

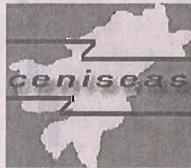
CENISEAS PAPERS

3

**POLITICS OF
DEFORESTATION IN
MEGHALAYA, INDIA**

BENGT G. KARLSSON

Sanjib Baruah, SERIES EDITOR



**Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast
Asia Studies**

**OMEO KUMAR DAS INSTITUTE OF
SOCIAL CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT
GUWAHAT, ASSAM, INDIA**

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Series Editor's Note

The CENISEAS papers seek to promote the intellectual mission of the Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies [CENISEAS] (briefly described on the back cover of this publication). The papers grow out of lectures, seminars and other events at the Centre. This paper by B.G. Karlsson is a revised version of his lecture in the CENISEAS Seminar series on November 24th 2003.

The potential opportunities that India's Look East policy might hold for Northeast India is a major area of interest to CENISEAS. The investments in transportation corridors through Myanmar connecting the region with the dynamic economies of Southeast Asia have been the source of some hope and enthusiasm in the region. It is expected that the new roads will give the region access to global markets and technology and enable it to overcome the handicaps of its landlocked condition. Thus Jaswant Singh, the then External Affairs Minister, described the Tamu-Kalewa-Kalemyo road in Myanmar that he inaugurated in 2001 as the "opening up the natural outlet of the Northeast." But will such outlets improve the prospects of peace, prosperity and the well-being of the peoples of the Northeast? Or could it become a source

of added misery?

The rights of local peoples to the natural resources of the region have been a major theme in the politics of ethnic assertion in Northeast India. Militants and student organizations even speak of a colonial pattern of exploitation of the region's resources by the rest of India.

It was fortunate that while CENISEAS was formulating its intellectual mission the Swedish anthropologist B.G. Karlsson was doing fieldwork in Meghalaya exploring issues that are relevant to answering these questions. I am thankful to him for having accepted our invitation to share his ideas with us and for submitting this paper for publication.

Karlsson looks beyond the fiction of community control of land, forest and natural resources in Meghalaya. He is skeptical of the formalistic notion that the situation of the "tribal" or "indigenous" peoples of the hills of Northeast India are unique and radically different from that of similar groups living elsewhere in India. Even though the Constitution's Sixth Schedule makes many of the tribal communities of Northeast India managers of land and natural resources, Karlsson finds that effective control over land and natural resources is not in the hands of "communities." Land is increasingly being privatized or controlled by influential local individuals and natural resources such as coal, limestone, timber are being taken out to the benefit of a tribal elite in cahoots with outside contractors or businessmen. This process of extracting Meghalaya's natural resources has been anything but sustainable; indeed the state as a result has had to cope with severe environmental problems.

Karlsson argues that a political rhetoric that exclusively focuses on exploitation by outsiders makes the role of influential tribal elites in the reckless exploitation of Meghalaya's forests invisible. While the law prohibits sale of land to "non-tribals," there are no safeguards against land alienation as such, or against unequal accumulation of land within the "tribal" communities. While an official commission in Meghalaya has argued in favour of cadastral surveys, the proposal has met with protests. Land surveys, it is feared, would lead to increased government control over "tribal" lands and taxation. Landholding elites, it appears, have a strong interest in opposing policies that might generate a transparent public record of actual land ownership and control.

CENISEAS hopes that Karlsson's paper will contribute to the policy debates on how Northeast India could prepare for the changes that are likely to come about as a result of the significant investments on transportation infrastructure currently being made to improve the region's connectivity with the rest of India and with its transnational neighbours. Does the timing of road-building make a difference? In a context when old forms of livelihood are disappearing and employment opportunities in the modern sector are inadequate, could new roads simply become corridors for siphoning off what is left of the natural resources of the region? The question may be especially relevant to certain remote parts of the Northeastern hills such as Arunachal Pradesh. If the existing regime of community control of land and natural resources is only a legal fiction, should cadastral surveys, mapping and documentation of land rights be on the immediate policy agenda before the post corridor-building deluge begins?

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Sanjib Baruah

Senior Fellow and Head

Centre for Northeast India, South and Southeast Asia Studies

Politics of Deforestation in Meghalaya, India¹

The environment has during last decades increasingly been studied from a security point of view, and thus particularly by suggesting a link between environmental degradation and social unrest or violent conflicts. What is proposed, in its most dramatic terms, is a sort of vicious circle where population increase leads to environmental scarcity that cause economic stagnation, marginalisation of the rural poor (elite groups capture scarce resources), which subsequently triggers social strife, migration and further conflict, insurgency, break-down of governance and as a result incapability to cope with the situation and thus aggravated environmental scarcity which triggers so-called “green wars”. There are different versions of the suggested scenario, but the basic idea is the same, i.e. that degradation of the environment triggers conflicts and wars within and between states. Not surprisingly such a

¹ This paper is based on a talk that I gave at CENISEAS, Guwahati on November 24th, 2003. I have kept the more casual style of a “talk.” I would like to express my gratitude to the organisers, in particular to Professor Sanjib Baruah and also to the participants whose input at the seminar have been of great help in developing my thinking. Some of the issues dealt with in the paper are also discussed in my article “Indigenous Natures” in the forthcoming book *Ecological Nationalisms: Nature, Livelihoods, and Identities in South Asia* (eds.) G. Cederlöf and K. Sivaramakrishnan (Permanent Black, 2004).

gloomy scenario is predicted for Third World states, particularly in Africa².

International security experts working within such a framework would probably find Northeast India a suitable case. Northeast India certainly has all the ingredients; environmental problems, economic stagnation, migration, social strife, ethnic conflict, insurgency and violence. But making environmental scarcity the underlying cause or trigger to all these social ills does not appear to be a particularly helpful proposition. I suppose most scholars working on Northeast India would agree that although land and natural resources play a prominent role in ongoing ethnic conflicts, it is simply not feasible to establish a causal relationship between the two. And if one would suggest such linkages, I assume that many scholars would argue that it is the control over and rights to the "abundant" resources – like timber, oil, coal, water and agricultural land – rather than local "scarcity" that might trigger conflict.

In this paper, I will focus on the depletion of one such valued resource, i.e. forests, and I will do that from the vantage point of what has come to be known as "political ecology".³ The latter is not a precise theoretical paradigm, but rather a multi-disciplinary research field that seeks to explore the relationship between environment and society. In focus are

² For an elaborate discussion and critique of this type of approach, see the various contributions in N. Lee Peluso and M. Watts (eds.) *Violent Environments* (2001). Peluso and Watts suggest a "political ecology" framework as an alternative approach to that of the increasingly dominant "environmental security school", and this is also what I attempt in this paper.

³ See, for example, Escobar (1999), Bryant & Bailey (1997), and Peet & Watts (1996) for a general discussion on "political ecology".

the "political" aspects or dimensions of environmental conflicts, and, as such, the power relations inherent in defining, controlling and managing nature. Who controls nature, whose rights and claims in natural resources are recognized, who are the relevant actors involved, such questions are particularly crucial from a political ecology perspective. My concern here is, as mentioned, forests or, to be more precise, the politics of deforestation. I will mainly discuss the situation in Meghalaya, but also relate to the experiences pertaining to other parts of the Northeastern hills. The role of communities as resource managers and the contested nature of the estimates about the scale of forest destruction are recurring themes in the paper.

