

# Palm Oil and the Politics of Deforestation in Tripura

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The factors compelling tribals to embrace new emerging monocropping plantations of palm oil in Tripura—amid many instances of resistance against palm oil in North East India—are analysed. It is argued that the primary reason for this adoption is centred around tribal land relations, while the political implications of deforestation and its concomitant factors and the perpetuation of state–private industry control over forestland remain overlooked.

Lately, there has been a vigorous push for palm oil plantations in North East India, which is touted as essential for enhancing the region's economy and achieving self-reliance for rural farmers. Conversely, substantial concerns have been raised about the social, tribal community livelihood, environmental, and ecological impacts of the plantations. These concerns have been voiced by several environmentalists, civil society organisations, and indigenous tribal communities within the region. Nevertheless, the promotion of palm oil plantations in Tripura—which is going to be the state's newest foray into monocultural plantations—appears intriguing because to date no objections or complaints have been raised. Instead, some visuals suggest that Tripura is poised to proceed with the palm oil plantations.

Palm oil is a plantation crop, which is known to have originated from Africa's western and central parts. During the 20th-century, palm oil plantations gained commercial traction in various parts of the world, especially in Malaysia and Indonesia. According to a report by the North-Eastern Development Finance Corporation (2020: 4), palm oil is distinguished by its ability to produce the highest quantity of edible oil per hectare (ha) compared to other oil crops. Consequently, there has been extensive encouragement to expand palm oil plantations in India to achieve similar production levels. This push is driven by India's current impact expenditure of ₹80,000 crore on palm oil, notably from Indonesia and Malaysia. Hence, by promoting domestic palm oil production, India aims to reduce this dependency on imports (Nath 2023).

Presently, Indian states engaged in palm oil cultivation are Andhra Pradesh,

Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Karnataka, and Goa, along with the north-eastern states of Assam, Tripura, Nagaland, Mizoram, and Arunachal Pradesh (*Rural Voice* 2023). In 2021, the union cabinet allocated ₹11,040 crore for the National Mission for Edible Oils—Oil Palm (NMEO-OP)—with a specific emphasis on India's north-eastern states and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Chinai 2023). However, although the rapid expansion of domestic palm oil plantations is intended to meet double the demand over the next 15 years, this surge is compromising biodiversity-rich landscapes. The North East region is collectively known to encompass three global biodiversity hotspots: (i) the most extensive forest tracts in India, (ii) home to a multitude of threatened wildlife species, and (iii) medicinal plants and wild food crops (Chinai 2023). Considering the threat to this rich biodiversity, several north-eastern states have opposed the aggressive promotion of palm oil plantations. However, while numerous tribal groups of the North East are resisting, the tribal communities of Tripura appear amenable to adopting this new agricultural practice, notwithstanding their previous experiences of sporadic and meagre profit from monoculture plantations such as rubber and areca nut.

Within this context, this article aspires to unravel the motivations driving tribal communities' adoption of palm oil plantations in Tripura. The article underscores the extensive opposition to palm oil plantations across North East India, and delves into the political dynamics surrounding deforestation driven by various monocropping initiatives within Tripura. In terms of the theoretical frame, this article follows Li Tania Murray and Pujio Semedi's (2021) discourse on "plantation life" that refers to the extensive control that corporate entities exercise over land, resources, and the labour force. This contains not only physical occupation but also sociopolitical dominance, which includes land acquisition, legal frameworks, and surveillance systems that ensure compliance and productivity. These

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plantations also reshape socio-spatial landscapes, while displacing tribal communities and altering ecological balances.

### Palm Oil Plans in Tripura

As indicated in the report of North-Eastern Development Finance Corporation (2020), Tripura has previously divulged no inclination towards adopting or cultivating palm oil. This is primarily because of the state's hilly terrain. But as of late, the Government of Tripura has declared its intention to cultivate palm oil on 7,000 ha of land for the fiscal year 2026–27 (*Rural Voice* 2023). Endorsing this initiative, Tripura's agriculture minister, Ratan Lal Nath, affirmed,

To expand palm oil cultivation in the state, digital mapping was done in 2020 by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) and the Indian Institute of Oil Palm Research. In the process, 1,46,364 hectares of land were identified in the state. Of that, 7000 hectares of land would be brought under palm oil cultivation by 2026–27. (*Rural Voice* 2023)

