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# Tbeh Jingshai

KINDLING A LIGHT

## *The first column: From the Editor's Desk*

Elections are over and even as the rest of the country mulls over the rather unexpected results and waits with bated breath to see the face and fate of the new government, there are some issues that demand attention. Let us look at the process of elections itself- especially the election campaigns. In the Indian polity this generally is the time when issues that have long been ignored are raked up, howsoever short the duration of interest may be. Issues that are 'real problems' but whose solutions are likely to hurt the interests of the powerful are given a short life to attract the voter.

So both the Congress and National Democratic Alliance manifestoes have entire sections talking about women's empowerment. Yet this purported sensitization to women's rights notwithstanding, the sex ratio in the country continues to decline, there is no talk of ratifying the Optional Protocol to the CEDAW and male candidates continue to dominate the political arena. All the political parties are promising to bring up and press for the ratification of the bill on 33 per cent reservation for women in the Parliament. The same parties have, however, turned a deaf ear to the election commission's suggestion that 33 per cent of every party's candidates be women. If one examines the list of candidates for the 141 seats that went to poll in the first and second phase of the elections, one finds that the Congress had fielded only nine women in the 104 seats that it was contesting from, the BJP five (it was contesting from 99 seats.) In fact, in the successive Lok Sabhas since Independence, the number of women has remained between 19 and 45 - that is, less than 10 per cent of the strength of the lower house. What does this reflect of our polity and us?

And it's not just the women whose plight is ignored. The seven states of the northeast have remained invisible to the rest of India, and this invisibility has stretched itself to the political arena as well. After all, together the states send only 25 candidates to the Lok Sabha.

However with the entry of the coalition era in the Indian polity wherein every seat counts, perhaps for the first time the north east region is no longer left on its own. Campaigning in the seven sister states was as much on the agenda of national parties as of regional parties. The NDA and BJP manifestoes have an entire section dedicated to the region. They promise peace, economic development, communications infrastructure and greater links with the rest of the country. The Congress manifesto also talks about the need for peace in the region. Many would take this to be a step towards the inclusion of the region in mainstream politics and therefore indicative of an end to the isolationism which the people in the region so strongly feel. Instead it is the inclusion of new linkages with trade offs between party members and not really the inclusion of civil society's concern and problems.

Further, the pre-election campaigns in some states took dangerous turns. Lives of politicians were being threatened by different stakeholders. Manipur was a case in point where the non-state army called for a ban on party related activities. For some, this is a result of bad governance and the inaction of elected representatives of the state agencies. Yet, this certainly does reflect on the murkiness of politics in the region and shows how little politicians and ministers have contributed to a civil society plagued by sharp ethnic divides.

The two biggest assets of the region- the youth and the natural resources- remain untapped and the region continues to be inundated with economic problems. There is a need for economic sovereignty in the region, especially in Nagaland, where civil society understands this as a social and economic rights issue and where the natural resources hold a big potential for the rural populace. The chief minister of the state finally seems to have recognized this need. Whether this recognition is just another poll gimmick remains to be seen.

*Note from the Editorial Board: We regret that the Winter issue of Tbeh Jingshai did not come out. However, we have just gone in for a revamp and that took time. We hope that you like the new look and format of the newsletter which is a small attempt to introduce you to us, our activities and concerns.*

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# To be or not to be...

*It's been five years since a Bill providing 33 per cent reservation for women in the Indian Parliament was proposed. And yet in clear violation of the CEDAW clauses that call for temporary measures to remedy discrimination, the Bill is yet to be put to vote. The over-riding fear that 180 male MPs will have to forgo their seats to make way for women has been disguised under the garb of meritocracy and sub-quotas. Currently there is a suggestion that one third of the constituencies be made double member wherein one member is a woman. The message: women are not competent enough. Their overall strength also continues to be less than desired in the Parliament. Further, the Election Commission's suggestion that it be made mandatory for all political parties to field woman candidates from one third of the constituencies is yet to be implemented. The NEN team in Shillong and Guwahati tried to find out how the people who have the potential to influence policy in the two states feel about the issue.*



Women should be included in all decision-making bodies to accelerate their development. If our society is not ready for 33% at the moment, then we should start with 20%. One difficulty may be that the law does not lay down any other criteria for the selection.