Decreasing Forests

The Northeast has a substantial part of India's remaining forests. According to some estimates somewhere around one fourth to one third of India's forest resource is to be found in the Northeastern region (see Darlong, 2002: 15). Several states boast of their greenness and their richness in flora and fauna – describing themselves as "biodiversity hot-spots". The official figures speak about impressive forest covers of more than 80 per cent of the total geographical area in several of the states: Mizoram 89.1 per cent, Nagaland 85.8 per cent and Arunachal Pradesh 81.9 per cent. But despite these figures, most observers seem to agree that the rich gift of nature is on a slippery slope of degradation. The alarming rate of forest loss, estimated to be about at eight per cent annually during the 1990s, was the focus of a seminar of the forest situation in Northeast India, organized in 1999 by the Northeast India Council for Social Science Research (to observe the World Environment Day). It was even suggested

that, “[I]f extreme caution is not exercised, desertification of North-Eastern region cannot remain far behind” (Maiti & Chakrabarti, 2002: 4). Extreme measures have also been taken. In the late 1990s the Supreme Court of India “banned” all felling of trees as well as the running of sawmills and other wood-based industries, to halt further destruction of the northeastern forests. The Supreme Court intervention is most controversial and has been criticised on many grounds, not least environmental. I will come back to this later, but suffice to say some opponents have questioned the very rationale of the intervention arguing that there is no cause for alarm since there are still plenty of healthy forests in the region.

Debates about alarming deforestation are of course not unique to Northeast India, but rather a well-known story from other parts of India as well as elsewhere in the world. It could even be argued that devastating deforestation has become somewhat of a master narrative of contemporary environmental crisis. The Brundtland Commission says in its widely circulated report, *Our Common Future* (1987: 2), that “more than 11 million hectares of forests are destroyed yearly”, and to give a sense of the magnitude of the problem it is stated that this, “over three decades, would equal an area about the size of India”. The report speaks the mood of the 1980s when environmental issues were a priority concern of the international community and had a sort of urgency to them; the very survival of planet earth was considered to be at stake. A global consensus started to develop during this time stressing the need to rethink earlier forms of state-centred management and to enhance the role of communities as resource managers. In India this realization translated into the much discussed and, indeed, internationally recognized scheme for Joint Forest

Management⁴. Even if such programmes have encouraged more sustainable use of the forest in certain areas, deforestation nevertheless seems to continue on a massive scale around the world. According to FAO’s “Global Forest Resource Assessment 2000”, the net deforestation globally approximate nine million hectares annually. The highest rates are found in Africa and Latin America, whereas the situation looks significantly better in Asia where tree plantations have compensated the forest loss (FAO, 2001). India makes again an interesting case with, as the Ministry of Environment and Forest proudly claims, a positive trend of increasing forest cover because of the government’s afforestation efforts. But again, there are reasons to be cautious here. What types of forests, for example, are being gained and what have been lost? Plantations make an ecologically poor substitute for “natural” forests. This matter is commonly downplayed in India due to the official emphasis on how much forest rather what kind of forest, or as Sundar, Jeffrey & Thin (2001: 16) have it, the state’s “obsession with forest quantity”. The more general problem of forest degradation thus tends to disappear. There are further a number of other difficulties with the entire exercise of assessing the forest situation. Figures are produced and used in different ways and for different reasons. The mentioned high forest cover figures for the Northeastern hill states, is a particularly telling example. Those who object to the Supreme Court “timber-ban”, for example, have found the strongest argument in the Forest Department forest cover figures, as we

⁴ For a recent comprehensive account of the Indian Joint Forest Management experience, see Sundar, Jeffrey & Thin (2001). As they point out, approximately 10 million hectares of forest land is under joint management arrangements between the Forest Department and as much as 36,000 committees (ibid:1-2). Numbers that indeed are impressive.

will see. What I find most striking, however, is the uncritical usage of these and other official figures.

The main tool for assessments of forest cover today is satellite remote sensing, i.e. use of satellite imagery along with GPS (Global Positioning Systems) and GIS (Global Information Systems). Even if these new techniques provide vast possibilities in the field of natural resource mapping, there is a need for critical scrutiny as well. For the layman, information based on remote sensing tends to get an almost mystical aura of scientific validity to them, as if one is dealing with undisputable hard facts. But at a closer look, it is evident that a lot of assumptions, interpretations and uncertainties go into the processing and reading of satellite imagery. There might be difficulties in differentiating between different vegetation or land cover types, and problems in getting clear shots free from clouds, dust, smoke and topographic shadows. Another problem with satellite imagery, as Ravindranath, Gadgil & Campbell (1996: 290) point out, is that it "often fails to pick up the more gradual processes of ecological decline". Ground-proofing, or physical verification on the ground is a crucial step to get reliable results, but as this is a tedious exercise that requires manpower and resources that seldom are available, it is commonly over-looked or not carried out in a satisfactory way. This, as I have been informed, is the case with much of the forest assessments that are carried out in India⁵. Another difficulty with aggregated forest assessments is the lack of clarity regarding what constitutes a forest, i.e. the definition. Assessments carried out at different moments in time and in different places commonly define

⁵ Personal communication, P.S. Ramakrishnan, December 2002.

"forest" in their own way, which naturally make comparisons over time and space difficult. FAO points to this in their 2000 assessments, stating that this is the first global report based on one singular definition, and as this is a new definition it is even problematic to compare their present findings with those of earlier assessments. In addition to this, as the report points out, most countries lack "comparable time series" data and have in general rather scanty information about their forest resources⁶. In sum, the point here is simply that all assessments of changes in forest cover need to be taken with several pinches of salt; the facts are anything but "hard". The significance of this will be clearer later in the paper.

But again people on the ground will certainly be able to tell about environmental changes in their surroundings. During my own work in North Bengal and, presently, in Meghalaya I have several times been told stories about how a particular place has been denuded. People remember from their childhood the place as a dense jungle, how it later gradually had been degraded and today become mere scrubs with only a few minor trees. Such stories provide valuable information, but can indeed be hard to scale up and use as a basis for a more comprehensive study on the environmental history of a particular region or a larger area⁷. Let us nevertheless begin our discussion on the forest situation in Northeast India with a personal account. The sociologist A.C. Sinha opens up his book on the environmental history of the eastern Himalayan

⁶ See FAO, *The Global Forest Resource Assessment 2000: Summary Report*, COFO-2001/INF.5

⁷ For a most impressive attempt along such lines, see Ann Grodzins Gold and Bhoju Ram Gujar's recent book *In Time of Trees and Sorrows: Nature, Power, and Memory in Rajasthan* (2002).

region with the following remarks,

It all started with the occasional observations on the tree cover around the highway between Shillong to Gauhati during the last fifteen years. Slowly and slowly, hills turned naked, trees have become fewer, scattered and younger: thickets have replaced the clumps of trees and settlements have sprung up all around. During the dry days one comes across even clouds of dust. From nowhere a new problem of drinking water in the abode of clouds – Meghalaya – has been added to the list of the urgent issues which are to be attended. . . . The Government Forest Officials claim not to be responsible for the alleged rape of forests as they hardly control an appreciable acreage of the forests. It is the community, represented by the District Council, which controls and manages the extensive forests as per constitutional provisions. Elsewhere [in India] the environmentalists are articulating the issue as a conflict between the state control and community interests and demand the forest to be given back to the community, as they were in the hands of local communities in the pre-colonial days. Is it so that the community control has led to destruction of forests in this region (Sinha, 1993: 7)?

