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From Subsistence to Market Integration: The Economic Transition of the Vaiphei People

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Abstract

The Vaiphei people, a recognized Scheduled Tribe predominantly residing in the hill districts of Manipur, have traditionally sustained a subsistence-oriented economy rooted in shifting cultivation, forest resource utilization, hunting, and indigenous handicrafts. In recent decades, processes of modernization, infrastructural expansion, state intervention, and growing market penetration have progressively transformed their livelihood systems. This study examines the nature and dynamics of the Vaiphei community's economic transition from a largely self-sufficient subsistence framework toward increasing integration with market-oriented activities. Employing qualitative ethnographic methods alongside analysis of secondary sources, the research investigates traditional agricultural practices, occupational patterns, livestock rearing, cottage industries, and emerging forms of economic diversification. The findings reveal that while traditional economic institutions continue to hold cultural and social significance, expanding commercialization, wage employment, and improved market connectivity have substantially reshaped local economic structures. The study underscores the importance of culturally responsive development strategies that harmonize indigenous knowledge systems with contemporary economic opportunities to ensure sustainable and inclusive community development.

Keywords: Market integration, Northeast India, Shifting cultivation, Subsistence livelihood, Vaiphei economy.

1. Introduction:

The Vaiphei are a constitutionally recognized Scheduled Tribe listed under the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1956 (Government of India, 1956). They are predominantly concentrated in the hill regions of Manipur, particularly in Churachandpur district, while smaller populations are also distributed across adjoining northeastern states, including Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura. According to the Census of India, the Vaiphei population in Manipur was recorded at approximately 42,957 in 2011, with a significant majority residing in rural hill areas characterized by limited infrastructural development (Census of India, 2011).

Historically, the Vaiphei economy was closely intertwined with the natural environment. Forest ecosystems functioned as the principal source of subsistence, providing food, raw materials, and livelihood opportunities. Their traditional economic system was marked by subsistence production, collective labour organization, and adaptive ecological practices, reflecting a high degree of environmental dependence and sustainability. However, in recent decades, expanding exposure to market forces, infrastructural

improvements, state development interventions, and socio-economic mobility have progressively reshaped these traditional economic patterns.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the processes and dynamics underlying the transition of the Vaiphei economy from subsistence self-sufficiency toward increasing market integration, with particular attention to the structural changes influencing livelihood strategies and economic organization.

2. Theoretical Framework:

This study is anchored in three complementary theoretical perspectives that together provide a comprehensive analytical lens for understanding the structure, resilience, and transformation of the Vaiphei economic system.

2.1 Subsistence Economy Theory

Subsistence economy theory emphasizes production primarily oriented toward meeting household consumption needs rather than profit maximization. As argued by James C. Scott (1976), peasant societies operating within subsistence systems tend to adopt risk-averse strategies designed to ensure food security and minimize vulnerability to environmental and economic uncertainties. The traditional Vaiphei economy reflects this principle through diversified cropping patterns, shifting cultivation practices, and strong reliance on communal labour arrangements, all of which function to distribute risk and sustain livelihood stability.

2.2 Sustainable Livelihoods Framework

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, developed by Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway (1992), provides a holistic perspective for analyzing how different forms of capital—natural, social, human, physical, and financial—interact to shape livelihood outcomes. Within this framework, the Vaiphei economy demonstrates a high degree of dependence on natural capital, particularly forests and land resources, while simultaneously drawing upon social networks, indigenous ecological knowledge, and community cooperation as critical livelihood assets.

2.3 Modernization and Market Integration Theory

Modernization theory posits that traditional societies gradually transition toward market-oriented production systems as a result of technological advancement, infrastructural development, and expanding economic integration. Walt W. Rostow (1960) conceptualized this transformation as a linear process of development characterized by structural shifts from subsistence to commercial economic activities. The evolving Vaiphei economy illustrates this trajectory through the increasing commercialization of agriculture, diversification of income sources, and growing participation in wage labour and market exchange systems.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives provide a multidimensional framework for analyzing both the continuity and transformation of the Vaiphei economic system within changing socio-economic contexts

3. Review of Literature:

Scholarly research on tribal economies has consistently emphasized the centrality of environmental dependence, subsistence production, and adaptive livelihood strategies. Early theoretical contributions by Ester Boserup (1965) highlighted the relationship between population pressure and agricultural intensification, arguing that traditional agrarian systems evolve through adaptive responses to demographic and ecological constraints. This perspective provides an important framework for

understanding the dynamic nature of shifting cultivation systems practiced by many indigenous communities.

