

Dynamics of Ganja Cultivation in Manipur

Case Study of a Village in Ukhrul District

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In the absence of alternative means of livelihood, ganja cultivation for decades has been the mainstay of livelihood for many families in the backward district of Ukhrul, Manipur. For these poor cultivators, earning a living takes precedence over considerations of morality and dangers involved in the illegal cultivation of this crop.

Over the decades, several international treaties have been passed to tackle the problem of illegal drugs. These treaties viz., the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971 and the UN Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988, continue to define the international drug control system. India is a signatory to all these conventions. Article 47 of the Constitution of India also mandates that “the State shall endeavour to bring about prohibition of the consumption except for medicinal purposes of intoxicating drinks and of drugs which are injurious to health”.

To meet the obligations under the three UN drug Conventions as well as Article 47 of the Constitution, the Indian government passed the [Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances \(NDPS\) Act, 1985](#). This Act prohibits

engaging in the production, manufacture, possession, sale, purchase, transportation, warehousing, concealment, use or consumption, import inter-State, export inter-State, import into India, export from India or transshipment, of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances;

The plant *Cannabis sativa*, commonly referred to as ganja in India, and its derivatives falls under the purview of this Act.

Trade Flourishing in Economically Backward Regions

However, over the years illegal drug consumption has grown and its trade has flourished all over the world. At the same time, the efforts to contain the drug trade have triggered a long chain of unintended consequences, raising the possibility that the war against drugs causes more damage than the drugs themselves (Keefer et al 2008).

Usually production of illegal drugs and drug pedalling are often concentrated in economically backward and deprived regions. Illegal drug markets thrive in places where “poor quality housing, lack of local employment or a bad reputation” are rampant (Lupton et al 2002). Drug dealing and the evil that accompanies it are tolerated more in lower-class than in upper-class neighbourhoods, and the drug crimes are much more concentrated in poorer neighbourhoods, because the drug retail business attracts the poor more than the rich (Duke 1995).

The world’s two main opium producing countries, Afghanistan and Myanmar, are characterised by oppressive regimes and lack of economic development (Chauvy and Arnand 2006). Colombia’s marijuana heartland Macizo and its inhabitants were “the forgotten ones”, and the region had been “historically neglected by the national government and left out of the country’s steady progress” (Craig 1983).

In China, the peripheral regions in the south-west (Yunan, Sichuan, Guizhou, Guangxi) and north (Qinhai, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Gansu) where drug production takes place are the poorest in the country (Dagher 1999). Bolivia, known for its coca production, too has been the poorest nation in South America (Craig 1987). In South Africa, “drug offenders come from black and Latino communities, the poorest in the country” (Laniel 2001). Poverty, inequality, unemployment and economic problems that exist in many drug producing areas aggravate marginalisation and discrimination of the underprivileged (Buxton 2006, Melis and Nougier 2010).

However, illegal drug production and drug dealing can be both beneficial as well as destructive. “Though many people suffered from the consequences of black market, no doubt, many others benefit from it in the form of money and cheap goods in the neighbourhood” (May et al 2005). Though “drug trafficking poses a threat to the nation’s political system, but in the short run, it also contributes to economic recovery and rural peace” (Craig 1987). In a country like Afghanistan, the trade-off becomes quite complex. On the one hand drug production and drug trafficking finance terrorist activities, but on the other it provides a source of livelihood for about 448,000 families (Singh 2007).

Ganja Cultivation a Preferred Option

This paper analyses the economics of ganja cultivation in one of the biggest villages of Ukhurul district^[1] and studies the reasons behind its cultivation and the justifications offered by cultivators for engaging in this illegal activity. The study is based solely on primary data, which has been obtained from in-depth interviews of 110 ganja cultivators, including 33 women, selected using snowball sampling method. These interviews were conducted

between April and July 2012.

The study found that the main economic activity of the respondents was farming. Despite different levels of educational qualifications, none of the respondents held government jobs except one who worked as an anganwadi worker associated with Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme. Even those who had studied beyond high school were jobless. About 10% of the respondents earned no income other than from ganja cultivation. Majority of the households did not have a television (80%), and just one household owned a computer. All the respondents used firewood for cooking.

The cultivation of ganja has been in practice for the more than five decades in the district. About one-third of the respondents' parents were reported to have cultivated ganja. One of the respondents had been cultivating ganja for the last 36 years. However, there were new entrants as well, who were cultivating it for the first or the second time.

