

UNRULY HILLS

Nature and Nation
in India's Northeast

Bengt G. Karlsson



Orient BlackSwan



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'This wonderful ethnography of Meghalaya's natural resource politics, of nature and nation, makes engrossing reading. Deforestation, mining, the drying up of rivers, climate change as well as insurgency and sovereignty are words that trip easily off policy makers' tongues, but too often, they lack engagement with real life. Here is a book that brings flesh and passion to these issues showing what they mean to the people affected. Balancing multiple actors and institutions, from the Supreme Court of India which banned timber felling in the Northeast to the Khasi Student's Union which is protesting against uranium mining to ordinary men and women who recount myths about their sacred hills, this volume fills a critical gap in the environmental history and ethnography of both Northeast India and the current moment of resource management.'

Nandini Sundar, Delhi School of Economics, Delhi University

'*Unruly Hills* is one of the most original and provocative books on environment and politics in India. Communities supposedly control most land, forests and other natural resources in the hills of Northeast India. However capitalist transformations have rendered the hill communities quite powerless: they are hardly able to control the local resource base. Behind the legal fictions of community ownership lie the ugly reality of a 'resource frontier' where there is massive privatization and accumulation of land by local elites and serious environmental degradation as the result of the crude exploitation of forests, water, and mineral resources. Karlsson's book brims with fresh insights on the crisis of legitimacy of India's democratic institutions in this border region.'

Sanjib Baruah, Bard College, New York and Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi



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Published by

Esha Béteille
Social Science Press
69 Jor Bagh, New Delhi 110 003
and
Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd.
1/24, Asaf Ali Road, New Delhi 110 002

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Distributed by

Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd.
Bangalore Bhopal Bhubaneshwar Chandigarh
Chennai Ernakulam Guwahati Hyderabad Jaipur
Kolkata Lucknow Mumbai New Delhi Noida Patna
www.orientblackswan.com

ISBN: 978-81-87358-59-6

Call No.: 304.209541 KAR/U P11
Acc No.: 41570

Set in Sabon 10/12, Optima 12/14
Typeset by Arup Giri
Printed by De-Unique, Delhi 110 018

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



This book has been long in the making. Over the years my path has crossed that of a number of people whose knowledge, friendship and support have made the endeavour not only possible but enjoyable and rewarding. First of all I would like to offer a collective thanks to all of you who spoke to me and shared your views on the topics at hand. Without you, there would obviously have been little for me to report. Among my friends and colleagues I would first like to thank Gunnel Cederlöf. Gunnel and I have been involved in several joint-ventures at Uppsala University, collaborations I highly appreciate. Together we received a generous research grant from the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation that enabled us to work on rights and claims in nature in India. Gunnel's important monograph *Landscapes and the Law: Environmental Politics, Regional Histories and Contests over Nature* (2008) and the present volume are the main publications of the project.

Tanka B. Subba, professor of anthropology at the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) in Shillong, has helped me immensely in realizing this project. I came to know Tanka already back in 1989 and we have since been in dialogue, sharing ideas and texts. As with my earlier works, Tanka has read and commented on this manuscript in its various stages of completion. Tanka and his wife Roshina have also opened their home for me, making me part of the family. For all this, I am truly thankful. NEHU has been my institutional base in India for almost a decade. Institutional backing has been critical and I would like to thank the university administration and the faculty members, especially A.K. Nongkynrih, A.C. Sinha, David Syiemlieh,

H.J. Syiemlieh, L. Cajee, S.K. Barik and B.K. Tiwari. At the Tura Campus, I am particularly grateful to the eminence of Garo studies, professor emeritus Milton S. Sangma.

On one of my first days in Shillong I ended up at the doorstep of the small office of the magazine *Grassroots Options* run by journalists Linda Chhakchhuak and Sanat K. Chakraborty. Since then I have pestered Linda and Sanat with countless questions and requests and they have patiently served tea and offered their opinions or dug through dusty files, searching for a particular document or article. Vincent Darlong and Imtiena Ao at the Ministry of Environment and Forests have offered invaluable assistance over the years. Vincent also introduced me to Banlum Blah and his wife Pam who run a guest house in Shillong. As it turned out, Bonnie Guest House was the ideal place to stay and Banlum and Pam soon became my close friends. They have both been of immense help and comfort for which I am most grateful. During travels, especially in the Garo Hills, I have been lucky to have Somu Ingty as my guide. Somu knows people and places in Meghalaya better than most and through him I have learned a great deal about the ground realities in the state. I would also like to thank Daniel Ingty and the local IFAD team in Tura who allowed me to accompany them to various project sites in the Garo Hills where I learned about their experiences in community resource management. In Tura I ran into the Dutch anthropologist Erik de Maaker. Erik has since provided many insights relating to Garo society. Deputy Commissioner Shyam Jagannathan in Tura was kind enough to give free access to the archival material kept in the record room.

In Guwahati I have had a friendly circle of travelling scholars in Sanjib Baruah, Zilkia Janer, Xonzoi Barbora and Dolly Kikon. Ongoing conversations with them helped me comprehend some of the troubled aspects of Northeast India. Sanjib, as head of the research centre CENISEAS, provided an important forum for me to present ongoing work. Xonzoi has been kind enough to go through the first drafts of all the chapters, offering most valuable comments. Sociologist Tiplut Nongbri gave important inputs at an earlier stage of the research and she has since been a great support. Her publications are central references in my work. Ecologist P. S. Ramakrishnan, also at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, similarly provided key insights and shared with me his rich work on environmental issues in Meghalaya and Northeast more generally. During the initial phase of my research I had the privilege of being a visiting postdoctoral fellow

at the University of Chicago (the academic year of 2000–2001). I am deeply thankful to my hosts at the South Asian Studies Center and the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations and to The Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education (STINT) for offering the fellowship. My greatest indebtedness is to Dipesh Chakrabarty for hospitality, friendship and continued intellectual inspiration. I would also like to thank bibliographer James Nye for his most valuable assistance in accessing the rich archival material held at the Regenstein Library (India office collections on loan from British Library). In Chicago I also had the great pleasure to get to know Kunal and Shubhra Chakrabarti, who also were visiting fellows at the time. Their home has ever since been my refuge while in Delhi.

Others scholars with whom I have been in contact over the years and whose scholarship has had a significant impact on my thinking are B.K. Roy Burman, Nandini Sundar, Amita Baviskar, Vinita Damodaran, Richard Grove, Brian Morris, Willem van Schendel, K. Sivaramakrishnan, Pernille Gooch, Alf Hornborg and Jonathan Friedman. Chris Erni at IWGIA in Copenhagen has been an important interlocutor. Staffan Löfving has been a critical source of encouragement especially during the writing process. Staffan has read and commented on various drafts of the text. Previous colleagues at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology in Uppsala have as always showed valuable faith in my work. I am thankful to Hugh Beach for his efforts at promoting environmental anthropology and indigenous studies at the department. My old college and friend Mikael Kurkiala have been around offering help when needed. Carina Green has been kind enough to keep an eye on my mail box and assisted me in urgent matters during my last years of absence from the department. Anne Cleaves has done a wonderful job in editing the language. At Stockholm University I would like to thank my new colleagues for the warm welcome. At Social Science Press my warmest thanks go to Esha Beteille and Meenakshi Jauhari Chawla for turning my manuscript into a beautiful book. It has been a great privilege to work with such professional and friendly people.

