

Prospects of Liberal Democracy in Meghalaya

A Study of Civil Society's Response to KSU-Led Agitation

The Khasi Students' Union (KSU), which came into existence in the year 1978, declared that it would work for upholding the Khasi identity by awakening respect for Khasi language, culture and tradition, fight against infiltration by outsiders, and ensure that the children of the soil control the economy, polity and land in Meghalaya. Initially KSU played a decisive role in state politics, though it was not affiliated to any political party. Later, however, the other tribes and the non-tribal communities living in the state started viewing it with suspicion and fear. KSU's hegemonic role had shrunk the democratic space for the rise of other organisations within the state. It was during KSU's agitation of 2001 that Meghalayan civil society demonstrated an acceptance of liberal democratic ideas by criticising KSU's ethnocentric agenda. Khasi society is now trying to make a break from the past and open itself to criticism and self-criticism.

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The emerging literature on the socio-political dynamics of the indigenous communities in the hill areas of the north-east India can be broadly grouped into two ideal categories. The first category includes the writings that romanticise the traditional life worlds of the hill communities and focus on the negative consequences of the externally induced strategies of economic and political development on the native people and societies. This category of literature takes a critical look at the process of modernisation and sympathises with the struggles of the local communities that aspire to retain control over the community resources and uphold their culture, traditional institutions and practices. The second category of literature includes the texts that are critical of the pre-modern and illiberal traits among the native communities. They attribute backwardness of the people and underdevelopment of the region to the persistence of ethnocentric ideologies and practices. Although there are elements of truth in the writings of both the categories of literature, being one-sided in their outlook they fail to encapsulate the complex processes of change and development taking place among the hill communities in the north-east ever since they became a part of the Indian union. Seeking to overcome the limitations of such partial interpretations, an attempt is made in this paper to examine the existential dilemmas of a tradition bound community in Meghalaya, which has been exposed to the waves of modernity. In the background of political developments that took place in the Khasi Hills since Indian independence, the paper examines the response of the government and the civil society in Meghalaya to a major agitation led by the Khasi Students Union (KSU) in the year 2001. By analysing the different contradictions that were at work during the agitation, the paper attempts to comprehend the stage of development of

the Khasi community and gauge the future prospects of liberal democracy in the state of Meghalaya.

Birth of Meghalaya

India's north-eastern state of Meghalaya comprises three distinct hill regions, namely, the Khasi Hills, the Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills. During the colonial period, the British annexed the Garo Hills and the Jaintia Hills and brought them under their direct control. However, in the Khasi Hills the British took control of only a few villages, including the area where they built Shillong city. In other parts of the Khasi Hills the British allowed the rule of the 'syiems', the traditional tribal chiefs, after coercing them to enter into subsidiary alliance with the British authority. Unlike the kings in other parts of India, the syiems were only territorial chiefs and had no control over the land. The land belonged to the clans and each clan living in a village had a 'dorbar', an assembly and a village head, called 'lyngdohs' or 'dolois', elected by the members of the dorbar. At the top of the hierarchy was the chief's 'dorbar' or 'syiem's dorbar'. Although several British scholars and Khasi intellectuals argued that the traditional Khasi society was classless and casteless and their traditional institutions of dorbar and 'syiemship' were more democratic than modern democracies,¹ in reality, these 'Khasi States'² were basically oligarchic republics wherein a certain privileged clans monopolised the political power at the top. The common people had no role in the selection of the syiems. There is a saying in Khasi that no person without moustache could enter dorbars, which implies that not only the women, even the youth had no role in the traditional Khasi polity. As such in the traditional Khasi polity the women and the youth had only marginal roles. The 'seng samlas', the youth organisations and the 'seng kynthei',

the women's organisations, which have been playing active roles in public life, appear to be recent phenomena, as nothing about them were mentioned in the works on traditional Khasi society. It was only after India got independence that the 'Khasi States' were amalgamated with other Khasi villages, which were under the British control and the united Khasi-Jaintia Hills were made a part of the province of Assam and brought under the provisions of the sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution.³

