

Meghalaya

YOURS TO DISCOVER

Mrs. C. T. SANGMA



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This is perhaps the first book of its kind in Meghalaya that highlighted the immense tourism potentials of the entire North East Region, covering an entire gamut of interests from the bounties of nature to the religious, culture & traditional practices of the people living in this obscure part of the world called the North-East India, the tales of yore in the form of myths and legends and their continued influence on the lives and practices of the simple tribal folks.

This book is not only about Meghalaya but about the entire region, the so called family of "Seven Sisters and one Brother".

Special emphasis has been given to Meghalaya covering a wide range of information a tourist need to know. From the entry into Meghalaya through Guwahati in Assam, information on the hotels and other hospitality services with contact numbers, where to eat, where to go, and above all what to expect in each of the tour circuits chalked out in such a way that the visitor will have a fair knowledge of what to expect and see in a given particular circuit. This way the visitor can selectively visit only the places he is interested in and save a lot of time, energy and money.

In short, this is a compact very comprehensive useful and informative book that will greatly benefit the visiting tourists. Not only that, even the Higher Secondary School & Colleges students can use this as reference and General knowledge book bank.

The book also gives a good insight into each and every state of the North-East through the eyes of a discerning tourist concluding with a packaged marathon tour of the entire North-East in a span of 30 days starting from Guwahati in Assam and ending at Gangtok in Sikkim.

A must have book for every visitor.

Rs. 595/-



Mrs. C.T.Sangma is currently the Director Fisheries in the Gov't of Meghalaya. Born and brought up in Tura, she completed her Schooling from Christian Girls High School, and graduated with Distinction in 1972 from Tura Gov't College.

She entered the Meghalaya State Civil Services from 1975 and since had served in various capacities. She was the Director Tourism, Meghalaya, Shillong from October 2000 to April 2003. Prior to her joining to the Tourism department, she has served as the Director of Arts & Cultures, Meghalaya, Shillong.

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Mr. C. T. Sangma


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FOREWORD

Dedication

Dedicated to our beloved daughter Mrs. Gracy Hlychho Sangma and her husband Mr. Blair Michael Jamieson, who are in far away country and also sons Abraham, Benjamin and Andrew

FOREWORD

Meghalaya is a beautiful state, there's no doubt about it, many say so, and so everyone agrees too. The Meghalayan panorama has been exquisitely carved out by the hands of nature; only we do not take too much notice of it and had not been able to exploit its potentials, nor improve upon it.

On many occasions, when I was in some other place of the country, in course of our interactions with other officers, after knowing that I am a Meghalayan working in Shillong, they use to say with a tinge of envy in their tones, 'How lucky you are!' and if I ask why so, the invariable answer is 'because Shillong is a very beautiful city.'

Lucky? Well, I have never in my life thought that way, I don't even feel so, but of course Shillong is a beautiful city I always agree!

Then, during my brief stint as Director Land Records and Surveys in the late 1990s too, in one of our regular meetings in Shillong with the high officials of Bangladesh, one officer remarked, "Allah had been very kind to Meghalaya to bless it with so much natural beauty and such cool bracing climate. You are indeed a very lucky people." Slow to catch what he means. I asked, Is that so?

He continued, " Out there in Bangladesh, scorching heat beat down on us and we suffer one natural calamity after another, but its not so in your state. Sometimes we use to look up to the green hills of Meghalaya and envy the people living there."

Well, well,well, this is how some people from other places feel about Meghalaya and its people, only we ourselves are not aware or do not care much about it.

Mg (Endowed with so much natural beauty) the state has so much scope and tremendous potentials for the development and promotion of tourism in the state. Sadly, however, due to our own ignorance and perhaps indifference to the development works, beset with various constraints both financial and administrative, the state had not been able to forge much ahead, for a number of reasons.)

1. Meghalaya being an integral part of the North East region that comprised of 8 (eight) states, has always remained in the shadow of her sister state Assam and has not been able to break away to carve out a niche for itself.)
2. Being a landlocked state, the state had suffered from lack of good communications network system.) The re-opening of the *Umroi* airport 31 kms north-east of Shillong, for small ATR planes, connected to Kolkata six days a week except on Tuesdays, had to a great extent eased the problems and greatly reduced the commutation time. However, the timings of its flight are erratic and hence, commuters still prefer to take off from L.G.B airport at Guwahati in Assam which is 128 kms away.

