

CHAPTER 4

The Hill Miris

Habitat

The Hill Miris inhabit the south-eastern corner of the lower Subansiri District. They live on either side of the Kamla river, which is a tributary of the great Subansiri that flows into the Brahmaputra near Majuli of Upper Assam. On their west side, they have the Nishis and the Apa Tanis as their neighbours, and on the east, the Gallongs of Siang District. Tagins are their northern neighbours. They claim that their forefathers migrated from the higher regions of the Himalays, wherefrom the great Subansiri river takes its rise.

The Hill Miris are known to be a migratory tribe. According to tradition, they went down even to the plains and foothills in search of good land, but finding those areas already occupied, came back again to the hills and ultimately settled down in the Kamla valley. The Hill Miris are known as Ghachi Miris or Prabatia Miris among the plainsmen of Assam. It is supposed that the present epithet "Hill Miri" was simply a translation of the Assamese word "Prabatia Miri" used by the British officers during their first contacts with these people. They retained this name in order to indicate a distinction from the Miris living in the plains.

The Hill-Miris were known to the people of Assam for a long time past. They used to come down to the plains every year with the products of the hill areas not commonly found in Assam, and in exchange, took away cloth, salt, iron and other goods made in the plains. The hill-tribes like Tagins, Apa Tanis and high-land Nishis were supplied with these goods and, in turn the Hill-Miris procured foodgrains for themselves and other commodities demanded by plains. They were thus a sort of middlemen between the plains people and the hill-people. Many people think that the word Miri means "go-between" (mediator).

British visitors to Miri country

E.J. Dalton, when he was serving in Assam, visited the Hill Miri country in 1845 and gave a fine account of the Hill Miri people.¹ Earlier in 1825, the Miris were found by Captain Neufville² to have inhabited the lower hills, but he did not enter into the high hills. In 1912, the Miri Mis-

1. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*.

2. Mackenzie, *North East Frontier*.

sion penetrated deeper into the Miri country and collected valuable information about the tribe.

When Haimendorf visited the Hill Miris in 1944-45, he noticed their close similarities, in many respects, with the Nishi tribe. In fact, he was of opinion that the Hill Miris should be considered to be a sub-tribe of the bigger group called Nishi or Nishang. Other writers, however, have not agreed in toto with Haimendorf. B.B. Pandey is of the view that the Hill-Miris have their own distinctive hairstyle, head dress decoration and female dress, and their own special religious and social practices. He, however, concedes that there has been mixing up of blood and culture from other neighbouring tribes, and the Hill Miri may be considered as a link or bridge tribe between the Nishi and the Gallong.

Population

The population of the Hill-Miris was 8174 in 1971. They form only 1.74 per cent of the total population of Arunachal Pradesh, but they have come into prominence because of their long association with the plains of Assam.

Villages and houses

Hill Miri villages and houses are small. A house accommodates two to three families only, and not ten to twenty as the Nishi long-houses do. As soon as a son is married, he generally builds his own house separately. Sometimes he is allowed to stay in the house of the parent, but with a separate hearth.

Loose social culture

Like the Nishis, the Hill Miris also do not have a central village body to exercise the social controls. There are village chiefs or Gaonburas, but they have no coercive power, though they are respected. Nor have the Hill-Miris any institution like Morung (dormitories for the youth), which can nurture the spirit of cohesion among the villagers and train them in their traditions and customs. The social structure, is, therefore, loose.

Cultivation and crop

The Hill Miris do only jhum cultivation and rarely grow any wet-rice. The reason, according to them, is the scarcity of available plain lands. The form of jhum practised by them is of the extreme type. They abandon a plot generally after one year, sometimes, after two years; but have a tendency not to return to the same plot again.

The crops grown by the Hill Miris are paddy, millet, maize, sweet potato and chillies.

The team visited 4 villages of Hill Miris in Raga Circle of the Subansiri district. The names of the villages are Kemliko, Kigam, Kicho and Dokum.

The following table shows the number of households, population and cultivated area in selected villages of Hill Miris.

