

Economy, Ethnicity and Migration in Meghalaya

I. Introduction

The eight States of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura that form the social and political entity of the Northeast have seen some of the worst conflicts. Fueled by issues of land distribution, ethnicity (there are 220 ethnic groups), illegal migration, religion, and political autonomy / secession, they have continued for over five decades.

Meghalaya, though a part of Northeast India, is considered to be relatively peaceful. However, a detailed inquiry into the dynamics of post colonial Meghalaya reveals that ethnic violence, conflict and politics, have become endemic to the State. Central to these is the sudden thrust of the state from a traditional primary sector economy to a tertiary sector economy fueled by the huge doles from the Central Government. This is compounded by the incessant population flow of migrants from Nepal and Bangladesh. In recent times the state has witnessed sudden exodus of transnational migrants, protracted ethnic conflict over the migrant 'foreigner', internal displacement of the migrants and reflection of competitive breeding amongst the Khasi tribe (propagating the idea of power through numbers)¹. All the factors as a result have put a strain on the resource base and ecological biodiversity leading to increased levels of poverty in an already underdeveloped area.

Meghalaya, with an area of 22,429 sq km, is one of the smaller States of the India Union. It became a separate state in 1972, and before that was a part of Assam. It shares 423 km border with Bangladesh in the south and the west, and is surrounded by Assam on the northeastern side. The population of the State was 1.775 million according to 1991 census, which became 2.306 million in 2001. As against decadal growth rate of 21.34% at the national level, the population of the State has grown by 29.94% over the period 1991-2001.² In the post-colonial period, a new dimension, that of migration was added to the already growing complex scenario of Meghalaya. The strategic location of the state within Northeast India, the relative low population and availability of economic opportunities made it prone to undocumented immigration from across porous, land and long river borders.³

An analysis on the dynamics of population flow of Nepalis and Bangladeshis into Meghalaya shows that because of the push and pull factors, outmigration has become an increasingly important livelihood and government strategy⁴ in Nepal and Bangladesh. The causal variables of migration is complex and inter-connected. Diverse factors form the “push factors” for people to migrate illegally: political unrest, famine, poverty, fear of persecution, and environmental degradation. Hope for a better life elsewhere, with better economic opportunities, in peaceful and stable environments are powerful “pull factors.”

1 Saikia. Udoy, *Threats from migration, socio-political injustice and reproductive behaviour in tribal communities- a study in*

the Khasi tribe in North East India.

2 Census of India, *Provisional Population Totals : India* . Census of India 2001

3 Das. Gurudas, *Immigration into Northeast India: The Security Dimensions*, published in C.J. Thomas, 2002, p.73.

4 The Nepalis crossing over to Indian territories do not have to undergo any strict documentation procedures due to the blanket cover provided by the 1950 Friendship Treaty. The Bangladesh Government denies any movement of people across borders to the Indian side(Kaushik, Narendra 2003a. 'Bangladesh turns back deported people,' Mid-Day , 28 January.) Personal observations at the Borsora border town in West Khasi Hills revealed the existence of an illegal mode of payments by Bangladeshis to BSF for entry into Indian territory. (The local channels have video documentation of BSF accepting payments from Bangladeshis at the Shella border town in East Khasi Hills).This obviously is done in connivance with the BDR.

A major sector of employment for the Nepali and Bangladeshi migrants is the coal mining sector, which also is the largest revenue generating sector in the state. The coal mines in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills have become the catchment areas for these migrants. This is because these areas have fluid borders with Assam, Tripura and Bangladesh, availability of economic opportunities, the consequent high level of integration and cultural assimilation with the local indigenous communities and the availability of social networks facilitating the migration process.

The coal mines in Meghalaya highlight the dilemma of clandestine population movements, the shifting patterns of flow of migrants into Northeast Indian states⁵, dubious citizenships, sustained informal and illegal economies. The easy admission and continued incorporation of these migrants as *de-facto* Indian citizens⁶ working in the coal mines in Meghalaya is largely due to porous borders, available networks facilitating the migration process, physical and cultural continuities at the border towns; and weak bases of documentary identification have become some of the most divisive issues for the local indigenous communities and the state.

Despite the dynamic implications and importance of migration process on the migrant and the host community it is noticeable that very few studies exist on the Nepali and Bangladeshi migration to Meghalaya, and the relation of migrants to the economy and the host community. One of the many reasons for the limited research could be due to the fact that the countries share common open borders, and the longstanding history of migration. Another reason could be the fact that the migration of Nepalis and Bangladeshis into Meghalaya has been a slow movement, only visible over a period of decades. Also the Nepalis and Bangladeshis in Meghalaya have been long-term migrants, involving themselves in the life of the host community, performing services and overcoming, over time, the barrier of being seen as an outsider. These migrations also follows various patterns with migrants changing from “legal” status (as tourists for example) to “illegal”.

This paper draws primarily from the empirical research conducted on the coal mines in Jaintia and West Khasi Hills districts of Meghalaya. The paper is based upon the observations and experiences during the field research with the migrant coal mine workers, indigenous coal mine workers, traders, dealers, exporters, custom officials, border security force, civil society groups, government officials, legislative assembly members, student union leaders, academicians, women’s groups, leaders and individuals. The nucleus of the research was to examine the migration process and the consequent ethnic tensions between the indigenous tribal and the migrant non-tribal population.

This paper examines the coal mines in two districts of Meghalaya and highlights the inequalities in the distribution of wealth and resources among the local indigenous populations and the growth of the regions. It argues that there exists a relation between the migration process, the unequal development and distribution of resources within the local economies of the coal mines of the two districts, rise of parallel forms of economy and governance, dubious citizenship, the role of the state, marginalization of local indigenous labour and the consequent ethnic violence between the indigenous tribal and the

5 Recent migration studies and Census data highlight the shifting patterns of migrant population from Nepal and Bangladesh. The last three decades have seen a movement of transnational irregular migrants from Nepal and Bangladesh into Nagaland, Meghalaya and Manipur as against the earlier movements to Assam and Tripura. This shift in the trend can primarily be attributed to the saturation of economic opportunities in Assam and Tripura and the ongoing ethnic tensions in the two states.

6 Ramachandran. S., *Indifference, Impotence, and Intolerance: Bangladeshis in India*, Global Migration Perspectives, No. 42, 2005.

migrant non tribal population. The research also attempts to examine how and why this population flow occurs, who is a migrant in the state, what individual or structural background enables migrants and their families to profit from migration; or what prevents them from doing so, questions about the complexities of irregular migrations, troubled relationships of these migrants with the local communities, informal economies, states, nations, and citizenship, perceived / real threat of such migration, creation of identities and the resultant latent ethnic tensions. The research has tried to look at the above listed macro issues through a micro economic framework of coal mining industry.

II. Historical Context of Nepali and Bangladeshi Migration to Meghalaya

Late twentieth and early twenty-first century have witnessed large-scale exodus of migrants from various regions in South Asia in the wake of internal conflicts and economic underdevelopment. Migration, illegal or otherwise, is a cross-cultural and historical phenomena wherein people migrate to improve their standard of living and ensure basic human rights. One of the inherent laws of migration implies that people usually migrate to areas close to their original home or village, where it is easy to find cultural similarities and relations. The migration of Nepalis and Bangladeshis to Meghalaya is one such example which has been a major issue of contention in recent years.

II. a. Background of the Nepali Migration to Meghalaya

The Nepali speaking people are settled in all administrative units of Meghalaya, but primarily in the East Khasi Hill and Jaintia Hills unit, as these are the central economic zones of the state. The process of migration of the Nepalis into Meghalaya and their subsequent settlement began in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, following the Indo-Bhutanese war of 1864.

In Meghalaya, the Nepalis, in addition to recruits in the Gurkha army, migrated for the purpose of labour, to open up forestlands, for lumbering, settlements and tea plantations and dairy farming in the colonial period. After their retirement from the armed forces, the Gurkhas (as the Nepalis are also called) were encouraged to settle down in the foothills, forest fringes and other strategic locations on the frontier thus creating compact pockets of Nepali settlements at Jowai, Laban, Bishnupur, Assam Rifles Quarters in East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya.⁷ Many of the retired Gurkha soldiers also took up dairy farming and agriculture, many even preferred cattle grazing to cultivation.⁸

The Nepali migration in Meghalaya, once it began followed a dynamics of its own. In the post-colonial period, the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty of 1950, revised in 1956, and the Tripartite Delhi Agreement of 1951 which gave them rights to engage in business, acquire property, settle, seek employment and move freely anywhere in India allowed them to escape Nepal's underdevelopment and economic pressures. The recognition of Meghalaya as a separate state in 1972 by the Government of India and the opening up of the coal mining industry led to increased migration and concentration of Nepalis in Jaintia Hills, East and West Khasi Hills coal belts. Nepali migration to Meghalaya increased overwhelmingly post 1975. The following tables give the statistics on the Nepali population in Meghalaya.

7 Sinha, A. C. *Northeast Frontier and the Nepalese Immigrants in Himalayan Environment and Culture*, Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1990, p. 227. [It is claimed that one Subedar Jaichand Thakur of the 8th Gurkha Platoon after retirement settled in Shillong as early as 1824.]