Subsequent studies focusing on Northeast India have further explored the ecological and socio-cultural dimensions of tribal subsistence economies. P. S. Ramakrishnan (1992) conducted extensive research on shifting cultivation (jhum), demonstrating its ecological sustainability, biodiversity value, and deep cultural embeddedness within indigenous livelihood systems. His work challenged earlier perceptions that viewed shifting cultivation solely as environmentally destructive, instead emphasizing its adaptive and regenerative characteristics.

More recent scholarship has examined the processes of economic transformation among tribal communities in the context of modernization and globalization. K. S. Singh (2012) observed that infrastructural expansion, state development initiatives, and increasing market penetration have contributed to growing market integration among tribal populations in Northeast India, leading to diversification of income sources and gradual shifts away from purely subsistence-oriented livelihoods.

Specific literature focusing on the Vaiphei community remains relatively limited. An important contribution is provided by Henna Vaiphei (2014) in his doctoral thesis *Identity Crisis of the Suantak in Northeast India and Myanmar*, which briefly discusses the economic life of the Vaiphei. His study documents traditional jhum cultivation practices, land allocation systems under village chiefs, cropping patterns, and supplementary livelihood activities such as animal husbandry, fishing, hunting, and cottage industries. Nevertheless, the scarcity of focused empirical research on the Vaiphei economy underscores a significant scholarly gap, thereby reinforcing the relevance and necessity of the present study.

4. Objectives of the Study:

The present study is guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the structural characteristics of the traditional economic system of the Vaiphei community.
2. To analyze the nature and functioning of agricultural practices and subsistence livelihood strategies.
3. To assess the role of supplementary subsistence activities in sustaining the local economy.
4. To evaluate the impact of market integration on the processes of economic transition within the Vaiphei society.

5. Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the economic structure and transformation of the Vaiphei community. The methodology integrates multiple sources of data to ensure a comprehensive and contextualized analysis. Primary data were collected through ethnographic fieldwork, including direct observations, field visits to selected villages, and personal communications with village elders and community members. These interactions provided valuable insights into traditional livelihood practices, social organization, and contemporary economic changes.

In addition, the study draws upon secondary sources such as historical documents, published literature, and official census data to contextualize empirical findings within broader socio-economic and historical frameworks. The triangulation of ethnographic evidence with documentary and statistical sources enhances the reliability and depth of the analysis, enabling a holistic understanding of the continuity and transformation of the Vaiphei economic system.

6. Traditional Economic Life:

The traditional economy of the Vaiphei community was predominantly subsistence-oriented and closely dependent on forest resources and agriculture. The primary economic activity was shifting cultivation (jhum), practiced on hill slopes across the region. This system involved rotational land use, mixed cropping, and collective labour participation, reflecting both ecological adaptation and community-based production practices. The forest environment served as the principal source of subsistence, supplying food, fuel, raw materials, and construction resources essential for daily life.

Historical accounts provide valuable insights into the self-sufficient nature of this economic system. As noted by Chapman Clark (1968), the Vaiphei people "were dependent on the forest, and on their own efforts, for all necessities of life. They were entirely self-sufficient, growing all they ate and also the cotton which was spun for clothing and bedding, while materials required for house construction such as wood, bamboo, cane, and thatch were obtained from the forest." This observation underscores the integrated relationship between the Vaiphei livelihood system and the natural environment.

At the household level, most families produced their essential needs, including staple food crops, cotton for weaving, and materials for housing. Economic activities were organized around cooperative labour systems, where community members collectively participated in land clearing, cultivation, and harvesting. Such cooperative practices not only enhanced productivity but also functioned as an important social mechanism for ensuring food security, strengthening social cohesion, and reducing economic vulnerability within the community.

7. Agriculture and Shifting (Jhum) Cultivation:

Agriculture forms the structural foundation of the traditional Vaiphei economy, with shifting cultivation—locally known as *Thingtang Lou*—serving as the principal mode of agricultural production in the hill regions of Manipur. This system has historically functioned as the primary means of subsistence, shaping settlement patterns, labour organization, and ecological adaptation within the community. Although processes of socio-economic change have gradually influenced livelihood practices, *Thingtang Lou* continues to be widely practiced in remote hill villages, while Vaiphei households residing in the plains have increasingly transitioned to wetland paddy cultivation.