TABLE 9
Population, houses and land (selected villages—Hill Miris)

Name of village	Total No. of houses	Total population (approx.)	Area under WRC (Hect.)	Area under TRC (Hect.)	Area under jhum (Hect.)	Total cultivated area. (Hect.)	Area under homestead (Hect.)
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Kemliko	33	700	—	2	96	98	4
2. Kigam	14	200	—	—	90	90	2
3. Kicho	9	45	—	2	54	56	1.5
4. Dokum	31	600	—	—	174	174	4
Total	87	1545	Nil	4	414	418	11.5

Predominance of jhum cultivation

It will be seen from Table 9 that permanent cultivation covers less than one per cent of the total cultivated area of these villages. The land-rights in these villages therefore relate almost wholly to jhum cultivation. This leads us to the question as to what type of jhum is practised by the Hill-Miris, —The Adi type or the Nishi type. In the Adi type, a jhumia returns exactly to his old plot at the end of the cycle, whereas in the Nishi type, it is not necessarily so, and the jhumia has no claim to occupy the same plot. The Hill Miri type is more or less the same as the Nishi type. A jhumia has no claim to his old plot. If he wants to occupy the same plot when a new jhum cycle begins, he is usually allowed to do so, but he does not return to it as a matter of right.

Jhum cycle

A *jhumia* in Hill Miris cultivates the same plot for one or two years and then abandons it. He may return to the same locality again after 5 or 6 years (not necessarily to his old plot). The jhum cycle is thus 5 or 6 years long.

In the process of cultivation, a jhumia family does its work in its own plot only. At the slash and burn stage, assistance of other families is sometimes taken, but no share of the crop-yield is given to the helpers on this account. At the most, daily wages are sometimes paid. Affluent persons offer feasts with the meat of mithun. But usually, the help is mutual. There may be similar mutual assistance in some other stage of cultivation, too, e.g. in harvesting. But the crop remains solely the property of the occupant of the plot, and is not shared with others.

The jhum plots are usually scattered, and are not clustered together. They are not parts of a big clearing parcelled out among the villagers. Each family selects its own plot, and permission from any other authority, governmental or social, is not needed.

Claims to all village forest land for jhuming purposes

The villagers claim that all forest lands within the village boundaries are at the disposal of each family for the purpose of jhum cultivation. The village boundaries are, of course, known to all, including the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages, so that there is no dispute between the jhumias of two adjacent villages.

Absence of plot history

Under such circumstances, there can be no such plot-history as is found in the case of permanent cultivation. A plot is abandoned every year or every two years, and its identity is lost. The same person does not repeat the use and occupation of the same plot, even at some interval of time. No plot is kept demarcated during the period of abandonment. It is therefore not possible to build up a history of any plot inspected on a particular date. All that can be done is to ascertain the name of the occupant on the particular date, estimate the area occupied and note the crop that is grown. The question of acquiring it by inheritance or by purchase from another does not arise.

Village Kemliko

In the village Kemliko, out of 33 jhum plots scattered in steep-hill-slopes, the team could see 10 jhum plots and one WRC plot and collect the following data which is given in the form of a Table.

Kemliko is a re-grouped village, newly established on the road from Raga to Daporijo. The inhabitants were originally in the parent village Maga. The village is growing up well, but the practice of jhum continues in full swing. Only one small plot of wet-rice-cultivation was found. The explanation given by the villagers is that flat land is not available, and that the terracing of steep-slope is costly and useless without water-supply, for which there is no suitable stream.

TABLE 10

Village Kemliko, Plot history (Hill Miris)

<i>Plot No.</i>	<i>Name of occupant</i>	<i>Area (Approx.)</i>	<i>Jhum or WRC</i>	<i>How acquired</i>	<i>When cleared from jungle</i>	<i>Crop grown</i>
1.	Maga Tago	1.20h.	Jhum	Jungle clearing	The same year	Hill-pady Recently harvested
2.	Enem Tara	0.40h.	-do-	-do-	-do-	-do-
3.	Maga Tama	1.20h.	-do-	-do-	-do-	-do-
4.	Maga Tacho	0.40h.	-do-	-do-	-do-	-do-
5.	Nemak Mar	0.40h.	-do-	-do-	-do-	-do-
6.	Nimak Taro	0.40h.	-do-	-do-	-do-	-do-
7.	Maga Lomo	0.20h.	-do-	-do-	-do-	-do-
8.	Maga Tahar	0.40h.	-do-	-do-	-do-	-do-
9.	Maga Teluk	0.20h.	-do-	-do-	-do-	-do-
10.	Maga Sidu	0.80h.	-do-	-do-	-do-	-do-
11.	Maga Tao	0.14h.	WRC	-do-	2 years	Wet rice

The team saw a hill-stream running by a deep ravine several hundred feet below. The rain water, it is stated, cannot be retained on the terrace, as it percolates through the sandy porous soil which forms these hills. Only soil-experts can verify the truth of this assumption but the disinclination towards terrace-cultivation was obvious.