**Mrs Margaret Mawlong, retired bureaucrat and active Community Leader, Meghalaya**

We should stick to 33% and not compromise for 20%. Perhaps the male candidates feel threatened. There is a need to ingrain gender equality in the new generation.

**Theilin Phanbuh, President, Lympung Ki Seng Kynthei**



Yes, there is a need for reservations. Women should be allowed to participate in the administration to work for their own empowerment. A sense of insecurity has perhaps prevented the bill from being passed.

**Rev. W.C Khongwir, Presbyterian Church of India**

At the panchayat level, reservations have made women come out of the confines of their home, though in most cases men continue to rule the roost. But the move would be effective only if educated and independent-minded women come in.

**Teresa Rehman, The Telegraph, Assam**



More than 33% is required. Otherwise women will still remain in minority. However only qualified women should be nominated and we must have a right to know their backgrounds.

Let us not think of disadvantages. I don't see any. Look at me. Despite my academic career, social commitments and my political career as a minister, I have never neglected my role as mother, wife and a grand mother now.

**Komol Kumari Barua, President, Assam Pradeshik Mahila Samiti**

## Should there be 33% reservations for women in the Parliament?

### The NEN team finds out what people in Assam and Meghalaya have to say

Reservation is necessary. If women can manage a family, they can manage the parliament too. Their participation will help reduce corruption in the polity. When women are willing to come out on their own there won't be any need for reservations. Political parties should give women a chance. Grassroots training for capacity building should be imparted.



**Pronoy Bordoloi, Journalist**

What do you mean by 33%? If we pass the bill, a time will come when this 33% will be applicable in all fields. Empowerment of women and gender equality will come with time. Talking of Meghalaya, we have seen the progress in the participation of women in the Local Durbars in some urban sectors. Even some churches have realised the need for women pastors.

**R. S. Lyndoh, Headman, Jaiaw Lumsyntiew**

The demand for reservation comes from the outside. Women are not willing to join politics because it is a laborious job and needs brain work. Women are not capable for such a job. Further, politics is considered a dirty job by society. Even the experience at the Panchayat level is not satisfactory. Women are elected only because they are women. They are not qualified enough to take the responsibility. Moreover, the income from politics is very less.

Women also fear that they will not be able to spend time with their family. If there are reservations for women, some men will be forced to sacrifice their constituencies and this might create many problems.

**Hitendra Nath Goswami, General Secretary, Asom Gana Parishad**



33 per cent reservation is irrelevant. I believe in merit. Women should be empowered. They should move forward in the legislature in Meghalaya. We are privileged as women here are active participants in all fields. Empowerment of women should start at the grassroots, right from the Local Durbars. This will help them move ahead without the crutches of reservation.

**Paul Lyngdoh, Minister of Sports and Youth Affairs, Meghalaya**

In Meghalaya where there is a Matrilineal System, we don't need reservations. Woman cannot come up in public life overnight as they are not ready for it. The 33 per cent figure is creating torment in the minds of the men. It is becoming a stumbling block. Instead, the Election Commission should make it mandatory for political parties to reserve at least 10-15 seats for women. Let us first try out with the EC scheme then have reservations after five years. We want quality women. Let the women prepare themselves.



**Manas Choudhary, Editor, The Shillong Times**

## Assam lags on the Development front

The Human Development Report for Assam released this year, shows a dismal performance. The percentage of people living below the poverty line (36.09%) in Assam is highest among the seven northeastern states and considerably above the national average of 26.10%. The per capita income in the state is by 1999 estimates, 45.5% lower than the rest of the country and this gap is widening with time. The incidence of unemployment measured as a percentage of the labour force has also risen to 4.6 per cent.

Life expectancy at Birth continues to be below the national average of 60.7 years and there is a high morbidity due to communicable diseases. Only 43.28% of the households have access to clean drinking water (against the national figure of 62.3%) and diarrhoea remains a common cause of death among children.

