Book Reviews

Bengt G. Karlsson, *Unruly Hills: Nature and Nation in India's Northeast*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan and Social Science Press, 2011.

Bengt Karlsson has given us a penetrating, although dispiriting, analysis of the terrible economic, political, and environmental problems that, since independence, have beset the area that now forms the Northeast Indian State of Meghalaya. It is a story with many parts.

Early in the 19th century, British power began to encroach on the area that we now think of as Northeast India, and by the end of that century, the plateau that lies south of the valley, and that now forms Meghalaya, was under firm British control. From the start, the hills and their people were seen, by their conquerors, as very different from people of the low lands. Their languages, their economy, their social organization, and even their looks all marked them as distinct. They were, and still are, known as "tribals" in contrast to the "non-tribal" Assamese to the north and the Bengalis to the south. They were pulled, not by their own choice, first into British India, and later into independent India, but they retain a strong sense of their differences from the other citizens of the country.

The British imposed their rule, but left much of the culture and technology of the hill people intact. Christian missionaries found the hill people more receptive to their teaching than most people in British India, and Christianity began its spread. As it did so, it has come to distinguish the hill people in yet another way from their neighbours in the plains.

In the decades since independence, accelerating economic pressures have brought increasing disruption. It is this disruption that forms the topic of Karlsson's book, and he describes its components with surgical care.

1. Resources: The Indian Northeast, including Meghalaya, has natural resources that are badly needed by India's developing economy: oil, coal, timber, limestone (for cement), hydroelectric power, even uranium. It is claimed that 1/4 to 1/3 of India's remaining forests are, or were, to be found in NE India. These riches promise wealth but at the same time they threaten disruption, deforestation, and pollution. Already during British times, local

farmers were displaced to make room for tea plantations. So many labourers from distant parts of India were imported to work in the tea gardens that the ethnic mix of some areas was radically changed, a development that was not at all welcomed by the earlier residents. Tea brought disruption and displacement for some local people, but it brought wealth to the planters, and it was not to be stopped. Today, outsiders want the Northeast's many natural resources, but who owns all this wealth? Who should benefit by it? It is easy for people in other parts of India to feel that the whole country should benefit, but it is just as easy for local people to feel that the district, the local region, the village, or even the individual landowner should be the primary beneficiary. People living in other parts of India sometimes complain that the Centre is subsidizing the remote and underpopulated northeast. Northeasterners are more likely to feel that their resources are being stripped and sent away for the benefit of others. Disputes are inevitable and fierce.

2. Land tenure: Most residents of Meghalaya were once slash and burn farmers. Every second year they would need to clear a new patch of forest for planting. Before clearing, the villagers had to agree on which plot of land each family could use, but usage did not confer permanent "ownership". Among the Garos, who live in the western part of Meghalaya, each village had a "Nokma" (a title that is generally translated as "Headman") who was recognized as having some sort of unwritten "title" to the village land. The Nokma participated in assigning plots to families, but he was not so much a land owner as a custodian who held the land on behalf of the village farmers. After the British took control of the hills, sketch maps were drawn to show the approximate location of borders between the villages, but the individual family plots were never mapped. Of course these changed from one year to the next, and their boundaries are still known only to the villagers.

A few small parcels of land have always been under more permanent family control. House plots were, and are, occupied for many years. Fruit trees and bamboo clumps belonged to the planter, but these required only small amounts of land and no one was tempted to plant more trees or bamboo than they needed for their own use. More recently wet rice fields have been carved into the low places between the hills, and these wet fields can be registered with the district government as privately owned property. Larger plots are now being removed from communal use to make way for perennial crops such as tea or pineapples. Villagers find ways to privatize land that was once used communally, and even outsiders sometimes manage to gain

control over plots that once belonged to the villagers.

Who, then, "owns" the land? Villagers had rights to claim and clear and plots, but private "ownership" as recognized in many parts of India, and in the west, simply didn't exist. The British rulers regarded land that was tilled only periodically as "empty," owned by no one, and they felt free to designate it as reserved forest where no one could cut or cultivate. Villagers were compensated for the loss of their buildings, but not for loss of their agricultural land. More recently land has been taken to form national forests, something that is generally seen as desirable, though not by the farmers who lose their rights to cultivate it periodically.