The comments by the two anonymous reviewers were most helpful, forcing me to clarify certain key arguments in the book. Elisabeth Dunn also offered valuable suggestions for the final revisions of the manuscript and Andrzej Markiewicz helped with the photographs.

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Finally, I owe my deepest gratitude to my wife Louise, whose love and encouragement has made all the difference. When things have looked especially gloomy, she has been the one to think ahead and to see new possibilities. This work owes more to her than to anyone else. My four wonderful children Emanuel, Agnes, Love and Ella should have credit for just being around, being the joy of my life. The book is dedicated to the memory of my father, Gösta Karlsson who sadly passed away in the summer of 2008. I offer it as a tribute to the values of solidarity and compassion that he held highest in life.

Parts of chapter 2 appear in *Ecological Nationalisms* (eds. Ced-erlöf & Sivarakrishnan 2005) and in CENISEAS Papers (No. 3, 2004) and a part of chapter 4 appears in *Economic and Political Weekly* (2009, Vol. 97(4)). And, finally, a part of chapter 5 appears in NEHU Journal (2005, vol. 3(2)).

GLOSSARY OF SELECTED TERMS



<i>a'king</i>	village land
<i>bandh</i>	strike
<i>begar</i>	forced labour
<i>benami</i>	title held in someone else's name to by-pass land laws restricting landownership of non-tribal persons
<i>bigha</i>	land unit, roughly equal to one-third of an acre or 0.13 hectare
<i>durbar</i>	council
<i>haul</i>	land tax
<i>hat</i>	local market
<i>hima</i>	native or traditional state
<i>jhum</i>	shifting cultivation
<i>ka khadduh</i>	youngest daughter who inherits ancestral property
<i>laskhar</i>	tax collector and lower judicial officer appointed by the British
<i>lyngdoh</i>	traditional priest, also title/name
<i>machong</i>	a unit of descent, clan or motherhood
<i>mahari</i>	matrilineal kin group
<i>mela</i>	festival
<i>nokma</i>	headman
<i>patta</i>	land title
<i>ri kynti</i>	private land
<i>ri raid</i>	common land
<i>syiem</i>	traditional chief or ruler (of a hima)
<i>zamindar</i>	landlord
<i>zamindari</i>	land estate under a zamindar

ABBREVIATIONS



ADC	Autonomous District Council
ANVC	A'chik National Volunteers Council
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CFI	Community Forestry International
CRPF	Central Reserve Police Force
DONER	Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
HNLC	Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
IWGIA	International Working Group of Indigenous Affairs
JNU	Jawaharlal Nehru University
KSU	Khasi Students Union
LAEF	Liberation of Achik Elite Force
MAA	Meghalaya Adventurer Association
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MOEF	Ministry of Environment and Forests
MP	Member of Parliament
MPHRC	Meghalaya People's Human Rights Council
NEC	North Eastern Council
NEHU	North-Eastern Hill University
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NSCN(IM)	National Socialist Council of Nagalim
PIL	Public Interest Litigation
TI	Traditional Institutions Movement
UCIL	Uranium Corporation of India Ltd.
ULFA	United Liberation Front of Asom
WCS	Wildlife Conservation Society
WWF	Worldwide Fund for Nature

INTRODUCTION



It was already late afternoon when the *lyngdoh* (the traditional priest) of Hima Khyrim, P. Lyngdoh Nongkrem, and his assistant welcomed us into their office in Smit. My friend Pam and her two children had come along to shop at the weekly market that was being held that day. After hours of haggling in the crowded marketplace, we were all rather exhausted. And as we waited for Lyngdoh Nongkrem to turn up, I had several cups of sweet tea which added to the stress I had been feeling during the day. I was going back to Sweden early next morning, and still had to sort out a number of practicalities. In short, it was not an ideal day for anthropological field engagements. But again, I did not want to miss the opportunity to get some new information about the felling (and destruction) of the sacred forest of Shillong Peak.

Shillong Peak, or *Lum Shyllong* as it is locally known, is among the most sacred places for the Khasi people. It is the point of origin of the nine streams that provide the people with drinking water and make their land fertile. As Kong Sweetymon Rynjah, a prominent interpreter of Khasi customs, put it, the peak is regarded as the 'Natural Guardian of Khasi land'.¹ Shillong Peak is the highest point in the Khasi Hills, with a wonderful view of the surrounding landscape. Because of the strategic location of the region, the Eastern Air Command established its headquarters in Shillong in the 1960s and built a radar station on lands close to the peak. The station covers a large area, including portions of the sacred forests.

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However, the peak itself had been spared and remained densely covered with impressive oaks and a variety of other species of trees. In March and April, with the blossoming of the trees, the grove was magnificent. It was a paradise for bird-lovers, especially during the migratory season, when a number of rare species could be spotted. People would go there for picnics on weekends. In earlier days, many people were afraid of the place, as an old woman running a tea stall nearby told me. Children never dared to enter the sacred forest, fearing to upset the spirits. The elders used to say that breaking a branch or plucking a leaf could lead to illness and even death. Yearly offerings were also performed on the peak but people no longer seem to care about the sacred forest, the old woman said. According to several accounts of people residing in the area, in the early 1980s all the trees were cut down. This occurred more or less in one go, and according to the common story, it was the *syiem* (traditional chief/king), Francis Syiem, who was responsible. Apparently, he leased the peak to a timber contractor for logging. After the contractor had finished his part, local villagers felled the rest of the trees. In the end, only one tree remained on the peak. As some men in the nearby village explained, when loggers tried to fell this tree, flames of fire came out and frightened them away. Since then the tree has been left undisturbed and still stands there as a lone reminder of the forest that once covered the peak.

Ever since I started my work in Meghalaya, I had been puzzled about the fate of Lum Shyllong. How had this most culturally significant grove ended up like much of the other forests in the state? Though Shillong Peak belongs to Hima Myllem, my search had now brought me to the *lyngdoh* of Hima Khyrim—the person who, I had been told, would be able to respond to all my queries.

