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NEHU

EDITORIAL

As you might perhaps have noticed, *The NEHU Journal* has started coming out regularly and with the current issue it celebrates its third birthday. I would also like to inform you that the journal is now refereed internationally the joy and pain of which I have put in my editorial of volume 2, number 2. I am positive that the journal will receive quality submissions in future not only from humanities and social sciences but also from the life and physical sciences that have so far remained outside the purview of the journal, not the least due to any policy but perhaps due to the hangover of its earlier *avatar* as the *North-Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, which the present journal continues to be called.

We at the editorial office of the journal are grateful that many of our colleagues have enrolled themselves as subscribers, but the number of subscribers it has today is still not enough to make it self-sustaining. This situation is certainly not desirable.

I therefore take this opportunity to request you all to send in your subscription amount at least for three years and those of you who are subscribers continue to support the journal till it becomes self-sustaining. On our part, I shall continue to try and improve the quality and reach of the journal with each issue.

T. B. Subba

Editor

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in Meghalaya

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Community Participation in Forest Management in Meghalaya

L. CAJEE, H. J. SYIEMLIEH & UBAHUNLANG LYNGDOH TMAR

Introduction

The concept of 'Community Forest Management' is recent. In fact this concept came from the people themselves. There were communities called tribes in today's parlance, who lived symbiotically with forests for hundred of years. But the concept received acceptance of scholars only when the so-called scientific management of forests failed miserably and the only way the forest ecology could perhaps be restored and regenerated was by using the wisdom lying in societies that practised community forest management for centuries.

The presence of community forests in the form of sacred groves and village forests has been an integral part of Khasi society. Most of these forests have been named according to their functions and purposes. They are locally called *Law Kyntang* or *Law Adong* or *Law Lyngdoh*, *Law Shnong*, *Law Raij*, *Law Sumar*, *Law Kur*, etc. in the Khasi and Jaiñtia Hill districts of Meghalaya. *Law Kyntang* is a sanctified sacred grove where all forms of extraction from the forest is strictly prohibited. Collection of certain medicinal leaves, herbs and undergrowths are allowed on exceptional grounds and restricted to personal use only. Any form of commercial exploitation is prohibited. Such forests are managed by a Lyngdoh (or priest) of the village or community. *Law Adong* is a restricted forest where only certain and very limited form of exploitation is permitted such as trimming and cutting of dry twigs and branches that can be used as a fuel for domestic use and not for selling. Permission is granted by the executive committee of the *durbar* (village council) to fell certain trees for community needs such as construction or repair of community hall, school and religious buildings and for such other

Dr. L. Cajee is Senior Lecturer, Dr. H. J. Syiemlieh is Reader, and Mr. Ubahunlang Lyngdoh Tmar is Research Scholar at the Department of Geography, NEHU, Shillong.

purposes as approved by the council. *Law Lyngdoh* is a sacred grove maintained by a Lyngdoh for certain rituals, rites and ceremonies. This is also a sanctified grove where hardly any extraction is allowed except on very exceptional cases such as those used during rituals, ceremonies, festivals etc. This type of community forest is similar to *Law Adong*. *Law Shnong* is a village forest where collection of firewood etc. is regulated by the village council. These forests are used in times of need such as death of any member of the village, for repair of houses destroyed by calamities like fire and tornadoes. Also dry twigs for firewood, for annual feasts and festivals etc. may be allowed to be extracted from such forests. *Law Raij* is a forest that belongs to a community. Here the utilisation of the forest is done with the mutual understanding of the villagers falling within the same community. Such forests may be entered for any need of wood or timber that is related to the whole community. *Law Sumar* is a forest that is taken care of by a particular clan or community. In such a forest only trees which are of commercial value are raised and are taken care of till they are fully mature. In case any member of the clan or community urgently needs support, the executive committee of the clan/community may decide on the matter. If the decision is in favour of supporting the needy member, matured trees are cut and sold to meet the crisis. The number of trees that are cut depends on the magnitude of need. *Law Kur* is a forest that belongs to and is managed by a particular clan. All resources that are extracted from such forests are shared by all the clan families. Here also the commercially viable trees are raised and when matured are cut and sold. The seniormost male member of the clan then distributes the money to all the clan families. In certain instances the whole forest is leased for timber extraction. The leased period depends on the size, maturity and value of the forest. The money received is also distributed equally.