Before independence, along with the Garos, the Khasis and the Jaintias living in the partially excluded areas controlled by the British also participated in the elections to the Assam legislative assembly in the year 1937. However, during the British regime no such elections took place in the 'Khasi States', which continued to be under the traditional rule of the syiems. It was only after independence that all the Khasis, Garos and Jaintias got an opportunity to participate in the elections for the autonomous district councils, Assam legislative assembly and the Indian parliament to elect their representatives. The hill representatives like Rev J J M Nichols-Roy, Capt William A Sangma, Larsing Khyriem, etc, became the ministers in Assam government.⁴ However, factors like shortsighted policies of the Assamese elite who aspired to impose Assamese on all the people living in Assam, the rise of middle class leadership in the hills and the failure of the autonomous district councils to satisfy the growing political aspirations of the hill communities for more autonomy, led the hill leaders to demand a separate hill state for the indigenous tribes living in the hilly areas of the state of Assam.⁵ Both the traditional elites and the rising educated middle class leadership in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills took the lead in demanding the hill state. The Garos and the Mizos also supported the demand. Although the leaders of Mikir and North Cachar Hills of Assam did not lend support to the idea of a separate state for hill tribes and the Mizos, who initially supported the idea, withdrew from the movement after few years, the movement continued in Garo and Khasi-Jaintia Hills for two decades. The leaders of the hill state movement had to face stiff resistance from the Congress leadership in Assam. Hence during the mid-1960s the central government showed its willingness to confer only an autonomous state status on the regions inhabited by the hill communities within the state of Assam. However, before this new controversial arrangement could take shape, for their own reasons the rulers in Delhi took a decision to group the hill districts of the Garo and Khasi-Jaintia Hills into one, to form a separate state. The aspirations and the struggles of the Khasis, Jaintias and Garos to have a separate state for the hill communities thus bore fruit with the formation of Meghalaya in the year 1972.⁶

Students Movements in Khasi Hills

In all the north-eastern states the students and youth play a very influential role in politics. The educated youth being the first group to get exposed to the modernist values, the indigenous communities look forward to them for the guidance and leadership in matters relating to politics and governance. However, as the native communities in the region are not secularised, the students and youth organisations that took birth in the region remain predominantly ethnic in their character. Even in Meghalaya, the state that came into existence as a result of the united struggle of three dominant indigenous communities, namely, the Khasis, the Jaintias and the Garos, the attempts made to unite the students

of the whole of the state met with little success. The students and youth in the state continue to be organised along ethnic lines. Such ethnically organised students and youth organisations may not exercise much influence on other communities, but they do enjoy enormous prestige, authority and control within their respective communities. This observation holds good even for the Khasi students and youth organisations that are active in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya.

As there was no system of formal education in the traditional 'Khasi States', prior to the entry of the British there existed no such social category that could be identified as students.⁷ By allowing the Christian missionaries to establish English medium schools and colleges in the region, the British introduced modern education to the Khasis. The English educated Khasis that came out of those educational institutions became a very influential group among the Khasi community. Some such Khasi elite who also had the opportunity of travelling to mainland India and interacting with the people there, got exposed to the cross-currents of the Indian nationalist movement. Although such persons were very few in number they played a decisive role in influencing the community's perceptions and the political events in the region. On the eve of India's independence, they ensured that the Khasi people gave their assent to the proposal of the 'Khasi States' merging with the Indian union. Later on during the agitation for the hill state the students and the youth in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills evinced keen interest in the politics of the region, while the educated middle class took the leadership of the movement. The Khasi-Jaintia Students' Union (KJSU) formed in 1968 took an open stand supporting the movement for a hill state. The hill state movement attracted and produced quite a few student and youth leaders, who subsequently played an important role in the regional politics after the formation of Meghalaya.

The student organisations like the Meghalaya Students Association (MSA) and Shillong Students Union (SSU) that came into existence during the early 1970s avoided direct involvement in political issues and movements.⁸ The people of the state reposed faith in the new leadership that had taken over the reigns of the new government. However, within a decade the optimism began to peter out. By that time, most politicians of the state proved themselves to be no different from their predecessors. The state sponsored economic development was able to create an educated middle class interested in trade, business and public contracts. Although Shillong developed as an educational centre long back, the establishment of North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU) in 1973 led to further growth of higher education in the state. Since employment growth in the state did not keep pace with the growth of higher education, the students and the youth began to worry about their future.⁹ It was during this period that the logic of the so-called anti-foreigners' agitation in Assam led by All Assam Students Union (AASU) attracted the attention of the students of Meghalaya. The KSU, which came into existence in the year 1978, spearheaded this agitation with the tacit support of the traditional elites.¹⁰ KSU declared that it would work for upholding the Khasi identity by awakening respect for Khasi language, culture and tradition and would fight against the infiltration by the outsiders and foreigners, and ensure that the children of the soil control the economy, polity and land in Meghalaya.¹¹ In the 1980s and early 1990s, KSU led several agitations in pursuit of its goals. The role that KSU then played was similar to the ones that their counterparts played in Assam

and other states of the north-east.¹² KSU raised several issues of concern to the Khasi community as a whole and did not confine itself to the issues concerning the students and youth. Although it was not affiliated to any political party, KSU played a decisive role in the state politics influencing the government and the political parties. Initially it represented the collective voice of the traditional elites, the rising middle class and the educated intelligentsia of the Khasi community. In the state ridden with volatile factional and opportunist politics,¹³ KSU tried to play the role of a factor of cohesion and unity of parties and individual politicians professing to stand by the interests of the indigenous tribes and the region. During this period, many Khasis and the Jaintias looked towards KSU for a solution to their problems. The weakness of local politicians, the backing of dorbars and seng samlas and the support of the community at large made KSU a powerful pressure group in the state.

