

SOCIAL ACTION

A Quarterly Review of Social Trends

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

- ❑ Cultivating the Future: Buckwheat as a sustainable food crop for the Anthropocene
Bengt G. Karlsson
- ❑ Economies of Care: Imagining Food Sovereign Communities in Eastern Himalayas
Meenal Tula
- ❑ Gendered Landscape and Entangled Everydayness: Stories of Women Foragers in Karbi Anglong, Assam
Trishita Shandilya
- ❑ In Honour of My Helos Tree: Locating Loss
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Deboleena Sengupta
- ❑ Culture, Consumption, and Conservation: The *Mithun* in Arunachal Pradesh
Abhishruti Sarma
- ❑ Food Sovereignty Movements and Environmental Justice in India: Critical Insights and Assessments from Uttarakhand and Odisha
Pushpa Singh

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Editor : **Denzil Fernandes**

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Guest Editors: Sanjay Barbora & Meenal Tula

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Changing Caste Equations and Assertion of Other Communities

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(Last date to receive articles : 15 February 2024)

Intolerance and Shrinking Space of Civil Society

July-September 2024

(Last date to receive articles : 15 May 2024)

Labour Codes: Challenges and Prospects

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SOCIAL ACTION

10, Institutional Area

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Food Sovereignty and Environmental Justice in Eastern Himalayas

The thematic context

This special issue of *Social Action* was the outcome of a three-day conference in Dibrugarh, on the emerging areas of conflict and cooperation in fragile ecological areas of the eastern fringe of the Indian subcontinent. The conference, *Sustainable Futures: Agriculture, Ecology and Conservation in India*, was held from 14th to 16th of December 2022, at Dibrugarh University, Assam, India. The editors wish to acknowledge the support of the Swedish Research Council (Project No. 2020-03859) in organising the conference.

The participants, many of whom have contributed to this issue, felt that it was essential to assess their work in relation to the traumatic events and upended lives that happened during and after the coronavirus pandemic. Their quest reflected a significant outcome of the pandemic for social scientists across the world. The pandemic had forced us to return to foundational relationships between the world of humans and that of nature. It is a question that has gained even greater currency among the youth, Indigenous communities, and advocacy groups working with marginalised communities. What kind of development are we pushing? What kind of disasters are we confronted by? These concerns are the foundational to environmental justice advocacy and research across the world. Furthermore, by focusing on access and decision-making related to communities' relationships to their food and ecology, we draw attention to food growing capacities of small farmers in the present-day context of climate change and rapacious economic development (or what has emerged as the discourse on food sovereignty).

Agricultural practices, especially in the manner in which they have evolved in the region, immediately connect with the emergent concerns for the environment. Both subsistence and semi-commercial farming practices, as well as pastoralism, have coexisted with various forms of extractive industries and border-making projects in South Asia. This reality has lent a normative sheen to some policies that now seem questionable. For instance, there was a concerted effort by Indian agricultural scientists and policy makers to portray swidden cultivation (*jhum*) as wasteful and detrimental to the environment. However, given the topography and predominance of

community ownership over the foothill and hill areas, *jhum* was the norm until the last decade of the 20th century, and as one is now aware, it has had a tremendous impact on preserving the biodiversity in the region. With very negligible use of chemicals, as insistence upon natural and traditional methods of growing food, swidden agriculture provided its practitioners with a balanced and nutritious diet that many policy makers are trying to reintroduce today. This assumes greater significance as the use of chemical pesticides and herbicides have increased in the region and led to arsenic poisoning in river fed plains – mainly in Bangladesh and the Brahmaputra valley – where paddy cultivation has been practiced for centuries.

Similarly, accelerating infrastructural and border-making activities were seen as ways out of the developmental deficit that was the outcome of colonialism. Because of this process, one is left with far more political and social insecurities than were there in the past. Citizenship and identity debates have led to intractable political differences, while infrastructural development, specially building of hydroelectric dams, have led to protests and unrest. This volatility has seeped into agriculture in the region in different ways. For instance, the introduction of new cash crops such as palm oil, areca nut, and rubber, as well as both ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ species like millet and buckwheat to offset imports, require greater debates within the farming community in the Eastern Himalayas. Typically, converting swidden fields into cash crops and plantations require relatively less labour and with ready subsidies from the state and industry, farmers can be persuaded to change their practices. However, they have an adverse effect on the soil and landscape. Furthermore, their efficacy to generate returns fall considerably within a farmer’s lifetime, leaving their future generations with very little earnings.