The present study focuses specifically on *Thingtang Lou* because it represents the most enduring and culturally embedded agricultural practice of the Vaiphei. Scholars examining tribal agrarian systems in Northeast India note that shifting cultivation persists not merely as an economic activity but also as a socio-cultural institution that embodies indigenous knowledge, ecological balance, and community cooperation (K. S. Singh, 2015; Vaiphei, 2018).

Among the Vaiphei, shifting cultivation follows a well-established and sequential cycle of operations governed by customary norms and village authority structures. These stages typically include site selection, forest clearing, controlled burning, mixed cropping, and rotational fallowing. Each phase reflects a sophisticated body of indigenous ecological knowledge designed to optimize soil fertility, minimize environmental degradation, and ensure sustainable food production. Moreover, the entire cultivation process is deeply embedded in collective labour arrangements, reinforcing social solidarity while facilitating efficient resource utilization within the hill environment. The practice of jhum cultivation among the Vaiphei is discussed as follows:

7.1 Selection and Allocation of Fields (Loumun Etna)

The agricultural cycle begins with *Loumun Etna*, the stage involving the identification and allocation of

cultivation land. In local terminology, *Lou* refers to the cultivation field, while *etna* denotes the act of selection. This process is typically conducted at the beginning of the year and may extend for approximately one week. The selection and allocation of jhum fields are carried out under the authority of the village chief and council, reflecting the institutional role of customary governance in land management.

In villages where forest land is relatively abundant, households are generally permitted to select their preferred cultivation sites within the designated area. Conversely, in settlements experiencing land scarcity, fields are allocated through a lottery system to ensure equity and minimize disputes. Members of the village authority traditionally enjoy greater flexibility in choosing their plots. Local informants frequently express the belief that voluntarily selected plots tend to yield better harvests than lottery-assigned fields, indicating the importance of experiential knowledge and perceptions of land suitability (Shimray, 2004; Singh, 2015).

7.2 Clearing of Fields (Loumun Vatna)

Following land allocation, households undertake *Loumun Vatna*, the clearing of cultivation fields. This stage involves cutting tall trees, shrubs, and thorny vegetation, which are then gathered into heaps for drying. Locally known as *Louvat*, this activity typically takes place between February and March. The cut vegetation, referred to as *Chap*, is left exposed to sunlight for several weeks until fully dried and suitable for burning. Field clearing is highly labour-intensive and often relies on communal cooperation.

7.3 Burning of Vegetation (Loumun Halna)

Once the vegetation has adequately dried, the next stage, *Loumun Halna*, or field burning, is conducted. The dried *Chap* is burnt, producing ash that serves as a natural soil nutrient in the absence of chemical fertilizers. This process, locally known as *Lohal*, usually occurs between late March and early April. Although relatively less labour-intensive, uncontrolled fires occasionally spread beyond cultivation areas, causing damage to surrounding forests. Such risks have historically contributed to environmental concerns, which are increasingly addressed through contemporary conservation initiatives (Baruah, 2011; Devi, 2012).

7.4 Cleaning and Preparation of Fields (Mang Chawm)

Following the burning stage, *Mang Chawm* is carried out to prepare the field for sowing. Partially burnt logs, roots, and debris are collected and either re-burnt or removed entirely. This process ensures a relatively clear surface suitable for digging and planting. The completion of this stage signifies that the field is ready for cultivation.

7.5 Digging of Soil (Lou Kal)

The stage known as *Lou Kal* involves the digging and loosening of soil prior to sowing. Traditional implements such as hoes and spades are used for this purpose. Communal labour groups, locally called *Lawm*, play a significant role, particularly in assisting households with limited manpower. Certain crops—such as pumpkin, gourd, and sugarcane—are planted without soil digging, whereas crops like rice, cotton, potato, and papaya require thorough soil preparation, demonstrating crop-specific indigenous agronomic knowledge (Singh & Gupta, 2017).