8 Chettri, G. K. N, in A.C. Sinha and T.B.Subba (ed) *The Nepalis in Northeast India: A Community in Search of Indian Identity*, Delhi, 2003, p. 309

Table 1: Demography of the Nepalis in Meghalaya for a period of 1951 – 1981⁹

State	Years			
	1951	1961	1971	1981
Meghalaya	NA	32,288	44,445	61,259

The larger section of the people in Meghalaya did not protest against the migration of the Nepalis to the region and even welcomed them as they provided the labour requirements. This provided them an opportunity to assimilate with the locals adopting the language and the customs of the region.

II. b. Background of the Bangladeshi Migration to Meghalaya

The history of migration from erstwhile East Pakistan and now Bangladesh to Northeast India is nearly 95 year old and dates back to the British Raj. However, the second wave of migration, which has caused serious social and political upheaval and discord in the region, took place in the early 70s when East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) fought a war of liberation.

The two Northeast Indian states which bore the brunt of migration from Bangladesh were Assam and Tripura. Assam faced a sudden rise in the population level during this period. The estimated figure of net migrants in Assam was 1.0 million during 1961-71 (7 per cent of the total population of Assam). At present it is speculated that 35 percent of population in Assam are illegal migrants from the adjoining districts of Bangladesh.¹⁰ Being a neighbouring state of Bangladesh with a porous border, the state of Tripura has now been overwhelmed by Bengali speaking Hindus. The indigenous inhabitants have now been reduced to a minority in their own state. In fact, Tripura's tribals now comprise of only 14 per cent of the population. The recent census report of 2001 revealed Tripura as one of the worst infiltration-affected state. The state showed a decadal increase in population growth rate from 15.74 per cent to 34.30 per cent in the 2001 census.

The case of Meghalaya is very different than that of Assam and Tripura. Meghalaya shares a 423km porous border with Bangladesh and a historical trade relation but no historical migration. B.C. Allen in his Gazetteer of the Khasi & Jaintia Hill District published a century back, gives an account of trades in these words:

The Khasis are keen traders and considerable proportion of the population earn their living by travelling round to the markets held at different places in the district... The principal exports from the district are lime, potatoes, oranges, betel-nut, pan, and bay leaves...The imports are rice and other food grains, dried fish, salt, tobacco... and hand woven cotton and silk cloths from the plains (p.92).

9 Timsina, 1992

10 Saikia, Jaideep, *Terror Sans Frontier: Islamic Militancy in North East India*, Vision Books Publication, 2004.

A sketch of the traditional trade in the Khasi and Garo Hills suggests that the economy of the area was not completely closed. There were cordial relations between the two regions and no population transfer problem. However, the partition of India in 1947 changed the nature and landscape of the border and the age-old traditional trade ties between Northeast India and East Bengal. Its immediate impact was the undocumented migration on a large scale from Bangladesh to Assam and Tripura. This led to a change in the demographic composition of the two regions. However, the last three decades witnessed an inflexion point being reached towards the availability of economic opportunities and basic amenities in Assam and Tripura. This inflexion point in turn has led to a shift in the migration pattern from Assam and Tripura to other Northeastern states, especially, Meghalaya and Nagaland. Infact, the states of Meghalaya and Nagaland have recorded a decadal (1991-2001) growth-rate of 29.94% and 64.41% respectively, as against the all India figure of 21.34%.¹¹ This suggests the clandestine movement of irregular migrants.

III. Coal Mines in Meghalaya

Meghalaya is endowed with great mineral wealth (coal, limestone, sillimanite and uranium) but its exploitation for development has been minimal due to varied reasons. Out of these minerals, coal is the most important and widely spread mineral resources and is of Gondwana origin. Meghalaya's Coal, popularly known as 'Tertiary Coal' is known for its high calorific value and low ash content. In Meghalaya, coal is mostly extracted by underground mining. Underground mining in the state differs from other forms of coal mining and incorporates traditional methods – which is popularly known as 'Rat Hole' mining. In this type of mining a hole is made and the process of precarious extraction starts and continues to go deeper depending on the availability of coal and can go up to hundreds of meter below the surface. As the burrow becomes deep, a hand cart is used for the speedy movement and transportation of coal.

Small cottage-type coal mining is widely prevalent in different areas extending from Jaintia Hills, East and West Khasi Hills in the East ending in East Garo Hills in the West. The total proved coal reserve in Meghalaya is estimated at 117.83 million tonnes, the total indicated coal reserves in Meghalaya is estimated at 40.89 million tonnes and the total inferred coal reserves in Meghalaya is estimated at 300.71 million tonnes.¹² Hence, the total coal reserve in the state is estimated at about 640 million tonnes, out of which, Garo Hills alone contains 359 million tonnes of reserves.¹³ Large deposits of coal are found in West Dadenggiri, Siju, Langring, Pyndengrei and Balaphakram in Garo Hills; Mawlong – Shella in East Khasi Hills; Borsora, Nongjri, Nongkhlam, Kologaon belts of West Khasi Hills and Bapung, Sutnga, Khliehriat – Rymbai, Ladrymbai, Jaraiñ, Kongong, Mookhep, Lakadang, Mawsiang, Lamare and Loksi belts of Jaintia Hills.¹⁴

Mining of coal in Meghalaya is done both in the organised and unorganised sectors. However, 90% of the coal mines in the state are under private ownership in the unorganized sector. This is due to the fact that unlike other regions of the country, Meghalaya, is covered by the 6th Schedule of the Constitution of India, which gives exclusive rights of ownership of land to private tribal / indigenous people. Under

11 Census of India, *Provisional Population Totals : India* . Census of India 2001

12 Press Information Bureau: Government of India, *Estimates of Coal Reserves in the Country, Archives*, March 18, 2001.

13 Meghalaya State Portal: Government of Meghalaya, Natural Resources; Mineral Resources; Coal,
<http://www.meghalaya.nic.in/>

14 Personal Interview with one of the major owner and exporter of coal in West Khasi Hills. Conducted at Laban, Shillong, March 2007.

the organised sector, coal is mined by Mawmluh Cherra Cement Limited. and Coal India Limited.¹⁵

III. a. Gemorphological Character of Coal Mines in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills

The paper is based on survey conducted in coal mines at Khliehriat – Rymbai, Ladrymbai in Jaintia Hills and Borsora, Nongjri, Nongkhlam in West Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. The nature of mines is very different in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills. Coal mines in Jaintia Hills are more difficult to mine due to the topographical and geological difference between the two regions. The mines in Jaintia Hills are typical Rat Hole mines. The coal beds and the coal seams in the mines in Jaintia Hills are horizontal to the ground / surface while those in West Khasi Hills are generally vertical but there are occurrence of horizontal coal beds in the region. This fact also makes mining more difficult in Jaintia Hills. The characteristics of coal deposits of Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills districts varies in terms of seam thickness, physical properties and chemical properties. The seam thickness of top layers varies from a minimum of 0.1 m to a maximum of 3.50 m, middle layer from 0.3 m to 0.6 m and bottom layer from 0.3 m to 1.2 m from location to location. In terms of physical properties the coal can range from hard and bright, soft and lumpy. The chemical properties of the coal reveal moisture content ranging between 0.44 to 9.20 %, ash content ranging between 1.3 to 24.7 %, carbon content ranging between 41.3 to 59.9 % and sulphur content ranging between 0 to 5 %. Generally, the calorific value of the coal is high at 6944 kcal / kg. Some of the recent researches on coal in Meghalaya pointed to the presence of traces of radio active elements in the coal. The most common radio active minerals found are Uranium 238, Uranium 235, Radium 228 and Thorium 232.¹⁶

III. b. Production Process

The coal mines in Meghalaya operate as specialized production centers, where all the process starting from mining to the export of the sorted coal are done by specialized groups. The first step in the chain is the mining of the coal by workers. The workers either work as a team or individually. Each team / individual is designated with a box (baksho in the local usage). The box as a general rule can hold 1 tonne of coal and is used as a measuring tool by the team / individual worker. The next step involves weighing of the coal and transporting the coal to the mid depots, located at the regional trading centers, which generally is at a distance of about 30 – 35 km from the mines, where it is sorted out according to the quality and grade. The sorting of coal is the only stage where female participation is observed. This is followed by the weighing of the coal and loading it into the trucks for transportation to main depots / trading depots. From these depots, the coal is transported to different parts of the country or exported abroad. The whole chain of process has many stake holders. The mining of coal is done by workers who are accountable to the 'sordar' who is entrusted with the responsibility of the transporting the coal to the mid depots. Generally at each mid depot there are managers employed by respective mine owners who are responsible for the supervision of the loading / unloading, weighing and dealings with the transporters and exporters. Once the deals have been finalized the exporters and dealers transport the coal to the main / trading depots which are generally located in other states. At these centers the exporters / dealers have their managers who then further deal with exporters and dealers from other

15 Sahu. B.P. and Goel. N.P. Social and Environmental Impact Assessment of Opencast Mining in Meghalaya. in Development and Environment, ed., Zahid Hussain and S.K.Barik, Regency Publications.

16 Note: The figures quoted not necessarily relate to present study area but are a general representation of the coal mines in the Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills. Sahu. B.P. and Goel. N.P. Social and Environmental Impact Assessment of Opencast Mining in Meghalaya. in Development and Environment, ed., Zahid Hussain and S.K.Barik, Regency Publications.

parts of the country.