As Sinha rightly argues, the situation in the northeastern hill areas differs greatly from that of mainland India. The bulk of the forests are, as pointed out, in the hands of communities,

under formal jurisdiction of the so-called “autonomous district councils”⁸, rather than with the forest department as elsewhere in India. Only about five per cent of the forest in Northeast is under state control (reserved forests and protected areas like sanctuaries and national parks). What then does the northeastern experience tell us? Sinha has a straightforward answer, “community control over the forest resources has completely failed to safeguard the forests” (*ibid*: 10). If this is correct it certainly has important implications for the larger debate about forest management, where community involvement, as mentioned, has become the blueprint for successful forestry. Are the advocates of such policies all heading in the wrong direction? Are communities, in this case “tribal” or indigenous people, as bad or even worse than state departments in managing forests in a sustainable fashion?

Before beginning to answer such questions one needs to ask what “community control” implies and what type of community involvement we actually are talking about in the northeastern case. As some of the recent literature on conservation and resource management in South Asia has pointed out, the notion of “community” is itself deeply problematic and in need of serious unpacking⁹. What this critique points to is that much of the development discourse on “joint forest management”, “ecodevelopment” and the like is based on rather naïve perceptions of communities as small-

⁸ For a discussion on the autonomous district councils that were established under the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution, see Gassah (1998) & Chaube (1973).

⁹ See for example two recent collections of articles, Jeffrey & Sundar (1999) and Agrawal & Sivaramakrishnan (2000).

scale, homogenous, territorial units (the self-evident atoms of rural polities). Agrawal and Gibson (2001: 7) rightly argue, that such understandings fail to take into account differences “within” communities; differences that indeed “affect resource management outcomes.” As they put it, communities thus need to be re-conceptualized as being “complex entities containing individuals differentiated by status, political and economic power, religion, social prestige, and intentions” (*ibid*: 1). Such a move allows a critical scrutiny of existing structures of dominance that easily disappear or are played down by the populist understanding of community as the very embodiment of grassroots democracy, solidarity and equity. Sinha is not unaware that the term community can conceal internal differences, and he raises the question of who is controlling the forest in the name of “communal control.” But he does not really engage the question seriously and, as mentioned, sticks to his main conclusion that community forest management has proven to be disastrous in Northeast India.

My simple suggestion is that what we see is in fact not a failure of community management, but rather the lack of it. The timber trade, causing most of the destruction of the forest in the region, is a capitalistic business undertaking where communities as such have little or no say. The main players running the show, to quote the High Power Committee set to monitor the mentioned Supreme Court Order banning all timber operations, are “mill owners, forest contractors, forest and other government officials and the politicians in the Northeastern Region”.¹⁰ Or what is commonly referred to as,

¹⁰ “Second Report of the High Power Committee for the Northeastern Region”, July 12, 1997. Quote from para 5.7, page 21.

“a nexus of contractors-bureaucrats-politicians” (Aier & Changkija, 2003: 358). This nexus consists of people from the elite group of the hill society and well-placed “non-tribal exploiters from outside” as the sociologist Tiplut Nongbri (2003: 158) puts it. There are huge sums of money involved and there is always a traditional chief, clan elder, headman or landowner who is willing to part with trees to make easy money. This is enabled by a historical process of increasing privatisation at the expense of the earlier communal institutions of land management related to swidden or *jhum* cultivation. Put differently one could say that we have a bifurcated set-up of, on the one hand, eroding communal institutions relating to land and resource management and, on the other, a very significant development of individual ownership and exploitation of forest and other natural resources.¹¹ Deforestation has thus taken place in a situation of multiple and changing property regimes where communities play a significantly diminishing role as resource managers.

The “timber ban”

I came to Northeast India to do research on community management institutions. My previous work in North Bengal

¹¹ Other scholars before me have pointed to the process of privatization of land and resources in Meghalaya. The anthropologists M.C. Goswami and D.N. Majumdar (1972: chap. 6) observed already in the 1970s a tendency towards private ownership of land in the Garo hills. P. C. Kar’s (1982) study of one Garo village also confirms these findings, and further also Robbins Burling’s (1997) who recently revisited the area in which he conducted field research in the 1950s and found that most land had been privatised. But due to lack of comprehensive land surveys it is nevertheless difficult to assess the extent of such a process, and the common assumption is that communal land regimes still dominate (see, further Karlsson, 2002).

concerned the indigenous Rabha community, who lived in forest villages under the forest department without any recognized rights in the forest (beside that of being seasonal labourers to the forest department) (see Karlsson, 2000). The idea was to compare the situation of the Rabhas with one where the forestlands were owned and controlled by the people themselves. But as indicated above, I soon realized the complexities of the matter and the difficulties of talking about existing “community control” in the northeastern case. During my first stay in Meghalaya in early 2000, I found myself in the middle of the controversy relating to the “timber ban”. This, I felt, was a perfect entry point into my new field. The timber-ban was on everyone’s lips and most of the people I talked to saw this as yet another example of New Delhi’s insensitive exercise of power. As the local newspaper *Shillong Times* reported, the Joint Action Committee of Jaintia Hills protested against the ban, and their advisor Phidalia Toi was imprisoned because of this and she went on hunger strike¹². An article in the magazine *Grassroots’ Options*¹³ described how the Supreme Court timber ban had devastated the rural economy of western Khasi Hills. Families had to go hungry and parents could not afford to send their children to school as their income from timber trade had dried up after the ban¹⁴. I was invited to take part in a one-day workshop on the timber-ban arranged in one of the nicer hotels in Shillong. Influential persons from all walks of life participated: senior representatives of the state government, forest department officials, development

¹² *The Shillong Times*, January 21 & 22, 2000.

¹³ *Grassroots’ Options’* is a quarterly magazine based in Shillong that mainly covers environmental and developmental issues in the Northeastern region.

