

## INTRODUCTION

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It was already late afternoon when the *lyngdoh* (the traditional priest) of Hima Khyrim, Mr. 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 Mr. Lyngdoh 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 the next morning, and had still 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 bits of information about how the sacred forest of Shillong Peak had been felled.

Shillong Peak, or *Lum Shyllong* as it is locally known, is one of the most important sacred places of the Khasi people. It is the place from which the nine streams originate that provide people with drinking water and make the land fertile. As Kong Sweetymon Rynjah, a prominent interpreter of Khasi customs, put it, the peak is regarded a "Natural Guardian of Khasi land."<sup>1</sup> Shillong Peak is also the highest point in the Khasi Hills, with an astonishing view of the surrounding landscape. Because of the regions' strategic location, 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, parts of which used to be sacred forests. But the peak itself had been spared and remained densely covered with impressive oaks and a variety of other species of trees. As I heard, in March and April when the trees blossom 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, though, as an old woman running a tea stall at nearby Elephant Falls told me, many people were afraid of the place. She said that when she was a child they never dared to enter the sacred forest, fearing to upset the spirits. If you just broke a branch of a tree or plucked a leaf, the elders had warned them, you could fall ill or even die. Yearly offerings

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were also performed on the peak, but, as the old woman said, people no longer seemed to care about these things. Finally, in the early 1980s, as several other interviewees confirmed, all the trees were cut down. It happened more or less in one go, and according to the common story, it was the *syiem* (traditional chief/king), Francis Syiem, who was behind it. Apparently, he leased the peak to a timber contractor who did the logging. After the contractor had finished his part, local villagers entered to get the rest of the trees. In the end, there remained only one tree on the peak. As some men in the nearby village explained to me, when the loggers had 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 to call to mind 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 come to end up like much of the other forest in the state, converted into timber? Though Shillong Peak belongs to Hima Myllem, my search had now brought me to the *lyngdoh* of Hima Khyrim, to the person who, I had been told, would be able to tell me what happened.

Mr. Lyngdoh Nongkrem was in a relaxed mood and seemed to appreciate our visit. As soon as we got seated in his dark office, another round of tea was served. Our meeting had been arranged through a relative of Mr. Lyngdoh and he knew about my research interest. As we were short of time, I thought it best to get straight to the point and just fire off a few direct questions (not my usual approach). My host, however,



Plate 1 Shillong Peak

had other plans. When I tried to begin, he raised a hand to hush me and make me wait. I was there to listen, not to ask questions, as I was soon to discover. Mr. Lyngdoh began by narrating a series of myths, the first one being about a deer that had come from the plains to graze on the peak. People in the nearby village saw the deer, were upset by its trespass, and subsequently killed and ate the deer. Birds that had watched the event informed the mother of the deer. The mother went to the peak and began crying in the most heartbreaking way. The god Lai Shyllong heard the mother's cries and felt sad for her. Lai Shyllong touched the mother deer with his silver rod and at once she turned into water, or a spring of sacred water. And, Mr. Lyngdoh Nongkrem added, it is this water that feeds the nine streams, and the *lyngdohs* still 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 to 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 myths, Mr. Lyngdoh Nongkrem inserted explanations about various aspects of Khasi history, how people migrated from the peak to settle in the surrounding parts of the Khasi Hills, for example, and how sacred rituals are still performed to link these places with the original home at Lum Shyllong. The overall message, as I understood it, was to underline the immense importance of Lum Shyllong in the Khasi cosmology and traditional belief system.

Finally, Mr. Lyngdoh paused, allowing me to raise the question that had been hanging in the air: "Then how come people allowed the peak to be 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 pointed also to the invasion of foreigners to the Khasi Hills. This invasion, and the impact it has had on the Khasis, is the original cause of all the problems they face today, he explained. The degradation of nature is because the Khasis have forgotten their own culture and faith. But not only that: Mr. Lyngdoh Nongkrem further stated that present-day chaos, with its conflicts, insurgency, and alienation from the land, has the very same basis in the foreign invasion that divided 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. Later he also acknowledged that Francis Syiem had played a direct role in it, saying that he was known to be especially cunning with money. Francis Syiem, however, was punished by the gods and died shortly after the peak was logged. With the loss of the sacred grove on Lum Shillong, which Mr. Lyngdoh also dated

to the early 1980s, the problems he spoke of in society have rampaged. "As a community," he summed up, "we need a lot of reflection on how to preserve our traditional beliefs. This is what eventually will bring back prosperity and peace."