3. Weak and ineffective marketing strategy cannot bring out the tremendous tourism potentials of the state to the fore. While it is no secret that most people know about Cherrapunjee and Shillong but hardly anything about the state where these two places we can easily assume that this is perhaps due to the fact that our publicity system is not enough, it is weak, ineffective and perhaps even outdated too.
4. Some of the most common things that any visitor to the state would like to carry back with them as souvenirs like the ordinary post cards, cassettes or cds with detail informations or the folders and brochures are also not within easy reach of the visiting tourists. Even the much needed guide books or the city maps or the tour circuit maps are not available. With such a prevailing scenario, the visitors are often left for themselves to find their way around much to their chagrin and discomfiture.
5. Absence of tourism information centres in strategic points and their complete nonexistence in most of the popular tourist spots, leave the visitors unaware of the rich and diverse interests that the state can offer.
6. The services of trained Tourist Guides are also not readily available as till now only a few have been trained as State Level Tourist Guides which is not at all adequate. From year to year the inflow of visiting tourists has been

increasing steadily, it is difficult for a small band of trained guides to cater to the increasing demand for the services of the trained guides.

7. The number of N.G.O.s engaged in tourism promotion activities are pitifully small. Many visitors have complained that in the absence of advice or guides from these N.G.O.s, they are left wondering where to go or what to do as there is no one to help them in these matters. Many lament that they have come with such high expectations but have been left high and dry not knowing where to go and what to do.
8. Frequent political instability in the state often breaking into serious law and order problems is also a major deterrant; for, after all the tourists come to have a good time and not to be caught in the middle of bandh calls, picketing and curfews and forced to remain cooped up in their hotel rooms for days together. Now, with the ban on bandhs and other agitational programmes, in a landmark judgement passed by the Hon. High Court in a very recent case may turn the tables around and the visitors can expect to have some quality time in the state without interruptions.
9. Total or near total lack of awareness among the masses of the tourism potentials and the fringe benefits that could come along with development and promotion of tourism in the state and people's indifference has hampered many efforts taken by the Gov't. If tourism is to flourish, the attitude of the people to the

visitors too should be pleasant and accomodating. Extensive awareness campaigns are necessary to educate the rural mass to adept to the changing needs.

10. Lack of vision and mission while formulating plans for development in addition to the perpetual financial crunch for so long had hampered the exploitation of its great potentials to the optimum.
11. Above all these the state is yet to evolve a workable tourism policy, without which, it is just like groping in the dark without any sense of direction. Until then any efforts taken however noble and well meaning they may be; will be infructuous.

There is no denying the fact that the great potentials properly tapped and exploited to the optimum, more benefits like generating employment for the educated unemployeds, improvement of social and economic status of people engaged in the industry etc. will be created and the people will greatly benefit out of that.

I have written this book mainly for the benefit of the visiting tourists, but no doubt the Higher Level School and College students also will it find it useful for their assignments and projects on any tourism related topics.

The information has been provided here zone wise and the tour circuit wise. Tour circuits have been divided according to the interests they offer, in one direction at a time. Careful selection of these tour circuits will help the visitors to selectively explore places according to their preferences.

Herein I have endeavoured to chronicle places of interest, legends and folklores, social customs and practices as a natural corollary to profile the state in a more informative way. The critical appraisal of the potentials of tourism in the region, is aimed at projecting the state as it is, with little or no exaggeration whatsoever, to try to help mitigate some of the niggling common problems that the tourists encounter while in the state. Attempts have been made to provide all required information as accurate as possible, discrepancies if any will be purely incidental and not deliberate on my part.

I do hope that anyone having access to this book will surely be able to enrich himself with the knowledge of our state and the prevailing customs and practices. Efforts have also been made to enlighten on the common tales and legends that dominate and influence the life of the simple tribal folks and also to include important basic facts of the entire North East region with some details about all the other seven states as well.

Any feed backs, in the form of constructive criticisms, suggestions and advice for improvement will be highly appreciated.

