

Cycling to the Umngot River: A Journey through Khasi History and Landscape

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Over the last few years, the Umngot River has become quite famous because of its crystal-clear water, which tourists from all over the world come to enjoy. The river itself rises from the Central Plateau of the Khasi Hills, forming waterfalls along the way as it travels south, being joined on its way by tributaries before it debouches into the plains of Bangladesh. Following the journey of a river from its source to the destination gives a cross-sectional view of the diversity of the landscape and the multiple ways in which the local indigenous community, i.e., the Khasis, have utilised the various opportunities it creates for generating sustenance. It was with this aim in mind that I cycled to the Umngot Valley on the eve of India's 78th Independence Day.

First, I had to cycle to Smit, which is the seat of Hima Khyrim, a successor of the legendary Hima Shillong, which is one of the first kingdoms to have emerged among the Khasis. This legendary kingdom today has bifurcated into two: Hima Khyrim and Hima Myllem. The landscape around Smit, on a plateau, is highly denuded; trees are only found around settlements, and vast expanses of grassland surround



them, interspersed with pine. This continues until the very edge of the Hima boundary, broken by deep canyons carved by streams of varying sizes and the Umngot.

These deep canyons are known as Ri War, or the country of the War, a subgroup of the Khasis who specialise in living in these highly inhospitable terrains. This is where I was going.

Smit is one of the ancient villages that emerged around Lum Shillong, a sacred hill from which the Umngot originates as a humble stream along its eastern slopes. Lum Shillong divides the Shillong Plateau into two distinct drainage zones: north- and south-flowing

rivers, with the Umngot being part of the latter.

The plateau from which the river emerges has been a very important site for the Khasis since they arrived in the region around 5,000 years ago. To the west of Lum Shillong is located the village of Myrkhan, where Neolithic tools have been discovered dating to be around 4,000 years ago. And around 15 km to the east is the village of Nongkrem, a village close to Smit, which researchers have identified to be the earliest site of iron smelting in Northeast India, dating back 2,000 years. Therefore, the area through which Umngot begins its journey is steeped in history, going back thousands of



years, and the story of Ka Pahsyntiew (the divine ancestress of the Syiems of Hima Shillong) suggests that this is where the earliest experimentation on Khasi state formation took place.

After Smit, the next most important village was Jongksha, one of the largest villages in the area. Here, people are engaged in thang bun (an adaptation of the erstwhile jhum/shifting cultivation to a less forested landscape), but they also have paddy fields lying on both banks of the river Wah Umliew, which then joins with the Umngot as it flows south.

Umngot is, in fact, fed by many such smaller streams before it swells and carves valleys into the plateau that are more than half a kilometre across, which are being used for growing rice. During the pre-colonial period, Hima highly sought after such valleys watered by rivers like the Umngot and fought battles against each other to control them, for food production and for revenue. Umngot, in fact, forms the boundary between Hima Khyrim and Hima Jaintiapur

(another kingdom based in today's Jaintia Hills, extending deep into the plains of Bangladesh). The villages still have memories of the battles they fought in the past.

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After crossing Jongksha, I came to a junction from which two roads diverged. One continued straight to Mawkynrew (headquarters of the CD Block by the same name), and the other turned left to Nongjrong, which is another very famous viewpoint, well known for the morning clouds that engulf the valley below the village. This was the road that I was taking. From here, it was a descent of over 600 metres to reach the valley. I was now in the land of the War.

Grasslands and pine gave way to broadleaf trees and bamboo. Previously, the farmers used the steep slopes for jhum and practised a fallow cycle of 10–15 years. Some still do, but these are progressively getting replaced by broom, which has become a very lucrative cash

crop for the farmers. I could see pickup trucks laden with brooms standing outside people's houses. While financially highly lucrative, broom leads to the drying of the water sources, and the herbicides used on them wash off and flow into the rivers like the Umngot. With more and more area being opened to broom cultivation, the impact on the river and the aquatic life downstream could face serious ecological problems in the future.

Another danger the river faces is the building of a massive 210 MW Umngot Hydroelectric Project. This led to public backlash led by villages like Umsawwar (located 12 kms to the south of Nongjrong) which overlook the Umngot and have been using the canyon walls for farming since a very long time. After intense protest the project has been shelved, at least for the time being. There is though a danger that it could be revived again in the future.

As I was getting to the bottom, the road started deteriorating, and innumerable potholes started appearing. But on the right, the view was exquisite. Carved into the slopes were innumerable terraces, which are used to grow rice. This was very peculiar, as the Khasis rarely make multiple terraces like these. It felt like I was in Chakesang (a Naga tribe staying in the Phek district of Nagaland) country. There was a stream flowing below these terraces, which also joined the Umngot a little ahead.

Rice has always been an important crop for the Khasis because

researchers believe the Austroasiatic group, to which they belong, first domesticated rice and brought it to South Asia during their migration.

It was this migration that brought the Khasis to present-day Meghalaya. And wet paddy cultivation, the most productive form of rice cultivation, would not have been possible without the valleys carved by rivers like the Umngot. The destiny of the crop and the river are, therefore, tightly bound.

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As I reached the bottom, I came to another junction with two diverges. One led to Nongjrong and another to Umngot. I took the Umngot road, which workers had newly laid. But after a couple of kilometres, it became a dirt road strewn with loose rocks and sand. As I was

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ripping my way down the path, I felt my cycle slowing down. I dismounted and found that a sharp rock had punctured my back tyre. I took out my kit, fixed the puncture, and continued with the ride.

On the way, I met cowherds and fishermen going to the river. In fact, as I was fixing my tyre, some fishermen had stopped by to talk to me. They asked me where I was coming from, expressing surprise that I had cycled all the way from Shillong. Most curiously, I met a father and son duo riding their scooter. He told me he was from Lumparing (a locality in Shillong) and had been married in one of the nearby villages. Following Khasi custom, he is now staying at his wife's house.

I was now at the bottom, and I could see the river, muddy in colour because of the rain the night before. On both sides of the river, there were paddy fields and huts built in the middle of them for farmers to watch after the crops. At the far end of the valley, there was a bridge that connected both banks. I wanted to go to the bridge, but the road had become impassable except on foot. Maybe by next year, the road will be complete, and then I'll come back again. It evoked the feeling of 'Yarrow Unvisited', and perhaps that's why I will think of it fondly.

Seeing that it was getting late, and the sun was shining down harshly, which, coupled with the humidity, was already draining me, I decided to start heading back. I climbed out of the valley, stopping to cool myself at the springs that had emerged because of the rains, had my ja shulia (a Khasi snack made of sticky rice), and continued till I passed Jongksha, Smit, and back to Shillong after over 8 hours of riding. Exhausted, I ordered food online, ate, and went to sleep completely exhausted but thoroughly satisfied with the trip. Next time, I will make it to the bridge.



(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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WATCON focuses on the legal aspects of water allocation to prevent sectoral water conflicts and to foster their resolution. This is framed around the concept of water security, through which the broader environmental and human dimensions of water conflicts can be examined.

WATCON uses a multi-scalar approach that links detailed considerations related to the realisation of the human right to water at the local level and threats posed by climate change from the local to the global level.

The project will contribute to pressing debates around water security and the human right to water. Its scientific contribution will emerge from close engagement with the legal aspects of water conflicts by examining them in their local to global dimensions, with a focus on South Asia and India in particular.