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Upland Agriculture, Entrepreneurship, and Innovation: Performing Developmental Responsibilities in Northeast India

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Abstract

In the last two decades, different governments in India have made a concerted effort to address the plight of the marginal farmer who owns (or has access to) some private or communal land across the uplands in the northeast of the country. Various governmental schemes and subsidies have been initiated to ensure that other ways of earning a livelihood mitigate falling returns from agriculture and the increasing need for cash among farmers. Upland farmers have evoked both hope and despair from governments that look to transform subsistence-style agricultural practices into revenue-earning endeavours. They have been the source of much political posturing, as the regional political elite, scientists, and industry have taken up their cause. The same farmers have also been subjected to intense policy pressure, persuading them to think differently and pull themselves out of poverty. There is, therefore, an increasing demand for them to prepare for radical changes in their livelihoods and way of thinking. In this article, I draw from fieldwork conducted in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Mizoram to examine how new discourses of entrepreneurship and innovation have become essential to understanding social and economic transformations in the uplands of Northeast India.

Keywords

agriculture, Eastern Himalayas, entrepreneur, innovators, militarisation, market

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Introduction

Amid India's crippling COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, farmers' organizations came out in protest against three new agricultural laws introduced by the government to reform the sector. The laws loosened regulations surrounding the sale, pricing, and storage of agricultural produce. They also permitted private corporations to hoard essential commodities for future sales—a practice previously restricted to government-authorised agents. Most controversially, the laws permitted farmers to sell directly to private buyers, thereby dismantling the government's role in procuring crops and guaranteeing a minimum support price (MSP). The protests drew scores of people, including students and farmers, primarily from northern Indian states, who marched to New Delhi. Farmers' groups from Northeast India were conspicuous by their absence in the protests, raising critical questions; for example, would the new laws impact only a certain kind of farmer, one who had already benefited from land consolidation, technological advances, and political patronage since the 1960s?

Northeast Indian states are emerging as essential areas for agriculture and marketing reforms, but in a profoundly distinct and uncritical manner. Agriculture in the upland regions serves as a source of cultural pride and a target for frequent government interventions. Most hills and plains communities have had an organic connection to seasonal rhythms, including the long cycles of swidden agriculture in the mountains and foothills.[1] On the other hand, the rent-collecting bureaucracies of national and regional governments view such agricultural practices as primitive and have constantly pushed for change among the practitioners. This approach emphasises revenue generation through innovations in upland agriculture, privileging the entrepreneur's role in a region traditionally associated with subsistence farming and violent demands for political autonomy (Barbora, 2018).

In the following sections, I examine how entrepreneurship and innovation serve as critical lenses in understanding this problem. I develop three interrelated arguments: (a) that the upland farmer or peasant has emerged as a problematic category for developmental experts and state governments; (b) the entrepreneur has ascended as the preferred agent of modern development in the region; and (c) the network of educational institutions, media and government have collectively worked to recast the peasant/farmer as an entrepreneur, with varying degrees of success. The three arguments follow a well-established line of thought in social anthropology and history focusing on upland areas ranging from northern Vietnam to western Tibet (van Schendel, 2002; Scott, 2009; Guite, 2018). They contribute to ongoing debates about the invisibility of the region in social sciences, especially after the militarisation of everyday life became highlighted in the 1960s and placed the region within the spatial history of capital expansion in the 19th century (Baruah, 2020; Kar, 2013; Ludden, 2011). Both processes—militarisation and capital expansion—are critical lenses for understanding the contemporary puzzle of the plight of the upland farmer and its emerging cousin, the entrepreneur.

I carried out immersive ethnographic fieldwork in three phases. The first phase took place in Mizoram during the winter of 2012 (January-February), where I had gone to study the New Land Use Policy (NLUP) in the state. The second phase was during the winter of 2019-2020 in two of Assam's autonomous districts, Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, where I studied the slow pace of the digitisation of land. The third phase of research was during the summers of 2022 and 2023 in the East Siang, Lower Dibang, and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh. In addition, I studied state government budgets and analysed specific agriculture-related policies in the uplands between the years 2005 and 2014 to understand why upland farmers are often erased from policy and politics.

This article addresses reasons for this absence of upland farmers from Northeast India's agricultural discourse by invoking

two interrelated realities concerning how markets and market-friendly laws have developed in the country. First, the region has long been associated with dominant rural, agriculture-based social systems that coexisted with cash crop regimes. Therefore, a complete absence of representatives from peasant or farming constituencies requires some explanation. Secondly, in Northeast India, political assertions centred around identitarian and social justice often coalesce around the image of rural, agriculture-based communities, where the upland farmer is both celebrated and denigrated simultaneously. The farmers are celebrated as custodians of tradition but are also seen as politically and economically insignificant obstacles to modern development. Hence, this absence of upland farmers at the protests marks a politically significant moment for agrarian change in India, requiring a critical analysis of agricultural interventions and political change in these uplands.