III. c. Coal Mining, Caste Affiliations and Division of Labour

There are certain aspects of mining which are peculiar to coal mining regions in Meghalaya. The process of coal mining in Jaintia Hills follows a very rigid division of labour. There are clearly demarcated roles of each individual worker. The most experienced workers go into the mines. The less experienced labourers work outside the mine and pull out the filled-in trolleys and unload them in the demarcated box. They at times accompany the senior members inside the mines to learn the process of mining or go into the mines when the senior member of a team is unwell. The process of transportation of coal from the mines to the mid depots also follows a clearly marked division of labour wherein there are separate people for loading / unloading, a helper, a driver and the supervisor at the mid depot. This pattern is also followed in the mines in West Khasi Hills. The only difference being the non existence of the system of working in a team. Ethnic and caste identities plays a very crucial role in the sociology of a mine. It was observed in Jaintia Hills that a team of two was always formed on the basis of either ethnic or caste affiliations. These affiliations extended themselves to daily activities of recreation and eating. Caste and ethnic affiliations influenced the choice of mode of remittance of money back home and the process of migration from one mine to the other. In Jaintia Hills these affiliations were found to be more pronounced within the mine. However, in West Khasi Hills these affiliation were found to be active not only at the mines but also at centers of trade and in the transport network. Amongst the workers in each mine an important role is played by 'sordar'.

i. Role of the 'Sordar'

A sordar is someone with years of experience behind him and is generally more aware of the mining processes. The recruitment of sordar is a complex process. Generally, a mine owner has certain networks which enable him to employ a sordar through word of mouth, past experiences, references and contacts. A sordar holds a prominent position among the mine workers and is responsible for the basic functioning of the mine. The main functions of the sordar are to locate the convenient and sustainable places for mining. This is done without any scientific basis. This is also a test for sordar to prove his skill and knowledge of the mining process. Once the mine locale has been selected, a sordar then draws up a plan on how the mining would be done, the number of labour required, initializing the mining processes, recruiting workers, looking after the well-being of his workers, reporting to the mine owner, arranging transportation, collecting wages of the workers from the owner and paying the wages to the workers, mitigating conflict between the workers of his camp and from other camps with his camp. It must be noted here that a sordar also works in the mines and is one of the most efficient miners. A sordar is the link between the workers and the mine owners. At times a powerful sordar also negotiates with the local goons and / or state agencies. The position and role of sordar was found to be of great importance in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills.

ii. The Process of Recruitment of Labour

There exists a complex process of recruitment of these migrant labourers in the mining activity. The onus of recruitment of workers lies with the sordar. The mine owner generally does not interfere in this regard. It is left entirely to the discretion of the sordar. The sordar generally follows certain patterns while selecting labourers. The social networks of a sordar play the pivotal role in the recruitment

process. The sordar generally recruits labour from either his place of origin or certain villages which are known for hardworking and sincere labour. Sometimes a sordar would employ certain people for certain jobs, like for instance Nepalis are generally preferred for carrying coal, loading and unloading processes due to their strength. A factor which was observed to affect the choice of recruitment of labour was caste and religious affiliations. In the surveyed mines it was observed that the majority of labour was found to be of the same caste and religious affiliation as that of the sordar. It was also observed that sordars always had a few workers from different caste and religious affiliations. It was seen that around 80% of workers in any given mine would belong to the same caste and religious affiliation and the rest 20% would belong to other caste and religious affiliations. It was also noted that the workers also had kinship relationships with other workers in a mine. This was very prominent in Jaintia Hills. In Jaintia Hills it was observed that a few mine owners had their own means of transportation to carry the coal from the mine to the mid depot. The recruitment of labour for these trucks was also the responsibility of the sordar. Sordar recruited either Nepali or local indigenous drivers, helpers and about 4 – 6 labourers to load and unload the trucks. Transport labour were mostly found to be belonging to the Nepali ethnic community in Jaintia Hills. In West Khasi Hills the transport in almost all cases was found to be a separate sector.

III. d. Unorganized Informal Sector and the Wage Rates

The coal mine workers in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills are in the unorganised sector and fall under the casual informal labour category. The labourers in the coal mines of Meghalaya do not have any provisions and are neither covered by the Contracts Act, Insurance nor medical benefits. There does not exist any concept of trade unions or labour unions.

Despite these disadvantages, a fact worthy of note is that the wages for coal mine workers in Meghalaya are above the wages prescribed in the Minimum Wages Act, 1948.

There are no standard / universal wage rates, but it was observed that the wage rates in Jaintia Hills were a little higher compared to the wage rates in the West Khasi Hills. This is due to the difficult condition of mining in Jaintia Hills. There exists a system of daily wage of the coal mine workers in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills, calculated on the piece-rate system. The wage amount is dependent on the total quantity of coal extracted in a day. It was noted that a team of workers in Jaintia Hills working for around 8 hours earn about Rs. 400 – 500, which gets divided into two parts. However a larger share (of about 60%) of the income goes to the worker working inside the mine, amounting to Rs 300 / day or roughly Rs 8000 / month.¹⁷ However, the minimum wages of a piece-rated coal worker in the public sector is Rs 238 / day Rs. 6204.62 / month.¹⁸

In West Khasi Hills where a worker works alone, he manages to earn about Rs. 200 – 250 in a day. A sordar working in the mine also gets similar amounts depending on the amount of coal mined. A sordar is also paid certain fixed amounts in a month ranging between Rs. 2000 – 5000. This is because he performs certain value addition functions during his productive mining hours and thus denying him his daily wage for the day.

17 The figures are calculated for a period of 26 working days / month.

18 The figure quoted as on 1st July 2001 and is inclusive of the Minimum Guaranteed Benefits. Coal India Limited, www.coal.nic.in/budchap5.pdf and South eastern Coal Fields, secl.nic.in/SECLPIO/DRAFT.pdf

This is due to a variety of reasons. Firstly, the wage rates in the coal mining industry in Meghalaya is decided by the law of demand and supply, the demand being high and supply being low helps to push the wage rates high. Secondly, the workers though not organized are well aware of the market rates of the coal and do not work below a minimum wage rate. Since the sordar is the main person in control of the recruitment process he influences the wage rates to a certain degree. Also, the employer finds it difficult to get skilled labourers at a lower rate.

A peculiar feature of the mines in Jaintia Hills and especially the ones in West Khasi Hills is the sympathetic attitude of the mine owners towards their workers. It was observed that the employers generally treat their workers well and there were regular payments and some of the mine owners bear the cost of medical treatments in cases of injuries or accidents.

IV. Workers and Working Conditions in the Coal Mines in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills

A typical coal mine in Jaintia Hills has about 25 – 30 workers at any given time. These workers stay in what is known as the 'camps'. The camps are makeshift houses made of thatched straw, tin and mud. A typical shaft / camps house around 4 – 5 workers. These are situated just around the quarry in a radius of 0.5 km. It was observed that these camps only house the workers who are engaged in the mining activities. The loaders, unloaders and the truck drivers do not stay in these camps. The workers work in a team of two. The senior member (in terms of experience) is responsible for going inside a mine and cutting / mining the coal and the other member of the team, who is outside, is responsible for pulling the mined coal out by means of a wooden trolley and putting it into a designated box (baksho). There are no specified working hours but a typical day at the mine starts at 7 or 8 in the morning and continues till 3 or 4 in the evening with a lunch break at 12 or 1 in the afternoon.

Due to the relative ease of mining in West Khasi Hills there are about 10 – 12 workers in a typical mine. The workers in these mines work individually. A worker is responsible for mining the coal, filling up his trolley, pulling it outside and dumping the coal at the designated place. In West Khasi Hills the count of the coal mined is kept by the number of trolleys. About 7 filled trolleys make 1 tonne of coal. There is a designated person who is responsible for keeping track of the number of trolleys pulled up by each worker. Though there are no specified working hours, a miners day usually starts around 7 in the morning and ends at around 4 in the evening.

The sections below present a representative analysis of survey conducted in coal mines in Khliehriat – Rymbai, Ladrymbai in Jaintia Hills and Borsora, Nongjri, Nongkhlam in West Khasi Hills.

IV. a Coal Mines and Migrant Workers

The coal mines in Jaintia Hills revealed an alarming 100% prevalence of migrant workers working as quarry workers, loaders, unloaders, truck drivers, and helpers. Though it is difficult to correctly assume the reasons for such a lack of local labour participation, some of the reasons may be: labour deficient markets in Jaintia Hills, traditional land relations, social customs, societal structures, historical richness of the local indigenous population, high literacy (higher education) rates among the local indigenous population, high rates of rural – urban migration of indigenous population, intra ethnic differences between the Khasi and Jaintia ethnic communities and as a consequence of which there exists a high social networking among the migrant workers and a complete domination of the coal mining economy by the non tribals or migrant population.

However, the survey of coal mines West Khasi Hills revealed a 40 – 60 (%) prevalence of local indigenous workers to migrant workers respectively. Among the main reasons for such a trend reversal from mines in Jaintia Hills, a few may be: higher rates of indigenous population concentration in West Khasi Hills, low levels of development of the region, low levels of mobility due to inaccessible terrain and poor road network, low levels of rural – urban migration of indigenous population but high rates of rural – rural migration of indigenous population, low levels of literacy (higher education) rates, high levels of unemployment, mine owners prefer local indigenous labour over migrant labour for a variety of reasons, hierarchical stratification of labour economy wherein the transportation, trading and markets are completely dominated by the Bangladeshis, while the local indigenous workers are at the lowest levels of the stratification.