7.6 Seed Sowing (Bu Tu)

Seed sowing, locally termed *Bu Tu*, follows soil preparation. Seeds are typically carried in small bamboo baskets worn around the waist. Rice is sown by placing two or three grains in each hole, spaced roughly one foot apart. Alongside rice, a variety of vegetables and secondary crops are planted, reflecting the

mixed-cropping system characteristic of jhum cultivation and its role in promoting household food diversity and nutritional security (Vaiphei, 2018).

7.7 Weeding (Lou Thaw)

Lou Thaw, or weeding, begins two to three months after sowing and continues until the harvest period. This stage is among the most labour-intensive and repetitive tasks within the cultivation cycle. Weeds and shrubs are periodically removed to support healthy crop growth. The activity is frequently undertaken collectively by *Lawm* groups, reinforcing cooperation and shared responsibility within the community.

7.8 Harvesting (Bu At)

The final stage of the agricultural cycle is *Bu At*, or harvesting. Early crops such as maize, pumpkin, and papaya are typically harvested between August and September, while rice—the principal staple—is harvested in November. Harvested produce is initially stored in temporary field barns before being transported to households, often manually over long distances. In years of high yield, this process may extend for several weeks, highlighting the labour-intensive nature of jhum cultivation (Singh, 2015).

7.9 Granaries (Bu Buuk / Bu Inn)

Post-harvest storage is carried out in traditional granaries known as *Bu Buuk* or *Bu Inn*. These structures are usually constructed near the dwelling house, often on the downhill side close to the front porch. Built from bamboo, wood, and thatch, and elevated several feet above ground level, they protect stored grain from moisture and pests. In addition to grain storage, these granaries often serve as safe repositories for valuable household items.

Another storage structure, known as *Bu Pang*, is constructed within the house. Made of plaited bamboo and resembling a storage chest, it is used primarily for short-term storage needs. Together, these indigenous storage systems demonstrate sophisticated knowledge of preservation, resource management, and household food security.

Overall, *Thingtang Lou* represents far more than a subsistence farming practice; it constitutes a holistic indigenous land-use system that historically balanced livelihood needs with ecological sustainability. Strengthening and integrating such traditional knowledge systems through community participation, adaptive governance, and environmentally sensitive development strategies can significantly contribute to sustainable land management and the preservation of cultural heritage. This can contribute meaningfully to the achievement of SDG 15 (Life on Land) while safeguarding the cultural and environmental heritage of the Vaiphei tribe.

8. Agricultural Tools and Implements:

The Vaiphei agricultural system is supported by a range of traditional tools and implements that reflect indigenous technological knowledge and adaptation to hill cultivation practices. These implements are primarily handmade using locally available materials such as wood and iron, and each serves a specific function within the shifting cultivation cycle.

Among the most commonly used tools is the *Tudal* (spade), which is employed for tilling and digging agricultural fields. The *Tuthaw* (hoe) is used for loosening soil and preparing planting holes during seed sowing. For clearing vegetation, particularly during the *Louvat* stage, the *Heicha* (axe) plays a crucial role in cutting large trees and branches. Another indispensable implement is the *Chempong* (dao), a multipurpose cutting tool widely used for chopping wood and crafting wooden components of other agricultural implements, including handles for axes, hoes, and spades.

Additional specialized tools include the *Sialkal-Chem* (sialkal knife), commonly used for precise cutting tasks, and the *Koite* (sickle), which is primarily used during the harvesting period. The *Kangkui* (wooden rake) is utilized during the *Mang Chawm* stage to collect shrubs, bushes, and residual debris from the field after burning.

Collectively, these traditional tools demonstrate the functional simplicity, ecological suitability, and technological ingenuity embedded within the Vaiphei agricultural system, highlighting the community's reliance on locally sourced resources and indigenous craftsmanship.

9. Supplementary Subsistence Activities:

Among the Vaiphei tribe of Manipur, hunting and fishing have historically functioned as important supplementary subsistence activities complementing agriculture, which has remained the primary source of livelihood. These activities were largely practiced to support household consumption rather than for commercial exchange and played a crucial role in bridging seasonal food shortages, particularly during pre-harvest and lean periods. By augmenting agricultural production, hunting and fishing contributed significantly to household food security and dietary diversity within a predominantly subsistence-based agrarian economy (K. S. Singh, 2015; Vaiphei, 2018).