With the spread of Christianity, growth of population with a rate of about 30 percent (2001 Census.) and other waves of modernization, most of these forests are under threat, especially the sacred groves. Already many sacred groves have vanished but there is no proper information regarding number and size of sacred groves present in the state of Meghalaya, except an estimated total figure of about 1000 sq.kms. (Forest Dept, Govt. of Meghalaya). Most of the present community forests are now village forests in which the utilization of trees and other non-timber and minor forest products is regulated by the village administration.

There are three major institutions responsible for forest management

in the state of Meghalaya. These are (a) the State Forest and Environment Department, (b) the Autonomous District Councils and, (c) community. Approximately more than 95% of the area under trees are currently under community management and control (*Down to Earth*, March 15, 2002).

Table 1: Status of Forest Cover in Meghalaya (in Sq.kms.)

| Geographical area | Total forest cover (FSI 2000) | Recorded forest cover (as per State Govt. report) | Government Forest* | Community used / Controlled Forest |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|---|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| 22,429 | 15,633 | 9496 | 903 | 8593 |

Source: Extracted from *Status of Forest cover in North East India* by the MoEF, NERO, Shillong, 2000.

*Government Forests are classified or recorded under three categories, viz., Reserved Forest, Protected Forest and Unclassed Forest.

The forest administration in India is governed at the national level by the Indian Forest Act of 1927, Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972, the Forest Conservation Act of 1980 and the recent Biodiversity Act of 2002. Along with these Acts there are the Forest Policies of 1952 and 1988, which are related to management of forest as stipulated by the Central Government. In Meghalaya, even though the State Forest Department is one of the forest management institutions, its area of control is very less (see Table 1) which is, of course, due to the nature of land ownership practised as per customary laws of people who own the same. Most of the remaining areas are managed by the respective District Councils (as per the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India) of Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills, under the United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District (Management & Control of Forest Act of 1958), and also the Garo Hills under the Garo Hills District Forest Act of 1958.

Study Area

The study areas for the present paper are under the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya. The village of Mawsmai is situated in a small depression with undulating hillocks covered with grass and patches of relict forest. It is about 3.5 kms south of Sohra, which is commonly known as Cherrapunjee (about 57 kms from Shillong), situated on the southern edge of the Shillong plateau. The nature of topography and the climatic conditions of the village have changed considerably and it wears a barren look today. The geology of the

area is composed of sandstone, limestone and other sedimentary rocks and formations.

About 25 kms southwest of Shillong lies the village Mawphlang at an altitude of 1842 metres s.l within the latitudes $25^{\circ} 34' N$ and longitudes $91^{\circ} 56' E$. Mawphlang is made up of 7 villages. A headman represents each village and all these villages are under the Mawphlang Lyngdohship. Topographically, it is situated on the central highlands of the Shillong plateau. The village has a relatively undulating slope.

The economies of both the areas are agrarian in nature. Historically, both villages are centres of importance from religious, economic, social and administrative points of view.

Forest Management

A. Mawsmi

There are now three community forests and one clan forest within the jurisdiction of Mawsmi village. All these forests were previously 'sacred groves'. The reason for their transformation into village or community forests is believed to be the fact that none of the villagers knows the various nuances and intricacies related to the rituals meant for sacred groves.

The four forests are as follows:

- a. Khlaw Ramjadong is situated adjacent to the village with an area of about 150 ha. It belongs to the Khongwir clan.
- b. Ka Law Blei Buh is a village protected or community forest and is spread over an area of 80 hectares.
- c. Mawlong Syiem is also a community protected forest located west of the village. The *Krem Pubon* (cave) is also located within this forest under a mount made of limestone. It covers an area of about 120 hectares.
- d. Finally, Ka Law Adong is a village protected or community forest and has a total area of about 200 ha. It is also close to the Mawlong Syiem forest.