Since the 1980s, the dominant mode of governance in India's eastern Himalayan region has been characterised by political violence and the co-optation of a local elite, which has displaced many and provided for a few. Agriculture has been a primary site for transformative policy-making, where the interests of technocrats, politicians, and owners of capital converged to change the shape of the highland farmers' (and their families') farming practices. In the following sections, I look at how government policies encourage entrepreneurship to address declining agricultural returns from Northeast India's highland communities from a sociological perspective.

Following James Scott's theory about the farmer's ability to stay beyond the reach of the state, the figure of the highland farmer in the uplands across the Burma-Northeast India frontier has emerged as an imposing metaphor in the social sciences. This fact is rendered more critical as the region is seen to represent a frontier of capitalist expansion, a phenomena where subsistence indigenous farmers across the globe are pressured to shift from subsistence agriculture to commercial plantations in their uneasy coexistence with settlers and a militarised state (Baruah, 2007; Borras and Franco, 2012; Geiger, 2008; Tsing, 2003). Recent scholarship and political developments reveal how the state's capacity to nationalise space has enabled the proliferation of modernist developmental discourse and practices, without necessarily changing the material conditions of the marginalised farmer in the region, whilst making them more market-dependent (Baruah, 2017; Ledoc and Choudhury, 2012; Li, 2014a). So, while the upland farmers may not have financial security or improved access to public health and education, they are increasingly being persuaded to grow commercial crops and undertake considerable risks to their livelihoods in exchange for an unreliable, unstable future. Over the decades, the state apparatus—universities, the media, and specific industries—has adopted a more persuasive narrative aimed at changing upland farmers' land use and cropping patterns.

Since the 20th century, upland agriculture has been viewed as both a detriment to economic growth and an integral part of the cultural repertoire of the region's indigenous communities (de Maaker and Tula, 2021). Government documents and agricultural extension officers' notes attest to the difficulties encountered in attempting to change upland agriculture practices, though these attitudes are slowly shifting due to efforts by inter-governmental agencies like the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) attesting to certain positive aspects of low-technology upland agriculture (Choudhury et al., 2021).

Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, governments in Northeast India have attempted to showcase their states' upland agricultural produce and handicrafts at various expositions and festivals. Nagaland's iconic Hornbill Festival, held in December every year, is an excellent example of such efforts, even as other regional governments attempt to follow the Nagaland model. At similar regional festivals, indigenous women sell rice, beer, skewered pork, chicken, beef,

and fish sticks, while others offer bamboo handicrafts, elaborately patterned shawls and stoles, and delicately crafted jewellery. Regional state governments support some of these festivals, with departments allocating budgets to ensure their smooth operation. These events sometimes draw interest from seemingly unrelated agencies. Other festivals must rely on multiple funding sources, including public sector companies, local businesspeople, and individuals.[2]

However, festivals that celebrate the produce of upland agriculturalists are relatively new in Northeast India. While such events certainly signify the benign aspects of government interventions, there is also a history of violent intrusions in the lives of upland communities. Essential studies have shown how the Indian state often destroyed highland crops and agriculturalists. During the 1950s-1980s, the Indian army burned down granaries and corralled farmers into concentration camp-like villages during counterinsurgency operations (Kikon, 2005; Sundar, 2011). Several initiatives seek to change how policymakers and institutions, including universities and various government departments, view upland agriculture across these two polarities.

Upland Agriculture, Peasants, and Farmers in Northeast India

The terms peasant and farmer have long-standing usage in the social sciences, each denoting specific characteristics that social anthropologists have sought to clarify throughout the 20th century. While a farmer is defined by land ownership for cultivation and a single occupational concern (Wolf, 1966), Teodor Shanin (1972) identified four interlinked facets of peasantry: (a) the farm as a multi-functional unit of social organisation, (b) land farming and livestock as sources of primary livelihood, (c) distinct traditional culture linked to rural communities, and (d) multidirectional subjection to powerful outsiders. Recent Latin American scholarship and experiences have drawn parallels between peasant and entrepreneurial/industrial farmers who share key features, particularly in attempts to reduce economic risks through cost minimisation and diversification of crops and livelihood practices (Van der Ploeg, 2008).

I use these terms interchangeably because upland agriculture in Northeast India is characterised by small, community-controlled landholdings. However, much of it is becoming insidiously privatised (Fernandes and Barbora, 2009).[3] This privatisation process comes with a loss of knowledge about the intricate links between upland agriculture and hunting practices, pre-colonial tributes, and the migratory cycles of indigenous communities.[4] I wish to add that upland farmers in Northeast India are not homogeneous, often requiring disaggregation by their capacity to take risks, diversify crops, and access agricultural finances (and related livelihoods).

