

Is Myntdu Doomed to Become the Next Wah Umkrah?

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Travelling to Jowai sometimes can feel like a trip back to a time when the water bodies of Shillong around the city were still alive and teeming with life. Having grown up not very far from a tributary of the Wah Umkrah, I remembered seeing people fishing in the stream while wading through it with a khoh. Then, as the stream descends, it forms a waterfall and joins the main body of the Wahumkrah which then makes a hairpin and continues its flow, passing through Demseiniong, Polo on its way to join the Umiam. The crystal-clear water resembled the Umngot River's portrayal in tourist reels.

If one had told us back then that this is what would attract tourists from all over the country, we would have laughed. Why would someone come for something so ordinary? But times have changed, and the Wah Umkrah resembles a drain instead of the serene stream of yesteryear. Can we ever get those memories back? I don't know. But we have a responsibility to ensure that no other water bodies suffer the same fate that befell the Wah Umkrah. This brings us to Myntdu, the lifeline of Jowai.



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Last week, I accompanied some friends to a meeting in Thadlaskien with a group of concerned citizens from Jowai. This group comprised retired government servants and social activists, with familiar faces like HH Mohrmen, who also joined the meeting. Among the others there was a person whose name I remember hearing many times in the past, but never had a face to put to it. This was Khroo Lamsalanki Pariat, an environmental activist, president

Of the Khooid Ya Ka Wah Myntdu (KYM) and party to the case before the National Green Tribunal where he has alleged that the road construction by the PWD, Government of Meghalaya is causing serious damage to the hydrology and ecology of the Myntdu River. We were there to understand the issues relating to the case as part of a research project. The meeting was organized by the intern, whose uncle, a retired government college teacher, was also a participant.

Khroo Lamsalanki Pariat told the audience, especially us, about the case in the NGT. From his testimony, what became apparent



was that the Myntdu was facing an existential crisis, and this did not bode very well for the residents of Jowai, who depend on the river for the drinking water supplied through the PHE. In the discussion, he also explained the river's deep spiritual and religious significance to the Pnars, highlighting that it is more than just a body of water. It is a deity that is still worshipped to this day and has a deep connection to Jowai and its surrounding villages.

The others in the meeting also discussed the importance of Myntdu and how over the years they had tried to revive and rejuvenate it, with the KYM being their latest attempt. But the challenges have also been increasing with a rise in the urban population and the disregarding of laws established by the State, which is constantly being violated. Khroo had organized a field trip for us so that we could see how the river's existence was being threatened.

The first site we visited was the Tyrchi Falls in the village of

Khliehtyrchi. The stream that makes the waterfall is a tributary of Myntdu, which joins it as it passes through Pynthor Nein, which we were told was the food basket of Jowai. Standing on top of the viewpoint, one could see a large valley clothed in green, which in autumn would start turning golden yellow. It was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen. The Myntdu River and its tributaries drained the valley, circling Jowai before flowing south, receiving other tributaries, and ultimately reaching the plains of Sylhet or Shella-Hat.

Khroo showed us the village of Mihmnytdu, which lies at the other end of the valley, the source of the Myntdu. It emerges from a forest in the village, and no one except the clans connected to the site may go to the source. He also told stories of how the spirits inhabiting the forest thwarted efforts to partition it. It was a very fascinating story, and one could feel the deep reverence that he and the other participants had for the river.

They took us to Jowai to show us how people were violating the NGT order by building within 50 meters of the river. Khroo showed us two sites where the buildings had come up very close to the river and described how connivance combined with apathy led to violations. Then he took us to the site connected to the earlier-mentioned NGT case. This was a new bypass which was coming up which started from near the District and Sessions court and joins the road that leads to Dawki out of Jowai. It was not a long stretch, and considering the lack of traffic, the need for such a project seemed unnecessary. But what was unmistakable was that the debris from the road construction had already started interfering with the flow of the river. A lot of sand and boulders had accumulated along the banks, narrowing the width. Loose rocks hanging from the roadside wall also posed a potential hazard.

While we were inspecting the impact on the river, a vehicle pulled up with a person coming out accompanied by a bodyguard who was sporting a gun in the holster. I did not know the person, but he seemed to know everyone else. He shook hands with a person I was standing with and nodded at me. I nodded back, confused about who he was. Later, while returning, we were told that the man with the bodyguard was Ngaitlang Dhar, former MLA of Umroi and the contractor in charge of the project. It was a very strange experience.

Khroo suggested that we visit the water treatment plant as well, which was within Jowai town and

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from where we could get another view of the Myntdu. They showed us the water pumping and treatment processes at the plant before distribution to Jowai’s population. He kept telling us that he was told by officials the water was clear but not clean.

Recently, the Government of Meghalaya announced it was going to develop the Wah Umkhrach riverfront into a tourist destination at a cost of around 39-49 crores. Khroo and others remarked one could revive Myntduh at half the cost and, unlike Wah Umkhrach, it is not yet dead. The reasoning seemed quite sound, but it missed an important point.

In October 2024, the NPP-led MDA government filed an FIR against eight individuals, including the Chief Engineer (NH) of the PWD, for an alleged multi-crore scam in the construction of the Shillong-Nongstoin-Rongjeng-Tura road, which cost Rs 2,366.77 crore during the Mukul Sangma government. Earlier, in 2023, the Congress party listed ten alleged scams in a



‘chargesheet’ against the ruling MDA government, claiming they had cost the state hundreds of crores over a period of five years. If Congress were ever to return to power, it is certain they would also file corruption cases related to projects under the MDA government, just as the latter has done in this case. From these events, the logic becomes clear and simple. Allow the Myntdu to decline, and then unveil a costly rejuvenation project—funds that may ultimately benefit contractors aligned with the ruling establishment, regardless of who is in power.

Then we bid goodbye to Khroo and the others, dropped Mohrmen at his home and started on our way back. An image that stayed with me from the trip was of a couple of young boys walking to the river with their fishing rods. It reminded me of my childhood and how we used to go swimming in the Wah Umkhrach every Saturday. We would then sit on the rocks, drying ourselves with our legs hanging in the clear water filled with pebbles shining under the sun. Oh, how I wish I could go back to those days. And I just hope that the children of Jowai and the surrounding villages may never lose what we have lost at Shillong. I hope the Myntdu never becomes another Wah Umkhrach.

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(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.