¹⁴ “Fighting for survival”, *Grassroots’ Options*, March/April, 1999.

organizations, researchers, journalist and civil society groups. All, except for the central government officer from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (in charge of monitoring the Supreme Court Order), condemned the timber-ban. The officer claimed it was in fact not a “ban”, but rather a “temporal moratorium” on timber operations until approved working plans had been established. Nobody took notice of his clarification, and “ban” was what everyone else seemed to take as the most relevant term. The minister of finance claimed that the loss of revenue from timber was ruining the state finances, not to speak of loss of employment as for example, almost the entire sawmill industry had been closed down. A Catholic nun running a boarding school confirmed that they were no longer getting students from rural areas, and in a most emotional way she urged that for the sake of children the timber-ban should be scrapped. Sociologist Tiplut Nongbri of Shillong described the severe consequences the ban had on women’s lives, and questioned the legal basis of the Supreme Court Order saying that it violated the autonomy given to tribal communities under the Sixth Schedule¹⁵. One of the organizers, Dev Nathan, a political scientist working for the Centre for International Forestry Research in Indonesia, spoke about the serious environmental consequences of the ban; that people had started making charcoal of valuable timber, selling bark of standing trees or converting woodlands into *jhum* fields as trees no longer have any market value. The ban was thus not only “anti-people”, but also “anti-environment”. Nathan ended by questioning the very rationale of the Supreme Court’s intervention. Quoting the forest departments’ latest forest

¹⁵ Nongbri develops, as I will come back to, her critique of the Supreme Court Order in the article “Timber Ban in North-East India: Effects on Livelihood and Gender”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 26, 2001.

assessment, Meghalaya has a forest cover of as much as 69.80 per cent of the total geographical area. And as he pointed out, this figure was based on data derived from satellite images. The National Forest Policy recommendation for hill areas is a 66 per cent forest cover, which is less than what Meghalaya has at present. Why then should the people of Meghalaya be penalized or “banned” in this way, Nathan asked rhetorically¹⁶.

The history of the Supreme Court intervention is intricate, but apparently it followed from a lawsuit by a private person in 1991 against the Indian Union for its alleged failure to halt deforestation during the 1980s.¹⁷ The case concerned initially the two states of Tamil Nadu and Jammu-Kashmir, and was later extended to include the northeastern region in view of the extensive destruction that had taken place there. In the Supreme Court Order of December 1996 it states that “all ongoing activity in any Forest [...], without prior approval of the Central Government, must cease forthwith.” (paragraph 1). The additional Order of January 1998, similarly speaks about the suspension of timber operations and other wood based industries until concerned State Governments had developed working plans approved by the Central Government. The Supreme Court Orders contain formulations that, at least for me, are anything but transparent. In her in-depth scrutiny of the Order, Nongbri (2001) draws attention to two things. First of all, as indicated above, that the Supreme Court Order bypasses the Sixth Schedule in which the autonomous district councils are given full jurisdiction over all forests except those

¹⁶ The paper Nathan presented, “Timber in Meghalaya”, is also published in *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 22, 2000.

¹⁷ “Writ Petition (Civil) No. 202 of 1991, T.N. Godavarman Thirumulkpad versus Union of India” in the Supreme Court of India.

declared as reserved forest or protected areas. In the name of forest conservation, the Supreme Court now entrusts the power over all forests – as stated in the order, “irrespective of ownership and classification thereof” – to the forest department or the state through the requirement of approved working plans. Secondly, the usage of the term “forest” in the Supreme Court Order fails to take into account the particular situation of the northeastern region where shifting cultivation still is a major form of agriculture. As Nongbri points out, the Khasis have a most complex system of ownership and management of land, and above all there is no “clear-cut separation between land and forests” (2001: 1895). People of course conceptually make a distinction between land and forest (and have different terms for the two), but the very nature of shifting cultivation is that trees and bushes reclaim land that has been cultivated and the boundary between the two are constantly blurred or in flux (*ibid*). The Supreme Court does not take these very basic features into consideration and by stating that the Order should apply to “all forests” they in fact impose centralized state control over most of the lands and resources that people depend on for their livelihoods. The relative autonomy and freedom that the tribal communities in northeast previously enjoyed have now seriously been constrained. To Nongbri, this is not by chance but “symptomatic of the state’s attitude to the rights of indigenous people” (*ibid*: 1897). And, as she further argues, the underlying assumption is that state institutions rather than tribal people are best suited to conserve or manage nature in a sustainable fashion. Nongbri is also concerned about the ongoing deforestation, but to her more sophisticated measures are needed that above all differentiate between subsistence farmers’ use of the forest

and outside contractors large-scale timber extraction (*ibid*).¹⁸

During my later stays, it became obvious that the timber-ban also have their local supporters. Most interestingly, the influential student body Khasi Students Union (KSU) had prior to the Supreme Court Order filed a so-called Public Interest Litigation (PIL) to the Guwahati High Court proposing a ten years moratorium on timber trade, and closure of saw and veneer mills, to save the remaining forest in the state. KSU backed their PIL with the claim that the forest cover dropped from 40 per cent, at the time of Meghalaya's formation in 1972, to 18 per cent in 1996, when they filed the case. Not only did they question the official forest cover figure, they also argued that satellite imagery did not provide reliable information because of the particular situation in a state like Meghalaya where green cover of shrubbery, grass etc., easily could be mistaken for trees/forest.¹⁹ KSU had to face a strong public reaction because of their stand, but as I understand it, people in Meghalaya have slowly come to appreciate the ban more, taking it as a necessary evil; arguing that something had to be done and that timber-trade sooner or later would have died by itself since all the valuable trees would have been cut.

¹⁸ Some steps have been taken towards relaxing the ban. The Ministry of Environment and Forests has for example recently approved a two years felling plan for the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council. Timber can thus be cut from October 2003, and then only up to a certain fixed volume for each district (*The Sentinel*, Jan 30, 2002).

¹⁹ I have not read the actual PIL, but am here referring to information given in the "First Report of the High Power Committee for the Northeastern Region" submitted on May 1, 1997 (para 22, page 14). I have also discussed the matter with the then KSU President Paul Lyngdoh.

Interpreting Nature

This takes us back to the previous citation from A.C. Sinha. As he states, the forests of Meghalaya is diminishing day by day, causing serious environmental effects like shortage of water and soil erosion. Based on my own brief observations, travelling through the state, I very much got the same impression. Nude hills and grasslands was the most common sight, and only rarely were more dense forest areas to be seen. The situation looked certainly more critical in the Khasi hills, which Sinha referred to, than in the Garo Hills. But as in the larger debate about the state-of-affairs of the worlds' forests, opinions differ and it seems rather difficult to come to any consensus about the actual situation.

The Indian State Forest Report of 1999²⁰ contains colored forest maps for each state that have been extracted from satellite imagery. In the case of Meghalaya the map is largely light greenish, meaning that most of the state is covered by "open forests". Dark green areas, denoting "dense forests" are relatively few and more limited in size. These areas are concentrated mainly in the Garo Hills and the bordering Western Khasi Hills. To the east, on the central Khasi Hills plateau and large part of Jaintia Hills the map is mostly white denoting "non-forest" areas. Put in numbers, the Report assesses the total forest cover to roughly 16 000 sq. km, or 69.80 per cent of the total geographical area as mentioned earlier. Of these forests, about 6 000 sq. km is classified as "dense forest" and 10 000 sq. km as "open forest". The Report notices an increase of dense forest, and a slight total loss of

²⁰ Forest Survey of India, *State of Forest Report* (1999) Govt. of India, Dehradun.

forest (compared to two years earlier). Shifting cultivation is said to have caused the loss. Logging is not mentioned. The overall impression, however, is that things are under control and that there is no cause for alarm. The previous Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Balvinder Singh, confirmed the correctness of the findings of the 1999 Report. When I met him, he even took out the report to show me the exact forest cover figures²¹. In view of this, it appears as if Nathan has a point in arguing that the Supreme Court “timber ban” is uncalled for.

