

# Nipping opium in the bud

**A carrot and stick policy should be adopted to end illicit poppy cultivation in the hills of Manipur and ensure equitable rural development**



## THONGKHOLAL HAOKIP

In the last couple of months, the Narcotics and Affairs of Border wing of Manipur Police, assisted by the Manipur Rifles, was strenuously engaged in destroying illicit poppy cultivation for opium in the hill areas of Manipur. It is claimed that several thousands of acres of poppy farms were destroyed by the police in their "war against drugs" in the state.

During the drive, videos went viral on social media wherein women cultivators could be seen wailing upon seeing the destruction of their farms. Indeed, after sowing and nurturing the plants for a year, spending huge amounts of time, energy and money, it must be painful to see their only source of income and livelihood being destroyed in front of their eyes and being helpless to do anything against the indomitable State forces.

Those sensational videos have divided the public into two camps – those who want to see the state provide alternative means of livelihood, and those who want total elimination of illicit poppy cultivation with the use of brute force. Such views almost neatly run along ethnic lines, thereby exacerbating division.

Instead of engaging in the destruction of illicit cultivation at the time of harvest, measures should be adopted to prevent such cultivation at all. In recent weeks, there have also been several reports of brown sugar manufacturing units being busted in the foothills and valley of Manipur. Those manufacturing units are the outcome of poppy plantations and would cease to exist when raw opium production stops.

There is enough bashing and whining of such cultivators without looking into how and why they turn to illicit farming. A recent study by Eric Dante Gutierrez claims that such crops "enable marginalised communities and territories abandoned by the State", who live in the "so-called 'fragile' and conflict-affected areas" and mainly "displaced and dispossessed households", to adopt "innovative and unorthodox strategies for coping and survival in changing and insecure environments".

In different parts of the world, research shows that illicit cultivation is prevalent mostly in areas torn apart by conflict and lack of development. In Afghanistan, opium is the "main source of cash" in remote areas where developmental aid did not reach. In the Southern American country of Colombia, coca is the main source of livelihood in remote and neglected areas inhabited by people who have been displaced by conflicts and commercialisation of agriculture.

The hill areas of Manipur have seen almost all the same factors and circumstances that lead to the illicit cultivation of the drug crop elsewhere -- violence and conflict, poor infrastructure and a languishing agrarian economy. Indeed, the grievances arising out of the long neglect of the hill areas in terms of transport communication, educational infrastructure and health facilities have piled up.

Studies conducted by the United Nations Drug Control Programme have found that "One unintended result of forced eradication was that

in some areas, growers, who received no assistance, developed opposition to the government and came under greater influence of drug traffickers and insurgent groups, thus posing a potential risk to national security".

### The State and hill areas

The hill areas of Manipur have a long history of resisting outside interference, like any other area in the hills of the North-east, from the time of the medieval Manipuri kingdom to the British Raj later. In the early colonial period, there was minimal intervention in the hill areas until the Anglo-Kuki War from 1917-1919. This resistance war brought tighter colonial rule in such areas, but it was limited to law and order. The hill peoples were largely left alone to administer their day-to-day life in villages.

After Independence, several laws were passed such as the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act, 1960 and the Manipur (Village Authorities in Hill Areas) Act, 1956. But those laws remain ineffective due to strong opposition from village chiefs, who are supported by the people. It is indicative of the fact that unless chiefs and the people support the policies of the government, they are unlikely to succeed.

In the Manipur government's "war on drugs", there is a possibility that forceful ending of illicit cultivation may exacerbate problems resulting in a State-versus-people situation or worse, fuel ethnic polarisation.

### Land ownership and farming

In the hills of Manipur, land is owned either by the community as a whole or the chief. Community ownership is common among Nagas, where the chiefs act as custodians. Among Kukis, the chiefs, who are known as *haosa*, own the land.

The main livelihood of the people is *jhum*, or slash and burn, cultivation. The annual allocation for *jhum* fields is usually done either at the end of the year or the beginning of each year. Traditional *jhum* cultivation, and other resource extraction from the land, is done by paying a nominal tribute to the chief annually. Such privileges are enjoyed only by villagers.

However, ever since the cultivation of poppy started about two decades ago, the cultivators lease a certain unit of land from the village chief with the payment of an annual rent. During my fieldwork in early 2018, for an acre of land, a sum of Rs 5,000-10,000 was paid to the chief depending on the fertility of the soil and availability of a stream nearby.

Poppy cultivation is quite different from traditional *jhum* cultivation. After decades of debate between foresters and researchers, it has been agreed recently that "jhumming" may not be as destructive as it was previously thought. The Nagaland government has officially permitted *jhum* cultivation with certain forest renewal measures.

While traditional *jhum* cultivation is dry farming, shifting fields after a year or a maximum of two years without uprooting tree trunks, poppy cultivation is just the opposite. It is sedentary cultivation and requires a lot of water and fertilisers. Some peo-



ple have cultivated for as long as 10 years in the same field. In the course of such cultivation, all trees were eliminated, deep down to the trunk and roots, from the field.

The illicit crop, opium, is cultivated in remote areas as a cash crop. It compensates for the infrastructure lacuna and decades-long governmental negligence. During the field work of my research project on land use policy in Manipur, on the question of primary education and educational opportunities, the response of opium cultivators revealed the stark absence of functional public schools in the hills. Majority of the respondents confessed that they used a large chunk of their income from such illicit cultivation to fund their children's education in private schools. While they are engaged in illicit cultivation in the far-off hills, their children stay in boarding schools under the close watch of wardens, which is a form of compensation for their moral duty as parents.

The government's recent attempts to destroy poppy cultivations have only increased the price of the opium product. Indeed, market value multiplies with prohibition.