Most of these forests are found sitting on limestone and sandstone beds. These forests are under the supervision and protection of village administration. Villagers are strictly prohibited from cutting trees and collecting

firewood from these forests. The Village Council allows one to collect firewood only from the forest, which faces southwards near the Mawlong Syiem forest. The line of demarcation has been on the basis of the nature of the terrain, and this regulated forest is in the lower slopes. The forest in the periphery of the Mawlong Syiem is stunted in growth compared to the core of the forest. The vegetation of the forest ranges from sub-tropical to mixed deciduous. The name Mawlong Syiem is derived from the place, which is a flat surface at the top of the hillock, above the cave and where in the past rituals were performed to propitiate the deity of the forest.

The nature of terrain at Mawlong Syiem forest is undulating with seasonal streams and rivulets running down the hill. These streams are tapped for drinking and for other domestic purposes by the people staying near the forest area. There are several persons in Mawsmat who collect water from these streams using iron pipes. The volume of water in these streams varies seasonally. The areas surrounding the forest are mostly hillocks with green pastures. Just on the border between the forest and the grassy hillocks are boundaries marked by a pile of stones in conical shape. Sometimes on top of this pile of stones are small boxes, which look like a miniature house. They seem to indicate that some kind of rituals have been performed by those who still hold the traditional Khasi beliefs. These rituals are performed mostly for protecting the boundary.

Some grazing activity by the side of the forest is noticed but grazing inside the forest is not allowed. There are also footpaths inside the forest, which are used by the people, especially during the winter season. These paths are used by those who cut and collect wood in spite of the prohibitions. Such pilferage is sporadic. According to the norms of the village administration, not even a branch is allowed to cut. A general rule applies that anyone found collecting or cutting wood from the forest is punished by imposing a fine of Rs.100 per person and the one who gives information regarding theft is given Rs.70.

As per rules of the village administration, the cutting and felling of trees from the forest are allowed only when a contingency arises within the village such as weddings, funerals, village feasts etc. The village administration gives the consent to one of the members who looks after the forest to identify the place in the forest for the trees to be cut and collected.

Fire is a major menace to the forest especially during the dry season.

As the forest extends up to the village the possibility of forest fires reaching the village is high. To avoid such disasters the village council arranges to clear and burn the dry grass at the boundary of the forest.

The quarry lies to the north of the forest. The possibility of it extending into the forest seems unrealistic since its extension is towards the opposite direction. To the west of the quarry is another cave with a small forest patch surrounding it. This area is being preserved possibly due to its potential for tourism in future.

B. Mawphlang

The presence of the sacred grove has put Mawphlang on the tourist map of the world. The condition of the grove is extremely good, as compared to other well-known groves within the state. The origin of this grove can be traced back to the inception of the village itself. There is a folktale on the origin of the grove. Briefly, the tale is like this. The earliest or first inhabitants were the Iangblah clan members who trace their origin from the present Jaintia Hills and who set up their first settlement not far away from the grove in a place known as Laitsohma. As time passed, other clans came from different parts of the state as well as outside the state and settled there. The clan called Lyngdoh Mawphlang, which traced its origin to Baligaon, which is now under Assam, was one such clan to settle here. Other clans and families who migrated to the area once decided to perform a ritual in order to obtain divine sanction to their rightful ownership. The ritual was performed by taking an oak tree sapling from the original village to the area where the present sacred grove is located and planted there. After this a ritual was performed at the oak tree seeking a divine answer to which clans would be the rightful owners.

From the time the first oak tree was planted, an area was demarcated for the grove to honour the deity, U Ryngkew U Basa, for his response and continued guidance in any matters related to the welfare of the village and its inhabitants.

The grove has now been divided into 3 units, namely, *law Iangblah*, *law Lyngdoh*, and *law Nongkynrih*. Like the *Law Raji* (community forest) and *Law Adong* (Restricted Forest), this grove belongs to the Lyngdohship with the exception of the *law Iangblah*, which is managed and preserved by the Iangblah clan. No clan can however claim ownership to any given part of the grove. Adjacent to the grove is a forest designated as *Law Synran*,

where trees and other forest products are allowed to be utilised by the villagers with prior permission of the village council. The grove is well endowed with a variety of plants species (NAEB, NEHU, 1996). It is a treasure house for those interested in plant studies. There are many endangered plant species present in this particular forest.

