

Beyond Dawki: The Umngot and the Communities That Depend on It

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When one thinks of the Umngot, they mostly picture Dawki and its crystal-clear water. But the Umngot is much more than that. The river begins as a small spring around Lad Smit, emerging from the wetland that forms along the depression on the right side of the road when travelling to Smit. As the river travels south it passes through dozens of villages, forming the boundary between present-day West Jaintia Hills and East Khasi Hills. In the past, the river was the boundary between Hima Khyrim and Hima Jaintiapur, and the language spoken by the people along the watershed is a testament to that. At some point, these villages were under the influence of Hima Jaintiapur, which subsequently lost control of the area to Hima Khyrim. Since then, the villages lying in present-day West Jaintia Hills have referred to those on the other side as Khynriam. Similarly, the villages on East Khasi Hill still refer to their counterparts as Synteng.



One interesting feature is the difference in land tenure between the two groups. On the Synteng side, land is still strongly controlled by the clan, and the area around Samanong and Moosakhia is still known as Raid Lai-kur Lai-kpoh, with the Lyngdoh from Kur Paksang still conducting rituals for the protection of the Raid from incursions. On the Khynriam side, however, land is mostly owned by private individuals. This arrangement concerns the land around the Umngot valley, where jhum was the main mode

of cultivation. On the tableland where the villages are located, however, the land is mostly under the control of the Dorbar Shnong, except for the paddy fields, which are owned by individual households. This is true in Nongjrong as well, whose paddy fields along the banks of the Umngot belong to private individuals. On the other hand, the paddy fields of Mawpyrsong in the valley through which the Umngot flows belong to the Syiem of Hima Khyrim, from whom the villagers rent the land for cultivation.

A common complaint regarding the difficulty of implementing any project in the state has been the land tenure system. It is described as being highly convoluted, since establishing ownership is quite difficult on the ground. There is always contestation over the rightful claim to a territory. Even when ownership is established, the multitude of ownership creates complication. Another problem is that, under traditional customary norms, tenants have rights over the land and their concerns cannot be ignored. This can create problems when a project, such as a large hydropower dam, tries to displace them or prevent their access to land on which they have depended for generations. This aspect is very important, considering that land is increasingly becoming a scarce resource, an issue faced by villages lying on both sides of the Umngot.

In fact, the importance of the Umngot for livelihoods has only grown in recent years, beginning with the introduction of broom grass, which has now replaced jhum as the main farming system. Cultivation first started on the Khyntiam side around 30 years ago. When the Synteng saw that the crop was doing quite well, they also started converting their plots to broom grass, and it has now completely replaced millet farming under jhum. The crop has brought tremendous benefits to the community. The earnings from broom grass allowed families to replace their thatched huts with houses with corrugated iron roofs and, eventually, with fully RCC dwellings. Even the Draft Agricultural Policy acknowledges the importance of the crop in supporting farmers' livelihoods.

According to the Draft Agricultural Policy, broom grass covers approximately 26,000 hectares of land in Meghalaya. However, considering the crop's harmful impact on the local ecology, any support for the crop is described as "stopgap livelihood support extended on degraded, steep and marginal land and on jhum fallow, and does not constitute an area expansion strategy." The policy also states that "cultivation is ... integrated with nitrogen-fixing shrubs and light-canopy trees, with 10–20% native vegetation retained within plantations; and that field burning is discouraged through no-burn guidelines." However, jhum fallows are not marginal lands. Describing them as such reflects a colonial approach, through which lands used under jhum were often designated as "wastelands," making them easier to appropriate and bring under



control of the state. These were prime agricultural lands used by communities to produce food, and they continue to serve this purpose today. In fact, farmers believe that jhum helps maintain forest cover, since a healthy jhum cycle depends on a long fallow period. Furthermore, the guidelines on broom grass cultivation are rarely followed on the ground. Entire forests have been cleared for broom grass cultivation, and this is particularly true along the Umngot as well.

Broom grass, though highly profitable, also tends to dry out the soil and is known to adversely affect water sources in the region. Villages on both sides of the Umngot understand this very well. Therefore, some farmers have started planting fruit trees, especially oranges, in their plots, and some have in fact started earning an income from them. However, the number of such households is still low, and many still want to continue with broom grass. But with broom grass prices having crashed over the past two years, many farmers are also realizing that, in the long run, they will need alternatives. Some farmers have even suggested that, if broom grass is no longer profitable, they will

return to jhum. At least they will not go hungry.

There is also a concern among some that the continued cultivation of broom grass is affecting water sources, particularly some of the streams that emerge from the hills and flow into the Umngot. Broom grass also requires the use of fungicides. When these are washed into the river, they can have serious implications for its aquatic life. Fish populations have already seen a drastic decline due to increasing human pressure and the use of dynamite and other destructive methods. The use of such methods has already been prohibited under The United Khasi–Jaintia District Fishery Act, 1954 (and The Khasi Hills District Fishery (Amendment) Act, 2023). Every village has incorporated these provisions

as part of its community rules. Villages like Samanong have, in fact, detained people who broke the law and imposed a fine of ₹20,000 for violating the village's fisheries regulations. However, other villages have not been able to strictly implement the rules because the settlements are located on top of the hills while the river flows hundreds of metres below. Violations also happen at night, making them difficult to monitor. But this does not mean that the community is not trying its best to arrest the decline in the fish population.

Around three to four years ago, three villages—Umsawwar and Ksanrangi from East Khasi Hills and Samanong from West Jaintia Hills—agreed to discuss the joint management of the river.



Since then, they have met every year, with the meetings taking place along the banks of the Umngot. Among other things, the strict implementation of community rules through effective monitoring is discussed. The long-term objective is to conserve biodiversity in order to ensure long-term livelihood benefits. Fish from the Umngot is still highly sought after, especially in Jowai, and some households are dependent on fishing as their source of livelihood. The three villages are, therefore, trying to get others to join the initiative as well.

The Meghalaya State Aquaculture Mission, which is in its third iteration, has community fish sanctuaries as an important component. This is where the initiatives taken by Umsawwar, Samanong and

Ksanrangi can be an important addition. Considering that the state still relies on 40% imported fish, community initiatives such as these should be supported. What they require are methods to strictly monitor the use of destructive fishing methods, and drones could help a great deal with this.

For generations, the Umngot has sustained the livelihoods of communities living along its course, and its importance is likely to grow even further in the years to come. However, it is also facing challenges, including decreasing rainfall due to climate change. But this does not mean that the community is a silent spectator. It is taking steps to address these challenges, fully cognizant of the implications of not acting. This is where the

inclusion of their concerns in the Draft Agricultural Policy, incorporation of their initiatives into programs such as the Meghalaya State Aquaculture Mission, and the strict implementation of legislation such as The United Khasi–Jaintia District Fishery Act, 1954 (and The Khasi Hills District Fishery (Amendment) Act, 2023) are very important. Hopefully, the government is listening.

(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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