Rich with vibrant ritual enactment, touching realms of consciousness, Meghalaya’s diverse experiences of reality, shaped by esoteric mysticism, traditional piety and modern scepticism intersect at different spheres. In the past 50 years, Meghalaya has witnessed unimaginable change — a challenge to the spiritual beliefs and practices rooted in the regional prehistory of the state. The depth of social transformation has had immense implication in every sphere, especially those related to water.

The book, Ka Mer Ka Sdad, is an outcome of a collection of papers presented at a seminar in Shillong. It aims to make a foundation for building up a picture of the response of the people to changing patterns of environmental control by looking at various aspects of the role of rivers and waters in Khasi culture and vision. There are numerous rivers in the southern side of the Khasi hills which criss-cross the state with narrow channels and cliffs, which rise to considerable altitudes.

The papers presented in the book are a significant contribution to the current debates in environmental discourse in the country and move on two lines: environmental conservation, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the reappraisal of a region by representing its past as “Golden Days”. All the papers portray the visions of the Khasis in their relationship with water and human beings.

The book covers the belief system of Khasis who worship spirits in trees, groves, ponds, rivers and mountain peaks. This belief system has a clear role in regulating and moderating the use of natural resources. It legitimises in a new framework the protection accorded to certain elements of the landscape in the form of sacred groves.

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The shift of focus towards well-researched regional studies has reinforced the view that there are contrasting experiences even within the region and this is the grey area which the organisers have been successful in bringing together in the 17 chapters spread over topics covering the role of waters and rivers in Khasi culture and visions. The articles are well divided, and though the titles of the articles sound similar, the content and schema of the papers are entirely different from one another.

The Khasis possess a considerable amount of folklore. During the colonial period, the Khasi language did not have a script of its own; it was an area rich in oral traditions and folklores. Later, the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist missions undertook the study of Khasi language. A trial was initially carried out with Bengali, but it was later resolved to adopt Roman characters. This system of expressing the sounds of Khasi has ever since continued. This point gains importance since most of the papers in this collection are written after going through the rich oral traditions and folklore of the region. The contributors have succeeded in passing their observations on to a larger reading public and are able to express their ideas clearly. They have sought the help of the extensive writings by British officials of the colonial era who provided large amounts of data and documents for studying the region. By combining the oral tradition and the documents left by the British, one can write a fairly comprehensive work on the role of water in Khasi culture and visions. This book is an outcome of such an endeavour. All the contributors agree that water is part of their culture and most of the papers revolve around its connections with changes in the social life, belief systems and the organisation of the means of production. Another aspect, which needs attention, is that while the Khasi hills are conceptualised as masculine, the rivers are regarded as feminine.

The book avoids various relationships between water and gender; and one finds that the role of women is ignored altogether. Women play an important role in water resource management primarily at the household level and have considerable knowledge about the availability, quality and reliability of water. The book altogether ignores these objectives.

And, another point which the book misses is that the inheritance of property and succession to tribal office ran through the female line; passing from mother to youngest daughter. This system has been modified by the conversion of many Khasis to Christianity, which has also drastically changed not only their traditional resource-use practices but their belief systems as well.

Finally, the book fills up an important gap by drawing attention to the role of water and rivers in the society and tries to locate this in a wider framework.

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