So why do farmers and governments continue to experiment with such an array of changes in land use that have severe consequences in the Eastern Himalayan region today? A provisional answer has to do with the lack of political capital possessed by farmers in the region. Other than the densely populated regions of Bengal and the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, the farmer has not been seen as an agent of change in the region. In fact, it has been noted that policy makers have viewed them as socially conservative, but easily malleable individuals who participate in large-scale changes in global land grab for converting subsistence food growing for commercial food growing, non-food production (like rubber), and biofuel production. Unlike other parts of South Asia, where large and medium farmers can mobilise along caste and class lines, those in the Eastern Himalayas are

socially and culturally isolated from large-scale political mobilisation.

The contributions

The contributions in this issue all grapple with these questions of the past, present and the future of our farming practices, food systems and environment. Karlsson's paper, using the example of buckwheat, a "future smart crop" that is being promoted by Meghalaya state for small and marginal farmers, dwells on how farmers' choices and decisions are imbricated in emergent economic, social and ecological relations. Tula and Shandilya in their papers discuss the significance of traditional agroecological practices within Indigenous communities which are predominantly performed by women. They bring together concerns about subsistence, solidarity, equity, preserving Indigenous food systems, agroecology, decision-making and access to livelihoods in the face of expanding industrial agricultural systems. Against the backdrop of the Baghjan blowout of 2020, Amrita Gogoi and Noihrit Gogoi raise poignant questions about how communities and individuals experience and resist environmental loss and alienation from their land, in the face of damaged landscapes and uncertain futures. Sengupta's paper speaks to the shifting relationalities between people, plants and animals in India-Bangladesh border enclaves, and how they get caught up in and also resist state projects seeking to materialise fixities in these liminal spaces. Sarma, through the themes of culture, consumption and conservation looks at how an endemic animal species of the Eastern Himalayas, the *mithun* (*Bos frontalis*) is entangled with the everyday practices of the local communities and state-led conservation projects. Through the relations of care and kinship she describes how the "in betweenness" of the *mithun* comes to be, and the difficulty in classifying it within fixed categories, or conserving it through state-defined practices. Singh's paper, through her work in Uttarakhand and Odisha, helps make connections with ongoing movements around food and agriculture in other parts of the country and reflects upon the various institutional, structural, economic and policy barriers faced by them.

This is a distinctively unique moment for region as the different contributions to the special issue will attest. In the carefully thought through mix of senior scholars and young researchers, readers will find a growing concern about the relationship between different communities of the region and the land that they live on. Extending the questions of a critical review of identity, representation, and development that had animated academic discourse on the region before the pandemic, the

contributors use the landscape and non-human, sentient beings to focus on new concerns that have universal resonance. Their work echoes the urgency expressed by advocacy groups, global campaigners for greater awareness about the impact of climate change, as well as Indigenous people across the world. The fragile ecosystem of the Eastern Himalayas therefore requires a collective response to our pandemic future. It returns to the foundational question about the relationship between the human and natural world. It is a relationship that must be mediated through justice, equity, and democratic debates about sustainable development, since they remain our best hope as we foray into an uncertain 21st century. □

Sanjay Barbora

Professor,
Tata Institute of Social Sciences,
Guwahati Campus.

Meenal Tula,

Postdoctoral Fellow,
North Eastern Social Research Centre,
Guwahati.

Cultivating the Future: Buckwheat as a sustainable food crop for the Anthropocene

Bengt G. Karlsson*

Abstract

Buckwheat is commonly described as a pseudo-cereal as its usage is similar to that of cereals, but without belonging to the family of grasses, as is the case with wheat and other cereals. Buckwheat has been on the retreat during the last 50 years or more. Now, however, there seems to be a revival underway for this and other ancient crops, being promoted and celebrated as “future smart crops” that are highly nutritious, climate resilient and grow well in poor soils under harsh conditions without major inputs of fertilizers, pesticides or irrigation.

