

# The Chizami model of development

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Khrolou Ngatsi weaving a table runner on the porch of her hut. Photo: Ananda Banerjee

Inside a small thatched hut, smoke from the wood fire danced with the sun rays beaming through gaps in the roof. We huddled around the fire, brewed tea and wordlessly consumed the packed breakfast of bread, jam and boiled eggs. An intense cicada cacophony resonated across the hillside; the incessant shrill buzz battering our eardrums and made conversation difficult.

We ended up at the straw hut after an early morning hike—a long winding trek through the leech-infested dense tropical forest of Chizami village in Nagaland. In the upper reaches of the forest (where the altimeter gave a reading of 6,000 ft), we crossed through *jhum* fields on the edge of a hill. *Jhum* is slash-and-burn cultivation traditionally practised in the hilly terrains of north-east India. In the *jhum* system, an area is divided into plots and a particular plot is cultivated for a year or two after which the farmer shifts to the next plot. The rotation cycle between plots vary between five to 10 years. The longer the duration, the better the crop yields as the soil gets more time to replenish with nutrients.

The

*jhum*

field we crossed consisted of neat rows of maize crops—each broad leafy plant sprouted like a fountain of water. “It will be ready to harvest in a few months,” said the female farmers who accompanied us. Adino, Weteu, Kozou and Khrozou—four smartly dressed women in slacks and graphic T-shirts from the nearby Enhulumi village who farm in this hilly land. Enhulumi and Chizami share the same forest patch.

Also accompanying us were Seno Tsuhah and Wekoweu Tsuhah, Project team leader and programme manager, respectively, from the North East Network (NEN), a women’s rights organization that promotes sustainable agriculture and agro-diversity in Chizami. The duo has been at the forefront of documenting the status of women in Nagaland, championing women’s rights, encouraging and supporting local communities in restoring and protecting traditional food systems and agricultural practices.

Chizami village, located in the Phek district of eastern Nagaland, a three-hour drive from the capital Kohima, has 600 households with a population of 3,000. The village comprises six **khels**, a Naga name for clans within the same community. All the **khels** have equal representation in the village council and play important roles in decision-making in matters related to village governance.



*Women farmers from Enhulumi village in their jhum fields. Photo: Ananda Banerjee*

Chizami is considered a model village for the quiet revolution it has led in the past decade in terms of socioeconomic reforms and environment protection. A signage at the entry point of the village sternly prohibits hunting and trapping of birds and animals. The village council imposes strict fines on those violating norms. In fact, the village celebrated Chizami Day on 8 January 2015 for the first time with the theme—“Recognizing history, celebrating the present, and inspiring the future”.

A sense of preservation is slowly taking over the village as its rich biodiversity is under threat due to rampant hunting, large-scale commercial logging and unplanned development—making the region highly vulnerable to climate change.

“Climate change and erratic rainfall is affecting our agriculture. As a result, farmers are shifting from cultivating food crops to horticulture and other cash crops. In this context, we need to look for answers within our traditional agriculture practices, which can be regarded as sustainable and ensures food security for the community,” observes Seno.

“Without the

jhum

fields, we cannot think of having diverse vegetables and wholesome food. In the past, when we would go to the

jhum

fields, we would gather as much produce as we could. We used to carry everything we collected to the village and shared the produce with neighbours and

khel

members. But with the present farming practices, we are looking only at market economy. By producing only for gain in the market, we are losing the essence of sharing that has been passed on from generations in our community. Today, young men are least interested in farming, leaving the women to work in the fields. There are now very few households where both husband and wife work together in the field,” says Wekowieu.

“Much of the village commons used for

jhum

cultivation have been taken up for monoculture.

Jhum

was a traditional way of life in Nagaland, a community activity that has shrunk with the advent of horticulture or monoculture, which gives better economic returns. Our traditional farming practices have declined over the years, and the marginalized farmers are suffering the most,” says Seno.

Today, as more and more individuals have made the transition from traditional farming of food crops to more lucrative and less time-consuming cash crops, a group of female farmers have kept the tradition alive by spearheading sustainable agricultural practices.



Kezungulo Wezah (left) discussing her seed bank with members of North East Network. Photo: Ananda Banerjee/Mint

As we took a tour of the *jhum* plot, Adino explained the need for the leguminous that were growing alongside the maize. “These are important nitrogen-fixing plants which replenish the health of the soil. Alder trees are planted in *jhum* plots to enhance soil fertility,” she said.

All along the hike, the Enhulumi farmers collected various kinds of leafy vegetables in their conical cane baskets—edible ferns such as Riikiga, Thenipiiga and Thusiigakhu, curry leaves called Gasii, and a leafy green vegetable known as Tsiiga—all part of the Naga traditional food system.