C .T. Sangma

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C.T. Sangma

CONTENTS

Foreword

Acknowledgements

1. **The East—End Himalayas** 1-10
2. **Meghalaya Profile** 11-38
 - Land
 - People, their traditional beliefs and practices
 - The Hynniewtrep
 - The Jaintias
 - The Garos
 - The Garo traditional practices and beliefs
3. **Festivals of Meghalaya** 39-57
 - Caves and caverns
 - Flora, fauna and avian life
4. **Visiting Meghalaya** 58-84
 - Shillong the capital city
 - Some dos and don'ts
 - Some facility services
5. **Tour Circuits of Meghalaya** 85-174
 - Eastern Zone-Khasi-Jaintia Hills
 - Western Zone-Garo Hills
6. **Other Neighbours of Meghalaya** 175-222
7. **North East in 30 days** 223-230

1

THE EAST — END HIMALAYAS

Area	: 2,65,000 sq.kms.
Population	: 3,90,35,583 as per 2001 census
Latitude	: 25.8° – 28.0° north
Longitude	: 88.30° – 94.30° east

The extreme east end portion of the Himalayas and its foothills is a land of great extreme diversities. This side of the land because of its location in the north eastern end of the country is also known as the North East India. It measures roughly 2,65,000 sq kms in size, and inhabited by a population of 390,35,583 as per the last census taken in 2001; a mixed population of races from different stocks and origin. It is bounded by the imposing wall of the great Himalayan ranges and China in the north, Myanmar in the east and Bangladesh to the south and west.

This north east region was once a composite state of Assam with its capital at Shillong, till it is fragmented

into several smaller states. Long long ago, in the bygone days, the entire present north-east region was once a powerful kingdom ruled by the Ahom kings. Their capital city was Pragjyotishpur, built along the banks of mighty Brahmaputra. That Pragjyotishpur of the olden days is now known as Guwahati, which is the capital city of Assam, the biggest city in the north east. Also because of its strategic location with good connectivity, Guwahati is considered the gateway to all the 7(seven) states of the North-East.

Today the region has been fragmented into seven different states due to political, racial and linguistic reasons.

These fragmented seven states that comprise the east-end Himalayan region or the North-East India, in clockwise direction are:

1. Assam, with its capital at Dispur, Guwahati;
2. Arunachal Pradesh, with its capital city at Itanagar;
3. Nagaland, its capital established at Kohima, then
4. Manipur, with its capital at Imphal;
5. Mizoram, with its capital located at Aizawl;
6. Tripura in the west with its capital at Agartala; and
7. Meghalaya with its capital city at Shillong.

This conglomeration of seven states is also sometimes called "**The Seven Sisters**" in a more affectionate and intimate way. To these seven states is

now added the state of Sikkim, with its capital city at Gangtok, as an integral part of the North-East, thus making it now a family of seven sisters and one brother, Sikkim being the lone brother. Sikkim is however not contiguous to any of the North- Eastern states being separated by Bhutan.

Geographically spread over 25.8° to 28.00° north latitude and 88.30° to 94.30° east longitude with vast variations in altitude, the entire eastern Himalayan region make up one great mass of extreme diversities. It extends from the Tropic of Cancer to North Temperate Zones, creating wide variations in climatic conditions which in turn influence the ecological balance of plant and animal lives. Owing to these extreme variations from mild, mild moderates to extremes in climatic conditions as well as vast variations in altitude, the region is enviably one of the richest areas in the world in bio-diversity.

As one of the most abundantly endowed areas by nature, the region has immense potentials for development and promotion of tourism especially in lines of eco-tourism, as well as the outdoor adventure sport activities. There is very few manmade attractions in the whole region, but the abundance of its natural beauty more than compensate for the lack of it. The sky is the limit for activities on diverse interests for those passionate about nature. From the majestic snow capped mountain peaks in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, the sun soaked great plains of Assam, the steep rugged picturesque terrains of Nagaland and Mizoram, the land steeped in history like Tripura and Manipur to the rain

drenched misty hills of Meghalaya, the region is a mixed bag offering almost everything and something for everyone.

