

**ECOLOGY AND THE LIVES
OF WASHERWOMEN AND
SUBSISTENCE FARMERS
IN LAITKOR, MEGHALAYA**

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‘Some of our names disappear and others live on, associated as they are with achievements, like a country, but a historian can hold the weave up to a different slant of light which falls on mothers who sustain the lives around them, all the while insisting upon their own irrelevance to history.’

Tamiya R. Zaman (2023: 3)

‘The violence that is built into the massive inequalities that dominate our societies today is often naturalized, made invisible, or made to seem inevitable, by the walls, pipes, wires, and roads that so profoundly shape our urban environments, even as we take them for granted.’

James Ferguson (2012: 559)

INTRODUCTION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PERI-URBAN

The aim of this essay is to present the lives of washerwomen and subsistence farmers in relation to ecological transformations in Meghalaya in peri-urban areas. As land that is situated at the periphery of the urban, the peri-urban is a site that undergoes constant change. It is a place that, according to Pratik Mishra and Sumit Vij, suffers from a lack of infrastructural amenities provided in cities while also experiencing capitalist interventions in the form of state and private initiatives (Mishra and Vij 2022: 105-109). As a result, the people living in peri-urban areas have had to make constant negotiations with what they know as their traditional way of life vis-à-vis the influence of modernity through the extension of urbanism into their territory. Land—its significance and function—is constantly remodelled to suit the needs of the people living in these areas. The peri-urban, therefore, represents an interesting space to initiate discussions on ecology and climate change. Due to rapid urbanisation, the peri-urban areas experience environmental stresses like the construction of buildings in what was previously farmland or forests and the depletion of water resources due to deforestation (Narain and Roth 2022: 1-4). Contrarily, the peri-urban is also home to rural activities, like farming and foraging, that rely on more traditional methods of land use and the continued existence of forests and water sources (Swyngedouw and Kaika 2014: 459-481). Because of its indefinite geo-spatial location (being neither rural nor urban), the peri-urban is often neglected as an area of specialised study, least valued for the importance of the stories emerging from the people living in it. The women I conversed with in this study share, in many ways, the societal and political occlusion of the land to which they belong.

Approached with the idea of telling their stories, the women displayed some measure of resistance. The resistance did not come from them thinking that I would not represent their stories faithfully.

Rather, they were incredulous about the very significance of their stories.

‘Ni,¹ what would you want with us? What would we know anyway?’ asked Kong Balari Khongsit, a washerwoman, when I approached her with my ideas.

Their responses demonstrated how spaces of neglect could also produce corresponding affective viewpoints that, in many ways, propagated their—the women’s and the land’s—peripheral positions. The situation reminded me of Tamiya R. Zaman, who faced a similar dilemma when she asked her mother if she could transcribe her diary. Like Zaman’s mother, the women whom I spoke to—except for one person who identified as a cis-man—were mothers. They sustained the lives of their families and communities but did not give a moment’s thought to how important their labour was to the well-being of those around them. A washerwoman washes and a farmer farms was their reasoning, a ‘natural’ order of things when it came to their line of work. The women indulged, therefore, in what Vandana Shiva calls ‘quiet work’ or work that is invisibilised by virtue of the labour being done by women in close concert with nature and natural surroundings (Shiva 1995: 42).

I intend to highlight, in this essay, the everyday-ness of the sort of labour that is too often taken for granted and is underappreciated even by those who engage in it. It is hoped that doing so will shed light on the many ways in which these women negotiated with the ecological transformations that form the underlying phenomena of their work and their desire to provide for themselves and for their loved ones. How do women perceive the natural environment and its place in their lives? What lessons do the women who are a part of this essay impart to our understanding of environmental sustainability? What are these women marginal to? I have chosen Laitkor as a representative case study through which to engage with ecological transformations—social, political and historical—in Meghalaya.

CONVERSATIONS AND TEA: A NOTE ON THE METHODOLOGY

In the Khasi community, we have a saying—*ka ktien kaba tam*. Meaning that, promises made by word of mouth are meant to be kept and that what is spoken is paramount. Words are everything because they have the power to transform reality and alter the material conditions of a person's life—a Khasi belief that lays emphasis on the oral as a vehicle for truth. Language is, in this regard, indistinguishable from the people who speak it. Orality also has its roots in gendered negotiations with time, space and belonging (Nic Craith 2012). My interest in this topic stems from the conversations I have had over the years on ecology and the impact of climate change in Meghalaya. Almost everyone I met and spoke to had a thing or two to say about the extreme weather conditions in the state.

‘Things are not like they used to be in the old days,’ is the general comment that one receives when broaching the topic of the climate in Meghalaya.

As I write this essay, Meghalaya (particularly Shillong) is facing one of the hottest days in 43 years. The mercury reached 28.1°C on April 11, 2023 (Lyngdoh unpaginated). Everyone agrees that climate change and global warming are to blame. But Meghalaya also has a complicated relationship with the natural environment. Coal mining, timber logging and the polluting of rivers and streams have all played a part in environmental degradation in the state. In his book *Unruly Hills: A Political Ecology of India's North East* (2011), Bengt G. Karlsson remarks that the state, like other states in Northeast India, is blessed by a ‘resource curse’. This makes the state susceptible to resource extraction and the bulldozing of the natural environment by both state and private entities (Karlsson, 37-44). In recent years, the national focus on neo-liberal initiatives such as smart cities has changed the public sentiment around what development looks like.² While some argue for the preservation of natural resources, others perceive developmental projects (like the building of roads and dams) as necessary pre-conditions to being as developed and rich

as other states in the country. These conversations show that the state's ecological well-being interacts with political ideologies and policies at the national level. These ideologies and policies, in turn, shape the people's perceptions of, and interactions with, the natural environment.

What gets lost in these debates, however, are the stories of women whose professions and survival depend upon the natural environment. As people whose lives are reliant on natural resources, the stories of these women are singularly absent. It is as if Meghalaya's ecological history has wiped out those who have the highest stake in the environment being like what it was in the 'old days'. The male-dominated nature of ethno-nationalist movements in the region has pushed the stories of women further into the periphery, even within their own communities (Kikon 2019: 49).³ It is my intention, therefore, to call attention to the lives of women whose historicities are often overlooked except as tokenistic gestures.⁴

In embarking on this project, I owe a debt of gratitude to many researchers who have studied rural agriculture in Meghalaya. Bhogtoram Mawroh, of the North East Slow Food and Agro-Biodiversity Society (NESFAS), is one such researcher who has written invaluable essays documenting the lives of subsistence farmers in rural Meghalaya. Reading his essays, published in *The Shillong Times*, acquainted me with traditional farming practices in Meghalaya. The essays touched upon the various ecological benefits of traditional farming practices such as agrobiodiversity, food sovereignty, and grassroots innovation in farming, and how these practices interacted with institutional structures such as farm laws. But while the essays were informative, I wanted to meet him in person to pick his brain regarding the state of agriculture in Meghalaya and what his thoughts were on this project, generally.