Rituals are still practised within as well as outside the groves, particularly those related to protection and prosperity of the Lyngdohship. There are other rituals practised by the other clans, and those rituals are related to the needs of the particular clans.

The Mawphlang Lyngdohship is made up of 7 villages, namely, Mawphlang, Mawngap, Lyngkien, Mawmyrsiang, Ryngiong, Lad-Mawpen and Ur-ur, in which each village is represented by a *Rangbah Shnong*. The Lyngdoh is the head of the *durbar* and is elected for life term from among the four clans, namely, Iangblah, Sohliya, Kharshiing, and Kharmujai. The Lyngdoh is assisted by four ministers known as Lyngdoh Myntri who are elected from among the four clans for life term. Another committee composed of 12 individuals is elected from any clan present within the Lyngdohship. These elected individuals become members of the Executive Council of the village for a life time period. At the village level, the organization and administration are based on traditional practices with certain modifications to suit certain changes.

The management of the grove is undertaken by the village council of the Mawphlang, which includes the seven villages. In matters related to the management and preservation of the grove, the Lyngdoh has imposed various rules and regulations which have been there since the inception of the grove. The restrictions are not equally effective in the community forest because the need for firewood, cultivation and house construction has increased due to increase in population of the villages within the Lyngdohship. The restrictions on the grove are more stringent and people are scared to enter the forest without the consent of the Lyngdoh.

There are demarcated areas where collection of herbs and other minor forest products is allowed with prior permission from the village council of the village. The felling of trees is done only if there are urgent needs for the welfare of the village and this is also decided by the village council with the approval of the Lyngdoh. Trees are usually felled from a nearby pine forest adjacent to the grove called *Law Synran*.

Conclusion

The practice of forest management is an integral part of the village tradition. The institutionalisation of forest management by the village council is strongly upheld for protecting the customs and traditions connected with community forests. Such management practices cater to the needs of the village in the form of NTFPs (non timber forest produce), MFPs (minor forest produce) and also timber depending on the nature and urgency of the need. Such extraction is normally done by the villagers after getting clearance from the village council. However, it appears that management of these forests has become difficult nowadays. The major reason for such difficulty is rise in population, which has put unprecedented pressure on forest resources. Another important reason is the impact of Christianity, as Christians tend to take the customary laws rather unseriously.

From the perspective of development, the sacred groves have an enormous potential especially for tourism. Most of these groves, especially Mawphlang and Mawsmai, are among the oldest and best known groves in Meghalaya. They are known as relict forests and are a window to the past of the Khasis both biologically and culturally. Thus a holistic approach to development of these groves may not only improve the livelihood of the Khasis but may also protect them from unwanted exploitation. There is general reluctance among the people to incorporate the national policies of forest management. This is perhaps why the people are highly doubtful of the Joint Forest Management, as there is a lot of scepticism about its operational implications. This scepticism may have emanated from encounters with previous projects funded by government agencies. They are uncertain about the partnership in management of resources and they fear that they might end up losing their rights over their forests. A lot depends on the attitude and approach of the government departments in executing development schemes for the people.

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Book Reviews

Agrarian Structures and Land Reforms in Assam by M. N. Karna, North-Eastern Hill University Publications, Shillong and Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2004, 103p, Rs. 250/-.

A brief review of peasant movements in India from 1860 to 1950 clearly reflects the changing trend of agrarian structures and land tenure/land reforms in the country. It identifies the changing features of Indian agrarian societies, which show more of discontinuity than continuity.

Initially, the East India Company's trade with India was insignificant. The decisive moment came in 1765, when the financial sovereignty over Bengal, Orissa, and Bihar went to the hands of the Company with the concession for levying taxes in exchange for a sum of Rs. 2.6 million per annum. In 1793, Cornwallis' Permanent Settlement brought a final regulation on the procedure for levying taxes, which led to decisive changes in land tenure. The British did all this as if the land belonged to the state and was thus at their disposal.