As previously noted, the upland farmer has been a source of paradoxical pride and embarrassment for a modernising indigenous elite in the hill states of Northeast India. Other than owning the essential tools to work the land and family labour, the farmers needed more to invest in improving the economic productivity of the land. Hence, the state has encouraged monocropping in the uplands, in attempts to appropriate the function of adding value to agricultural production. This contradictory response has material manifestations.

State governments in Mizoram, Nagaland, and the autonomous councils in the hill districts of Assam have constructed heritage villages to showcase the ingenuity of indigenous farming practices. Overlooking magnificent views of the hills and situated just a short drive from state capitals and district headquarters, these heritage villages represent a bureaucratic perspective on indigenous futures. Empty models of rural villages reflecting the types of bamboo and mud homes that indigenous peoples might have lived in form the core of these villages, classified as tourist resorts. Examples of such official commemoration of agriculture in the region include the Reiek village in Mizoram, where the state's tourism department has built a complex hoping to attract visitors to the state during the flower

blooming season, and the Heritage Village at Kisama (near Kohima in Nagaland). The Hornbill Festival at Kisama is an attraction for those who want to experience Naga culture condensed into a few hours. In these and similar efforts, the peasant way of life, especially in the hills, is showcased as a tourist attraction. A key concern here is how deceptively cultural tropes have been used to erase discussions on relations of production for the region's upland farmers.

Much is erased in these touristic ideas of peasant life in selective efforts to memorialise culture. During fieldwork, especially in the autonomous hill districts of Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, and Mizoram, one was always struck by the narrative of hardship shared by practising cultivators in interviews with researchers. Most older farmers cited hardship and poor returns from agriculture as reasons they do not wish their children to follow them in the backbreaking work of upland cultivation. Instead, they invoked a repertoire of alternative activities, placed on a spectrum of choices. These alternatives would range from migration on one end to acquiring specific non-agricultural skills on the other. This trend was reinforced by the work, budgets, and emphasis allocated by state governments to skill-development and entrepreneurship departments.[5]

Experiences of upland agriculturalists in Northeast India and the eastern Himalayan region differ from those of peasant life. Similar processes are at work in the highlands of Indonesia as well, where indigenous cultivators are forced to supplement their livelihoods with more than one kind of work, and where migration increasingly emerges as an inevitable consequence of the economic unsustainability of subsistence agriculture in the highlands (Li, 2014a). The mid-1990s marked a critical moment owing to the participation of large numbers of rural women, who were previously less likely to migrate. As expected, this threw upland agriculture off course, since family labour is crucial (especially women's labour) in cleaning the fields, planting, and cultivating crops. As a result, cultivators from the plains expect to see wetland agriculture in the hills today.

Added to the narrative of hardship was the constant pressure to improvise, innovate, and grow crops to yield higher prices in the market. In many ways, such pressures by most developing countries in the 20th century (including the postcolonial Indian state) are part of a broader effort to modernise agriculture (Harriss and Stewart, 2015). In the same vein, the Indian government had begun an ambitious project to provide farmers of Mizoram with a stable trade to wean them away from agriculture as part of its NLUP.[6] Much of this depended on central funding, technological support from industry, and scientists. The idea was to turn the local farmer into a surplus producer like the 1960s Green Revolution did in states across northern India. However, the upland farmer needed the kind of landholdings that plains farmers might have had. They needed individual land titles to leverage for finance from banks and passed on to their progeny. Instead of titles, upland farmers had access to complex community-controlled lands, where individual land ownership coexisted with rights of access to clan and community land (Karlsson, 2011; Ltu, 2021; Shimray, 2009). Upland farmers also lacked access to connections such as university and industry networks, primarily because of the conflict-ridden years 1960s and 1970s in the region. Several years of counterinsurgency in Mizoram had led to a brutal crackdown by the Indian army and forced relocation (by regrouping of villages) of almost 85 per cent of the population in around 5 per cent of Mizoram's current territory (Nunthara, 1981).

Such experiences highlight the vulnerabilities of Northeast India's upland agriculturalists. Unlike political patronage seen in other parts of the world, where the peasantry can mobilise for itself, upland agriculturalists in Northeast India have yet to be able to negotiate with the state. Thus, in their isolation and lack of coordination, they needed advocates on their behalf. Nonetheless, the violent period was

mediated by peace-making episodes: new states like Nagaland and Mizoram were formed in 1963 and 1987, respectively, ceasefires were signed, and local assembly and council elections were held. Spanning decades, these efforts enabled the extension of governmental departments and the expansion of the state's bureaucracies into the region's uplands.