“For the Chakhesang tribe working on

*jhum*

, the first year is for paddy, second year is for millet and third year is for rice beans, or

Kholar

. Along with maize, used in livestock feed, these are our main crops along with mix cropping of leguminous vegetables,” explains Seno.

In Nagaland, the crop calendar begins in March, which is the sowing time; May and June are for harvesting vegetables such as melon, cucumbers, spinach leaf, mustard, onion, chillies, carrots, tomatoes, brinjal, etc; July is for harvesting millets and August for maize. August is also the month for sowing of rice beans, another soil nitrogen-fixing plant. The last to harvest are oil seeds such as sesame in October.

Paddy is cultivated in the terrace fields in June, the start of the rainy season. In fact, traditionally for farmers in this region, the arrival of the noisy cicada at this time of the year is nature’s signal for planting of paddy saplings in the wet terrace fields.

For the Chakhesang tribe, birds and insects have had an intrinsic role in farming activities. According to village elders, the Kukurhe’s (Common hawk-cuckoo) arrival in March announces the time for sowing of seeds (known as Tshipfo-Tshikhru) in the *jhum* fields. When the Kuti (Eurasian cuckoo) arrives in May, it’s time to get ready for wet terrace paddy cultivation. The Kasakaku bird’s arrival cautions that it is too late to sow seeds. Likewise, the Lelemu insect’s (cicada) arrival means time for wet terrace paddy cultivation. Towards the end of Khuno (wet terrace paddy transplanting season), the Chuzhukhwini insect passes through the village, signalling that it is too late to cultivate wet terrace paddy.

### A new beginning

In Chizami, the seeds of change in community work, especially in terms of women and their area of work, were sowed back in the late 1990s. The story goes back to 1994 when Monisha Behal, women’s rights activist and founder of NEN, landed in Nagaland to work on reproductive health issues.

“What struck me was the complete lack of recognition for women’s issues and the deplorable health and sanitation environment. Yet, the collective strength of women in Naga society was noticeable. NEN had started operations in neighbouring Meghalaya and Assam and a fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation encouraged me to work on improving women’s health standards in Nagaland. The fellowship gave me enough freedom and space to conjure up some ideas on what to do with this collective of women,” says Behal.

In 1996, Behal met Seno while she was conducting a workshop on organization building, reproductive health, tackling alcoholism and community development in Pftusero town, located 20km from Chizami.

“I went to attend the workshop as a representative of the Chizami Women’s Society (CWS) and wanted to try out some of the ideas discussed there. Later, I wrote to Monisha about a possible partnership between CWS and NEN. Monisha responded and there has been no turning back,” says the soft-spoken Seno.

Apart from setting up the Nagaland chapter of NEN, Seno teaches at the government primary school in Sumi village, adjacent to Chizami, a job she has held since 1996.

In the initial years (between 1998 and 2004), the work focused on improving reproductive and community health, sanitation and nutrition. By the end of 2002, the Chizami village council gifted land to NEN to set up a resource centre, which was completed in 2005. Today, the NEN resource centre stands as a beacon of progress and change in the state. In June, a vocational training centre was set up to provide skill development programmes.

“After six long decades, Nagaland was coming out of conflict and the main challenges ahead was to engage and empower the youth. So, we started looking at things more holistically, and slowly from health, we expanded into other areas. NEN and CWS began engaging the youth in skill enhancement programmes such as bamboo craft, food processing, organic farming, rooftop water harvesting and low-cost sanitation. Further, there were discourses on governance and human rights issues,” says Seno.

In Nagaland, women work largely in the unorganized sector, which includes farming, weaving, food processing, etc. According to the female farmers from Enhulumi village, “In the past, we were not conversant on how to raise or address issues concerning the womenfolk, the inequalities and discrimination in our society. Only after becoming aware of these realities from NEN’s workshops, we identified issues and started raising them in our meetings and to the village council. But most importantly, we have realized the importance of engaging men in such issues.”

It took eight years for Seno to convince the village council to accept that women are entitled to equal pay as men in unskilled farm labour.

“When I first raised the issue in the village council, people laughed. Change takes time, but is also inevitable, and in January 2014, the village council passed the resolution for equal wages in agricultural labour. Next year (January 2015), another significant milestone was achieved with the induction of two women as members in the Enhulumi village council—the apex body in village administration,” says Seno.

Now, several women collectives in the rural areas of Phek district have begun advocating for parity of wages and demanding the effective implementation of state support services and schemes.