The objective of the British was to establish their commercial interests firmly in India. Since the textile industry played an important role in the beginning of industrialization in England, very large amounts of cheap products manufactured by mechanical looms were exported to India and this soon led to a collapse of her home textile industry. A large number of weavers became unemployed. In order to secure a basis for existence, they migrated to rural areas and tried to lease land for cultivation. The monopoly over the means of livelihood soon shifted to the hands of *zamindars* who were able to extort more and more taxes as the demand for land increased. This led to peasant indebtedness and even loss of their occupancy and usufructory rights. This was compounded by rise in prices of agricultural produce between 1860 and 1950. The landlords asserted their proprietary rights by evicting tenants while the latter claimed, and were occasionally granted occupancy rights. Over the century, the peasants' ability to resist landlords increased and landlordism stood considerably weakened by the end of British rule.

Consequences of the changes in the land tenure brought about by the Permanent Settlement undermined the rural stability. More and more cultivators became indebted, lost their occupancy rights, and dropped in status

to tenants-at-will or agricultural labourers. On the other hand, the wealth of *zamindars* increased on account of the income they earned from the difference between the amount of taxes and the rentals, increase in cultivated areas, money lending, and expropriation of debtors. In the course of time, the *zamindari* areas were characterized by marked difference in wealth, power, and prospects in life between the two distinct rural classes.

More liberal *ryotwari* system was introduced in Madras, Bombay, and Assam. Under this system, the government claimed property rights to all of the land and allotted the same to cultivators with the proviso that they paid taxes. They could use, sell, mortgage, bequeath, and lease the land as long as they paid taxes. Otherwise, they were evicted. This direct tax relation between the government and the cultivators was meant to prevent sub tax collectors. It sought to increase purchasing power, and, widen the market for British products in rural India. Taxes were pre-determined and fixed in a temporary settlement for a period of thirty years. It was revised and the tenure was extended.

Communal rights to land were common in North and North-West India. This system ideally fitted with the *Mahalwari* system. Tax was imposed on the village community, which distributed the same among the cultivators. Everyone was liable for the others' arrears. A village inhabitant - the *lambardar* - collected the tax and remitted it to the state. Tax assessment was also revised at intervals.

Over a period of time the *ryotwari* region was no longer a self-cultivator area. More than one third of the land was leased and in many districts more than two thirds. Indeed, it was not possible to transfer land to the people who were not from the locality, but the result was that landed property became concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy people, whereas the others lost their rights. A constantly increasing number of people became landless. While in the middle of the nineteenth century there were no landless persons, in 1931 and 1945, respectively 33 and 70 million landless labourers were registered. Others succeeded in renting some land, but on less favourable terms. Share tenancy increased greatly.

After Independence, economic situation in rural India changed very differently. A large part of the population remained poor and landless. A complicated relationship between landlords, cultivators, and landless emerged based on mutual rights and obligations.

Assam is a miniature replica of the Indian subcontinent. It has noticeable

diversities and variations in demographic and economic characteristics. It has a wide range of human responses to natural-ecological settings and historical compulsions. Within the confines of this region, a variety of people with diverse ethnic origins, representing different racial strands, speaking different languages and professing diverse religions have migrated and settled. The modes of living of the people, their lifestyles, and material basis of culture and consumption behaviours are diverse.

There are communities in the valleys whose agricultural calendar keeps them busy most of the year while those in the hills and mountains raise a single *jhum* crop. Then there are communities who are partly agrarian and partly dependent on forest produce. In the river valleys of the region, particularly the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, the peasant communities live in a state of dynamic equilibrium with nature and are surrounded on all sides by tribal groups. The varied ecological-environmental settings in the region encourage a variety of agricultural practices and cropping patterns to emerge. The natural factors also influence the human choices in two crucial areas—land and its quality and water and its availability. These greatly influenced their responses and settlements.