However, one must remember that in the violent decades between 1960 and the late 1980s, governments viewed the upland farmers and peasants with much apathy, even demanding an end to the harmful practice of *jhum* (swidden agriculture). In conjunction with emerging opportunities beyond the agricultural sector, this prompted numerous medium and small-scale farmers to adopt unsustainable cash crops, primarily coffee, tea, rubber, and palm oil, during the early 2000s (Barbora, 2002). The shift failed to endure as urban buyers were not used to such small-scale production. Furthermore, the various government-constituted boards for tea, coffee, and rubber were financially stretched and unable to sustainably procure from isolated upland producers (Moa and Chakraborty, 2020; Debbarma and Debbarma, 2018). Scholars highlight that peasants with access to small farms and community land often choose unsustainable alternatives, not for opportunist land grabbing but as a self-inflicted short-term risk to secure basic amenities (Li, 2014a; Sturgeon, 2007). Hence, with the political violence plateaued in the first decade of the 21st century, regional state governments prioritised essential training and entrepreneurship skills for local youth (Kikon and Karlsson, 2019).

Bureaucratic Budgets and Entrepreneurs in the Hills

Modern bureaucracies have a stabilising function to them. The governments in the hill states of Northeast India had to work with a relatively small, predominantly rural population at the beginning. Unlike Mizoram, where earlier decades of groupings had ensured that local populations got concentrated along specific semi-urban centres, most other states had a relatively dispersed population that lived far away from district centres. One of the problems they inherited was the verticality of the landscape, where distances could be optically deceptive. In his elaborate description of the impact of the resettlement of indigenous Andean communities following the 16th-century Spanish conquest, historian Jeremy Mumford threw light on the specific ways in which the verticality of landscapes is essential for understanding the kind of power relations that evolve in mountain areas (Mumford, 2012). Scott (2009) used a similar lens to explain how upland societies had different sensibilities regarding rules and social organisation.

Modern bureaucracies are meant to provide impersonal services and must be geared to incorporate such nuances. However, this Weberian idea of an impersonal bureaucracy remains integral to the exercise of increasing the state's authority in the hills, especially when various national governments in India attempted to alleviate conflicts. One of the main ways to read this expansion is by looking into how governments plan their spending in the hill states. In looking through recent budget plans for Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Assam, as well as referring to literature on disaffection of upland communities, one is struck by the frank acknowledgement of how state governments addressed the issue of the falling returns from agriculture, especially in the hills (Kipgen and Chowdhury, 2016; Umdor and Syiem, 2017). Between 2016 and 17, the government of Assam showed a marginal increase of 0.88 per cent in farm income between 2003 and 2013, a trend that continued and adversely impacted the agrarian crisis in the state (Haque and Barua, 2021).

The situation is partially worse for upland farmers in Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, and Mizoram, partly because these states depend on central funding. Moreover, unlike Assam, where consolidated figures from the valley and hills show some agricultural surplus, there are

no comparable figures in the hill states. For a bureaucrat looking at revenues and expenses, there would be very few revenue lines from agriculture in the hills. Instead, they would see costs incurred by extending central government schemes for farmers in other parts of the country. The role of state grants and loans for agriculture is an essential factor in recalibrating agricultural policies in the hill states.

Furthermore, the need for more readily available labour for shifting agriculture was often bypassed seasonally by involving landless workers from the plains, who were usually brought to the hills for road construction and other infrastructure (Mishra, 2017).

Labour scarcity in the hills is a historical fact with cultural and political ramifications. In precolonial times, valley kingdoms and societies (especially in the Brahmaputra valley) sustained reciprocal relationships where surplus and labour were shared between the hills and valleys (Kar 2016). This has changed in present times. With greater investment in labour-intensive crops and plantations in the uplands, the quest to look for surplus labour from the plains has become inevitable. Many upland farmers, including those capable of taking greater economic risks, depend on plantation workers and seasonal farmers from the plains in the river valleys. The farmers from the plains and their employers in the hills enter into highly personal contracts enforced by affective relationships, rather than the established rule of law.[7]

For the political elite, such informal arrangements between local farmers and workers were cause for concern, for they could raise ethnic tensions. However, the main worry for political representatives and bureaucrats in these states was the need to enforce some sense of discipline in the upland farmers and ensure they added economic value to the land they occupied and farmed. Hence, bureaucrats and politicians in the region often encourage the involvement of experts from outside. Professionals and development agencies with additional budgets and expertise have come in to help persuade the upland farmer to do more, do different things with the land, and change the crops they grow. More recently, such transition has been called for in the name of climate adaption, where local advocacy groups and agricultural experts in the uplands recommend a mix of plantation crops (like cardamom), as well as harness the potential of neglected and underutilised species (like buckwheat and millets) (Karlsson, 2021).[8]