On a Saturday evening in February, I made my way to a teashop in Laitumkhrach, Shillong, where Mawroh and I were joined by one of our friends. Mawroh had just arrived from a conference in Rome the previous week, so I asked him how the trip went.

‘I wasn’t impressed by the paintings. But the sculptures were magnificent,’ he said.

Globalisation, he said, has made it possible for knowledge and ideas to cross boundaries. Over cups of tea, he quizzed me on the nature of my project. Why this sudden interest? How do you plan to go about it? What have you read about ecology and Meghalaya? Are you looking at the workers’ rights? I felt as though I was undergoing an interrogation for a crime I did not commit (or was about to). He punctured holes in my arguments and gave me directions on how I could take the project forward.

‘Be careful,’ he warned. ‘Sometimes, people lie.’

My interactions with Mawroh proved to be informative and enlightening. There was, however, one last hurdle to surmount. How would I, as a woman, conduct research and have conversations with women who were reluctant to speak? Thankfully, my mentor Rita Kothari came to my rescue. Her work on the Muslim community in Banni in north Gujarat touched upon the challenges that ethnographers who are women face in the field.

‘It is about translatability,’ she said. ‘I wouldn’t have been able to speak to the women without the consent of the men.’

Her essay, ‘Traversing the *Otaak*: Gendered Fieldwork and Boundaries of Language’ (2021), dealt with the difficulties of accessing the spaces occupied by women when men stand as sentries to guard and ‘protect’ these feminised, inner spaces. Her experiences in Gujarat allowed me to discern similar structures at work, especially when I interviewed the farmers. Although Kothari’s essay talks about a literal space that she has to traverse—the *otaak*—her understanding of the *otaak* as an outer room peopled only by men extends to methodological concerns as well. Much of what we are taught as methodology involves the meticulous documentation of literary sources, a primarily colonial and masculinist way of approaching research. The truth, however, is that ideas can also have amorphous and undocumented origins. Literary sources have, therefore, been used in this essay as a support to what is being said rather than being sources of knowledge in and of

themselves. It is in the nature of the oral to be uncircumscribed, multifaceted, and accommodative of contrarian points of view. Similarly, the women in this essay also have contradicting desires. Most of them long for material comfort while they also want to preserve traditional ways of life that oppose the material indulgences associated with urban tastes and inclinations.

SETTING THE CONTEXT: LAITKOR—THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

Situated about six kilometres from the city of Shillong, Laitkor is home to 12,600 inhabitants. The population is divided into denizens of the land who make their living chiefly through subsistence farming, carpentry, masonry, working as household help, and other working-class labour and people from the city who have shifted to Laitkor due to the lack of space in the capital, Shillong. The entry of urban dwellers in Laitkor has altered the land's topography significantly. The street on which I live, for instance, is marked by rows of houses made of reinforced concrete. This makes it seem as though the village is a suburb of the city, a seemingly natural extension of the city itself. Added to this, there are several buildings such as the Woodland Institute of Nursing, the army cantonment and army school, and the Doordarshan Kendra, which serve as landmarks within the village. These institutions, and the people whom they serve, constitute the silent and unobtrusive ways in which urban tastes and structures are perceived as being an inevitable development as far as Laitkor is concerned. This is a far cry from the landscape that P. R. T. Gurdon found so intriguing due to the presence of monoliths and memorial stones. While a few of the monoliths, including the nine monoliths that Gurdon talks about in *The Khasis* (1914), still dot the Laitkor landscape (see Fig. 1), most of them have been repurposed or preserved as ornamentation in the gardens of private homes (see Figs. 2 and 3). The existence of monoliths on



Fig. 1: The Nine Monoliths mentioned by P. R. T. Gurdon in *The Khasis* (1914).



Fig. 2: Monoliths being repurposed in private gardens.



Fig. 3: Monoliths being repurposed in private gardens.

private land strikes one as an example of how women re-invent the past in order to pay homage to it—gardening being an activity that is usually done by women. There is now a resurgence of the indigenous knowledge that goes with the ritualised erection of monoliths. Marco B. Mitri calls the monoliths the ‘living’ megalithic culture of the Khasis associated with funerary rites (Mitri 2016).

Save for a few people who practise the indigenous faith, most of the inhabitants of Laitkor have converted to Christianity. It is not unusual, therefore, to find grottos dedicated to the Virgin Mary as well as Christ and churches in the heart of the localities of the village. Farmers often have to vie for space with both Catholic and Protestant churches as the latter seek to expand their cemeteries (see Fig. 4). The sacred mount of Lum Shyllong,⁵ standing at 6,445 feet above sea level, is the highest point in all of Meghalaya and is located in Laitkor (see Figs. 5 and 6). It is believed to be the seat of U ’Lei Shyllong, the guardian deity of Shillong city (see Appendix A). In keeping with this status, the peak



Fig. 4: A Christian cemetery in Laitkor.

is regularly used for the performance of indigenous rites and rituals. In recent years, there has been a re-planting of trees and other flora on the hill. The hill that was once bare is now covered in forest, with rhododendrons, fruit trees and berry bushes growing on its slopes (see Figs. 7, 8 and 9). The existence of Lum Shyllong is also significant for its resistance to the 'official' geographical history of Laitkor.

Lum Shyllong is not to be confused with Lum Sohmyllan, which is what the Eastern Air Command of the Indian Air Force has named Shillong Peak. This mis-naming of indigenous land by state entities has generated confusion in relation to the Laitkor topography. Today, mainstream encyclopaedias and tourist sites such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and the Tourism Department of India wrongly attribute the highest peak in Meghalaya (standing at 6,433 feet above sea level) to Shillong Peak when, in fact, they mean the Sohmyllan Peak located in the Air Force base. The Tourism Department of India has gone a step further by appropriating the myth associated with Lum Shyllong



Fig. 5: Lum Shyllong range



Fig. 6: Lum Shyllong Peak



Fig. 7: Rhododendron tree (*Rhododendron arboretum*) at Lum Syllong



Fig. 8: Himalayan bayberry tree (*Myrica esculenta*) at Lum Shyllong



Fig. 9: Yellow Himalayan Raspberry (*Rubus ellipticus*) shrub at Lum Shyllong.

and applying it to Lum Sohmyllan (see ‘Shillong Plateau’ and ‘Shillong Peak’). Such official ‘histories’ undermine indigenous knowledge of land and topography, obfuscating the significance of these knowledge systems. They reveal, moreover, the extent to which places such as Laitkor suffer from historical otherisation due to the historical narrative being on the side of official state records. Urbanism and its attendant industries (such as tourism) play a key role in how indigenous knowledge of land and topography is remembered and passed on to succeeding generations.

