

Article for the UUPCC Newsletter

“Just Imagine”

During the last week of October eight Unitarian Universalists from Virginia visited their partner churches in the Khasi Hills region of far northeastern India. Imagine what they found.....

Imagine a land of rolling green hills and verdant valleys with the mighty Himalayas dominating the distant horizon. Imagine hillsides spotted with groves of pine trees and tree-like banana plants. Imagine tangled undergrowth filled in places with a plethora of wild flowers that include both orchids and roses. Imagine the valleys filled with rice paddies, potato fields, and vegetable gardens. Imagine tumbling streams of water racing over rocky precipices and falling hundreds of feet to the plains below.

Imagine hump-backed cattle grazing quietly along the highways and byways, watched over by small boys and old men. Imagine villages and small towns filled with for the most part with a gentle, peaceful people whose faces reflect an aura of contentment and joy rarely seen in our own country.

Even more exciting, imagine that a substantial portion of the population share our Unitarian-Universalist principles and values. Imagine that these hills and valleys are inhabited by over 10,000 Unitarians. Imagine that 30 of these towns and villages contain Unitarian churches. Imagine that some of the villages even have Unitarian schools that welcome enrollment from all ethnic and faith groups –Hindu or Moslem, Animist or Christian – it seems not to matter.

Sounds like the fictional Shangri-la? Well, it is – almost. But it isn't fiction. Such a place really exists. Many believe that the Khasi Hills region of far northeastern India, served as the model for, the fictional Shangri-la made famous by James Hilton's 1930's novel Lost Horizons.

Six of us Virginians came from the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fairfax in the Washington, DC suburb of Oakton, Va. We were joined by two members of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church of Charlottesville (Va.). The ultimate goal of the UUCF group was to spend time with our partner church in Puriang, a village of some 1,500 people located about an hour's drive from Shillong, the capital and largest city (population 600,000 and growing) of the State of Meghalaya. The two Charlottesville members of our group had as their destination their partner church in the village of Nongkrem.

Dee and Govind Idnani were our trip facilitators and mentors. They had been to the Khasi Hills previously. The remaining six of us were Hal and Pat Fuller, Nancy Smith, and Martha Ades – all from UUCF; and Janice Rapp and Glenn Short from

Charlottesville. For the six of us, it was a new and exciting experience. For all eight of us the trip produced memories that will remain with us for the rest of our lives.

Unfortunately, not all is peaceful and tranquil in the Khasi Hills, despite the idyllic setting and its beautiful, hospitable people. Poverty of the spirit may be rare, but economic poverty is all too common. The vast majority of the Khasi people live well below the global poverty level of one dollar per day.

Most of the people who live outside of Shillong (the largest city in the state of Meghalaya and its political capital) are farmers or farm laborers. Children often must leave school during their formative years in order to help earn a living for their families – either as farm laborers or in the extractive industries that are beginning to scar the pristine landscape. When work is available, farm laborers are paid 200 rupees a day if they are men; half that amount if they are women. That is the equivalent of \$4 and \$2 per day for 10 to 12 hours of back-breaking labor – when it is available.

Decent paying jobs are scarce even for those who complete their education. Young people generally have to leave the village to find gainful employment. Those few who go on to college generally must leave the State to find suitable jobs or to continue their educations.

In many areas the infrastructure – transportation systems, power grids, and telecommunications -- are stretched to the breaking point. There are no railroads or major airports serving the region. Main arterial roads, although paved, are chocked with heavy lorries and ancient buses that emit polluting fumes as they crawl at a snail's pace between the major towns.

Health problems abound. While there are few signs of acute malnutrition in the villages, the infant mortality rate is one of the highest in India. Many of the Khasi suffer acute anemia, and other diseases that are brought about because of inadequate sanitation and contaminated water supplies. In the village of Puriang, only 10 homes have access to outhouses. Indoor plumbing, of course, does not exist. The Unitarian School has no sanitary facilities at all – not even an open latrine.

