have more responsibility in the field while the responsibility of men increases steadily with the shift from shifting to cash crop cultivation. The cultivation responsibility of men and women in three groups of households (sc, sc+cc and cc) is given in Table 3. It is seen that men and women share most responsibilities, which is a characteristic of tribal communities. However, in case of households practicing cash crop cultivation only the responsibilities of men particularly in on field works has increased significantly. It is interesting to note that on field responsibility of women alone have also dropped significantly implying that in household practicing cash crop cultivation only the cultivation responsibilities are either done by the men or it is shared by both the sexes.

Table 3.: Cultivation (on farm) responsibilities of men and women in three different types of cultivation

Who involved	Shifting cultivation (%)	Shifting + Cash crop (%)	Cash crop (%)
Men	23.33	12.66	42
Women	16	30.66	6
Men + Women	60	56.66	52

The access and control of men and women over various resources are given in Table 4. In the community under study the resources are accessible by both the sexes but interestingly the control and ownership rests with the women. It was found that the access and control over resources has not been affected by the shift in cultivation practice. This is because the ownership of resources is governed by the matriliney, a customary tradition, which has remained intact.

Table 4: Access to and control over various resources by men and women in Nohron village of Meghalaya

Resource	Access by gender	Control/Ownership	Benefit
Kitchen garden	Men and women	Women	Vegetables and aesthetics
Individual private land	Men and women	Women Men in management	Income and food
Leased land	Men and women	Women	Income and food
Community land	Men and women	Village head	Fire wood, land for subsistence cultivation
Private/Clan Forests	Men and women	Women	Income
Income	Men and women	Women	
Credit	Men and women	Money lenders	Availability of Cash
Household decision making	Men and women	Men and Women	

4.3 Decision-making

Decision making pertaining to household needs and cultivation is shared among the men and women. Major decisions include education of children, selection of land for cultivation and hiring land in case of the landless. Women have control over family income and expenditure. Daughters usually enjoy greater share of property from their parents, traditionally. In financial

constraints of the family, schooling of daughters is preferred which is reflected in the high female literacy rate of the state. In the local *Dorbars*, traditionally only men participate, however, in the detailed study village of Nohron, women are also allowed to attend the meetings for the last few years although they seldom express their opinion in the assembly.

4.4 Fuel wood Collection

In the collection of fuel wood there is little change in the role of men and women with the introduction of cash crops. This type of work requires the co-operation of both men and women. However, men's role alone is negligible in fuel wood collection when cash crop cultivation was adopted. With the increase in cash crop cultivation, fuelwood is usually bought or if collected from the woods, the responsibility is shared between men and women (Table5).

Table 5: Involvement of men and women in fuel wood collection among household practicing different cultivation systems

Who involved	Shifting cultivation (percent)	Shifting + Cash crop (percent)	Cash crop (percent)
Men	3.33	3.33	0
Women	26.66	20	10
Men + Women	70	76.66	90

5 Discussion

Shifting cultivation has been a way of life for many inhabitants of the region. However with the increase in population and lowering of fallow period, shifting cultivation has not remained ecologically and economically sustainable. With the passage of time and the introduction of cash crop cultivation, the socio-economic structure has changed which has also impacted gender dynamics. Shifting cultivation embodies certain cultural facets that include celebration by way of community feasts every year during the sowing and harvesting period. These types of celebrations have steadily faded away with the adoption of cash crop cultivation. The main reason is because cash crop cultivation is more of a family based activity and does not necessarily require communal sharing of labour and other resources. This has promoted individualism and thus weakened the social bondage among the village inhabitants, which is an important social capital and characteristics of tribal communities. Childcare by the elder children of the family is a common sight among shifting cultivation households, as the mother is involved in fieldwork. However, with the introduction of cash crop cultivation, the mother whose workload shifts from fieldwork to household work substitutes this activity. There is increase in responsibility of men at the field with the shift in cultivation pattern while women take over the responsibility of childcare and other reproductive chores. It is seen that while staying at home the women utilize their time by working in the homestead gardens primarily for growing vegetables for home consumption.

Worldwide only two percent of all productive land is owned or registered in the name of women (Graney, 2001) and the introduction of cash crops has resulted into further impoverization of women or 'feminization of poverty', (Zweifel, 1995) however the customary powers and functions of the Khasi women remain intact and probably because of this the introduction of cash crops has negligible impact on this. The introduction of cash crops among the Tolai people of Papua, New Guinea – a matrilineal tribe has increased the on farm work load of women and has resulted into gendered (female) market failure due to male control of money (Newlin, 2000) while in the community under study, the on-farm workload has been taken over by the men while the trade and finance still remain with the women. The exposure to market has not altered

the traditional or customary matrilineal system of property ownership. The finance of the family and trading of products continues to be within the women's domain. Although men contribute a higher percentage in fieldwork, movable and immovable property remains with the women of the family. However the patriarchal characteristics are also existing in the community where the mother's brother have a say in the important decision making process of the family. Male dominance exists in community decision-making, yet with the passage of time, women are allowed to inertly be a part of the assembly in the study village. The community cohesion has weakened with the introduction of cash crop cultivation, as cash crop cultivation is a family based enterprise. Overall, the study demonstrates that in places where women are traditionally empowered, the shift to cash crop does not adversely influence the gender relations rather it helps in overall well being of the family as it provides space for schooling of children by reducing their on-farm responsibility.

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