Crucial to the narrative of Lum Shyllong are the nine streams that feed Shillong city in the valley below Laitkor. In Khasi myth and legend, these streams are known as *Ki Khyndai Umdih*, *Khyndai Umtong*—the nine living waters.⁶ Below is a list of these streams with the geographical co-ordinates of their sources:

Table 1: Geographical Co-ordinates of Ki Khyndai Umdih, Khyndai Umtong

No.	Name of the Rivulet/ Stream/River	Geographical Co-ordinates of the Primary Source of the Rivulet/ Stream/River
1.	Um Shyllong	25° 31' 54.3'N 91° 51' 1.7'E
2.	Um Jasai	25° 32' 20.9'N 91° 50' 55.8'E
3.	Um Rynthong	25° 32' 52.9'N 91° 53' 8.5'E
4.	Um Dienglieng	25° 32' 46.7'N 91° 53' 31.2'E
5.	Um Demthring	25° 32' 47.1'N 91° 53' 53.1'E
6.	Umkhen	25° 31' 44.5'N 91° 53' 49.5'E
7.	Umngot	25° 31' 44.5'N 91° 53' 49.5'E
8.	Umiew	25° 30' 43.3'N 91° 50' 56.9'E
9.	Umtongsyiem	25° 31' 44.5'N 91° 51' 28.9'E

Many of the rivers, lakes and cataracts, which serve as landmarks for the city of Shillong such as Umiam Lake, Sweet Falls, Elephant Falls, Crinoline Falls, and Ur-ka-Liar (Spread Eagle Falls), to name

a few, owe their existence to these streams. Wah Thangbania, where the washerwomen of Laitkor wash their clothes, has a story associated with it that is not unlike the one related to Lum Shyllong. It was the site where a jeweller who dealt in gold, a Baniya, was cremated. Currently, an ethno-nationalist discourse that takes pride in ideas of racial purity has become popular in Meghalaya. However, sites like Thangbania prove that, contrary to this ethno-nationalist discourse, the land is also mapped with racial diversity.

Something must be said, at this juncture, about my point of contact—Kong Rita Marbañiang (see Fig. 10). Kong Rita, or Kong Meetu as we lovingly call her, has been taking care of our family for the past 23 years. She and her family of five live in a house by the NH-44 in Laitkor.



Fig. 10: Kong Rita Marbañiang (Kong Meetu)

‘I came to work with your family on February 11, 2010,’ she told me.

Kong Meetu tends to our garden, cares for my parents and makes delicious—oh so delicious—bone marrow stew. Our pets also love having her around. Miw Maw, our cat of eight years, runs to the front door whenever she hears her voice and our dogs, Pablo and Khoi, wait for her at the gate to our house every morning. She is the heart and soul of our household. It is from her that we know of the washerwomen in Laitkor.

‘They work so hard,’ she said.

She also told me that since the washerwomen work practically the whole day, it would be best to ask them what the appropriate time would be for me to speak to them.

‘It is also advisable to give them some money,’ she said.

‘Wouldn’t gifts be better?’ I asked her.

‘No,’ she replied. ‘You won’t know if they will use your gifts or not. Politicians give “gifts”.⁷ Think of it as a gesture of appreciation for the time they spend with you. They can spend the money you give them in any way *they* please.’

Suitably chastised for my lack of understanding regarding such matters, we decided on a minimal compensation. Then, we headed off to meet the washerwomen of Laitkor.

FIGURES OF RESILIENCE: THE WASHERWOMEN

A winding road connects my house to the homes of the washerwomen I intended to interview. A grotto marks the location where the path forks (see Fig. 11) and Kong Meetu and I take the path on the right. We walk on a trail that cuts through the grass and opens out into a rectangular, concrete courtyard, on which sits a three-room house. There is an outhouse on the left, a little way away from the main house. The walls of the house are whitewashed with lime and the windows



Fig. 11: The grotto of Christ where the path turns towards Kong Balari Khongsit's house.

are painted green (see Fig. 12). The house has a corrugated tin roof, characteristic of most houses in Laitkor. When we reach the place, however, no one is home.

'She is not home,' said Kong Meetu, stating the obvious. 'I will call her.'

After a couple of phone calls, the person on the other end of the line picks up. We are told to move in the direction of a petrol station on the NH-44 highway (see Fig. 13). As we walk up the slope leading to the station, we see her—Kong Balari Khongsit (see Fig. 14). She had just returned from the city on an errand.

'I won't talk to you today,' she said upon seeing me. 'I attended a feast yesterday and today is my day off.'

The firmness with which Kong Balari Khongsit conducts herself is seen in the way she tells me about the journey to the river where she and her friends wash their clothes.

'315 steps [to the river],' she said.



Fig. 12: Kong Balari Khongsi's house



Fig. 13: The petrol station at Laitkor



Fig. 14: Kong Balari Khongsit.

We agreed to meet the following evening with two other washerwomen—Kong Skilameri Rting and Kong Barilang Kharkongor—at my house. The February cold sunk into our bones and the four of us sat by a *chulha* with cups of tea for warmth.

Kong Balari Khongsit was born on November 25, 1996. She studied up to the 12th standard and supported herself in the last two years of her schooling. When asked about her time in school, she said that school was okay.

‘I was denied the opportunity to study after that [Class 12],’ she said.

Kong Balari Khongsit’s educational qualifications are an exception in Laitkor. Most of the working-class community in the area stops going to school after their matriculation. There is a general disinclination to talk about education. The two affordable schools for low-income families in Laitkor are the local government school, or *skul shnong* as

the locals call it, and Pliti Syiem Memorial School, set up by the Syiem Myllem clan. Our neighbour, Kong Eva, who used to teach at the Pliti Syiem Memorial School, said that the dropout rate is high and hardly anyone passes their Class 10 state board exams. The only student who passed the matriculation, while Kong Eva was a teacher at the school, came from the city. This is not to say, however, that education is not valued. When the results of the state board exams are announced, everyone remembers the names of those who have passed, and sweets are distributed in the neighbourhood. Things are changing slowly but steadily. Kong Meetu's daughter, who passed her undergraduate degree, works in an insurance company. And there is a young man who is working as a traffic policeman after having graduated from college. Then, there is a woman, two houses down from where I live, who started college when she was in her 40s. All of them are first-generation learners in their families.