While on a tour with officials from the Japanese International Development Agency (JICA) and agricultural consultants in Mizoram in 2012, I was struck by the number of times non-Mizo bureaucrats accompanying us would apologise for the lack of revenue emerging from the JICA projects. As the local sociologist called upon to explain cultural mores and traditions, I defended the seemingly extravagant farmers to the Japanese donors. The bureaucrats were keen to transfer one line of expenses from their budget, minor irrigation projects, to the Japanese. The JICA officials were curious to know how and why the government of Mizoram was spending such seemingly large sums of money on an effort that could have brought them more revenue. In the evenings, as we settled into dusty inspection bungalows and prepared for dinner, one saw a distinct division of opinion between the Mizo bureaucrats and their non-Mizo counterparts from the plains. The former thought that the state's expenses incurred in extending irrigation to the hills were a part of its duty to the Mizo farmer, an obligation of sorts. They kept reminding the group that much of the central funds for such projects were eventually funnelled back to the mainland as payment for material not produced in Mizoram and for salaries of engineers and consultants from outside the state. The non-Mizo bureaucrats seemed annoyed that the upland farmer was wasting money and attempted to convince the JICA officials that the farmers should stop growing rice and grow something that would bring revenue, like palm oil. For their part, the JICA officials were in two minds, as they, too, argued

about the possible ill effects of plantations in the hills.

Over the day, they had spent as much time as anyone else attempting to understand upland agriculture's complexities. When we stopped at roadside markets, they joined me in buying fermented soya beans from women farmers. We discussed produce from the swidden fields and the beautiful forests and terraces we saw along our journey. At the same time, they savoured the view of the mountains and food; as members of JICA, they were invested in infrastructure development in Mizoram. For many in the group, the idea of a surplus-producing infrastructure utilising upland agriculture seemed like an excellent project to aspire to. For upland farmers, however, being included in this project was predicated upon accepting all the infrastructural costs added to the irrigation project. While they were seen as the beneficiaries of small minor irrigation projects, the bulk of money spent was funnelled into paying for material (like PVC pipes and motors sourced from outside the region) and salaries for skilled professionals. The individual farmer did not receive cash benefits from such projects and was supposed to reap the benefits of an infrastructural investment that they had not even asked for. Sometimes, the costs of experimentation with market-friendly cash crops like coffee and perishable ones like flowers led to huge risks that farmers had to bear as individuals and without any safety net from the industries they were supplying (or their local governments).

This vignette embodies the numerous contradictions the upland farmer faces when dealing with modern, impersonal bureaucracies. Since the late 1990s, especially with the intervention of organisations such as the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the India-Canada Environment Facility (ICEF), and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), there has been a renewed attempt to rehabilitate the idea of a productive and valuable upland agriculturalist. These organisations have added new ideas for old bureaucratic budget lines that left states with the concept that upland agriculture could have been more productive and modern. They brought with them a more nuanced notion of upland agriculture, concentrating on gender roles, lack of use of chemicals and pesticides, and the possibility of leveraging such practices for the market. During this period, specifically those that began in the late 1990s, the discourse on upland farming began to transform from a highly negative one to one that was willing to see its benefits if the peasant was able to find a niche in the expanding markets.

These significant changes had other effects on the social fabric of the world of subsistence farmers in the uplands. The push towards entrepreneurship, as scholars of development and the politics of aid argue, can be a double-edged sword for the kind of aspirations they encourage. While they offer an escape from poverty for a few, they reproduce an unsustainable demand for neoliberal economies, furthering the conditions for more significant inequalities and conflicts (de Maaker, 2020; Duffield, 2002, 2017; Nilsen, 2021; Peck and Theodore, 2019).

Institutions, Innovations, and Markets

The first generation of scholars who challenged the view that upland agriculture was wasteful were geographers and social anthropologists, mainly from local universities such as North Eastern Hill University (NEHU). In the 1980s, geographers like P.S. Ramakrishnan wrote extensively on the importance of traditional knowledge in preserving the biodiversity of the Himalayas (Ramakrishnan 1992, 1996). His sociology and social anthropology counterparts, like M.N. Karna, T.B. Subba, and Virginius Xaxa, expanded on the knowledge of social structures among mountain communities (Karna, 2009; Subba, 1999; Xaxa, 2008). Some of this research contributed directly to the interventions by multilateral organisations discussed above. The links between researchers and implementation agencies (including donors) in Northeast India and

its transnational neighbourhood have always been complicated, contentious, and rewarding in equal measure (Siddiqi, 2009)[9]. My point here is to underscore how educational institutions, the media, and the state have converged in describing the future of upland agriculture in Northeast India since the turn of the century. The need to balance academic approaches to learning and their application in the field has continued to animate debates around agrarian societies, especially in the uplands of Northeast India.

Hence, the emergence of innovation as a crucial means of addressing these debates and the impasse they pointed to, primarily routed through universities that were more than just dedicated to agriculture.[10] In the last decade, traditional departments in local colleges and universities have had to include concerns about sustainable development, entrepreneurship, and innovation in their curriculum. Social sciences and commerce, and technology departments have also begun to contribute to programmes that teach students about agriculture.[11] As a result, there has been a renewed debate on agricultural technology's applicability and apparent universality in the region's uplands. Additionally, the Government of India has mandated the National Innovation Foundation to extend some of its work to include small farmers in the area. This has created interfaces where social sciences, technology, and the ground realities of farmers in the field have converged to yield exciting results. There is a more critical awareness about celebrating the gains of industrialised farming, at least in the social sciences.

