At the Source: Reflections on Tradition, Change, and Water Governance in Shillong

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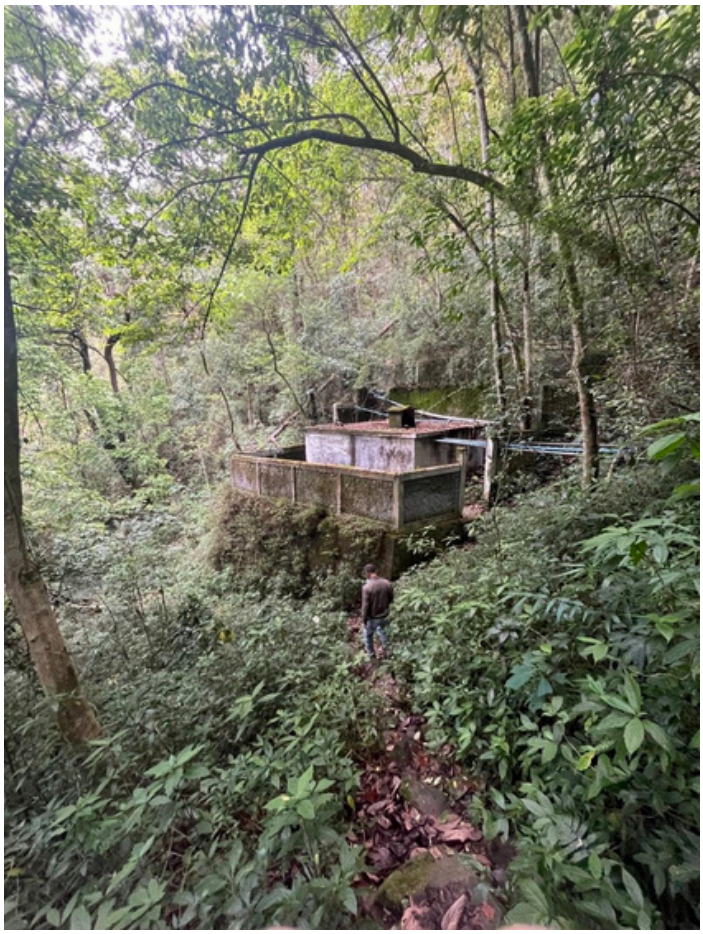

Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, lies in the Northeast hills of India and is home to the Khasi, one of several indigenous peoples of the region. Meghalaya is recognised under India's Constitution as a "Sixth Schedule State," meaning it has a special governance regime that gives local communities greater autonomy and representation. In Shillong, this distinct governance structure is most visible in everyday life, where traditional Khasi institutions often manage public services such as waste collection, road maintenance, and especially water supply, sometimes in parallel with state agencies. For water, the key unit is the *Dorbar Pyllun,* a collective of neighbouring *Dorbar Shnong* (localities), each of which maintains its own approach to delivering services.

Take, for instance, the *Dorbar Pyllun* Nongthymmai, an area covering twelve localities: Nongkhyriem, Lawjynriew, Lumsohphoh, Nongrim Hills, Rynjah, Lapalang, Pohkseh, Nongshilliang, Lumiawblot, Lumbatngen (Law-u-sib), Lumpyngngad and Lumdiensoh (also referred to collectively as Motinagar). With an over 100 localities estimated in Shillong, this structure exemplifies the various complexities involved of water governance in the city, along with the idea that governance at this level is both centralised, through the state and municipal governments and decentralised, through the place-based expressions of local authority. This area is outside of the municipality, and therefore, the *Dorbar Shnong* has more responsibilities and autonomy. Some services, like garbage collection or building permits require a hybrid approach between the municipality, state governments, and *Dorbar Shnongs*, while other services, like streetlights, are managed solely between households.