Whether these changes are due to the influence of cityfolk coming to live in the village is a question that needs more space to discuss than this essay would allow. Being the primary caregivers, however, mothers play a very important role in their children's education. Their aspirations are connected to the need to have their children 'do better' than their parents. They express no desire for competition. Rather, their hope is to have the generations after them do the things they were themselves not given the opportunity to do. Systemic challenges, however, make the washerwomen wary of depending wholly on education as a path towards better living standards.

'From the time they [her children] are eight years old, I've taught them how to wash socks [and] handkerchiefs so that they know,' said Kong Barilang Kharkongor.

The economic uncertainty of the lives they lead and the inability to provide for the intellectual lives of their children make the washerwomen I spoke to disinclined to depend solely on education as a path to economic betterment. But urban tastes and social mobility are certainly motivations for the washerwomen to work.

‘I wanted to buy things for myself. I can’t fulfil my needs if I only ask [others],’ said Kong Balari Khongsit. ‘We have to want things for ourselves. If our children ask for things, we can’t only expect our husbands to pay. We want to provide for them ourselves. So, we have to help the family ourselves.’

These ‘things’ include a barrel large enough that, when filled with water, the women could forgo going to the river on rainy days. A typical working day for the washerwoman begins at 4.30 AM. The washerwomen place the clothes in a big plastic basin, which is placed inside a conical cane basket (*ka khoh*), which they carry on their backs (see Fig. 15). The basket is heavy enough on dry days. But when it rains, the clothes get heavier owing to the garments being soaked in the rain. Even if they choose to wash the clothes in their homes, carrying water from the village pump is quite a task.



Fig. 15: A washerwoman carrying clothes in a ka khoh (a conical cane basket).

‘There are difficulties, of course. When it rains and things like that. The water here is not available in our homes. We have to carry the water [from the pump] when it rains. So, the difficulty is always there. It’s only when it rains. When it is dry, things are better,’ Kong Skilameri Rting explains.

The difficulties that the washerwomen face in relation to the availability of water in the village are as urgent as they are political. Every five years, the candidates contesting the state elections make promises to give the people of Laitkor water that will arrive in their homes through a pipeline, and, each time this happens, my mother proclaims that she will vote for whoever gives her water at home. But the water does not arrive. This is ironic given that the water sources in Laitkor provide most of the running water in nearby localities in Shillong. As Kong Skilameri Rting implies in her conversation, the people who suffer the most from these administrative and political lapses are the women who look after the everyday running of the household. Moreover, with their meagre savings, the washerwomen cannot afford to buy water the way richer, middle-class households in the village do.

* * * * *

Kong Skilameri Rting (see Fig. 16) was born on June 14, 1987. She has been washing clothes for 15 to 16 years. Prior to becoming a washerwoman, she was a house help. She is rather shy talking about her work, but she does not hold back when speaking about the challenges she faces daily. She speaks about the distance of the river from her house.

‘[T]he road is good. But it is only passable halfway by car,’ she says. ‘If it only goes halfway, then what’s the point? We might as well carry our load all the way home on our backs with our own physical strength, don’t you agree?’

There is an element of pride in the ability to do a physically demanding job. Physical strength is associated with being disciplined and hard working in contrast to intellectual work, which is sedentary



Fig. 16: (*facing the camera*) Kong Skilameri Rting (left) and Kong Barilang Kharkongor (right)

and which compels one to ‘sit’ in the same spot for hours. The morning after our conversation, I got a sense of what the journey to the river meant.

We met at 4.30 AM at the grotto of Christ down the road. There was much excitement and chatter. They’ve not met anyone who was interested enough to accompany them to their place of work, not even members of their families.

‘How will you take pictures?’ Kong Balari Khongsit asked me.

I showed her my point-and-shoot camera. Satisfied that everything was in order, we went on our way. Our path took us to the NH-44, which we crossed. I asked them if their load was heavy—a question that was met with laughter. It was a stupid question to ask. At this time of the day, the roads were empty and the sun had not yet risen. I was told to keep to the side of the road where there was a footpath.

‘A truck might come whizzing past,’ Kong Skilameri Rting said. ‘They’re unpredictable. You might get run over.’

We entered a locality opposite the petrol bunk. There was no sound coming from anywhere, save for our footwear crunching as it met the gravel. We went past houses that were quiet, with only the silhouettes of their roofs showing that there was any human presence. We followed a cemented road, which led us to a flight of stairs that cut through a forest (see Fig. 17). At the top of the slope, there was a signpost by the Dorbar Shnong, Laitkor, the local governing body that looks after the localities in the area.

‘Ka Jingmana,’ it said (see Fig. 18). Warning.

This statement was followed by a list of things that were not allowed at the place, including bringing vehicles to take water from the river. People who were not from Laitkor were especially discouraged from bringing their vehicles to the area.

‘Anyone who flouts these rules will be punished according to the laws of the *dorbar* of Laitkor Rngi,’ the sign read.



Fig. 17: The 315 stairs leading down to the Wah Thangbania (Thangbania River).



Fig. 18: The rules of the Dorbar Shnong, Laitkor, at Thangbania.

Wah Thangbania may be located in the forest, but it appears to be a place that is well administered by the village officials. In this regard, Laitkor shares with other frontier areas the idea of indigeneity being embedded with state aspirations for development (Guyot-Récharde 2013: 22-37), though on a much smaller scale than, say, coal mining or the building of dams. As a reflection of this relationship, a couple of houses have been built on the slope leading to the river below. Permits for the building of houses are handled by the local governing body, the *dorbar shnong*, a system of governance that is often touted as one of the world's oldest forms of democracy (Warjri 2023). The *dorbar shnong* in Meghalaya are under the supervision of the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council (KHADC), an administrative body set up under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution to take care of, and preserve, the customary laws pertaining to Khasis in the state. Among its various administrative functions, the KHADC looks after the village forests or *khlaw shnong* (KHADC 2014).

