

# Students versus the State: The Politics of Uranium Mining in Meghalaya

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The plan to mine uranium in Meghalaya to address the needs of the nuclear industry in India has run into opposition and protests in the state. A complicated story featuring the opposition led by the Khasi Students Union emerges as one delves into the issue. Placing an active source of rent in a region with not one but several established insurgencies is fundamentally a flawed idea. While the country's energy concerns are indeed pressing and immediate enough to require quick action by the central government, on this particular issue the centre needs to reconsider its options and strategy.

Since mid-September the Khasi Students Union (KSU) in Meghalaya has been engaged in an anti-uranium mining agitation against the Uranium Corporation of India Limited's (UCIL) proposed plan to start mining in Domiasiat in the West Khasi Hills. The KSU is in opposition to the Meghalaya government's decision to lease 422 hectares of land to UCIL for 30 years. The pre-project development plan in the West Khasi Hills is estimated to be worth Rs 209 crore. The students' organisation has called for blockades and bandhs twice in the last two weeks during which government and private vehicles have been torched or vandalised.

The launch of a massive anti-uranium mining agitation against a government-owned corporation, the Meghalaya state assembly and the central government by a students' organisation is unique and raises interesting questions – how has an organisation led by tribal youth been able to dominate the public debate about uranium mining in the north-east region with an impressive level of success measured by the state government's recent overture to the KSU to enter into a peaceful negotiation?

But first let us run through some quick facts. What appears to be a state-specific issue about health concerns of indigenous people, tribal property rights and special institutional safeguards listed under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, also has a national dimension. Currently India's uranium reserves amount to 78,000 tonnes and 1,00,000 tonnes are required to sustain its current commitment to generating nuclear power. Ninety per cent of India's energy requirements are met by coal and oil; the latter reserves estimated at 247.85 billion tonnes will run out in 80 years at the current rate of consumption (Raul 2008). Given the growing

energy crisis in the country, complicated by the desire to maintain an 8% rate of growth of the economy, the Indian government has been harnessing renewable sources of energy along with exploring the nuclear option.

Following the ratification of the Indo-us nuclear deal in October last year, India has to demonstrate its commitment to civilian use of nuclear energy. The deal, which is supposed to aid India yield up to 25,000 megawatts of nuclear power by 2020, rests on technology transfers from advanced countries like the US and France and aims at freeing India from dependence on fossil fuels, and imports of nuclear fuel from other countries. India's civilian nuclear programme allows for three kinds of reactors to be built – Pressurised Heavy Water Reactors, Fast Breeder Reactors and Breeder Reactors. Fast Breeder Reactors require a mix of plutonium and uranium-based fuel, while the Breeder Reactors can make ample use of thorium. India has the second largest thorium reserve in the world estimated at about 2,90,000 metric tonnes. There are 17 nuclear power reactors in India. In addition to this six more are under construction; three of which are Fast Breeder Reactors. The nuclear reactors function at half capacity because of the lack of availability of uranium (Karlsson 2009).

## The KSU and Meghalaya

Meghalaya contains 2,75,000 tonnes of high-grade uranium (enough to ensure India's self-sufficiency) in the West Khasi Hills district, the largest such reserve in the country. Undoubtedly, extraction of uranium from Meghalaya would settle the nuclear fuel dependency issue once and for all. However, there are a number of questions that can be raised about the political and economic feasibility of the proposed project. To understand these implications further we must be familiar with the politics of Meghalaya and the role that the KSU has played in protecting the economic and political interests of tribal people. A brief history of the KSU and its politics followed by analysis of the interaction of state and society in Meghalaya will follow; establishing why a large development projects aimed at extracting a high rent yielding primary commodity in conflict zones is problematic.

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Meghalaya gained statehood in 1972. The Khasi tribe is numbered at about 1.3 million out of the total state population of just over 2.3 million people. Khasis, along with Jaintias and Garos are linguistic and ethnic minorities in India. The Khasis are a matrilineal society and are predominantly Christian with a small number still adhering to the indigenous Khasi religion. The KSU was formed in 1978 as an organisation dedicated to protecting the Khasi tribe from the economic and political domination of “outsiders”. Over the last three decades the KSU has turned into the self-appointed custodian of Khasi culture and identity drawing its student and non-student members from both rural and urban areas.

