

Title: Why Are Farmers in Manipur Cultivating Poppy?

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Why Are Farmers in Manipur Cultivating Poppy?

Ngamjahao Kipgen

Abstract: The fight against opium poppy production in Manipur can be won only if economically viable alternatives are provided to farmers, who are hitherto excluded from development initiatives in the state.



In Manipur, cases of drug addiction deaths due to heroin overdose are rampant. HIV/AIDS has also spread through the state due to intravenous drug use (Sharma et al 2019). Churachandpur, which is located in the southern part of Manipur that borders northwestern Myanmar, was the first district to be affected by heroin (Phanjoubam 1997). Manipur currently has the highest prevalence rate of HIV among adults in the country (Press Trust of India 2018)

Today, in various districts of rural Manipur, the poppy plant can be found growing barely a few kilometres from residential areas. Although the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 lists poppy as a contraband substance known for its psychotropic effects, the plant is being extensively cultivated in the interior hill areas of the state. Illegal poppy cultivation for opium has been in existence for almost a decade, but production has increased manifold in the last few years. Based on an empirical field study, this article tries to identify the drivers of poppy cultivation in Manipur. This study used a probability-based sampling technique (a total of 60 households from three hill districts in Manipur—Kangpokpi, Churachandpur, and Tengnoupal—that engage in poppy cultivation for opium were surveyed), and in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 opium farmers. Narratives from the field reveal that poverty, food insecurity, and material needs are the drivers of illegal opium production in Manipur. This article argues that short-term measures taken up by law enforcement officials, such as the forcible eradication of poppy cultivation, are insignificant unless and until the government

provides these farmers with sustainable alternative livelihoods. Arguably, broad-based development programmes that address economic, social, and political issues must be favoured over enforced eradication and other repressive and often counterproductive measures.

Proliferation of Poppy Cultivation: The Current Imbroglia

The Narcotics and Affairs of Border (NAB), Anti-Narcotics Department, Manipur Police, and Assam Rifles regularly destroy poppy and ganja crops in the state^[1]. In Manipur, it has become an annual affair to conduct drives against the illicit cultivation of poppy. The Indian Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) (India's counter-narcotics enforcement agency) and the Central Bureau of Narcotics (mainly concerned with the supervision of legal opium poppy cultivation) officially conduct eradication operations in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Manipur, Uttarakhand, and West Bengal (NCB 2012). Under section 48 of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substance Act, 1985, the NCB is authorised to attach and destroy poppy crops and other narcotic substances which have been illegally cultivated. This act prohibits the cultivation of opium poppy, cannabis, and coca plants without a license.

Despite law enforcement agencies destroying hundreds of acres of poppy plants each year, government survey reports show that poppy cultivation is still rampant across the hill areas of the state (NCB 2018). The seizure of different forms of narcotic substances is regularly reported in daily newspapers in Manipur. Poppy is reportedly being cultivated in the remote hill areas of the state (*Sangai Express* 2018). The total area under poppy cultivation in different hill districts in Manipur can roughly be estimated to be 6,000 acres in 2017–18^[2]. The yearly eradication drives by government agencies often destroy around 10% of the total cultivated crop, which is negligible. Evidently, the authorities' efforts to check widespread cultivation of poppy have yielded few positive results.

During January and February 2018, personnel from the NAB, along with the help of other security agencies, destroyed poppy plants that were illegally cultivated across more than 600 acres of land in seven districts, namely Ukhrul, Kamjong, Churachandpur, Senapati, Kangpokpi, Tengnoupal, and Chandel (see Table 1). This joint team managed to destroy approximately 6000 kg of opium, with a net worth of over Rs 45 crore.

Table 1: Estimated Opium Poppy Plants Destroyed by Officials

| Name of district | Area of land in acres (approx) | Quantity of opium produced (in kg) (approx) | Net value (in Rs crore) (approx) |
|------------------|--------------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| Kamjong | 80 | 800 | 5.8 |

| | | | |
|---------------|-----|-------|------|
| Churachandpur | 220 | 2,200 | 16 |
| Kangpokpi | 100 | 1,000 | 7 |
| Senapati | 15 | 150 | 1.1 |
| Ukhrul | 90 | 900 | 6.5 |
| Tengnoupal | 35 | 350 | 2.6 |
| Chandel | 90 | 900 | 6.5 |
| Total | 630 | 6,300 | 45.5 |

Source: Calculated by the author, based on the survey conducted, and from data collated from newspaper reports of local dailies.

Based on data collected from study sites, it is evident that one *pari*^[3] of land can produce 5–7 kg of opium. The price of 1 kg of opium in the local market usually ranges from Rs 50,000–70,000. During the off season, the price of opium can go as high as Rs 1,50,000. Compared to other crops, it is a significant return for an area of one acre. To the marginalised rural people, nothing is more appealing than poppy cultivation. Unlike rice, cereals, and vegetables, the returns on poppy plantation are significantly higher.

