

## Meghalaya's black diamond



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Nothing works in Meghalaya [more](#) than owning a land. And in this land, which is traditionally owned by the tribals – they can do whatever they like. And the way things are moving here the day is not far when such lands may well be used even for nuclear tests, as somebody opined lightly. This is indeed the sordid tale of the controversial land ownership system in Meghalaya where if you have coal, diamond, gold and the rest of it then the owner is not the government but the owner of the particular land where these natural resources are hidden. This is how the luckier lots in the state are making mind boggling sum of [money](#) by extracting and exporting coals but what they have forgotten in the process is that their senseless search for black diamond is affecting the lives and ecology of the neighbouring state and country, now.

The ban on rat-hole coal mining in Meghalaya was looming large for quite sometime. That a heinous crime on Mother Earth is going on perpetually without any care or [concern](#) just to quench one's selfishness since donkey's years has been aptly dealt with by the National Green Tribunal ([NGT](#)), recently. Anything that is done neglectfully, despite knowing the consequences, must be dealt with a firm hand, be it, militancy in Garo Hills or coal mining in Jaintia Hills. And that is what the [NGT](#) has proved. All those who complaints that the ban has been sudden must ask themselves what they have been doing to the ecology, are on expected or unexpected lines. Say, if the ban is to be imposed after 2 months instead of what mine owners call this sudden ban, giving them ample time then what things would they have done within this timeframe. Had they dived deep inside the [earth](#), like those who dives deep into the sea with oxygen tanks on their [back](#), and extract all the black diamond at one go. Today a drive to Jaintia Hills region of the state can only give one the sight of dried river beds, desert type croplands, devastated landscapes and what have you. The damage is so great that it has reached the neighbouring state and affecting their livelihood. The All Dimasa Students' Union and [Dima Hasao](#) District Committee who took the matter to the [NGT](#) has done the right thing by doing so. What would have Meghalaya done say if it was the affected party? Would it allow it to continue or approach the [NGT](#)? So such scrap reasons by mine owners in the aftermath of the ban that mining is going on since British era in the state is baseless and unfounded. There are many other things which are going on since the British Raj but that does not mean that if that is detrimental must continue.

There is no difference between the coal traders of Jaintia Hills and the legislators of Garo Hills. Whereas the former extracts coals and earns big bucks by exporting them and builds their empire in Shillong as they themselves know well that the destruction they have done to the milieu in Jaintia Hills is not conducive for human habitation. Today capital Shillong is in such a state that every alternate house perhaps belongs to coal [trader](#). They have literally bought this town and all the high rise buildings are the products of their black diamond. The latter too is no different. They reached the top with the votes of the average Garos and steadily shift their base to Shillong or neighbouring [Guwahati](#), leaving behind the people who look up to them with hope. So in both the cases there is an alarming betrayal all for their own selfish desires. Like coal mining, politics have become a profession in the state. And what is the coal lobby's influence in the political arena here is known to all.

After the [NGT](#) has revoked to shift from the ban on rat-hole coal mining in Meghalaya imposed earlier, the affected mine owners said that they have been mining coal since British Raj and how can this be imposed. [Now](#), since the British Raj many things were running, such as, the coal laden steam engines of rail bogies. But with time these steam engines were taken off the track and there are a countable few being run by the Indian Railways. Majority were converted to either diesel / electric engines. So such a basis that something which is going for over a century in itself qualifies for its continuance is baseless and earns laughing stock and nothing else. There are many things which have been running since British Raj even in Meghalaya. This author have been told that much of the farming methods used by farmers of Meghalaya have undergone changes in the last 100 years whereas there is a significant shift from jhum cultivation to other high yielding methods now. There is also a growing voice to stop the ridiculous tribal yearn to [burn](#) dry leaves at the beginning of every year in forests because it causes huge [forest](#) fires damaging natural wealth, ecosystems and even extends to human settlements.