IV. b. Numerical Composition of Workers in the Coal Mines of Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills

Majority of the workers in the mines in Jaintia Hills belonged to the Garo, Nepali and suspected Bangladeshi ethnic groups. The numerical composition of the surveyed mines revealed a 60% domination of the suspected Bangladeshi workers, 30% belonged to the Nepali origin and 10% belonged to the Garo ethnic group.

The surveyed mines in West Khasi Hills revealed a different trend. Of the 40% local indigenous workers 95% were from West Khasi Hills, and only 5% from East Khasi Hills. Of the 60% migrant workers in the mines 50% belonged to the Nepali community, 40% belonged to the Garo community and 10% from Bangladesh (it must here be pointed that workers from Bangladesh had no hesitation in telling the research team about their country of origin unlike the case in Jaintia Hills, were all the suspected Bangladeshi workers claimed to be Bengali's from Assam).

Also it must be noted here that there was complete domination of the Bangladeshis over the trading center at Borsora (West Khasi Hills) and the proportion of Bangladeshi workers working in the mines is very minor. A peculiar feature of these mines was the non prevalence of workers from Bihar.

IV. c. Geographical and Regional Distribution of Workers in the Coal Mines in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills

The geographical distribution pattern of the origin of the migrant workers in Jaintia Hills revealed that of the 60% suspected Bangladeshis all claimed to be from Assam. Of the 30% Nepalis about 85% responded as being from Eastern Nepal and 15% from Western and Central Nepal, of the 10% of Garo workers 70% were from Karbi – Anglong region and 30% from South Garo Hills. The regional spatial distribution of workers in the surveyed mines of Jaintia Hills revealed a prevalence of workers from Cachar, Kamrup, Dhuburi, Hailakandi and Karbi Anglong districts of Assam and Eastern Nepal. The

The regional spatial distribution of workers in the surveyed mines of West Khasi Hills revealed a prevalence of workers from Phlangmawpra, Jakrem, Mawkyrwat and Mairang in West Khasi Hills, South and West Garo Hills, Eastern Nepal and Bangladesh.

Conversations with the KSU leaders and FRRO officials revealed a complex underground network of Islamic groups from Bangladesh in Assam which organizes mass movement of people from

Bangladesh to Assam. These groups also arrange for identification proof and citizenship cards of India for these illegal migrants. The team was informed that there are 14 such underground networks operative in Assam. This fact was established in the coal mines of Jaintia Hills where the alleged Bangladeshis when asked about their names and places of origin responded instantly by providing residential proofs, voter id cards and ration cards from Assam. It was also noted that these migrant workers were speaking in the Bangladeshi dialect of Bengali.

IV. d. Religious Affiliations of Workers in the Coal Mines in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills

The religious composition of the workers in the surveyed mines in Jaintia Hills revealed that of the total workers in the mines 84% were Muslims, 12% Hindu and 4% Christians.

The mines in the West Khasi Hills revealed a different pattern of religious composition wherein 55% were Christians, 30% Hindus and 15% Muslims.

IV. e. Educational Status of Workers in the Coal Mines in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills

The literacy levels of the workers in the surveyed mines in Jaintia Hills revealed highest literacy (upto secondary / class X) levels among the Christian population of the workers. Of the total 84% of Muslim workers, only 18% had some sort of secondary education, 33% had some sort of primary education and the rest 49% had no formal or informal education. Of the 12% Hindu population of workers, 20% had some sort of secondary education, 30% had some sort of primary education and the rest 50% had no formal or informal education. Of the 4% Christian population of workers, 60% had some sort of secondary education and 40% had some sort of primary education.

The literacy levels of workers in the surveyed mines in West Khasi Hills revealed that of the 55% Christian population of workers, 30% had some sort of secondary education 45% had some sort of primary education and the rest 25% had no formal or informal education. Of the 20% Hindu population of workers, 15% had some sort of secondary education, 25% had some sort of primary education and the rest 60% had no formal or informal education. Of the 5% Muslim population of workers, 10% had some sort of secondary education, 29% had some sort of primary education and the rest 61% had no formal or informal education.

IV. f. Social Relations of the Workers in the Coal Mines of Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills

A survey of the coal mines in Jaintia Hills revealed that about 40% of the total workers had their families in Jaintia Hills. These families do not stay in the camps around the quarries but stay around the trading centers such as Ladrymbai, Khliehriat, Rymbai in what is commonly known as the 'Bengali Line', 'Assamese Line', 'Nepali Line'. The rest 60% of the workers claimed that their families were in the places of their origin.

The coal mines of West Khasi Hills revealed a different scenario as the majority of workers in the coal mines were from different parts of West Khasi Hills. The labourers from West Khasi Hills do not bring their families to the coal mining areas. But among the migrant working population almost all the workers have their families staying at / around the Borsora trading center or in villages little further up from Ranikor. An interesting point to note is that most of the Nepali workers families stay in and

around the trading center in 'Nepali Line', but the families of the Bangladeshi workers stay in villages little further from Ranikor.

The availability of basic facilities of education to the children of the workers is relatively better in Jaintia Hills in comparison to West Khasi Hills. Almost all the workers who have their families in Jaintia Hills claim to be sending their children to either government or missionary school. An important role is played by the missionaries in bridging the educational gap of the children of the coal mine workers by providing them free education, irrespective of their socio-economic status.

IV. g. Health of the Coal Mine Workers

The coal mine workers in the surveyed mines of Jaintia Hills informed the research team about the lack of availability of health facilities. In case of any health related issues the workers had to travel to the regional center at Jowai, which from the nearest of mines is about 30km. Majority of the workers suffer from respiratory tract infections such as Emphysema, Pneumoconiosis and Chronic Bronchitis. These are the types of occupational lung diseases caused by the inhalation of coal dust, characterized by formation of nodular fibrotic changes in lungs. The most common disease among the workers was Pneumoconiosis, which is also known as coal workers' pneumoconiosis, dust disease, miner's asthma, or black lung disease. Majority of the workers also complained of body ache, bouts of food poisoning, fever, eye infections, tuberculosis and bronchial asthma. It was also observed that the workers neglected their health issues and addressed the problems locally or symptomatically on their own. The health status of the surveyed coal mine workers in West Khasi Hills revealed a similar pattern to Jaintia Hills. The workers in the West Khasi Hills had more limited access to the health facilities as the nearest health center equipped to handle emergency was at a distance of about 100 – 180 km. It was observed that the local indigenous labour believed in addressing health related issues on their own through local herbal / traditional medicines, which they procured from their village. If the traditional methods failed to provide respite, the workers then sought help from the local doctor either at their villages or at regional centers like Nongstoin, Shillong. However the Bangladeshi and Nepali labour had a different approach in addressing the health problems. They preferred to go to doctors on the other side of the border in Bangladesh. However, this fact was not universal and some did travel to regional centers for check ups. Another observation during the course of research revealed that some of the workers had some major illnesses which were affecting their productivity at work. It was also noted that the workers either did not want to talk about their health or tried to conceal certain facts. These, we assume could be related to the rampant consumption of liquor, drugs or other reasons. An important fact which needs mention is the co-relation of masculinity and non-addressal of health problems by these workers.

V. Coal Trade in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills

The mainstay of Meghalaya's economy is agriculture, but the highest revenue in the state is generated through coal trade. Around 85% of the coal from mines in Jaintia Hills is exported to mainland India through the Jowai – Shillong national highway (NH – 44) and the rest of the coal is exported to Bangladesh from the Dawki border. However, in West Khasi Hills the trend is reversed and around 95% of the coal is exported to Bangladesh through the Borsora trading center. A negligible 2% of the low grade coal makes its way to districts of Meghalaya and around 3% of the coal is used for local

consumption. The reason for the bulk of the proportion of coal from mines in Jaintia Hills being exported to mainland India being the accessibility and connectivity by metaled road network (National Highway 44) in Jaintia Hills.

The trade between the Meghalaya and its neighbouring countries is broadly divided into two types – official and unofficial. While the trading activities through the official channels are recorded at different points, the unofficial trade is more often designated as illegal trade or simply trans-border smuggling. The land custom stations (LCS) located in Meghalaya (4 each in Khasi-Jaintia Hills) are mainly used for the export of coal, but it is difficult to estimate how much of coal is being exported to Bangladesh. Despite the difficult task involved in making a realistic assessment about export of coal to Bangladesh through LCS, the following table provides data of export during the last five years.

Table 2: Year Wise Breakup of Export of Coal from Meghalaya to Bangladesh (in Metric Tonnes)¹⁹

<i>Mineral</i>	<i>Year</i>				
	<i>1999-2000</i>	<i>2000-2001</i>	<i>2001-2002</i>	<i>2002-2003</i>	<i>2003-2004</i>
Coal	5,44,738.0	6,41,301.3	8,05,986.8	8,85,316.2	9,67,167.8

The above data reveals the consistent increase in coal export to Bangladesh from Meghalaya. Coal, one of the two major mineral products (other being limestone), found in southern belt of Meghalaya, is conveniently exported through the land custom stations located at Dawki, Borsora along Meghalaya – Bangladesh border. In fact there exists a complementarity between the resource base of the hills of Meghalaya and the nearby plains of Bangladesh. For instance, the tea gardens, jute mills and brick - manufacturing units in Bangladesh largely depend on coal mined in Meghalaya.²⁰

As stated in Section II.b, there exists traditional methods of trade in border areas. The system was institutionalized as a result of numerous barriers and formalities imposed by the Governments on both sides of the border, leading to disruption of smooth traditional markets / hats. Under this condition, a sizeable section resort to unofficial channels of export. In addition to the official trade the volume of unofficial trade is equally substantial between Meghalaya and Bangladesh. Although no systematic and authentic data on the direction and composition of such trade is available, “It is learnt that the volume of illegal exports of coal, will be 4 to 5 times higher than the volume of official exports from Meghalaya to Bangladesh”.²¹ The above quotation was found to hold truth in the studied areas, where the trucks registered to carry 7.5 tonne of coal were observed to carry a minimum of 26 tonne of coal for export to Bangladesh. The informal border trade has active participation of the state agencies.²²

The following table presents an official figure of coal export to Bangladesh from the two LCS of Dawki and Borsora, which constitute the studied area.