Proximity to the infamous Golden Triangle—Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam—is often cited as a major factor for the proliferation of different forms of banned drugs in Manipur. Official records from the NCB maintain that the crude product of poppy grown in Manipur is smuggled out to this triangle through the porous Indo-Myanmar border. In 1998, Myanmar accounted for 65% of global opium cultivation, and 60% of the estimated total potential opium gum production (Kumar 1998). Further, fertile soil, vast economic disparity, and availability of cheap labour in the remote hilly areas of Manipur favour poppy cultivation.

According to a press release from the Press Information Bureau, Manipur has become a haven for opium and ganja cultivation (*Imphal Free Press* 2010) due to its proximity to the Golden Triangle, along with widespread militancy, lack of employment opportunities, hilly terrain and porous border with Myanmar. Both poppy and ganja produced in Manipur are said to be of very high quality. Of late, ganja growers have shifted to poppy cultivation, as the harvest is more profitable.

Drivers of Opium Poppy Cultivation: Narratives from the Field

Usually, the production and peddling of illegal drugs are often concentrated in economically backward and deprived regions. Illegal drug markets thrive in places where poor quality housing, lack of local employment or crime are rampant (Lupton et al 2002). Lack of infrastructure, corrupt government agencies, and poverty have pushed poor farmers into poppy

cultivation. Deprived of any form of development and living in conditions of abject poverty, villagers in interior areas of Manipur cultivate poppy for opium production. For many households, opium production provides off-farming season employment, as the opium harvest takes place later. During the harvest season, an individual can earn between Rs 300 to Rs 400 a day, which is a decent amount of money in rural Manipur. According to a village chief, “In the past three years, [poppy cultivation] comes as a substitute owing to the irregularities on the part of the government in providing bare minimum employment under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act to job cardholders.” For many people, including women and children, poppy cultivation has become an income generator during the farming off season.

Poppy cultivation also has certain advantages over other crops: it can be cultivated almost everywhere and is a relatively high-value product that has an assured market. Further, due to inadequate transportation infrastructure in rural areas, poppy is less cumbersome and can be easily managed, unlike other yields. Third, poor rural families are dependent on poppy cultivation for their economic needs. Given the economic scenario in hill areas of Manipur, there are barely any alternative livelihood options that could provide farmers with economically sustainable opportunities and incentives to move away from illegal poppy cultivation.

This expanding illicit economy in interior areas of Manipur has made many communities dependent on the income derived from poppy farming. Poverty, food insecurity, and material aspirations are the major drivers of illegal opium production in Manipur. This has been explicitly articulated by many opium farmers during the study. Some of the other drivers of poppy cultivation are the need for cash to pay for children’s education, housing, and health care. Throughout the study, it was observed that none of the farmers cultivated poppy for domestic consumption.

Table 2: Drivers of Opium Poppy Cultivation in Manipur

| Reason | Percentage of respondents |
|---|---------------------------|
| Food—unemployment, poverty, and lack of an alternative means of livelihood | 56.9 |
| Children’s education—need money to pay for school fees, uniforms, books, etc | 20.9 |
| Material needs—money to build a house, and to buy items such as phones, televisions, motorcycles, etc | 10.8 |
| Indebtedness—need cash to pay debts | 10.5 |
| Total | 100 |

Source: Based on interviews conducted with poppy farmers.

Many farmers also confided that until a few years ago, poppy cultivation was a taboo, practised only by a handful of villagers. However, after witnessing the significant profits, several other

villagers and villages have gradually taken up poppy farming. Today, poppy farming is openly practiced on a massive scale.

A number of farmers cited the declining productivity in *jhum* fields, stating that the income generated was insufficient to feed even an average family throughout the year. Coupled with the absence of alternative sources of livelihood, these farmers resorted to poppy cultivation to meet their needs and expenses. A majority of the respondents (more than 50 %) stated that the harvest of paddy either in *jhum* or terrace fields was insufficient to sustain their family year-round. Therefore, they engaged in poppy cultivation to purchase food items, particularly rice, which is their staple diet. Often, when yields from other crops are lower than expected, opium provides an alternative means of livelihood to families.

More than 20% of the respondents cited that they resorted to poppy cultivation to pay the educational expenses of their children. This study also found that one or more members of these households go to nearby private schools. Even though private schools are more expensive, there is a reluctance to attend government schools due to the dearth of infrastructure and the shortage of teaching staff.