Furthermore, the granular details of the working lives of individual farmers and their families have been collated in creative case studies by various projects. The emphasis of these developments has been to focus on the positive contributions that agriculture can make to future livelihood strategies. More importantly, they include ways to improve access to the market, even for some of the most isolated farmers. Since 2010, the government of India has introduced several rural-based fellowships and projects that allow young social work and social sciences graduates to spend at least two years in the villages of India. In the past decade, students who have graduated from local universities in the region have found it exciting to join programmes like the National Rural Livelihoods Mission, the National Health Mission, the Prime Minister's Rural Development Fellow Scheme, and other schemes, some of which are initiated by state governments. They work long hours and are placed with district officials who are still trying to find a role for them in rural governance. Others find placement in interesting non-governmental research initiatives, encouraging rural children to express their ideas about innovation and change. These are new areas of inquiry that one needs to allow to settle before one can see their impact reflected in the government's annual balance sheets. So far, they are still in the realm of incubation. This term is borrowed from the biological sciences, and there is a growing concern that they cannot comprehend the intricacies and complexities of upland communities and their complicated pasts.

This predicament reverts to the old question—discussed in the earlier sections—about the direction of traffic in ideas. Here, too, one can see the emphasis on expanding markets, where the focus is on adding value to the traditional upland produce. One outcome of such a realisation is the investment of considerable sums of finance in marketing mountain products. The long rows of shops selling similar artefacts at the airports and state government emporiums, as well as the sustainable development forums in the mountain states of India, bring together a professional interest in upland agriculture to improve links with the market. These are interesting, new interventions in an old debate on the peasantry in upland areas. In addition, the local media in the region have begun to actively participate in encouraging entrepreneurship in farming. Local television channels and voluntary agencies have come together to celebrate the innovations of upland agriculturalists, especially women (Pinto-Rodrigues, 2020).

Such initiatives have a different view of work and labour, as they attempt to draw rural people to avail government schemes for healthcare, education, and diversification of occupations. They are also predicated on the success of additional government schemes like the public distribution system that allows farmers some leeway to plan their futures, especially if they wish to diversify. In some states of India, such as Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh, these initiatives have indeed succeeded in improving the lot of individual farmers in the plains, significantly through procurement and prices that have been streamlined by local (federal state) governments (Dreze and Khera, 2019; Reddy, 2018). There is still some doubt about their effectiveness in the hills, where old doubts about upland farmers' character come into question occasionally.

I returned to my fieldwork in Mizoram for further corroboration of the need for more conversation between national planners and upland farmers whose livelihoods they seek to change. The fruit juice concentrate plant outside the town of Chhingchhip in the Serchhip district was one of the flagship projects of the Mizoram Food and Allied Industries Corporation, a company set up by the Government of Mizoram's Department of Industries. Its machines were geared to pulp oranges, pineapple, and passion fruit, all growing in abundance in the neighbouring hills. However, as it was February, the unit did not get the usual volume of fruit from neighbouring farms, so the place was relatively quiet. As the managers showed us around the sparkling new plant, they mentioned that it had no procurement procedures and farmers had to bring the fruit to the unit for processing. This, they emphasised, explained the fact that there was never enough raw material and that the unit was running at a loss. It was producing approximately 5% of its capacity. The unit had a Memorandum of Understanding with Shimla Hills Offerings Private Limited, a New Delhi-based company, that bought the passion fruit sulphite juice from the Mizoram unit.

The expensive unit was set up with great hope but without much consultation about its efficacy for the district. When faced with such a monumental example of innovative imagination waiting for its potential to be realised, I asked the most obvious question: Were any local fruit growers consulted before the project was placed in Chhingchhip? The manager looked puzzled at first and then said he was unsure. Still, he knew the plan for setting up the unit was done by consultants from the Central Food Technological Research Institute in Mysore, Karnataka, located more than 3,600 kilometres away.