In colonial times, most timber grew so far from any road or navigable river that lumbering would not have been profitable. Limestone, coal and hydroelectric power were not yet important enough to cause serious disputes. Today, all these resources can yield previously unimagined wealth, but compensation may never reach the villagers who once grew crops where the resources lie buried. Some Garo Nokmas have managed to sell timber rights but this violates the rights of other villagers. Terrible quarrels seem inevitable.

Along with the erosion of land rights has come a general spread of the monetary economy. Specialized crops are, increasingly, grown for sale. More goods are purchased. More and more objects and more and more labour are given prices and exchanged for money. Even land acquires a monetary value. It can sometimes be bought and sold. Earlier community rights are undermined.

3. Ethnicity: India has elaborate rules that are meant to protect the autochthonous inhabitants from encroachment by outsiders. These rules have certainly slowed the alienation of land belonging to the Garos, Khasis, and Jaintias, the three major ethic groups of Meghalaya, but the rules also raise problems. People belonging to other, much smaller ethic groups have lived for generations in what is now Meghalaya, but their rights to live there and to work the land are not clearly recognized. Are Hajongs or Koch who live in the Garo Hills "immigrants" even though their ancestors have lived there for generations? Exactly who counts as a Garo, a Khasi, or a Jaintia? What about the children of mixed marriages? It seems impossible to find agreement in every case about exactly who is a Khasi or who is a Garo.

4. Politics: The people of northeast India do not always acknowledge their good fortunate in being able to elect their own representatives to their

District Councils, State Legislatures, and the National Parliament. Elections occur regularly and, more often than not, the candidate who gets the most votes is able to take office. Northeasterners would do well to compare themselves to the neighbouring Burmese and Tibetans. Still, electoral democracy never lives up to its promise. Political office is supposed to carry responsibilities; It always brings opportunities. The candidate who promises the most may not deliver the most, and the temptations to enrich oneself are hard to resist. In Northeast India, political corruption is pervasive. It is often more efficient to bribe the right politician than to campaign for representatives who will help to promote just laws and honest enforcement. The office holder knows that elections will come soon. He (rarely "she") has every motive to enrich himself while he has the chance. The citizenry comes to distrust electoral politics.

5. Disputes: When economy and society change as rapidly as they have changed in the Northeastern hills, disputes are inevitable, but the means for resolving them peacefully remain elusive. No issue has been more contentious than uranium mining in the Khasi Hills. It has passionate supporters who hope for easy wealth, and it has passionate opponents who fear not only the loss of their own land but serious ecological damage. Ordinary villagers lack any reliable source that would help them to understand the risks. From one side they hear bland assurances of complete safety. From the other side they are told that exposure to uranium will result in birth deformities. The average citizen has no way to find the truth that lies between these extremes, but has good reasons for distrusting the mining company. Scary stories from one side about the dangers of radiation are met with whitewash from the other side. Some people hope for wealth, others fear losing what little wealth they already have.

Other disputes have swirled around timber and coal mining, often among those who are competing for a share of the wealth. The ordinary citizen, who could once count on a plot of village land on which to grow his crops, may have little chance to profit from the new opportunities but every risk of loosing his traditional rights. It is little wonder than some are tempted toward violence.

6. Violence: Meghalaya has been spared the degree of violence that has engulfed Nagaland, Mizoram and some other parts of NE India, but it has not escaped entirely. Where serious political injustices are perceived, it is tempting to threaten violence. Restless, adventurous, or unemployed young

men, who feel that they or their families have been treated unjustly, may even find a degree romance about living in the forest and promising to bring "liberation" to the unliberated. They may hope to achieve just ends by violent means, but violence turns easily to corruption. "Contributions" become "taxes" and "taxation" becomes theft. Insurgents, sometimes hanging out in the forest, need to eat, and collecting "tolls" from each passing coal truck is an easy way to make money. Until it gets too high the "toll" becomes a routine business expense for the trucks, but political protest that is backed up by the threat of violence passes over easily to extortion.

Too often, also, the Indian government, far away in Delhi, sees the violence but fails to understand the corruption and injustice that feed the violence. Delhi over-reacts, and sends in the army. The army overreacts and shoots. Soldiers have sometimes fired into peaceful crowds. Sometimes they have killed unarmed youths who are imagined to be insurgents, but in the "Emergency" the army goes unpunished. The Army seems to be everywhere in the Northeast, but the soldiers generally stay segregated from the general population. Neither the soldiers nor the citizenry make much effort to understand the other. Army violence and insurgent violence feed on each other, while ordinary citizens are caught in the middle, afraid to cooperate with either side for fear of inviting vengeance from the other.