The rural-urban divide and the gender gap is high. Four of 10 people in rural Assam are below the poverty line, as against one in 10 in urban Assam. Urban literacy is 85.76%, rural literacy only 60.92%. Life expectancy in rural areas is 10 years less than in the urban areas and access to clean drinking water is 20% higher in the cities. Almost 70% of the women in the state continue to suffer from anaemia and their life expectancy is 5.2 years less than their counterparts in the rest of the country. The literacy rates for men in the state is 15% higher than for women. The report also notes that Assamese women face aggression, domestic violence and increasing harassment in the workplace.

There is however some good news. While the sex ratio in the rest of the country has been declining, in Assam it has gone up to 932 women per 1000 men. The literacy rate in the state has increased to 64.28%. The Infant Mortality Rate in the state continues to be higher than the national average, but has declined substantially from 92 per 1000 live births in 1991 to 70 per 1000 live births in 2001. Assam is also making a move towards decentralization and elections to the Panchayati Raj institutions were held in the state after six years.

*Source: UNDP HDR for Assam*

## Mizo "Song of humiliation" invites ire

The Mizo Hmeichhe Insuihkhawm Pawl, the state's largest women's organisation, has resolved to boycott "Hmeichhia leh Uite", the hit single of pop diva Ramthanzuali, popularly known as Puibawihi. The song which literally means "Puppies and women," is a satirical song about the similarities between girls and puppies, based on an old Mizo saying that puppies and girls are easily attracted to those who cuddle them most. The organisation feels that the song is indicative of the rejuvenation of an old Mizo chauvinistic attitude and humiliating for the women.

*Source: The Northeast Tribune*

## Traditional Institutions meet

Traditional Institutions have been in place in Meghalaya since the time of the Syiems (Kings) who ruled through their Hima durbars. These durbars then gave way to Durbar Shnongs or local committees present in every area.

Today these institutions are facing a challenge from the district councils and losing ground to them, the locals fear. Rajya Sabha M.P. Robert Kharshiing had earlier proposed direct funding to local institutions for developmental works. In this context, over 40,000 villagers assembled at Smit in Meghalaya on January 14, 2004 to demand constitutional recognition for the durbars and to ask the centre for direct funding to the Traditional Institutions in the state on the lines of the Panchayats in other parts of the country. The objective of the assembly was to gather all the diverse people of the state, discuss and pass a people's budget for development in an open and transparent manner. Direct funding, it was hoped, would bring down corruption in the implementation of central schemes as funds would be monitored by the chief auditor general.

## What's in a name?

At first glance, it seems like any other village nestling peacefully in the foothills of Meghalaya and yet, the village of Kongthong, located in the East Khasi Hills district, is special. It is heir to a unique tradition, a tradition that goes without a name. People here don't call each other by names, but by unusual sounds and musical tunes. No, it's not that they don't have a language of their own. They belong to the Khasi tribe and speak the Khasi language. But when it comes to addressing each other, they prefer to do it the musical way.

For first time visitors, a trip to this quaint little village, located just 40 Kms from Shillong in Khatar-Shnong (meaning 12 villages), is nothing short of a still from a Hollywood blockbuster. The young boys climbing trees and using natural sounds to reach out to their friends and families in the foothills or in the forests remind one of Tarzan using his verbal skills to find a playmate. In this village, which is yet to see development, everyone is identified by a particular song or sound, which was tagged to the person either at the time of birth or during a special ceremony later on. The sounds are derived from birds and animals. The skill - a legacy of their forefathers. A perfect example of living with nature.

Some people feel that through this "rare demonstration of dialect usage" the people of Kongthong have proved that tradition can be preserved, the influences of globalisation and modernisation notwithstanding. For the people of Kongthong and Khatar-Shnong, who make a living by selling broomsticks and minor forest produces, what the world outside their village thinks of them and their lifestyle makes little difference. For them it is life as usual.

*Source: The Northeast Telegraph*

## Unravelling OP-CEDAW...

**H**uman rights treaties are often followed by Optional Protocols which may either provide for procedures with regard to the treaty or address a substantive area related to the treaty. Optional Protocols to Human Rights treaties are treaties in their own right, and are open to signature, accession or ratification by countries that are party to the main treaty. The Optional Protocol (OP) to the CEDAW gives individuals and groups of women the right to complain to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women about violations of the Convention. It does not establish any new rights, but is a means for interpreting the rights in the Convention and detailing the steps that should be taken to implement those rights in specific situations. It allows women who have been denied access to justice at the national level to have their claims reviewed by the committee. However, it is not mandatory for governments to sign and ratify the optional protocol to the convention that they are party to. The government of India has not signed the OP to the CEDAW until now.