But let us look a bit closer into the issue. Forest cover, in the Report, means “all lands with a tree canopy density of more than ten per cent”; open forest 10-40 per cent, and dense forest 40 per cent canopy density and above (Forest Survey of India, 1999: paragraph 1.3). As open forest is most prevalent, it appears crucial to know more about what could come under this category. In the Report it is mentioned that it is difficult in satellite assessments to differentiate between forests and “bushy vegetation” or plantations like that of tea and coffee (*ibid*: para 1.2.5). In Meghalaya there are large areas with various types of plantations and further also *jhum* land that after being cultivated quickly is covered by bamboo, bushes and other “secondary vegetation”. The question that arises is to what extent such types of vegetations are registered as open forests. On its homepage the Meghalaya State gives a much more modest assessment of the forest cover. Of the total area of the state, which is 22 429 sq. km, only 8 514 sq. km are said to be forests.²² This would give a 38 per cent forest cover.

²¹ Interview, November 2002.

²² <http://www.meghalaya.nic.in/natural-resources/forest.htm>

There is no information on how they have reached at this estimate, and neither about how the term “forest” is used. Interestingly, a recent study by the geographer S. Sharma from the North-Eastern Hill University points to figures in the same range. Sharma’s study is based on satellite imagery; he estimates the total forest cover in Meghalaya to be 44.71 per cent (2003: 156).²³ Sharma does not comment or reflect over his significantly lower figure compared to that of the Forest Survey of India. This is indeed remarkable as the Forest Survey commonly is taken as the authority in these matters and their statistics quoted in most reports (also by Sharma himself). In addition, one would think that such comparison would be particularly interesting since both the Forest Survey and Sharma are using satellite remote sensed data. For some strange reason, Sharma instead finds it useful to juxtapose his forest cover figure with that of the Meghalaya government, finding the latter to be slightly lower (i.e. 42.34 per cent). The difference between the two, he explains, might be due to “higher accuracy achieved through remote sensing data” (which the Meghalaya government apparently is not using). Sharma does not provide any definition or explanation of how he uses the term “forest”, and we are thus in the dark about what his “forest cover” consists of. My point here, however, is not to question the findings of this or that study, but rather to draw attention to the ambiguity of the figures themselves; an ambiguity that is masked by the exactness of numbers (even given in decimal fractions). Regardless of whose assessment one would find the most reasonable – KSU’s of a forest cover

²³ Somewhat confusingly, Sharma includes in the total forest cover figure 1.41 per cent “unclassified area”, in parenthesis said to be “fog, cloud, hill shadow covered area” (2003: 157). As I understand, he thus assumes that these areas have a forest cover.

as low as 18 per cent, Meghalaya government's and Sharma's of around 40 per cent or the Forest Survey of India's of almost 70 per cent – it is obvious that the forest cover figure itself reveals little about the environmental status of a particular area. This has, for example, been pointed out in case of Mizoram, the state with the highest official forest cover. As a forest officer explains, “[T]he official records of Mizoram forest cover is 87 per cent, but hardly anyone is bothered to identify that most of this is bamboo brakes”²⁴. In a similar way, I think that Nathan makes a serious mistake when he takes the high forest cover figure as an indication of a healthy environmental situation in Meghalaya.

But if forest figures are poor indicators, let us listen to some personal accounts regarding the lay of the land. Garo Hills is commonly taken to have the richest forest in the state. Winstone G. Momin, Deputy Conservator of Forest at the Forest Resources Survey Division, with decades of experience in the area, says the following: “most of the areas of Garo Hills. . . fall under *open forest cover*. These areas are not worth calling forests as most of them are degraded after repeated indiscriminate *jhuming*” (Mumin, 2002: 30).

In another account, this time on the state of the forest in Meghalaya as a whole, F. Suchiang, retired Chief Conservator of Forest, holds that,

With the increase in demand of raw materials for feeding the forest based industries in the other parts of the country most of the erstwhile

²⁴ Cited in Linda Chhakchhuak's article “Mizoram's soft, deadly hills”, in *Grassroots Option*, Monsoon/Autumn 2002: 26.

lush evergreen and coniferous forest have been destroyed without rhyme and reason. During the last four decades or so many of the erstwhile rich forest areas which were full of matured crops have been either degraded or laid waste and barren. It is beyond one's comprehension even to conceptualise the ecological changes that have taken place in these forests. (Suchiang, 1994: 22)

And, finally, by the noted ecologist P.S. Ramakrishnan who describes the general situation in Northeast India in the early 1990s as follows,

Large-scale timber extraction has been carried out in this region during the last few decades. In fact, a substantial part of the timber needs of the country is met from the north-east. The secondary damage done to the forest due to the falling trees during timber harvest, destroying everything else in their path is also substantial. Bamboo forests ... are being harvested in a major way by the pulping industry (Ramakrishnan, 1992: 3).

Here again we have stories of rampant loss of forests, in the first case due to shifting cultivation (*jhuming*), the common story of those working in the forest department, and the latter due to outside demand for wood. The High Power Committee for the Northeast Region take the size of the wood based industry as an indication of the denudation of the forest. According to their findings, prior to the timber-ban there were

1228 sawmills, 291 saw-cum-veneer mills and 77 plywood factories in the region²⁵. Together these naturally consume enormous quantities of trees, to which one has to add the export of round wood, i.e. un-sawed timber. That we are dealing with a substantial timber business could further also be proved by the protests against the ban itself. If it is true that so many people are being affected, which certainly seems to be the case, there must have been considerable logging going on as well. The journalist Sanat K. Chakraborty gives a revealing account of the timber trade in West Khasi Hills, one of the districts of Meghalaya. A sawmill owner told him, for example, that according to a conservative estimate around 150-200 trucks of timber would leave the district daily. The acting Syiem of Nongstoin puts the figure at as much as 400-500 trucks a day at the peak of the business in the early 1990s (Chakraborty, 2000: 15)²⁶.