Table 3: Official Figure of Exported Coal to Bangladesh through the Land Customs

19 Computed from the data provided by the Office of the Commissioner of Customs, Shillong, Meghalaya.

20 Gurudas Das & R.K.Purkayastha (eds.) *Border Trade: North-East India and Neighbouring Countries*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2000, p.34.

21 Ibid, page 40.

22 Personal Observations at the Borsora and Ladrymbai trading centers.

Stations located in Meghalaya (in Metric Tonnes)²³

LCS	Year				
	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004
Dawki	222426.4	304061.7	420622.4	494966.5	478056
Borsora	166804.7	169211.8	233758.2	242577.5	372466.65

Assuming the illegal exports of coal is 3.5 times the official quoted figure, from Table 3 we can deduce an approximate unofficial figure of coal exported in a year to Bangladesh.

Table 4: Unofficial Figure of Exported Coal to Bangladesh through the Land Customs Stations located in Meghalaya (in Metric Tonnes)²⁴

LCS	Year				
	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004
Dawki	778492.4	1064215.95	1472178.4	1732382.75	1673196
Borsora	583816.45	592241.3	818153.7	849021.25	1303633.28

From the above two tables, we can compute and evaluate the gap between the official and unofficial figure of revenue generated. In Jaintia Hills one tonne of coal that is transported to mainland India fetches a price of Rs. 2000 to 2200 to the mine owner. This implies that a truck carrying 26 tonnes of coal fetches a price of Rs. 52000 to the mine owner. In West Khasi Hills, where most of the coal is traded internationally, one tonne of high grade coal fetches about 58 US \$ or Rs 2610 to the exporter when the markets are down and about 70 – 72 US \$ or Rs. 3195 when the markets are high.²⁵ In other words, a truck carrying 26 tonnes of coal in the international market fetches Rs. 67860 when the markets are down and Rs. 83070 when the markets are high. The international trade of coal in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills, involves a central role by the customs and the Directorate of Mineral Resources (DMR), the head office being in Shillong and the regional office for Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills located at Jowai and Nongstoin respectively.²⁶ Each exporter involved in the international trade of coal has to pay a royalty to the DMR. The royalty amount ranges between Rs. 120 – 165 / tonne of coal or Rs. 900 – 1238 / truck (7.5 tonnes), dependent on the quality and grade of coal, but the standard royalty paid by exporters is Rs. 146 / tonne or Rs. 1100 / truck.²⁷ Considering Rs. 146 as a base average amount, we can calculate the total amount of royalty generated from the official export of coal from Table 3. Similarly, the total amount of royalty generated from the unofficial export of coal can be calculated from Table 4. The following table highlights the difference in the revenue collected from the official and the unofficial figure of exported coal to Bangladesh.

23 Computed from the data provided by the Office of the Commissioner of Customs, Shillong, Meghalaya.

24 Computed from Table 3, at an average of 3.5 times the official figures.

25 Personal Interview with an exporter of coal to Bangladesh in the West Khasi Hills region, March – April 2007. The rates of 1US\$ have been taken as Rs 45 for ease of computation.

26 Personal Interviews with a mine owner in Nonjri in West Khasi Hills and coal exporter to Bangladesh through the Borsora town in West Khasi Hills, Meghalaya, March 2007.

27 Government of Meghalaya, Mining and Geology Department, Annual Report, 2003.

Table 5: Difference in Revenue Collection (in Rupees)²⁸

LCS	Year Wise Difference				
	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004
Dawki	81185636	110982520.5	153527176	180662772.5	174490440
Borsora	60883715.5	61762307	85321743	88540787.5	135950327.98

The above table shows the exorbitant unaccounted amount that supposedly should have been paid as revenue / royalty to the DMR. This unaccounted amount however gets diverted to third parties involved in the unofficial exportation of coal. Within the informal network of unofficial trade of coal, there exists a hierarchical formalized economy of corruption.

VI. Parallel Forms of Economy and Governance

The unregulated movement of illegal migrants in Meghalaya has not only created demographic pressure within states, scarce labour and economic opportunities, and environmental degradation resulting in the loss of traditional sources of livelihood. The last two decades have also witnessed the increasing criminalization of illegal migration, with the trend towards organized crime gangs and syndicates incorporating the illegal movement of people into other already existing illegal activities; drug trafficking, illegal gambling, and weapons smuggling among others.

The unorganized nature of coal mining in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills have created organized spaces and systems of informal, parallel forms of economy and governance. These organized spaces seemed to have legitimized the illegal modes of payments, parallel local economies of liquor, drugs, prostitution, smuggling and violence. These organized spaces also involve a number of state actors who play a central role in legitimizing these illegal spaces and exploitation of work force and resources. Some important questions pertaining to the parallel forms of economy, corruption and governance emerged during the course of research.

The first relates to the ‘Benami’ system of ownership of coal mines, trade and commerce. Due to the peculiar landholding system (non-tribals are not entitled to own land, property or business establishments) in Meghalaya, ‘Benami’ system is the common mode of non-tribal ownership of coal mines, trade and commerce. It is an arrangement between a tribal landowner and a non-tribal entrepreneur, wherein the latter acquires an indirect control over land or trade. This is done by registering the land or business in the name of the tribal but the actual controls remains with the non-tribal. In lieu, the tribal person is paid a predecided amount of money annually by the non-tribal entrepreneur. The coal mining regions of Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills are notorious for their ‘Benami’ mine ownership. ‘Benami’ arrangements are also extended to the transport sector, wherein the trucks are registered under names of tribal locals but are controlled by non-tribal. It is difficult to state the number of ‘Benami’ coal mines / transport networks, but it is generally speculated that more than 60% of the coal mines are under the control of non-tribal through the ‘Benami’ arrangement. West Khasi Hills supposedly has a higher rate of ‘Benami’ arrangements of coal mines and transport networks than Jaintia Hills, despite the availability of legal provisions in the form of Meghalaya

28 Computed from the data provided in Table 3 and 4.

Transfer of Land (Regulation) Act, 1971 and Meghalaya: Benami Transactions Prohibition Bill, 1979.²⁹ The high degree of ‘Benami’ arrangements suggest a great reliance on state agencies, who are generally aware of such arrangements but do not take any actions as they are a part of the larger network involving the mafia and due to the regular informal payments made by the non-tribal. The ‘Benami’ system though an exploitative system, is sustained as it is a lucrative option not just for the non-tribal entrepreneur and the state actors but also for the tribal. In Jaintia Hills this is because of the fact that mafia who exert a great control extort money from the non-tribal entrepreneur. In West Khasi Hills the ‘Benami’ system is more exploitative in nature as the land is generally owned by the low income and uneducated indigenous people who are duped into giving away the control. In cases where the land is owned by educated indigenous people, it is the fear of life and property that forces them to arrive at an arrangement with the non-tribal.

The ‘Benami’ system is extended to the transport network in the coal trade. The arrangement gives legitimacy to the non-tribal operators to operate through illegal means by making informal payments to the local mafia and the state agencies and evade certain export duties. In Jaintia Hills, where the maximum trade of coal is to Assam; trucks carry 3.5 times the stipulated amount of 7.5 tonne, manage to cross the check posts along the NH 44 and cross over to Assam by making informal payments to the state agencies and mafia. Reliable sources informed that a truck carrying 26 tonne of coal to Assam have to pay an amount ranging from Rs. 500 – 800 to various agencies for safe passage. The number of trucks transporting coal from Jaintia Hills to Assam (daily) for the last three years are presented below.

Table 6: The Total Number of Trucks Carrying Coal Daily from Jaintia Hills to Assam for the years from 2003 – 2005³⁰

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of Trucks (Daily)</i>
2003	512
2004	506
2005	625

From the above table we can calculate the amount of illegal payments made to the various agencies.

Table 7: Amount Incurred as Unofficial Payments for Safe Passage (in Rupees)³¹

<i>Year</i>	<i>Daily Amount</i>	<i>Yearly Amount</i>
2003	307200	112128000
2004	303600	110814000
2005	375000	136875000

29 The Meghalaya Transfer of Land (Regulation) Act, 1971 stipulates that no land in Meghalaya shall be transferred by a tribal to a non tribal. Meghalaya: Benami Transactions Prohibition Bill seeks to restrict land, trade and business transactions carried on by non tribal in the name of tribal.