Lyngdoh Nongkrem was in a relaxed mood and seemed to appreciate our visit. As soon as we were seated in his dark office, another round of tea was served. Our meeting had been arranged through a relative of Lyngdoh Nongkrem and he knew about my research interest. As we were short of time, I thought it best to go straight to the point and begin by asking a few direct questions (not my usual approach). However, I quickly realized that I was there to listen, not to ask questions. Lyngdoh Nongkrem began by narrating a series of myths, the first about a deer that had come from the plains to graze on the peak. People in the nearby village saw the deer and killed it. Birds that had watched the event informed its mother.



Shillong Peak

Shillong Peak, once lush with vegetation, now has this single tree standing

The mother went to the peak and began crying in a heartbreaking manner. The God Lai Shyllong heard the mother's cries and feeling sad for her, touched her with his silver rod; at once she turned into a spring of sacred water. And, Lyngdoh Nongkrem added, it is this water that feeds the nine streams. Even today, the *lyngdohs* take sacred water from the well for their rituals. As I desperately tried to scribble down notes—I had of course forgotten my tape recorder—I thought to myself, why is it that everyone thinks anthropologists are all in for myths? But I had no chance to intervene. As we ventured into the third myth, I completely lost track and Pam took over the pen and notebook. Between relating myths, Lyngdoh Nongkrem also explained various aspects of Khasi history—how people had migrated from the peak to settle in the surrounding areas of the Khasi Hills and how sacred rituals are still performed to link these

places with the original home at Lum Shyllong. The overall message was to underline the immense importance of Lum Shyllong in the Khasi cosmology and traditional belief system.

Finally, Lyngdoh Nongkrem paused to allow me to ask the question that had been hanging in the air : ‘Why then was the peak stripped of trees?’ He knew the question would eventually come, and said, in a matter-of-fact way, ‘It all began with the deer’. The deer, I thought to myself, wasn’t that about the origin of water, the nine streams? But he said, as he skillfully moved into another mode of narration, that the deer myth also pointed towards the invasion of Khasi Hills by foreigners. This invasion, and its impact on the Khasis, is the root cause of all the problems that they are facing today. The degradation of nature is taking place because the Khasis have forgotten their traditional culture and faith. Lyngdoh Nongkrem further stated that the present-day chaos, with its conflicts, insurgency, and alienation from the land, has the very same basis in the foreign invasion that divided the Khasi people and made them give up their culture. ‘New ways of living, new beliefs, and new forms of government have taken over and people have forgotten what we used to respect and keep sacred. This is why the trees on Shillong Peak have been cut’, he said. He also acknowledged that Francis Syiem had played a direct role in this destruction and that he was punished by the gods for his avarice. He died shortly after the felling of the trees on the peak. With the loss of the sacred grove on Lum Shillong, which Lyngdoh Nongkrem dated to the early 1980s, the problems in their society have increased manifold. ‘As a community’, he summed up, ‘we need to reflect on how to preserve our traditional beliefs. This is what will eventually bring back prosperity and peace’.

Lyngdoh Nongkrem narrated a vivid environmental history of the Khasi Hills; taking us from the beginning of history, related in terms of myths, to the British intrusion and its new ways—including Christianity and modern forms of governance—leading to the present predicament with social animosity, militancy, human greed, and ecological crises. Finally, he emphasized the urgency for reviving traditional Khasi culture. His entire story was beautifully woven around, and in response to my query about, the Shillong Peak.²

In many ways this book grapples with similar issues relating to the nature–society interface and how this has evolved over time. My geographical context includes not only the Khasi Hills but also the other areas that make up the present-day state of Meghalaya,

situated in the northeastern corner of India. If Lyngdoh Nongkrem skillfully grounded his story in myths, mine is based on a variety of sources: interviews and observations carried out during fieldwork in combination with written sources such as archival material, media reports, government documents, political pamphlets, and not least the work of other scholars. The initial aim of my research was to understand how the forests were being managed in a situation where ownership and control were with the people (villages, clans, and individuals) rather than with the State, as in other parts of India. What did this difference in property arrangements imply for the management, use, or abuse of the forest? Can we speak about a more sustainable forest regime in situations when communities and not the state forest department are the principal resource managers? Questions like these figured initially. But I soon discovered that the reality on the ground was far more complicated. Contrary to the commonly held belief, local communities, in fact, had, and still have, very little say in the use of forest and other natural resources. In addition, as in Lyngdoh Nongkrem's story, the forest issue opened up into a large number of interrelated problems concerning resource control, property regimes, land rights, customary laws, development, violence, gender and the politics of culture and identity. It is very difficult to formulate my aim in terms of a concise question or a well-defined problem. But if I were nevertheless asked to do so, I would say that this book concerns the appropriation of nature: how does the politics of nature unfold in Meghalaya?

The answer to this question, however, is not so straightforward. In the book I discuss a number of issues linked to forests (chapter 2), land (chapter 3), minerals (chapter 4), and governance (chapter 5). The common thread running through the stories is the cultural aspect of environmental politics. For example, access to land is intrinsically associated with the position of women in society as well as the politics of ethnic belonging and indigenous sovereignty. Further, as in most environmental histories of India, colonialism is a critical event that radically restructured the economy and society. An extractive resource regime was put into place with severe repercussions on the people's mode of dwelling or being in nature. To begin with, the hill areas appeared to offer little scope for revenue generation. However, this situation changed with the expansion of the tea industry in Assam during the nineteenth century and the new demands and possibilities that opened up with the integration of this region into the larger

colonial economy (chapter 1). Jungle tracts that had earlier seemed inaccessible now turned into highly valuable forests that provided hardwood, fuel, and a number of other commodities. The British also introduced new notions of land ownership. They separated the administration of hills and plains, applying a form of indirect rule in the hills. The manner in which the hill areas were included as an economic and political frontier in the British Empire is of utmost importance for the post-colonial developments that are my main concern in this book.

The hill areas that eventually came to constitute Meghalaya remain in many ways a frontier. Frontiers, as geographer Michael R. Redclift (2006: 23) aptly puts it, are 'transitional spaces' marked among others things by an 'ambiguity towards the authority of the state'. Put differently, frontiers are unruly places, not yet fully governed or incorporated into the expanding nation-state structures.³ The unruly can be frightening, but arguably also a space of hope.

Anthropological Horizons

The events examined in this book arguably involve the familiar story of global circuits of capitalism penetrating Southern hinterlands. As this story goes, land and natural resources are being appropriated and turned into commodities, and indigenous livelihoods and ways of being in the world are subsequently pushed to the edge by the ravaging forces of 'the great transformation' (Polanyi 2001 [1944]). However, recent academic work reveals that things are not as straightforward or uniform as was once assumed. In this process there is also resistance, negotiations, continuities, and the creation of new cultural differences. The forces of capitalism appear extremely powerful but are not omnipotent; and there are those who, rather than thinking in terms of one singular process, point towards co-evolving capitalist geographies producing what they refer to as 'alternative', 'vernacular', or 'multiple modernities'.⁴ If anthropologists have long been occupied with documenting cultures dying or disappearing under the onslaught of Western civilization, during the last two to three decades most anthropological accounts of the modern predicament of peripheral peoples have oscillated between the concurrent stories of destruction and creative engagement.