When a forest area is cleared of trees other forms of environmental degradation might kick in. According to Ramakrishnan, various exotic and native seeds can take over and create a bald landscape where trees no longer can regenerate in a natural way. This, he argues, further reduces the land available for shifting cultivation, and adds the pressure to an agriculture system that already is under great stress. To him, large-scale extraction of timber with an increasingly unsustainable *jhum* cultivation (shorter fallows) creates a

¹⁸ Some steps have been taken towards relaxing the ban. The Ministry of Environment and Forests has for example recently approved a two years

²⁶ With the Supreme Court ban there was, as Chakraborty (2002: 18-26) explains, a sudden collapse of the timber-driven local economy, putting not only the timber-traders and the daily workers out of business, but also all those who had made a living out of various related services (tea stall *wallahs*, road garage owners, shop keepers, truckers etc).

vicious circle that severely effects things like water flows and soil fertility; a process of environmental degradation which is happening in Meghalaya and elsewhere in the northeastern hills (Ramakrishnan, 1992: 373, 386-387). Water shortage, for example, in the towns of Shillong and Tura is commonly attributed to decreasing forest cover in the surrounding areas. *The "alarmist environmental discourse"*

In contemporary literature on forests and deforestation, a number of researchers have started to question such gloomy accounts where first of all large-scale loss of (tropical) forest is taken at face value, and where it is further assumed that deforestation always triggers negative spirals of ecological destruction. The anthropologists James Fairhead and Melissa Leach (1998: xiv) argue in the case of Western Africa that the alarmist discourse on depletion of the tropical rain forests is "hugely exaggerated." Forest is lost, but not to the extent that is claimed. The type of forests lost is also different from the commonly mourned destruction of rainforests. On the basis of different types of historical material, they claim that in some areas there has even been an increase of forest cover (Fairhead & Leach, 1998). In the same spirit, Jack D. Ives and Bruno Messerli (1989: xvii) argue against "the widely supported prediction that the Himalayan region is inevitably drifting into a situation of environmental supercrises and collapse." Their particular critique relate to the taken for granted relationship and supposed causal linkages between population increase, deforestation, soil erosion and water shortage and floods (*ibid*: 8-9). Ives and Messerli question alarming reports of deforestation, as in the case of Nepal where as much as half of the forests cover is claimed to have been lost between 1950

and 1980 and assertions that by AD 2000 no accessible forest would remain (*ibid*: 39-40). Such reports according to them, are based on inaccurate and unreliable data. Different surveys of the forest cover have used different definitions of "forest" making comparison over time difficult. In many cases, areas defined as forest were in fact "mere shrubberies" (*ibid*: 46)²⁷. The underlying motive of these exaggerations is power, i.e. to legitimise external intervention in the control and use of nature (in this case forests). As put by one observer, "[B]y generating and appealing to crises narratives, technical experts and managers assert rights as 'stakeholders' in the land and resources they say are under crises" (Roe 1995, cited in Leach & Mearns, 1996: 20).

This type of critical questioning of dominant environmental crises narratives is certainly welcome. It reminds us that all readings of nature are positioned; they stem from some particular vantage point and hence, in some respects, are always political. "One person's degradation is

²⁷ In a recent book about Himalayan environment and people, David Zurick and P.P. Karan depart from the discussion generated by Ives and Messerli's (1989) controversial work. They support Ives and Messerli's critique of the single model to account for environmental changes in the region. The highly diverse environmental conditions make it impossible to claim an universal crisis. But things are nevertheless, far from comforting. As they put it, "the trend of habitat destruction, soil erosion, declining farmland production, and human poverty are so alarming and widespread" that the cumulative impacts "may well have global consequences" (Ives and Messerli, 1989: 295). In a particular place, it is crucial to note, one cannot take for granted that (say) deforestation necessarily results in a degraded, sterile environment. Peoples in the Himalayas, they argue, have always changed the landscape, and converted forests into fields, grazing lands and homes. Recent changes in the landscape are however of a rate and intensity that by far surpass previous ones (*ibid*: 8-9).

respects, are always political. "One person's degradation is another's accumulation", as Piers Blakie and Harold Brookfield put it in their classic study *Land Degradation and Society* (1987: 14). As they stress, it is critical to realize that there are always "competing social definitions of land degradation", and that, for example, deforestation does not necessarily "constitute degradation in a social sense" (*ibid*: 17, 6). For Fairhead and Leach (1998: 197) the alarming forest statistics that are circulating in various international forums speaks about "power relations with long historical roots" (i.e. going back to the colonial period). Many of the scholars that pursue this type of analysis take a sort of pro-people stand; more or less overtly framing it as a defence of local livelihoods and community rights in natural resources. Although I largely subscribe to such a normative approach, I nevertheless find that the questioning of the supposedly dominant environmental narrative has been pushed too far here, subsuming all accounts of serious environmental disturbances under the banner of ideologically motivated "alarmist discourses" or as just being "myths"²⁸. In this way we are left with no space to address

²⁸ A good example of this is Vasant K. Saberwal's recent article "Environmental Alarm and Institutionalized Conservation in Himachal Pradesh, 1865-1994" where he goes so far to claim that there is no scientific evidence to back up the "popular" idea that deforestation can lead to different types of environmental degradation (like water shortage, soil erosion or floods). The "alarmist degradation discourse", he argues, is purely ideologically or politically motivated (Saberwal, 2000: 69, 79). That the Punjab forest department used conservationist arguments to get control over forest areas, at the expense of other state departments as well as local communities certainly seems reasonable, and this has also been recorded in many other parts of India. But the fact that there are different interests and actors that benefit from establishing eco-catastrophe scenarios does not need to imply that all alarmist reports are just a matter of political myth making. What he seems to forget in his eagerness to deconstruct or renounce

“real” ecological problems²⁹. Again returning to the timber-ban issue, destruction of forests would then be taken as only a pretext for the Supreme Court to intervene and hand-over the ultimate control of the forest to the state (the central government which is the final institution to approve working schemes) at the expense of the rights of the local people. This argument has, as mentioned earlier, been put forth in the debate. I would agree that this is an important aspect of the timber-ban, but I would nevertheless argue that one has to keep the issue of the state of the forests separate from that of the intervention itself. The Supreme Court intervention can be criticized on many grounds, but the ecological rationale behind it does indeed appear to be real. In addition, what strikes me as most interesting about the Supreme Court Order is that by focusing on the timber industry there is a radical discursive shift away from *jhum* cultivation as the main culprit of forest destruction. From colonial times up to the present, the dominant trope of the state has otherwise been shifting

environmental alarms is that there are powerful interests today that do everything they can to suppress such alarms. Just think of the Bush administration's obstruction of the Kyoto protocol.

²⁹ By this I mean to say that although “nature”, “environment”, “environmental degradation” etc. are cultural constructions that vary over space and time, we can nevertheless postulate the existence of an “independent” bio-physical reality and if, for example, someone cuts down all the trees in a forest this might cause various ecological changes, for instance a decrease in the groundwater level. Such a change in the groundwater level would then happen regardless of whether any human being would be there to take note of it or not. In that respect we might talk about it as a “real” ecological change. But of course, when we start to investigate, interpret and argue about the change in the groundwater level it becomes in a sense “ideological” or “political”; marked by the particular discourses within which statements are being articulated (see Escobar 1999, for a further discussion on this).

cultivation/shifting cultivators as the major threat to the fragile mountain environment.