Indebtedness is another feature among poppy cultivators. Around 10% of the respondents engaged in poppy cultivation to pay off family debts owed to local moneylenders, who usually charge high interest rates. A newly married couple was forced to opt for poppy farming due to the acute state of unemployment. According to the husband, “Despite having enough academic qualifications and ability, it is difficult to get a decent job in Manipur because of corruption. So, my parents sold our agricultural land to bribe officials in the state police recruitment, but I was rejected and abandoned without any source to secure my livelihood.” Moreover, the desire for a decent standard of living, which includes the accumulation of wealth and housing, was cited as another justification for the respondents’ dependence on poppy production. More than 10% of the interviewees said that fulfilling their material needs was the driving force behind them cultivating poppy. Even treatment for illnesses is being paid for from the money earned by selling poppy. This narrative is echoed in most interior hill areas that are deprived of basic development facilities.

Government Efforts to Replace Poppy Cultivation

As discussed, despite poppy farming being banned in Manipur, cultivation is widespread. Interestingly, many farmers who are dependent upon opium for earning their livelihood are not even aware of the fact that it is illegal. Their only concern is to earn enough for their well-being, and their children’s education. This can only be attained by farming and selling opium.

In the past few years, government authorities have been trying to arrest the illegal cultivation of

poppy. For instance, the Senapati district administration introduced cardamom cultivation in different places in a bid to wean people away from cultivating poppy, and to also provide them with an alternative source of income. This new initiative is proposed to be taken up under the Integrated Watershed Management Programme, and the district administration has tied up with the Department of Commerce and Industries so that cardamom farmers are spared the trouble of searching for markets.

In a public speech, the sports minister of Manipur said that “Considering the adverse environmental impact caused by poppy cultivation, like clearance of large forest areas which led to soil erosion, the government is determined to provide alternative livelihood to poppy cultivators. (Sharma 2017)” The state government has agreed to replace poppy with lemongrass cultivation to ensure sustainable livelihoods. In the same vein, on 11 February 2018, the Chief Minister of Manipur, N Biren Singh stated that “Alternative means of livelihood like cattle rearing such as mithun (*Bos frontalis*) and plantation of fruits bearing trees shall be provided to the affected farmers of opium plantations which were destroyed by the state forces recently. (Sapam 2018)” He further mentioned that providing alternatives to poppy farming will also help in preventing the practice of shifting cultivation, which contributes to climate change.

At first glance, the initiatives put forward by the government seem laudable. However, a plethora of issues remain unaddressed. For instance, is the government even in a position to provide alternative means of livelihoods to poppy cultivators? Will farmers even have access to such schemes by the state government? In reality, despite initiating such programmes, the state government of Manipur is yet to deliver on its promises—to provide assistance, compensation, and alternative livelihoods to farmers. Without this, farmers cannot be expected to escape from the vicious cycle of poppy cultivation. Eradicating poppy cultivation necessitates providing farmers with incentives such as subsidies, technical assistance, and agricultural inputs in order to persuade them to stop growing opium poppy and instead shift to alternative or sustainable means of livelihoods. Unfortunately, the forced eradication of poppy cultivation instigated by the government officials is a more problematic approach as it can escalate social tensions, and also create animosity between the local government and farmer communities, which would hinder the establishment of the rule of law. A survey respondent also stated that “going to the hills” (a mantra used by Singh after he became the chief minister in 2017, to signify an effort to reduce the inequality between the hills and the valley) should not be limited to only destroying poppy fields, but should also include immediate alternate arrangements for poppy farmers.

Eradication is not the Solution

Given the amount of economic dependence of farming communities on opium, the forced eradication initiated by law enforcing agencies will destroy the livelihoods and incomes of many rural households. Forced eradication (especially at the time of harvest season) of poppy

plantations risks the survival of these communities, thus creating a major source of social tension. Many families lament that they will starve for the entire year and will be in debt as the investment on poppy cultivation is quite high. Moreover, cultivators would be unable to meet the expenses of their children's education. Poppy eradication cannot succeed where so many rural households are dependent on its farming, and where there is no viable economic alternative available.

Eradication drives also tend to drive up farm-gate prices, which in turn create stronger incentives for farmers to continue cultivating opium poppy, and also attracts newcomers to the industry. Forced eradication does not usually bring about a sustainable reduction in the cultivation of poppy, as it is a one-time, short-term effort. In areas where large-scale illegal opium production is rampant, holistic economic development is the only viable solution to wean people away from poppy cultivation. The counter-narcotic action initiated by law enforcing bodies should not be resorted to in a hasty manner before economic alternatives are implemented.

Endnotes:

[1] A report of the same by the Manipur police can be accessed here: http://www.manipurpolice.gov.in/?page_id=1109.

[2] Based on personal observations.

[3] *Pari* is a customary unit of area measurement of area in Manipur. One *pari* is approximately equal to one hectare.

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