On the morning of 4 May 2025, I took a walk to discover where water for drinking and household needs was coming from into this locality. I was joined by Deng, the son of the former *Nongplie Um*, or "the one who opens the water." Although this is often colloquially referred to as the plumber, his role is much more comprehensive, diverse, and integral than a 'plumber' in the Western sense. They are responsible not just for pipework but for safeguarding, allocating, and maintaining the flow of water throughout the locality. Deng's father was the plumber for Lumpyngngad (Motinagar), where I had spent the previous month.

Photo 1: Deng at the door of a water collection structure

Photo 2: Water Collection Reserve

As we descended up these steep forested hills, we passed many streams and water channels. There were several streams with pipes in them, as we continued further, we saw constructed buildings for water collection and storage (Photo 1). Some served particular clans or households, others for the wider community. At this time of the year, the streams had become more like a trickle than a flow, as the monsoon season was a few weeks away. Deng and I chartered our way through these hills, stopping to inspect the pipes and buildings to better understand their central role in water delivery for the community (Photo 2). We spoke about the changing attitudes towards water for household use, the lack of reverence for the current plumber, and his general thoughts on how the current plumber had not lived up to the standard set by his father. The sentiment is not unique, the city is experiencing a water crisis and he has seen, throughout his life, these regressions firsthand.

From a socio-legal perspective, focused on allocation of drinking water in urban areas, this walk was enlightening. Throughout my time there, the house I was staying in had to purchase water from private vendors, who are not sourcing from the forest water, in order to meet their daily needs.

This was partly seasonal, part of it was due to the infrastructure (leaky pipes are synonymous with the city and were seen throughout the walk up the hill), and part of it was because the household was fortunate enough to be able to afford to fill their tanks. I could not help but wonder what less fortunate households would do in this situation.

Photo 3: PHED 'Blue Pipes'

Photo 4: PHED Water Collection

The state-run servicing from the Public Health and Engineering Department (PHED) and the Greater Shillong Water Supply Scheme, have no responsibility for water delivery in this locality, leaving the responsibility to the traditional institutions. This is accepted, and protected, by the community and they would not have it any other way. Yet, before entering the forest, we passed a giant water reservoir tank for the PHED and their infamous 'Blue Pipes' were littered throughout the walk (Photo 3 and Photo 4). This water was destined for another locality. I wondered, *who gets this state-supplied water? Who doesn't? And are they also having to pay into the private market in the dry season to meet their basic human right to water.*

For Deng, this was all a luxury, as he lived in a different locality that had no supply besides the private option. He thought that this was an injustice, but a necessary one. The price he paid was fair and there was no other choice but to pay it, so there was nothing he could do.

The material conditions of this situation cannot be fully understood without walking through the forest paths. The shifting nature of these conditions could not be fully understood without the lifelong lived experiences of Deng. Several things became clear through this experience: Supplying water to households requires a trust in Nature, to continue to uphold its end of the bargain. It requires a reverence for the water and for the individuals responsible for managing and upholding its systems. This was only one locality in the city, but many have mirrored experiences.

In the coming years, due to increasing pressures from the city developing and issues related to the environmental crisis, the water situation in Shillong will likely become more unstable, potentially leading to conflicts over governance between traditional institutions and the municipal, state, and autonomous district councils.

As the culture of Shillong continues to shift, and the State and Municipal governments continue to gain control over these sources, traditional roles like the *Nongplie Um* and traditional water sources from these forests need to improve their conditions and maintain their autonomy and space to operate. Private solutions and top-down policies may be able to address some of the gaps that I experienced, but they are not able to replace this fundamental role rooted in traditional knowledge. For locals, the tension between autonomy and integrating into the PHED water supply scheme is real. There are questions about the quality of the water through the PHED, accountability for disruptions and maintenance (which is currently held through the *Dorbar Shnong* meetings), and the loss of access to the forest water for the locality once integrated into the wider scheme. In other words, the question is *who* can provide more security, reliability, quality and accountability for water resources. For now, the answer seems to remain in the traditional institutions.

(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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