In this book I grapple similarly with questions concerning, to cite historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'the fact that global capitalism

exhibits some common characteristics, even though every instance of capitalist development has a unique history' (2000: 47). Chakrabarty argues that though there are different ways of thinking about this 'fact', most of the available approaches suffer from a tendency to 'think capital in the image of a unity that arises in one part of the world at a particular period and then develops globally over historical time, encountering and negotiating historical differences in the process' (Ibid.). For Chakrabarty, the issue is finding new ways of addressing the persistence of historical difference, or ways of being in the world, that are inside the story of capital and yet are not subsumed by it. In the more common language of anthropologists, this could be rephrased as a matter of cultural continuity under conditions of modernity; a call for what Marshall Sahlins terms the 'resistance of culture' (1999: 412). My theoretical inclination makes me favour such a call, but during the work on this book I seem to have gravitated in the opposite direction, placing greater emphasis on the common characteristics of global capitalism.

Anthropology is known as the source of knowledge about the lesser known people and places, covering, as it were, 'the local aspect of the human condition' (Löfving 2005: 9). Since the 1990s, margins have lost much of their appeal to anthropologists. Those anthropologists who did stay in the margins tended to dwell on transnational connections that mark these places. And, of course, even the most out-of-the-way place has its history of global entanglements that needs to be accounted for. But one can also sense a scholarly impatience with the details and idiosyncrasies of small places, the notion that too much of mundane ethnographic facts will just get in the way of the argument or obstruct the larger story. As a friend and colleague told me, 'Face it, ethnography makes boring reading'. To gain an audience, then, many anthropologists prefer to stay aloof from the field, to avoid being seen as 'area specialists', and instead posit themselves as theorists of the global, sometimes reducing ethnography to mere anecdotal illustration. Personally, I think that insisting on in-depth knowledge of particular settings remains critical and there are reasons to be wary of some anthropological attempts to 'think big' (Englund and Leach 2000). In an assessment of recent developments in anthropology, Bruce M. Knauft notes a move towards 'mid-level articulations' that span different temporal and geographical scales but stay closer to local and regional levels and that, further, engage more directly with 'concrete human problems as

foci of research' (2006: 422). This move towards place-based issues is perhaps a reaction to the previous excess of globalization talk and this is a development that I, too, welcome.

To enjoy rapport with the people in a particular place and get some clue of what they are upto is in itself a most daunting venture. Adding the imperative to think across different scales makes the task look almost un-doable. There is something deeply humbling in the ethnographic practice of enmeshing oneself in the daily life of people, listening to their stories, engaging with their problems and aspirations and, in the end, trying to make sense of it all. Every encounter seems to take you astray, to undermine what little coherence you have started to perceive, and hence to ask for new beginnings. Perhaps this is a kind of epistemological weakness in the ethnographic way of knowing, but equally, one can argue, it is the very strength and ethical imperative of grounded research. Anthropology strives to take seriously the lived experience of people, and for this the researcher has to engage in open-ended dialogue, the direction of which one cannot know in advance. This uncertainty is what makes anthropological research challenging and, for me personally, worth pursuing.

If my earlier ethnographic experiences come from fairly conventional localized village-based studies, the present attempt is somewhat different. The scale is extended, but at the same time the focus is more limited. In short, I aim to understand the politics of nature in the state of Meghalaya, thus seeking to delineate central aspects of the contemporary nature–society relationship or 'socio-ecological processes' to use a term from David Harvey (1996). More precisely, the endeavour is to understand the modalities of resource extraction in the state, their development over time, and the types of conflicts and negotiations that shape the present uses of nature. If Meghalaya is my geographical point of departure, this does not mean that the processes I look at remain bounded within this entity. The opposite is very much the case. In simple terms, I am looking at the extraction of resources for markets outside the state. Such extraction is bound to generate conflicts, whether they relate to the ownership or control of the particular resource, the distribution of the 'revenue' generated, or the social and environmental consequences of, say, coal mining or large-scale logging. I focus especially on issues that have become particularly contentious and publicly debated in the state. In situations of conflict, the different interests, claims, and assertions of

rights are made explicit, and the discourses that are being generated subsequently become a vital form of 'data' in the study. 'Forest' is a primary theme; it reappears in debates about reservations of forest, deforestation, bio-diversity conservation, survival of sacred groves, logging, shifting cultivation, and community management. In addition, the mining of coal, limestone, and uranium are also key themes in the book. As we will see, these issues are closely intertwined with the question of land, and throughout the book I have reasons to come back to this especially intricate matter. It is important to note that we are dealing with societies where shifting cultivation has been, and still is, a dominant form of land use and hence the landscape is in a sort of flux with blurred boundaries between forest and agricultural land.

What I aim at here is akin to the methodology and epistemology that Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing alludes to in her recent book, *Friction*. As she puts it, '[D]espite the standardization and consolidation of capitalism, I found it impossible to learn about resource extraction without dragging my analysis into the arrogance and despair of the Kalimantan frontier' (2005: 267). Rather than assuming that we know in advance where things will go, we are called to engage with the messy, contradictory, and contingent nature of global interconnectedness. Special configurations in the margins might indeed destabilize assumptions that are usually taken for granted. Tsing calls her study an ethnography of global connection; my book more modestly traces mainly regional configurations. Even so, I find a great resemblance to the type of 'patchwork fieldwork' that she has conducted (Ibid.: x). I have followed the trail of a number of resource issues spanning several different communities and localities; for many of them I cannot claim any deep knowledge but rely on the work of others. I hope that through my strategic ethnographic intersections in combination with archival material and a variety of other sources, I will be able to capture the central dynamic of the historical process with regard to the appropriation of nature. As I elaborate further, the question of nature is closely intertwined with that of the 'nation'.⁵ The politics of nature and nation converge in a number of issues such as ownership of land, rights over natural resources and the revenues generated, struggles over ethnic homelands. This is aptly summed up by Sivaramakrishnan and Cederlöf's (2005) term 'ecological nationalism'.

