

AGRICULTURE IN MEGHALAYA, MIZORAM AND MIKIR AND NORTH CACHAR HILLS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Until recently Assam comprised two main divisions, hills and plains, which were more or less equal in geographical area though not in population. With the creation of Meghalaya as a full-fledged State comprising Garo Hills, and United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and of Mizoram out of the Mizo district as a centrally-administered territory, there remains now in Assam only one hill district, namely, United Mikir and North Cachar Hills. Certain economic, social and cultural patterns are common to all these hills and hence the grouping together of all these districts in a study of hill agriculture may not be considered unwarranted. For purposes of this paper, Assam Region means: (i) the old Assam State comprised of the present State of Assam, Mikir and North Cachar Hills inclusive, (ii) Meghalaya and (iii) Mizoram.

The common denominators for the hill districts under study are: stagnating tribal society, monocultural economy, and relative seclusion of the highlanders from the mainstream of the Indian milieu. Though the money economy has been impinging on these societies for a long time now, the Garos and the Khasis, the Mikirs and the Dimasas, the Mizos and the Pawis and the Lakhers still call themselves tribal people and their societies as tribes. Cultivation is the mainstay of the bulk of these people and here again, *jhuming* — the cult of the axe, the hoe and the fire, is the dominant mode of farming. For a variety of historical reasons contacts between these hill tribal communities and their 'non-tribal' neighbours from the plains were rather infrequent in the past. The carving out of Nagaland in the early 'sixties, and of Meghalaya, Mizoram and Arunachal Pradesh early this year is an indication of the fact that tribal areas of North-east India have distinct personalities of their own which cannot but be respected.

A cursory review of the economies of these hill tribal communities would reveal certain other features which mark these economies out from the economies of the plains. Common ownership of lands by the people who, however, do not have the right to sell or transfer lands, relative absence of alienation of land to non-cultivating owners, lesser pressure of population on land, and smaller incidence of rural