The adoption of an Optional Protocol to provide a right to petition was one of the commitments made by States at both the 1993 Vienna Conference on Human Rights and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women. Its entry into force represents a major step towards the realisation of the objectives set out in the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (OP-CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 6 October 1999 and came into force on December 22, 2000.

Governments which ratify the OP-CEDAW recognise the competence of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to a) Consider petitions from individual women or groups of women who have exhausted all national remedies through a *communications procedure*; b) Conduct inquiries into grave or systematic violations of the CEDAW Convention through an *inquiry procedure*.

The committee can recommend measures to combat the structural causes of discrimination against women and set out a broad range of recommendations to achieve equality between women and men. It comprises of 23 experts in the fields covered by the Convention. Experts serve in their personal capacity and are elected by the State Parties to the Convention for a term of four years. Consideration is given to the representation of different forms of civilization, the principal legal systems and equitable geographical distribution in electing the experts.

The OP-CEDAW is significant for a number of reasons. Its two procedures reaffirm existing remedies available under other international human rights instruments, such as the first OP to the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention against Torture and Other Forms of Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The OP-CEDAW also advances the development of international human rights law, and recognises that women continue to face specific challenges in seeking redress for their grievances under general human rights mechanisms.

## FACTFILE

- ◆ The suggestion for a complaints procedure was made by the Netherlands, Belgium and Canada during the drafting of the CEDAW Convention between 1973-76.
- ◆ The OP-CEDAW is a separate treaty. Only states parties to the CEDAW Convention can become parties to the OP-CEDAW. A State has to ratify or accede to the OP-CEDAW separately to become bound by it. It is not obligatory for a state party to the CEDAW Convention to adopt the Optional Protocol.
- ◆ As of February 3, 2004, there are 60 Optional CEDAW State parties.
- ◆ The Inquiry Procedure is set forth in Articles 8 and 9 of the OP-CEDAW. In accordance to Article 10 of the OP-CEDAW, States may "opt-out" of the Inquiry Procedure at the time of signature, accession or ratification.

### Update

#### CEDAW Ratifications Up!!!

On 10 December 2003, San Marino became the 175th State to ratify the CEDAW Convention. They were the fifth and final nation to become a CEDAW State Party in 2003, along with Sao Tome and Principe (3 June), Timor-Leste (16 April), the Syrian Arab Republic (28 March) and Afghanistan (5 March).

Ironically, the US which claims to fight for women's rights the world over including in Afghanistan and Iraq, is among the few states that have not ratified the CEDAW Convention!

#### General reco 25 Adopted

At its 30th Session, the CEDAW Committee adopted General Recommendation 25 on Article 4(1) of the CEDAW Convention, on temporary special measures. This Recommendation explains the meaning and scope of temporary special measures in CEDAW, and includes a list of recommendations for State parties to pursue in relation to this matter.

#### CEDAW 31st Session

CEDAW 31st session will be held from July 6-23, 2004 at UN Head Quarters in New York. The committee on the

Elimination of Discrimination against Women will start work on General Recommendation 26 on Article 2 of the Convention in this session.

Many countries are likely to present country reports in this session. They are Angola, Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Latvia, Malta, Spain and Argentina.

Earlier it was expected that the government of India would also be reporting this year, since its report is due.

Source: Internet resources, especially [www.iwraw-ap.org](http://www.iwraw-ap.org)

## 2003 - 2004 Scholar Rescue Fund Fellowships

**Description:** The Institute of International Education's Scholar Rescue Fund provides fellowships for scholars whose lives and work are threatened in their home countries. These fellowships permit scholars to find temporary refuge at universities anywhere in the world, enabling them to pursue their academic work. When conditions improve, these scholars will return home to help rebuild universities and societies ravaged by fear, conflict and repression. Fellowship recipients are expected to continue their work in safety at the host institution - conducting research, teaching, lecturing, writing and publishing. Fellowships from 3 months to one calendar year will be considered and up to 25 fellowships will be awarded annually. The maximum award is US \$20,000. Applications will be accepted at any time. Emergency applications receive urgent consideration.

