

DEATH'S CIRCL



SOIL CONSERVATION in Meghalaya

soil conservation

The basic wealth of the nation depends not only in its gold reserves but on the products of the resources which feed us, shelter us and with which we trade. These are Soil and land resources which are most important for our existence. Their proper and optimum utilisation is vital to our economic progress.

The State of Meghalaya is a hilly state with a total geographical area of about 22,500 sq. km. and the average density of population in 1971 was 44 per sq. km. Out of the total of 4583 inhabited villages, 3192 have a population of less than 200. This is because the people do not have facilities for permanent cultivable plots around which bigger villages can spring up. While on the one hand, large areas of the State experience heavy and high intensity rainfall during the monsoon rains, at the same time shifting

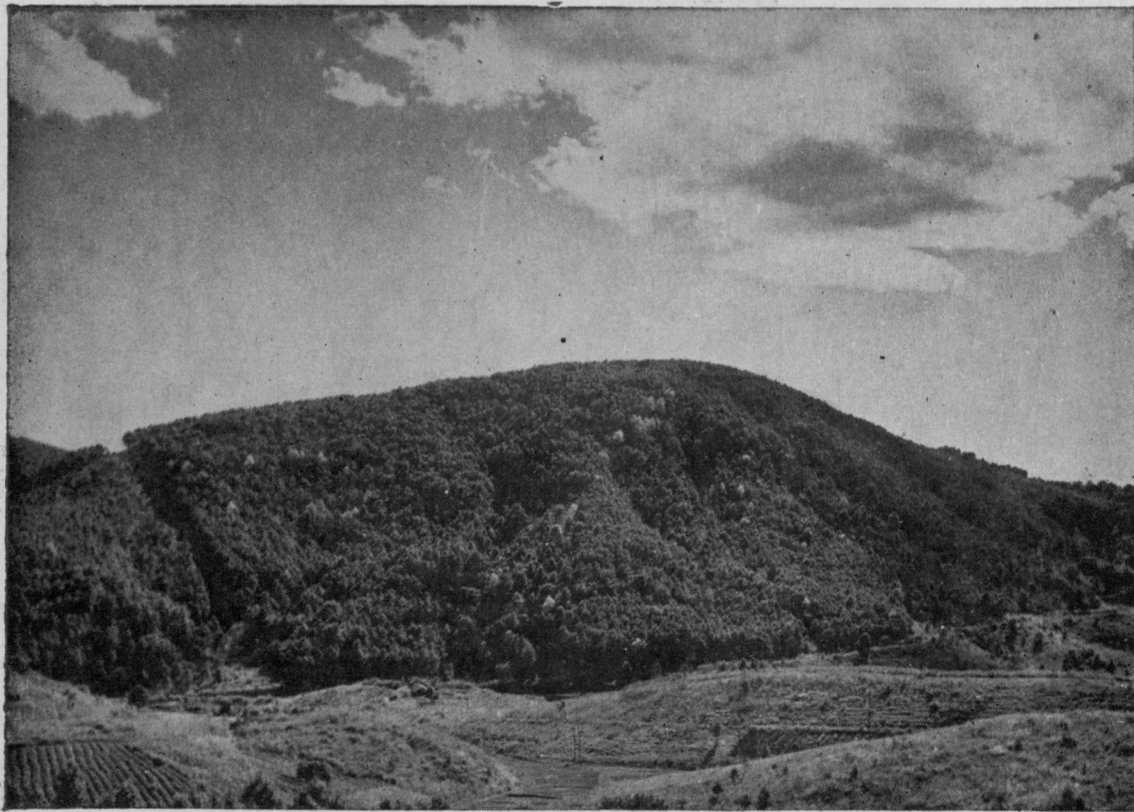
cultivation, uncontrolled grazing and destruction of forests have exposed large area of the land of the State to this heavy and high intensity rainfall resulting in loss of fertile top-soil. While the areas under forests is about 37 per cent of the State's land surface, actually only about 700 sq. km. are Reserved Forests and remain permanently under forest. The remaining areas, though called forest areas, are subjected to shifting cultivation. It is estimated that about 3,50,000 persons of the State are dependent on this method of cultivation and about 76,000 ha. of land are annually put under shifting cultivation. Without effective cover during the rains, fertile top-soil is washed away and very less absorption of water in the soil takes place and as a result there is a heavy run off during the monsoon and shortage of water during the winter.

The most important problem therefore is to tackle this practice of shifting cultivation, control it and ultimately stop this practice. The Soil Conservation Department, therefore, while taking up measures for soil and water conservation has taken special steps for tackling this problem.

The problem of shifting cultivation is very much in the mind of the Government since Independence, but concerted effort from all angles was not taken up earlier. When land developments for cultivation of food crops were done, follow-up programmes for supply of seeds, fertilisers and manures, etc., were not provided by the same agency which had resulted in confusion of the farmers regarding the availability of these inputs.

Similarly, arrangement for other facilities for the newly settled farmers were also not included in the programme. Since the creation of Meghalaya, all the facilities and inputs required for inducing the shifting cultivator to settle down in one place has now been provided for by one agency, that is the Soil Conservation Department, which has greatly facilitated the newly settled farmers to take up permanent cultivation.

Since the beginning of the Fifth Plan, a special scheme for inducing the shifting cultivators to take up settled cultivation by settling them in groups of 50 families or more at one place, thereby also increasing the number of villages with a population of more than 250, has been taken up.



A well-managed slope

A
general view of an
area under Jhum
(Crop in the foreground
Ginger)





A large area of
Forest wealth burnt
and wasted