Tripura has already engaged in palm oil cultivation to some extent—however, there is a strategic objective to augment palm oil production within the state. The agriculture department has reportedly finalised memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with Godrej Agrovet and Patanjali Foods under the NMEO-OP to execute palm oil planning. As a result, Godrej Agrovet has opened a nursery at Nalkata in the Unakoti district (*Rural Voice* 2023). Reportedly, a large-scale palm oil plantation was scheduled to commence from 25 July 2023 and to continue until 5 August 2023, covering various districts across Tripura. For example, Patanjali Foods to operate in five districts and Godrej Agrovet will function in three districts of the state (Nath 2023). In addition, the state has dispatched 18 officers to Andhra Pradesh to receive training in the cultivation of palm oil. The Ministry of Agriculture has corroborated this initiative by stating,

The Department (agriculture and farmers) has already imparted training to 2123 farmers. Of them, 1076 have expressed interest in raising palm oil plants for better return. (*Rural Voice* 2023)

The primary focus of palm oil plantations in Tripura is within tribal villages

and hilly forest areas, which are perceived to possess plenty of agricultural land crucial for the state's economic development. This initiative also aims to attain self-reliance in the agricultural sector, particularly given the limited presence of industries within the state (Nath 2023).

### Resisting Palm Oil in the North East

While Tripura is moving forward with palm oil plantations, other North East states have shown strong resistance against the plantations. For example, according to a GRAIN (2023) report, a public discussion in Manipur held in May 2022 strongly avowed that the palm oil plantation should not proceed without community consent. In Nagaland, the Naga Students' Federation (NSF) has expressed serious apprehensions about the long-term negative impacts of palm oil plantations on forest degradation, biodiversity loss, and degrading soil quality (GRAIN 2023). In Assam, progressive political parties have advised palm oil companies—notably Patanjali Foods of Baba Ramdev—to stop their palm oil cultivation initiatives in the state. Even Meghalaya stands out as one of the dissenting states among the North East states against palm oil expansion due to concerns over social, environmental, and community livelihood impacts (GRAIN 2023). For instance, James K Sangma—the leader of the National People's Party and chairperson of the Meghalaya Industrial Development Corporation—and Mazel Ampareen Lyngdoh—the agriculture and health minister of Meghalaya—have opposed the new push for palm oil plantations in the state (Nandi 2023). As Sangma opined,

I understand the national mandate for the palm oil push, but I have historically opposed its cultivation on biodiversity terrain like ours ever since there was the push on the same. Our ancient forests and biodiversity perform valuable climate service for the nation, and we are looking at a sustainable livelihood model that is less extractive in nature. Together with Arunachal Pradesh, we are one of the biggest carbon sinks for India and are very critical for our nation in realizing its Paris Accord pledges in terms of climate action and environmentally judicious growth. (Nandi 2023)

Moreover, reportedly many members of Parliament from the North East—representing various political affiliations—have jointly appealed to the union government to reassess the planning of palm oil cultivation in the region (GRAIN 2023). Their appeal underscores the significant risks to the region's environment and biodiversity. However, to date there have been no objection remarks from Tripura.

### Why Oppose?

The adverse impacts of palm oil plantations are the primary reasons for this resistance. Palm oil plantations are notorious for causing significant forest loss, water depletion, human–animal conflicts, soil degradation, and the conversion of forestland into biological deserts. Numerous studies (Li and Semedi 2021; Chinai 2023; Rajshekhar 2024) have documented these harmful effects ranging from ecological degradation to economic unviability. For example, M Rajshekhar (2024) noted that while oil palm is typically cultivated in regions with high rainfall, its expansion has led to substantial deforestation in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Cameroon, where governments have replaced forests with palm oil plantations. This has devastated habitats of endangered species such as orangutans and reduced planetary resilience to climate change. Many indigenous tribal communities in the North East have been influenced by these negative experiences and hence oppose the plantations. For example, Lyngdoh added,

We need to find greener alternatives and diversify oil seeds portfolio for extractive commodities like palm oil. So, in essence, we have chosen our national contribution to be of the climate service variety by creating

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a new template of green growth for India. There is a lot of resistance locally to palm oil. I do not think we'll take it up immediately. (Nandi 2023)

Chinai (2023) also stated that palm oil plantations are unsuitable for hilly regions such as North East India. However, as seen from Table 1, the present spread of palm oil in North East India is carried out at the expense of biodiversity-rich forest landscapes.