Sikkim in the extreme north west, located at a high altitude of the great Himalayan ranges, with its snow-capped mountain peaks and fast flowing rivers has the enviable *Mount Kanchenjunga*, in its territory, the 2nd highest mountain peak in the world. The numerous Buddhist temples and holy shrines with their majestic magnificent structures dotted across the whole state make it a holy state for Buddhism and a booming boost for Pilgrimage Tourism.

Assam the oldest state among the seven sisters is well known for being the home of the famous one horned rhino called the *gonda* by the locals being conserved at their own natural habitats at *Kaziranga* wild life sanctuary and National Park. It also has the mighty *Brahmaputra* river flowing from east to west, in its course creating the biggest inhabited riverine island in Asia, *Majuli Island*. Not only these, Assam is the sole producer of highly prized *muga* and *endi* silk handloom products too.

Arunachal Pradesh is proud to have the biggest and perhaps most magnificent Buddhist monastery in the world located at an altitude of 13, 714 ft above sea level at *Tawang*. The mythical creature abominable snowman *yeti* is believed to be found in these regions. Their woolen carpets, with the dragon designs are highly prized all over the world.

The woolen shawls of Nagaland with their exquisite designs and motifs, each of their 16 tribes having their

own distinctive colour combinations and designs are a great demand everywhere, the pride of every owner and the envy of their neighbors. The biggest war cemetery in the region relating to the World War II also is located in the heart of Kohima, the capital of Nagaland.

The state of Manipur was reportedly the pioneer of the royal game of polo. The highest topiary in the world nearly 70 ft tall and with 47 crowns is found near the town at Imphal, the capital city. One big attraction to Manipur is the inhabited floating islands on *Logtak* lake, the biggest lake in the region, and its extremely rich flora and fauna. Both Nagaland and Manipur states share the enigmatic *Dzouku* valley, sometimes called "the valley of flowers" where wild flowers of all kinds and hues bloom all year through. In winter the temperature goes down so low freezing the waters of the river that magnificent icicles form in the waterfalls.

The southernmost region of the North-East, also the land of steep rugged terrains is state of Mizoram. The hills in this part of the region stand almost perpendicular and reaching any place on top of the hills, (for the Mizo people like to settle on top of the hills) is an harrowing experience through spirally winding roads. Despite this handicap they are very hard working enough to get the distinction of achieving a near 100% literacy in the state, the 2nd highest in the country just behind Kerala state.

The land-locked state of Tripura at the extreme westernmost region of North-east is the only state among the seven sisters with a glorious historical background. Tripura was once a glorious kingdom of

the Maharajahs of the *Manikya* dynasty. The majestic palaces, the magnificent monuments and holy temples and shrines dedicated to many Hindu deities continue to remind and remain as relics of the glorious past.

Then finally, Meghalaya, one of the youngest states of the region holds the maximum number of records in various fields. It has in its territory not only one but two, wettest places in the world in 2nd and 3rd positions at *Mawsynram* and *Cherrapunjee* respectively. Besides this, the state has the maximum number of caves and caverns in the country many of them with magnificent stalagmites and stalactites, *Krem Kotsati*, *Krem Umlawan* at *Lumshnong* village getting the honour of being the longest and deepest cave in the sub-continent with a record length of 21.5 kms and nearly 90 m deep. The 2nd biggest riverine island *Nongkhnun* is also located in the state. To top it all the unique practice of our matrilineal system of inheritance put the womenfolk of the state at an enviable high position in society, a boon and a boost to womanhood.

(Demographically speaking too, the region accounts for as many as 65 indigenous major tribes, along with many more of their sub-tribes speaking an astounding 235 different dialects. This blended mixture of population from different stocks and races, like the Monkhmer of Austro-Asian origins, said to have come from the far east, the Indo Chin, Indo-Mongoloids from the far north, the Tibeto Burmans, the Indo-Burmese; and some mixed races create a very interesting mosaic of amazing vibrant diversity of ethnicism. Interestingly, all these eight states have their own distinct costumes,

customs and traditions, each one of them different from the other, no two states being similar in any way. So far, most of these indigenous tribes have been able to steadfastly adhere to their primitive ethnic traditional lifestyle and practices untouched and unaffected by the forces of other cultures just as the physical geography of the region remains in all its pristine glory, unsullied by the forces of modernism. In this modern era of science and technology, it is in stark contrast to the modern world, that the north eastern people continue to maintain their intrinsic raw inimitable beauty of ethnic primitiveness.)

