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We aim sustainably to improve health, education and the environment in developing countries by providing a hook, not a fish. BODHI was founded in 1989 on the principle of skillful, compassionate action and is neither religious nor political. We have supporters and advisers from many faiths. We encourage your support, ideas and acts of kindness. Realizing the interdependence of all beings is in our enlightened self-interest. If we don't work together to reduce the world's much discussed problems, then who will?

Land of the clouds

Dr. Colin Butler, BODHI's Medical Director, recently finished a fact-finding tour to India, concentrating on the northeast. Here is his report.

Monday October 20, 2003. While staying in Delhi with BODHI adviser Dr. Shanti Raman and her family (see p. 3), I met with Prof. P.K. Ramakrishnan, at Jawaharlal Nehru University. He is an expert not only on traditional ecology and sacred groves but also on the complex social patchwork of northeast India. He lived in the area for a decade and co-ordinates a network of young scientists.

October 25. I left the peace of the Institute of Economic Growth, where I spent two days on a visit organized by Profs. Kanchen Chopra and Pushpam Kumar, and flew at dawn on a venerable 737 to Guwahati, Assam. We stopped in Patna, once known as Pataliputra, capital of the Mauryan Empire, now capital of Bihar a state famous for the enlightenment of the Buddha at Bodhi Gaya, corruption, lawlessness and illiterate chief ministers. Bad weather thwarted the next leg to Bagdogra, gateway to Darjeeling

and Sikkim, so instead we flew straight to Assam, descending through clouds to land over tea fields. For the first time since arrival in India, the air looked fresh and inviting.

Seven sisters

Seven states (Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura) comprise NE India (see map, p. 2). India is a varied country and the NE especially so, geographically, linguistically, socially, ethnically and politically. Following partition of the subcontinent to form West and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1947, the NE has become significantly more isolated and disadvantaged, with a sealed border with Bangladesh that blocks coastal access. Instead, land access is by only a slim corridor between Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. This isolation restricts travel, commerce and the flow of ideas. Arguably, it also contributes to indifference from the central government, even though some states, such as Nagaland, have received substantial assistance on a per-capita basis, perhaps contributing to dependency. Roads

are narrow, slow, dangerous and clogged; phone and internet connections are limited. Air links are also poor

The NE is known as the wettest place on earth, and also for its mountains, tea, the Brahmaputra river, sacred groves and diverse tribal populations. Unfortunately, the area is increasingly known for its problems: some of the highest maternal and infant mortality rates in India, high population growth, corrupt politicians, votebanks, separatist movements, militants, refugees, and allegations of mafia-like protection rackets that demand 23% of salaries. There is also an increasing problem with HIV/AIDS, spread by intravenous drug users, truck drivers, sex workers, denial and poor leadership.

Meghalaya ("land of the clouds") is the most stable state in the NE. BODHI supports two adult education projects here, in the villages of Sohbar and Muypat near Shillong and the Bangladeshi border (see map, p. 2).



Muypat: woman in traditional bamboo hat; girl and villagers. **Sohbar:** Banri (standing), Dr. Ghonglah, Colin, Kynsai, headman; Kynsai with students. Photos courtesy Dr. Ghonglah

< Land of clouds

October 26. Shillong. Kept awake by another night of incessant explosions as people celebrate Diwali, the Festival of Lights. Here on the frontier no curfew is observed.

At 5.30, bus and truck horns announce another grey, smoky day. Pollution has robbed much of India of blue skies and the Milky Way.

The NE, as close to Thailand as to Delhi, suffers by the central government's insistence that India, which spans over 25 degrees of longitude, should share one time zone. If Indian time were set on purely geographical grounds, then the northeast would be 1.8 hours ahead of Gujarat. It would be like Sydney and Perth being on the same time, or Los Angeles and Chicago, or London and Istanbul. That the sun in the NE rises and sets far earlier than in western India is likely to have a subtle but negative impact on both economic productivity and social cohesion in the NE. Commercial life starts over an hour later than it should and the darkness falls early, a sort of daylight losing rather than daylight saving policy. Nights are long, electricity is intermittent and alcoholism is common.

Tribal patchwork

Seventy percent of Meghalayans are Khasi, probably of Khmer origin, and 20% are Gharo, of Tibeto-Burman origin. As well, there is a smattering of other tribal groups from the northeast, with a mix of Hindu traders and Nepali refugees. Many Muslims escaping from the poverty of Bangladesh cross illegally into the NE. Most settle in Assam.