When we stumbled out of the office some two hours later, I could not believe what had transpired. Mr. Lyngdoh had narrated in masterly fashion a vivid environmental history of the Khasi Hills, taking us from the beginning of history, told in the idiom of myths, to the British intrusion and the new ways it brought with it—not least of which were Christianity and modern forms of governance—leading to the present predicament with social animosity, militancy, human greed, and ecological crises and, finally, as a way out of this, he pointed to the urgency of reviving traditional Khasi culture. And the entire story was beautifully woven around, and in response to my query about, the Shillong Peak.<sup>2</sup>

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 is extended to include not only the Khasi Hills but also the other areas making up the present-day state of Meghalaya, situated in the northeastern corner of India. If Mr. Lyngdoh 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 like 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 people (villages, clans, and individuals) rather than with the state, as they are elsewhere in 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, not the state forest department, are the principal resource managers? Questions like these figured initially. But, as I soon discovered, the reality on the ground was far more complicated. Contrary to the commonly held belief, communities had in fact little say over how the forest and other natural resources were being used. In addition, as in Mr. Lyngdoh's story, the forest issue soon opened up into a large number of interrelated problems having to do with resource control, property regimes, land rights, customary laws, development, violence, gender and the politics of culture and identity. It is more difficult now to formulate my aim in terms of a set of concise questions 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. As a question: how do the politics of nature unfold in the state of Meghalaya?

My answer, however, cannot be stated in a similarly straightforward manner. In the book I will engage a number of stories linked to forests

(chapter 2), land (chapter 3), minerals (chapter 4), and governance (chapter 5). The red thread running through these stories is the cultural aspect of environmental politics. Access to land, for example, is intrinsically about 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, putting an extractive resource regime in place with severe repercussions for people's mode of dwelling or being-in-nature. If the hill areas appeared to offer little scope for revenue generation to begin with, this 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 too 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 and separated hills and plains administratively, applying a form of indirect rule in the case of the hills. The way in which the hill areas were inserted as an economic and political frontier in the British Empire is of utmost importance for the later postcolonial 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 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 in to the expanding nation-state structures.<sup>3</sup> The unruly can be frightening, but arguably also a space of hope.

### **Anthropological Horizons**

The events recounted and 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 being pushed to the edge by the ravaging forces of "the great transformation" (Polanyi 2001[1944]). But as we have learned from recent scholarship, things might not be as straightforward or uniform as was once assumed. In this process there are also resistances, negotiations, continuities, and the creation of new cultural differences. The forces of capitalism appear extremely powerful, then, but not omnipotent, and there are those who, rather than thinking in terms of one singular process, point to co-evolving capitalist geographies producing what they refer to as "alternative," "vernacular," or

“multiple modernities.”<sup>4</sup> 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.*, emphasis added). For Chakrabarty the issue is one of finding new ways of addressing the persistence of historical difference, or ways of being in the world, that are inside the story of capital yet 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 has me favoring such a call, but during the work with this book it seems I have gravitated in the opposite direction, putting greater emphasis on common characteristics of global capitalism.

Anthropology has made a name producing 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 need 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 to be told. 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 that there are reasons to be wary of some of the anthropological attempts to “think big” (Englund and Leach 2000). Bruce M. Knauft notes, in an assessment of recent developments in anthropology, 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 turn to place-based issues is perhaps a reaction to the previous excess of globalization talk and this is a development I, too, welcome.

To gain rapport in a particular place and get some clue about what people are up to is in itself a most daunting venture. Adding the imperative to think across different scales makes the task look almost impossible. 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. 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 to happen the researcher has to engage in open-ended dialogue, the direction of which one cannot tell beforehand. This uncertainty is what makes anthropological research challenging and, for me, worth pursuing.