Potable water is a serious problem for some of the villages. During the six-month wet season (600 inches of rain per year) the Puriang villagers obtain water from the “near source” – a spring a mile distant from parts of the village. During the dry-season, water comes from the “far source” -- a stronger spring located down a steep hillside at twice the distance from the village. The same spring is used year round for bathing and for washing clothes.

Water is transported in large jars within a basket strapped to the back of the carrier (usually a woman) and supported by a head band. A round trip to this spring requires two hours. Two trips per day are required to meet the minimal requirements of

an average family for cooking and drinking water. Imagine the time and energy that goes into meeting this basic need!

Why did we go to Puriang? Our purpose was threefold:

Firstly, we went to strengthen the ties between our congregations and our partner churches. In the case of UUCF and Puriang, our partnership is less than a year old. Two exploratory trips had been made by members of our congregation before we established the partnership. Just being there demonstrated our commitment to the partnership. And we were received so warmly! The welcome came not only from the 57 Unitarian families that reside in Puriang, but from the village elders and indeed, from the entire village.

We found that doors were opened to us. We met with the village council, with the women of the village, and with members of the young adults of the village. We played games with the school children and observed them in their classrooms. We visited village homes where we were plied with tasty dishes made from local produce. Some of us stayed overnight in the village, although some of worried that as overnight guests we were drawing too heavily on our hosts' limited resources. In brief, we found a community that experiences material poverty but one that knows no poverty of the spirit!

Secondly, we wanted to see how the financial and other assistance that we had provided the school during the past year had been put to use. Of course, we had received periodic communications from Ditoll Myllemngap, principal of the Unitarian School; and from Rev. Helpme Mohrmen, visitor/minister of the Unitarian Church, but we wanted to see for ourselves. We were not disappointed with what we saw. The school is fully staffed with dedicated, competent faculty. There was new classroom construction. The Meghalaya state government had delivered long-promised computers. Meals are being provided to youngsters who otherwise would go hungry.

In essence, we found a vibrant school community that does the best it can with what it has to work with in providing the children of Puriang and surrounding villages with educational opportunities. Much remains to be done. Low salaries for teachers risk the loss of needed educators to more lucrative employment. Too many children drop out of the school before they can take full advantage of its educational opportunities. More needs to be done to provide educational opportunities for working children. The school currently offers education only through Grade 10. Those who wish to finish secondary schooling must go elsewhere for Grades 11 and 12. But with hard work from the villages and continued involvement by UUCF, these deficiencies can and will be addressed!

Finally, we went to Puriang because we wanted to pursue what the village council had identified to earlier UUCF visitors as their primary need – a better water system. We had established at UUCF a “Puriang Water Strategies Group”. We are fortunate that its membership includes nationally and internationally experts on global poverty issues and on water problems in developing areas (in addition to well-meaning amateurs). Armed with a checklist of appropriate questions to ask and things to look out for, our UUCF

visitors set about to learn about Puriang's water problems and what might be done about them.

We met with the Puriang village council to discuss water. We met with Meghalaya state officials and the Puriang representative in the State Legislature to discuss water. We met with administrators of Indian federal grant programs and international assistance programs to discuss water and sanitation issues. We met with representatives of non-governmental organizations to discuss water, sanitation and poverty. We drank a lot of tea while discussing water!

What will come of all these discussions remains to be seen. There are promises of a brand new piped-in water system for Puriang and a neighboring village that will be built at the expense of the State government. This system will use gravity flow (not dependent upon erratic electricity) to deliver water to stand-pipes located strategically throughout the village. We have promises that once the water system is installed, we can work cooperatively with the authorities to bring sanitation facilities and, equally important, education about sanitation, to the village. We hope to start out by installing sanitation facilities at the Unitarian School.

Just imagine.....

Note for potential visitors to the Khasi Hills: travel to northeastern India, whether via Europe or over the Pacific, requires a minimum of two days to complete. Moreover, the air fare is relatively expensive, even by U.S. standards. Visitors may wish to maximize the return on their investment by arranging to tour other parts of India, e.g. wildlife parks in nearby northeastern India, or to spend time in India's large cities. Travelers may also wish to take advantage of one or more of the educational tours of India available through Elder Hostel. Also, remember that Indian visas are required.

Written by: Hal Fuller