(Coal mining activity in a Naga village: Photo by the Author)

(Naga dancers performing in an ethnic festival: Photo by the Author)
Cultures of Coal
Extractive Resources and Tribal Aspirations in Nagaland

Culture and Coal

Nagaland is a hill state in Northeast India. It attracts a multitude of tourists and visitors to the Hornbill Festival, the most important state festival and the mountains comes alive with its vibrant colours, textiles, dances, and cuisines. So crucial is the display of Naga culture that the official slogan of the Department of Tourism declares Nagaland as the Land of Festivals. However, this cultural representation hides another reality. The vibrant coal mining activities and speculation for hydrocarbon in the state of Nagaland. These extractive economic regimes capture the politics of coal mining activities and highlight the ongoing economic transformation in the frontiers of Northeast India.

In Nagaland, while the state sponsors and organizes various ethnic festivals like the Hornbill Festival, it is the a network of rich landowners, armed groups, and tribal entrepreneurs who carry out the extractive economic activities and control the coal trade. It is a profit driven enterprise that has managed to keep away the state authorities and agencies. This extractive economic activity is founded on a Constitution of India provision known as Article 371(A). This provision guarantees special rights and protection for Naga people living in the state of Nagaland in relation ownership of land and its resources.

Conducting fieldwork in the coal producing villages along the foothills of Nagaland from 2006 till 2011, I noticed how the coal season starting from November onwards ushered in a spirit of excitement and festivity, similar to the celebration about Naga culture in the ethnic
festivals across the state. Both locations – the dance and culture amphitheatre at the Hornbill Festival, the biggest stage for Naga culture and the coal mines in the Naga villages – underlines the powerful ways in which authority, power, and everyday life in the frontiers of Northeast India unfolded. These cultural and economic activities take place within the backdrop of a long armed conflict situation. The hills of Nagaland have witnessed one of the longest insurgency movements in South Asia. After a section of the Naga armed groups and the government of India signed a ceasefire agreement in 1997, there has been a significant rise in extractive activities and contestation over who represents the Naga people.

**Politics of Representation**

Three Naga groups significantly feature in this politics of representation. The Naga armed groups who claim for a sovereign homeland, the government of Nagaland, and finally the Naga landowners who control the coal mines and land. At the heart of this debate about representation lies the unique story of tribal/indigenous people’s aspirations and fantasies about hydrocarbon, and the scramble for land. As various groups in Nagaland – some armed (various factions of the Naga insurgents), others elected (representatives to the Naga tribal councils, student bodies, cultural associations and the state legislative assembly) – vie for the right to represent the Naga past and their future, this is most intensely articulated in the scramble for control over resources in the Naga coal mining villages. It is in these same locations that plans to explore for oil and natural gas are being mapped out as well. The story of coal cultures and resource aspirations is important because it informs us about the creation of a tribal elite group who directly profit from the coal trade, have the capital to amass large tracks of prospective sites for oil explorations actions, and disregards issue of environmental and community rights. What these processes tell us about resource extraction in the frontier
regions like Northeast India and elsewhere are the complexities and the fissures within tribal communities, including various nexus of power among different state and non-state actors, and questions about collective justice and equity.

**Carbon Aspirations**

Among all the natural resources in the foothills, Naga villages perceived oil and coal as the symbols of power that could radically transform their lives. These carbon aspirations and fantasies were starkly visible where the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) had explored for oil between 1973 and 1993 in Nagaland. It was apparent that the conversations about a carbon future in Nagaland, particularly oil and coal, originated from the hydrocarbon activities in the foothill border of Assam and Nagaland. Oil and coal extractive processes were both desirable in the Naga village, but sparked different dreams like its geological compositions. Coal was practical and accessible, while oil was hidden and speculative. It was this hide-and-seek nature that captured the imaginations of the Naga people.

The Naga people’s desire to participate in this carbon future continues is fueled by the ongoing ceasefire negotiations between Naga armed groups and the government of India, and the constitutional safeguards for Naga land and resources. Taking advantage of these autonomous rights, Naga tribal elites continue to buy vast plot of lands across the coal mining sites and in villages with abandoned oil wells. As I noted earlier, many coal mining sites in the Naga villages were important hydrocarbon exploration sites for the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation of India (ONGC) between 19973-1993. After Naga cultural and political associations banned the exploration activity in 1993, the ONGC abandoned infrastructure remained, but several coal mines emerged in the adjoining areas of the villages.
Although it remains unclear how the government of Nagaland and the Naga villages would eventually solve the contentious issue about who is the rightful owner of the land in Nagaland, the fantasies and desire for oil and coal indicates an important development. The scale of coal mining operations has rapidly swallowed cultivable lands, chocked the natural springs, and killed the aquatic life around the coal mining Naga villages. The passion, nightmare, and fantasy in the coal mines of Nagaland opens up questions about everyday experiences and dreams in violent places and questions about resource extraction, access to resources, and profit. It is evident how coal mining activities and the prospects for a carbon future in, Nagaland is rapidly transforming social relations among neighbors, kin, and the state, and producing new political subjects across tribal communities in Northeast India.

Biography

Dolly Kikon is a political anthropologist. She teaches Development Studies, Gender, and Anthropology at the University of Melbourne. She is completing her book manuscript titled *Carbon Connections* that explores the resource aspirations and desires among indigenous communities in Northeast India.