### Lessons from Mizoram

Certainly, palm oil plantations are not new to India's North East. Earlier, excessive palm oil plantations were denied in the region because of its unsuitability due to hilly terrain. However, to promote plantations, palm oil is now officially recommended as suitable for plains and foothill areas. According to a report by GRAIN (2023), during 2018–19, the total cultivation area in the North East was 38,358 ha, with Mizoram leading at 26,730 ha. However, many studies and reports suggest that the potential impact of palm oil plantations in the North East can be gauged from the severe impact of palm oil on Mizoram. Corroborating a similar argument, Chinai (2023) has stated that Mizoram's adoption of monoculture palm oil plantations since 2004 has had disastrous consequences. One of the major detrimental impacts of palm oil plantations is on groundwater resources. Palm oil is incredibly water-intensive, requiring approximately 300 litres per plant daily, which totals around 45,000 litres of water per ha per day. Due to this, water depletion has set in from the excessive need of plantations, along with soil fertility depletion due to the heavy use of chemicals (GRAIN 2023). These consequences further include the drying up of groundwater, loss of food security, impacts on wildlife, and the loss of natural forests and resources which have manifested in Mizoram's hilly terrain, particularly in areas adjoining the Dampa Tiger Reserve (Chinai 2023).

The other concerning observation was the marked absence of soil macro-organisms such as ants, earthworms, centipedes, and millipedes, highlighting significant disruption of soil ecosystems

(GRAIN 2023). Given the severe impact of palm oil plantations in Mizoram, there is considerable apprehension among indigenous people regarding the extensive expansion of palm oil production. For example, Sangma stated,

We have studied its socio-ecological cost at compared to economic outcomes in Mizoram, Assam etc, and we have decided against it. (Nandi 2023)

In terms of economic viability, Godrej Agrovet has played a significant role in providing major support during the early plantation years, which led to the significant change of outlook in Mizoram towards oil palm farming. In 2021, the corporation doubled the amount it paid for fresh fruit bunches to \$0.12 per kg. Furthermore, the union government assisted farmers in the form of a direct benefit transfer into their accounts at the rate of \$0.42 per kg. Unfortunately, in later years, farmers did not receive enough assistance and when their palm oil businesses faced difficulties, they were left to fend for themselves.

Many have also suggested that palm oil plantations shift land tenure from community control to private ownership. For example, the power of gram panchayats and other village and community-based councils to manage their own lands is transferred to companies, leaving communities without a voice in land management (Chinai 2023). In Mizoram, this shift has led to the impoverishment of farmers, many of whom are even compelled to sell their lands.

### The Case of Land Relations in Tripura

Despite the alarming concerns associated with palm oil plantations, it is imperative to understand why Tripura continues with these plantations, particularly among tribal groups who have not objected. This situation is deeply rooted

in the historical context of land alienation experienced by indigenous tribal communities in Tripura. In the early years after independence—mainly after Tripura's merger with the Indian union—the indigenous tribal communities face massive alienation. The indigenous tribal community approximately lost over 74,607.03 acres for refugee rehabilitation, 17,269.68 acres for private industries, and the remaining forest areas—which they did not legally own—were designated as “state property” (Fernandes et al 2021: 94). Widespread land alienation among indigenous tribes has occurred due to land acquisition for various state-led development purposes, illegal settlements, and mortgages, leading to their socio-economic and political marginalisation. This historical injustice has inflicted significant historical trauma on indigenous tribal communities, who vividly recall their past experiences of land loss. This trauma has made them deeply concerned about the potential for further losses of land in the present time, hence prompting them to actively pursue any opportunity to retain their land. Numerous cases of tribal land restoration serve as evidence of this ongoing struggle.

Most notably, many tribals have now the opportunity to obtain land in reserved forests (RF) areas under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, commonly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA). This legislation aims to rectify historical injustices by granting land rights, or land *patta*, to forest-dependent tribal communities. However, under the FRA, the indigenous tribal communities cannot simply acquire land *patta*, and they must agree to specific terms regarding cash crop plantations at the allotted *patta* land. State agencies consistently advise tribal people, who traditionally practise shifting

**Table 1: Planned Areas for Palm Oil in North East India**

State	Area of Coverage (ha)	Remarks
Arunachal Pradesh	25,000	The state is implementing an oil palm programme
Assam	20,000	The state is implementing an oil palm programme
Manipur	5,000	The state is taking up the crop for the first time
Mizoram	10,000	The first north-eastern state to implement the commercial plantation of oil palm
Nagaland	15,000	The state is implementing an oil palm programme
Total	75,000	