In Shillong the words one often hears are “non-tribal”, “outsiders”, “genuine non-tribal” and “mainlander”.<sup>1</sup> I understand these terms as constructed categories that were discursively produced during a movement that sought to indigenise the economy and the bureaucracy and wrest economic and political control from “outsiders”/“non-tribals”/“mainlanders”, which included mostly (but not always) Marwaris, Punjabis, Bengalis and on occasion, even Nepalis.

Student organisations in principle are always firmly rooted in campus politics. In the case of the KSU their relationship to university campuses in the state is completely incidental. In 1979, under the leadership of Michael Syiem the KSU launched an anti-Bengali movement during which a bus containing some non-tribals was attacked and many were killed. In 1987 the KSU launched an anti-outsider agitation led by Bull Lyngdoh<sup>2</sup> driving away many “outsiders” from the state. Others who stayed behind could do business only when a tribal partner came on board. One independent journalist described the KSU during the late 1980s as a “frenzied mob” led by Lyngdoh who blamed his time in police captivity and the beatings he had suffered as having contributed to his unbalanced mental state. In 1989 the KSU tried to stop the construction of a railhead in Byrnihat in the Khasi Hills ostensibly against facilitating an influx of outsiders that increased rail transport might bring.<sup>3</sup> In 1991-92 another anti-outsider agitation was launched when current Meghalaya

deputy chief minister, Paul Lyngdoh, was general secretary of the organisation.

The KSU is today an organisation that occupies a unique space in Meghalaya’s politics. In interviews with student leaders in Shillong conducted last November, several mentioned that political parties reneged on their promises when in office, did not guarantee economic opportunity for people or secure property rights against “outsiders” and were largely seen as irrelevant and discredited. Paul Lyngdoh, a former KSU president formed his own political party in 2007 called Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM) upon leaving the KSU. In an interview conducted in November 2008 he commented on the lack of party organisation in Meghalaya, which disallowed them from taking up issues in a systematic and sustained manner.

The *modus operandi* of the KSU and other tribal students organisations in Meghalaya involves taking over the contentious and electorally unrewarding positions national parties may shy away from – against institutionally correcting the influx of “outsiders”, anti-mining and power projects and re-instituting the “inner line permit” regime in Meghalaya. The KSU has built a reputation for itself that hinges on the credible possibility of violence combined with genuine popularity and legitimacy in the public imagination. The organisation has defended its strategy saying it always resorts to peaceful protests first and violent action is precipitated by the inaction of the political system and parties to adequately respond to the demands of people.<sup>4</sup> The KSU is also actively concerned about remaining a majority group in the state to retain political dominance. For instance, the KSU perceived Nepalis as a possible vote bank for national parties like the Congress, because Nepalis had a tendency to aggregate in particular areas of Meghalaya. Therefore, it was necessary, the organisation said, to drive them out. Most recently the KSU has directed its efforts against illegal Bangladeshi immigrants in the state, in tandem with agendas of other student organisations in the rest of the north-east.

### ‘Xenophobia’ and More

The KSU has managed to corner a political space in Meghalaya because of its ability

to construct and represent common anxieties and fears about tribes being outcompeted on their own territory by “outsiders”; a category whose constitutive elements keep shifting with each decade. Sometimes it is Nepalis, at other times Punjabis or Marwaris and currently illegal Bangladeshis. It has also secured for itself independent sources of rent that have given KSU extreme flexibility in political matters since it is not beholden to any political party for organisational sustenance. Finally, it has been able to portray itself as a credible source of coercion even in the face of stiff disciplinary action by the state. One police officer in the state described a non-verbal negotiation that occurred during one KSU protest. When the officer sensed the KSU agitation could turn violent, he signalled to the group leader to break up the procession or control it. The student leader nodded in return and asked the group to dissipate and regroup at separate locations. This tacit arrangement between student and state seemed to imply that the state would tolerate the KSU as long as they did not break or burn cars or turn violent, in which case the state would be forced to act equally violently.