A littoral and East Indian model of the Asiatic monsoon regime with dominant wet conditions prevail over a longer duration in the year, and demand prolonged spell of work in the fields in North-East India. In this wet region paddy has emerged as the most dominant crop. The diversities in the crop ecology and the resultant cropping pattern engendered differences in the social division of labour, the absorption of women in the agricultural labour force, in the quantum of agricultural work and leisure available to the agrarian communities. Female labour force participation rates varied strikingly between the hill-mountain and plains-valley communities.

In an area like Assam, with a variegated politico-administrative set-up, there are significant inter-regional differences in the landownership patterns and tenurial relations. In fact, the British policy, like in the rest of the country, was so designed as to accommodate multiple forms of landownership in the hills, mountains and plains regions, depending on agro-climatology, social custom and local tradition. These types of landownership evolved in the course of social history of the various peoples within the niches provided by their respective ecology.

It is in this background that the book under review assumes significance. This book is an outcome of a series of three lectures by Professor Karna

delivered as Professor H.K. Barpujari Endowment Lectures at Dibrugarh University, Assam. It is an attempt to study agrarian structure and land reforms on all India level. Karna raises the issues of peasant mobilisation, policy decisions and their implementation in a broad temporal framework. He has also traced the peasant uprisings such as Phulaguri uprising and No-Rent agitation. He has been successful in providing wider canvas on which land reforms in India can be better understood.

He provides a broad assessment of the land reforms adopted since Independence. With the abolition of intermediary interests the ownership of land is broader based and the erstwhile superior tenants acquired a higher social status.

Karna argues that while abolition of intermediaries brought about a measure of uniformity in the agrarian system of Assam, tenancy reforms provided a new confidence to the disgruntled tenants. He states that a preponderance of tenants with virtually no ownership rights on land characterises the Assamese agrarian structure. He adds that this has been further complicated by the religio-feudal establishments like *Satras* and *Maths*.

Under the prevailing socio-economic condition in the country no tangible progress can be expected in the field of land reforms. Wherever effective mobilisation of beneficiaries has taken place the result has been positive. The beneficiaries of land reforms, especially sharecroppers and landless labourers, are crippled by social and economic disadvantages. By tradition they are inarticulate, passive and unorganised. They do not constitute a homogenous social and economic category. Hence, a deliberate attempt at mobilisation is needed to generate an appropriate political and administrative climate for implementation of land reform measures. Such a change leads to better implementation of agrarian laws.

Those who believe in a liberal market-oriented path of development may come to accept the necessity of enforcing any package of land reform measures to foster sustainable agricultural growth, a pre-condition for rapid industrialisation and steady economic development. Undoubtedly an outmoded agrarian structure characterised by absentee ownership, widespread tenancies, persisting religio-feudal land control, and scattered holdings is a grave impediment to the optimum utilisation of land and water and to the adoption of improved technology and modern farming practices in the otherwise agriculturally well-endowed plains districts of Assam. Thus, the

need of the hour is to complete the unfinished task of reforms, which should include abolition of absentee landownership, identification and protection of *adhiars* (sharecroppers) effective and efficient enforcement of ceiling laws, speedy distribution of acquired surplus land, and consolidation of holdings and provision of supporting facilities to enforce minimum standards of cultivation. If these steps are integrated with development programmes related to surface irrigation and ground water, soil conservation, social forestry and such other activities, Assam should be able to come out of the vicious cycle of poverty and backwardness.

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The Great Earthquake of 1897 in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills translated by Basil Moris, North-Eastern Hill University Publications, Shillong, 2003, pp.40 + xiii, Price : Rs. 95.00 (SB), US\$3.

Like any other eyewitness account of an event of importance, this one by the Reverend Robert Evans, who was a missionary to the Mission Field in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills between 1878 and 1901, makes interesting and fascinating reading, as indeed anything about the Great Earthquake of 1897 is. With the epicentre in the Shillong Plateau, and with a magnitude of 8.5, a report of the Meteorological Department says: "It is one of the major earthquakes in the seismic history of the world. Lasted about 2.5 minutes and completely ruined an area of 150,000 square miles and was felt over an area of one and three quarter of a million square miles. Caused landslides, fissures, vents and disrupted normal communication line. It was followed by a large number of after-shocks. The epicentre tract was within a cot-shaped area covering the entire Shillong Plateau". The severest shock might not have lasted for less than one minute but the devastation was complete.