Subsistence farming was widely practiced in the village, and all respondents grew food crops for their own household consumption. A portion of the land used for cultivation of ganja was also used by about three-fourths of the respondents to grow food crops solely for domestic consumption. The remaining one-fourth grew food crops for family consumption as well as for sale. Majority of the households (90%) were not dependent on the market or other sources for food items, which they grew themselves, like maize, potato, cabbage, beans, spices, pumpkin and various types of leafy vegetables. However, they had to purchase paddy, which was their staple food from the market. Sharing their produce with other families, friends and neighbours was found to be a common feature.

Given the poor road connectivity and the exorbitant transport cost to the nearest town—a one-way trip approximately costed Rs 2,500 to Rs 3,000—made it unprofitable for them sell their agricultural produce in neighbouring towns. Unlike other agricultural produce, the market for ganja was in the village itself, with the buyers coming to the village to procure the substance. Under the given conditions, for those who dared take the risk, ganja cultivation, which promised decent monetary benefits, was a preferred option. Hence, ganja was grown as the only commercial crop.

The Farming

Ganja was cultivated about 7 to 8 kilometres away from the homestead. All the respondents grew ganja on the village community land or community lands of neighbouring villages. About 60% of the respondents used the village land, and the rest depended on lands belonging to neighbouring villages.

There existed an easy system of land use in the village where households were free to use the village community land for as many years as they wished. There was neither restriction on the size of land holdings nor did they pay any rent for using the land. The only condition was that the land could not be sold by any household. A type of “first come-first serve” land

use policy was being followed. When one household occupied a plot of land, another household could not cultivate the same plot. This was a tradition that had been prevalent for generations. Families hardly ever shifted their area of cultivation, with sometimes the same land being used for 30 years or more.

Cultivators who used the village community land did not pay any tax, whereas nearly three-fourths of those who used land of neighbouring villages paid an amount of Rs 100 as land tax per annum. Payment or non-payment of tax depended on the verbal agreement or understanding between villages.

Ganja is a labour intensive crop, and labour is needed throughout its cultivation cycle. Only about 40% of the respondents used hired labour and that constituted less than one-tenth of the total labour employed. However, the practice of engaging hired labour is of recent origin and was practically non-existent a decade ago. Instead, the cultivators practiced the barter system where labour was exchanged for labour; about 70% of the respondents had provided their labour to other cultivators. Sharing of labour has been a traditional practice among these cultivators for generations. It was found that relatives, friends and neighbours staying together in the same locality helped the cultivators without wages, which indicated that the community was rich in social capital. However, such a practice is now gradually declining.

The wage rate was influenced both by the village authority as well as market forces. The village authority that administered the functioning of various affairs of the village had fixed the wage rate of Rs 150 per day for all manual work in 2011. The rate was fixed taking into account various factors—social, political, economic, cultural etc. However, the wage rate for ganja cultivation has been always higher than the administered rate as well as the rate for farming other crops.

During the plantation and harvesting of ganja, when the demand for labour was high, the wage rate was also steep. The rate also depended on skills of the workers, but it was never below the administered rate. Moreover, though ganja cultivation engaged both men and women equally, a wage gap existed between them. Men were paid Rs 300 or more per day, as they were regarded stronger and more suitable for the job, and women were paid Rs 200.

The cultivation of ganja still depends on obsolete and traditional agricultural tools like spade, dao, etc. It primarily utilises human labour, and only about one-fourth of the respondents employed animal labour because the hilly terrain made the use of animal labour costly. No mechanised and advanced tools were being employed. However, all cultivators used chemical fertilisers in order to increase the crop yield.

Reasons Behind its Cultivation

Table 1 lists the reasons why the respondents have undertaken ganja cultivation. More than 90% of them have no other alternative means of livelihood.

