

The Myntdu River Through the Lens of Syntu Ksiar

DA O EMI LAMAR

The Myntdu River originates at Mihmyntdu, a village adjacent to Jowai town (Meghalaya). It originates at 1420 meters above the sea level and is integral to the district of West Jaiñtia Hills. It primarily provides water supply to Jowai, Mihmyntdu, and a pertinent source for irrigation and cultivation in villages like Khliehtyrshi, Chyrmang, Iangnoh, Tuber and other villages downstream of Myntdu all the way up to Bangladesh.

Historically, Myntdu and other rivers across Jaiñtia hills have geographically engineered the formation of territories and boundaries of ‘Elekas’. It is within this context that the human-river relationship fosters an assemblage of social, cultural, and ecological networks. However, the advent of anthropogenic activities has disrupted this assemblage and created nature as a distinct entity; An entity that is to be manipulated, controlled under the guise for ‘development’.



“*The human-river relationship fosters an assemblage of social, cultural, and ecological networks.*”

In this article, I recount and write about my visit to ‘Syntu Ksiar’. Although Syntu Ksiar does not adequately represent the issues that concern Myntdu river at large, it is one of the few remaining stretches of the river that has been relatively well conserved within the vicinity of Jowai. It portrays an idealistic image of the river, a threshold to understand and oscillate between Myntdu’s

idealistic past and a hopeful tomorrow. As an inhabitant of Jowai, I navigate through this article by incorporating narratives and observations that I have encountered through the years. In essence, this article is not only based on an isolated visit, but predominantly inspired by a reminiscent past as well.

In its literal translation, Syntu Ksiar means ‘golden flower’ and it is a vast stretch of land on the banks of Myntdu river. A valley that bridges connectivity between Jowai and other villages such as Chyrmang and



Iangnoh. A rather peculiar feature of Jowai's landscape is that it is encircled by the Myntdu River on almost all of its sides, barring the northern side of the town. Inevitably, such close proximity to the river translates to a profound hydrological relationship between the people and the river.

“

Such close proximity to the river translates to a profound hydrological relationship between the people and the river.

In the recent past, the concern for Myntdu has taken shape in legal cases. In my conversations with the petitioner and as well as people around town, they have highlighted the historical significance of the river. It was in Syntu Ksiar, that the anti-colonial freedom fighter U Kiang Nangbah is said to have received a divine sign to lead his people. As the story goes,

the dorbar of the twelve Dalois organised a meeting along the banks of Syntu Ksiar. Since he was not born a noble (Daloi) nor a chief (traditional elder), it was unanimously decided that he had to undergo a process of divination before he was chosen to lead the resistance movement against the British. The task was to submerge into the river and bring out three branches which bear fresh green leaves; The three branches significantly represent patriotism, truth and confidence and lastly, spirit of oneness, fraternity, love and integrity; The trunk symbolizes the existence of the 12 Dalois. U Kiang Nangbah, upon submerging himself in the river, successfully emerged holding a twig with three branches. Oral narratives about 'U Kiang Nangbah' have bestowed political and historical legitimacy upon the river. Although, contemporary struggles are not against a 'colonial institution', the

symbolism of the narrative nestles amidst conservation initiatives.

In Syntu Ksiar, several small dams have been built to regulate the river's flow and channel water into the paddy fields for irrigation. These dams serve a dual purpose as they also been adopted as platforms where people wash their clothes, a practice often criticized for polluting the water. Notwithstanding the criticisms, the practice continues due to the limited and irregular water supply to households, which is barely sufficient for daily sustenance. While private water delivery jeeps operate across Jowai town as an alternative, their services remain unaffordable for many.

During the monsoons, Syntu Ksiar experiences seasonal floods that submerge the entire valley. While it is not unusual, waste that has been carelessly discarded into the river become visible especially during floods. Once the waters recede, remnants of plastic and debris are left scattered across the paddy fields. Sand deposits carried downstream from road construction sites in other parts of Myntdu accumulate here in the river banks and the paddy fields, affecting both the fertility of the soil and the quality of the harvest.

To combat this, conservation activities in Syntu Ksiar have accelerated. What has particularly caught my attention is how the area has become the focal point for river clean-up drives, often led by local organizations and rangbah shnongs (village headmen). For instance, Panaliar locality, organised an inspection and a clean-up drive focusing on the areas of Syntu Ksiar and urged visitors to refrain from littering Pynthorwah (lower valley) and other Syntu Ksiar areas. Such efforts however often fall short as they rarely confront the root causes of pollution. As a result, they risk becoming performative gestures, leading to a monotonous cycle that does not address the garbage menace that persists in Jowai nor the waste that emerges from the highway construction alongside Myntdu river.



Apart from clean-up drives, the fish sanctuary set up by the Jaiñtia Fishing Association is another form of community stewardship. The sanctuary's objective is to safeguard the river's biodiversity and sustain aquatic life in the Myntdu, with the hopes of fostering a more resilient ecological future. In a joint effort, the association together with representatives from the Panaliar locality, have strictly prohibited fishing within this zone, making it the only area in Syntu Ksiar where fishing is prohibited.

Such initiatives are laudable, and have contributed to Syntu Ksiar's popularity and potential for tourism. However, the discourse on tourism is no different from the ongoing neoliberal projects that have hindered the river's existence. Under the guise of development, Myntdu is seen as an entity that is to be controlled and exploited rather than to be protected.

In conclusion, the rhetoric of invoking nostalgia and culture simultaneously constructs a past and seeks to alter an imaginative future which is ecologically resilient. A reliance on Syntu Ksiar as a template to re-imagine a future for the Myntdu further portrays it as the quintessential example of the relationship between nature and harmony. However, the paradox with such a framing is that it projects a monolithic veil onto Myntdu and ignores issues that have persisted over generations.

(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)



Da O Emi Lamar holds an undergraduate degree in Sociology and Anthropology from Ashoka University, where he later pursued a Postgraduate Diploma in the same field. His research interests lie at the intersection of urban anthropology and political ecology. Additionally, he is also interested in exploring innovative approaches to community development, addressing environmental challenges, and engaging in policy advocacy. He is from Jowai, a hill town in Meghalaya.

Da O Emi Lamar
daoemi@watcon.org

The project Addressing the Multi-scalar Dimensions of Sectoral Water Conflicts Through the Lens of Water Security: Lessons from South Asia (WATCON)' is hosted in the Law, Environment and Development Centre (LEDC) at SOAS. It was assessed by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. It has received funding from UKRI under the UKRI Frontier Research grants scheme.

For additional information, please refer to www.watcon.org or send a message to info@watcon.org