In this paper, I will trace the ongoing campaign to introduce buckwheat cultivation in the Northeast Indian state of Meghalaya. As I show, buckwheat is a crop that relatively easily can be accommodated by local, small-scale farmers and even if the state campaign mainly points to the large export potential of buckwheat, local food entrepreneurs have also expressed interest in the new crop. Yet as with the case of quinoa in Latin America, “miracle crop” stories need to be taken with caution. To think about farmers’ choices of crops and how these are imbricated in wider economic, social and ecological relations, I introduce the notion of modes of cultivation.

Key words: Buckwheat, Meghalaya, Eastern Himalayas, miracle crops, modes of cultivation

Contrary to what the name suggests, buckwheat (*Fagopyrum esculentum*) is not related to wheat. Buckwheat is commonly described as a pseudo-cereal as its usage is similar to that of cereals, but without belonging to the family of grasses, as is the case with wheat and other cereals. Other such pseudo-cereals are amaranth and quinoa. If wheat is being cultivated on ever-increasing acreages around the world, buckwheat has been on the retreat during the last 50 years or more. Now, however, there seems to be a revival underway for this and other ancient crops, being promoted

*Professor, Social Anthropology, Stockholm University. Email: bengt.karlsson@socant.su.se

and celebrated as “future smart crops” that are highly nutritious, climate resilient and grow well in poor soils under harsh conditions without major inputs of fertilizers, pesticides or irrigation. On top of that, buckwheat has a short maturation cycle and as it suppresses weeds the farmer can basically leave the crop to itself in the field between sowing and harvest. One need not be a climate activist to despair over the present conditions of the Anthropocene, and here buckwheat does indeed offer glimmers of hope. As the title of a new book has it, *Buckwheat: Forgotten Crop for the Future* (Pirzadah & Rehman, 2021). Yet, the narrative of loss and neglect might be somewhat misleading, buckwheat has after all been cultivated all along in various parts of the world, not least in the Eastern Himalayas, the region I am concerned with here. The idea that the crop has a bright new future ahead seems to be a widely shared idea among agricultural experts and researchers specialised in buckwheat. The 14th Conference of the International Buckwheat Research Association (IBRA) was held at the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong, Meghalaya, in 2019. The theme of the conference was “Diversifying Food Systems for Health and Nutritional Security”. In one of the plenary lectures, the Japanese plant scientist and founding member of IBRA, Professor Taiji Adachi, announced the arrival of a “buckwheat renaissance”. If the crop once provided food for the poor, buckwheat is now recognized “to be a potentially important crop for humankind” (Adachi, 2020, p. 25).

In this paper, I will trace the ongoing campaign to introduce buckwheat cultivation in the Northeast Indian state of Meghalaya, with the initial aim to reach 1000 acres by 2025. The campaign was launched shortly after the IBRA conference in the state capital and we can perhaps assume that the buckwheat research community’s enthusiasm rubbed-off on the concerned authorities. The Indian Government who funded the IBRA conference also support research on buckwheat and other underutilized crops, notably millets. The buckwheat campaign in Meghalaya is orchestrated by the semi-independent government body, the Meghalaya Farmers’ Commission in conjunction with the local Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK)¹ branch office, who offer technical support and carries out farm trials. As buckwheat is widely grown in Sikkim and Bhutan and adjoining areas of Eastern Himalayan uplands, it is assumed that the plant can do well in Meghalaya as well. The buckwheat campaigners also point to the wild relative of buckwheat called jarain (*Fagopyrum cymosum*) that grows in abundance in the state. The presence of *jarain*, however, is also a source of confusion as people mix up the two and question why they should cultivate something that is commonly regarded as a weed and grows wild all around.

According to plant scientists, buckwheat was originally domesticated in the Yunnan province of China and adjoining areas of eastern Tibet, and later spreading along trade routes across the Himalayas and further out in the world (Onishi, 2020). There are also reports of buckwheat being cultivated in high altitude areas of Meghalaya (cf. Rana et. al, 2012), and, as we found out, Nepali villagers also used to cultivate buckwheat in the state. But despite such earlier traces of buckwheat cultivation, for the farmers that



Figure 1: Buckwheat Trial Fields at KVK, Shillong.