Women, however, are not permitted to be members of the executive body of either the KHADC or the *dorbar shnong*, although

Laitkor is an exception. Kong Rimetty Kharkongor, who heads the women's committee on behalf of the village, says that while she is allowed to sit in the executive body meetings of the *dorbar shnong*, she is rarely consulted on matters regarding housing permits. The granting of house permits is taken care of by the headman of the village (*rangbah shnong*), the secretary, and the headman of the locality (*rangbah dong*), all of whom are men. Women, therefore, have a limited role in the administrative functions of the *dorbar*. With the lack of a proper drainage and sewage system, there is a concern that the houses that are newly built beside the river might pollute the water. In a recent study conducted by the Commissionerate of Food Safety, Laitkor was named as one of the localities neighbouring Shillong that had contaminated drinking water with a high *E. coli* content (*Highland Post* 2023). Urbanism, therefore, has had an adverse impact on the ecology of Laitkor, including on the chemical composition of the water. The washerwomen, moreover, have no voice in how the land is allocated for the building of homes, despite the fact that such changes directly affect their livelihood.

Kong Skilameri Rting was especially peeved that, despite the cemented road leading to the river, the burden of carrying clothes up the 315 steps has not eased. Development has come, but not in the way that she wanted it to. Kong Barilang Kharkongor was quick to offer a theological explanation for how her friend felt.

'Sometimes we complain even about what God gives us,' she said.

Her statement elicited laughter. Kong Skilameri Rting does have help, however, from time to time.

'I have a younger brother who has a scooty, so sometimes he picks me up, but not from below where I wash the clothes,' she said.

Kong Skilameri Rting's words reveal the need for a mode of conveyance that would ease the physical demands of her job. Some washerwomen, I am told, have cars that can pick them up from the top of the hill. But most washerwomen, including the ones I have had conversations with, do not make enough to avail of such facilities, not even enough to afford the coveted barrel in which to store water.

They make, on average, ₹12,000 per month, which is barely enough to cover living expenses, let alone money for a car.

‘There is no barrel big enough to store water. What we make from our work does not cover expenses for a barrel big enough to store the water [we need],’ Kong Skilameri Rting says.

Due to the difficult nature of their work and the meagre income, the support they receive from their families and neighbours is invaluable. This support is especially essential where raising their children is concerned.

* * * * *

Kong Barilang Kharkongor (see Fig. 16) was born on November 13, 1985. She has five children and has been working as a washerwoman for five years. Before she took up washing clothes as a profession, she worked for an hourly wage (*bylla kynta*) as a house help in the houses in Shillong. Unlike Kong Balari Khongsit and Kong Skilameri Rting, Kong Barilang Kharkongor does not supplement her earnings through the Job Card.

Under the *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005*, the Job Card initiative has been implemented in Laitkor. Every winter, for three months, low-income families are permitted to have one family member work under the scheme. The work, which involves clearing weeds from the sides of the roads and ridding the streets of plastic, is mostly done by women. During the months in which the Job Card scheme is in place, one will come across groups of women, armed with shears, hoes and brooms, working in the public spaces of the localities. Usually, the younger women are accompanied by a child or two. Some even have babies tied to their backs in a sling. Even as they work, therefore, women still perform what they believe to be their primary duty—caring for their children. For Kong Barilang Kharkongor, working under the Job Card scheme and as a house maid takes precious time away from her children.

‘Earlier, I used to work for an hourly wage in people’s houses. But later, I felt washing clothes gave me more flexibility,’ she said.

‘It [washing clothes] gave me more time. It’s like having your own business.’

Children are prized possessions in Laitkor, and most families have eight or nine children in their households. The infant mortality rate in Meghalaya, however, is high. For every 1,000 live births, Meghalaya records 34 deaths. Maternal mortality rates, too, are as high as 197 deaths out of 1,00,000 deliveries (Government of Meghalaya Health and Family Welfare Department 2021). As of 2022, Meghalaya recorded the second highest infant mortality rate in Northeast India, with 29 deaths for every 1,000 live births (*Highland Post* 2022). It is not these figures, however, that worry Kong Barilang Kharkongor.

‘I stay with my younger sister and my father. My husband has passed away... They help me also with school fees and schoolbooks for my children,’ she said.

Kong Barilang Kharkongor is a single mother. With her youngest child being one and a half months old, Kong Barilang Kharkongor is prevented from engaging in other kinds of work, even though this would supplement the income she makes from washing clothes. She also told me that her seven-year-old son had not yet started school owing to money being in short supply. I wondered if social mobility is possible for the poorest families in our country. Research tells me that 70 percent of people in the country who belong to poor families remain poor, and that indigenous communities are more likely to slip into poverty even after they have achieved a fair degree of social and economic mobility (Roychowdhury 2019). The assistance that Kong Barilang Kharkongor receives from her extended family, therefore, is essential.

Kong Barilang Kharkongor also experiences loneliness when she washes clothes.

‘I don’t really have much to say. I’m alright with the work. It only gets tough when it rains. Sometimes, when it rains, the place where we wash clothes gets lonely. It gets lonely; not like now when it’s winter. Sometimes this one finishes (*pointing to Kong Balari Khongsit*) and

sometimes this one also finishes (*pointing to Kong Skilameri Rting*) but I don't,' she said.

Because she depends solely on washing clothes for a living, Kong Barilang Kharkongor has a greater number of clothes to wash than either Kong Balari Khongsit or Kong Skilameri Rting. Her loneliness is unusual in a profession that is otherwise communitarian in nature.

In washing clothes for a living, the washerwomen participate in an activity that has existed in the Khasi community for eons. Although washerwomen, particularly those who wash clothes in lakes and rivers, are virtually extinct in the West, the profession is still alive and well in Meghalaya (see Fig. 19). It is not strange to see women washing clothes beside water bodies in Meghalaya. For those earning a living from it, public perceptions about modern technology—such as washing machines—have helped popularise the notion that their profession is essential.

'Clothes washed by washing machines are not clean,' said Kong Balari Khongsit, expressing a popular opinion about technology.

'It's [only] clean when they're washed by hand,' said Kong Barilang Kharkongor, reiterating her friend's point.



Fig. 19: Women washing clothes at a stream in Nongdaneng, Laitkor.

In an age when technology dominates and impinges upon human endeavours, the washerwomen are engaged in a profession that still has human labour as an integral part of the equation. As I made my way down the steps to the river, the silence gave way to a babble of voices. Gingerly, I stepped onto the banks of the river. Before me were at least 20 women washing clothes (see Figs. 20 and 21). There were lights shining from smart phones, hung in polythene bags along the boundary wall, to enable sight. News and local gossip were being exchanged. Someone called Bah Deng was getting married and the women were arguing amongst themselves about the best way to get to his wedding.

‘Phan leit?’ one of the washerwomen asked another. Will you go?