To the Welsh Presbyterian Mission, originally named the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission, the event was of particular significance as the areas most severely affected were those within the Sohra (Cherrapunji) area, where the Mission had established the first church and schools. One may understand the concern that the 'Mother Church' must have felt when news of the devastation reached England. The Reverend Dr. John Roberts,

whose name will always be linked with the development of Khasi literature, was in his country at that time. He had, in fact, just been nominated Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Mission of Wales. The scene of devastation that they saw on their return, with most familiar landmarks beyond recognition, and roads and paths on which they had often travelled drastically altered, was almost beyond belief. The Deputy Commissioner of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills at that time, Mr. J. C. Arbuthnot, whose report to the Government of India was perhaps the most detailed and graphic of the reports submitted, bears out the fact that no comparable natural disaster has ever taken place, perhaps for centuries! This is what he had to say: "In my tour of the district, I have been much struck by the way in which the ancient Khasi monoliths, often of immense size, the antiquity of which unknown, have been levelled with the ground and in many cases snapped off two, three and four feet from the base."

Eyewitness accounts agree that during the two minutes or so when the full force of the earthquake was felt it was impossible for anyone to remain standing. It was said that two women cyclists who were riding past the old All Saint's Cathedral fell down and from where they lay, they saw the church building collapse. The Chief Commissioner of Assam and his wife, who were preparing to go for a ride, had a narrow escape when their residence, the Government House, met a similar fate within minutes of their leaving the porch!

Although Shillong was well within the area most affected, it got off comparatively lightly, with only 23 deaths including Mr. McCabe, the Inspector General of Police, who was buried under the debris of his bungalow on the near side of the Umkhrah River opposite the Polo Ground. It is worth mentioning that the memorial that was erected on the spot has unfortunately been built over by unauthorised constructions during the past few years, which is a stark reminder to the state government to take more interest in what happens in the city than what it has been doing, in order that historical sites are not obliterated as has been done in this and other cases.

By contrast, it was the area closer to Sohra that was more grievously affected, the reason being in the nature of the topography, with steep slopes and cliffs everywhere. The village of Laitiam in the deep valley below the Mawsmat falls accounted for 86 deaths, all lost when the overhanging cliff broke off to overwhelm the habitations below. With these casualties, the Sohra Syiemship lost a total of 237 lives. The Khyrim Syiemship lost 146 lives mainly in the villages on its southern slopes.

Literally, earth shaking events such as this one do arouse strong reaction, and impressions upon those who experienced them. All of them suggest that the earthquake was a form of devil. Retribution for the wickedness of men, which at this point of time may conflict with the belief held by many, in a merciful, forgiving God. Who would extend His compassion not only to His noblest creation, Man, but even to animals, as may be seen in the Book of the Prophet Jonah (Ch.4:13).

Over the next few decades, however, there would be many eyewitness accounts left to various people in the form of newspaper articles, or even in poems published by individual authors, as by the Reverend Morkha Joseph, many of which bring to mind the destruction that overwhelmed places like Shella, the wealthiest village in the Khasi Hills at the time, but today reduced to a shadow of its original self. The once prosperous village of Shella Circle lost a total of 217 lives of which 117 were from the Shella village itself. This village, which was perhaps the most prosperous in the district at that time, with a population in 3658 in the Census of 1891 never recovered from this disaster having been reduced within minutes to a shadow of its former condition.

As one goes through Reverend Evans' account, one will appreciate that primarily, Robert Evans prepared this account for the Mission Board which would want to know how the earthquake affected the new church in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and more especially upon the believers. This account would appear to have been a vindication of the faith that God would not abandon His own in times of crises, but give them strength and ever greater faith, as one can see from the short personal experiences of local pastors and their flocks. What will impress the reader even more is the effect upon the young, who never lost their faith but carried on in the belief that was the time when they would declare how their faith had sustained them even at the worst moments of their young lives.

The account left by the Reverend Robert Evans will therefore be better appreciated if also read against the background as provided by official records.

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