While the Khasi community in general looked at KSU as their representative, other tribes and non-tribal communities living in the state viewed it with suspicion and fear. Apart from the ordinary non-tribal workers and businessmen living in the state whose interests were threatened by the rise of KSU, the democratic minded intellectuals otherwise sympathetic to the cause of the indigenous communities also looked at the growth of KSU with some amount of scepticism. In their private conversations and also in some of their writings, these intellectuals expressed the view that KSU's hegemonic role had in fact shrunk the democratic space for the rise of other organisations within the state.¹⁴ Absence of public space for debates, lack of internal criticism and silent acquiescence of the community even to the unconstitutional and undemocratic means that KSU at times adopted in pursuit of its demands were often cited to justify their logic. However, the government's and the civil society's response to the KSU's agitation in 2001 clearly show that today Khasi society is becoming more mature and that the state of Meghalaya is definitely not what it was in the 1980s and early 1990s.

KSU's Agitation of 2001

In May 2001 the KSU leaders submitted a charter of demands to the chief minister, E K Mawlong and demanded that his UDF government should take decision on their 10-point demand charter. KSU's major demands included revision of the reservation policy of Meghalaya government, introduction of the Inner Line Regulation system, issuing of work permits to workers coming from outside, acceptance of 1951 as cut-off year for identifying the indigenous population, changing the Land Transfer Act to prevent other tribal communities from purchasing the land from the indigenous tribes, setting up of a board of higher secondary education in Shillong, creation of 10,000 jobs in the state, and handing over of the cases involving corruption to the CBI.¹⁵ Some of these demands were made right from 1980s and were reiterated by KSU while initiating what it called the Ksan Rngiew Movement in September 2000.¹⁶ None of the governments could do anything about them in view of the complexities involved. Raising the demands once again, KSU called for bandh on May 25, 2001. In the first week of June 2001 KSU started picketing of government offices, banks and schools. E K Mawlong's government heading the UDF ministry invited KSU for talks on June 6, wherein the chief minister gave an assurance that he would soon constitute two committees, one to

look into the general issues raised by KSU and the other to arrive at consensus about the employment policy of the government. On June 14 the government agreed to fix the cut-off year, although it rejected KSU's demand for considering 1951 as the cut-off year. The government also accepted to remove the Nagas, Mizos and Kukis from the official list of indigenous tribes of Meghalaya.¹⁷ KSU leaders were assured that they would be called for further talks after the budget session. Satisfied with the chief minister's assurance, KSU withdrew its agitation temporarily in June.

However, when KSU did not find any response from the government even after the budget session, the student leaders, defying the prohibitory orders, held a public meeting on July 31 and declared that they would take up a series of programmes in pursuit of their demands. KSU called for a 48 hours bandh from on August 7 and 8. The KSU leaders threatened a Manipur like situation in Meghalaya. On the eve of the bandh, the agitators assaulted a few government employees, torched several government vehicles, attacked the chief minister's private house at Mawprem and destroyed public property in different places. It was reported that some KSU volunteers assaulted even the Mizos and Manipuris residing in Shillong and demanded they leave Meghalaya. On the second day of the bandh, some miscreants stopped the press vehicles and fired at the press personnel. E K Mawlong issued a statement saying that the KSU's demands were political, not scholastic and that the purpose of their agitation was to destabilise his government.¹⁸ The police arrested the organising secretary of KSU, Embah Syiemlieh, under the Meghalaya Preventive Detention Act (MPDA) and sent him to Williamnagar jail in the Garo Hills. They spoke to the public about the alleged nexus of KSU and Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC), a local insurgent group fighting for independence. The KSU leadership strongly denied the allegation.¹⁹ After the bandh, KSU called for picketing of central government offices, banks and educational institutions on August 13 and 14. All the government offices and the educational institutions were virtually closed. Some persons fired at CRPF personnel in Shillong. The KSU's picketing was followed by HNLC's call for a 36-hour bandh starting on August 14 on the eve of Independence Day. After this, KSU again called for 48 hours bandh in four districts of Meghalaya starting from August 17. KSU leaders appealed to the people to participate in mass picketing on August 20 and 21. The police raided the KSU's head office and tried to arrest all its leaders. To escape from the police onslaught, the main leaders of KSU went underground. They sent appeals to the governor and to the leaders in Delhi to intervene and compel the state government to look into the KSU's demands.