The current movement against uranium mining is another phase in the KSU’s antagonistic career against seemingly unrepresentative state power in Meghalaya. The multilayered debates that surround this issue are complex and need some elucidation.

First, at the heart of this matter is the debate between the advocates of national development strategies and the smaller and weaker advocates of the rights of indigenous people. Why, the argument goes, must indigenous tribes be asked to give up their rights on land, be exposed to irreversible health hazards and undergo forced displacement to supply nuclear fuel for the rest of the country? The other infamous case of uranium mining comes from Jaduguda in Jharkhand. Effluents from the Jaduguda uranium mines leaked into the water system over three decades and have adversely affected village communities settled nearby – mostly Ho, Santhal, Muhali and Munda tribes. The Jharkhandi Organisation against Radiation (JOAR), a non-governmental organisation (NGO)

that spearheaded a health study in nearby villages had some staggering statistics to report. One in five women reported a miscarriage or stillbirth. Almost 4.5% reported deformities at birth; as compared to similar villages a little further away that reported 2.49%. Increased cancer incidence was also common in the affected villages.<sup>5</sup> Given the inadequate safeguards and measures taken to control the long-term health effects of uranium mining, the logic of setting up new mines and exposing healthy village communities to radiation-related illness and disease diminishes substantially. JOAR also warned that proper health impact assessments were not conducted and that this should influence people and state governments' choices about setting up similar projects in Meghalaya and Andhra Pradesh.

Second, to the tribes of Meghalaya land represents not only an economic asset held by communities (not always individuals), but also has an emotional and affective dimension. Land is tied in to tribal identity

and sovereignty. The Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills districts are categorical spheres of influence of the three tribes in the state directly related to the implicit maintenance of a historic political balance of power between the groups.

Third, many in the north-east make a distinction between their region and "mainland" India. While these categories are often the result of intricate political constructions, their imaginative appeal to and power over common people is immense. The Indian state is not seen as a benevolent patriarch, but as a colonising behemoth. The people from "mainland" India have been the target of anti-outsider movements across much of the north-east and especially in Meghalaya. At the height of one phase of the anti-outsider movement in the late 1980s, slogans in Khasi announced "We are Khasi by blood, Indian by accident". In the 1990s the Hynniewtre National Liberation Council (HNLC) demanded to secede from the union of India. The HNLC threat was curbed

by the timely intervention of the Meghalaya state police that "didn't want Meghalaya to become another Assam, where surrendered militants are now politically powerful as well and act as a legalised mafia".<sup>6</sup> Meghalaya's consistent rejection of India's broader strategy of the politics of accommodation is cause for concern. Strong-arming the state government or buying political consensus by increasing central financial transfers to the state does not solve the basic problem of the lack of legitimacy and sovereignty of the Indian state in the entire region.

Fourth, the UCIL project has not remained a bone of contention only between the nation state and its fringe communities; it has also exposed schisms within Meghalaya itself. Landowners famously reported in September 2008 that they wanted the mining to proceed citing the need for job opportunities for young people.<sup>7</sup> Villagers of Domiasiat refused to grant mining rights stating that the land was held in common. Further other



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student groups in the state like the Federation of Khasi, Garo and Jaintia People (FKGJP) and the Garo Students Union (GSU), which in the past have had political differences with the KSU and have been treading a fine line asking for more scientific testing and safeguards before the mining proceeds; are slowly consolidating behind the KSU agenda. To complicate the matter further, West Khasi Hills is an Autonomous District Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. This institutional feature allows the District Council to have next to complete control over the district, to the extent that the state assembly cannot make decisions about the land without permission from the District Council. The West Khasi Hills District Council in this case has given a green-signal to the project.