Photo: Bengt G. Karlsson

now are being approached to cultivate buckwheat it is a matter of taking up a new crop which they lack previous familiarity with. The Farmers' Commission is carrying out training sessions and courses to popularize the crop and bring farmers along. They also distribute seeds free of costs. The seeds were initially sourced from the government research institute in Almora (ICAR), but gradually seeds are now increasingly sourced locally. The government have further issued a guarantee to buy buckwheat from farmers for a minimum price.²

Even if the Commission highlights the health aspects of eating buckwheat, the key motivation for launching the campaign is nevertheless the export potential of the crop. Japan is one of the major markets to be targeted, a country where buckwheat flour is the main ingredient of the popular Soba noodles. With more and more people in the world with gluten intolerance or who suffer from various life style diseases, pseudo-cereals like buckwheat and amaranth are increasingly recognized as healthy alternatives to cereals

and hence the projected increase in global demands. Buckwheat is also of particular interest of the booming functional food sector, as the plant is rich in essential amino acids, vitamins, minerals and with a high-quality protein content (Romanovskaja et. al 2022, p. 2381; Pirzadah & Malik, 2020, p. 2). Russia's war in Ukraine, as Farmers' Commission executive adviser Mr. B. K. Sohliya told me, also works to their advantage. As the two countries are main buckwheat exporters, with the war raging other producers will be able to take over shares of the world market.³ The projected buckwheat renaissance has not gained the same public attention in India as with the high-profile campaign to revive millets and the subsequent United Nations declaring 2023 the International Year of Millets (cf. Tula & Karlsson, 2022). Yet, the arguments about health aspects, the sustainable mode of cultivation and the export potential are strikingly similar for both these "under-utilized" crops.

The paper is based on fieldwork carried out together with Meenal Tula in the fall of 2022 and early spring 2023. As a long-term observer of environmental issues in Meghalaya, I further build an ongoing conversation with activists and researchers in the state. In the first part, I will give an account of the Buckwheat Festival that was organized at newly established Institute of Hotel Management in Shillong, September 9-10, 2022. Some of my activist friends dismissed the festival as a costly spectacle, arguing that instead of focusing on single export crops (one year rubber, next coffee, strawberry, cut flowers and so on), the government should instead work on a long term, comprehensive, agricultural strategy to strengthen the overall food security of the state. One of my friends who works with a local NGO further opposed buckwheat on the basis of it being a foreign crop, arguing, "why not stick to the 'indigenous crops' that farmers are familiar with and that are adapted to the environmental conditions here". While these are genuine concerns, I still think that buckwheat can be considered an attractive proposition for farmers in the state. As I will show, despite its 'newness' buckwheat shares many of the properties that indigenous food sovereignty initiatives tend to favour, above all that the crop is not controlled by agro-industrial companies. Earlier plant-breeding attempts to develop new high-yielding cultivars have not made much progress and the buckwheat cultivars in use today continue to large extent to be landraces with high genetic diversity (Rana et. al, 2012, p. 50). These landrace varieties further remain in the hands of indigenous farmers across the Himalayas. As the cultivation of buckwheat is organic, much of the additional agricultural inputs can also be sourced locally. Buckwheat, hence, remains to large extent a "crop under subsistence farming practices"

(Campbell & Nagano, 2020, p. 27). These are issues that I will explore further in the second section of the paper where we will visit two farmers that have taken up buckwheat cultivation with support from KVK.

In the third and final section, I will consider buckwheat in relation to the future of agriculture in the Eastern Himalayas. In doing so, I pay attention to plant life as a regenerative force and agricultural practices as a way of cultivating the future. Farmers' choices of what to plant and how, ultimately live on and can have far-reaching consequences for the environment and for social well-being more generally.⁴ During last decades there have been a massive expansion of a few monocultural crops like oil palm and soybean in the Global South (cf. Chao, 2022; Hetherington, 2020). Such plantations have expanded at the expense of subsistence farmers whose lands, livelihoods and environments are being appropriated and devastated.⁵ Buckwheat, on the other hand, appears as crop that can be integrated into existing small-scale farming systems that are central for maintaining agro biodiversity in the state. To think about how crop choices are imbricated in wider economic, social and ecological relations, I introduce the notion of *modes of cultivation*.