Source: North Eastern Development Finance Corporation (2020 F)

cultivation, to transition to commercial crop plantations to enhance their family income. This advice is based on the perception that shifting cultivation is less economically profitable and environmentally unsustainable. Consequently, many tribal people are willing to accept commercial crop cultivation because it comes with the promise of land patta under the FRA. For example, Hamte, a 45-year-old woman stated,<sup>1</sup>

We were informed that if we clear the forest area and plant the species prescribed by the forest department, we would be granted patta land. Hence, I am prepared to adopt any commercial crops.

According to the NITI Aayog, the Government of India and the United Nations Development Programme (2015: 223),

Tripura holds the highest record of land deeds distribution under the Forest Rights Act in the country. Over 1.91 lakh claims were received from forest dwelling families and of these, over 1.24 lakh families have been benefitted with land ownership due to the successful implementation of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, in the state.

For tribal land patta holders, the tribal welfare department has collaborated with multiple other departments to implement various economic schemes for commercial plantations. These initiatives are believed to offer substantial economic benefits, with thousands of tribal families benefiting from sectors such as agroforestry, fisheries, and horticulture. Additionally, other cash crop plantations, such as rubber, were encouraged on jhum lands which was later converted into patta land. These plantations initially provided tribals with some income. Because of this, land patta holders are predominantly viewed as beneficiaries of several forest-related development projects, which are perceived as advantageous for the tribal community. However, as rubber prices have declined, many tribals were encouraged to switch to different commercial crops—such as areca nut—which are perceived to offer higher financial returns. Although government bodies and corporate entities emphasise the economic advantages, they often fail to issue cautions regarding alterations in land tenure, environmental repercussions, labour expenses,

the use of agrochemicals, the depletion of water resources, and the unsuitability of such plantations to the local terrain (Chinai 2023).

Yet, indigenous tribal communities are majorly willing to accept monocropping plantations if it means securing land-ownership. However, there is little attention paid to the specific damage these inconsistent commercial monocropping crops have caused to forests and the subsequent effects of climate change. Many indigenous tribal communities remain uninformed about the risks and ramifications associated with palm oil plantations and analogous monoculture crops.

### Politics of Deforestation

The detrimental effects of deforestation on human and animal populations are well known. Deforestation in Tripura is largely driven by commercial agroforestry plantations. Previous monocropping cash crop initiatives have adversely impacted the ecosystem and environment, as extensive deforestation has occurred within the state. These commercial plantations have neglected afforestation efforts in hilly forested areas like the foothills of Atharamura (locally known as Hachuk Beram) and Baramura (Hatai Kotor) hills, which, traversed by the Agartala–Assam National Highway in Tripura, are witnessing significant forest decline and ecological degradation. However, the blame for deforestation is often placed solely on the Jhumias due to their practice of shifting cultivation. The Jhumias are tribal communities who are heavily reliant on forest resources for their livelihoods and are the most affected by this deforestation. The issue of deforestation directly impacts the livelihood of tribal communities, leading to food insecurity and a clean water crisis.

Numerous research studies have proven that monocropping plantations, such as rubber cultivation, have caused significant habitat changes for wildlife, leading to increased conflict with humans. Widespread deforestation has resulted in habitat loss and food scarcity for animals, compelling them to migrate into human settlements and thus escalating human–animal conflicts. For example,

in Tripura, massive deforestation and inconsistent monoculture plantations have exacerbated human–monkey conflicts. A study by Patari and Dasgupta (2021) found that 75% of respondents from villages near RFs with dense rubber plantations attributed the rapid rise in deforestation to shrinking primate habitats, forcing monkeys to stray into human settlements. Many villages with rubber plantations have expressed similar experiences. For example, Mohante—a rubber cultivator—stated,<sup>2</sup>

In our rubber garden, we neither see snakes nor any birds' nests; instead, it only attracts more mosquitoes.