Beyond their economic value, hunting and fishing possessed considerable social and cultural significance in Vaiphei society. Hunting expeditions were traditionally organized on a collective basis, promoting cooperation, reciprocity, and equitable resource sharing among clan and village members. Such communal practices strengthened social cohesion and kinship networks, while also serving as informal institutions for transmitting customary norms, ethical values, and indigenous ecological knowledge across generations (Ursula Shimray, 2004; L. M. Devi, 2012).

Fishing activities, particularly in nearby streams and rivers, were similarly embedded within seasonal rhythms and community life. These practices encouraged collective participation and reinforced reciprocal relationships among households. The customary sharing of fish within the village not only enhanced food security but also reaffirmed social obligations and communal solidarity, reflecting the Vaiphei emphasis on collective welfare over individual accumulation (Singh & Gupta, 2017).

In recent decades, however, the subsistence role of hunting and fishing among the Vaiphei has declined considerably. Processes of modernization, changing dietary preferences, expanding market integration, and the availability of alternative livelihood opportunities have reduced dependence on these traditional practices. Furthermore, legal restrictions related to wildlife conservation and forest protection have limited access to customary hunting and fishing grounds, further diminishing their economic relevance (Sanjib Baruah, 2011; Devi, 2012).

Consequently, although hunting and fishing continue to retain cultural symbolism and heritage value within Vaiphei society, their direct contribution to contemporary household economies has become marginal. Nevertheless, these practices remain vital for understanding historical livelihood strategies and illustrate the adaptive mechanisms through which the Vaiphei traditionally ensured food security, social cohesion, and resilience within a subsistence-based agrarian system.

9. Major Crops of the Vaiphei

Agriculture forms the economic foundation of Vaiphei society, and the diversity of crops cultivated reflects both subsistence needs and ecological adaptation to the hilly environment of **Manipur**. The Vaiphei traditionally practise mixed cropping under shifting cultivation (*Thingtang Lou*), resulting in the

cultivation of cereals, pulses, vegetables, spices, tubers, fruits, and fibre crops. This crop diversity contributes to household food security, nutritional balance, and livelihood sustainability. The major crops of the Vaipheis are listed below:

9.1 Cereal and Millet Crops

The principal food crops are cereals, which constitute the staple diet:

- **Bu** (rice)
- **Kawlbu** (maize)
- **Min** (millet)

Among these, rice occupies a central position in both subsistence and cultural practices, while maize and millet serve as supplementary staples.

9.2 Pulses and Oilseeds

Pulses and oilseeds play an important role in dietary protein intake and household consumption:

- **Be** (bean)
- **Bepai** (pea)
- **Si** (sesame)
- **Ankam** (mustard)

9.3 Vegetables and Gourds

A wide range of vegetables and gourds are cultivated, reflecting mixed and intercropping practices:

- **Um** (bottle gourd)
- **Mai** (pumpkin)
- **Maipuang** (ash gourd)
- **Changmai** (cucumber)
- **Manta** (brinjal)
- **Lothul** (onion)
- **Malcha** (chilli)
- **Jawngta** (stinky bean / *Parkia speciosa*)

9.4 Tubers and Root Crops

Root and tuber crops provide dietary diversity and serve as important food reserves:

- **Bal** (taro)
- **Kawlha** (sweet potato)
- **Thingkaithum** (yam)

9.5 Spices and Condiments

Spices and condiments are grown for household use and cultural cooking practices:

- **Thing** (ginger)
- **Ai-eng** (turmeric)

9.6 Fibre and Commercial Crops

Certain crops are cultivated for non-food uses and limited trade:

- **Pat** (cotton)
- **Dum** (tobacco)
- **Kelzu** (sugarcane)

9.7 Fruit Crops

Fruit cultivation supplements household nutrition and contributes to seasonal income:

- **Kawlthei** (guava)

- **Mawt/Naga** (banana)
- **Lengthei** (pineapple)
- **Lamkhuang** (jackfruit)
- **Thingchangmai** (papaya)
- **Vaichangmai** (muskmelon)
- **Sekthum** (orange)
- **Sekthuk** (lemon)
- **Saisek** (pomelo)
- **Downkhaw** (water lemon)
- **Hai** (mango)
- **Kawlbuthei** (pomegranate)

9.8 Economic and Ecological Significance

These crops collectively form the **economic base of Vaiphei households**, with agricultural productivity directly influencing the financial status and food security of individual families. Crop selection and yield vary considerably depending on rainfall patterns, soil conditions, and fallow cycles, making agriculture highly sensitive to ecological factors.