To appease the agitators the state government took a decision to constitute a broad state level forum on public issues, which included apart from the ministers and opposition leaders, the representatives of different socio-cultural organisations and students and youth bodies like KSU, Jaintia Students Union (JSU), Garo Students Union (GSU), Federation of Khasi Garo Jaintia People (FKGJP), etc. Not satisfied with the government's response, KSU continued its agitation. The police mercilessly arrested several KSU volunteers who attempted to sit for an indefinite hunger strike near the youth hostel, adjacent to the state secretariat building, violating the Section 144 of CrPC. The KSU leadership then took the decision to shift the venue of the hunger strike to Don Bosco Square where some important schools and

colleges of Shillong are located. Strategically for KSU it was an ideal location, as it was easy for the leaders to mobilise the students to gather at the venue of hunger strike. The women's wing of KSU took the lead in the fast-on-to death programme. The KSU volunteers from other districts also joined the agitators in Shillong. The volunteers were mobilising the students from different schools and colleges to the public meetings addressed by second rung KSU leaders and their supporters. Everyday a batch of KSU volunteers and sympathisers used to sit on hunger strike and the police was forcibly admitting them in the hospital. As the hunger strike continued, the public built pressure on the government to end the impasse. Finally on September 6, the chief minister agreed to have a one-to-one talk with KSU leaders. The following day Paul Lyngdoh, the president of KSU, who had gone underground, surfaced at Don Bosco Square and addressed the gathering. While expressing the KSU's willingness to accept the chief minister's offer, he set preconditions for the talks. Later KSU leaders met the chief minister on September 12 and discussed their demands. KSU got an assurance from E K Mawlong that his government would review the reservation policy and suspend the Elector's Photo Identity Cards (EPIC) programme. The chief minister informed the KSU leaders that the cut-off year needed to be discussed in-depth, as it would affect the entire population. The following day, KSU held a mass rally at Students' Field, Jaiaw, where the KSU leaders explained the outcome of the meeting and thanked the public for their support. Thus ended the month long agitation of KSU.

KSU leaders tried to project the agitation as a victory. But contrary to their claims, nothing concrete came out of the talks. E K Mawlong's UDF government, which promised many things to KSU, fell within a few months. The next government formed under Khonglong virtually paid no attention to the KSU's demands. Despite KSU's protests, the government went ahead with the EPIC programme. KSU's major demands such as revision of reservation policy, Inner Line Regulations, work permits, cut-off year, etc, were virtually put on the backburner. Like the previous government, Khonglong talked about the nexus between KSU and militants and levelled charges against KSU for resorting to extortion and other illegal activities.²⁰ Realising that nothing positive would come out of the new government, in May 2002 the KSU leaders floated their own party called, Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM) and contested in the assembly elections in 2003 on KSU's agenda. After managing to win only two assembly seats, KHNAM joined the Congress-led coalition government which consisted of many parties opposed to the KSU agenda. The KSU's firebrand leader, Paul Lyngdoh joined the D D Lapang's cabinet as minister of sports and youth affairs.²¹ Although he promised to work for the pursuit of KSU's demands, Paul Lyngdoh found it difficult to convince other coalition partners to support the KSU's ethnocentric agenda. His party, KHNAM was further marginalised in the elections held for the local bodies in 2004. Even today KSU continues to be an active and powerful force in Meghalaya, but it has learnt its limits. After 2001 it avoided taking unilateral decisions on controversial issues.

Although we have narrated the course of KSU's agitation at some length here, the concern of the paper is neither to examine the past and future of KSU nor to pass judgments about the rights and wrongs of KSU leadership. This agitation needs further discussion, as it involved not only the students and the administrators, but also the entire civil society in Meghalaya.

Unlike the previous agitations, where the public in the main remained silent or indifferent, during this agitation for the first time there was a public debate, where different organisations, individuals and the press came out openly to express what they thought was good or bad for the people of Meghalaya. In view of their implications for the future of democracy in the state, we need to study the reactions of the civil society to the actions and reactions of KSU and the government.