One of the women cracked a joke and laughter followed. I realised, then, that it was more than a profession that would be lost should the waters of the river dwindle or become polluted. The river’s ecology is bound to a more precarious element which the modern, globalised world has forsworn—the community. At the heart of it were people like the washerwomen of Laitkor. Because while many of the washerwomen may lead difficult lives, they also know that they share similar burdens with other washerwomen elsewhere. Will this ease Kong Barilang Kharkongor’s loneliness? I do not know. But, as long as the river exists in its present state, the washerwomen will continue to take pride in their work.



Figs. 20 and 21: Washerwomen at Thangbania

‘[W]orking makes me feel good. It doesn’t feel nice to be sitting [at home] the whole day,’ Kong Balari Khongsit said.

Kong Barilang Kharkongor and Kong Skilameri Rting nodded their heads in agreement.

‘Yes,’ they said in unison.

She had spoken like a true survivor.

BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY: THE SUBSISTENCE FARMERS OF LAITKOR

My attempt to study the lives of subsistence farmers in Laitkor took me to familiar territory, quite literally. The fields of Laitkor (see Figs. 22 and 23) are places that I have rambled through and known for more than 20 years. Until recently, however, I had not given much thought to the lives of those who work in these fields. We exchanged



Fig. 22: The fields of Laitkor



Fig. 23: A field in Laitkor with a field hut
(*trep lum*)

pleasantries, of course—‘How are you?’, ‘What is your son/daughter doing now?’—but pleasantries alone were not enough to understand the lives of the subsistence farmers and engage with the world from their perspective. On a fairly warm day in February, Kong Meetu and I made our way to the home of a family that has been engaged in subsistence farming for at least three generations.

Their house is located on top of a hill opposite ours. On the way, we passed a stream, across which the village council has built a concrete well with funds from the KHADC (see Figs. 24 and 25). The well is meant to provide drinking water to the people living in the Nongdaneng locality of Laitkor. But it dries up during the winter months. The journey from the top of one hill to the top of another took a toll on my strength. By the time we reached our destination, my winter jacket was off. I was sweating and breathless. Kong Meetu found this quite amusing.



Fig. 24: A concrete well for storing spring water



Fig. 25: The plaque of the KHADC-funded project

‘You’re not used to it anymore,’ she said, having assured herself that the time I spent in Hyderabad had made me a non-local.

We arrived at a house located at the top of a hill. But something was amiss. Instead of flowers being grown in the flowerpots, vegetables were grown instead. I learned later that one of Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid’s sons eats only vegetables, hence the need to plant vegetables around the house.

‘Bahnah (Petra) has a son who doesn’t eat rice. So, we have to be diligent with planting. [He] only eats vegetables,’ explained Kong Wanshai Mylliempdah, Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid’s sister-in-law.

Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid (see Fig. 26) was 43 years old at the time of our conversation. She carried a two-month-old baby with her. I wanted to know if she had any problems going to the fields while she was pregnant.



Fig. 26: Kong Ailinda Kharumniud (left) and Bah Petra Mylliempdah (right)

‘No,’ she replied, but not before she shot a knowing look at Kong Wanshai Mylliempdah.

Gynaecological illnesses are common among the working-class women of Laitkor. The illnesses, however, are not commonly discussed, especially in the presence of men. In her book *Waiting for an Equal World: Gender in India’s Northeast* (2019), Patricia Mukhim observes that conversations around sex and sexuality in Meghalaya are hard to come by because of a lack of sex education within families and schools. Sex is a taboo subject in Meghalaya. Mukhim also observes that in the matter of childbirth, Khasi women often reverted to divine explanations for the number of children they could have. Contraception, though available, is rarely used or practised (Mukhim 50–53). My memory takes me back to my teenage years when a traditional healer and midwife visited my mother.

‘*Ka lah khih ka pla khun,*’ she had said. The womb has shifted.

Many women, including some of my neighbours, had gone to her to correct this ailment. The healer would massage their lower abdomen in an effort to put the uterus back in place. Since the only doctor in the village was a man, women preferred to go to the traditional healer for gynaecological problems. My conversations with the farmers also took place in the presence of Bah Petra Mylliempdah (see Fig. 26), Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid's husband and the head of the household. His presence might have prevented Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid from disclosing any difficulty she might have had as a birthing woman. She has seven children between the ages of ten years and two months old. In any case, Kong Meetu filled me in on the details regarding Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid's work.

'She is very strong,' said Kong Meetu. 'In the morning, she gave birth and by [the] afternoon she was out in the fields, weeding.'

The farmers who were women, therefore, had very little time to rest after parturition. I was also told that there was a gendered component to their work. While the men ploughed the fields, the women took care of weeding and planting the seeds.

The method of farming in Laitkor is *bun* agriculture. It differs from the *jhum* cultivation practised in other parts of Meghalaya in that there is a shorter fallow period between the planting cycles—about one to three months. To replenish the nutrients in the soil, tree branches, hay and bramble are burnt before sowing (see Figs. 27, 28 and 29). The ash from what has been burnt is covered with manure, and only then does the sowing of seeds happen. Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid has known only this type of farming. She never went to school. As a child, she accompanied her mother to the fields and learned agriculture through observation and experience. She admitted to passing down her knowledge to her children.

'They grow cabbages, they hoe the field for planting. They know how to weed, pluck herbs and all that. They know it very well,' she said.

Generational knowledge of farming, including associated activities like the gathering of local herbs, is passed down through the female line. This makes Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid a seed keeper and a custodian



Fig. 27: Branches of trees that had been cut off for burning



Fig. 28: Tree branches, bramble and hay being prepared for burning



Fig. 29: Bramble and hay being burnt

of seeds in her family (Rodrigues 2023: 58). On the way to the fields, we were joined by two of Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid's children (see Fig. 30). The family plants cash crops in their field, including winter potatoes (see Figs. 31 and 32). August is an especially busy month with cabbage, cauliflower, peas and radish being grown alongside potatoes. During this time, Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid's family hires labourers to help with the work in the fields. They pay ₹500 per day to the men and ₹300 per day to the women.

'The women help in harvesting potatoes. We pay them ₹300 for planting. But it's not the whole year. This is seasonal,' explained Bah Petra Mylliempdah.

The gendered nature of work is also observed in the domestic space. When I entered their house, Bah Petra Mylliempdah was entertaining guests and the women were involved in cooking and tending to the children. I gladly accepted the cup of tea that was given



Fig. 30: On the way to the fields



Fig. 31: Potato spuds used for planting



Fig. 32: Winter potato being planted

to me to quench my thirst. To my dismay, Kong Meetu introduced me as a ‘doctor of books’ (*doktor kot*). I wondered how this would affect the nature of the conversation. To my delight, Bah Petra Mylliempdah was more than happy to share his experiences with agriculture. He tended to steer the conversation away from the ‘feminine’ activities of foraging and tending to the plants and towards the economics of the trade when Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid and Kong Wanshai Mylliempdah were talking. But he did provide interesting insights into how the business of farming is run.