Logging

Among forest officers, the most common claim is that deforestation is largely a problem in the privately or community owned forests and that most of the still dense forest would be those under their management. And there are certainly reserved forests and protected areas with healthy tree cover, but equally there are also areas under the forest department that have been heavily degraded due to unregulated logging. One of the largest scams in Meghalaya relates to the illegal felling of trees in two reserved forests in southern Garo Hills in the 1990s. An independent commission set to investigate the matter, found that about 45,000 trees had been illegally cut inside the reserves (Dutta, 1997: 107-108). The Commission further points to a “systemic collapse” of the forest administration as the main factor behind the illegal felling and that responsibility has to be shared by all officers in the “entire chain of command” (*ibid*: 59-60). A local timber merchant that was active in the area at the time described to me how the whole thing started in the early 1990s with the coming of a new Assistant Conservator of Forests who could organize the large-scale undertakings with backing from no less an authority than the Minister of Forests and the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests. As he put it, “everyone was involved, it was easy big money”³⁰. I leave it to other and better placed persons to confirm the truth of such allegations, but simply note that like the local timber contractor more or less all persons I have spoken to about this case confirm the findings of the mentioned

³⁰ Interview December 2003.

Commission, i.e. that the scam involves senior-most forest officers as well top representatives of the government.

If we stay in Garo Hills, the rather typical story of the timber trade is that of an outside merchant (from Assam, West Bengal or more distant places) with the help of a local contractor approaching a headman (the *Nokma*) or a private landowner, and often for a rather nominal fee, managing to secure the right to cut all the trees in a particular area (this could be in terms of a long-term lease agreement). The local timber contractor would then hire local labourers to cut the trees and also arrange for transportation down to the plains, from where the outside merchant takes over. Sometimes the timber would be converted into planks, in one of the many sawmills that mushroomed during the 1980s and 1990s, or sent out as round timber. The outside merchant determined the prices and subsequently made the largest profits. There was no real check on the extraction, and widespread irregularities were certainly at work. For instance, a former saw-mill owner in Garo Hills told me that one of his friends in the timber trade had his own copies of transit permits and could issue passes for whatever amount needed. For others, it was just a question of bribing the persons in charge of the check gates. The District Council, although equipped with a detailed Forest Act, was basically interested in getting as much revenue as possible. The very functioning of the District Council administration was in fact to large extent dependent on the income from timber. After the ban, this source of revenue has dried up and the finances is today in a severe crises.³¹ The forest management of the District Council is basically non-

³¹ This has been conveyed to me in interviews with several District Council officers.

existent today. As the forest officers in charge told me, they did not even have the money to buy petrol for their vehicles and they cannot be expected to keep a watch on the huge forest areas under their jurisdiction by travelling on public buses or going by foot. Thus they remained in the office in Tura. In their views, the District Council lacked actual authority to impose anything on the people who owned the land. Though this is not technically correct - the existing District Council Acts give far-reaching powers to regulate the forest operations on private/community lands³² - in practical terms, the landowners apparently did what they wanted with their forests.³³ In short, it could be said that the situation has been relatively similar in other parts of Meghalaya. To cite Sanat Chakraborty's (2000: 6) study again, "a sort of *laissez-faire* principles govern the land and forest management in large parts of the Khasi hills, with both the state forest department and the autonomous district councils failing to enforce any forest laws citing legal, financial and managerial problems."

With the Supreme Court Order this changed suddenly. And the "sudden-ness" of the intervention is one of the things that many of the people I have spoken to describe as one of the main problems. "The timber-ban came out of the blue", as one sawmill owner in Garo Hills told me. He was in favour of regulating the timber industry and agreed that the forest needed further protection, but he objected fervently on how the ban was put in place. Besides the problem of no prior consultations or information, he was most critical of the complete inactivity on the part of the Meghalaya government. According to him,

³² See, for example, the Garo Hills District Forest Act of 1958.

³³ Interview with three forest officers at the Garo Autonomous District Council in Tura, October 2003.

the government had not tried to make use of the openings in the Supreme Court Order to allow certain approved felling etc. Everything had come to a standstill, and valuable, already felled trees, were rotting in the forests and in the timber yards.³⁴ Other critics of the ban take note of the lack of compensatory schemes or programs, arguing that there should be some economic plans to provide alternative incomes for those who were dependent on timber for their very survival. And in addition, people raised the issue of self-determination, the supposedly constitutional guaranteed right of the hill people to govern themselves (under the 6th Schedule); asking whether the 6th Schedule no longer had legality. In the case of Garo Hills, it has even been suggested that the militancy that re-emerged in the late 1990s partly was a reaction to the imposition of the ban.³⁵ Regardless of whether such linkage can be established or not, it is clear that the organizations working for increased autonomy have a case to argue that present arrangements allow “the Centre” too much powers or control over their lives (see, for example, the earlier arguments by Tiplut Nongbri).

International experiences relating to logging bans show that it is an obtuse instrument that only becomes effective under certain circumstances. A recent FAO study on logging bans in the Asian-Pacific region during the last ten years, states that one of the main problem with these type of top-down policies is the hastiness of their implementation, which “often contributed to confusion, conflict, and adverse impacts on local

³⁴ Discussions in Tura, December 2003.

³⁵ Social activist Walter Fernandez made this point at the seminar when this paper was presented. I have also touched upon this point in an earlier paper (see Karlsson, 2002).

communities” (Brown *et al* 2001, Part II: 2). In some cases, the ban can even exacerbate the pressure on the forest. As it is put in the report, [I]f policies fail to provide viable alternative livelihoods or if they create economic disincentives to community – or private sector – participation in conservation and protection activities, then abuses and illegal forest activities will persist” (*ibid*: 3). And, as a consequence, this also causes “resentment of government policy” (*ibid*: 5). A successful implementation on the other hand would, in short, require popular participation and that the costs of forest conservation are “equitably borne by all segments of society” (*ibid*). Without elaborating this any further, I think it is obvious to anyone that the timber ban in Northeast India lacks most of the desirable pre-conditions for successful implementation. Many observers in Northeast India claim that illegal logging is going on at a large scale. Although, this naturally is difficult to appraise there are good reasons to believe that this indeed is taking place. It could also be argued that the volume of illegal trade is nevertheless far from those prior to the ban, and, hence, that the felling of trees has been substantially reduced. This again is an argument I find reasonable. The immediate and short-term effects on the logging volume is of course important, but more important are the larger political and ecological implications of the ban.

Outflow of resources

One of the main theme of insurgency discourses in Northeast India is that of a colonial-like relationship with mainland India, through which the natural resources of the region is said to be exploited by outsiders. The only locals that benefit is the very few of the elite groups – businessmen,

contractors, government administrators and politicians – that organis and facilitate the extraction of these resources. The development funds that are canalised from the Centre to the different state governments are equally claimed to be appropriated by the same elites. Demands for increased autonomy or self-determination is thus legitimised with reference to such an exploitative set-up. Sanjib Baruah argues, in the case of Assam, that the political demands of the autonomy movements are “intertextual” with “mainstream Assamese social discourse” (1999: 87). I think this also holds for the other northeastern states. However, it does not mean that people necessarily support autonomy aspirations, but rather that the political analysis of these organizations resonates with that of the general public. The Khasi Students Union (KSU) backed their demand for a moratorium on logging on the claim that it was mainly outsiders that benefited from the business whereas the local people had to bear the environmental costs. KSU takes a similar stand in their opposition to the planned uranium mining in Domiasiat, in West Khasi Hills. As the Former KSU president Paul Lyngdoh puts it, as reported in a BBC News interview, “[O]ur people cannot suffer because India wants *our* uranium” (emphasis added).³⁶