30 Meghalaya Legislative Assembly, Re – Assembled Budget Session, Starred Questions, Thursday, the 29th June, 2006.

31 Computed from Table 6. Average amount as Rs.600 / truck.

The above quoted figures of unofficial payments is being divided amongst different agencies, some of the agencies accepting the payments are the police officials at check-post points, the transport authorities, the local mafias, etcetera. It is noteworthy that despite the huge payments incurred by the traders / dealers, it is still profitable for them to transport coal through illegal channels. This is due to the higher profit earned by trading 26 tonne over allotted 7.5 tonne and less harassment faced.

In West Khasi Hills, the entire coal mining and trading is rooted in illegality. During the course of study it was observed that the custom office on the Indian side was comprised mostly of Bangladeshis (identified by their dialect) who take bribe from the Indian exporters to allow a truck to carry 26 tonnes of coal, which is registered to carry 7.5 tonne of coal. The illegal payments to the custom officials generally range from Rs. 1000 to Rs. 2000 / truck depending on the caste affiliations of the exporters and the frequency of exports.³² In other words if an exporter was a Bangladeshi or had some affiliations to Bangladesh then the payments made were low. Similarly, if there were frequent exports by a particular exporter, the payments made to the custom officials were low. Bribes are also paid to the BSF officials for allowing such illegal transactions by the custom officials. The exporters do not deal directly with the BSF. A noteworthy feature is the fact that the custom officials also take payments from Bangladeshi importers. Reliable sources informed that on an average 135 trucks pass over daily to Bangladesh from the Borsora check post. From the above figures it is possible to derive the illegal amount paid to the customs and BSF at the Borsora check-post. The following table presents the figures.

Table 8: Illegal Amount Paid at Borsora Check-Post³³

<i>Number of Trucks Daily</i>	<i>Illegal Payment / Truck</i>	<i>Daily Amount</i>	<i>Yearly Amount</i>
135	1500	202500	73912500

The key player in the hierarchy of illegality are the Coal Barons / Coal Lords.³⁴ The Coal Barons are the either the largest exporters, mine owners or resourceful people with monetary influence and have been in the business for a number of year. The Coal Barons possess full control / partial control over the mafia, which in turn regulates the export of coal from other exporters. The mafia also indulge in regular acts of violence to keep a check on other players in the market and maintain a monopoly over the market. It was observed that these mafia had a set of informants who kept a watch on any new faces in the area.³⁵

32 Personal Interviews with an exporter of coal to Bangladesh through the Borsora town in West Khasi Hills, Meghalaya, March 2007.

33 Computed on an average figure of bribes paid by each truck from the figures preceding the table.

34 The most influential Coal Baron in West Khasi Hills happens to be a Bihari Muslim from Bangladesh. Key informants stated that he had migrated to West Khasi Hills during 1980. He owns huge amounts of property in Shillong, Nongstoin in Meghalaya and has invested recently in real estate in Bangladesh. All of his operations are through illegal channels.

35 Within 10 minutes of the teams arrival at Borsora, some of the Bangladeshi toughs came and inquired about the purpose of our visit. They tried intimidating the team and left after assurance that the team was on a college field visit to survey the geology of the region. Within a few minutes team's presence was reported to BSF, who then caught us and interrogated the team members separately for about 40 minutes. BSF officials tried to intimidate the team by saying "this is not a good area, leave before afternoon, anything can happen here, your belongings and money could get snatched". There were only 5 BSF personnel manning the Borsora border.

A startling revelation during the course of research revealed that the Coal Barons in connivance with BSF personnel in West Khasi Hills are involved in organized transfer of labourers from Bangladesh.³⁶ The local media claims to have documentary evidence of BSF personnel taking bribes to allow Bangladeshi people into India at Shella border in East Khasi Hills.³⁷ A key informant revealed that he paid Rs. 500 to the BSF for allowing a safe passage across the border. He also revealed that there were organized network of agents who work in collaboration with the mine owners, sordar and the Coal Baron.

Issues of informal governance are closely implicated with politics. This is clearly represented in the coal mining regions of Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills. The role of Coal Baron in influencing the politics of the region is critical. Insiders, inform about the role of the Coal Baron from West Khasi Hills in providing monetary support amounting to crores of rupees for getting a candidate from Bangladesh (who obviously had become Indian citizen) elected as a member of governing body of councilors for Garo Hills. Similar instances of either financial or manpower support are provided by the influential Coal Barons to political parties and antisocial elements in Jaintia Hills. This is done in order to have a political patronage and resist any legislations that seek to regulate the coal mining.

There exists a rampant network of drug and country liquor, as subsidiary parallel economies to the coal mines in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills. In Jaintia Hills illegal economies of drug and liquor are controlled by the local mafia. The local mafia is comprised of local youths. Reliable sources informed the team that the whole mafia network is run by two powerful ladies, who also own a number of mines in the area. The informal / illegal economy of drugs, liquor are sustained by and around the coal mining areas. Every mining belt (which generally comprises of about 30 – 50 quarries) there are certain villages which act as the locus of all the illegal activities. In evenings girls could be seen carrying baskets containing country brewed liquor. Some of these girls also doubled as prostitutes. Though the liquor was freely available, drugs and prostitution were only accessible through networks or word of mouth. Large number of Nepalese girls belonging to low caste were engaged in prostitution. It was very difficult to procure information due to the hostile nature of the locals. Also the workers were apprehensive of providing information on the subject. A notable feature of the informal / illegal economies is that they get maximum business on holidays. In the surveyed mines the weekly off happened to be a Tuesday. This was a day when all the workers would claim to go to the markets but in reality they would visit these villages. Another interesting feature was that no two mining areas had holidays on the same day. This meant more business for these villages on almost all days of the week. When inquired about the reason for holidays on different days the workers informed that it was decided by sordars of mines. When this statement was verified with the sordar he informed that it is generally decided by all the sordars after consultation with the mine owners and villagers so as to avoid problems between workers. But as we understand there is a huge network of local mafia which influences such decisions.

Interviews and case studies revealed that drugs were routed into the region from Bangladesh and Myanmar. The drugs in Jaintia Hills were either brought in from Bangladesh to Tripura and then to Jaintia Hills or from Moreh to Mizoram and then to Jaintia Hills. In West Khasi Hills the drugs were

36 Personal Interviews and Case Studies with a sordar and workers from Bangladesh. Another interview with a surviving victim, the victim and his friend were waylaid by goons from Bangladesh and one of them was murdered.

37 From conversation with a local media high ranking personnel, who did not want to be named and did not want his organisation to be named.

brought in directly from Bangladesh.

The coal mining region of Borsora, bordering Bangladesh are running a 'parallel' or 'mixed' currency system, posing a serious threat to local economies. Currencies of Bangladesh are fast replacing the Indian Rupee as a medium of exchange and store of value in the region. Traders and exporters in Borsora openly do transactions with importers from Bangladesh, in taka. Indian traders in turn use these currencies to buy other commodities and services in whole area. Even some workers are paid their wages in Bangladeshi currencies. Since the volume of coal trade is extremely large in the region, free circulation of foreign currency is weakening the Indian Rupee. The mixed currency system has caused collapse of the local economy by disrupting the rate of exchange of the local currency. The official rate of exchange of Indian rupee vis-a-vis, Bangladeshi taka, is at present in the ratio of 1 : 1.69. That is 100 Indian Rupees fetch 169 Bangladeshi taka. But, this norm does not work in market dealings in the coal mining border town of Borsora. The matter is further complicated by the non presence of any legal measure of converting the Bangladeshi taka to Indian rupee. This has given rise to illegal money-changers, hawala dealers and touts. By paying a commission, Bangladeshi takas are easily converted into Indian rupee and vice-versa. This practice has not only weakened the valuation of the Indian rupee but has also enabled the Bangladeshi traders to windfall profits and gain control over the local economy.

Circulation of parallel currencies have given rise to the mixed currency system. For instance, in Borsora a bottle of mineral water made in Bangladesh costs Rs 25. The shopkeeper only accepts Indian rupee for the transaction (from an indigenous tribal or a newcomer) but himself procures the good for 12 Bangladeshi taka. This implies that he is charging the Indian customer 42.2 Bangladeshi taka for the bottle of water. But the shopkeeper is buying the water for 7.10 Indian rupee. This implies that the shopkeeper is earning a windfall gain of 17.9 Indian rupee or 30.2 Bangladeshi taka.

Another instance of mixed currencies was observed when a local indigenous worker bought a perishable good costing Indian rupee. The shopkeeper returned the balance to the buyer, comprising Indian rupee and Bangladeshi taka. This we learned is done deliberately to turn the rupee-taka par of exchange topsy-turvy and circulate more Bangladeshi taka.

The mixed currency has not only weakened the local economy but also reduced the purchasing capacity and savings of the local indigenous people. This has also its ramifications in the control of the economy which is dominated by the Bangladeshis and a few Nepalis. This has further marginalized the local indigenous labour who firstly are forced to procure basic goods at high prices due to non-availability of options and the non-availability of market for indigenous goods. This has further intensified the cycle of poverty for the indigenous and low income groups in the coal mining region.

VII. Coal Mining and its Impact on Environment

Meghalaya's peculiar land tenure system, where ownership vests with the 'people'³⁸ has already had devastating effects on society and environment. Meghalaya is the only state so far where mining of coal is done privately by mine owners who resort to the unscientific, cheap and risky method of

38 Private ownership of land entails ownership of all resources above and below the surface. It means that a person can own the forests, shrubs, water sources, water catchment, and, above all, the mineral resources under the earth. Explained by Ms. Patricia Mukhim in a personal conversation in Shillong, March, 2007.

extracting coal leading to a lot of wastage and environmental degradation.