I was told, for instance, that the pesticides, seedlings and potato spuds were bought from a private firm.

‘It is more expensive, isn’t it?’ I asked.

‘There is a pesticide that the government gives at a subsidised rate but we don’t go. Why should we go all the way to MeCOFED [Meghalaya State Cooperative Marketing and Consumers’ Federation Limited] and take it, even a little?’ he said.

MeCOFED is an organisation established by the state government to encourage and look after cooperative societies in Meghalaya (MeCOFED 2024). Among its various schemes, such as providing seed grants for the raising of pigs and ducks, MeCOFED also provides farming cooperatives with subsidised seeds and pesticides. Having heard that there was a long waiting list for procuring the pesticides and seeds, however, Bah Petra Mylliempdah chose a more expensive route by getting them from a private firm.

Bah Petra Mylliempdah went into a lengthy chronicle about the transportation of goods, how vegetables were bought and sold at the market, and the people involved in the trading of vegetables (Khasis are employed as agents, and the export of goods to other states is done by Marwaris). I realised, as he was talking to me, that the affective lives of cis-gendered male farmers are influenced by the economic components of the trade. It mattered to Bah Petra Mylliempdah whether his crops were sold at a profit and whom to approach for the ‘right’ price. The women, on the other hand, were more concerned with the nature of the work itself as a self-sustaining endeavour. Kong Meetu provided me with an insight into this aspect of women’s work.

‘You should see the way she [Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid] weeds the field,’ said Kong Meetu. ‘It’s so beautiful, like she is practising a craft—like art.’

This aesthetic consideration of farming can also be observed in the manner in which plants are regarded in their family.

‘[We] grow them like flowers,’ said Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid and Kong Wanshai Mylliempdah of the vegetables grown in their garden.

The family’s reliance on vegetables as a food source that is grown at home and in their fields was especially helpful when the COVID-19 pandemic was at its peak. While many of their neighbours faced a shortage of food, Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid’s family was able to

depend on their vegetables for sustenance. They also had enough produce to give away in the locality. Although profit for their goods was hard to come by, Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid's family and other farmers within the village kept the people of Laitkor well supplied with food and vegetables during the lockdowns. What constitutes food is also extremely variable and fluid.

* * * * *

Kong Wanshai Mylliempdah (see Fig. 33) was born in 1987. Having gone through a pregnancy in her teens, she had stopped going to school and worked, for a time, as a household help. At the time of our conversation, she had been engaged in farming for 20 years. She also worked, during the winter months, in the Job Card initiative of the Meghalaya Government. It is imperative, she felt, that women



Fig. 33: Kong Wanshai Mylliempdah

stay close to the home when the men go to work elsewhere during the fields' fallow months. This gendered notion of domesticity vis-à-vis stepping outside the home to work, however, is an echo of what Bah Petra Mylliempdah felt a woman should do.

'When the men go to work, the women sit at home,' he said, as though expressing a truism.

Bah Petra Mylliempdah had expressed a sentiment that is quite popular in Khasi society. Contrary to the popular perception of Khasi women being able to work outside the home, being in the house is still the preferred space for women. Interestingly, the affective labour that results from domesticity, such as caring for children and tending to household duties, is regarded as a passive activity in comparison to the 'active' work that men do in earning for their families—Kong Wanshai Mylliempdah and the other women in the household 'sit at home' while the men 'go to work'. It appears that labour is valued commensurate to its monetary reward.. The monetisation of labour also influences what is viewed as food.

The field that Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid's family has is located east of the Nongdaneng locality in Laitkor. In an acre of land, which they share with a cemetery of the Presbyterian Church (see Fig. 34), the family grows their crops. When we reached the field, Bah Petra Mylliempdah told me of a friend of his who was buried in the cemetery adjoining the field.

'He always wanted to come here,' he said. 'Now, he guards over our land.'

The land, however, is not owned by the family. I learned that the owners of the property had leased it to them for ₹8,000 every sowing cycle. The lease is renewed every three years, with ₹1,000 added to the rent amount every year or so. Along with the crops that are grown for market, however, other plants also take root in the field. Local herbs such as *jatira* (*Oenanthe linearis*) (see Fig. 35), *jajew*, *jabar*, and *jaraiñ* (*Fagopyrum dibotris*) grow alongside the crops. Bah Petra Mylliempdah called them weeds that are meant to be uprooted in order for the crops to grow. For Kong Wanshai Mylliempdah, however, the herbs were



Fig. 34: Graves at the edge of Kong Ailinda Kharumnuid's field



Fig. 35: Jatira (*Oenanthe linearis*)

a valuable source of nourishment. Her particular favourite was jajew, which she would prepare by mixing the plant with mint, coriander, and lime juice.

‘Jajew has a lot of vitamins. Herbs are tastier than the vegetables we grow,’ she said. ‘Tasty, very tasty.’

The food sovereignty that Kong Wanshai Mylliempdah practices is at odds with the demands of the market espoused by the male members of her family and the state government. Researchers, including Bhogtoram Mawroh, Melari Shisha Nongrum and Bethamehi Joy Syiem, have often pointed out that the devaluing of indigenous agricultural systems by the government has the potential to create adverse environmental conditions and negatively impact agrobiodiversity in the region (Mawroh and Diengdoh 2018; Nongrum and Syiem 2022). The sustainable use of land, as is evidenced in Kong Wanshai Mylliempdah's words, is also one that is gendered, since it is the women farmers who practise sustainable farming. They inhabit a doubly precarious world. Bah Petra Mylliempdah tells me that the farmers get paid an amount as low as ₹5 per kilo of their yield. But if the market prices are not kind to the farmer, the weather conditions are even less so.

The spraying of pesticides in the fields is done just before the rainy season in order for the rain water to dilute the effects of the chemicals. However, Kong Wanshai Mylliempdah revealed that, of late, the weather has not been consistent. The fickleness of the weather makes the crops prone to pestilence, especially what the Khasis call *iapiong* (which literally translates as black death), in which the leaves of the plants wilt and turn black. To avoid such catastrophes a lot more pesticide than is otherwise needed is sprayed on the vegetables. The run off from the fields when the rains finally come poses a threat to the streams below, and the people who use the water for drinking. The wildlife in the area, too, is threatened, particularly the birds that pick on the crops and nest in the surrounding forests.

