

## Cultural Dimension of Water in Khasi Society

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### The Khasi Conception of Water

The Khasi conceive of water as a gift of nature to be used for their benefit. In the traditional subsistence economy, rivers and streams are sources to meet their economic needs and also a recreation centre. This is true even today in the villages. To a Khasi water is relatively clean (*Khuid*) or dirty (*Jngut/Jakhlia*) to be used for drinking, cooking or washing etc. There is no concept of 'Pure/'Holy' versus 'Polluted' water. The Khasi definition of good drinking water is based on two indicators: firstly, water which is visually clear or transparent (*Sngur*) and secondly water which is palatable. Dirty drinking water on the other hand is water which is turbid. Nonetheless water which is considered unclean for drinking is considered relatively clean for washing purposes. Thus there is no explicit distinction between what is clean and what is dirty water. The definitions of good and dirty water vary and depend on the purpose of using it. It is a fact however that the Khasi do make a distinction between what should be the sources of drinking and cooking water (*Um bam umdih*) and what should be the source of cleaning and washing one (*Um sait um khlieng*).

The Khasi regard spring water (*Umpohliaw*) as the best source for drinking water because it is clear and tasty. There may be a possibility that spring water contains certain minerals which gives it a distinctive taste. Nevertheless water from

ponds (*Pung*) is commonly used for drinking and cooking since spring water is not available everywhere. Water from these sources is believed to be clean and clear but not as palatable as spring water. Rarely water for drinking and cooking is used from streams, brooks or rivulets (*Wahduid*) because these sources are generally not regarded as clean. Water from the streams (*Wahduid*) and rivers (*Wahbah*) are usually avoided for drinking and cooking since as a rule these are regarded as sources to be used for bathing, washing etc.

Ponds used for drinking and cooking in many cases are covered to prevent the water from getting dirty. Besides the ponds are kept clean by periodic washing, scrubbing and emptying the water. It is a traditional norm that all consumers of a particular pond should join hands while cleaning it. During winter and spring cleaning is rare but in the summer and autumn cleaning is more frequent. I have observed that people usually clean their ponds after the market day. On the market day it is not only the local inhabitants who use the ponds but also the adjacent villagers. This makes the water muddy and shallow, therefore cleaning it becomes a necessary and labour saving activity. Washing of clothes, utensils, etc. in and around the ponds which are used for drinking purposes is prohibited according to the traditional norms. Those who break the rules are penalized in a form of a fine or otherwise. If the cattle stray to the water source it is the owner who will be reprimanded or fined according to the convention of a particular village.

Thus we can infer that the people keep their sources of drinking water free from dirt or 'pollution' which is human-made. Traditionally the Khasi not only distinguished between what is good drinking and cooking water vis-a-vis washing water, but also what should be the respective sources for the same. Besides they have stringent rules against dirtying or polluting the drinking water sources. These norms relating to usage of water is adhered to by all in the traditional set up.

The study conducted at Umphyrnai and Lumlyer village (about 30 km from Shillong) reveals a confusion: What should be the sources of water for drinking and cooking? What should be the sources for washing etc.? This confusion arises due to the introduction of tap-water unused by the villages in the past. This new system disorients the villages' conception of the usage and sources of water.

Most villagers consider tap-water unfit for drinking because the streams from where it is tapped is made dirty. Besides the chemicals sprayed to purify the water renders it tasteless. Some villages who have access to their own or others' private springs, wells or ponds, do not use the tap water supplied by the government department (PHE) for drinking or cooking but for washing, cleaning and bathing purposes only. The sources the villages use for drinking and cooking are located far from their houses, but still they prefer to fetch separate drinking water even from a distance. According to them the sources of Lumlyer reservoir are not clean. One simple cultivator emphatically stated that he and his family members would not

think of using the water supplied by the government for drinking and cooking since the streams which flow to the reservoir are dirtied along its course. He cited example of people washing clothes, taking bath or even easing themselves on the streams.

Other who do not have access to spring ponds etc, use tap water for all purposes. They resignedly believe that the water supplied from the reservoir (Lumlyer) is safe even if not pleasant to their palate. According to them the water supplied by the PHE department is inadequate due to irregular supply. So even those who use tap water for drinking water from the ponds etc. also need water for washing and cleaning. The most convenient place is naturally the streams nearby. The traditional concept that springs and ponds are for drinking and rivers and streams are for washing is so deep rooted in their mind that the people do not conceive that they are dirtying or endangering their tap water source.

Those who are aware of this problem express their helplessness and inability to stop those who dirty the sources of water. The sources for Lumlyer Reservoir pas through private lands. Therefore they cannot stop the people from dirtying the water. According to them only the government can protect these sources with the help of a law.

In the urban area (Shillong) this traditional set-up has broken down completely. People depend on tap water for all their needs and most are not bothered about the sources from where it comes. Sources and water use in their houses are so wide apart that people do not even think that they could be dirtying and endangering their own sources of water. The concept of boiling and filtering drinking water has permeated to most of the urban population. Amongst the urbanites it is only by boiling, filtering, and spraying of chemicals that water is considered clean. Thus in the urban areas the concept of clean water has taken new meaning. The people are no longer bothered about the sources of water they use. This perhaps explains the rampant use of the streams as dumping places for domestic garbage and human waste all over the city.

Judging from the above discussion, the introduction of the tap system without educating the people about the same creates confusion and problem. The people use different sources to their advantage and become impersonal to what they think do not affect them directly. The main problems identified by the present study are:

1. Lack of awareness amongst the people. Who is to educate those who perceive of water sources in the traditional dichotomy i.e. drinking and cooking water is from the wells/ponds and cleaning, washing water is from the streams and rivers nearby? Who is to prohibit those who endanger the water sources? The traditional set-up is breaking down and the new system offers no better alternative. The injudicious introduction of the new system without educating the people about the same results in disorganized though and action.

2. Irregular and inadequate supply of water to the villages to a great extent create the above mentioned problem. If adequate water is supplied so that people get enough water to use for all purpose, the villagers do not have to use the streams and pollute the water.

With the mounting problem of environmental pollution of which water is none small aspect and smaller still the aspect discussed above; it is a necessity to create awareness and educate the people. It would not be out of place to suggest that the government should seek the help of voluntary organisations to impart the needed information to the people. The importance of tackling the problem at the root, that is, to keep the water sources clean, whether in urban or rural areas could not be overemphasized. Integrating the traditional thoughts and practices with the modern ones become a practical necessity. The people's mind should be reoriented to suit the new system based on traditional knowledge or modify it accordingly.