### **Revival of a tradition**

One skill that is omnipresent in every Naga household is weaving. For years, Naga shawls and traditional mekhela (wraparound) have enjoyed cult status in the apparel market. “But the weaving tradition was languishing for the lack of entrepreneurship. It was more for domestic consumption than for the market. For more viability, it was time to look beyond shawls and diversify into other products in home furnishing,” says Wekewe.

In 2008, NEN initiated Chizami Weaves, a decentralized livelihood project to create employment opportunities for the marginalized women in the district.

Starting with seven weavers, Chizami Weaves has grown to 400 members. Apart from Naga shawls, the weavers have diversified into products such as stoles, cushion covers, belts, bags, mufflers, coaters, table mats and runners which are now shipped to emporiums in New Delhi, Kolkata, Bengaluru and Mumbai.

“To revive our age-old tradition of home weaving, we got experts from Delhi and Mumbai to train and help develop a range of products and also to infuse new colours apart from the traditional Naga red, black and white,” says Seno.

The weaving is done at home, and the finished products delivered to the NEN centre. After quality checks, the weaver is paid following a set of rules and standards. At the centre, I came across Khrolou Ngatsi from Sumi village, who had come by with her little daughter to drop off her latest consignment—a set of table mats, mufflers and scarfs. Each item took between two to three days to finish. Not much, but Khrolou is also a farmer like all weavers in the Naga community and the money she earns from her weaves is extra income for the family.

I accompanied Khrolou to her hut to see some of her work in progress. She was working on a colourful table runner, a weave of lines composed in purple, green and red. It was nearing completion and another half-day’s work was all she needed.

“However, we get less products during the sowing and harvesting season,” says NEN’s Neitshopeu Thopi, in charge of managing Chizami Weaves.

“Chizami Weaves has opened a new chapter in the life of marginalized women farmers to realize their full potential, to explore and capitalize on the talent they always possessed,” says Behal.

“Women farmers need recognition as they are the custodians of traditional knowledge, especially in terms of food security and conservation of seed banks. There is a need to promote sustainable farming as opposed to the aggressive promotion of cash crop through government policy,” says Wekewe.

The fragile mountain ecosystem in Nagaland is already experiencing the wrath of climate change with irregular rains and increasing temperatures. In recent years, food security has become a major concern for many villagers. NEN is mobilizing villages in the district to adopt millet-based biodiverse agriculture. Currently, 150 farmers (who have a minimum one-acre plot) from eight villages have come aboard to revive millet-based biodiverse farming.

“Millet is not a crop but an integral part of Naga culture. Millet is climate-resilient especially at the time of drought. It ensures nutrition, health, community bonding and well-being. Amongst crops, millet is the only one that is edible even after 30 years of storage. It also has medicinal properties,” says Seno.

A short walk from Khrolou’s hut leads me to the home of Kezungulo Wezah. In her 50s, Kezungulo has kept alive a childhood hobby—selecting and storing the best seeds for future use. Today, she is regarded as one of the custodians of a traditional seed bank in Chizami. She can recognize indigenous seeds from other hybrid or inferior varieties and shares her knowledge with other farmers who come for help.

In the porch of her hut, Kezungulo showcases a row of cane baskets, small and big, filled with different indigenous seeds. There were seven to eight types of seeds of millet, five types of corn, 10 types of yam, pulses, rice, ginger, beans, pumpkin, cotton and oil seeds. She is particularly proud of her collection of millet seeds and recalls how everyone used to look forward to Ethsunye, a five-day millet festival, in the past. “Unfortunately, the festival lost significance because of the disappearance of millet from our [jhum](#) fields,” she laments.

According to Kezungulo, the cultivation and consumption of millet have greatly diminished, if not vanished, in the past three decades. “People have become disinterested and lazy, especially with the arrival of a rice mill in the village; it is easier to dehusk paddy unlike millet, which needs manual labour and is a tedious process,” she says.

In the past couple of years though, with the revival of the millet festival, Chizami has brought back the focus on millet. "It's a positive step, but a lot of work remains ahead," says Seno.

Seno's efforts through NEN to herald a change in society have been recognized by the central government. The ministry of women and child development awarded Seno with the Stree Shakti Puraskar for 2004, 2005 and 2006 for her "dedicated and selfless work in the field of women development and empowerment in the face of extreme difficulties and challenges".

Seno brushes aside the accolades and says it is more important for the farmers to receive some kind of state recognition for practising sustainable agriculture.

Chizami has taken giant steps to transform the Naga society in sustainable livelihood. During my stay, I saw a stream of youth from Kohima and neighbouring villages visit the NEN office in Chizami for internship on health issues, women's rights, social enhancement programmes and agro biodiversity. Once done with their training, they would take the Chizami model of development back to their villages.

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