
[Oil palm plantations through contract farming and a new Forest Amendment Law threaten India's North-East forests](#)

India's North East has a very particular geopolitical context. It comprises eight states - namely Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim-, and has almost its entire geographical boundaries shared with five countries – China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan. The region is therefore only connected to the rest of India via the Siliguri Corridor (known widely as the Chicken's Neck), which is just about 20 km wide.

The region, moreover, is considered crucial to link with South East Asia via a land route, particularly with the expansion of the Trans Asian Highway and the Trans Asian Railway. For the state of Manipur especially, this is transforming their region into an international trade corridor, which can have far reaching impacts on their livelihood systems, forests and diverse territories.

Oil palm companies controlling more lands in the state of Manipur

The state of Manipur has been recently in the news due to violent conflicts between the Meitei and the Kuki people. These conflicts however have occurred on and off since colonial times, when people were 'absorbed' under British rule, and later on, under the jurisdictions of the government of India or other neighbouring countries, without considering ancestral populations and territories. Hence, the root of the violence in Manipur can be traced to measures that threaten the customary rights of Indigenous Peoples over their territories. (1)

Nevertheless, conflicts might worsen with the current push to expand oil palm plantations. There are already around 6.300 hectares of identified poppy plantations in the hills, with some experts explaining that the 'golden triangle' of the drug's production has moved to Manipur. (2) The expansion of other monocultures will be disastrous for the forests of Manipur. The State plan is to establish the oil palm plantations on small farmers land in the valley as well as on the foothills, which are primarily forest under different forms of legal and community protection, but also some used for *Jhum* (known as shifting cultivation or terrace cultivation). This expansion will likely dispossess several Peoples from their food sovereignty and water sources, but it would also impede crucial aspects of their relations and connections with their territories, which include their memories, knowledge and practices. In a nutshell, a new system of economy imposed from outside and closely linked to the global trade systems will replace a largely subsistence economy that has been built over generations.

India is a net importer of palm oil, mostly coming from Malaysia and Indonesia – an estimated of around 9 million tonnes per year. Yet, in August 2021, the government announced the National Mission on Oil Seed and Oil Palm with the aim of increasing the national production of palm oil. The target of this Mission is to expand plantations to 1 million hectares by 2025-26 and 1.65 million hectares by 2029-30, with special focus on the North-East and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

In this context, in 2020, the State of Manipur released the Oil Palm Mission Manipur (OPMM) project,

which aims to convert more than 66,500 hectares into oil palm plantations. Considering that almost 70 per cent of Manipur's territory is still forested, this represents a big threat to Indigenous Peoples' systems.

The strategy for accomplishing this expansion in Manipur seems to be mainly focused on contract farming. Although presented as a win-win deal, contract farming is in fact a trap for small-scale farmers. By being locked with contracts, small farmers accumulate debt right from the start, lose the freedom to decide who to sell their production to, face strict restrictions on planting other crops, and give up autonomy and even their land. (3)

For convincing small farmers to accept changing their cultivation and to start oil palm nurseries, the Central and State government are offering different subsidies, seeds and technical support. At the same time, companies like Godrej Agrovet or Ruchi Soya Industries Ltd., which is part of the multinational group Patanjali, offer contracts to guarantee farmers that their harvested fruit will be bought by them, even if market prices crash. Godrej Agrovet is the largest oil palm processor in the country, with around 65,000 hectares of oil palm plantations across India.

On 2022, Godrej Agrovet signed Memorandums of Understandings (MoU) with the states of Manipur, Assam and Tripura, through which the company got allotted land across the three states for the development and promotion of oil palm cultivation. The company already owns oil palm plantations in Mizoram, where it also has a processing plant since 2014, besides other five plants across India. Godrej Agrovet's CEO said in 2022 that the company plans to further convert within the four states 15,000 hectares into oil palms in the next five years. (4)

Moreover, on September 2023, the company signed an agreement with Malaysian palm oil company Sime Darby to import oil palm seeds for its plantations in India. Godrej Agrovet's spokesperson confirmed that it has more people working in the region and that it is opening places for distributing fertilizers, equipment and know-how for the farmers signing a contract with the company. (5)

According to groups active in the state of Manipur with whom WRM has spoken with, company representatives have been seen in Manipur and other North East states trying to convince small farmers to enter into the oil palm business. They are requesting small farmers to form committees in order to facilitate the conversion of 'grouped lands' into oil palm plantations. This, of course, mainly facilitates the company's plan to have large areas of land under its control.

Most of the area that the government has allotted for oil palm plantations in Manipur is on the valley and the foothills, where the land is most fractured among small holders. The government and the company thus need many hundreds of farmers on board in order to reach the thousand of hectares that they expect to convert.

Besides the valley, the consultant for the project in Manipur revealed in June 2022, during a workshop, that the plantations would also be established on 'abandoned' shifting cultivation lands in the hills, the fallow lands and the foothills. (6) The government claims that fallow *Jhum* lands –meaning lands under the ancestral practice of shifting cultivation in Manipur- are 'unused' and need to be converted into 'productive' lands. But there is nothing unused or abandoned in *Jhum* lands. The areas that are not being cultivated in a specific period of time are being rejuvenating and recuperating, which will lead to more fruitful harvests in a later period of time. *Jhum* has been used mainly by the Indigenous Nagas and Kukis for generations and it is intricately linked to their existence.