If my earlier ethnographic experiences come from fairly conventional localized village-based studies, the attempt here is of a different kind. The scale is extended, but at the same time the focus is more limited. In short, what I aim at is understanding the politics of nature in the state of Meghalaya, thus seeking to delineate central aspects of contemporary nature–society relations or “socio-ecological processes,” to use a term from David Harvey (1996). More precisely, the aim is to understand the modalities of resource extraction in the state, how these have evolved over time, and the types of conflicts and negotiations that shape 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 are disputes relating 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 forest reservations, deforestation, biodiversity 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 land question, and throughout the book I have reasons to come back to this especially intricate matter. Here it is especially 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 with a landscape in flux, with blurred boundaries between forest and agricultural land.

What I aim at here is akin to the type of methodology and epistemology that Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing alludes to in her recent book *Friction* (2005). 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” (ibid.: 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 taken for granted. Tsing names her study an ethnography of global connection; this book more modestly traces mainly regional configurations. Even so, I find a great resemblance to the type of “patchwork fieldwork” she has been conducting (ibid.: x). I have followed the trail of a number of resource issues spanning several different communities and localities; many of them I cannot claim any deep knowledge of but must rely on the work of others. I hope nevertheless that through my strategic ethnographic intersections in combination with archival material and the use of a variety of other sources, I will be able to capture the central dynamic of the historical process in which I am interested with regard to the appropriation of nature. As I will elaborate, the question of nature is closely intertwined with that of nation.<sup>5</sup> Ownership of land, rights over natural resources and to the revenues generated, struggles over ethnic homelands: in all these issues the politics of nature and nation converge, aptly summed up by Sivaramakrishnan and Cederlöf’s term “ecological nationalism” (2005).

“Nature” is a key term in the book. As a great many scholars remind us, 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 pop up here and there in the book. Briefly, nature, as it will be used here, refers to the biophysical realm that, however shaped by human history, still has an independent existence outside human consciousness. Nature works according to its own laws and processes, independent of yet in relation 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, so to say, approach nature directly, without the mediation of culture.<sup>6</sup> The proxy



term “environment” has a more precise meaning in that it signals a relationship with a subject, i.e., that which surrounds and co-evolves with a particular organism, population, or society. Even so, as will be clear as we move along, some of my formulations tend to evade a precise distinction between nature and the environment.<sup>7</sup>

## Environmental Destruction

I opened 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, largely at odds with the official rhetoric of the state’s spectacular greenness. 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 very much the opposite expectation—to experience the thrill of untamed jungles and richness of biodiversity. A man working in adventure tourism in Shillong told me once that he was taking a British group of wildlife explorers to a particular 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 “wild cow.” For these people, I guess, this was very much a quest for pristine tropical jungles. From adjoining parts of the Garo Hills there are also reports of the mythical creature “Yeti” or “Bigfoot.” Outside adventurers still come to find out 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.<sup>8</sup> Still others come to enjoy the sacred groves, not least the Mawphlang sacred forests situated some twenty-five kilometers outside Shillong. In a recent film produced by the American organization Community Forestry International it is said that the forest is at least five hundred years old, successfully managed by the local community for generations.<sup>9</sup>

I too have enjoyed visiting the sacred groves as well as other such spectacles of nature’s bounty in the state. Stopping by the roadside in the Garo Hills to watch an elephant happily munching on a stand of young bamboo trees, for example, or walking across the fabulous plateau of the Balpakram National Park, a holy site for the Garos where the spirits of the dead come to dwell. I have been to 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, carried away to Bangladesh or to the Assam plains to be used as ground fill or for construction. As the machines bite into the hillsides of

the northern slopes, the red soil is exposed, and with rain and wind it erodes 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 in the places where coal is being mined, reloaded, and stored, everything is covered instead in black. Run-offs from the coal pits enter the water system, making the water acid and toxic with high levels of heavy metals, killing fish and other organisms and making it extremely hard for people to find 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. As I have been told, the main highway, passing through Shillong, was often completely jammed by these trucks, all in a hurry to bring their valuable loads down to the plains. This was during the heyday of the timber boom, finally leading 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 license). As mentioned, even one of the most sacred places of the Khasis, Shillong Peak, was looted in the hunt for timber during this period. This was the fate of many other sacred groves in the state as well, as will be discussed later. Religious idioms as a basis for traditional forms of protection and management were not able to hold against the prospect of profitable resource extraction.