### The Fear of Displacement

Finally, in a pamphlet I acquired last November the KSU lists three reasons to oppose the mining project – health concerns, displacement (up to 30,000 tribals will be displaced) and influx control. The emphasis in the pamphlet is on the third factor. The fear that along with mining companies will come a new wave of “outsiders” – engineers and technicians from the rest of the country, perhaps cheaper labour as well. In interviews with the leaders of the KSU they referred to Jaduguda in Jharkhand as a case on the basis of which they established that health was a concern. However, they did not have enough facts or evidence to make a good case and so often resorted to anecdotes. Focusing their agitation on health and displacement alone would have sufficed. However, the power of the imagined “outsider as threat” is so immense that this is all the KSU really needs to build a consensus around its agenda.

What should be a debate about the polluting and long-term environmental and human health impacts about such projects, has degenerated into a debate about outsider and native; in yet another reheated version of the same agenda that has kept the KSU in business for three decades. As outlined earlier, each time an agitation against “outsiders” happened, it also turned violent and non-tribals were driven out of the state. The UCIL project is

focused entirely on energy needs of the country and has not taken into account the state-society relations and political dynamics in which it is being embedded. It is one thing to outline one of the single-largest mining projects in an underdeveloped state which still relies on most of its income on exports of primary commodities (like coal) to the rest of India and central funds, and quite another to imagine that such a large project will have no unpredictable political outcomes.

The KSU has immense organisational strength stretching from Shillong to semi-urban and even rural areas, and has effectively combined disruptive tactics with a common xenophobia to make itself heard and enter into negotiations with the government. However, critics of the KSU warn against “seeing these boys as heroes”.<sup>8</sup> Some businessmen in Shillong’s thriving business district, Police Bazaar, talked of “polite extortion” and “voluntary contributions”, i.e., KSU members asking for a full tank of gas, taking small favours and on some occasions even borrowing private vehicles for short periods of time. This rent seeking, because it occurs under the garb of civility, has much compliance, but is extremely difficult to measure empirically.

The unwritten yet somewhat symbiotic relationship between the Meghalaya state government and the KSU is coming under strain over the uranium issue. The KSU, started by students who faced high levels of economic uncertainty and strove to wrest control of the economy from “outsiders”, paradoxically also ended up protecting the economy for a select few who now constitute the tribal elite and have amassed much of the gains from the indigenisation of state and economy. One prominent businessman in Shillong commented that the KSU had outlived its usefulness for all intents and purposes, but could not be ignored because it had become a parallel government at some point.

Over time the KSU has articulated several other issues, like education, employment and cultural protection, but its basic myopic protectionist vision has remained unaltered for the last three decades. Officially divorced from any political ideology and political parties, the KSU retains its uniquely disruptive voice in the politics of Meghalaya.

### Conclusions

What conclusions or possible words of caution can be drawn from this short narrative? First, development projects in underdeveloped countries, and especially in conflict-affected areas in these countries, cannot be seen as merely suspended over society and politics. They are embedded in the social and political dynamics of the state and groups will react to the new incentives and disincentives these projects will generate. In the north-east the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) often kidnapped tea plantation and ONGC managers in Assam because the ransom acted as a quick source of rent. Alongside this, oil pipelines were often hacked into and barrels of oil stolen not only by secessionist organisations but also by poor villagers.<sup>9</sup> Uranium mining can act as a ready source of rent for any secessionist or militant organisation in the region. To put matters in perspective and draw attention to the scale of the problem, there were 624 militant attacks across the north-east from January to June 2009. The Annual Report of the Ministry of Home Affairs lists two militant organisations in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, Nagaland and seven in Manipur. The South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) has a more inclusive list, even mentioning organisations that may not be as active. According to SATP there are 36 militant organisations in Assam, 39 in Manipur, four in Meghalaya and three in Nagaland.<sup>10</sup>

Theories of ethnic conflict and civil war have been able to predict the possibility of conflict given a set of conditions that enable insurgent groups. These include the existence of a legitimate grievance, access to rent especially through proximity to or control over a natural resource, hostile terrain which makes it harder for the state to establish control (like mountainous regions and forests) where native groups may have an advantage (Collier and Hoeffler 2001). In addition areas where the reach of the state is weak and there is a supportive native population the predictability of active insurgencies is quite high (Fearon and Laitin 2003). All of these conditions are replicated in the north-east. Uranium will undoubtedly function as a source of rent once the mining begins.