Yet, the colonial rhetoric that silences and diminishes Indigenous knowledges and practices is an imposition that is still repeated and used by governments and companies in order to expand their control over more areas of land. Destroying small farms and *Jhum* would destroy their food sovereignty as well as their relations to their territory, thus destroying their own existence as Indigenous Peoples.

RSPO: a brand for sustaining profits

The state of Assam, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram have already initiated oil palm plantations since 2017. However, the renewed expansion plans have sparked resistance among the Northeasterners because the National and States' targets will require clearing vast areas of forests and fertile soils. Resistance is getting stronger, with groups in Mizoram beginning to reject large scale oil palm plantation in the State, (7) as they already see how water shortage is evident in several areas surrounded by palm oil plantations.

In parallel, State propaganda is focused on how the bad experiences from Indonesia and Malaysia will be different in the North-East, as small holders can leave space for farmers to grow their own food. (8) But small farmers have started to be more aware of the experiences in Indonesia and Malaysia.

Despite the resistance and concerns from many sectors of civil society in Manipur, according to groups in Manipur with whom WRM has spoken with, representatives of the certification scheme RSPO (Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil) have started to talk with small farmers in the North East region about what they call 'responsible palm oil', trying to convince them to sign the contracts. RSPO representatives argue that contract farming is going to be sustainable and beneficial for farmers and that farmers should not be afraid as these plantations can be done "properly".

The certification presence in the region coincides with RSPO's latest milestone of reaching 100 members in India. In this regard, RSPO announced in August 2023 that it has "intensified its engagements and interventions with the Indian government, industry players and communities, amplifying the call for sustainability through effective partnerships in India's palm oil industry." (9)

According to Ram Wangkheirakpam, who is an environmental activist based in Manipur, the coming of RSPO attempted to diminish the resistance. However, the voice was clear: "There cannot be responsible oil palm plantations at that scale". It is not only about activists, but also about farmers' unions in Manipur having already made their position clear. Farmer representatives from all the districts of Manipur have stressed the necessity for establishing a strong farmers' union for the whole of Manipur to highlight their issues. They already resolved to say NO to oil palm tree plantations in Manipur. (10)

Defining 'forests' as plantations: A Law to allow further deforestation

As if the plans to expand oil palm plantations in Manipur would not be enough threat to forest dependant populations, on August 2023, a new Forest Conservation Amendment Law was issued by the national government. Although the name of this Law is supposed to relate to "preserving forests", in reality, the Law actively promotes "compensatory afforestation". This means that industrial tree plantations are promoted with the stated objective of increasing India's 'forest cover' and fulfilling its international commitment of creating an additional carbon sink of 2.5-3 billion tonnes by 2030.

The Law is now set to dramatically change the forest conservation arena in India, altering the landmark Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980, which attempted to put the brakes on widespread deforestation.

It severely constricts conservation to only those forests registered on government records after 1980, which means that 28 per cent of India's forests are automatically left without protection. On top of this, other large areas of forest are now exempt from protection due to national security and other reasons. The result will be rampant forest diversion for plantations, infrastructure and other commercial interests. (11)

The forests of the North-East of India, which comprise as much as 25 per cent of the country's total forest areas, are set to be especially hard hit by this new Law, as these areas are largely not in any official record. In Manipur, 88 per cent of its forests are not classified as forests under official registries. (12)

Even more alarmingly for the North-East is that under the Law, authorisation to clear forests within 100 km of international borders will no longer be required from the Ministry of Environment to construct "strategic linear projects of national importance". (13) This affects all eight states in the North-East. The Law is effectively lifting a ban on deforestation on border areas. Given that all states in this region are surrounded by other countries, there will be hardly any area left if one counts the 100 Km. from the international borders.

The Law is also completely silent on the rights of forest communities. It makes no mention of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) or the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights Act from 2006). (14)

With large areas of forests threatened to lose protection and Indigenous Peoples to lose their rights, the focus is on expanding large-scale industrial plantations with the narrative of addressing climate change and implementing 'sustainable development'. Following the guidelines of the UN's FAO agency, 'forests' are defined in India (as in many other countries) in the same way as an industrial plantation. This is not only false but also dangerous, as it reduces all forest's diversity, complexity, interconnections and relations to others, including human populations, to accounting trees (and now, conveniently enough, to accounting the carbon stored in those trees). (15)

The Law is effectively opening the door for commercial exploitation of India's Northeast forests while converting these large diverse areas into monoculture plantations. Paradoxically, these plantation areas could be accounted as 'forests' under official records, as they will only account the tree cover increase, despite the traces of deforestation.

Resistance is nonetheless strong against all odds. It is crucial to stand in solidarity with those groups struggling to defend life in India's Northeast.

The Secretariat of the WRM in conversations with groups active in Manipur and the Northeast region*

*Some names of the groups and the people WRM spoke with remain anonymous due to security reasons

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