7. Ecological disaster: Into this turmoil of corruption and threatened violence come people and industrial organizations that hope to grow rich from timber, coal, limestone, waterpower, or uranium. Bribes pass, conservation rules are ignored. Officials appointed to protect the forest too often find it more rewarding to sell the trees for timber than to protect them. Coal is mined with no effort to return the land to a condition where agriculture is again possible. All that is left are sacred and polluted hillsides. Safety is ignored. A few people do get rich, but the best jobs go to outsiders. Others toil in miserable conditions in unsafe coalmines. Denuded forestland is left to erode. Places once known as biodiversity hot spots become biologically impoverished. People are threatened by wholesale displacement to make way for the flooding caused by dams. Just who "owns" the land remains unclear, but few of those who have had a claim on its use receive much compensation.

Most of Karlsson's book is taken up with this depressing story. In the penultimate chapter, however, he gropes for a ray of hope. He describes a movement among some people in Meghalaya who would like to use

"Traditional Institutions" and "Indigenous Governance", to bring justice to the local people. He describes the convening of traditional village "durbars" where villagers gather to talk out the issues and to build consensus about how to deal with the problems and opportunities that they face. In the past, such gatherings could sometimes bring a consensus and resolve local disputes. If these "TI"s, as these Traditional Institutions seem to be called, could be revived, they might help to sort out the conflicting options that face people today.

I wish I could share Karlsson's hope for the TI's, but when opinions are sharply divided, as they often are on matters of land ownership, mining, and conservation, it is not clear to me how they could provide a way to reach a workable consensus. In times past, the TI's could probably exert social pressure on a disagreeing minority, persuading it to go along with the majority. When the stakes are as high as they are today, consensus is not so likely. If the TI's were ever to gain enough power to determine who should profit from the natural recourses, I would expect them quickly to become targets for the same kind of corruption that has already afflicted elected offices. I would hold out more hope for a gradually growing ability of voters to elect representatives who were more interested in working toward just ways for achieving development, than in lining their own pockets. That, however, will be a long and slow process and, in the meantime, some people will win and others will lose.

I do have a few quibbles. I wish that the acronyms could have been kept under better control. I struggled with "TI, DONER, SOT, ST, UCIL and dozens of others. Most, though not all, of these acronyms are defined in a list near the front of the book, but my memory is less than perfect and even when they were also defined on first introduction in the text, I had to keep leafing back to check the list. I would also have liked a more detailed index. More often than not, when I looked for a topic in the index, I failed to find it.

More seriously, Karlsson notes, but does not, I think, take sufficient account of the population growth in Meghalaya that would have strained resources even without either land alienation or mining. The 1951 census, the last for British India, gave the population of the area that now forms Meghalaya as 606,000. A half century later, the census of 2001 counted 2,319,000 people in the State, almost four times as many. (http://indiabudget.nic.in/es2006-07/chapt2007/tab97.pdf). Some of the increase, to be sure, is due to immigration, but the largest part is "natural" growth. It

seems unlikely that anything like traditional slash and burn agriculture could have adequately fed such a rapidly growing population. In earlier times, of course, that problem would have been solved by epidemics and famine.

Every part of this disaster is well known to the people of Meghalaya and Northeastern India, but Karlsson brings it all together in a most skillful way. He tells the story clearly and with compassion. He seems to have talked to people on all sides of every issue. He points to the many interests that compete for the wealth, and to the dilemmas that make the problems so intractable. The book deserves a wide readership, not only in Meghalaya, but elsewhere in India as well. Indeed, it is relevant far beyond India, for problems of corruption, land alienation, and rapacious destruction of natural resources are found on every continent.

Reviewed by:
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H. Srikanth, *Indigenous Peoples in Liberal Democratic States: A Comparative Study of Conflict and Accommodation in Canada and India*, Bauu Press, Colorado, 2010, ISBN 13: 978-0-9820467-4-6, 242p.

This book is a product of the Canadian Studies Faculty Research Fellowship held by H. Srikanth in 2005. It deals with a growing, albeit contentious, field of inquiry in social sciences, as the questions surrounding "indigenous peoples" are many and satisfactory answers rather few. Part of the problem of Indigenous Peoples studies is the ideological stances taken, either openly or tacitly, by most scholars engaged in the subject. Such ideological inclination is also visible to some extent in this book, but in my estimate the author has successfully kept his ideological moorings within an acceptable limit.