Role of NGOs

Local institutions like dorbars and their frontal organisations like seng samlas (youth organisation) and seng kynthei (women's organisation), etc, and the student organisations like JKSU and later KSU have been playing the role of pressure groups in Khasi society. Apart from them, in recent years Meghalaya has seen the rise of several voluntary organisations representing different interests. Of them, KSU and the Federation of Khasi Jaintia Garo People (FKJGP) emerged as very powerful and militant NGOs capable of influencing both the public opinion as well as the government decisions. Other NGOs used to either passively support these leading organisations or preferred to remain silent. But in the agitation that KSU led in 2001, for the first time, many voluntary organisations came out and expressed their views openly. They did not hesitate to criticise the government authorities and the KSU leaders. For example, Khasi Women's Welfare and Development Association (KWWADA) came out in support of KSU's demand for revision of the reservation policy and suggested its own formula to the government. The women members of seng kynthei went on a night vigil in Lower Mawprem against anti-social elements trying to use the KSU agitation to terrorise the non-Khasis in the locality. The Hynniewtrep People Social Organisation (HPSO) supported the KSU's demands and criticised the government's indifference. Meghalaya People's Human Rights Commission (MPHRC) criticised the government for arresting the KSU leaders under MPDA and even complained to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) against the government repression.²² In Jaintia Hills, in support of KSU's agitation, Jaintia Students Union (JSU) declared a bandh for one day, but refrained from following the KSU's agenda. Differing with KSU which demanded 50 per cent of government jobs for Khasi-Jaintias combine, JSU demanded that all the three major indigenous groups, the Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintias should get 30 per cent each and the remaining 10 per cent should be given to other members. In the Garo Hills, GSU and Garo Mothers' Union called for a bandh and protested against the KSU's demand for revision of reservation. Hajong Koch Rava Boro Students Federation (HKRBSF), representing the interests of minority tribes in Meghalaya criticised KSU for not treating them as indigenous tribes. In the month of June itself six dorbar shnongs and Lympung Ki Seng Kynthei asked KSU not to go for picketing. Jaiaw Laitdom dorbar urged KSU not to disturb the schools. A meeting of the leading citizens and workers of a cement factory at Sohra under the chairmanship of the Syiem of the Khasi State of Hima Sohra appealed to KSU not to obstruct the working of the factory.²³ Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) expressed its concern over the plight of the school students. Meghalaya Parents and Guardians Association (MPGA), while sympathising with the KSU's demands, appealed to the KSU leaders and teachers' organisations to exempt the educational institutions from the purview of picketing or any other

agitational programmes, which might be launched by the two organisations in the future. Making a similar demand not to obstruct the functioning of the classes, the senior citizens of Shillong asserted, “We can no longer be a mere spectator to this wrong action of depriving the students of their right to attend schools and colleges”.²⁴ The Shillong Khasi Jaintia Church Leaders’ Forum (SKJCLF) urged the youth bodies to reconsider their programme, keeping in mind the interests of the public in general and that of the farmers and student community in particular. They boldly stated that the interests and the future of the people of the state should not be jeopardised by myopia, as was evident from the confrontationalist attitudes of both KSU and the government.²⁵ The Catholic Mothers’ Organisation of Nongphoh urged upon the students community and the people at large to bring about normalcy and restrain themselves from the agitations. Laitumukhrah dorbar took objection to KSU holding the hunger strike and public meetings near the Don Bosco Square without dorbar’s permission and openly criticised the students who misbehaved with the public and local merchants during the agitation.²⁶ Forestalling the KSU leaders’ wish to conduct another rally near the Don Bosco after their meeting with the chief minister, Laitumukhrah dorbar passed a resolution against holding any further rallies, meetings and demonstrations within the Laitumukhrah locality, particularly around Don Bosco Square. After the agitation, another NGO, Shillong We Care, organised a public debate on ‘Adverse effects of bandhs on society’ on September 21.

Citizens Speak

Earlier when KSU led agitations, very few individuals used to come out and speak their minds. Even if they did not support the KSU’s style of functioning, none – except a few individuals like the Padmashri Award winner, Patricia Mukhim – dared to criticise KSU. Not just the non-tribal communities, who were scared of the backlash, even the Khasi intelligentsia also hesitated to say anything against KSU in public. But during KSU’s agitation of 2001, many individuals – both big and small – came out in public to express their stand. Whereas the politicians like P R Kyndiah of Congress sympathised with KSU’s demands and criticised the repression of the movement by the government, R G Lyngdoh of Congress openly said that KSU should own the responsibility for the attack on the press and for the destruction of public property.²⁷ P A Sangma, the NCP leader, asked KSU not to insist on the revision of the reservation policy, as the Garos never filled up more than 15 per cent of the allotted 40 per cent quota in government jobs. As usual Patricia Mukhim was commenting on the course of agitation in the newspaper columns and was trying to mobilise the public opinion against the bandh culture. She openly criticised the KSU leaders for going underground and for not showing the courage to come out to lead the agitation and face the consequences boldly.²⁸ Many people criticised the KSU’s style of functioning and expressed concern over the adverse impact of KSU’s agitation on the students and the general public. They freely expressed their views on the reservation policy, the bandh culture and the absenteeism and irresponsibility of the government servants.²⁹ One reader wrote that KSU owed its success in agitations to the fear of threat and intimidation, indifference of people, poor work culture of the government servants and a weak administration.

