

KHUBLEI*

By Erika Davis, Malvern, PA

(Four Unsung Unitarian Health Care Heroes in Khasi Hills, India)

It was a cool August night, the middle of monsoon season, although no one would know by the crisp air and the clear starry skies. We quickly descended the windy hills of Shillong—a quaint town in the Indian Northeast. Under the dim light of the full moon, and listening to the ancient folklore of the Khasi people, I began to understand what this place is really about.

I first learned of Khasi Hills through my aunt's charitable work in the outlying village Unitarian schools and churches. Enticed by her stories and curious to see this place for myself, I arranged to accompany her on this unique journey to the other side of the world. After two days of plane rides, shuttles and taxis, we arrived in Shillong—our base camp for the ensuing ten days. The goal was to visit Shillong itself as well as the villages, all the while observing the life of the Khasi people and evaluating how we, the fortunate few, could help. As a medical student, I especially hoped to observe the existing healthcare situation. I expected to find poverty. Similarly, I expected to see disease, but I did not expect to discover the two existing side by side with an inexplicable beauty. There is beauty in the largely unspoiled nature, in the smiling faces of the village children and in the comfort and ease of Khasi friendships—made without effort or suspicion.

The fact of the matter is that the Khasi villagers are largely neglected by their own government and many are exploited by their fellow citizens. Most villages are without running water, sanitation systems, medical care, electricity and adequate schools. Government assistance is spotty at best and rarely amounts to much. There are no assistance programs for the sick or the poor. However, amid the poverty and disease is a wealth of spirit unique to this small corner of the globe.

The first thing you notice when you discover the great state of Meghalaya, home to the Khasi people, are the children; not just because they are so beautiful, but simply for their sheer numbers. Most families have at least four or five children and some have a dozen or more. As would be expected, this situation amounts to a medical nightmare. Children frequently suffer from night blindness and rickets, due to Vitamins A and D deficiencies, respectively. These conditions can lead to severe visual and orthopedic problems, but would be cured by a simple Flintstone vitamin. Congenital cataracts go untreated leaving children partially or completely blind. Gastroenteritis, dysentery, respiratory tract infections and roundworm infections run rampant in the countryside. All are easily treated with existing drugs that just never reach the poor villagers. The government has constructed clinical facilities in a number of rural locations, but they remain essentially useless due to the lack of electricity and running water.

So who are the tireless few who provide the villagers with what little medical care they do receive? I had the privilege of meeting four such individuals during my visit — Drs. D.K. Nongbri and Rica Lamarr, and the dedicated husband and wife team of Dran Wahlang and Kyiek Mukhim, pharmacist and midwife. These healthcare providers are attempting to fill in the holes that the

government has left behind. They collectively treat over five hundred villagers per week. More often than not, they reduce or waive their charges as an approximate eighty percent of their patient population resides below the poverty line. Finally, they often purchase medicines and equipment out of their own pockets when supplies run dry-not an uncommon occurrence. There is no time for them to fall ill or take a personal leave. In short, they desperately need help. Shockingly, just ten dollars, a common copay charge for many Americans, can provide life-changing medication for approximately twenty villagers. For only \$250 per year, a village student can become a trained nurse or midwife who will provide invaluable care for many decades to come. We have numerous opportunities in our lifetimes to help others monetarily as well as through generous actions. But, never before have we had the chance to empower such a unique and spiritually rich culture as is found here in the great state of Meghalaya, "The Scotland of the East," and in the hearts of the Khasi people.

I learned many lessons during my short stay. I thought long and hard about what it means to be a part of a family, a society, and even a culture. I also know that I have only learned a small fraction of the life secrets these ancient people comprehend. The Hills are a place to find peace, to find contentment and to discover the compassion that our Western culture sorely lacks. This trip was truly an invaluable experience. It was a lesson in love, a lesson in fraternity and, most importantly, a chance to begin to unravel the complexities of the human spirit.

*KHUBLEI, a versatile word of the Khasi people which means " God bless you, hello, welcome, thank you, sorry, etc" depending upon circumstances