
Role of the Student Organisation in Uranium Mining at West Khasi Hills in Meghalaya

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ABSTRACT

Uranium mining in West Khasi Hills of Meghalaya is one of the important issue not only at the state level but also at the national level to meet the demands of energy in the country, the student organization of the state i.e the Khasi Student Union (KSU) have been playing an effective role in the decision making process of the state government on this issue. It has also faced criticisms from the people of the community in opposing uranium mining in the state but gain the support of the many. This paper will thus study how far the KSU is able to influence the state government or delay the process of uranium mining in the state.

Keywords: students, government, mining, development.

INTRODUCTION

Uranium mining in West Khasi Hills in the state of Meghalaya is one of the important issues for the country as a whole to meet the demands of energy crisis. The proposed mining of uranium in the West Khasi Hills region by the Government of India faced with opposition from the Khasi Student Union which is the student organisation of the state. The KSU was formed in the region in the year 1978 with the objective to protect the khasi community from the political and economic domination by the outsiders. Since its inception it have raised many issues to protect the khasi community in the state, it raised the voice against the illegal immigrants and anti-foreigners issue, it also opposed to the construction of the railway network in the state as it will affect the demographic profile of the state and also demand for implementation of Inner Line Permit in the region. This student organization have also vehemently oppose the proposed uranium mining project in West Khasi Hills by the UCIL, it has also abled to mobilize public opinion on this issue, no doubt it faced criticisms from those people who are in favour of uranium mining, and also encounter with the state government from time to time.

METHODOLOGY

The study was a descriptive and analytical one. The data were collected from both the primary and secondary sources. The primary sources included the constitutions of various organisations, memoranda submitted from time to time by the students and youth organisations, Legislative Assembly Debates and other Government Reports. Structured questionnaires were sent to 50 respondents by using a simple random sampling to the people of the area to elicit their views and opinions.

The secondary sources included books, journals, periodicals, newspaper report.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In 1972 the Atomic Minerals Directorate Exploration and Research found a rich deposition of uranium in the region. In 1984 the Uranium Corporation of India Limited (UCIL) the government agency for uranium mining started to explore and found a huge uranium deposit at Domiasiat and Wahkhen in West Khasi Hills, the total reserve of uranium deposit in Meghalaya accounts for 16% of India's uranium reserve and third after Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh.¹ The proposed project started on 1991 when the officials of the Department of atomic Energy visited Domiasiat and in 1992-1996 drilling of uranium was started, with this activities thus began the debate in the legislative Assembly

¹ "We made fresh efforts to allay fear over uranium mining: Roy", News on North East India A Monthly Compilation of Newspaper Clipping ICSSR Shillong, 6 (7), July 2008,134

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of the state, the KSU vehemently opposed the drilling of uranium in the region since 1993. The infamous Jharkhand leakage in which effluents from Jaduguda uranium mines leakage into the water system have adversely affected the village communities settled nearby added to the bitterness of indifference opinion for uranium mining in the state. Uranium mining took a centre stage on 2007 when the UCIL requested the state government to lease 237 hectare of land for 30 years to carry on the mining and processing of uranium ore at Kylleng- Pydengsohiong- Mawthabah a new name to the popularly known Domiasiat. The student organization opposed uranium mining in the region on the ground that firstly many people will be displaced from their land, secondly health and environment hazard will arise and finally influx of the population in the region will be very high.² With the Union Ministry of Environment and Forest accorded environmental clearance to the UCIL, the UCIL proposed for an open cast mining at Kylleng- Pydengsohiong-Mawthabah Uranium Mining and Processing plant³, the state government under Meghalaya Democratic Alliance led by D.D Lapang decided to start uranium mining in the region and this caused a spearhead agitation in the state on 2007, the KSU called a 36 hours bandh and night road blockade in the state to intensify their agitation to oppose the decision of the government to organize a public hearing to allow uranium mining in the region. Due to the opposition from the student organization working in tandem with the local organizations of the region like the Langrin Youth Welfare Association and the Meghalaya People's Human Rights Commission extraction of uranium could not be taken place, thus the UCIL proposed developmental activities in and around the area as pre-project developmental plan with the intention to create a perception in the mind of the people that uranium mining will bring developmental activities in the region. The President of the North East students' organizations an organization which include the members of all the students' organisations in the North Eastern States of India criticized that developmental activities in the region should not come from the mining agency and it seems that the government of the state awaits the developmental activities in the region from the uranium agency only. The developmental activities coming from the UCIL or the central government in and along the uranium mining site is opposed by the KSU.

A committee was also formed which includes of many youth and students' organizations in the state known as Co-Ordination Committee Against Uranium Mining (CCAUM) comprising 11 organizations including the Khasi Students' Union (KSU), Meghalaya People's Human Rights Council (MPHRC), Western Youth Welfare Organisation (WYWO) etc, has decided to launch a movement in the entire Khasi and Jaintia Hills to prevent uranium mining at Domiasiat in West Khasi Hills. The CCAUM on 21st March 2005 decided that the movement would be launched on 6th April 2005, by holding a public rally at Nongstoin to highlight the negative impact of uranium mining on people who are living near the proposed uranium mining project.⁴ On 2009 The state cabinet under the Congress led Meghalaya United Alliance government expressed that they approved the pre-project development activities of the UCIL in 422 square hectares of land in West Khasi Hills in the mining sites on August in the same year, but the issue of actual uranium mining have not been decided yet.⁵ The KSU have adopted many steps and methods to pressurise the government not to extract uranium in the region, public meetings and public rallies are being organized from time to time by the student organizations in and around the region and even in headquarter of the state at Shillong by the KSU to mobilize public opinion and to enlighten the local people of the area and the state as a whole about their stand on why they are oppose to uranium mining in the region. To extract uranium there is a need of land acquisition by the UCIL but in Meghalaya land is mostly owned by the community and it also represents not only the economic assets but the affectionate bond of the tribal in the state, it thus tied up to their identity.