As we made our way to the fields after our conversation in the house, I looked around me and my eyes captured a different slant of light. The sun had reached its zenith, the winter grass took on a golden hue (see Figs. 36 and 37), and the sparrows called from the trees. The beloved fields around me still existed and I will continue to walk in them as I have always done. But settled in my heart was a sadness that I had not previously experienced. I saw a place that wrestled with its own sense of being, a contradictory existence that is propelled by its need to be both traditional and modern.



Figs. 36 and 37: Winter grass in the fields of Laitkor

CONCLUSION: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

As February drew to a close, I stepped into a taxi and we drove past Laitkor. Within an hour, my partner and I were far away from the people who had so generously opened their homes and indulged in conversation despite their initial reluctance to speak. I was reminded of Nabanita Kanungo's 'The Mushroom Picker', a woman who so lovingly practices her craft of picking mushrooms that nature wills itself into providing bounty for her livelihood (Kanungo 2014). Like the woman of Kanungo's poem, the working women of Laitkor inhabit a precarious world. They are marginalised subjects to the neo-liberal interests of the state and the masculinist narrative that propagates these interests. Their knowledge, founded upon generations of human-nature interactions, reflects the 'invisible wealth' they generate beyond economic value and profit making (Shiva 1995). But it is also essential to note that these women are not averse to development projects. Development as they understand it—including the building of roads and increasing water connectivity—is welcomed because such amenities can ease the physical burden of their work. In the case of the farmers, their engagement with private enterprises enables them to ward off pestilence and produce a bountiful harvest, albeit at an environmental cost. It is a vicious cycle—climate change causes the farmers to use more chemicals on their crops and the chemicals, in turn, adversely affect the environment they so longingly want to preserve. 'Who doesn't want a road?' asks an intrepid villager in Janice Pariat's *Everything the Light Touches* (2023). It is a sentiment that the women of Laitkor also express. It is in balancing the modern with indigenous knowledge systems that their knowledge could contribute significantly to helping us understand the relationship between the environment, gender, and indigenous land rights. We would do well to pay heed to their voices.

NOTES

1. An expression of disbelief.
2. An example of a smart city project is the state government's desire to turn the area around Polo Grounds, Shillong into a replica of Times Square, New York.
3. In the book *Living With Oil and Coal: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India* (2019), Dolly Kikon observes that the masculinist nature of ethno-nationalist movements pushed women to the periphery of nationalist discourse because they 'did not have a "story"' (Kikon 2019, 49). A similar process is at work in Meghalaya.
4. An example of how tokenism works in Khasi society is how matriliney is used to support the argument that women are respected in Khasi society.
5. The Khasi name for Shillong Peak.
6. Knowledge of these streams has been passed down orally by five elders—Rangbah Phriek Sing Sohtun from Umlyngpung, Rangbah Slanshon Marbañiang and Kong Dromon Kharmawphlang from Lyngkien Shyiap, Kong Dhanakiri Marbañiang from Pomlakrai, and Rangbah B. Dkhar, who was the former headman of Raid Nongpiyur. See Kharakor, S. and Lyngdoh, S. P. 2019. 'Ki Khyndai Umdih Khyndai Umtong Jong U Lum Shyllong', November 23. <https://www.urupang.com/ki-khyndai-umdih-khyndai-umtong-jong-u-lum-shyllong/> (Accessed 30 April 2023).
7. As an example, Kong Meetu tells us a story about how a candidate for the 2023 state elections had come to her house to give her a blanket so big that it could cover a whole room. 'The only thing that probably crossed his mind was that Laitkor is cold,' she said. 'He did not consider how a family of five with four very narrow beds in three different rooms could possibly use the one enormous blanket he "gifted" us.'

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APPENDIX A

A RE-TELLING OF THE LEGEND OF SHILLONG CITY

This re-telling of the legend associated with Shillong city has been inspired by E.W. Chyne's Na Ki Hamsaia Ka Mynnor [Oral Narratives from the Past] (1994), in which the legend appears in print. The story of Lir depicts how gendered marginalities can often be a pivot for the centre. Lir's marginalisation by her community results in the 'birth' of U 'Lei Shyllong, the most powerful deity in the Khasi belief system.

Many years ago, there was a woman by the name of Lir who lived in the village of Bisi near Myllem. Although Lir was a beautiful woman, she was extremely lazy and was unconventional in her behaviour. The nature of her character made her an anomaly in the village. Unlike many of the villagers, who took delight in working, Lir preferred to roam the hills surrounding the village. Her favourite spot was a rock formation in the Umiew River where she could be found napping during the day. One day, as she was taking a nap on the rock, a strong wind—which carried the leaf of a reed—blew. The leaf pierced Lir's anus, at which point she woke up. In the days that followed, Lir felt changes in her

body. Soon, the people of the village noticed her growing belly and concluded that she was pregnant. But when they asked her who the father of the baby was, Lir could not provide them with an answer. Because of this, the villagers called her an idiot or a person with an ‘unsound mind’. Lir’s relatives, meanwhile, were worried about the shame she had brought to her clan by having a baby whose father was unknown. A village meeting (dorbar) was called to decide what was to be done with Lir. Fearful of her fate, Lir slipped out of her home and fled to another village, presently named Rngi Shyllong. It was in Rngi Shyllong that Lir constructed a hut and lived by foraging for food in the nearby forests. When the time came, Lir gave birth to a baby boy who was, unfortunately, stillborn. She buried the foetus in her garden and planted pumpkin seeds over the grave of the child.

One night, as she was sleeping, Lir was awakened by the sound of pounding from her garden. She rushed out of her house to find a young man giving instructions to his workers to plough the garden. Lir was terrified.

‘Young man,’ she said. ‘Don’t you have any shame in claiming a poor woman’s garden as your own?’

‘Don’t you remember me, mother?’ the young man asked. ‘I am the son of the thunder, whom you had buried in this plot in your garden.’

Awestruck and happy at the turn of events, Lir called all her neighbours, friends and relatives to witness the miraculous resurrection of her son. They called him U ’Lei Shu Long or the God who Came to Be, a god that came into being of his own volition, without any assistance from other supernatural entities. On his part, U ’Lei Shu Long taught the people various rites and rituals that they could perform in order to have him be their protector and guardian. Today, the rituals at Shyllong Peak are performed as a mark of respect and a petition to U ’Lei Shu Long to protect the Khasi people from various ills. U ’Lei Shyllong, as he is now called, is the guardian deity of Shillong city.