Mining activities across the country are regulated by the Indian Bureau of Mines. Meghalaya due to private ownership of land does not fall under the purview of Indian Bureau of Mines. Without any regulation the coal mining is posing serious threats to the fragile ecosystem of the region. Abandoned mines are left unfilled and pose as potential environmental hazards. Meghalaya being in the high seismic zone, these abandoned mines pose grave dangers of caving in and also produce after effects of seepage and run-off, releasing harmful chemicals in the soil and water.

Water sources around the coal mining areas are heavily polluted with sulphur residue from coal. Most water sources that have been tested show high levels of heavy metals like Copper, Zinc, Manganese, Lead and Iron. Coal mining has also been responsible for depleting ground water sources from 500 m to a depth of 2km, leading to an acute shortage of water. The surrounding villages have to traverse several kilometers to get their quota of drinking water. The per capita requirement of water according to norms prescribed by World Health Organisation (WHO) is 240 liters per person per day. The impoverished villagers have to make do with about 40 liters of water per day for an average family size of five members. The problem is compounded by the fact that most of the villages around coal mining areas are not covered by government water supply schemes.

Soil erosion from active mining areas and fresh dumps silt the drinking water sources, rivers and streams. This has disturbed the natural flow of water and had adverse effects on the marine life and associated small scale industries of fisheries in the coal mining regions of Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills. Another major environmental effect of coal mining has been through the Acid Mine Drainage (AMD) caused due to seepage and run-off water from the coal mines. This has led to soil degradation and caused loss of fertility of soil. This is most evident in Khliehriat – Rymbai, Ladrymbai in Jaintia hills and Borsora in West Khasi Hills, where, large fertile agricultural tracts have become barren and unfit for agriculture. This has led to an increase in the incidence of rural poverty.

The loss of agricultural land due to coal mining has also had its repercussions in the increase of deforestation. The coal mines in Meghalaya employ a large number of migrant labour. These labourers and their families after migrating to Meghalaya reside in the villages close to the coal mines. Due to the shortage in the agricultural land, these labourers, alternatively, practice shifting or slash and burn cultivation leading to deforestation. This has further caused ecological imbalances and irreversible damage to flora and fauna. Rampant deforestation has caused climatic changes. The evidence of this has been the record low amounts of rainfall in Mawsynram, 'the wettest place on earth'.

Air pollution is an indirect effect associated with open cast mining, coal transportation and and coal preparation. Mining activities generate suspended particulate matter. The suspended particulate matter contain silica (5%) of the dust and at work work place the particles are around 3000 micro grams / m³ (permissible limit 200 micro grams / m³). The air quality shows concentration of suspended particulate matter far exceeding the national ambient air quality standards.

VIII. Ethnic Conflict

Violence against the outsiders (dkhars), comprising Nepalese, Bengali (Bangladeshis), has been on rise in the state of Meghalaya. The violence is manifested through riots between the indigenous tribal populations, and the outsiders. Over the last three decades, these sporadic rioting have led to creation of

insurgent outfits, camouflaging themselves under the cover of ethnic identities. Meghalaya, unlike other Northeast Indian states has seen the rise in movements against the outsiders based on economical deprivation as an agenda. But in course of time criminal elements have got attached to these movements and diluted them. The very usage of phrase 'ethnic conflict' in Meghalaya might be a misnomer. It might just be a political way to speak about the violent confrontations between groups of people belonging to two distinct ethnic groups. The conflict in Meghalaya does involve ethnic or cultural identity, but is mostly about ramifications of illegal migration and the consequent rising levels of unemployment and economic deprivation.

This section seeks to examine the rise of violence in Meghalaya, simultaneously examining the links between the migration, economic deprivation of the local indigenous population and politics through the prism of coal mining.

Situating the Causes of Ethnic Conflict in Meghalaya

The genesis of conflict in Meghalaya can be traced back to inter-tribal rivalry and indigenous acrimony against the outsiders in the otherwise hospitable state. Among the main causes of such disturbances has been the economic underdevelopment, growing unemployment and the fear of the indigenous tribal populations regarding the demographic change and a steady rise of non-tribal settlers. There exists a proportional relation between the fears of the indigenous people of being outnumbered and outsmarted in the cultural and economic spheres. Although the origin of conflicts is rooted in economic disparities, in the course of time, the underground elements have used the issues of identity and culture. These issues coupled with growing corruption and injustice are responsible for the growth of conflict in Meghalaya. At this point, it is important to analyze the linkages between the causes of ethnic conflict and the actual ramifications at the ground level. This would also to some degree highlight whether the fears of the indigenous population viz-a-viz the migrants are real or perceived. The analysis of the linkages are presented in the sections below.

Migration, Social, Economic Deprivation and Ethnic Conflict

Meghalaya, in the last three decades has experienced migrations from across its southern, western and north-eastern border directly and indirectly from other Northeastern Indian states, particularly large-scale flows associated with the economic opportunities. Ironically, there is little empirical work on more recent migrations. For the purpose of our research, it is important to note that all migrants who have entered Meghalaya after 1972, are classified as 'illegal' migrants.

The 'migration industry'³⁹ is crucial in escalating new transnational flows in Meghalaya, while blurring the distinction between labour migration, irregular migration, and trafficking. In the case of Jaintia Hills the migration of Nepalis and Bangladeshis involves a well-organized network of dalals in Nepal and Bangladesh and illegal underground fundamental groups along with agencies, sordars, touts, and brokers. Senior KSU and FRRO officials informed the team that there are about 14 underground groups in Assam which facilitate movements of people into different parts of Meghalaya along with the dalals, finding suitable employment opportunities for migrants and facilitating their movements.⁴⁰

39 Ramachandran. S., *Indifference, Impotence, and Intolerance: Bangladeshis in India*, Global Migration Perspectives, No. 42, 2005.

40 Personal Interviews with senior KSU leaders and FRRO officials. KSU conducted a personal research and fact finding on the issue of irregular migration of Bangladeshis into Assam and Meghalaya and the report has been submitted to the

These organized underground networks also provide potential migrants with official Indian documents like passports and ration-cards to minimize the risks of detection as 'illegal' migrants. A feature that makes migration to India for prospective migrants more lucrative is the low amount of money needs to be paid to brokers, the higher possibilities of long-term settlement and higher probability of migration to countries of Gulf.

A few studies on the coal mines in Meghalaya suggest that the labour migrations to the coal mining regions in Meghalaya are of short-term and 'back and forth' movements. However, our research indicates that these migrations might not be of temporary nature. The research indicates that such irregular migrations provides a base for these migrants to seek economic opportunities and climb higher up the economic hierarchy. Consequentially, it leads to these migrants acquiring permanent residences in the region, further facilitating established networks for migration to urban areas and new migrations. This process has been the most common observation in the coal mining regions of Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills. The migrants come into Meghalaya as workers in coal mines, after five to eight years of work these workers build networks and acquire property and permanent residence in and around the coal mines. These migrants then further move to the urban centers in search of better jobs and enable new migrations.

A feature that has attributed largely to the growing unrest amongst the local indigenous population is the long-term settlements of these irregular migrants in various parts of Meghalaya beyond the coal mining belts and the high level of assimilation within the social and political fabric of the society. This is clearly evident in the Garo Hills which have been completely swamped over by Bangladeshis⁴¹ The process of acquiring Indian identity has not been insurmountable for migrants for several important reasons. Firstly, the inefficiency of the state and central governments in providing durable solutions, lack of proper research and information about the illegal migrants in the state and the country, motivated political agendas of political parties, high level of corruption from the lowest to the highest levels of government officials and BSF and the vested interest groups who sustain from such illegal parallel economies. Secondly, the physical and cultural similarities between migrants and Indians have been a crucial factor. Populations directly migrating from Bangladesh to Meghalaya claim to be Garos due to the similarities in appearance, furthermore, these migrants adapt in various ways (language, dressing, food habits) to the new locales in which they have settled.

Populations migrating indirectly from Bangladesh, despite differences in dialect, enjoy a common language, culture and lifestyle with Indian Bengali's. They also share cultural norms with Indian Muslim communities and generally pass off as either as Bengali's or Assamese. Most of these irregular migrants move to places where other Indian Bengali's and Indian Muslim communities live, allowing them to blend in easily. Over the years, these migrants have established kinship bonds with the people from Meghalaya through marriage, thereby acquiring legal cover.

Simultaneously, these migrants adapt various strategies to evade detection. These include camouflaging religious identity by using fake Hindu names and identities. This was very pronounced in West Khasi Hills where almost everyone claimed to be belonging to be Hindu. However, one could observe that people across the border carry ostensible Muslim identities such as the cap, beard etc. A feature even more stark was the presence of women migrants who have assumed Hindu religious markers on their

Government of Meghalaya. March – April, 2007

41 Personal Interviews with senior FRRO official, he cited the example of Garo Hills and especially Mahendraganj which have been completely been taken over by Bangladeshis. Surprisingly the local political leader is a Bangladeshi Muslim.

bodies like the application of sindur and bindis. When the team spoke to a few of these women they routinely claimed that they were from West Bengal and not Bangladesh.

The above social affects of migration formed some obvious reasons for the rise in inter-ethnic tensions in Meghalaya. A number of other economic affects of migration detailed below have also been responsible for widening inter – ethnic divides.

