
India: Oil palm individualizing the use of collective land in Manipur

The introduction of oil palm in new locations brings about land use changes which causes long-term disruption. It is not only the health of the land that changes, what grows, its diversity, etc. but the ownership and control of land. This article will explore this reality in the state of Manipur, in India's North East, where oil palm is introduced as part of the country's effort to grow its own oil palm to reduce its dependence on imports from Indonesia and Malaysia.

This reality had already been outlined in a previous WRM bulletin article, entitled: "Oil palm plantations through contract farming and a new Forest Amendment Law threaten India's North-East forests". (1) Written three years after the State of Manipur released the Oil Palm Mission Manipur (OPMM) project in 2020, the text provides a clear contextualization of this 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".

As the article explains, what is happening in Manipur is part of a national policy thrust: "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".

The current article is based on a visit to three villages in the state of Manipur where oil palm has been recently introduced: Chadong, Ramrei and Saram Tangkhul.

Chadong Village: Sandwiched between tradition and capitalism

Chadong, in Kamjong district, is a village of the Tangkhul People. (2) Like most Tangkhul villages, Chadong is situated in a vast and wide forest. It has a total population of about 1,200 individuals. As the village boundaries are not marked by land surveyors and entered into the government land cadaster, the community's traditional boundaries carry a big significance. The boundary area of the village is defined by streams, stones, and other natural markers which are fiercely defended if the community sees threats.

When government officials approached the community with the proposal for an oil palm plantation at Chadong, in August 2025, an Emergency Sitting of the Village Assembly was organized. The written resolution says: "This House, after in-depth discussion, unanimously agreed not to take up the Palm Oil tree plantation project".

The Village Assembly is the key decision maker in all key matters related to village governance in Chadong. Members of the Village Authority are assigned responsibility for specific issues. For example, there is a member whose job it is to look into forest, another one covers questions related to education, etc. However, the whole Village Assembly collectively decides on these specific issues.

The Village Authority member responsible to look into forest issues says that their position against the oil palm plantation project is that since there is no private land in Chadong, there can be no plantation. The only private land that the village had, was the fertile agricultural land by the Thoubal river. This fertile land is underwater since 2015, when, despite decades of community resistance, the Mapithel Dam of the Thoubal Multipurpose Project was built. All remaining lands, mountains, streams, trees, etc. in Chadong are public - except for the homestead allocated to each household. This means that there cannot be any private plantation or any other activities that could endanger the collective life. The Village Authority decides what each family can take from the vast forest of the village, but that threshold cannot be crossed.

This way of life is always under pressure. The construction of the Mapithel Dam, for example, forced the displacement of part of Chadong villagers, (3) along with other adjoining villagers. Since then, the main village of Chadong is submerged and the village is now primarily in two locations separated by the reservoir. With little or no proper rehabilitation and resettlement, as well as no alternative income sources, produce from the mountain remains the only key source of livelihood.

It is at this period, post-dam, that the Directorate of Agriculture, Government of Manipur, under the National Mission of Edible Oils-Oil Palm (NMEO-OP) approached the Village Authority of Chadong. (4) As mentioned earlier, the Village Authority rejected the oil palm plantation in Chadong as it is all public land. Although, it was also agreed, but not in the written resolution, that individuals from Chadong may take up plantations if they possess private land elsewhere. Anyway, private lands are still governed within the laws of the village and cannot be transferred outside the tribe nor can they be used inimical to the interest of the village. (5)

This is where two individuals, both from Chadong, surfaced. They had previously bought land from the neighboring village of Ramrei.

Ramrei Village: Oil palm benefits individual interests while destroying the forest and community life

Like Chadong, Ramrei is also a village inhabited only by Tangkhul People and displaced by the same Mapithel Dam. The lands these individuals from Chadong bought in Ramrei are forested areas. They met with the government representative who promoted oil palm plantations, and thus an undertaking was signed in October 2025, and nurseries were provided one month later. One of the individuals has received Rs180,000 (nearly USD 2,000) for jungle [forest] clearance. Several promises were made, too. These included funds for digging four ponds, pumping sets, and that the government would also provide Rs 10,000 (around USD 110) per hectare after planting plus Rs 12,000 (around USD 132) per hectare for four years supervision. It is expected that by the fifth year, there will be fruits and then the state government department will purchase the fruit for about Rs 25 (USD 0.27) per kilo. The two villagers were told that each plant will bear about 70 to 200 kilograms of fruits. By February 2026, one of them had planted 950 out of the 1300 seedlings provided to him. And the other had planted 500 seedlings. Both plantations are on a hillock, and one of the individuals claimed to have planted at least 9 hectares so far.