Traditional agriculture is also vulnerable to several risks, including rodent infestations, excessive rainfall, hailstorms, crop diseases, and damage caused by wild animals such as bears, monkeys, and birds. These environmental uncertainties underscore the adaptive nature of Vaiphei farming practices and the importance of crop diversity as a risk-mitigation strategy within a subsistence-oriented agrarian economy.

10. Livestock Economy:

Livestock rearing constitutes an important component of the traditional Vaiphei economy, functioning as a supplementary source of subsistence, wealth, and social security. Vaiphei households traditionally rear a variety of domesticated animals, including cattle, buffaloes, goats, sheep, pigs, dogs, and cats, which contribute to household nutrition, ritual requirements, and economic resilience. These animals play a crucial role in meeting subsistence needs, particularly during periods of agricultural shortfall.

In addition to large livestock, poultry rearing forms an integral part of the household economy. Most Vaiphei families traditionally keep hens and ducks, which are valued for both meat and egg production. Poultry serves as an easily accessible source of protein and is often used in domestic consumption, ritual feasts, and community gatherings. Because poultry requires relatively low investment and minimal space, it has historically provided an important buffer against food insecurity and has been especially significant for economically weaker households.

Among all livestock, *Sial* (mithun; *Bos frontalis*) occupies a position of exceptional economic and cultural importance within Vaiphei society. Unlike fully domesticated animals, mithun are semi-domesticated and typically allowed to roam freely in forested areas. Ownership is nevertheless clearly established and socially recognized. Owners identify their animals through distinctive ear markings or other visible signs and periodically provide salt—an item to which mithun are particularly attracted—to maintain control and familiarity. This practice reflects indigenous animal management strategies adapted to forest environments.

Beyond its economic value, the cultural significance of mithun is deeply embedded in Vaiphei social institutions. The animal serves as a prominent symbol of wealth, prestige, and clan status. Its importance is particularly evident in customary marriage practices, where mithun are used as bride price payments.

The number of mithun offered traditionally corresponds to the social standing of the bride's clan, thereby reinforcing hierarchical relations and kinship obligations within the community. Historical accounts indicate that the customary bride price generally ranged from two to ten mithun, depending on social rank and family prestige (J. Shakespear, 1912).

Overall, the livestock economy of the Vaiphei encompasses both subsistence and socio-cultural dimensions. While animals provide essential nutritional and economic support, they also function as symbols of social identity, status, and customary values, underscoring their enduring significance within traditional Vaiphei society.

Traditional cottage industries constitute an important component of the Vaiphei economic system, complementing agricultural livelihoods and contributing to household self-sufficiency. These industries primarily include handicrafts such as bamboo and cane work, weaving, and blacksmithing, all of which have been practiced for generations. The Vaiphei have long demonstrated considerable skill in producing a wide range of household utensils and furniture from locally available raw materials such as wood, osier, cane, and bamboo. Commonly manufactured items include tables, chairs, racks, baskets, and various domestic utility objects.

The production process is highly labour-intensive and involves participation across age and gender groups. Men, women, and even children traditionally engage in collecting raw materials from forested areas, after which these materials are processed and crafted into functional and decorative household items. This collective participation not only supports household economies but also facilitates the intergenerational transmission of technical skills and indigenous craftsmanship.

Weaving, in particular, occupies a distinctive place within Vaiphei cottage industries and is traditionally regarded as an exclusive domain of women. It is deeply embedded in social and cultural norms, where proficiency in weaving is considered an essential attribute of womanhood. Traditionally, a woman's social standing and marital prospects were closely associated with her weaving skills. Consequently, girls receive training in weaving from an early age, typically under the guidance of their mothers or elder female relatives. This practice reflects the strong role of cottage industries in sustaining cultural identity, gender roles, and household-level economic resilience within Vaiphei society.

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12. Economic Transition and Market Integration:

In recent decades, the traditional subsistence-oriented economy of many hill communities in Northeast India, including the Vaiphei, has undergone substantial transformation as a result of increasing integration with regional and national market systems. This shift reflects a broader structural transition from a largely self-sufficient, community-based production system toward a semi-commercialized and monetized rural economy. Scholars of agrarian change note that such transformations are typically driven by infrastructural expansion, state intervention, and the gradual penetration of market forces into previously isolated subsistence economies (James C. Scott, 1976; Karl Polanyi, 1944).