From a bird's eye view on a helicopter traveling from Shillong to Tura, a journey transecting the state, the most common sight is hillocks with little or no tree cover left. Even if large-scale timber extraction has been stopped, illegal felling continues, and trees are also being felled for charcoal production; smaller trees and shrubs are being cut for charcoal as well. A large proportion of rural people, especially in the Garo Hills, live on shifting or *jhum* cultivation, and as large tracts of swidden land have been taken over for other uses, the fallow periods are being substantially reduced. This mode of subsistence seems to be taking a toll on the environment as well, and the farmers experience this directly through the less fertile soil and consequently smaller harvests (Burling 1997: 326). Throughout the colonial and postcolonial period, shifting cultivation has been opposed by state agencies, commonly charged with being the main cause of tropical forest destruction. The issue has been cast largely as a problem of finding alternatives, most commonly in the form of permanent cash-crop agriculture. Today, however, the debate has started to change towards a greater appreciation of shifting cultivation, not least for its contribution to "agro-biodiversity,"<sup>10</sup> and policy measures are being geared increasingly towards finding ways

of improving and complementing *jhum* cultivation rather than abolishing it. Such reorientation is visible, for example, in the rural livelihood project that IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development) is running in the region. Even so, when it comes to discussions of the driving forces of deforestation in the northeastern hills the blame commonly ends up with the *jhum* farmers. For example, a recent report by the National Forest Commission, under 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.<sup>11</sup>



**Plate 2** Denuded landscape, Garo Hills

As I will discuss in this book, the environment in Meghalaya is undergoing rapid and far-reaching transformations, what appears in many places to be devastating ecological deterioration. Whether there are causes for alarm—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 obviously think there are troubling signs. My aim, as I have said, is rather to map the politics of nature, which among other things relate to the different voices struggling to define if, how, and why the environmental is being degraded.

In simple terms, one can detect two dominant narratives in Meghalaya, one cherishing the lavish greenness of the state and the other, opposite one, speaking of loss of forests and disappearance of wildlife and the once unique flora. Depending on context, it is not uncommon for a per-

son or organization to invoke or employ both of these narratives. These opposing narratives have their respective iconic representations in the sacred forest and the wet desert. The latter, the wet desert, stands as a warning example 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 place on earth, now suffering water shortage due to deforestation and unsustainable resource usage. The Mawphlang sacred forest, as mentioned, has on the contrary 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 a primary concern. There are some environmental organizations in the state, but these are numerically weak and have little impact on public opinion. When environmental issues are brought to the fore, it is commonly a result of 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 one of the key actors. The environmental aspect, as we will see, is 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 particular conflicts. This seems to be the case with the northeastern region as a whole. Part of the reason, I believe, is that the all-India lexicon of environmental protests does not apply in the Northeast. The good and bad guys seem all 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 that 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, and this in combination with the geographic distance from the economic, political, and cultural centers that define agendas and distribute public attention, makes it difficult to sustain public interest.

In chapter 2, I look more closely into the debate about deforestation. The point of departure is the above mentioned timber ban or moratorium on all felling of trees imposed by the Supreme Court in Meghalaya and the other states of the Northeast as well as in some other parts of

India. This intervention was based on the understanding that forests were being destroyed in an unprecedented way, calling for a particularly drastic measure. The timber ban has been opposed on many grounds, environmental as well as social, not least on the grounds that it is 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 understood as forest and thus come under the Supreme Court order or be regarded as agricultural land where the order does not apply. With regard to the environment, the debate came to circle around the question of how much forest there actually was 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 thus lacked even an ecological rationale. Others welcomed the ban on the grounds that the forests in the state were on the brink of total destruction and questioned the accuracy of forest department assessments, for example whether satellite imagery provides reliable data on the state of the forest. Situations of environmental conflict like this offer a most appropriate entry point for the type of political ecology analysis 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 the different actors that surface 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 the conflict over forests, I will 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 intertwined 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 in land and natural resources are recognized, who are the relevant actors involved; such questions are of particular importance for studies using a framework of this kind.