Buckwheat Festival

The entrance to the festival venue was draped in colourful banners all with the colourful buckwheat logo. To enter, one has to have elegant festival tags. We had the fortune to get VIP tags, as we came in company with acclaimed journalist Patricia Mukhim. Inside the venue there were stands showcasing various buckwheat products



Figure 2: The Japanese chef's demonstration of Soba noodles at Buckwheat Festival, Shillong.

Photo: Bengt G. Karlsson

as well as other locally produced agricultural produce, not least various types of fruit wines. The highlights were the stall with a Japanese chef

cooking and serving the famous Soba noodles made with buckwheat. In the background of the stall there was a large colour image showing a snow-capped mountain saying 'Farm Yukino', a farm run by an experienced buckwheat farmer who, we learned, would be staying on for a week to meet and share his experience with local farmers. Indian celebrity chefs took turns to cook new cross-over dishes with buckwheat on a large stage, filmed by enthusiastic media persons and visitors. The famous Chef Joel and colleagues from Nagaland were preparing different traditional Naga dishes where they exchanged rice with buckwheat. Inside the venue, VIP guests, notably the Japanese delegation, were invited to take part in a food and wine tasting session led by sommelier Gaurav Thapar from Bangalore. Local fruit wines were served along with experimental buckwheat dishes like spring roll, spaghetti, *idli* and brownie as a desert. It was a highly festive mood, jokes and comments about the servings exchanged between the tables. Students from the Institute of Hotel Management had beautifully arranged the tables and were serving the guests. Apparently, no expenses had been spared to make this a first-class event.

Outside we ended up at the KVK counter where they were selling buckwheat from local farmers nicely packed in 250 grams packages. They also showed the buckwheat seed (variety VL Ugal-7) distributed to farmers. Next to their counter a business entrepreneur from Hyderabad demonstrated a small buckwheat dehuller, developed for small-scale farming conditions with a stated capacity to dehull 10 kilos buckwheat per hour. During the two-day festival several seminars, workshops and cooking classes were taking place. On the way out, an exhibition pedagogically explained how buckwheat can be cultivated and one of the posters with the title 'Why grow buckwheat?', listed five key benefits; nutritional security, food security with export potential, green manure, honey production and short duration/ potential economic crop for farmers. When the grand finale was about to take place, the skies opened up and a massive downpour of rain forced people to take shelter, missing much of the speeches and the cooking award-ceremony that ended the festival.

It is hard to make sense of the festival. While we met a group of women that had been part of a seminar on how to grow buckwheat, and there had also been an event where farmers had shared their experiences of cultivating the crop, the general impression is nevertheless that the farming community was not the targeted audience but rather the urban middle class in Shillong. The pairing of fruit wine and buckwheat dishes was in itself rather intriguing, obviously not something that speaks to popular sensibilities. Yet again, it

might well be argued that to spur an interest and ultimately a demand for buckwheat it is critical to reach the middle-class consumer. A restaurant owner and foodie we met a few months after the event applauded the buckwheat festival, telling us that he had been there selling his fruit wine. And as he runs a Korean and Japanese restaurant, getting locally produced buckwheat is wonderful news. He already serves imported soba noodles, but has now started making his own noodles and is also experimenting with new buckwheat dishes. It was easy to cook with buckwheat, basically just to boil as with rice, saying “it is kind of yummy”. When you cook it, he continued, “the aroma is similar to *Joha* rice” (a fragrant rice variety in Assam). But before getting buckwheat dishes on the menu, he had to be sure that there will be a regular supply. In addition to food, he was also experimenting with buckwheat-saké, sourcing recipes from the internet where he exchanged rice (traditionally used for saké) with buckwheat. The result was promising and he was convinced that it will eventually work and that he will be able to bring it out in the market. As he felt there was so much potential in buckwheat, he had also decided to start growing it on his own land, saying that it is supposed to be pretty easy to cultivate.⁶ When we visited, the restaurant was mainly populated by younger people. With the youth in Shillong – like in other parts of Northeast India – attracted by East Asian popular culture, not least K-pop and Manga, it is perhaps no surprise that a restaurant serving Japanese and Korean dishes has turned out such a success.⁷ And, hence, it is not unlikely that a new buckwheat menu will go down well with the younger generation.