According to our investigation, the land brought under plantation in Ramrei was forested and it has now been all cleared: there are about three feet (one-meter-tall) oil palm plants already coming up from the soil in the area. Agreements such as these seem not to be exclusive to Ramrei, but have also been carried out in various forest areas in Manipur. That, despite the fact that a pamphlet provided by Directorate of Agriculture of the Government of Manipur on the Oil Palm Mission clearly states that: "Oil Palm Trees should never be planted in the existing forest or lands where economic

trees are growing”.

The forest and tree cover of Manipur is 77 percent of the state's total geographical area, according to official data. This total forest area of Manipur is divided into state forest land (such as Reserve Forest, National Parks, Protected Forest, and so on) and un-classed forest. Around 8 percent of the total forest area is under Reserved Forests including Wildlife Protected Area Network; 24 percent is Protected Forests; the rest, 68 percent, belong to the category of Un-classed Forests. (6) Un-classed forest is under the different ownership pattern and control of the tribes that inhabit the state. The Ramrei portion of forest could be within the un-classed forest and the uses of it will largely be decided by the Village Authority and/or the 'owner' of that portion of forest.

The questions then are: can Tangkhul individuals utilize their 'private' land, bought in another Tangkhul village, in any manner they like? Can they enter into an agreement with the government and/or corporations, particularly in the case of oil palm, where land will be locked in for decades under monoculture plantation?

While the plants are still young and most promises and problems are yet to manifest, the arrival of oil palm has already brought some changes. These lands brought under plantations will become inaccessible to other villagers and village activities, as they are designed to serve only the parties involved. While this will undermine the village's governance laws and institutions, it also sets a dangerous precedent for opening a doorway for corporate entry into the Tangkhul Commons. (7)

One worrying point raised by villagers from the region is that oil palm expansion will eat into the forest area. Local informants say that in many districts of Manipur the land brought under oil palm plantation was once a forest. As we saw in Ramrei, there is payment for 'land clearance before planting' for oil palm plantations in forest areas.

The loss of non-classed forest is not only about forest cover loss, but about other development projects such as highway expansion, increasing conversion to poppy plantations, among others. (8) This loss has larger implications, such as the impacts on village livelihood, drying of springs and gradual loss of access to one's forest land, all of these possess indications for rethinking the adoption of oil palm.

Furthermore, based on the leaflet titled “Centrally Sponsored Scheme National Mission on Edible Oils-Oil Palm (NMEO-OP)” distributed in the villages by the Directorate of Agriculture of the Government of Manipur, a memorandum of understanding has been already signed between the government and Patanjali Foods Ltd, on March 2025, for operations in the Districts of Imphal East, Thoubal, Kakching, Ukhrul, Kamjong, Tengnoupal and Chandel. (9) While this memorandum is not available to the public, the plantations at Ramrei are tied to this palm oil company Patanjali Foods. This also means that the land under the plantation is indirectly brought under the control of the company while the government becomes the broker and facilitator for companies like this one.

Land put under oil palm plantations gets locked in for up to three decades, given the life span of an oil palm tree. And some negative impacts are already surfacing. The water scarcity is already visible at the plantation site of Ramrei. The two ponds dug specifically for the oil palm irrigation so far are completely dry: the people setting up the plantations were not aware that oil palm requires enormous amounts of water for its growth and productivity. It is very stark that those taking up plantations have not been informed of the possible negative implications whereas the brochure mentions only monetary benefits and uses of oil palm in Fast Moving Goods, without not even mentioning precautions that farmers need to take.

Saram Tangkhul Village: oil palm plantations approaching

The Saram Tangkhul Village is a small hamlet located in Thoubal District, Manipur. (10) Like Ramrei and Chadong, it is a Tangkhul People settlement. The village has approximately 25 households, with a total population of around 150 people. Their primary livelihood is farming. Recently, its population has seen oil palm plantations being set up.

Unlike in Chadong, according to a planter, the Manipur Organic Mission Agency (MOMA), under the Department of Horticulture and Soil Conservation, introduced the oil palm plantation project in the village in 2025. There was no Village Authority involved in this case. Individuals made their decision based on their interactions with the government authority to make way for oil palm plantations.