I took my questions to researchers at Mizoram University and journalists in Aizawl for clarity on the various activities supporting online farmers in Mizoram. In several ways, the intense pressure on upland agriculturalists to change their farming practices was incommensurate with the actual numbers of those who could access the markets, thereby making upland agriculture more viable for their children. If anything, upland farmers were more than happy to receive financial incentives from the government and use them for purposes other than intended. For instance, under NLUP, farmers were given a certain amount of money to help them move towards growing cash crops in their fields. Instead of following the script, anecdotal evidence from journalists and government functionaries suggested that farmers were spending the cash transfers on health and education. To their credit, the local government functionaries did not see the farmers' actions as transgressions or theft, as some of the consultants from Delhi seemed to suggest. They hoped, instead, that the NLUP would be able to draw in allied issues, such as retaining forest cover and ensuring regular water and electricity supply (by building dams). The views of bureaucrats, researchers, and journalists on these issues had converged on the inability of old modes of upland agriculture to sustain the requirements of a new century, where people were increasingly moving away from farming and into cities (and towns).[12]

Upland farmers in Northeast India have yet to be able to live up to the expectations thrust upon them by economic planners and politicians. This, however, has kept the performative aspects of the process from taking on new meanings. State governments (in Northeast India) continue to allocate funds, albeit increasingly modest, to showcase the cultural underpinnings of upland agriculture in the hope that it adds value to farmers' produce. Hence, efforts to introduce geographical indexing and patents for upland agriculture occasionally make it to the local news. Nevertheless, these efforts dissipate in the face of governmental inability to make markets (of the capitalist kind) more accessible for farmers in the uplands. The recent announcements by the Government of India to expand the cultivation of edible palm oil in Northeast India's uplands to make up for import shortages have been met with alarm by environmentalists and agriculturalists alike (Bhattacharya et al., 2021).[13] These efforts by the government have further erased upland farmers from narratives of economic progress. They conform to the contentious land use transition from food production to biofuels that Borras and Franco described in their global land grab typologies (ibid). The question is, will this process be relatively less violent and aggressive? The principal armed insurgencies in these uplands are on the wane, and the farmers of the region do not have as much at stake to find common ground with those protesting the new farm laws.

Conclusion

Occasionally, I follow sceptical students who had forgone good placements with government initiatives. They were not entirely convinced by the attempts by industry and government to impose the onus of development on the upland farmer. Instead, I have followed their questions with ideas of justice and the complicated futures that upland farmers see ahead of them. While innovations and entrepreneurship are being promoted, there is a need to revisit older accounts of work and labour, especially considering the historian's evidence that upland agriculture was part of the region's intricate ecological and political history. The entrepreneurial push lacks a certain authenticity for upland farmers. Their inability to comply with its demands resonates with the protesting farmers from the more agriculturally developed states, in conflict with the state on pushing them towards globalised markets (Valbona, 2021). Moreover, as Tania Murray Li and Janet Sturgeon point out, the political optics of using the most vulnerable demographic in the great developmental leap forward are closely linked to other forms of structural violence (Li, 2014b; Sturgeon, 2007). Can these narratives be circled off, like an Aristotelian tragedy with plot, character, thought, diction, song, and spectacle? Again, history provides evidence that this need not be the case.

In the middle of Diphu—the main town in Karbi Anglong hill district in Assam—there is a remarkable statue of a peasant woman bearing an axe, with her comrades and a dog following her. The statue was sculpted by Biren Singha, an artist involved in the struggle for territorial autonomy for the hills in Assam in the 1980s and 1990s. Kareng Rongpharphi was a figure plucked from late 18th-century folklore by activists and archivists of a left-leaning movement for autonomy in Assam. In her compelling story, she was a peasant incensed by the King's demand for milk from nursing mothers so that he could feed the royal tiger cub. Kareng, a nursing mother, fought off the soldiers who had come to force her to give milk. She then organised her village to build roads into the wilderness so the King's soldiers would follow them and get stranded in the forests. The demands on upland farming communities by planners, political representatives, and the local elite might seem less dramatic today. However, they are still quite significant, and observers ought to expect some pushback in the future. It is difficult to pinpoint where this resistance might germinate, as few platforms can unite upland farmers as bearers and subjects of history. Still, it could include refusing market forces in their current forms.[14]

In May 2023, the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council representatives

decided to move the iconic statue from the town centre to the interstate bus terminus along the Diphu-Manjha road. The council members claimed that a new flyover would diminish the monument's stature, so ironically, they decided to move it to an impersonal bus stop terminal, where the metaphor of resistance would be further erased. Indigenous communities and student bodies protested this move, arguing that the small town did not need a flyover.

The challenge for social scientists, historians, and those advocating for the rights of farming communities in India will be to absorb the many different trajectories that farmers have taken within the country. While the current protests by north Indian farmers on the mainland have received deserved attention from commentators and activists, this is also an opportunity to understand how the market is such an elusive and contentious object. The market demands sacrifice from farmers who were beneficiaries of state subsidies, scientific and technological advancement, and political mobilisation. Several generations of upland farmers have already forgone peace in the nation-building process in 20th-century India. Even as governments seek to integrate them into inconclusive projects for the future, it would be meaningful to ensure their pasts are not erased in the process.

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Endnotes

1. This includes rites of passage, religious rituals, and festivals for many communities. Through the 20th century, upland communities in the region have engaged and negotiated with dominant religions like Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, have retained many agriculture-based rituals from the past (Burlings 1963, van Schendel 1992, Zou 2009).

