

HOW THE RAINY HILLS OF MEGHALAYA ARE UNDER THREAT BECAUSE OF STONE QUARRYING?

Pitch of the Story

Illegal stone quarrying along Meghalaya's ecologically sensitive Shillong–Cherrapunji highway threatens one of the wettest and most fragile regions on Earth. Despite NGT orders and mining rules, quarrying continues within prohibited zones, risking landslides, infrastructure collapse, and harm to villagers. This story investigates why enforcement has failed, whether permits were illegally issued, and how unchecked quarrying endangers both people and nature in a seismic-prone area. It reveals a deeper crisis of governance, law, and environmental justice in a state celebrated for its natural beauty.

Why This Story is Worth Doing

This story uncovers a dangerous contradiction: a state famed for natural beauty allowing ecological destruction. It exposes violations of mining laws and NGT orders that put lives, infrastructure, and biodiversity at risk. With Meghalaya in Seismic Zone V, unchecked quarrying could trigger deadly landslides. The report challenges the myth that development must harm the environment and calls for urgent enforcement and accountability. It is a timely reminder that legal safeguards are meaningless without action.

Sources

- National Green Tribunal (NGT) orders and judgments
- Environmental regulations and notifications (e.g., EIA norms)
- State mining and minerals rules and guidelines
- Ground reports from local communities and affected villages
- Environmental experts, NGOs, and visual evidence (e.g., satellite images, photos)

Meghalaya, in the northeast of India, is one of the most ecologically rich and naturally beautiful states in the country. It is perhaps best known for being home to Cherrapunji —the wettest place on Earth. While the state is widely celebrated for its tourism due to this unique distinction, the increasing quarrying activity, especially along sensitive infrastructure corridors, like the Shillong–Cherrapunji highway is raising serious environmental and legal concerns (Annexure- A).

The highway is lifeline for numerous villages and a corridor dotted with natural springs and forested patches. Alarming, quarrying activities here are increasingly conducted dangerously close to the road, villages, and ecologically sensitive areas. Stone extraction, often unregulated, disrupts not only the natural terrain but also jeopardizes the safety and well-being of nearby inhabitants

However, this issue is not new in Meghalaya, Back in 2014, the National

Green Tribunal (NGT), India's premier environmental adjudicatory body, delivered a landmark judgment in the case of *All Dimasa Students Union Dima Hasao District Committee v. State of Meghalaya & Ors.*ⁱ The NGT unequivocally directed an immediate halt to all illegal mining and quarrying activities across Meghalaya, emphasizing that no such activity should proceed without valid licenses and the mandatory environmental clearances. This judgment underscored the urgent need to protect Meghalaya's fragile environment from unchecked mineral extraction.

In response to growing concerns, the Meghalaya state government also introduced the **Meghalaya Minor Minerals Concession Rules in 2016.**ⁱⁱ These rules set clear boundaries to safeguard communities and infrastructure by prohibiting the granting of mining leases or quarry permits within 50 meters of villages, bridges, national highways, reservoirs, tanks, or any public place. This buffer

zone was intended to reduce the environmental and social impacts of quarrying and to regulate the industry more effectively.

Despite these judicial and legislative safeguards, illegal quarrying has continued with alarming regularity. The situation grew so critical that in 2024, the NGT took **suo motu** cognizance of the ongoing violations—proactively initiating judicial oversight without a formal complaint.ⁱⁱⁱ The Tribunal ordered the establishment of District Level Task Forces charged with conducting regular inspections, monitoring unauthorized mining and quarrying activities, and enforcing compliance with environmental laws. These Task Forces were mandated to report violations promptly to the District Magistrate and the Meghalaya State Pollution Control Board and to ensure that fines and penalties were imposed on offenders.

Yet, enforcement remains the weakest link. Quarrying continues unabated, frequently breaching **the 50-meter buffer** mandated by the 2016 rules,

often occurring dangerously close to highways, villages, and ecologically sensitive zones. This persistent non-compliance highlights systemic governance failures and poor oversight at multiple levels of administration.

Here, crucial questions arise: Have permits been granted for quarrying along the Shillong–Cherrapunji highway and nearby villages? If yes, do these permits violate the Meghalaya Minor Minerals Concession Rules, 2016, by allowing mining within restricted buffer zones? Furthermore, have these operations obtained the mandatory environmental clearance under the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006?^{iv} If clearances were not granted, is the honorable NGT's clear directive being blatantly ignored? These questions are not merely procedural—they get to the heart of governance and accountability.

Meghalaya lies in Seismic Zone V,^v India's most earthquake-prone area, making strict enforcement of mining rules critical. Unregulated quarrying

here raises the risk of landslides, soil erosion, and damage to vital infrastructure, endangering local communities. The ongoing illegal quarrying also challenges the false narrative that development must come at the cost of the environment. Instead, sustainable development is possible by following laws that balance growth with ecological protection.

The government must immediately halt quarrying within restricted zones, publish a list of valid permits, and

ensure no activity proceeds without environmental clearance. District Level Task Forces should operate transparently and involve local communities in monitoring. Meghalaya's unique ecology and people's safety demand urgent action. The law is clear, the risks are real, and enforcement cannot wait. The real issue is not development versus destruction, but development that respects the environment and the law. Meghalaya's future depends on this balance—and time is running out.

REFERENCES

ⁱ<http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/rat%20hole%20mining%20Jaintia%20NGT%2017Apr2014.pdf>

ⁱⁱhttps://meghalaya.gov.in/sites/default/files/rules/Meghalaya_Minor_Minerals_Concession_Rules_2016.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/39696302/>

^{iv}https://environmentclearance.nic.in/report/EIA_Notifications.aspx

^v<https://westjaintiahills.gov.in/disaster-management/#::~:~:text=The%20State%20of%20Meghalaya%20being.of%20human%20lives%20and%20properties.>

ANNEXURE-A