In matters of religion too, each of the eight states has their own religious affinity. Whilst Buddhism is dominant in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh, with indigenous tribes practising their own tribal religion, it is Hinduism in Assam, Manipur and Tripura. The two states of Nagaland and Mizoram have declared themselves fully Christian states whereas Meghalaya remain predominantly Christian with about 30% of the population strictly adhering to their indigenous traditional beliefs.

As far as tourism potentials are concerned, the combined eight states of the region has more potentials than any part of India and could easily rival some of the states already booming in tourism industry. Unfortunately, as an aftermath of partition, carving out the then East Bengal, now Bangladesh, from the sub-continent nearly cut off the entire east end region of the Himalayan range, except for the narrow strip at Cooch Behar that connects it to the mainland. In the long run

this near physical isolation from the mainland India had a very negative impact, for the people of this region felt much neglected and alienated from the rest of the country, that the development works suffered, as a result of which, this part of the country lagged far behind in all respects.

Hence, it could easily be surmised that, due to its strategic position of near isolation, the region remained much neglected, unknown and undeveloped, that is until very recently. The Ministry of Tourism in the Gov't of India has now eyed the region more compassionately and considering its immense potentials announced its plans to make the North East India, the hot destination in future.

✓ The new strategy adopted by the Gov't of India marketing India under the banner of ***Incredible India***, wherein the north east region also is expected to get a big morale boost may perhaps usher in much needed sweeping changes and much required positive transformations to the region. This welcome shot in the arm will definitely open up new vistas for tourism development. Of course a lot of ground works are yet to be started. Apart from identifying likely successful areas and activities, chalking out viable regular tour circuits, promoting the region aggressively as one of the future great destinations, developing certain essential services like good communications systems both surface and aerial, creation of adequate standard infrastructures in the regular popular tourist spots and above all creating the tourist friendly environments would need to be addressed to properly. Formulation of some

attractive packages designed especially to meet the challenges of the region need to be looked into.

✓ For so long the entire North east region had remained unexplored and unknown to the outside world. The imposition of the Inner Line permits and the Restricted Areas Permit in the region barring Assam and Meghalaya with a view to protect the interest and identity of the tribals had in fact did not have a positive impact on tourism for as long as these restrictions on the entry of outsiders even for a short visit or only for simple sight seeing exists, the region will continue to remain out of bounds as forbidding as ever.

Developed and promoted properly, the region could easily surpass its potentials, for it offers various diverse interests for any discerning tourist. The imposing majestic snow-capped mountain peaks and its ranges offer unlimited scope for adventure sports like mountain climbing, trekking, outdoor camping, mountain biking, abseiling, hang gliding, para sailing etc. The mighty Brahmaputra and its innumerable turbulent tributaries are ideal for many water sports like rapid water rafting, canoeing, kayaking, boating and other related sports like fishing and angling for the exotic cold water fish species like trouts and mahseers which are in great abundance in the upper reaches of the mountain rivers.

The wide spectrum of flora, fauna and avian life, offer great scope for highly intellectual Scientists, Naturalists, Environmentalists, Botanists and Biologists endless scope for their research and study. Even ordinary laymen visitors too can revel in the wonderful creations of nature.

But perhaps the biggest attraction in the region is its rich tapestry of colourful ethnic cultural diversity. The 65 (sixty-five) indigenous tribes and their sub-tribes from different backgrounds, stocks and races with their extremely rich cultural heritage, their distinct colourful ethnic costumes, customs and traditions, each one of them distinct and different from one another create one great fusion of a myriad of cultural diversity. The never ending feasts and festivals of these colourful people almost throughout the year is a great feast to the eyes.

The north east region has to be seen, discovered and experienced first hand to really understand its throbbing vibrant diversity steeped in culture and tradition.



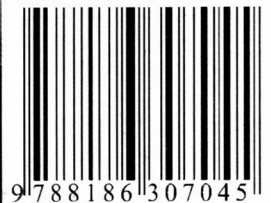
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