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. Put differently, it can be said that a new "nature regime"

is taking over (Escobar 1999).<sup>12</sup> 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, which the axe-men failed to cut as flames scared them away, is a reminder of this. Hence, I would argue, it is not a matter of a wholesale transition from one mode to another, but rather a more complex coexistence of multiple modes of dwelling where capitalist appropriation nevertheless has come to dominate. It goes without saying that people engaged in different economic activities—farmers living on *jhum* cultivation or government servants working in an office in town—also relate differently to the environment. But even in situations where people are directly involved in extractive activities—coal mining or the timber business, for example—we cannot expect them to have a purely capitalist or instrumental relation to nature. The anthropologist Michael Taussig’s classical study of plantation and mining laborers in South America (1980) is a telling example of people co-inhabiting capitalist and “pre-capitalist” life-worlds. I will return to the significance of this later, and as I move along will complicate the picture further, engaging recent critique of the reductionism inherent in claims that nature under modernity is solely a product of commodification. But I will nevertheless begin at this end, using Marx’s notion of “primitive accumulation” as a point of departure (chapter 1). What this alerts us to is how land is being privatized, accumulated by the economic and political elites; how forests, water, and minerals are being turned into extractable resources; and, in more recent times, how certain sites or environments are simultaneously being reinvented as pristine nature to be consumed by 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). It was remote and difficult to access, and the 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, whereas the less civilized inhabitants of the hills were not considered, as Gait put it, “suited for elaborate legal rules” but had to be “governed in a simpler and more personal manner” (*ibid.*: 315–16). The region’s otherness and away-ness continues to be the dominant trope defining it. The Northeast was on the fringe of the expanding Mughal Empire; the various polities in the hills remained largely independent. The British finally did occupy the hills but adopted a policy of light administration in order not to cre-

ate unnecessary disturbance in this unruly frontier tract (Mackenzie 1999 [1884]). With Independence, and the establishment of the Indian nation-state, another phase of intensified integration has taken place. Even so, during both the colonial and postcolonial period, most of the characteristics commonly associated with frontiers persist, i.e., relatively sparsely populated areas peripheral to political and economic centers of power undergoing rapid demographic transformation along with ferocious land- and resource-grabbing.<sup>13</sup> In many ways, frontiers are unsettled places. Or, as Tsing aptly put it, a frontier “is a zone of not yet—not yet mapped, not yet regulated” (2005: 28).

In earlier studies of colonialism it was often assumed that the frontier was a space 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 even at times direct failures in, for example, 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 taking in Pratt’s characterization of colonial encounters, particularly her ideas concerning 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 as well apply in other contexts, say, in the resource rich states of central India.<sup>14</sup>

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, commonly insisting 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 given analytical priority. In this, political ecology parts from studies of human–environment relations that concentrate mainly on the local context and the internal dynamics in society as a driver of ecological change.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as most introductory texts or attempts to summarize the field will 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 [1996]; Robbins 2004; Neumann 2005; Biersack and Greenberg 2006). Nancy Peluso and Michael Watts sum it up well, saying:

Political ecology provide[s] 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 or issue under scrutiny, actors that would range from the more powerful ones like the state, transnational corporations, or multilateral institutions to the weaker ones like communities, local 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 or ground upon which those claims are based. Here it is also interesting to note the different worldviews 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 riven by opposing interests. For example, recent anthropological work on the state has increasingly come to question the unity of the state, pointing instead to the often chaotic and incoherent nature of state activities (Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Das and Poole 2004; Nugent 2004; Spencer 2007). The same could 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 could be read as a call for a merging of political ecology with environmental history, which to some extent is being pursued here (see also Hornborg 2007).<sup>16</sup>

### **Critical Research**

In research of this kind, 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 sprouting years in the 1980s, and have 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 have spent a lot of time with the writings of people like Schumacher, Naess, Gandhi, and Thoreau. Through my anthropology studies I also got involved in organizations working for minority and indigenous peoples’



