Landlessness and rural deprivation have historically been virtually absent in the uplands of Northeast India. Currently, due to the increasing presence of a monetarised market oriented economy, rural destitution is becoming an everyday reality. Previously, jhum or swidden cultivation would produce subsistence crops such as rice in abundance, but in many places that is no longer the case. Steep population growth, increasing popular demand for cash and large-scale statist interventions have resulted in a growing pressure on jhum land. Forced by the substantial investments that the commercialization of agricultural production demands, and a need for cash more generally, jhum farmers are increasingly in need of credit, creating indebtedness and even alienation of land.

Erik de Maaker, Dolly Kikon & Sanjay Barbora

Shifting Ground? State and market in the uplands of Northeast India

IN INDIA, shifting cultivation has been controversial for decades. To administrators, agronomists and conservationists, it has primarily been primitive, wasteful and inefficient. “…” (An extravagant and unscientific form of land use”, that is “degrading the environment and ecology,” as some critics put it) Even as policymakers point out the precarious nature of this agricultural method, anthropologists and environmentalists have identified shifting cultivation as a technique that is exceptionally well suited for the uplands climate and soil, and ecologically sustainable. Obviously, growing population pressure, and the acquisition of land for other agricultural purposes, has reduced the viability of jhum cultivation. But even as the odds are against it, people make great efforts to continue the practice. Encroaching upon areas that were hitherto uncolonised, jhum farmers move towards steeper slopes, and less fertile plots.

How can this sustained commitment towards jhum farming be explained, particularly since an increasing number of studies also show that subsistence peasants are rapidly becoming landless daily wage labourers or migrant workers in urban centres across India? What can we learn from these developments regarding the radical transformations that the economies and societies of the uplands are subjected to?

The criticisms of shifting cultivation continue to be vocal and well represented both among policymakers and in the public domain, and quite a few government policies are in place intended to discourage it. Large-scale programmes have been initiated aimed at the expansion of capitalist intensive commercial crops, such as rubber and tea, to improve the profitability of upland agriculture. In addition, and to some extent contradictory to these measures, over the last decades been subject to extensive extensions have over the last decades been subject to extensive.

The uplands of the eastern Himalayas and its hilly southward extensions have over the last decades been subject to extensive ‘state-making’. This region, a single ecological zone, is cress-crossed by the international borders of India, China, Bangladesh and Burma/Myanmar. These states are actively consolidating their borders, and expanding their political and economic presence in the once semi or ‘lightly’ administered uplands. Throughout these uplands, shifting cultivation has historically been an important economic activity.

Shifting cultivation, as the name suggests, is a method of farming on temporary fields. Throughout a growth season, which lasts for about six to eight months, the rain-fed fields carry both subsistence crops (such as maize, vegetables, pulses, rice, tubers) and cash crops (such as cotton, ginger, turmeric). The sheer diversity of these crops, and their rotation over a period of several months, spreads the risk of a failed harvest. The seeds are derived from previous harvests (no dependency on seed merchants), and many are unique varieties, that are well attuned to the specificities of soil and climate. The fields are abandoned after one or two years of cultivation, allowing shrubs and trees to grow back. People then cultivate a next ‘fallow’ ensures the continuation of a jungle cover that helps to maintain biodiversity.

The increasing state encapsulation of the uplands of Northeast India has many consequences. As road connectivity improves, private educational facilities develop, and the electrical grid is extended, people increasingly aspire towards modernity. The conspicuous absence of the state as a service rendering entity, notwithstanding its overwhelming visibility as a security force in the region, has resulted in a growing presence of private players. Private health care, educational institutes, loan companies, and consumer agencies have produced a debt culture and rural populations across the hill states of Northeast India are increasingly becoming indebted and are mortgaging homes, jhum lands and crops in order to attend to health emergencies or children’s education, or to pay agents for securing jobs in urban centres across India and abroad.

The growing demand for cash is gradually drawing subsistence cultivators from the uplands deeper into a money and market oriented economy. In this new economy, they are becoming visible as the poor, dispossessed, and the landless. It is within this context that the ongoing state interventions to integrate the jhum uplands need to be examined. Particularly measures aimed at the promotion of plantation economy and the commercialization of crops in the uplands appear to be dangerous since these undermine the political texture of local communities.