### Alternative development

The UN uses the term "alternative development" to describe "conventional rural development applied to a drug-producing area". The concept was developed in the 1970s, after identifying the underlying root causes for illicit crop cultivation – "lack of development, marginalisation, poverty and, thus, overall human insecurity". To address those factors and the root causes for illicit drug economies in a sustainable way, it was identified that economic development, especially in rural areas, through an integrated rural development approach was needed.

It was felt that there is a need to shift from crop substitution to a

broader, integrated rural development approach by "complementing interventions focusing on the quality of life and investments in social and road infrastructure". According to that, the State needs to provide well-established networks for production, distribution and marketing in order to enable cultivators to effectively compete by manufacturing legal products in an area of illicit cultivation. Hence, it was felt that "economic and technical provisions must be made to ensure the marketing, storage and transport of new products. The new concept of integrated rural development also sought to improve the overall quality of life of the target population by addressing not only income but also education, health, infrastructure and social services".

The UN recommended a relatively heavy infrastructural investment, particularly in road building, in order to overcome the barrier of inaccessibility, along with other inputs that would facilitate the opening up of remote and underdeveloped areas where illicit crop cultivation was prevalent.

### Carrot and stick policy

Evidently, illicit crop cultivation cannot be stopped by infrastructure development and other largesse alone given the huge income cultivators have enjoyed over the years. One of the best ways to end illicit cultivation of poppy is to restrict the access of land. That can only happen if one understands the intricate land ownership system in the hills.

Village chiefs are also part of the problem since land for illicit cultivation is mainly leased from them as they are the sole landowners in the hills. They can also be a part of the solution by not allowing such cultivation. Therefore, there is a need to find ways to dissuade chiefs from leasing their land to illicit cultivators.

As seen from efforts to imple-

ment various laws that affected the hill people in the past, any attempt at direct intervention would be resisted and antagonise them further given the fragile relations between different ethnic groups. It will lead to the adoption of a confrontational approach and if such a situation arises, the whole "war on drugs" would be jeopardised.

Using insurgent groups, who are engaged in peace talks with both the Central and state governments, to implement such ideas by imposing huge fines on the chiefs, who are allowing such cultivation, would also be futile. The use of threats and intimidation would encourage both the chiefs and cultivators to align with rebel groups, who are not under any understanding with the government, for their protection and continue their illicit crop cultivation.

Given this situation, a carrot and stick policy must be devised. There should be efforts towards integrated rural development programmes including improving road infrastructure, building government schools, healthcare facilities and water supply, along with a crop substitution scheme and the government facilitating marketing, storage and transport of the produce. Alongside that, village chiefs should be weaned away from leasing their land through certain schemes or regulations.

The scheme should either compensate for the possible lure of leasing their land or the regulation should empower the state machinery to stop providing welfare to those identified villages, which practice illicit poppy cultivation. Only then would village chiefs be more likely to choose welfare schemes over allowing illicit cultivation, as they have become used to receiving generosity from the government for decades.

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## PLUS POINTS

### Women's Day in AP



International Women's Day was celebrated with great enthusiasm at Anini of Arunachal Pradesh, where both the Indian Army and civil administration organised several events including a mini marathon. The programme attracted many enthusiastic women participants. A female Army officer also gave a motivational lecture to around 100 girls on various career prospects in the Indian Army.

In another function at Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu said that the lack of quality education has emerged as a hurdle in providing girl children with a bright future. Speaking about the drug menace, the BJP leader asserted that women can take the lead in creating awareness among the youth and vulnerable groups of society. He asked the State Women Commission, AP Women's Welfare Society etc to keep a vigil on the functioning of de-addiction and rehabilitation centres and report the same to the government with necessary recommendations.

Stating that women always show exemplary grit, honesty and sincerity when given responsibilities, Khandu urged women entrepreneurs to take advantage of various government schemes including the "Deendayal Upadhyay Swawlamban Yojana".

—NAVA THAKURIA

## Book release



With Assam going to the polls on 27 March, 1 and 6 April, chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal recently released the Assamese translation of Union home minister Amit Shah's biography, *Amit Shah and the March of BJP* in Guwahati. State finance, health and education minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has translated the book into Assamese as "Amit Shah Aru Agragami BJP". The function was graced by Union minister of state for development of the North-eastern region Jitendra Singh, the saffron party's national vice-president Bajjayant Jay Panda, national general secretary Dilip Saikia and state BJP president Ranjeet Kr Dass, among others. Originally written in English by Anirban Ganguly and Shiwanand Divedi, the book highlights the political journey of Shah. Both authors were also present on the occasion.

Sarma, who also serves as the North-east Democratic Alliance convenor, stated that Shah has immense knowledge about the country and its civilisation. "When I met Amit Shah ji and began working with him for the BJP, I could realise that I had already wasted 22 years of my life with the Congress Party," he said.

—NT

## Candlelight vigil



The Dimapur Meitei Council and Chümoukedima Meitei Apunba Lup held a joint mass candlelight vigil programme at Meitei Mandop, Manipuri Colony and marched till Tinali Junction, Chatterswary Colony in Dimapur last week, says a report in the *Morung Express*.

The programme was held to express solidarity with Meiteis in particular and all innocent civilians living in Myanmar given the prevailing turmoil in the country. Prem Thongbam, media secretary and treasurer of the Dimapur Meitei Council, informed in a press release.

The Meitei communities in Dimapur appealed for full humanitarian access to support the most vulnerable civilians and protestors in Myanmar. "We also appeal to the various state governments of India, especially the bordering governments such as Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, to raise their voice and shun violence," the release added.

Further, the communities offered condolences for the loss of precious lives and appealed to the military and police in Myanmar "to exercise utmost restraint, and respect human rights and international law."