‘Nature’ is a key term in the book. Many scholars remind us that however straightforward it may appear, ‘nature’ is a most elusive word (see Williams 1976). Although I do not dwell at any length on the more subtle ontological and epistemological debates concerning ‘nature’, such issues do come up here and there in the book. Briefly, nature, as used here, refers to the biophysical realm that has an independent existence outside human consciousness, even though it is shaped by human history. Nature works according to its own laws and processes, independent of, yet related to, societal processes. However, our ways of knowing nature—how we perceive it, speak about it, and engage with it—are always historically situated. We can never approach nature directly, without the mediation of culture.⁶ The proxy term ‘environment’ has a more precise meaning in that it signals a relationship with a subject, that is, that which surrounds and co-evolves with a particular organism, population, or society. Even so, some of my formulations tend to evade a precise distinction between ‘nature’ and the ‘environment’.⁷

Environmental Destruction

I began with the story of the sacred forest of Shillong Peak, and I take its fate as a metonym for the state of the environment as a whole in Meghalaya. Though there are places of great natural beauty, the general situation is rather dismal, and largely at odds with the official rhetoric of the spectacular greenery of the state. I suppose you see what you come looking for. My gaze was perhaps geared towards the degradation of the environment. Yet others travel to Meghalaya with much the opposite expectation: to experience the thrill of untamed jungles and richness of biodiversity. A man involved with adventure tourism in Shillong told me that he was taking a group of British wildlife explorers to a particularly dense and inaccessible part of the forest near the Bangladesh border in the southern Garo Hills to search for what was believed to be an undiscovered species of the ‘wild cow’. For these people, I guess, this was a quest for pristine tropical jungles. From adjoining parts of the Garo Hills there are reports of the mythical creature ‘Yeti’ or ‘Bigfoot’. Adventure tourists still come to explore whether there is any truth to reports by local eyewitnesses who claim to have seen the creature or in the photographs that have been taken at places where the yeti is supposed to have stayed.⁸ Still others come to enjoy

the sacred groves, especially the Mawphlang sacred forests situated some 25 kilometres outside Shillong. In a recent film produced by the American organization Community Forestry International (CFI) it is reported that the forest is at least five hundred years old, successfully managed by the local community for generations.⁹

I too have enjoyed visiting the sacred groves as well as other such spectacles of the bounty of nature in the state, for example, stopping by the roadside in Garo Hills to watch an elephant happily munching on a frame of young bamboo trees. I have visited dense forest areas, wildlife sanctuaries, and have seen stunningly beautiful waterfalls, mysterious caves, and breathtaking canyons in the Khasi Hills. All this is there, yet what surfaces for me are the scarred hillocks denuded of vegetation, some literally shoveled away. Boulders and soil are being loaded onto trucks and carried away to Bangladesh or to the Assam plains to be used as ground fill or for construction. As the machines cut into the hillsides of the northern slopes, the red soil is exposed; it is eroded by rain and wind and covers everything. During the rains, roads and tracks become almost impassable because of the red mud. Coal trucks ply all over the state, and places where coal is being mined, reloaded, and stored, everything is covered in black. Run-offs from the coal pits enter the water system, making the water acidic and toxic with high levels of heavy metals, killing fishes and other organisms and making it extremely hard for people to access safe drinking water. Large tracts of agricultural land have also been severely degraded because of the extensive coal mining carried out, especially in the Jaintia Hills. During the 1980s and 1990s, the coal trucks were accompanied by caravans of timber lorries. The main highway, passing through Shillong, was often completely jammed. This was during the heyday of the timber boom which finally led to the intervention by the Supreme Court with its imposition of what is popularly known as the 'timber ban'. Felling of trees was no longer permitted, huge quantities of logs were seized, and the saw mills that had sprung up all over the state were closed (except for a few operating under government licence). Even the Shillong Peak, as discussed above, was denuded of forest cover during this period. Many other sacred groves in the state faced a similar fate. Religious idioms as a basis for traditional forms of protection and management were not able to hold against the prospect of profitable resource extraction.

The view from a helicopter while traveling from Shillong to Tura—a journey criss-crossing the state—is of hillocks with little or no tree cover. Even if large-scale timber extraction has been stopped, illegal felling continues, and trees and shrubs are being felled for charcoal production. A large proportion of the rural people, especially in the Garo Hills, practise shifting or *jhum* cultivation, and as large tracts of swidden land have been taken over for other uses, the fallow periods have been substantially reduced. This mode of subsistence is taking a toll on the environment, and the farmers experience this directly in terms of less fertile soil and consequently smaller harvests (Burling 1997a: 326). Throughout the colonial and post-colonial period, shifting cultivation was opposed by state agencies because it was believed to be a major cause of tropical forest destruction. The issue was cast largely as a problem of finding alternatives, most commonly in the form of permanent cash-crop agriculture. Today, however, the debate has started moving in a different direction with a greater appreciation of shifting cultivation, not least for its contribution towards ‘agro-biodiversity’.¹⁰ Policy measures are being taken towards finding ways of improving and complementing *jhum* cultivation rather than abolishing it. Such reorientation is visible in the rural livelihood project of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in the region. Yet, the blame for the deforestation in the northeastern hills is laid squarely on the *jhum* farmers. For example, a recent report by the National Forest Commission of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, resumes the colonial trope of the necessity of ‘weaning away people from shifting cultivation’, even raising the question of whether it should be allowed to continue at all.¹¹

As I will discuss in this book, the environment in Meghalaya is undergoing rapid and far-reaching transformation, what appears in many places to be devastating ecological deterioration. Whether there is a cause for alarm—or a possible ‘crisis’—remains, as elsewhere in the world, a matter of dispute. Opinions and interpretations differ. It is not my intention, nor within my capacity, to evaluate the general state of the environment, though I think that there are troubling signs. My aim is to map the politics of nature, which among other things relates to the different voices struggling to define if, how, and why the environment is being degraded. In simple terms, one can detect two dominant narratives in Meghalaya, one that cherishes the lavish greenery of the state and the other that is concerned about

the loss of forests and disappearance of wildlife and the once unique flora. Depending on the context, it is not uncommon for a person or organization to invoke or employ both of these narratives. These opposing accounts have their respective iconic representations in the form of the sacred forest and the wet desert. The wet desert stands as a warning of nature rendered barren, a kind of dystopia with the environment pushed beyond repair. The sacred forest, on the other hand, speaks about a possibility of a green future based on indigenous wisdom and respectful engagement with nature. These icons have become powerful global tropes. Schoolchildren around the world learn about Cherrapunjee, the wettest places on earth, now suffering from water shortage due to deforestation and unsustainable resource use. On the contrary, the Mawphlang sacred forest has become somewhat of an international success story in community nature conservation.

Even if the state of the environment does figure frequently in public debates, I think it is correct to say that it is nevertheless not



Denuded hillock

This hillock has been prepared for *jhum* cultivation by clearing its vegetation

a primary concern for people at large, and especially not for the government. There are a few environmental organizations in the state but these have little impact on public opinion. When environmental issues are brought to the fore, it is commonly due to the involvement of high-profile persons and/or influential political groupings. In the case of deforestation and uranium mining, for example, the powerful Khasi Students Union is a key actor. The environmental aspect is, however, not necessarily the sole or main reason for their involvement. The fact that environmental issues are entangled with local politics, commonly with ethnic undercurrents, makes it difficult to get outside backing. Though there are contacts and exchanges with larger Indian and transnational environmental networks, such contacts seem to play a rather nominal role in mustering support and providing logistical backup in conflicts. This seems to be the case with the northeastern region in India as a whole. I believe that part of the reason is that the all-India lexicon of environmental protests does not apply in the Northeast. The good and bad guys seem mixed up. To begin with, the main villain, the forest department, is not the all-powerful institution that it appears to be elsewhere in India. As stated earlier, it is people and not the forest department who officially own and manage most of the forest lands in the northeastern hills; this in itself is a complicating factor that disrupts the common story of forest struggles in India. In the case of the environment, as with other matters, the Northeast is different; also there is a geographic distance from the economic, political, and cultural centres that define agendas and distribute public attention. This makes it difficult to sustain public interest.