rights, 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 late 1990s, India as well as Pakistan joined the club of states with nuclear weapons, and India is also investing a great deal in nuclear energy as a vital component of the country's energy strategy to meet the ever-increasing demand. The recent deal with the US to cooperate in civil nuclear energy development has further enhanced these plans. In this situation it is obviously an imperative to secure the existing uranium assets in the country.<sup>17</sup> It so happens that an inaccessible, sleepy cluster of villages in Domiasiat in the West Khasi Hills are 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 or not 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 give 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.<sup>18</sup> Some people in Meghalaya seem to share such views and welcome mining, whereas others take a strong stand against it. Given what I said earlier, my personal conviction and sympathies are obviously with the latter camp. This is not to say, however, that I have taken an activist role and in any way tried to lobby against or influence people to oppose uranium mining. This is neither called for nor my assigned task as researcher. As in the case of the other contentious issues dealt with in the book, I have instead 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 of the land," those who seldom reap any of the profits made from capitalist extraction but commonly are left to face the environmental consequences or who lose their lands and livelihoods in the process. And if one were to look for an underlying message in this book it would be a call for serious reflection on what it entails 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 in Shillong, but I have made rather extensive

travels in 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, i.e., those who arguably exercise a major influence over how land and resources are being used and managed. Though “ordinary” villagers also figure in my stories, their voices have less prevalence. Hence the main body of ethnographic data derives from interviews and interactions with middle-class people like politicians, community leaders, development workers, activists, journalists, university scholars, and businessmen, above all coal traders and timber contractors, most of whom are based in or operate from Shillong, the state capitol, and to a lesser extent Tura, the commercial and administrative center of the Garo Hills.

English is the official language as well as the link language in Meghalaya; it is used in government offices, is taught in schools, and has rather wide circulation in society. Most of the people I have interacted with or interviewed are fluent in English and this is also the language I have used in my research. In conversations with people who do not know English, commonly during stays in villages, I have 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 have 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 the year 2007.

In most cases I refer to the people I have interviewed by their real names. Only occasionally, when I found reasons for anonymity, have I omitted names and referred to informants as a “government officer,” “coal trader,” 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 at a later point. I have screened my text with this in view and sincerely hope that none of the people who have taken time to share their experiences with me, making this work possible, would 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 when 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). Mr. Lyngdoh Nongkrem’s story is a telling example of this, calling upon people to fight outside influences and reconnect with the land through the old Khasi beliefs and customs. Despite some troubling aspects of this turn to indigeneity—a phenomenon we can note 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

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’ve 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 northeastern India in the west) to keep the state at a distance. The pursuit of evading the state to avoid taxation, conscription, forced labor 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,” according to 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 Meghalaya and the Northeast more generally do resonate well with the anarchist spirit of the self-governing uplanders that he is concerned with.
4. See, e.g., Rofel (1997) on “alternative modernities” and the special issue of *Daedalus* (Winter 2000) 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 I use it, to encompass 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 about the difference between “nature” and “environment” see, e.g., 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 with two photographers in Tura involved in the search for the Yeti and they told of the enormous interest from outside about this (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 twenty-three varieties of rice and twenty-five varieties of millet were being cultivated in the *jhum* fields (presentation by Dhruvad Chaudhury, natural resource expert working for IFAD, at a seminar on biodiversity in Northeast India held at St. Mary’s College, Shillong, November 27–28, 2002).
  11. The report has a special chapter on the Northeast (chapter 10) and is available on the Ministry of Environment and Forests webpage (<http://envfor.nic.in/welcome.html>), 2006, page 158. The same language, of the necessity “to wean the tribals away from *jhuming*,” 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, page 14, 24 (<http://modoner.gov.in>)).
  12. Anthropologist Arturo Escobar has 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,” but I nevertheless find it useful to think with. My main concern here is the relationship of the organic and the capitalist regimes of nature and how the latter has come to take precedence. 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, e.g., 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 I identify for the Northeast apply to Central India as well. This then would suggest 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. As I hope will be clear further ahead in the book, 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 would 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 ecological anthropology, not least Rappaport’s pioneering study *Pigs for the Ancestors* (1968), suffers from the lack of engagement with extra-local processes. For an early critique of cultural ecology, see Friedman (1974).
  16. As an emerging cross-disciplinary field political ecology is being criticised from various quarters, for example, claiming that it over-states the political and hence fails to account for how the environment functions (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 criticisms seriously – I could properly be found guilty on both accounts—one has to be alert to how political ecology is being assembled. In the above two cases, I would say, 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 usages and India will remain dependent on domestic uranium for its weapon programme (Karlsson 2009).
18. See, e.g., “Uranium energy eco-friendly,” *The Shillong Times*, 17 March 2007. Friends at NEHU have told me that President Kalam made similar statements at a meeting with faculty and students at the university.