Saying that KSU was not really a powerful organisation, the reader expressed the opinion that a strong government could easily crush KSU’s agitation. But he felt that such a thing would not happen, as KSU was useful to many politicians within the government.³⁰

Role of Press

The press in Shillong played a commendable role in reporting to the public the day-to-day developments taking place during the KSU agitation. Apart from the Khasi newspapers, the three English newspapers published from Shillong, i e, *Apphira*, *The Meghalaya Guardian* and *The Shillong Times*, carried several editorials, articles and letters during the course of the agitation. Though their opinions regarding KSU’s demands differed, the strategies that KSU adopted was not supported by any of these newspapers. For example, *Apphira*, under the management of Khasis, sympathised with KSU demands, yet it did not hesitate to condemn the KSU sponsored bandhs, which disrupted normal life and affected trade and economic activities. When KSU decided to go in for an indefinite hunger strike, *Apphira*’s editorial cautioned KSU to ensure that anti-social elements did not take advantage of their agitation. It felt that a reasonable time frame should be considered for solving the demands of students and various organisations and the government should make sincere efforts to execute whatever is possible without any delay.³¹ *Apphira* was also publishing a column in the newspaper reflecting the news published in the Khasi newspapers. In one of its columns, it informed the readers of a survey undertaken by *U Peitngor*, a Khasi newspaper, which showed that both the farmers and the consumers suffered losses because of KSU agitation.³² Another English daily, *The Meghalaya Guardian*, in one of its editorials titled, ‘Agitations aplenty’, criticised the over reaction of the government to the KSU’s agitation and expressed the worry that the agitation was taking the shape of a personal clash of wills between the KSU president and the chief minister. The editorial pointed out the complexity of the demands raised by KSU. It clearly stated that it was not possible to alter the reservation policy without consulting the Garos and that when the whole world was crying for openness between states and nations, talking about Inner Line Regulations had no meaning.³³ Unlike *Apphira*, which felt that the reservation policy in Meghalaya was unconstitutional and against merit, and had to be scrapped.³⁴ *The Meghalaya Guardian* suggested that the reservation policy could be revised on population lines and made an appeal to both communities to sit across the table and work out a solution that would be acceptable to all communities.³⁵ Similarly *The Shillong Times* also played a commendable role during the agitation. It took upon itself the responsibility of representing the opinions of the ‘others’ in Meghalaya – the minority tribes and the non-tribal communities. Commenting on KSU’s demands, it made it clear that the constitutional provisions and the relevant laws should be taken into consideration while defining who is/is not a foreigner. No separate yardstick could be made for Meghalaya in this regard. It also said that in all fairness, the issues raised by KSU should not be put on the backburner. It expected that the chief minister would consult the political parties in creating a consensus on all contentious issues, without being populist and evasive.³⁶ Perhaps, one factor that united the entire press and media in Shillong was the attack on the press during the KSU sponsored bandh on August 8. Protesting against the attack, the

press corps led a rally in the city, carrying the placards with the slogans like, 'The world respects the press, why not Shillong?', 'KSU admit your failures', 'Violence does not go with democracy', etc. The media condemned the students' body for failing to keep control over their cadres and urged upon the KSU leadership to come out openly and condemn such violent attacks on the press.³⁷

KSU's Reactions

In the past on several occasions KSU faced arrests and police repression. But at no point of time, its actions came in for such a critical scrutiny by the civil society. KSU leadership had to take pains to defend their demands and justify their actions. Pyndap Saibon, the general secretary of KSU, admitted that never in the past, KSU was under attack from all quarters, including the press.³⁸ The KSU leadership took pains to convince the people that it had nothing to do with HNLC. When the police showed evidence to prove that the KSU volunteers were actually involved in the destruction of the public property, the leadership wanted the government and the public to understand that such actions were the reactions of the frustrated youth. Paul Lyngdoh, the president of KSU, appealed to the general public to bear with the inconveniences caused by the agitation and support their cause against the government.³⁹ The KSU leaders indeed got frustrated to see that the people did not come out in large number, as in Manipur, in support of their agitation. KSU had to sit with JSU to discuss the issue of reservations and express its willingness to modify their demand for reservation quota to get the support of the Jaintias for the agitation.⁴⁰ Similarly, the KSU leaders had to send the list of their demands and give sufficient time to 'Synjuk Rongbah Shnongs' to discuss their demands. KSU convened joint meetings to convince the Rongbah Shnongs and seek their support.⁴¹ KSU felt embarrassed when the traditional dorbars and many leading organisations and individuals in the Khasi society also opposed the methods adopted in the agitation. Since the public resented the bandhs and picketings, the KSU leadership took the unconventional decision to go in for indefinite hunger strike to gain public sympathy. But when Laitumukhrah dorbar criticised the KSU for holding a hunger strike and public meetings near Don Bosco Square, the student leaders felt irritated. Paul Lyngdoh angrily asked whether Don Bosco Square was not in Meghalaya and if not in Meghalaya, where else they could hold their meetings. However, KSU withdrew its plans to hold a public rally after its meeting with the chief minister, when Laitumukhrah dorbar asserted that no rallies and public meetings would be allowed around Don Bosco Square without prior permission from dorbar.