**Eligibility:** Researchers, academics and independent scholars from any country, field or discipline may qualify. Applications from female scholars and under-represented groups are encouraged. Universities, colleges and research centers from any country may apply to serve as hosts. Applications, nominations should be made to the Fund's Selection Committee. Institutions interested in hosting a particular

### Women and Peace

There is a global effort to award the Nobel Peace Prize to a 1000 women who have contributed to world peace and yet gone unrecognized, next year. An initiative of Ruth-Gaby Vermot-Mangold, a member of the Swiss Parliament, and Swisspeace, these prizes will be in recognition of women's role in peace making and peace building. Nominations for the prizes have been collected from the world over and the first phase of the awards is being funded by the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs. A separate association called 1000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005 has been formed for this purpose.

scholar should submit a letter with the scholar's application.

**Contact:** IIE Scholar Rescue Fund Fellowships  
809 U.N. Plaza, Second Floor  
New York, New York 10017  
Tel: (USA) 1-212-984-5472  
E-mail: [SRF@iie.org](mailto:SRF@iie.org)  
Website: [www.iie.org/SRF](http://www.iie.org/SRF)

### 8th Asian Training and Study Session on Human Rights

**Last Date:** June 30, 2004  
**Duration:** October 10-30, 2004  
**Organised by:** Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development  
**Description:** The course is conducted in Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand and costs US \$2000 (excludes travel expenses, includes lodging, insurance). It is open to Asians. Proficiency in English essential.  
**Contact:** [angkana@forumasia.org](mailto:angkana@forumasia.org)  
Website: [www.forumasia.org/HRT2004.html](http://www.forumasia.org/HRT2004.html)

### Participatory Action Research for Community-Based Natural Resource Management

**Duration:** September 13-28, 2004  
**Location:** Bangkok, Thailand  
**Description:** The course is geared specifically for senior decision-makers working on community-based natural resource management (CBNRM). Participants will have the opportunity to reflect upon and share experiences of CBNRM, explore principles of participatory action research (PAR), experiment with a range of tools for examining different perspectives relevant to CBNRM with stakeholders in the field, critically analyse the PAR approach in relation to CBNRM, and document their insights to add to the discourse on PAR for CBNRM. Emphasis will be placed on providing a stimulating learning environment for the sharing of ideas. Proficiency in English is highly recommended. This course is a joint undertaking by the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR), the Regional Community Forestry Training Center (RECOFTC, Thailand) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC, Canada).

**Course Fee:** US\$2,650 includes course materials, field trip, accommodation, health insurance, and daily allowance which covers expenses for food and other essential items in Thailand.

**Contact:** [contact@recoftc.org](mailto:contact@recoftc.org)  
Website: [www.recoftc.org](http://www.recoftc.org)

### NCAS Advocacy Internship Programme

**Last date:** June 20, 2004  
**Duration:** 18-months, commencing July 2004.  
**Description:** The Advocacy Internship aims to groom a set of young and dedicated professionals committed to social action and aspires to facilitate their learning to gain knowledge, skills, perspectives and sensitivities to engage in rights-based and people-centred advocacy. The programme will cover the concepts and practices of advocacy, democratic institutions, law and HR, role of media in social change, campaign building, new social movements and civil society structure, networking, national and international policy analysis, community participation and leadership building. Focus will be on self learning, learning through interaction with experts from respective fields and through hands-on experience. The programme includes 6 months of field work for writing the dissertation. Monthly stipend of Rs. 4000 provided to cover living expenses in Pune.  
**Eligibility:** Any person below the age of 25 who intends to work on Public Advocacy, has a PG degree in any discipline or an UG degree with at least two years experience with a social action / human rights / consumer rights group can apply. After preliminary screening of applications, shortlisted candidates will be invited to participate in a Youth Camp on Public Advocacy and Social Justice. Final selection will be done based on performance in this camp. NCAS recruits on an average eight candidates every year.  
**Contact :** [ncas@vsnl.com](mailto:ncas@vsnl.com),  
[www.ncasindia.org](http://www.ncasindia.org)  
Source: [www.comminit.com](http://www.comminit.com)  
Forum-Asia  
NCAS