Impacts on host countries

From the point of view of the host country, the presence of migrants raises three main issues. The first issue concerns the impact of transnational migration on the labour market, where the fear of losing jobs and purchasing power because of the presence of large number of migrants is wide- spread among the indigenous population, particularly among those at the lower end of the labour market. The second issue concerns the impact of immigration on economic growth and the third concerns the fiscal consequences of migration.

Impact on the labour market

It is a common concern among the native population of Meghalaya and in large of all developing countries that immigration leads to higher unemployment and lower wages for the local populace. This concern is especially evident in the two districts of Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills, where the general unemployment levels are high and the proportion of the long-term unemployed among the unemployed is large. This is compounded by the fact that the position of immigrants in the coal mining sector being higher than the local indigenous worker. The earnings of immigrants relative to natives are either at par or higher. It must also be noted that in the coal mining sector in the districts of Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills the absorption of immigrant does not necessarily take place disproportionately at the lower end of the labour hierarchy. The table presented below establishes that indigenous workers were consistently underrepresented in the top two categories of managerial and sordar and overrepresented at the low end of the occupational categories, encompassing workers. Moreover, while the total immigrants increased their representation in the category of managerial and sordar positions, the proportion of indigenous workers employed in the sector is steadily decreasing.

Table #: Distribution of Migrant and Indigenous Workforce by Specialized Positions in the Coal Mining Sector in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills⁴²

Specialized Positions within the Coal Mining Sector	Migrant Workers	Indigenous Workers
Managerial	7	3
Sordar	4	0
Team Leader	23	3

42 The data presented is representative of 4 coal mine, 2 each from Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills. The total working population in the 4 mines was 78. Of the total 78 workers 47 were migrant workers and 31 were indigenous workers. The data is only representative of the workers in the coal mines and is not representative of the workers at mid depots, transport, etc.

Worker	13	25
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Migration, Income Inequality and Growth in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills

One of the major effects of transnational irregular migration has been on the trends on income inequality. The past three decades have seen an increase in income inequality in the coal mining sector in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills and migration has been viewed as one of the causes. Considering, that the coal mining in Meghalaya is done in the most primitive manner with no technology intensive methods, it can be argued that migration might be the primary element in deciding the changes in the wage structure. While recognizing the ill effect of migration on the wage rate it must be noted that the rise in inequality can also be attributed toward other factors such as the unorganized nature of coal mining and non – existent unionization process.

The low skill levels of illegal migrants from Bangladesh and Nepal, have implications for their impact in the coal labour market. The illegal migrants compete with low-skilled indigenous workers for the jobs in the coal mining sector and also compete with low-income indigenous families in the low-income housing market and for public income transfers . With the increasing of the stock of illegal migrants in the coal mining destination, the greater is the intensity of this competition in the labour market, the housing market and the market for public income transfers, and hence lower the level of economic well-being among the indigenous poor. It is the low-income native-born population that pays the highest economic price from illegal migration.

On the other hand, a greater supply of low-skilled illegal migrant workers, increases the wages of high-skilled workers and the return to capital . This follows from the principle of complementary in production, that is, that a greater supply of one factor of production increases the productivity of other complementary factors.

It is often said that one of the benefits of illegal migrant workers is that they will do the jobs that indigenous workers will not do. These are the dirty, dangerous, dull and difficult low-skilled jobs. It is to be expected that undesirable jobs, that is, jobs with less favorable non-pecuniary characteristics, will command a higher wage in the labour market by the indigenous workers than the illegal migrant workers, than desirable jobs requiring the same level of skill. The coal economy is particularly active in the illegal labour market, the low-skilled illegal migrants workers from Bangladesh and Nepal come providing “needed” labour services that need not have host-country skills (including knowledge of the destination country’s language) with cheap labour and still contribute equally / largely to the production of coal. Here the local indigenous workers lose place in the labour force due to their higher cost of low-skilled labour.

Fiscal Effects of Immigration

Another concern that has negatively impacted the migrant – indigenous relations is the effect of migration on the fiscal situation, especially in the light of demographic trends. It is argued that immigration has provided the labour force required to support the demands of a labour deficient markets of Meghalaya. In these circumstances, an argument in favour of immigration is that it would provide impetus for growth within the economy. However, this argument in favour of immigration is

overridden by the fact that coal mining in Meghalaya being an unorganized sector, infusion of immigrants has a negative effect on the fiscal position of the state. This is due to the fact that over their lifetime, immigrants do not contribute to the state revenues through taxes but increase the government expenditure on public goods.

Thus migration in the coal mining sectors in Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills has not created any positive impact on the labour markets, income generation, growth and development. In fact, the irregular migration has only widened the gaps between the unequal distribution of resources within the coal mining sector. The mine owners, exporters, traders and the migrants themselves have risen the economic scale while sidelining the indigenous workforce. This has led to serious discontention in the minds of the local indigenous populace.

Border Controversy, Migration and Informal Trade

The two coal mining districts of Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills being landlocked, carry out trade operations through land borders with Bangladesh. The international borders in the Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills are not clearly demarcated and are mostly fluid with ready exchange of goods and people. At the crux of the border demarcation are the irritants in highly skewed and informal trade which threatens to bedevil the relationship between the two countries. It is at this point that irregular transnational migration plays an important role in the organized network of informal trade of goods and commodities across the borders ('smuggling'). There exists an informal trade of food items, traded through informal channels. The economy of Borsora is dominated by Bangladeshi goods. The items traded include food items, clothes, toiletries and all other basic goods. Another example of such illegal trade is in the mobile phones and connection. As per the International protocols no mobile phone towers can be constructed within a radius of 50 km of an international border.⁴³ Due to these regulations there are no Indian mobile phone towers in Borsora. However the town of Borsora has a surplus of mobile phones and connections from Grameen phone from Bangladesh. There is a huge network of agents involved in the illegal procurement of connections on false documentary evidences from the company. This trade, amounted for a large illegal monetary transaction across borders. Much of this trade in Borsora is one-sided, in that goods move from Bangladesh to India. The informal capital markets around the border is so well integrated that remittances are quick and reach the designated people in various parts of Bangladesh, at favorable exchange rates and with lower transaction costs compared to formal channels.

Likewise, cross-border trade through transnational migrations has a fundamental role in preserving local economies in Meghalaya. Many residents in the border areas make a living by acting as 'carriers' - transporting goods to Bangladesh. This we were informed a regular feature especially in the coal mining belts where the women and children carry the low grade coal in baskets and logs of wood across the border. The irregular transnational migrants play a crucial role in informal trading, due largely to the available networks on both sides of the border, bribes paid on a recurring basis to border security agencies and the low levels of fines imposed on confiscated goods.

At the same time it is necessary to think beyond the debate over territorial borders. While clear demarcation of the boundaries is important in the easing of tensions among the security forces on both

⁴³ Sources inform us that there has been an amendment in the protocol wherein the radius of 50 km has been brought down to 10km.

sides of the border, it is unlikely that strict enforcement of measures like border fencing, would help the people on either side in their trans-border communication to which they have been historically accustomed to. It is the lack of facilities on one side of the border and their availability on the other side, that is sustaining transnational migration.

Role of State and Governance

Despite the huge doles provided by the Central Government to the state of Meghalaya the number of people living below poverty line are increasing by the year. As Ms. Patricia Mukhim explains “1,60407 families live below poverty line. If each family has an average of five members the number of individuals below poverty line would be something like 8,02035. In a population of 2.1 million, the BPL figure of eight lakhs is a staggering one. Several poverty alleviation programmes have been taken up by governments from time to time but these have remained only on office records. The reason is because out of every rupee allocated for rural development only six paise actually reaches the poor.”

Poverty coupled with unabated migration have given rise to unrest, violence, militancy and extortion among the unemployed youth. The issue of governance is made complex by plethora of governing authorities in Meghalaya consisting of the Dorbar Shnong or village level council, the Dorbar Raij or a conglomeration of villages, the Dorbar Syiem or the chieftainship, the District Councils and the elected state representatives. The relationship between all the above authorities is antagonistic leading to failed and non implemented policies. One aspect which needs serious consideration is the high level of corruption within the state agencies. Benami transactions of various kinds work in connivance with the government officials. The problem of unabated influx from Bangladesh and Nepal is sustained because the irregular migrant is seen as a prospective vote bank.

The free flow and movement of people across borders highlights the dearth of a conclusive method of identifying the irregular migrant population. This is compounded with the fact that a high number of these irregular migrants, have been inadvertently issued voter identity cards and passports. The result of this has been that a lot of these irregular migrants have effectively become residents and citizens of India and participate in the electoral process.

In this case it becomes confusing and unclear to a citizen of Meghalaya as to what truly constitutes Indian citizenship and specifically at a time when they are discriminated against in the mainland India. This has significantly undermined the scope of detection of such irregular migrants. Correspondingly, additional dimensions of blanket cover provided by the 1950 Friendship Treaty and the Bangladeshi governments stand that there are no population flows from Bangladesh has made detection and deportations an impossible probability. As a result, a mass of individuals have emerged with dubious identities who cannot be classified as ‘undocumented’, ‘irregular’ or ‘illegal’ migrants because they have been documented not only in their countries of origin but also countries of destination.

The specter of undocumented labour migration within the state has the potential to upset the already precarious social and ethnic balance of a multicultural state. Meghalaya remains plagued by problems of ethnic violence, extinction of the indigenous population and separatist movements with ethnic cleavages threaten the peace in the state.