In chapter 2, I look more closely at the debate surrounding deforestation. The point of departure is the Supreme Court - imposed timber ban or moratorium, as mentioned above, on all felling of trees in Meghalaya and the other Northeastern states as well as in some other parts of India. This intervention was based on the understanding that forests were being destroyed in an unprecedented manner, thus requiring a particularly drastic measure. The timber ban has been opposed on many grounds, environmental and social. It is also claimed to be an infringement of indigenous rights: wresting control of one of the main resources from the community into the hands of the State. It became a contested issue here whether *jhum* land should be regarded as forest and thus be included in the Supreme Court Order or as agricultural land where the Order would not apply.

The debate came to centre on the question of the actual forest cover in the state. Those who opposed the ban argued, on the basis of official forest department figures (generated through satellite images), that Meghalaya had a sound and even increasing forest cover and that the intervention lacked an ecological rationale. Others welcomed the ban on the grounds that the forests in the state were on the brink of total destruction. They questioned the accuracy of forest department assessments and reliability of satellite imagery. Situations of environmental conflict such as this offer a most appropriate entry point for the type of political ecology analysis that I seek to apply. Different epistemologies, ways of knowing nature, and opposing interpretations and interests in nature—commonly tied to particular rights claims—are being articulated by different actors in the conflict. I seek to trace the arguments and see how different positions and actors evolve in particular situations of environmental conflict. Besides the many aspects of forest, I also address related conflicts concerned with the mining of uranium, limestone, and coal. These conflicts can be described, in brief, as ‘nature-as-resource’ issues. As we will see, the right to, and control of, resource extraction is closely related with issues of land ownership. In line with political ecology modes of analysis, my focus is on the social and political aspects or dimensions of environmental conflicts, and, as such, the power relations inherent in defining and managing nature. Who controls nature? Whose rights and claims on land and natural resources are recognized? Who are the relevant actors involved in the conflict? Such questions are of particular importance for studies using this kind of a framework.

A way of beginning to theorize the present situation in Meghalaya, as has already been suggested, is that what is going on relates to a far-reaching capitalist appropriation of nature. As it appears, the ‘commodification’ of nature is an extremely critical socio-ecological process that seems to alter people’s relationship to, and engagement with, nature as well as their mode of dwelling and perceptions of the environment. Nature is thus turned into extractable resources, commodities for market exchange. In a different manner it can be said that a new ‘nature regime’ is taking over (Escobar 1999).¹² This, as we know, is a common feature of capitalist transformations. In general terms, however, we still need to consider the possible resilience of other, non-capitalist, modes of dwelling or ‘being in nature’. The single tree still standing on the Shillong Peak, is a reminder of this. Hence, I argue that it is not a matter of a complete transition from one

mode to another, but a more complex co-existence of multiple modes of dwelling where capitalist appropriation nevertheless has come to dominate. People engaged in different economic activities—farmers surviving on *jhum* cultivation or government servants working in an office in town—relate differently to the environment. But even where people are directly involved in extractive activities such as coal mining or the timber business we cannot expect them to have a purely capitalist or instrumental relation to nature. Anthropologist Michael Taussig's classical study of plantation and mining labourers in South America (1980) is a telling example of people co-inhabiting capitalist and 'pre-capitalist' life-worlds. I will return later to the significance of this issue and as I move along I will engage the recent critique of the reductionism inherent in claims that nature under modernity is solely a product of commodification. Nevertheless, I use Marx's notion of 'primitive accumulation' as a point of departure (chapter 1). This alerts us to the privatization of land and its accumulation by the economic and political elites; extraction of forests, water, and minerals; and, in more recent times, the simultaneous re-invention of certain sites of the environment as pristine nature for eco-tourists and wildlife enthusiasts.

Political Ecology

The colonial civil servant and historian Sir Edward Gait comments in his still widely referenced *A History of Assam* on the problems in governing this 'out-of-the-way tract' (1905: 317–18). The area was remote and difficult to access, and local conditions were quite different from what the colonial administration had experienced in Bengal. The Assam plains were soon incorporated into the general legal framework but the less civilized inhabitants of the hills were not considered, as Gait put it, 'suited for elaborate legal rules'. They had to be 'governed in a simpler and more personal manner' (Ibid.: 315–16). The region's distant location and otherness continues to be its dominant defining factor. The Northeast was on the fringe of the expanding Mughal Empire; the various polities in the hills remained largely independent. The British finally occupied the hills but adopted a policy of light administration in order to avoid unnecessary disturbance in this unruly frontier tract (Mackenzie 1884 [1999]). With Independence, and the establishment of the Indian nation-state, a phase of intensified integration has taken place. Even so, during both the colonial and post-colonial periods, most of the

characteristics commonly associated with these frontiers still persist, that is, relatively sparsely populated areas peripheral to the political and economic centres of power, undergoing rapid demographic transformation along with ferocious land- and resource-grabbing.¹³ In many ways, frontiers are unsettled places. In Tsing's words, a frontier 'is a zone of not yet—not yet mapped, not yet regulated' (2005: 28).

Earlier studies on colonialism often assumed that the frontier was an area entirely controlled or dominated by the expansionist colonial power. Recent research, however, points to a more unpredictable process that involves not only conquest but also negotiation and compromise with local societies, and at times, direct failure in colonial attempts to establish control over valuable resources (Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Cederlöf 2008). Mary Louise Pratt has suggested that 'contact zone' might be a more suitable term for capturing such 'improvisational' aspects of colonial encounters (1992: 6–7). While considering Pratt's characterization of colonial encounters, particularly her ideas on how subjects are constituted in, and through, such encounters, I prefer to retain the term 'frontier' (using it in the sense indicated above). Even if the resource frontier I discuss in this book relates to an area that is marked by the international borders of present-day national states, the conditions of a frontier can apply in other contexts, say, in the resource rich states of central India.¹⁴