# Herbal Remedies Dying Out

With the pharmaceutical industry churning out yet new chemical concoctions everyday – pills in all shapes, sizes, colours and flavours - to counter illnesses and rid the body of the army of viruses, bacteria and other microbes that seek to disrupt its normal functioning, herbal remedies are fast dying out. This despite the fact that in developing nations like India where access to healthcare is still denied to many, these traditional medicines could provide much needed succour and save many a life, especially the lives of women who cannot traverse long distances to reach the nearest dispensary and whose needs are often ignored.

While the growing disenchantment with herbal cures cannot be attributed to any single factor, a major bottleneck is the perception that allopathic medicines are more scientific and hence more reliable than oral traditional wisdom. There is a definite procedure – some combination of double-blind clinical trials, in-vitro, in-vivo testing and community based epidemiological studies – to test the validity of modern medicines. However, laboratory testing of herbal remedies would imply the standardization of plant remedies and the extraction of the active ingredient, that is, the component in the herb responsible for the healing action. This could be extremely problematic because herbalists believe that every herb consists of a number of ingredients which work as buffers, synergists or counter-balancers to the active ingredient and help the healing procedure. Modern medicine - 25 per cent of which derives at least one active ingredient from plants- by isolating and using only the active ingredient, loses out on this balanced healing. Further, the standardization of plant parts and quantities to be used is also difficult because the alkaloid content of plants varies with

environment, geographical

location and the time of the year. Standardization and laboratory testing procedures would also imply big costs and hence investments in traditional medicines. While this might increase the credibility of natural cures by making them look safe and scientific, it would take these cures further away from the people and reduce their accessibility. The modern medical system has already taken away from the women their traditional role of healthcare practitioners and pushed them much

## Emerging Concerns

lower in the medical hierarchy reducing their power and position. Standardization would further erode their role.

Besides the question of validity, the biggest USP for modern medicines is the belief that they offer immediate relief. In today's world where time is money, allopathic medicines treat the symptoms of the disease- stomachache, fever, diarrhoea, cough- immediately, giving the impression of prompt treatment. The causes of the malady are then tackled over a period of time in a fashion that does not disrupt the rhythm of one's daily life. As against this, herbal medicines take time to prepare. In some cases the recovery time too is longer because grandma's remedies treat the cause of the disease rather than its symptoms first.

Another reason for the downfall of traditional remedies is that with growing urbanisation, forests and other spaces available for growing herbs are fast shrinking. This is not only affecting the availability of herbs, but also awareness about them. A generation that does not live with plants can hardly be expected to understand them and trust them over the finely packaged and cleverly marketed chemical concoctions. Increasingly, among

the communities where such traditional wisdom still exists and is practiced, the youth are unwilling to learn the secrets of the herbs and knowledge tested and acquired over the centuries is dying a slow death. This is especially true of the north-east.

There is an urgent need to spread awareness about the benefits of herbal remedies and to preserve this wisdom. Many individuals and NGOs in the region are working to this end. NEN has also made a few efforts in this direction. The NEN team has been including a session on herbal remedies in all its health trainings wherein the participants are sensitised to the need for herbal remedies and taught how to make herbariums to preserve them. Generally, after the training gets over, the participants go about making herbariums for their respective areas. NEN is trying to document these in the form of a booklet. In June 2001, NEN along with Gene Campaign documented the herbal remedies prevalent in Assam. The organisation is currently undertaking a similar project in Meghalaya with the IDRC. Local youth are being trained on how to document the herbal remedies. Not only does this aid in preservation of the remedies, but it also acquaints the youth with the value of herbs. However, the over-riding fear in this process of documentation and preservation is that of patents. Biopiracy had been on for centuries. There have been many instances where multinational companies having learnt the secrets of herbal cures from local populations have patented the same, making huge profits. The local communities received no benefits. While this needs to be checked, the need for documentation cannot be denied. The best route then perhaps is to follow in the footsteps of Pattuvam, a village in Northern Kerala where the villagers have made an exhaustive register of all the plants and crops within their village and submitted it to the Head of the village Panchayat for safe-keeping. They have issued a declaration asserting absolute ownership over identified genetic resources available and utilised within the jurisdiction of their village.