2. Funders for government-supported events like the Hornbill Festival are not without their critics. Political commentators argue that states like Nagaland should prioritize unpaid government wages over funneling funds from other development projects into the festival. See: http://morungexpress.com/hornbill-festival-the-need-to-get-it-right/ (accessed October 16, 2017).

3. People who live off the land, mainly by farming, are called Nongrep in Khasi, Kuthnathawk in Mizo, Lotamei in Mao Naga, Louuba in Meiteilon, and Loubolmi in Thadou Kuki. These terms denote someone who looks after agricultural land, especially rice cultivation. They may be economically differentiated from the small but emerging group of wealthier community member with better access to political power.

4. The state museum in Guwahati displays late-Ahom period (18th century) exhibits that allude to tributes paid by upland agriculturalists to the Ahom Kings. In exchange for hill produce such as poison and salt, they received rights to agricultural surplus and labor from the valley. Known as called posa, this system was labeled 'blackmail' by colonial British officials, who overlooked its cultural and historical significance (Kar 2016).

5. All Indian states have a skill development and entrepreneurship departments that reflect regional adaptations of the vision and mission statement articulated by the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Government of India.

6. For details, see NLUP Mizoram, https://nlup.mizoram.gov.in/ (accessed October 17, 2017).

7. There is a wide range of affective relationships between lowland and upland

farmers. During fieldwork in 2012 (in Mizoram), I observed Mizo paddy farmers employing Muslim farmers, who often came with their families from Assam's Barak valley. Both groups kept to their own. The Muslim farmers, usually men who headed the family, spoke a few words of Mizo to interact with the landowners. Their families did not mingle. During fieldwork in 2017 and later in 2022 and 2023 in Arunachal Pradesh (in East Siang, Lower Dibang, and Lohit districts) and Assam (Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao Districts), I observed markedly different relationships between Assamese and Adivasi farmers from the plains and their Adi or Galo landowners and employers. They shared language, food, festivities, and sometimes brawled with one another.

8. Such experiments have occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s as well, especially with crops like cardamom in Nagaland. The cardamom experiment ran into difficulties following the fall in prices in the early 1990s, leaving local farmers in Nagaland at a loss. Adding neglected and underutilised species like millets was an innovation popularised by women's groups in villages like Chizami (in Nagaland). In the past decade, this has expanded into small, celebratory events around the production and consumption of millets.

9. Writing about women workers in Bangladesh, Dina Siddiqi raises a point that holds true for other South Asian contexts as well. Some of the most critical scholarship that emerged from grassroots advocacy was quickly adopted into the developmental donor discourse that was being pushed by multi-lateral agencies. The traffic of ideas between the field, classrooms and donor spreadsheets was mediated by exceptionally committed teachers and their students, who worked towards translating classroom discussions into practical action-oriented work in rural settings. Donors furthering developmental goals that were supported by multiple actors, including the United Nations and other multi-lateral organisations, were keen to include such work in their portfolios.

10. Agricultural universities and colleges were created in the region following India's independence from Britain. However, efforts to conduct research on rice in the region, especially Assam, had begun in the 19th century. These efforts offered the beginnings of agricultural research and became the foundations of the Assam Agricultural University when it was established in 1969. Its earliest Vice Chancellors and professors were trained in agricultural sciences in the United States and were instrumental in providing intellectual support and research for India's green revolution in agriculture.

11. For instance, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) has a Centre for Ecology, Environment, and Sustainable Development, where concerns of abuse of public and natural resources are part of the curriculum; North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), has a department of Rural Development and Agricultural Production that focuses on promoting entrepreneurship in various agricultural fields. Similarly, the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Guwahati, has a Centre for Linguistic Science and Technology, where historians, linguists, and engineers come together to provide practical information to indigenous farmers in languages that they (the farmers) speak at home.

12. I hasten to add here that among the three—bureaucrats, researchers, and journalists—some were less convinced about the celebratory potential of radical land use. Some researchers, especially those who did archival work, as well as journalists, were cautious. They were not surprised that farmers were not behaving as the planners hoped they would, and they attributed this to a long history of impoverishment and neglect of upland farming. Even the inheritors of the two-decade-long guerrilla war (1966-1986) who wanted Mizos to be self-sufficient in food production, were not quite convinced that the upland farmer would be the right vehicle. They too, I was told, focused on lower-elevation paddy growing to expand grain and vegetable production in the 1980s and 1990s (when they came to power).

13. On 18 August 2021, the Government of India announced that the cabinet had approved a plan to expand the area and productivity of edible oils, especially palm oil, in Northeast India and Andaman Islands: https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1746942 (Accessed on October 10, 2021). Both places—the uplands of Northeast India and Andaman Islands—

fit awkwardly into the national map and imagination as peripheral places.

14. There are platforms that seek to bring them together, but as objects of history that require greater skills, more trainings, and sometimes even seek to change their occupations altogether.

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