The Newsletter
Towards a trans-regional perspective
Compared to Northeast India, shifting cultivators of the Chittagong Hill Tracts have very limited access to capital and markets, resulting in the perseverance of prior social and economic arrangements. The same holds for the Chin Hills of Burma/Myanmar, reputedly one of the most deprived regions of that country. There, people who depend entirely on swidden cultivation tend to be poor, but nevertheless have a high level of food security (as among the Konyak Naga, or in parts of the Chittagong Hills tracts), due to the variety of crops that can be harvested spread across many months. Does this explain the remarkable commitment of shifting cultivators to absorb state efforts aimed at controlling their ‘traditional’ practices, and to continue with these against many odds?

Upland communities, as ‘state evaders’, have a history of self-governance. Their encapsulation by the states of which they have become part in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries has resulted in complex legal configurations that encompass both customary laws as well as state laws. The extent to which localized customary arrangements are recognized at the state level differs significantly. For instance, official land records exist only for certain parts of the uplands. Where there are no land records, as in most of Arunachal Pradesh, but also in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Chin Hills, the state informally recognizes customary arrangements. Such arrangements are vulnerable, since they can easily be challenged when competing claims to land are advanced by commercial companies or the state. The contiguous uplands of Northeast India, Burma/Myanmar and the Chittagong Hill Tracts constitute the ‘last enclosure’ perhaps the last area in the world that due to its earlier impenetrable terrain has remained outside the realm of state administrations, national laws, and the commercialization of natural resources. Development to the uplands implies their integration in lowland oriented political and administrative structures, and an opening up of their resources for national if not global extraction.

India, Bangladesh and Burma/Myanmar are advancing hegemonic claims over the uplands that have triggered the emergence of ethnic movements that counter these claims. In turn, this has resulted in (frequently violent) counter reactions and political claims. These have also set the stage for developmentalist interventions in which ethnic elites play a role in the reification of differences and the reiteration of exclusionary entitlements. This has resulted in preferential discrimination. This has resulted in political regimes of such states (Scott, J. 2009. “State-making” in peripheral and disputed border zones such as Northeast India can be understood as ‘nationalising space’: political, administrative and economic integration achieved through the extension of state institutions, legal frameworks and developmental programs (Baruah, S. 2005. Durable Disorder: Understanding the Politics of Northeast India. Oxford University Press, p. 38).

Northeast India is included in the Eastern Himalayas Biodiversity Hotspot, as defined by the influential US based NGO Conservation International (http://www.conservation.org/Hotspots/HOTSPOTS.asp).

Across the region, an increasing number of forest and natural resources are being exploited by shifting cultivators, a practice that has sustainability implications. Jhum, a traditional slash-and-burn system, may be seen as both an example of a successful adaptation to a particular environment and as a transcultural practice. The integration of shifting cultivation into state-regulated development and capitalist interventions still gives largely unacknowledged, and the political dimensions of ethnicity are urgently in need of being explored.

References
3. In November 2014 a group of concerned social scientists, NGO-related policymakers and journalists committed to the uplands met at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Guwahati, in an attempt to trace the impact of current developments

Conclusions
Jhum farmers in Northeast India face increasing economic pressure, which challenges existing social and political textures. The increasing presence of the modern state in Northeast India and the growth of market oriented monetarised economic activities marginalises jhum agriculture. Yet, people go to great lengths to continue to cultivate swiddens. One reason for this seems to lie in the fact that this long-proven agricultural technique keeps them – at least partly – outside the realm of the market. While market prices fluctuate, subsistence jhum crops retain their food-value. In addition, jhum cultivation seems to provide much more than a subsistence base, since it also allows for the anchoring of social and political configurations that connect the present to the past. Particularly in this latter respect, the relevance of jhum cultivation has so far remained ill-understood. Gaining better insights in its continuing, yet changing, social and economic relevance is a requirement for a better appreciation of the radical transformations that the Northeast Indian uplands are currently subjected to.

Erik de Maaker, Assistant Professor, Inst. of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University (maaker@ffn.nl, leidenuni.nl)
Dolly Kikon, Lecturer in Anthropology and Development Studies, Department of Anthropology and Development Studies, University of Melbourne (dollykikon@gmail.com); Sanjaya Barbor, Associate Professor, Tata Inst. of Social Sciences (sanjany.barboratiss.edu).

Above: Bringing in cotton that has been harvested in the swiddens. Below: Producers selling ginger to merchants at a local market.

All photos by Erik de Maaker.