While no written document or agreement is available in the village, we understand that approximately 200 acres of land (81 hectares) were proposed for oil palm cultivation and around one thousand oil palm saplings were planted in 2025 by private landowners on their respective land holdings. Besides that, they mentioned that initial labour costs were supported by the concerned government department, with assurances of continued funding and assistance until plant maturity. They further shared that future establishment of processing units was also promised. However, villagers reported that support was discontinued midway, allegedly due to emerging conflicts and objections.

It is known that oil palm guzzles water and if the current plants grow to maturity and plantations expand further, it can only mean doomsday, not only for Saram Tangkhul village, but for all villages around it. That is because there has been already report of serious shortage of drinkable water in the village. The private water tanker, which brings water on small open vans, charges Rs 250 (USD 2.75) for 500 liters and every family in this village depends on this supply.

Since its introduction in the state of Manipur, in 2025, oil palm plantations at Saram Tangkhul village have faced opposition from two major fronts: the Langmathet villagers and the Manipur Forest Department.

First, the objection came from the neighboring Langmeithet village - a Meitei People village just at the foothill of Saram Tangkhul village. The conflict surfaced after the Langmeithet village opposed oil palm plantation. (11) This has been made clear from the press release by the village in July 2025. The press release, however, does not mention why they are opposed to the plantation. This is the first time in Manipur that land-based conflict surfaced as a result of what has been planted by a neighboring village. It is expected that, if oil palm plantations expand in the state, in the long run, conflicts over land, water and water contamination will arise.

The second major objection came from the Forest Department of the Government of Manipur, which claimed that the village and the plantation area fall under the Gwarok Reserve Forest. (12) Villagers were instructed to stop oil palm plantation activities, and some farm huts built on the hill slopes were dismantled by the forest department, too. If one reads this along with what is happening on private or unclassified forest lands in Ramrei village, then this is an indication that oil palm plantations could be expanding both in state and non-state forest areas.

Conclusion

The introduction of oil palm plantations in Manipur reveals how those plantations can undermine collective land systems, cause forest loss, cover corporate interests, wear away at Indigenous land governance and relations. In Chadong, Ramrei, and Saram Tangkhul villages, the push for oil palm

has already led to deforestation and conflicts. What is aggressively presented by the government and corporations as a path to economic gains is, in practice, undermining the Commons and threatening the very foundations of community life.

The experiences of these villages highlight a well-known truth: monoculture plantations lock land into decades of extractive use, stripping away biodiversity and weakening traditional safeguards. Resistance from Village Authorities and neighboring communities underscores the importance of protecting collective land governance and forest ecosystems. If unchecked, oil palm expansion risks not only ecological collapse but also the disintegration of Indigenous cultural and social systems in the long run.

What we see in these villages in Manipur is not just about oil palm, it is about defending the Commons, sustaining water and forests and livelihood, and defending a future not dictated by corporate and state interests.

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IP is a non-governmental organization based in Imphal. It seeks to understand and provide local perspectives on globalization.

References:

- (1) WRM, 2023. [Oil palm plantations through contract farming and a new Forest Amendment Law threaten India's North-East forests](#)
 - (2) [About Tangkhul Naga](#)
 - (3) Nei Water Talks, 2021. [Tales of Two Villages: Upstream-Downstream](#)
 - (4) Home | [National Mission on Edible Oils \(NMEO\)](#)
 - (5) The issue of private land or of land governance in general is dealt more elaborately in [“The Different Existing Patterns of Landholding System that Determine the Mode of Agrarian Change: A Case Study of Tangkhul Nagas”](#) by W. S. Machutmi.
 - (6) Forest Department | Government of Manipur
 - (7) For further readings on Tangkhul Land Governance, see: [The Different Existing Patterns of Landholding System that Determine the Mode of Agrarian Change: A Case Study of Tangkhul Nagas](#)
 - (8) As per government figures the highest poppy plantation expansion is in this category of 20.40 Km² in 2023-2024 alone.
 - (9) The Economic Times, 2025. [Patanjali Foods partners with Manipur Government for oil palm plantation initiative](#)
- See also: [Patanjali website](#)
- (10) It is called Saram Tangkhul village as there is another village known by the same name but inhabited by another tribe.
 - (11) [This issue was reported in local newspapers.](#)
 - (12) Reserve Forest is an Indian legal category of forest protected by the government from minimal human interference and for biodiversity conservation unless allowed by the government.