² Vasun Dharna Sirnate, “Students versus the State: The politics of uranium mining in Meghalaya,” *Economic political Weekly*,44(7),November 2009, 18-23.

³ “Green signal for uranium mining”, in *The Shillong Times*, dated 31-12-20007

⁴ “Newly formed anti-uranium committee announce rally against Domiasiat uranium Project”, in *The Shillong Times*, dated 23rd March 2005.

⁵“MUA backs Cabinet decision on UCIL projects”, News on North East India A monthly compilation of Newspaper Clipping ICSSR Shillong ,7(10) October 2009,107

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The KSU not only oppose mining of the uranium in the state level but had also sent memorandum to the central government to voice their stand on uranium mining in West Khasi Hills. Criticisms were raised by other local organizations of the region who are in favour for uranium mining and of the view that the people who reside in that particular area should decide to extract the uranium or not and their demands from the UCIL that it should sponsor local students for education in mining to be able to work in the mining site and also increase the reservation quota to 90 percent to the local people for employment opportunity under the UCIL. These local organisations appeal the people of the area to support their stand for acceptance the developmental activities of the UCIL and even to decide the extraction of uranium on their own.⁶ A division occurred in the region those who are support of uranium mining and those who are against it, despite this the KSU uphold to their demands. Due to the adamant respond from the government to the demands of the KSU to stop the propose pre –project developmental plant by the UCIL in an around the uranium mining area it thus resorted to violence. Public offices like District Horticulture department was set on fire on the 21st October 2009, miscreants attempted to burn the office building of the Assistant Executive Engineer, distribution subdivision of the state government and many government vehicles were burnt. Arson attacked was also reported in East Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills and Ribhoi districts and many parts of the state. Public curfews and night’s road blockades were also imposed by the student organizations along the National High ways and this also affected the movement of interstate traffics.⁷ The KSU works along with other organizations like the Meghalaya People’s Human Right Commission, the Langrin Youth Welfare Association (LYWA) and some regional parties like the HSPDP and the KHNAM to oppose uranium mining in the region.

On 2016 on the proposal for construction of two lane roads by the central government i.e the Nongstoin- Wahkaji- Mawthabah road to develop the area, the KSU through the Right to Information Act found out the details that the construction of the road is not to be specifically bring development to the people of the area but for the process of uranium mining, they oppose the sanction of the central government for the construction of the road. Interwoven with the constitutional provision of the sixth schedule that land in Meghalaya should be under the supervision of the Autonomous District Council and No Objection Certificate (NOC) of acquiring land by the central or the state government should be issued from the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC) for this region. Again with the issuing of the NOC by the KHADC to take up developmental activities by the UCIL on 29th July 2016 for the construction of the two lanes from Nongstoin-Wahkaji -Mawthabah road, the members of the KSU *gherao* the office of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council and asked the Chief Executive Member to withdraw the NOC. The members of the KSU expressed that they support to any developmental activities in the region but oppose to any developmental activities which facilitate uranium mining. The CEM of the District Council withdraw the NOC for the construction of the road by the UCIL and agree for the construction and reparation of one lane road which is to be borne by the KHADC only which was suggested by the student body to cover the distance from Nongstoin to Wahkaji and not to Mawthabah. Surprisingly on the very same day the 1st August 2016 the cabinet meeting under Meghalaya United Alliance-II revokes the agreement of the 24th August 2009 for leasing 432 hectare of land to the UCIL. The Government of Meghalaya under the MUAI government led by Dr Mukul Sangma expressed that uranium mining will not take place in the state as long as the people of the region are not willing or ready with it. The role played by the KSU has delayed the anticipation of the central government for uranium mining in the state, it is also faced criticisms from Vincent Pala the present Member of Parliament of Meghalaya that the student organization as the pressure groups which disturbed the development of the region, any developmental projects of the Centre or state government are always link to the feeling of insecurity and fear psychosis of the people about the influx of population and uranium mining in the state.⁸

⁶ “KSU loses campaign allies”, in *The Shillong Times*, dated 29th Sept 2006

⁷ “Ksu Intensifies protest”, “Violent Incidents mark Night-1 of KSU’s road blockade”, “Night road blockade again,” *News on North East India* A Monthly Compilation of Newspaper Clipping ICSSR Shillong, 7(10), October 2009 , 107-109

⁸ “Pressure groups in state stalling development” in *The Shillong Times* dated 28th June 2016

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Their effective role was also highlighted in the discussion in the parliamentary debate in the Lok Sabha on 2015 for delaying the proposed uranium project in West Khasi Hills. From the interview conducted to the people who are located in the area it is found that the 73 percent of the respondents support the KSU in their opposition to mine the uranium in the region.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion reveals that the KSU as a pressure groups in the region have emerged as an effective body to pressurised the government on the said issue, the presence of the educated youth in the region and the widespread membership of this student body have helped in the functioning of the student organizations to be an effective pressure groups of the state, with their knowledge in their hands they have also abled to mobilize public opinion and get the support of the masses, in recent years they have also welcome and accepted criticisms from the intellectuals and people of the state on any issues raised by them.

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