## From the Field ...

It was one of our regular trainings with representatives from different health collectives across Meghalaya. While we were conducting a session on Sexually Transmitted Diseases and the use of herbal remedies at the Pastoral Centre in Shillong, a hand shot up. It was a middle aged woman from Nartiang Village in the Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya. "It's all very well for you to talk of herbal cures and remedies, but we have lost our livelihoods now," she said.

Women from Nartiang village Health Collective had been a part of the group that NEN had sent to AIKYA, Bangalore in 1998 for a training on the *Preparation, preservation and documentation of indigenous knowledge of medicinal plants*. Armed with their new found knowledge, these women came back and shared their experience and wisdom with other health collective members. In Nartiang village, this group started selling herbal remedies and a new source of livelihood was found. Pleased with their success, the collective decided to share their knowledge with the rest of the village women. Gradually, everyone started making medicines at home and there were no buyers for the medicines being sold by the group. This was what had prompted Wanbiang Phalyngki to raise the issue in the midst of the training.

There are moments in one's life when one is forced into retrospection and an evaluation of one's ideals. This was one such moment for the NEN

Shillong team. We had started out on a cause we believed in. Herbal remedies needed to be preserved and shared. In the absence of properly functioning health centres and given the limited access that village women had to health facilities, this traditional wisdom could provide much needed succour. It could ease their pain and even save lives. This had been achieved. And yet, here was a very practical problem. For those who had shared their knowledge, it was the loss of a livelihood. What were they to do? We had no answers.

After the training was over, the NEN team started looking for a solution to Nartiang's problems. The first step was to examine the other health collectives. And to our immense relief, we found success stories.

The HC members of Kyndong Tuber had also imparted training to their community members. But they were luckier because their medicines still had takers. They would meet once or twice a week, prepare medicines and sell them off in different local markets in the Jaintia Hills. And they decided to take up other activities as well. They started vermi-compost and managed to buy a piece of land. Such has been their success that "the Department of Horticulture has recently given the group a scheme for plantation of Herbal plants", a proud Selmim Lyngdoh, secretary of the group told us.

A ray of sunshine and an immense relief. Yet the nagging question, what is the answer to Nartiang's problems? We are looking for answers but with a lighter heart now. After all even the best of solutions can have glitches. One only needs to deal with them and carry on.

### Refreshers Training in Health and Gender

A refreshers training programme was organised for 12 health collective members from Kyndong Tuber, Nartiang, Jaintia



Participants having a group discussion

Hills and Nongstoin, West Khasi Hills District at the Pastoral Centre in Shillong from February 17 to 19, 2004. Participants were introduced to the Health care system of the government. They were divided into groups, given a notional map and asked to fill in the location of the healthcare services available to them. Sessions on food and nutrition,

human body systems, sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and reproductive health problems followed. During the workshop, participants shared their experiences and a process of mutual learning was initiated. They felt that this workshop which brought them out of their villages and helped them network, was more beneficial than previous workshops that were conducted in the villages.

## Health The Herbal Way



**Botanical Name:** Mimosa Pudica

**English Name:** Sensitive, Touch me not plant

This short-lived evergreen subshrub is grown for its curiosity value - the fern like leaves close and droop when touched or exposed to flame, usually re-opening within minutes. It has an erect, slender, prickly stem and pale green bipinnate leaves. Small, fluffy, ball shaped pink flowers appear in the summers. The plant grows to a height of 5 ft and is common in moist waste grounds, lawns, open plantations, and weedy thickets. It forms a dense ground cover, preventing reproduction of other species and is now becoming a noxious weed in many areas. It is adaptable to most soils and only needs an open, sunny place to grow. Indigenous to the northern hemisphere, Mimosa Pudica poses a fire hazard, when dry.

**Medicinal Use:** Treatment of Gonorrhoea, a sexually transmitted infection and Leucorrhoea (the discharge of a white, yellowish, or greenish, viscid mucus, resulting from inflammation of the membrane lining the female genital organs.)