Growing Buckwheat

KVK often work through what they call ‘progressive farmers’⁸ to roll out their programs, and the officer in charge of the buckwheat campaign gave us two names of farmers he felt we should meet. Bah Wallamkupar Lyngrah lives some 30 kilometers from central Shillong, nearby the Umroi Airport. He did indeed appear as a farmer who knew what he was doing. As he proudly explained, visitors frequently came to his farm and, especially to learn about his innovation in keeping chickens. On their homestead, he and his wife had pigs, a fish pond, a green-house for vegetables and they cultivated most of what they needed.

Bah Lyngrah showed us the two acres of land he had prepared for buckwheat. The sowing was just about to happen, scheduled for the first week of March (or thereabout, depending on the rains). This was his second year with buckwheat and he was hoping it will be as successful as the first

year. After 85-90 days the crop will be ready to harvest, after which he will grow various other food crops like maize, french beans and ginger, and then in August he will again plant a second crop of buckwheat, he told us. It was Bah Lyngrah who pointed out to the Farmer's Commission about Nepali farmers who had earlier cultivated buckwheat in the village. Most of the Nepalis had left Meghalaya after the ethnic clashes in the late 1980s and only a few families remained. According to Bah Lyngrah, the Nepalis called buckwheat *phapar* and their way of cultivation was radically different to the methods now instructed by KVK. The Nepalis always kept the soil covered and sowing the seed directly on the ground without ploughing after harvesting the previous crop. In this way, Bah Lyngrah reasoned, they could keep the moisture in the soil and the sprouting plants got some initial protection. Bah Lyngrah planned to try this way of cultivation. For him, buckwheat was not solely a cash crop. His wife was diabetic and she regularly used to eat buckwheat. And, as he put it, they could eat everything of the plant; leaf, stem and seeds. He had developed his own ingenious method of dehulling the seeds, using an old manual rice de-husker. This was not only cheaper, but more effective than the dehulling machine he had tried at the Buckwheat Festival. It was also easy to store buckwheat seeds. As we parted, Bah Lyngrah summed up his philosophy, that is, the need to be self-sufficient in essential food stuffs. When crisis hit, as with the Corona pandemic, you can't trust there will be food available in the market, he told us.

The second farmer, Kong Baphira Nongrep lives in Smit. She was getting ready for her third attempt at buckwheat. The previous ones had not lived up to expectations, something she attributed to the field she had planted on – “buckwheat doesn't like clay soil” - and that she didn't follow the advice of KVK to apply biopesticides. As a result, white grub worms had finished off most of the crop. The worms, she told, were already present in the soil as she earlier had cultivated potatoes in the field. Such hiccups seemed not to dampen her enthusiasm to give buckwheat another go. Kong Nongrep had now selected fields behind her house, and these were now ready for sowing. She also showed us the beehives provided by KVK, saying that beekeeping and buckwheat is a perfect match. Honey from buckwheat is supposed to be of finest quality, catching up to five times the price of regular honey. She had also prepared compost to be applied, mainly consisting of cow dung and paddy straw. Kong Nongrep had saved seeds from previous harvest, but like with Bah Lyngrah she was also expecting to get more seeds from KVK. Earlier she had sold back a portion of the harvest to KVK, but the plan now was to process the seed herself and sell directly to consumers. Her

husband who is a carpenter will help her develop a method to dehull the seeds. As Kong Nongrep explained, the planted buckwheat is easy to deal with, unlike the wild sibling, *jarain*, that is impossible to get rid of once it had established itself somewhere. Kong Nongrep stressed that buckwheat was such an easy crop to grow. She had started to use it in her cooking, but that the problem remained with the de-husking.