Village Kicho

Kicho is another regrouped village on the Rage Daporijo road. The villagers had originally lived in the old village called Gitmohrey, which was shifted to the present site in 1974. In the new village they were given subsidies for practising wet-rice-cultivation and confined themselves only to jhum. The reason given is that there are no irrigation facilities. The single person Kigam Keni who is still adhering to the wet-rice-cultivation in about 26 hectare of land is getting water from a small spring called Panya Nala. The administration has now provided irrigation facilities to others too, and the original wet-rice-cultivators are now planning to resume such cultivation. The old plots which they had abandoned are recognised by the villagers as the property of the original cultivators. These WRC plots are heritable and transferable, too.

Homesteads

The home-steads are permanent and are not changed with the change of jhuming fields. All the houses are clustered together in one locality, generally on the slope near the hill-top. They are neither so close to one another as the Apa Tani houses, nor so far apart as the Nishi long-houses. The homestead land is heritable, but not transferable. If a man shifts to a new house on a different site, his old site is treated as abandoned and anyone may occupy it without paying anything to the original occupant.

Village Kigam

Kigam is another village visited by the research team. The homesteads are not too far from one another. The houses are not as long as the Nishi houses. The average number of families living in a house, unlike the Nishi, is two. Some homesteads have kitchen gardens as well as bamboo groves.

Cultivation

There is no wet-rice-cultivation in the village. All are dependent on jhum-cultivation. They continue to cultivate in the same plot generally for one or two years, where the soil is fertile, the cultivation is continued even for 5 years at a stretch, but such cases are rare. Jhum cycle is about 7/8 years. Maize and paddy are the usual crop. A jhum plot belonging to Sri Kirgam Tabe was inspected by the team. Jhum-plots are scattered in hill-slopes, most of which are rather far away. A person may clear as many plots as he likes and needs no permission from anybody. Jhum plots are cleared and cultivated by individual families. A jhumia can return to his own plot if he likes, but does not usually bother to locate his exact plot.

Village Dokum

Dokum village, also visited by the team, was re-grouped in 1975 out of old villages called Liega, Raga Kaba and Raga. People do not cultivate wet-rice, but are entirely dependent on jhum. Paddy and millet are the chief crops. In all other respects, the customs about land were found to be the same as in Kigam.

Common lands

In all the 4 villages, there is no common burial ground. The dead bodies are buried near the houses. There is, however, a common hunting ground, which can be used only by the Hill Miris, and not by any other tribe.

Inheritance and transfer

In all the 4 villages, the system of inheritance was found to be patrilineal. The sons inherit equally, though sometimes the eldest is given a major share. The women have no right of inheritance to landed property. As all cultivated lands were almost wholly jhum, no case of transfer was found. Even in homestead, no right of transfer is recognised. No case of gift, bequest, mortgage or subletting was come across.

Salient features

In the light of above findings, the position as to the rights over land may be summed up as follows :

1. Anyone has the right to clear any forest land for the purpose of jhum cultivation.
2. In the cleared jhum plot, the cultivator has only the right of use and occupation, for the period of his continuous cultivation.
3. When the cultivator abandons the jhum plot after one or two years of continuous cultivation, he does not retain any right over it so as to be able to come back again.
But if he desires to cultivate the same plot, his desire is generally respected by the other villagers.
4. Except the right of temporary use, the jhumia has no other right over the jhum plot. Right of inheritance to jhum land is limited to the year or years of continuous cultivation only.
5. In the homestead land, the right of inheritance is more real. The system is patrilineal. No woman can inherit. No rule of primogeniture prevails.
6. There is no right of transfer in any jhum plot.
7. Homestead lands are also not transferable. If a man abandons his homestead, any other Miri person may occupy it without payment of any sale-price.
8. Wet-rice-land is rare, and the question of rights over such land is only of hypothetical interest. The owners of the few WRC plots who were met, claimed that they had the right of sale and mortgage, gift and bequest, but not to a person of a different tribe.