**Part Used:** Root

**How it is used:** Grind 2-3 pieces of root (2-3 inches) in water. Squeeze the ground material for juice and consume the juice in an empty stomach, twice a day, till cured.

**Source:** Survey on the use of medicinal plants by NEN (Tiwa village, Assam) and the Internet

# NEN ACTIVITIES

## Sahsniang Intervention

When Meghalaya attained statehood in 1972, Blocks I - II, inhabited by members of the Pnar community of Meghalaya, remained under the Kamrup District of Assam. These areas had historically been under the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District. Following attacks by militant groups like the Karbi National Volunteers (KNV), over 4,000 inhabitants of Block I-II areas fled to Sahsniang, 100 Km from Shillong in the Jaintia Hills District.



NEN made several enquiries on this issue from the Deputy Commissioner's office in Jowai, the headquarters of Jaintia Hills District. The team learned that these people were living without clean drinking water or toilets. Nursing mothers and their babies were getting neither nutrition nor a place to sleep. Children were dying of malnutrition. There were 859 such families, 1554 infants and 2116 women who were suffering, the Block Development Officer informed us. The number of families has in fact gone up to 873.

On November 22, 2003, the NEN Shillong team and members of the Kyndong Tuber Health Collective distributed 540 packets of baby rice in 22 villages in Sahsniang and gave sleeping mats to every family in the area.

## Organizational Development

NEN organised an Organisation Development Strategy workshop from February 18 to 22, 2004 in New Delhi. The heads of organisations and nominees from Masum (Pune), Sakhi (Kerala), Bailancho Saad (Goa), Swayam (West

Bengal), CREA (New Delhi) and NEN, spent the first two days reflecting on their work, strategies and factors affecting their interventions and the challenges of working in a changed world scenario. Manisha Gupte facilitated this reflective process, while Nandini Narula and Shaweta facilitated the OD workshop on the last three days. The participants felt that it was an important and enriching exercise to have sat together and openly discussed issues, which are of programmatic and ideological significance for those working on women's rights. They felt that this process should be carried forward.

The reflective process and the OD workshop were enriched by the experience of the participants and the diverse organisation structures of those who were present. The OD workshop helped the participants to revisit organisational vision to examine if their activities are in tune with it. The process also helped in looking at the structure and growth of the organisation, leadership styles, and its influence on achieving the vision of the organisation.

## Chizami Resource Centre



The NEN Resource Centre in Chizami village, Nagaland is nearing completion. The main building has already been constructed by village members. Only the kitchen and toilet blocks remain.

NEN's vision for a resource centre where trainings and meetings could be conducted, people could stay and which could function as an information dissemination point came close to realisation when in December 2002, Neikhalo Lohe of

Chizami donated land to the organization. Work on the centre started in July 2003 with the support of NEN and the community's help in cash, kind and labour. Today, the centre is all set to serve as the focal point for a new project being undertaken by NEN for youth development in the area.

## VAW Fortnight Activities

During the 2003 International Fortnight Protesting Violence against women and girls, the NEN Shillong team put up new public hoardings in English and Khasi in Shillong. Bookmarks with the 2004 calendar and protesting VAW were distributed in schools and colleges in the city. Darilyn gave talks on VAW to the students and initiated discussions and presentations on the issue. Pamphlets were distributed in a rally protesting VAW and an article on VAW was published in Khasi in the local papers. As a result of these activities, NEN has been approached by the heads of various educational institutions to conduct programmes concerning women and VAW with the students.

## Inhouse Trainings

An inhouse training on CEDAW was facilitated by Roshmi Goswami, Programme Officer, Ford Foundation, between April 21-22, 2004, in Guwahati, to orient the new members of the organisation on the Convention and to help the old ones revisit the founding principles of NEN.

Besides this, NEN members attended a number of trainings to upgrade their skills. Alpana Devi Choudhury and Namrata Goswami, a short term volunteer with NEN, attended the Gender Training in Rishikesh organised by Jagori in December, 2003; Sreekala attended the weeklong Institute for Rights in Activism and Development in Bangalore organised by CREA in January, this year; Krishna Devi Choudhury and Gunjan Veda attended a training on Fact Finding Techniques and Human Rights Investigation conducted by the Indian Social Institute, in Delhi in February, 2004.

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