I heard that many of these migrants are given limited rights in exchange for an unwritten contract to support the network of corrupt officials and politicians who provide these rights. This seems plausible. So-called votebanks are notorious in Bihar, where false promises sway the mostly illiterate masses.

Matrilinearity

The Khasi practice an unusual form of matrilinearity in which property is passed to the youngest daughter. Men are said to be overly protected, stay long at home and grow up comparatively passive and lacking in entrepreneurship. For example, most eggs and fish consumed in Meghalaya are transported by truck from distant Andhra Pradesh, yet it seems the state could be self-sufficient in both products, as water is abundant.

In contrast to men, women are often better educated and more confident. There is a long custom of Khasi women leaving the area through marriage to outsiders. This female empowerment is not all it seems, at least in the villages. Both headmen I met were male, elected only by men. Unlike with Tibetans, there seems no organization of Khasi women. Nor does matrilinearity translate into a low birth rate. Meghalaya has one of the highest fertility rates in India.



It also seems plausible that the custom of passing land ownership to the youngest rather than the eldest daughter leaves her more vulnerable to family pressure, including from powerful uncles. Life expectancy is short and, in many cases, the youngest daughter will still be a child at the time of her mother's death. I speculate too, that this custom may actually encourage additional children. On the positive side, the practice of selective female foeticide, common in most of India, especially in the Punjab, seems unknown.

Muyput and Sohbar

October 26, later. We headed for Muyput, about 3 hours east of Shillong. On the way we passed many deforested areas as well as patches of intact forest. Dr. Ghonglah said land ownership is unequal, and much of the state remains comparatively underdeveloped agriculturally. He didn't think there were any tractors in the entire state. All agricultural labour is performed by hand. There are a few terraces growing paddy (rice) in the flatter parts. The traditional agricultural practice, called *jhum*, is a form of slash, burn, plant and fallow, but the time for the fallow periods has grown progressively shorter.

Eventually, after avoiding dozens of diesel-belching coal trucks en route to the Bangladeshi border, we reached Muyput. I have seen extreme poverty before, but Muyput was as poor and unpromising as anywhere I have been. Children were plentiful (see picture). Most adults were barely five feet (a sign of lifelong poor nutrition), shoes and even thongs were scant (hookworm is common), the soil looked exhausted and the crops weak. There were no signs of sanitation. Though light bulbs worked, the power supply was intermittent. The only signs of prosperity were the three churches, for a population of fewer than 2,000, in various stages of completion.

A survey conducted by the Human Development Foundation, Dr. Ghonglah's NGO, found that only 12% of adults could write their own names. I met the headman, aged 44, with five children, already a grandfather. He seemed somewhat interested in encouraging education. I also met the

teacher we have been supporting. Alas, he did not strike me as very promising, being either very shy, or perhaps just disinterested.

October 27. We visited Sohbar, tantalisingly close to the Bangladeshi plain. *En route* we passed Cherrapunji, with 300 inches of rain per annum, the wettest place on Earth. This is known as the "wet desert." The forest was cleared long ago; very little vegetation seems to survive the heavy rain. Sohbar is far more attractive than Muyput, but still poor and overcrowded. There were even a few birds in the forest remnants (birds are generally scarce in the NE, most having been consumed). I met some adult students and the co-ordinator, a talented and motivated artist called Kynsai.

Reflections

Accompanying Dr. Ghonglah and myself on these journeys were several well-educated, well-meaning and apparently motivated young Khasi men. Not everyone is caught in the poverty trap. Contributions from these people will be vital if the villages are to improve. But motivation to learn is low. From a very early age children, even though illiterate, contribute economically, for example by weeding, herding or child-minding. Importing a paid Western consultant for a short time would be a waste. Progress seems glacial. An adviser for aquaculture or egg production could be useful, but would first require locals with motivation to run any scheme. Long-term commitment is needed.

Almost every day I was in India, people complained about corrupt politicians. Yet, because of the abundance of extremely cheap labour, the middle classes in India live comparatively well. What motivation do they have for promoting the rural development that is likely to both reduce and empower their cheap workforce? Delhi is growing in size by at least half a million people per annum, India as a whole by 15-20 million. Water tables are falling, especially in the Punjab, India's breadbasket, and crop yields are increasingly static. Many people are optimistic about India. I am not so sure.