The colonial metaphor does indeed make sense in accounting for the Northeast as a raw-material exporting region. This was established during the British rule when the area was fully incorporated into the capitalist world economy, a process in which the tea industry was the prime mover (see Guha, 1977). Today there are hundreds or perhaps thousands

³⁶ See, “Tribes dig in to fight uranium”, by the BBC correspondent Subhir Bhaumik, 2003/05/05. http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/3000991.stm

of trucks that daily carry the natural resources of the Meghalayan hills down to the plains in Assam and further to the Indian mainland, or are going directly to Bangladesh. If the outflow of timber has been reduced, the trucks are now mainly loaded with coal, lime-stone, granite, clay and even ordinary soil. To this we can add hydro-electric energy and various forest produce that are being transported out of the state. With the opening of the Indian economy, the Meghalaya government is projecting itself as an investor friendly place, where the abundant natural resources are made the major selling point of the state. As stated in an investment prospect by the Department of Industries, Meghalaya “with its rich and vast minerals, water and forest resources, offers tremendous opportunities for investment”.³⁷ Development in this vision is to be achieved through further extraction of the “untapped resources”. The same development rhetoric can be identified for the other northeastern states. Hydro-power is one of the major fields through which the un-exploited potential of the region is expected to bring about development. As much as 35,000 megawatt is estimated to be the total potential of Northeast India, which is said to be about 40 per cent of the potential of the entire country.³⁸ The environmental costs of pursuing a development strategy based on resource extraction are obviously tremendous, not least in terms of deforestation (a common consequence of, for example, mining and the construction of dams). It will further undermine subsistence-based livelihoods, and such a strategy implies further also a strengthening of the existing structural relations of external

³⁷ Meghalaya Government, *Meghalaya Investment Friendly*, Department of Industries, (2003: 1).

³⁸ See *ibid*: 19

dominance, popularly perceived as exploitative and the very cause of the region's under-development. Though development in the official version is presented as the way out of insurgency in Northeast India, it is not unlikely that it might as well trigger further tensions and autonomy aspirations.³⁹

The state's development discourse, one can argue, stands in opposition to the autonomy discourse claiming that indigenous self-governance is a pre-requisite for genuine social and economic progress. The stress on self-determination is of course not something peculiar to the northeastern situation, but is more or less a universal aspect of contemporary indigenous peoples' movements (see Karlsson, 2003). Yet for some observers it comes as a surprise that the tribal communities in Northeast India, with a relatively high degree of political autonomy as well as control over land and resources, still nurture political hopes for further ethnic autonomy (see, for example, Xaxa 1999). Without going into a discussion about the relevance of such self-determination claims, which I have done elsewhere (Karlsson 2001), I would like to close this paper with a reflection on an aspect that I find missing in the public debate, or at least not satisfactorily addressed: and it is the role of the indigenous elite. Even if it is common knowledge that politicians and other people with power in the hill societies have enriched themselves through the reckless exploitation of the forest, this tends to be lost due to the stress on exploitation by outsiders.

³⁹ See further Sanjib Baruah's critical interrogation of "developmentalism" in Northeast India (Baruah, 2003).

The Indigenous Elite

In a series of articles, the anthropologist Elizabeth Rata explores the recent emergence of what she calls, "neotribal capitalism" in Maori society in New Zealand (see, for example, Rata, 2002 & 2003). By this she refers to the capitalization of traditional resources and the formation of new class relations among the Maori, processes that are concealed by Maori ethnic revivalism and claims for indigenous self-rule. As she argues,

The use of the newly capitalized lands, waters, and knowledge for commodity production has resulted in the emergence of exploitative class relations between a new bourgeoisie, located in sites of power and control in the corporate tribal regulatory structures, and a proletarianized worker-in-community class (Rata 2002:1 74).

Even if the New Zealand situation is very different from that of Northeast India, I still find Rata's observations most helpful in thinking about the current predicament of the latter. As I mentioned initially, land and resources are increasingly being privatised in the northeastern hill societies. The Land Transfer Act of 1971 prohibits sale of land to non-tribals in Meghalaya, but gives no safeguards against land alienation or unequal accumulation of land within the tribal communities. Already in the 1970s a Land Commission in Khasi Hills argued for the necessity of cadastral mapping, but this was met with vocal protests and claims that a land survey would lead to taxation and increased government control over land that traditionally belongs to the people.⁴⁰ Later attempts to carry out land surveys have also been opposed, and as has been

⁴⁰ See *Report of the Land Reforms Commission for the Khasi Hills*, Meghalaya Government (1974).

pointed out by some commentators⁴¹ the landholding elite – with an interest in avoiding public scrutiny into these matters – instigate this opposition.

Profits from the coal or the timber trade are increasingly being invested in land holdings, both in urban and rural areas. In the Khasi Hills there are now several studies that reveal a disturbing tendency of increasing number of landless people, and along with it an increase of “absentee landlordism”.⁴² In the context of the timber-ban controversy it became clear that some of the most vocal protesters also belonged to the landed elite, some of them organized in the influential lobby group, ‘Forest and Landowners Association’. The said organization states in a letter to the Minister of Forest and Environment of the Government of Meghalaya, that the Government has failed to protect the “fundamental right of our people” and, goes on to argue, that “even our private property is now at the mercy” of the Government’s Forest Department. The letter further states that jhuming and charcoal production is a much larger environmental problem than logging, and that the forest owners only select mature trees and are most active in afforestation.⁴³ A lot could be said about these claims, but what I would like to draw attention to is the very existence of “land and forest owners” as a distinct interest group; a group concerned about their private property rights and that assert themselves as prudent resource managers. What this narrative reveals is a

⁴¹ The well-known journalist Patricia Mukhim, for example, has pointed to this in several articles in the local newspaper *The Shillong Times*. See also Nongbri (2003:155-159).

⁴² See, for example, Nongkynrih 2002.

⁴³ Letter from Forest and Landowners Association, West Khasi Hills District, Nongstoin, to The Minister of Forest & Environments, Meghalaya Government, dated 20th December, 1999.

situation radically different from that which we started off with, i.e. the popular perception of community ownership and management of land and natural resources in the northeastern hills. In my view, a political ecology of Northeast India requires an in-depth scrutiny of the emergent class-relations and, in particular, the role of the new elites in the capitalization of nature.

In this paper, I have grappled with a number of questions regarding access to and control over natural resources. I have made a modest beginning in mapping one of the most critical environmental conflicts in Northeast India; that of the shrinking forests. As the Meghalaya case shows, there are great difficulties assessing the extent of deforestation and subsequently the amount and quality of the existing forest. Official statistics, like that of the state-wise forest cover figures need critical scrutiny and can indeed be seriously misleading. More disputed, however, is the very measures to halt deforestation. Top-down initiatives like the Supreme Court timber ban might have short-term effects, but are highly unlikely to achieve lasting improvements in the management of the forest. Building sustainable futures requires grounded approaches that are attuned to the realities and aspirations of the concerned people. As a part of this, there is a need for a better and more thorough understanding of the different actors and structures that control the usage of the forest and other natural resources in the state.

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