Implications for Future of Democracy

Over the years KSU has led several agitations. However, the agitation of 2001 attains significance not so much for what it achieved, but for the kind of public response it received. The civil society's reaction to the agitation points to a complex process of change and development taking place in the traditional Khasi society, which appeared to certain critics as closed communities guided only by ethnocentric considerations.⁴² The way the civil society in Meghalaya responded to the agitation shows that the Khasi community is becoming plural and is gradually accepting certain liberal democratic norms and

practices that were conspicuous by their absence in the traditional Khasi society. In one sense the emergence of students and youth organisations as powerful pressure groups in the state point to the community's transition to modernity. However, the development of liberal democracy presupposes the existence of plurality of institutions and organisations, each playing its role in a specified field. One organisation taking up all issues starting from school admissions to allotment of public contracts; from reservation policy to monitoring of trade licences to the outsiders, and from the problem of pollution to the threat of 'foreigners' in the state, while all other organisations and groups passively endorsing the lead taken by it and the people either out of fear or indifference choosing to remain mere onlookers, cannot be considered an ideal democratic situation. The political situation in Meghalaya more or less appeared to be like this in the 1980s and the 1990s. But the political dynamism that the civil society in Meghalaya exhibited during the agitation of 2001 indicates that Khasi society is indeed making efforts to break with the past. The Khasi society opened itself to criticism and self-criticism. Several organisations and individuals actively debated both on the issues raised and the strategies adopted by KSU. As one commentator has pointed out, during this agitation the confrontationist approach of KSU and the government response to it have to some extent freed the society from its fear syndrome.⁴³ With the press playing a pro-active role and the common man calling shots, all parties – the government, the KSU leadership, the dorbars, the government officers and the police – had to justify their actions and positions. This positive development raises the hope for liberal democracy in Meghalaya.

While taking note of the positive outcome of the agitation, one should not however jump to the conclusion that liberal democracy has taken deep roots in Meghalaya. Here the secular civil society that can think and act above ethnic loyalties is only in its formative stage. Although the Khasi community has opposed the strategies adopted by KSU, it still appears to be in agreement with the KSU's demands, most of which are basically ethnic in their content and ignore others' points of view. By and large the Khasi community has not yet to come to terms with the reality that Meghalaya belongs not only to the Khasis and Jaintias, but also to the Garos and to other tribes and non-tribes living in the state since independence. Although of late, many Khasis have started going to other parts of India for education or for jobs, the local leaders still find it difficult to accept the fact that Meghalaya is only a province within the Indian union and therefore other Indian nationals also have a right to come and live in the state. Though KSU has started accepting internal criticism, its leaders become extremely sensitive when the non-Khasis criticise them. One can see statements made by the Khasi students' and youth leaders from time to time stating that the state belongs to them and that the other people, especially the non-tribal communities, should obey their supremacy in the state.⁴⁴ Factors such as geographical location of the state, underdevelopment, resource constraints and growing unemployment problem perpetuate their fear of outsiders and contribute to persistence of illiberal attitudes towards other communities. Although the developments during the KSU's agitation in 2001 point out that the people have begun to come out of their ethnic shells, to what extent would the Khasi society open itself and accept and imbibe liberal democratic norms in future depends on several other factors, such as economic development, political wisdom of the local leadership, democratisation of

traditional institutions, growth of employment opportunities and building up of trust among different communities living in the state of Meghalaya. [17]