One of the most significant factors facilitating this economic transition has been the expansion of road connectivity. Improved transportation networks have reduced geographical isolation and enabled greater mobility of goods, labour, and services between rural hill settlements and urban market centres. Enhanced road access has allowed agricultural produce—such as vegetables, fruits, and forest-based products—to reach nearby markets more efficiently, thereby increasing income opportunities and encouraging commercialization. This development reflects the gradual shift identified in peasant economy studies from subsistence security toward greater engagement with market-based risk and opportunity structures.

Government development interventions have also played a critical role in accelerating economic transformation. State-led initiatives—including rural employment programs, agricultural extension services, microfinance schemes, and livelihood missions—have introduced new institutional support mechanisms and diversified economic opportunities. These programs have encouraged the adoption of modern agricultural techniques, small-scale entrepreneurship, and integration into formal economic networks. From a theoretical standpoint, such processes correspond to the concept of embedded economies, wherein economic activities are shaped and mediated by institutional and political frameworks.

Another major driver of economic transition has been the increasing shift toward cash crop cultivation. Traditionally, subsistence agriculture was centered on staple crops such as rice and millet, primarily intended for household consumption. However, improved market access and government incentives have encouraged farmers to cultivate commercial crops, including ginger, turmeric, chilli, oilseeds, and horticultural products. While this transition has enhanced household incomes, it has also introduced new vulnerabilities associated with price volatility, climatic uncertainties, and market dependency. Consequently, rural households increasingly adopt dual strategies that combine subsistence production with market-oriented farming.

Wage employment has further contributed to the restructuring of the rural economy. Opportunities for wage labour have expanded through government employment schemes, infrastructure development projects, plantation work, and labour migration to urban areas. Seasonal and long-term migration has become an important livelihood strategy, resulting in increased cash inflows to rural households. This diversification reflects a broader shift from exclusive agrarian dependence toward mixed livelihood systems integrating agriculture, wage employment, and small-scale trade activities.

Overall, economic transition toward market integration represents a complex and multidimensional process characterized by both opportunities and challenges. While infrastructural improvements, state support, commercialization, and wage employment have enhanced income generation and economic mobility, they have simultaneously altered traditional social institutions, communal labour practices, and ecological relationships. The contemporary Vaiphei economy may therefore be best understood as a hybrid system in which traditional subsistence values coexist with expanding participation in market-oriented economic structures.

13. Table 1

Comparative Features of Traditional and Modern Economic Systems among the Vaiphei

Dimension	Traditional Economic System	Modern Economic System
Production Orientation	Subsistence-based production primarily for household consumption	Market-oriented production aimed at income generation
Agricultural Practice	Shifting cultivation (jhum)	Permanent and settled farming systems
Exchange Mechanism	Barter and reciprocal exchange	Monetized cash economy
Labour Organization	Communal and cooperative labour arrangements	Wage-based individual labour system

14. Conclusion:

The study demonstrates that the Vaiphei economy has undergone a gradual yet significant transition from a predominantly subsistence-based system to an increasingly market-oriented economic structure. Traditionally rooted in shifting cultivation, forest resource utilization, and community-based labour arrangements, the Vaiphei livelihood system historically emphasized self-sufficiency, ecological adaptation, and collective welfare. However, processes such as infrastructural development, state intervention, expanding market connectivity, and livelihood diversification have substantially reshaped economic practices in recent decades.

Despite these transformations, traditional economic activities continue to retain strong cultural and social significance within Vaiphei society. Practices such as communal labour cooperation, indigenous agricultural knowledge, livestock rearing, and cottage industries remain integral to cultural identity and social cohesion. At the same time, the growing adoption of commercial agriculture, wage employment, and market participation reflects the community's adaptive response to contemporary economic opportunities and challenges.

In this context, future development strategies should adopt a balanced and culturally sensitive approach that integrates modern economic opportunities with the preservation and strengthening of indigenous knowledge systems. Such an approach is essential not only for ensuring sustainable livelihood development but also for safeguarding the ecological resilience, cultural heritage, and social integrity of the Vaiphei community.

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