It is of course hard to generalize from the experiences of these two farmers. But what stands out here is the ease and confidence that both farmers had in trying out this new crop. It is obviously not the first crop that has been suggested to them. Their approach seems a rather pragmatic one, KVK provides them with training, seeds and other forms of support, and if it seems doable, they give it a try. If in this case, buckwheat doesn't do well, they will most likely give it up after a few years. Both Kong Nongrep and Bah Lyngrah have gone to this with caution, only using a portion of their land and have not invested much besides their labour time and land use. Hence, they don't stand to lose much if the project fails. But again, if the expected buckwheat renaissance that scientists and government officers foresee ultimately will take off, their gains might be bigger.

Cultivating the future

Critical food study scholar Emma McDonell points to a persistent “miracle food narrative” that over the years have identified different miracle crops supposed to feed the hungry and elevate the world from malnutrition and starvation, and while these crops earlier were the scientifically modified crops of the green revolution, in the recent decades with concerns about sustainable development, climate change and multiculturalism, quinoa has emerged as the unlikely new candidate. She writes,

Quinoa is framed as a miracle food and a miracle crop that while curing global hunger, can also provide poverty alleviation, biodiversity conservation, and climate change adaptation (McDonell, 2015, p. 71).

Many of the words used to describe quinoa also applies for buckwheat, for example, being neglected and underutilized, a climate change adaption crop, highly nutritious, being an indigenous or traditional crop and above all, being a ‘grain of the future’. As McDonell (2015, p. 78) describes, FAO declared quinoa “humanity’s most promising crop” and as the hype evolved export of quinoa from the main producers Ecuador and Peru skyrocket in the early 2000s (known as the ‘quinoa boom’). This boom, however, did

not benefit the highland farmers that had cultivated it all along. With more than 40 countries now experimenting with quinoa cultivation, small scale producers in the harsh Andean mountains now finds it hard to compete, according to McDonnell (2015, pp. 81-82).⁹

Bhutan is one such country that identified quinoa as a future export crop and since 2015 the country is carrying out experimental cultivation with several quinoa varieties across different agroecological zones. As with the introduction of buckwheat in Meghalaya, the Bhutanese government is organizing festivals to popularize quinoa and showcase how it can be integrated with local cuisines as well as providing technical knowhow, seeds and other support to farmers (Katwal & Bazile, 2020). Despite such elaborate measures, Katwal and Bazile (2020, p. 14) note, “(I)n parallel with agronomic issues, the absence of marketing channels to sell farmers’ small household surpluses, which is absent today, must be resolved.”

Here one cannot but think that it would have made much more sense for Bhutan to go for buckwheat, an indigenous crop that is widely grown and consumed in the country.¹⁰ As mentioned, buckwheat and quinoa share many of the attractive properties as a nutritious food crop and an export commodity.¹¹ On the other side of the border, the Sikkim government has identified buckwheat as one of four prioritized export crops. During a brief visit to the state, I was struck by the enthusiasm for organic buckwheat cultivation.¹²

In the food sovereignty project, which this study is a part of, we come back to questions about if and how it matters that farmers take up new crops or stick to familiar crops, that is, indigenous crops (Deka et. al, 2023). Newly introduced crops might lack cultural resonance and farmers tend to become dependent on seeds and technical know-how from outside. Yet, as we learn from historical accounts, peoples have always adopted new food crops and some of these have ultimately become central staple foods like in the case of maize and cassava that migrated to Africa from Latin America as part of the so-called Columbian exchange (cf. Logan, 2020). In thinking about farmers’ choices about what to cultivate, it is important to consider the affordances of specific plants, that is, the usages and thriving they bring forth or enable (Ingold, 2018). Here it is critical not only to think of what plants offer humans, but also what they bring forth or close off for other living beings as well as the wider surroundings. In addition, and more importantly for this discussion, I would suggest that we also need to consider agricultural crops in relation to their *modes of cultivation*.

In a most basic form, I see *modes of cultivation* as a continuum where the monocultural plantation (export oriented, capital intensive farming where seeds and other inputs are externally sourced) is on one end and subsistence farming like indigenous shifting cultivation with large number of crops sown in a singular field (mainly for household needs and where seeds and other inputs are locally sourced) on the other. Most contemporary smallholder farmers or family farmers today, like Kong Nongrep and Bah Lyngrah, as discussed above, would grow crops for their own needs as well as for sale in the market, and as such, can be thought of as somewhere in the middle, between the two end points, in the continuum.¹³ Choices of crops, hence, comes with a set of social, economic and environmental relations that brings forth or carry different futures.

