

The Two Waters: What Water Means in Shillong

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My time studying indigenous water governance in the Khasi Hills, particularly in Shillong, has led to a gut-level realisation that keeps me thinking: the critical importance of water's meaning, which I believe is foundational to effective management. The meaning of water is revealed in the everyday way residents speak about the water that supplies their homes. In this context, water is not treated as a uniform substance. Instead, it assumes distinct, powerful identities that divide it into two clear, operative categories: 'our water' and the 'other water'.

The image above shows a chaotic tangle of pipes that has become increasingly common as Shillong expands, especially in the city's more densely populated areas. Determining which pipe goes where is a monumental, perhaps impossible, task - one that even water engineers and local plumbers find difficult to trace. This confusion signals a significant shift: water is



becoming just another city service, like electricity or roads, losing its unique cultural importance.

The water flowing through these pipes has changed fundamentally. Where once 'pure' spring water ran through them, there is now a concerning dilution - a mixing with PHED[1]-supplied water that many consider 'impure.' People recognise this shift, and it directly affects their connection to both land and water. The meaning has changed; it now holds lesser value, with diminished

emotional attachment. For many, it's becoming just water.

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This transformation brings to mind Ivan Illich's concept of "waters of forgetfulness"[2], where people lose the historical and imaginative relationship they once had with water. As it becomes viewed as a mere material substance, we witness a troubling separation from nature. Modern infrastructure hides water's natural cycle; we



no longer see the rivers and springs that sustain us.

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To grasp this transformation, one must understand how water reaches the city. Pure spring water is primarily supplied through two main systems: the Shillong Municipal Board (SMB) and various village councils. Both draw from the same network of natural springs in the surrounding hills. However, with rapid urbanisation and population growth, the SMB system alone cannot cater to the growing demand. This is where the PHED comes in - supplementing supply with water from larger, often treated sources. This intervention, while addressing quantity, fundamentally alters the quality and meaning of what flows through the pipes.

Despite the widespread mixing of water sources, some localities still receive pure spring water through small, village council-managed schemes. These communities are fortunate to have a supply that has not yet been diluted. This purity must be protected by preventing any mixing with external supplies. For these communities, such protection is about more than just preserving taste or quality - it is about safeguarding a cultural heritage and a unique relationship with their local environment. While this pure spring water cannot meet the demands of the entire city, what remains must be safeguarded. These protected sources can thus endure as islands of "our water" in a growing sea of "other water."

This other picture of a serene forest stream in the heart of the city represents the alternative - water that maintains its story and purity.

While the tangled pipes represent the complex present, this stream represents what many communities must seek to preserve.

"Our Water"

In rural areas of the Khasi Hills and in those urban localities of Shillong that have protected their spring sources, water maintains a more profound significance. Here, water represents more than just a material substance - it connects people to their environment and heritage. Many residents don't just receive water; they understand it. They can trace its journey from specific hillside springs to their taps, maintaining what urban areas are rapidly losing: a living relationship with the natural water cycle.

This knowledge creates a language of belonging - this is genuinely "water from our land, our hills." The value is both practical and deeply personal, evident in its clarity, cool temperature, and fresh taste. It's the water preferred for cooking family meals and brewing tea - because it remains genuinely 'theirs'.

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The "Other Water"

The mixed water in most of the tangled pipe networks represents something entirely different. It has become a resource that is disconnected from its source and from the people who use it. The occasional chemical taste and the thin layer of oily substance that floats on top mark it as processed, as something separate from the natural environment. It becomes generic H₂O, valued primarily as a necessity that has been stripped of its cultural identity.

This is the reality of Illich's warning: a shift where we lose the historical and imaginative relationships with water sources. Modern infrastructure creates separation from nature, hiding water's natural cycle and turning a living relationship into a transactional service.

The Challenge - Preserving Meaning

The central challenge lies in balancing urban development with cultural preservation. As Shillong expands, the pressure to formalise and centralise water supply threatens these remaining pockets of pure water. The need to put an end to the mixing of waters is not just about quality control - it's about maintaining a relationship with their environment and heritage.

Conclusion

My research has led me to a crucial understanding: water management cannot be just about delivering H₂O. The remaining pure water sources in Shillong stand as important reminders: the meaning of water matters as much as its quantity. For water management to be truly successful here, it must recognise that for many communities, the best water isn't just about availability but about maintaining the quality, identity, and natural connections that make it genuinely 'theirs'. What pure water remains must be protected, for in preserving its quality and natural character, we preserve its deeper meaning and prevent it from becoming just another material substance in the urban landscape.

(The views expressed in the article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way his affiliation to any organisation or institution)



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