As I stated at the outset, I seek to apply a political ecology framework in understanding the dynamics of the resource frontier in Northeast India. Political ecology is an increasingly influential research field that focuses on various aspects of nature–society interrelations, especially on the social and political basis of environmental problems. Issues of power and interests linked to larger political processes of the market and the State are accorded analytical priority. In this, political ecology is different from studies of human–environment relations that concentrate mainly on the local context and the internal society dynamics as the drivers of ecological change.¹⁵ Yet, as most introductory texts or attempts to summarize the field state, political ecology is not one thing: there is no single theory or analytical framework to which all political ecologists would subscribe. It is more correct, perhaps, to talk about a shared perspective and a common research agenda, scholars who address similar questions and share a number of basic assumptions

and theoretical orientations as well as modes of explanation (Peet and Watts 2004; Robbins 2004; Neumann 2005; Biersack and Greenberg 2006). Nancy Peluso and Michael Watts sum it up well:

Political ecology provides tools for thinking about conflicts and struggles engendered by the forms of access to, and control over, resources. Its attentiveness to power relations inherent in defining, controlling, and managing nature suggests an alternative way of viewing the link between environment and political action. (Peluso and Watts 2001: 24–25)

Political ecology studies often begin by mapping the different actors involved in the particular conflict, ranging from the more powerful ones like the State, transnational corporations, or multilateral institutions to the weaker ones such as communities, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or social movements (Bryant and Bailey 1997).

It is not only the different interests of these actors that are important, but also how their respective claims are being articulated, and the very basis on which those claims are based. It is also interesting to note the different world views or perceptions of the environment that might be at play in the conflict. Ventures of this kind always run the risk of simplification, of imposing an internal coherence on actors that are themselves internally differentiated and driven by opposing interests. For example, recent anthropological work on the State has increasingly come to question the unity of the State, highlighting the often chaotic and incoherent nature of State activities (Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Das and Poole 2004; Nugent 2004; Spencer 2007). The same can be said about the community and the other actors involved. Another related problem that political ecology analysis needs to be wary of is the tendency, as Arun Agrawal rightly argues, to take actors and interest as ‘already given’ and thus fail to ‘examine how they are made’ or emerge in situations of conflict (2005: 211). This last point may be considered a call for a merging of political ecology with environmental history, which is pursued here to some extent (see also Hornborg 2007).¹⁶

Critical Research

In this type of research, it is hard to claim a detached position outside the conflicting interests and interpretations. I certainly have my own

sympathies, biases, sensibilities, and prejudiced notions that influence arguments and discussions. I have a background in the alternative movement in West, was active in the Swedish Green Party during its developing years in the 1980s and protested against nuclear energy, sought out radical communes around Europe, and started a small collective bakery producing 'organic' bread in Uppsala. Like many other Western 'greens', I spent a lot of time with the writings of people like Schumacher, Naess, Gandhi, and Thoreau. Through my anthropology studies I became involved in organizations working for the rights of minority and indigenous peoples, for example, organizing campaigns to protest against the genocide of the hill peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. All these previous engagements have a direct bearing on the topics at hand.

During the late 1990s, India and Pakistan joined the club of states with nuclear weapons, and India began investing heavily in nuclear energy as a vital component of the country's energy strategy to meet the ever-increasing demands. The recent deal with the US to cooperate in civil nuclear energy development has further enhanced these plans. In this situation it is imperative to secure the existing uranium assets in the country.¹⁷ It so happens that an inaccessible, sleepy cluster of villages in Domiasiat in the West Khasi Hills is sitting on what is regarded as the largest and best-quality asset of uranium in India. As I will discuss in chapter 4, the question of whether to mine this deposit is haunting people in Meghalaya. The then President of India Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam stated during a visit to Shillong in 2007 that uranium mining is perfectly safe and poses no risks whatsoever to people's health. According to the president, mining would provide a critical boost to the development of Meghalaya. With his background in natural science, working closely with nuclear physicists, he further asserted that nuclear energy is a clean and 'eco-friendly' source of power that is of great importance to the nation.¹⁸ Some people in Meghalaya seem to share this view and welcome mining, whereas others take a strong stand against it. My personal sympathies are obviously with the latter camp. However, I have not taken an activist role or in any way tried to lobby against uranium mining. This is neither called for nor my assigned task as a researcher. As in the case of the other contentious issues dealt with in the book, I have, as far as possible, engaged all the concerned actors and tried to map their respective interests, their influence, and mode of operation. Such an

enterprise might be deemed political to the extent that it provides a space for critical reflection or social critique. Along with many other scholars in the field of political ecology, I like to think of the approach developed here as having an emancipatory dimension. The implicit solidarity is with people who ‘eat off the land’—those who seldom reap any of the profits from capitalist extraction but are left to face the environmental consequences or those who lose their lands and livelihoods in this process. If one were to look for an underlying message in this book, it would be a call for serious reflection on how to build an environmentally sustainable and socially equitable future.

My fieldwork in Meghalaya spans a period of over six years, from a brief one-month stay in December 1999–January 2000, to field stays of three to four months in 2002, 2003, and 2005, and a shorter final visit in 2006. My base has been Shillong, but I have traveled extensively across the state. Sometimes I have been out just for the day or a couple of days or, as during my stays in the Garo Hills, for a few weeks at a stretch. The choice to work from the centre and outwards was motivated by my focus on the elite in society, that is, those who arguably exercise a major influence over how land and resources are used and managed. However, ‘ordinary’ villagers also figure in my stories. Hence the main body of ethnographic data derives from interviews and interactions with middle-class people such as politicians, community leaders, development workers, activists, journalists, university scholars, businessmen (coal traders and timber contractors), most of whom are based in Shillong, the state capital, and to a lesser extent in Tura, the commercial and administrative centre of the Garo Hills.

English is the official state language in Meghalaya; it is used in government offices, is taught in schools, and is widely spoken in society. Most of the people I interacted with or interviewed were fluent in English and this is the language that I have used in my research. In conversations with villagers who did not know English, I worked with interpreters. In most such situations, I have used a tape recorder, which has allowed me to return to the conversations and go through the translations at a slower pace. Between stays in the field I remained in contact with a number of people and thus followed the evolving resource conflicts from a distance. The cutting date of the book is roughly the end of 2007.

In most cases I refer to the interviewees by their real names. Only occasionally, when I found reasons for anonymity, I have omitted

names and referred to the informants as a 'government officer', 'coal trader', or a 'journalist friend', etc. In my experience, most people like to have their names included—this is also what people have told me—but a researcher still has to consider, of course, whether a particular statement might get someone in trouble later on. I have screened my text keeping this in view and sincerely hope that none of the people who have taken the time to share their experiences with me; making this work possible, will eventually come to regret this. If this were ever the case, for what it is worth, I extend my sincerest apologies.