Second, on the optimistic front this could be a great moment of manoeuvre for Meghalaya as a whole. Never before has the Indian government shown as much economic interest in the north-east as it has over the last decade. The common complaint of the north-eastern states of being neglected by the centre has been changing especially since the formation of the Ministry of Development of North East Region (DONER) in 2001. In the north-east taxation is typically very low and in the absence of much industry and manufacturing, GDP depends on the export of primary commodities to the rest of India. The centre has increased financial transfers to these states thereby enhancing the state government's dependency on Delhi (Hassan 2008). This has had unique consequences for state politics especially in Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya, the full extent of which is yet to be played out. Also regional political parties like the Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP) and KHAM could use this particular phase to bargain with the centre and re-imagine their place in the Indian union with or without more autonomy.

The KSU today remains a non-ideological organisation sporadically engaging in activism and functioning as a springboard for politically ambitious young men. Their lens on the uranium issue based on an old paranoia of influx by outsiders has led many observers to see it at best as politically alarmist. When there is an excellent case to be made against uranium mining-based on environmental, health and property considerations, it is troubling to see the KSU use "outsiders" to generate consensus. The lack of innovative thinking within the KSU has been compensated by their control over the threat of coercion. As a senior police officer in the state said,

How can people be more scared of KSU than the government? This is because the student community is the largest community in Meghalaya today. They are everywhere, even where the police and state is not there. You will always find students who will go later and say, 'why did you violate our *bandh*? Give us money now.' People don't want to deal with this.

I have tried to outline a narrative of the political and economic scenario in which

the acts of the KSU, the state government, UCIL and the centre are embedded. Placing an active source of rent in a region with not one but several established insurgencies is fundamentally a flawed idea. Security is lax, and uranium will always fetch a high price in the international market. From a state sovereignty aspect, this will enable several groups to challenge the Indian state's already weak sovereignty in the region. Importantly as well health concerns for indigenous tribes and the extent of radioactive pollution should be the very first concern not only for the KSU but also for all agencies involved including the state government and UCIL. While the country's energy concerns are indeed pressing and immediate enough to require quick action by the state, on this particular issue the state needs to reconsider its options and strategy.

## NOTES

- 1 Over the last year I have spent 10 months travelling to five states in the north-east to understand state-society relations. I have conducted 90 interviews with student leaders, politicians, bureaucrats, counter-insurgency specialists, journalists, prominent businessmen, academicians

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- and ex-militants. I was in Shillong in November 2008 and again between March and April 2009. The present commentary, however, is restricted to Meghalaya.
- 2 KSU history pamphlet no 2 (itemised by me).
  - 3 "Khasi Frustrations" in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol 24(23), 10 June 1989, p 1271.
  - 4 Separate interviews conducted with two KSU office bearers.
  - 5 See "Uranium Mining Waste Imperils Villagers in Jaduguda" in *Down to Earth*, 14 March 2008. <http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/node/32083>.
  - 6 Interview conducted with counter-insurgency officer in Meghalaya State Police in November 2008.
  - 7 See article entitled "Meghalaya Uranium Mining Plan Divides Landowners from Other Locals", 24 September 2008. Accessed at [http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/uncategorised/meghalaya-uranium-mining-plan-divides-landowners-from-other-locals\\_10099208.html](http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/uncategorised/meghalaya-uranium-mining-plan-divides-landowners-from-other-locals_10099208.html)
  - 8 Interview conducted with a senior Meghalaya bureaucrat in November 2008.
  - 9 Interview with "Bijoy", a self-identified "oil thief", conducted in October 2008, who explained how oil was stolen and sold. He was a child of 11 when he got involved and left home at the age of 15 to work as contract labour at one of the new hydroelectric power projects in Arunachal Pradesh.
  - 10 See Annexure IV of the Annual Report for 2008-2009 of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Can be found online at [http://www.mha.nic.in/pdfs/AR\(E\)\\_0809.pdf](http://www.mha.nic.in/pdfs/AR(E)_0809.pdf), p 170. Also, South Asia Terrorism Portal accessible at <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/terrorism/toufits/index.html>

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