State agencies are cognisant of the situation, yet no adequate interventions are being implemented. Instead, the promotion of agroforestry cash crops such as palm oil is continued. Despite significant factors contributing to deforestation, including timber smuggling, road expansion, and resource extraction, there is a lack of updated assessment data regarding forest decline. There available data is outdated. For example, an evaluation of Tripura's dense forest cover indicates a reduction between 1972–75 and 1997–99. Furthermore, the most substantial loss of dense forest cover occurred between 1972 and 1985. According to the Forest Survey of India (FSI), approximately 73% of the state's forest area is experiencing moderate to severe degradation (cited in Bhowmik and Chakraborti 2011: 117). FSI's assessment indicates that around 21% of the forest area falls under the category of dense forest, while 34% is classified as open forest. Between 1991 and 2003, the dense forest area expanded from 185 sq km to 4,988 sq km, whereas the open forest area slightly declined from 3,710 sq km to 3,602 sq km during the same period (Bhowmik and Chakraborti 2011: 117). The aggressive promotion of palm oil plantations suggests that economic considerations are being prioritised over concerns over deforestation.

### Economic Development or State Control?

Further, doubts persist regarding the economic viability of palm oil plantations, given the limited success of previous

monocropping ventures such as rubber in the state. Although some reports may suggest that rubber plantations have spurred economic development among tribal populations, the actual benefits to many tribes remain questionable, as tribal communities continue to struggle with achieving favourable market values for rubber and areca nut products. However, it is ironic that despite the outcomes of these earlier crop plantations, the promotion of palm oil cultivation is lauded as a lucrative alternative to rubber. Palm oil cultivation promises substantially higher profits for farmers compared to rubber, contributing to both national and state economic independence (Nath 2023). For instance, it is argued that while rubber cultivation takes approximately seven years to become profitable, palm oil can achieve profitability in as little time as four years. To support farmers, the government plans to establish centres where it will purchase crude oil from them and send it to refineries for processing into finished oil, which will be marketed as Ruchi Oil by Patanjali Foods. The state will also look at the development of separate processing centres operated by Patanjali and Godrej (Nath 2023). However, this raises significant concerns, as tribal communities of Tripura have been excluded from accessing equitable markets and fair pricing mechanisms for their products, just like their previous and present experience with rubber plantations. Consequently, the perception of palm oil as a viable replacement to rubber plantations for the economic development of tribal communities remains contentious, as it is more likely to intensify economic disadvantages experienced by tribals.

In the context of this plantation-led economic growth for tribals through palm oil plantation, a significant concern emerges regarding whether this initiative will reinforce state and private company control over tribal lands. This concern is particularly pertinent in Tripura, the sole state in North East India where forest areas are predominantly managed by state-corporate entities, primarily through monocultural plantation projects. A significant observation

of ongoing agroforestry initiatives in Tripura reveals that, despite the forest department's stated commitment to community consultation and participation in selecting tree species, this practice is often neglected. Instead, the department provides specific species for cultivation to the villagers. During my discussion with some tribal communities, they demeaned and criticised the forest department's involvement in land-use decisions concerning patta lands, which remain under its jurisdiction. Even palm oil plantations are introduced in this top-down linear manner. However, the significant impact of changing land use towards monoculture plantations on tribal life and community-owned land and biodiversity is frequently overlooked. Agroforestry plantations regulated under forest provisions have already instigated division, structural changes, and conflict within communities due to a lack of transparency and the exclusion of local stakeholders from decision-making and project execution processes. Hence, the introduction of palm oil plantations is further likely to diminish the authority of tribal community-based councils, gram panchayats (village councils), and the interface between autonomous district councils and the state in land management, transferring significant control to oil industries. This shift is anticipated to further complicate and exacerbate issues of community land management and forest loss under palm oil plantations.

### In Conclusion

Tripura is proceeding with oil palm plantations despite its detrimental impacts and the extensive opposition to palm oil cultivation in other parts of North East India. The primary insight here is that deforestation—largely driven by commercial plantations—significantly exacerbates climate change, yet receives insufficient attention, a pattern that is likely to recur with palm oil plantations. While monoculture plantations like palm oil are promoted by the state and its private partners in Tripura, they offer minimal economic benefits to marginalised tribal communities and the perpetuation of state control primarily

to serve external trade and resource extraction interests. Within this context, it is crucial to safeguard forests and their biodiversity, addressing socioecological issues alongside balanced and sustainable forest use and cash crop plantations.

### NOTES

- 1 Interviewed on 20 March 2024 in Kamalachara village (Dhalai district).
- 2 Interviewed on 15 March 2024 in Kamalachara village (Dhalai district).

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