Table 1: Reasons for Ganja cultivation (%)

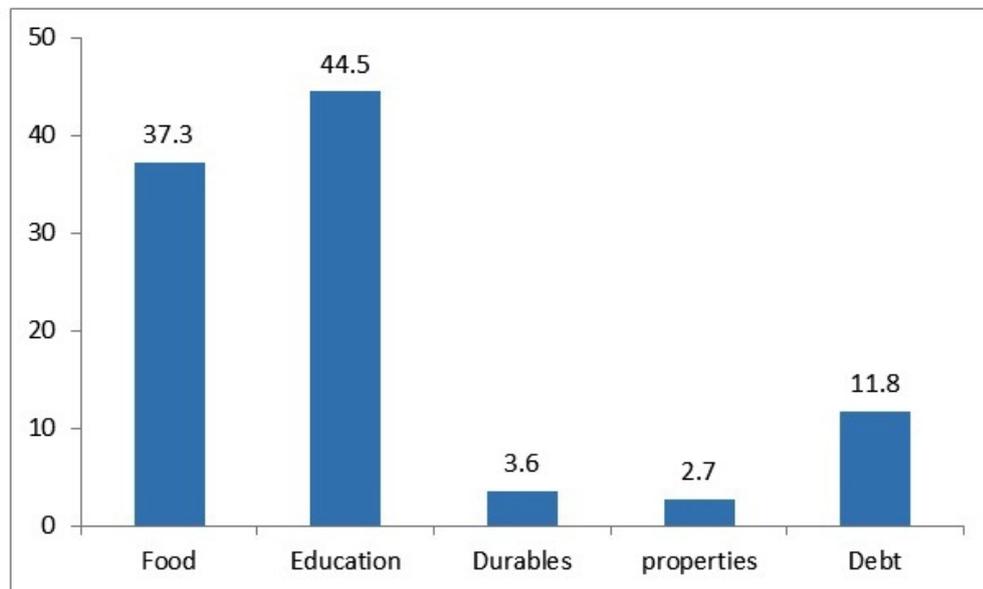
Reasons	Percentage
No other alternative for means of livelihood	90.9
To accumulate huge amount of money and live a luxurious life	1.8
Enjoy taking risks	2.7
No specific reasons, cultivating because others are doing	4.5
Total	100

Source: Personal Survey

To meet their various needs and expenses, and with no other sources of livelihood, they resorted to ganja cultivation. However, it was observed that none of them cultivated the crop for domestic consumption. About 40% of the respondents engaged in the cultivation of ganja to purchase food items, particularly paddy, which is their staple food. Most of the respondents either did not have paddy fields of their own, or they had marginal plots, which were insufficient for the sustenance of their family throughout the year.

The desire for a decent standard of living, was cited as yet another justification for their dependence on ganja production. Most of the respondents felt that their standard of living could improve only through investment in their children's and siblings education. Nearly half of the respondents cultivated ganja to meet the educational expenses of their children and siblings. The study found that more than 70% of the households had one or more members of the household going to college.

Figure 1: Needs of Cultivators (%)



Source: Personal survey

Indebtedness was a common feature among the ganja cultivators, and it was found that about 66% of the respondents were in debt. In fact, the debt was passed on from one generation to the other. About 12% of the respondents engaged in ganja cultivation to pay off family debts. It was found that only a few respondents resorted to ganja cultivation for purchasing assets like land, house and consumer durables (6%).

The Moral Dilemma

All respondents followed Christianity. Many Christians denounce the use of any intoxicants and psychoactive substances. Many people believed that consumption of psychoactive substances was sinful. So was its cultivation and trade. But the issue of morality became subservient to the issue of earning a livelihood. Cultivation of ganja posed a moral dilemma for 50% of the cultivators, as the act was illegal. But despite its immorality and illegality, they were forced to do it because, for them, morality alone could not take care of hunger. One of the respondents rightly remarked, "Morality cannot fill my stomach".

However, for the other 50%, cultivating ganja posed no moral problems. Few respondents considered cultivating ganja as a way of life and felt that there was nothing wrong with it. Some others believed that growing ganja was a better option than indulging in other unlawful activities; activities they might have to resort to in order to sustain their families. One of them stated; "with no other source of income, and my wife unable to work due to ill health, I toil and sweat, to feed and to bring up my five children. This is neither looting nor cheating, which I might be compelled to indulge in, if I don't, grow ganja. That would be

worse”.

While some respondents thought that the state government’s indifferent attitude to the development of the area was responsible for cultivation of ganja. One of them furiously said “the government has neglected the development and welfare of people. And this forces me to take certain risks to sustain myself and my family; why should I then care at all about it being illegal?” All such arguments points to one fact, that is, poverty and lack of development had forced the respondents to turn to the illegal cultivation of ganja.

Notes

[1] The name of the village has been kept anonymous in order to respect the privacy of the respondents who took part in the research and to avoid compromising the reputation and credibility of the village. This is the case with most of the researches on illegal drug-related activities or illegal drug markets. In some cases, the areas where the field surveys are carried out are given fictitious names

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