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Notes

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- 1 Hamlet Bareth, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1997; L S Gassah, *Traditional Institutions of Meghalaya*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 1998; R S Lyngdoh, *Government and Politics in Meghalaya*, Sanchar Publishing House, New Delhi, 1996.
- 2 It is said that at the time of the entry of the British, there were about 25 'Khasi States' in the region. Although the Khasi intellectuals call them as states, they were so small and underdeveloped that they lacked many of the characteristic features of the modern state.
- 3 Helen Giri, *Khasi under British Rule (1824-1847)*, Akashi Book Depot, Shillong, 1990; David R Syiemlieh, 'The Political Integration of the Khasi States into the Indian Union' in B Pakem (ed), *Regionalism in India*, Har Anand Publications, New Delhi, 1996, pp 147-56.
- 4 R S Lyngdoh, *Government and Politics in Meghalaya*, Sanchar Publishing House, New Delhi, 1996, pp 451-60.
- 5 S K Chaubey, *Hill Politics in North-East India*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 1999.
- 6 Dhiren Bhagawati, 'Meghalaya: The Struggle of the Three Sisters to Have a Place in the Sun' in Girin Phukon (ed), *Political Dynamics of North-east India*, South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, 2000.
- 7 A K Baruah (ed), *Student Power in North-East India: Understanding Student Movements*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2002, p 1.
- 8 Pascal Malngiang, *Students and Politics in Meghalaya*, Seven Huts Enterprise, Shillong, 1994.
- 9 According to 2001 Census, about 63.31 per cent of people in Meghalaya are literate. Meghalaya has 4,685 junior level schools, 1,041 middle level schools and 572 secondary and higher secondary schools and 35 colleges and university level institutions. Educated unemployed in 1999 stood at 36,094. Majority of the educated employed (72,629) are in government, quasi-government or local bodies; only a few of them (9,296) are in private sector. Source: <http://meghalaya.nic.in/figures.htm>
- 10 Pascal Malngiang, op cit, pp 12, 13.
- 11 Pascal Malngiang, 'Students and Youth Organisations in Meghalaya', in A K Baruah (ed), *Student Power in North-East India: Understanding Student Movements*, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2002, pp 173-96.
- 12 A K Baruah, 2002, op cit, p 15.
- 13 Sushmita Sengupta, 'Politics of Coalition in Meghalaya: Meghalaya United Parliamentary Party (MUPP) Coalition of 1990-91' in Girin Phukon and Adil-ul-Yasin (eds), 1996, *Working of Parliamentary Democracy and Electoral Politics in North-east India*, South Asian Publishers, New Delhi, pp 201-10; Pascal Malngiang, 'Electoral Politics in Meghalaya: A Study of Meghalaya Federation and Congress Party in 1993 Assembly Election' in Girin Phukon and Adil-ul-Yasin (eds), op cit, pp 87-96; P C Biswas, 'Electoral Politics in North-East India: With Special Reference to Meghalaya' in P S Dutta (ed), *Electoral Politics in North-East India*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, pp 73-83; Umasaday Bhattacharyya, 'Meghalaya Election Politics: A Critique of Ideology of Dominant Parties in Assembly Polls of 1978 and 1983' in P S Dutta (ed), op cit, pp 106-12.
- 14 For example, see A K Baruah, 'Understanding Social Tensions in Shillong I', *The Shillong Times*, October 28, 1998 and 'Understanding Social Tensions in Shillong II', *The Shillong Times*, October 29, 1998; also his 'Of Traditional Democracy in Shillong', *The Shillong Times*, November 29, 2002.
- 15 Some of the demands mentioned here need explanation. At the time of formation of Meghalaya, a reservation policy for jobs was introduced in the state, which allotted 40 per cent to the Garos, another 40 per cent to the Khasi-Jaintias and the remaining 20 per cent to the other tribes and non-tribes. Of late the KSU has been fighting to revise this reservation policy, as it feels that giving 40 per cent reservations for the Garos is detrimental to the development of more competent Khasi and Jaintia communities. The Garos oppose any change in the reservation policy as they are still backward and hardly fill 15 per cent of the quota allocated for them. KSU demands that Inner Line Permit system, as practised in Mizoram and Nagaland, should be introduced in Meghalaya to regulate the entry of the workers from outside Meghalaya. But such system was not in vogue in the region even during the British period. Like AASU in Assam, KSU has been demanding for making 1951 as the cut-off year for determining the foreigners. It insists that only after fixing the cut-off year, the government should go ahead with Elector's Photo Identity Cards (EPIC) programme. When KSU leaders talk about foreigners, by that whether they mean only non-Indians or even those Indians who have come from other parts of India is not clear.
- 16 *U Nongsain Hima*, September 25, 2000.
- 17 *U Nongsain Hima*, June 15, 2001.
- 18 *The Shillong Times* August 9, 2002.
- 19 *Apphira*, August 8, 2001.
- 20 *U Nongsain Hima*, July 4, 2001.
- 21 For a critical assessment of election results, see Apurba K Baruah, 'Meghalaya Elections 2003: Decline of Regionalism', *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 19, 2003.
- 22 *The Shillong Times*, September 6, 2001.
- 23 *Apphira*, June 5, 2001.
- 24 *The Meghalaya Guardian*, August 17, 2001.
- 25 *Apphira*, August 26, 2001.
- 26 *The Shillong Times*, September 12, 2001.
- 27 *The Shillong Times*, August 10, 2001.
- 28 Patricia Mukhim, 'The KSU Leadership Must Lead from the Front', *The Shillong Times*, September 15 2001.
- 29 *Apphira*, August 27, 2001, *The Meghalaya Guardian*, August 28, 2001.
- 30 *The Shillong Times*, August 2, 2001.
- 31 *Apphira*, August 31, 2001.
- 32 *Apphira*, August 24, 2001.
- 33 *The Meghalaya Guardian*, August 10, 2001.
- 34 See *Apphira*, August 9 and 23, 2001.
- 35 *The Meghalaya Guardian*, August 8, 2001.
- 36 *The Shillong Times*, August 10, 2001.
- 37 *Apphira*, August 9, 2001.
- 38 *The Meghalaya Guardian*, August 17, 2001.
- 39 *U Nongsain Hima*, August 31, 2001.
- 40 *U Nongsain Hima*, September 28, 2001.
- 41 *U Nongsain Hima*, June 14 and June 30, 2001
- 42 Rajesh Dev, 'Human Rights, Relativism and Minorities in North-east India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 23, 2004.
- 43 K Vincent, 'Honest KSU and Honest Government', *The Shillong Times*, August 15, 2001.
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