Although this book mainly concerns the material aspects of people's engagement with nature, above all in terms of contested rights and claims to land and natural resources, such issues are intimately linked with other, should I say, existential aspects of people's attachment to place. '[P]laces', anthropologist Keith H. Basso writes, 'provide points from which to look out on life, to grasp one's position in the order of things, to contemplate events from somewhere in particular' (1996: 56). In situations where people experience a loss of control of the land or the resource base of community, we can also assume a profound experience of ontological insecurity. Struggles over land and resources are, in other words, deeply entangled with struggles over meaning and belonging. As we will see, being 'indigenous' has gained particular salience in Meghalaya (chapter 5). Lyngdoh Nongkrem's story is a telling example of this, calling upon people to fight outside influences and reconnect with the land through traditional Khasi beliefs and customs. Despite some troubling aspects of this turn to indigeneity—a phenomenon we observe among marginalized people around the world—it nevertheless seems to open a critical space for resistance against State and capital intrusion into the life of inhabitants of resource-rich global peripheries.

Notes and References

- 1 Interview in Shillong, 15 December 2002.
- 2 My meeting with P. Lyngdoh Nongkrem took place on 11 December 2003.
- 3 As I make the final round of revisions of the book manuscript in

November 2009, I have been able to lay hands on James C. Scott's much anticipated and highly enjoyable *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009). In this book, Scott focuses on the continued struggle among hill peoples in the larger region of Southeast Asia (including parts of China in the north as well as the hills of Northeast India in the west) to keep the State at a distance. The pursuit of evading the State to avoid taxation, conscription, forced labour, and other forms of State oppression has made these people move up in the hills, take up shifting cultivation, develop a segmentary lineage system and an acephalous social organization. These 'nonstate spaces', however, are fast disappearing as people, lands, and resources are being 'monetized' (Scott 2009: 4–5). Without necessarily agreeing with all facets of Scott's historiography, the distrust of the State that I identify as critical in the Northeast in general and Meghalaya in particular does resonate well with the anarchist spirit of the self-governing uplanders that he is concerned with.

- 4 See, for example, Rofel (1997) on 'alternative modernities' and the special issue of *Daedalus* (Winter 2000, the introductory essay by Eisenstadt) on 'multiple modernities'.
- 5 Much has been written on the concept of 'nation'. I will not directly engage with this literature here, but in discussing various aspects of cultural and ethnic identity or a sense of collective belonging and the related political struggles for territorial sovereignty or self-determination, I consider 'nation', as encompassing all these issues.
- 6 In this I subscribe to a kind of 'critical realism' shared by many political ecologists (Neumann 2005: 46–51).
- 7 For further elaboration on the difference between 'nature' and 'environment' see, for example, Ingold (2000: 20) and Gold and Gujjar (2002: 6–14).
- 8 'Bigfoot' is known among the Garos as *Mande Burung*, and during the last ten years it has been spotted a couple of times by local people, most recently in the Nokrek National Park (see 'On the trail of mysterious Bigfoot', *The Telegraph*, 12 March 2002, and 'Probe ordered into yeti sightings in Garo Hills', *The Telegraph*, 6 December 1997). I met two photographers in Tura who are involved in the search for the Yeti and they told me about the enormous outside interest (see the website of the American organization, The Bigfoot Field Research Organization, <http://www.bfro.net>).
- 9 The film is entitled *Sacred Forests of Meghalaya—Wisdom from the Mother's Hearth*, directed by Minnie Vaid (Community Forestry International 2005).
- 10 In a cluster of villages in the West Garo Hills it was found that as many as 23 varieties of rice and 25 varieties of millet were being cultivated in the *jhum* fields (presentation by Dhrupad Chaudhury, natural resource expert working for IFAD, at a seminar on Biodiversity in Northeast India held at

St. Mary's College, 27–28 November 2002.

- 11 The report has a special chapter on the Northeast (chapter 10) and is available on the Ministry of Environment and Forests (2006) webpage (<http://envfor.nic.in/welcome.html>), p. 158. The same language on the necessity to wean the tribals away from jhumming is also used in the recent report 'Peace, Progress and Prosperity in the North Eastern Region, Vision 2020' (Ministry of Development of Northeastern Region, Government of India, 2008, pp. 14, 24); available at <http://modoner.gov.in>
- 12 Anthropologist Arturo Escobar introduced the notion of 'nature regime', by which he refers to different historical articulations of society–nature interactions or, as he puts it, 'different regimes of articulation of the historical and the biological' (1999: 5). Escobar focuses on three major nature regimes: 'organic nature', 'capitalist nature', and 'technonature'. It is hard to fully comprehend Escobar's theoretical underpinnings as well as his usage of the term 'nature regime', nevertheless I find it useful. My main concern here is the relationship between the organic and the capitalist regimes of nature and how the latter has come to take precedence over the former. The capitalist regime is characterized by the twin processes of governmentalization and commodification of nature. Escobar develops these ideas further in his recent monograph *Territories of Difference: Place, Movement, Life, Redes* (2008). (See also Biersack 2006 for a constructive application of Escobar's 'nature regime'.)
- 13 See, for example, Paul Little's study of the Amazonian frontiers (2001) and the earlier mentioned book *Frontiers: Histories of Civil Society and Nature* (Redclift 2006).
- 14 I thank the anonymous reviewer of the manuscript for pointing out that many of the frontier characteristics that I identify for the Northeast apply to Central India as well. This suggests that the proxy to nation-state borders is of less significance and that frontiers are more about a 'cultural condition'. While I agree with this, I do think that international borders matter greatly in shaping different frontier histories. I hope it will become clear in the book that this is also the case with the frontier dynamics of Northeast India. But again, I fully embrace the reviewer's suggestion to compare the Northeastern situation with that of Central India where resource grabbing, insurgency, and indigeneity are equally familiar configurations. As a starting point for such an exercise, I recommend the recent excellent volume *Legal Grounds: Natural Resources, Identity, and the Law in Jharkhand* (2009), edited by the sociologist Nandini Sundar.
- 15 A lot of work within cultural ecology as well as in latter work within environmental anthropology, not least Rappaport's pioneering study *Pigs for Ancestors* (1968), suffers from the lack of engagement with extra-local processes. For an early critique of the functionalism in such work, see Friedman (1974).

- 16 As an emerging cross-disciplinary field, political ecology is facing critique from various quarters, for example, that it over-states the political and hence fails to account for the functioning of the environment (Vayda and Walters 1999) or, as sociologist Amita Baviskar put it recently, that it is dogged by 'economic determinism' and hence misses the symbolic dimensions of natural resources (2008: 1). While there are reasons to take such critiques seriously—I may be found guilty on both accounts—one has to be alert as to how political ecology is being assembled. In the above two cases, the respective authors define the field too narrowly in order to make their points.
- 17 As I point to, in a recent article, the Indo-US nuclear deal signed in 2008 is built on a separation between civil and military nuclear uses and India will remain dependent on domestic uranium for its weapons programme (Karlsson 2009).
- 18 See, for example, 'Uranium energy eco-friendly', *The Shillong Times*, 17 March 2007. Friends at North Eastern Hill University have told me that President Kalam made similar statements in a meeting with the faculty and students at the university.