Conclusion

In a photo-ethnographic essay on tobacco farming in the Indo-Bangladesh borderland, anthropologist Sahana Ghosh narrates how one of her interlocutors describes tobacco as a “hungry crop”, that “eats up nutrients, labour, pesticides, and thus cumulatively even profits” (2022, caption 1). In this short paper, I have followed attempts by the Meghalaya government to introduce buckwheat cultivation. What the future holds for this venture remains to be seen. Meghalaya farmers, as I suggest, might find the crop a suitable addition that can be easily integrated within the existing modes of cultivation. How eventually the farmers might come to perceive the crop also remains to be seen, but sticking to my perhaps naïve optimism my guess would nevertheless be that of a more benevolent being than the hungry tobacco plant. □

Endnotes

¹Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) is part of the National Agricultural Research System to support the agricultural sector with technical and scientific expertise. KVK functions as an agricultural extension center between research institutions and farmers, and in many instances regional KVK centers acts as nodes for the implementation of government schemes and projects in the field of agriculture.

²We have different information on what this guarantee price is, but according to our latest information it is around Rs. 80 per kilo (February 2023).

³Interview in Shillong, November 2022.

⁴An extraordinary example of this is when the Laujje highlanders on Sulawesi started planting cocoa, which within a decade completely altered social relations and the landholding system (Li, 2014).

⁵Mizoram has rolled-out a large program to support oil palm cultivation and Nagaland is now on the verge of taking up oil palm in a big way – aiming for 15 000 ha in seven

districts - something that raises alarm in the state. In an article in the newspaper *The Morung Express* several environmental and indigenous rights activists point to monoculture plantations as being in direct contradiction to traditional farming practices where a large number of crops are being grown together in the same field. The fear is further that the expansion of monocultural plantations will lead to a land grab or concentration of land in the hands of the political and economic elite (Jamir, 2021).

⁶Interview in Shillong, February 2023.

⁷On K-pop in Northeast India, see Kenye & Pou (2022).

⁸The term 'progressive farmers' were commonly used in interviews and interactions with KVK staff and government officers. As far as we could make out, it refers to farmers with an interest and capacity to implement government schemes. This was certainly the case with the two progressive farmers cultivating buckwheat, that we met. Before joining the buckwheat scheme, both of them had been part of several other schemes and seemed to have a close relation with the KVK staffs.

⁹In her recent book, *Quinoa: Food Politics and Agrarian Life in the Andean Highlands* (2023), anthropologist Linda J. Seligmann gives an in-depth account of how the quinoa boom have affected the lives and livelihoods of the Huanquite, a Quechua speaking indigenous community in Peru. One critical aspect, of relevance for our discussion here, is that with the turn to quinoa cultivation as a major export commodity, was that instead of cultivating traditional landrace varieties, farmers were encouraged to turn to improved, high-yielding, quinoa cultivars (Seligmann 2023, Introduction).

¹⁰FAO has played a key role in financing and providing technical know-how, seed materials and other agricultural inputs to the quinoa scheme in Bhutan (Katwal & Bazile, 2020). To what extent international support can explain why ultimately quinoa was given priority over indigenous food crops with similar characteristics is beyond the scope of this paper, but still something I hope to explore further.

¹¹In July 2022 when I discussed the possibility to do field research in Bhutan to study millets and buckwheat, I was told by the Director, Department of Agriculture, Mr. Yonten Gyamtsho, that these old food crops were not a priority of the government and that if I wanted my research to be of any use for them, I should instead look at quinoa cultivation.

¹²Interview in Gangtok with KVK officer Dr. Boniface Lepcha, November 2022. See also, Sikkim government press release, October 20, 2020 -<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1666098>.

¹³Smallholder farmers, according to the FAO, are those that cultivate land from less than one ha up to 10 ha (cf. https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/nr/sustainability_pathways/docs/Factsheet_SMALLHOLDERS.pdf).

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