The merciless coal mining in Jaintia Hills is perhaps not seen anywhere else in this country. We have never heard young people dying on a regular basis in the coal mines in West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa and other coal rich states in the country. Then why is it a phenomenon only in Meghalaya? It certainly cannot go unnoticed. The reckless mining of black diamond with the aid of cheap labour from across the [border](#) burying all the laws that governs their safety and wellbeing is the order of coal mining here. And given the 'patting' [Congress](#) led governments in the state their task got much easier because for this party nothing matters most than their self. The unregulated mining of coals without any safety or precautionary measures for health hazards out of such mining activities have been so alarming that even the gravest of accidents were overlooked by the state government in the past. The coal miners should consider themselves lucky that they are not prosecuted for running alleged "slavery" by sourcing cheap labour and making them work in the most inhuman conditions on [earth](#). Surprisingly, there is none from the so called NGOs, raising their voice regarding the presence of [illegal](#) workforce without any valid documents, barring a very few. That the coal miners in search of capital have not only destroyed the environment but also the demographic pattern is not in sync with these NGOs. What have these coal miners done for the society except making their own wealth on the weird ground that land belongs to the tribesmen? There are no infrastructural facilities like health centres, educational institutions, marketplaces, tourism et al that should have been voluntarily fostered by mine owners. These owners have utilized Jaintia Hills in a "use and throw" manner. "Extract as much as you can and then abandon it" is their way. The rat-holes after being mined is not even filled up with [earth](#) as there are many fatal cases reported when lives were lost as someone slipped inside these holes. Such wilful negligence is not seen anywhere else. And [today](#) such is the after-effects of the [NGT](#) ban that all are rendered jobless. Labourers are unable to send their children to schools, transportation has come to a

complete standstill, [school](#) dropouts are on the rise, commercial establishments closing their shutters one after another and there is a possibility that those business houses and commercial banks who have opened up their shops in Jaintia Hills eyeing the liquid cash flow may well shift their base elsewhere. That the brunt of coal has started to spread everywhere can be gauged from these incidents. And given the situation, the day is not far when the cement plants of Jaintia Hills may also start feeling the [NGT](#) heat. That is indeed, forthcoming. In fact [today](#)'s Jaintia Hills reminds me of the Dunlop factory at Sahagunj in West Bengal, which is a closed chapter now. There was a time when its employees would throw cashew, one of the costliest dry fruits, up in the air and gulp it in their mouth showing onlookers how well-off they are. And [today](#), neither the factory or its employees or their cashews can be seen.

Those coal mine owners who says that they are mining coal from the time of their great, great grandfathers, must have switched over to scientific mining on their own had they any knowledge about the upcoming ban. They kept on mining 'cashews' and so is their 'Dunlop' condition [today](#). It is utter madness to think that these coal miners would be allowed to continue to mine heartlessly affecting the environment of their own state, neighbouring state and a country at large, unabatedly because there will be none to stop them. Whether or not the Meghalaya government implements the mining policy, these coal mine owners, even if a handful of them had switched over to scientific mining and created an example for others to follow, the present crisis could have been much lesser. While doing any business, innovation plays a crucial role or else a ban like this is imminent. The mine owners' single eye on [money](#) has made them so blind that they could not even see that the world outside Meghalaya is changing at a thick and fast rate. There are people who are of the observation that scientific mining is done when coal is extracted in large quantity and the prevailing coal traders in the state are not in a position to switch over to such an option. But what these coal traders would do [tomorrow](#), say, in the next hearing, if the [NGT](#) ruled that coal mining is allowed but specifically on scientific methods. Even the mining policy of the state government which it is trying to implement now brazenly after the [NGT](#) heat cannot afford to ignore the scientific side. The [NGT](#) has made it clear to the Meghalaya government that in order to mine coal in the state environment clearance has to be sourced from the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India besides amendment of the state mining policy in consultation with the Coal Secretary, Government of India. It does not mean that coal traders who are not financially capable of tuning into scientific mining will be allowed to [rape](#) the nature. This is as bizarre as it can be.

Many coal mine owners argued after the [NGT](#) hearing on June 9, that rat-hole is better than open-cast mining because it is conducive for the hilly environment. But the major issue here is about the attitude adopted by mine owners towards environment and the damages they have done to Jaintia Hills. So in what way they can say that rat-hole mining is safer for hilly areas like Meghalaya. What have been their contributions towards environment sustainability in Jaintia Hills? This is where the Mines and Mineral Policy, 2012 of Meghalaya government will come into play. Can it ensure scientific process of mining, regulating coal trading in the state like registration of labourers, traders and coalmine owners, labourers' safety inside mines like use of protective [body](#) gears, oxygen supply, alarm systems to mitigate disasters et al? Most importantly it has to earmark specified zones where coal extraction can take place instead of the prevailing "mine anywhere you like". "If you want to mine then do it scientifically" may well be version of the [NGT tomorrow](#) and the coal traders, who can afford, must get [ready](#) if they want to do business with black diamond. Or else say goodbye, forever.



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