In India some senior anthropologists like B. K. Roy Burman, P. K. Misra and André Beteille, whose understanding of Indian society is unquestionable, have reservations about accepting the word "indigenous peoples" in Indian context. They view Indian civilization as a byproduct of waves of migration from different directions over centuries and they consider it almost impossible to identify certain communities as "indigenous" and others not, as it is possible to do so, rather easily, in

countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America. Roy Burman even goes to the extent of alleging the international agencies like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund for injecting these concepts into the Indian soil. There are however other, younger, sociologists like Jaganath Pathy and Virginius Xaxa, who have no difficulty in accepting the word "indigenous peoples" in Indian contexts. Bengt Karlsson, a Swedish anthropologist working on the indigenous peoples of India for several years now, is also of the view that the concept of indigenous peoples is already out there and the only option social scientists have today is to engage with it.

One of the conceptual problems that scholars like Beteille and Xaxa have addressed at length is the relationship between indigenous peoples and Scheduled Tribes. This relationship has grown rather complex today because many Scheduled Tribes are claiming to be indigenous peoples or indigenous tribes in India.

Srikanth in this book carefully avoids entering into the complex debate on the relationship between scheduled tribes and indigenous peoples. Otherwise it would be difficult for him to compare the Scheduled Tribes of the hill areas of Northeast India with the First Nations of the British Columbia in Canada, which he does in the book under review. The author has of course given elaborate justification for such a comparison. Although the length at which the author has gone for justifying the comparison of the two regions itself makes one suspicious about the justifiability of the same one finds enough grounds for comparison. The author's admission of certain incomparable features between the two regions in both introduction and concluding chapters neutralizes any possible attack on him on the matter.

In the Introduction chapter the author deals with definitional aspects of indigenous peoples. Although this chapter is not exhaustive about the extant literature on the indigenous peoples it is adequate. In the second chapter he deals with colonial experiences of the First Nations in British Columbia. I think this is an excellent account of colonization of the British Columbia and the changes brought about by colonization in the society of the First Nations, whose inter-tribal wars not only became more violent but who even experienced the phenomenon of depopulation. Chapter 3 titled "British Colonialism and Hill Tribes of Composite Assam" brings us back to the Northeast region with the account of, among others, the role of the Christian

missionaries in mitigating tribal antagonism towards the British rule.

Chapter 4 takes us to Canada. In this chapter the author shows how, like the district councils in Northeast India, the band councils in British Columbia are restricted in their powers due to their dependence on federal funding. The author also notes that there are numerous experiments in Indian self-governance in British Columbia but most of them are recent and not yet studied dispassionately. The next chapter brings us back to Northeast India once again with a discussion on limits of political autonomy and problems of development in the hill areas of the region. One of the observations Srikanth makes in this chapter is that the hill tribes did not have liberal democratic traditions, which is perhaps a matter of debate and which cannot be settled without agreeing upon what really constitutes a liberal democratic tradition. On the district councils, however, he has rightly observed that they have not fulfilled the expectations of the people and have not been able to prevent the class polarization of the society and privatization of community land.

The concluding chapter summarizes the indigenous peoples' responses to colonial experiences and government policies towards them. The chapter also revisits the debates on native self-governance and the limitations of liberal democratic nation states.

I think the author has made his points very sensibly and logically in simple and jargon-free language. The book is free from printing errors although other kinds of errors have remained. For instance, he talks about Chimals in Andaman & Nicobar Islands on page 14 whereas there are no such people there. In the second chapter he does not make the conceptual distinction between colonization and colonialisation, which would be useful to represent the experiences in Canada and Northeast India respectively. Chapter 3 shows that he is ignorant about the conceptual distinction between dialect and language, as most people not initiated into Linguistics are. In the next chapter he uses First Nations, Indians and Status-Indians rather confusingly for his readers in India. Finally, there are several proper names that are wrongly spelt such as C.S. Belshow (correct Belshaw), S. K. Chaubey (correct Chaube), Bengst Karlsson (correct Bengt), Christopher von Furer-Haimendorf (correct Christoph), etc.

These small mistakes are however far outweighed by the positive contributions of the author in the book. The book is highly readable and the views expressed therein are rather balanced. I for one felt proud about the

fact that this book was written by one of my colleagues at North-Eastern Hill University. I wish more such books were published by my colleagues to do our university proud.

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