

My visit to Mawlynnong: Asia's cleanest village

by

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Dear Surya,

This time, I would like to share about my exciting trip to a village, Mawlynnong, on my way back from Cherrapunjee to Shillong. The road going to Mawlynnong starts halfway between Shillong and Cherrapunjee, like Y-shaped. One arm goes to Cherrapunjee (also known as sohra), the other arm extends to this tiny village in Meghalaya. This village was obscured for a long time until roads were built in the late 90's. Now, it can be easily accessible by road from Shillong. After visiting Tagore's summer-house (Picture 1) in



Shillong, which he described in *Shesher Kobita*, I went to Cherrapunjee and visited Ramakrishna Mission, a picturesque architecture almost 5000 ft. above the sea level. Once Cherrapunjee was credited as having the highest rainfall on Earth, although nearby Mawsynram currently holds that record. Nevertheless, when

Picture 1: Tagore's summer residence in Shillong, which is now converted into an art gallery in his memory. Newly built Meghalaya Legislative Assembly house is on the right. The eucalyptus tree in between the buildings was described by Tagore in *Shesher Kobita*, which was composed here but finally written while he was in Bangalore.

I was getting a picture with the signboard in the background (Picture 2), it started raining as if to prove its old fame. On my way back, I decided to go to Mawlynnong, which was declared as Asia's *cleanest village* by National Geographic in 2004. This tiny village, 90 km from Shillong, is in Meghalaya— one of the 7-states (also called *seven sisters*) in North East India that was curbed out of ancient Assam in 1972 and is home of *Khasi* tribes. The road to Mawlynnong is full of scenic beauty. This road often meets dense clouds as if to prove Meghalaya as a place of *meghs* (clouds). It was chasing our car from behind and often running side-by-side, playing hide-and-seek, making driving so difficult – apparently more risky compared to driving in Darjeeling. Only a local driver who is very much familiar



Picture 2: Cherrapunjee – the famed place on earth that could boast of having highest rainfall until recently. The author is with the signboard in the background.

with the road conditions can drive to this destination. Very frequently, our car had to slow down to almost halt when a cloud suddenly appeared in front of the car and made the road completely invisible. On our way, we found a vast hilly place where construction workers with bulldozers, excavators and other heavy equipment vehicles were demolishing the stone hills to supply the stones to neighboring states as well as to Bangladesh (not far from there) as building and road construction materials. After crossing paddy fields and finally a concrete bridge, we entered the village. At that moment, roads became relatively clear of clouds. We briefly halted on the bridge to get the scenic beauty of waterfalls from the hills. The cab driver told me that this spot attracts a significant number of campers from local and abroad. This is really a nice spot for camping – worthy to consider in our next visit. Our car finally rolled to enter the village



Picture 3: Mawlynnong – the roads in the village are always kept clean.

at dusk. This village (Picture 3) still remained relatively obscured to travelers. In fact, I came to know that the existence of this village was not known even to travel loving Bengalis until a report appeared in the *Human Planet* written by Timothy Allen of BBC in 2005. Since then, this village has attracted people from all over the world. Now, you can watch several videos and documentaries on YouTube. Incidentally, there is no hotel or motel.

Realizing that this is a golden

opportunity for extra income, local villagers are now extending their cottages to build 1-2 rooms as guest house known only to the cab drivers. We stayed in one of such guesthouses (Ph. +91 9615973768). It has 2 rooms and one bathroom. I was surprised to see that the bathroom is western type and has toilet paper (lacking even in most mid-range hotels in India). Rent was 2000 rupees per night – relatively costly. But you don't have much option. Not many places are available there to stay. We got the last vacant one. I heard, bank loan is difficult to get; neither the existing infrastructure is good enough to build hotels. They have recently started a concrete construction to build a community hall. I saw tourists had to go elsewhere without getting any accommodation in the village. There is no restaurant either. So, we had to order our dinner with the owner. The owner is a lady – the head of the family. Seems, they have a dress code. They wear garment in a special way and also carry a handbag (Picture 4), which obviously carries betel nuts among other things. Most of them don't understand Bengali or English. Their native language (also known as Khasi) was difficult for me to understand. Interestingly, the Khasis are a matrilineal society, meaning that a family's lineage is traced through the surname of the wife, with the daughter inheriting all the family's property. When grown up, a bride goes to the groom's house to marry. They accept dowry from the groom's family. The groom follows the bride to come to her family and perform most of the household duties including raising the children (except delivering the baby, of course! Nature has still reserved it for female in all the animals

except for seahorse!). Although we normally accept our mother as the ruler of the family, in reality, we live in a male dominated society. So, it really amused me when in the early morning, I saw her husband cleaning outside their house with a *jharu*. Incidentally, this place is a major supplier of *jharu*. Wherever you go in that village, you will feel that you are literally surrounded by *jharu* grass/trees. It is also a major supplier (and perhaps consumer) of betel nuts. My cab driver also pointed to a plant that he said is a cardamom (*elachi*) plant. If that is true, I fail to understand why the Meghalaya Govt. does not promote farming these plants, which are obviously more profitable. By selling a *jharu* they hardly get 2-3 rupees per kg! Meghalaya and surrounding states are full of natural resources, but the people, although hard working, are very poor. Agriculture is the chief occupation of the local population, with betel nut being the main crop. They 'survive' with India Govt's special fund. I wish that the local Government



would engage a multidisciplinary team to study and work on their economic benefit, if not initiated

Picture 4: A lady in Mawlynnong – this is their typical dress and the style. They always carry a bag, perhaps for betel nuts among other things. Betel nut is known to keep the body warm in a cold weather.

already. Interestingly, there is great ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity within these seven states. No wonder why North-east India (the then Assam) could not be effectively governed from Guwahati. It had to be divided into seven states over time after independence. Moreover, this region suffered from insurgency and intra-tribal warfare, including terrorism and violence, for decades making this paradise unexplored by the tourists and investors.

This village has about 87 families – each has about 5-6 members. My host has three children. I don't know whether anyone marries more than one time or what is the divorce rate in this female dominated society. I also came to know that the literacy rate is nearly 100%. Anyway, we had dinner made by the owner of the guesthouse. It was so tasty. The order was chicken, dal, aloo bhaja (fries), and a vegetable. The vegetable was made of the stem from *thor* (in Bengali; Banana inflorescence). I have not tasted such a preparation before. Even my elder sister who is a good cook was amazed that such a preparation can be made out of the stem! I like to suggest that you must go to stay in her guest house just to taste this stem preparation. Moreover, *dal* and *aloo bhaja* were delicious. Not to mention the taste of chicken curry – it was superb. Although the rice was coarse, I had a dinner so tasty that I cannot forget. And the cost was 250 rupees per head, less than US\$5, but relatively costly in local standard. I was told that they have to bring everything from the market, which is located in the valley. One jeep goes there twice in a day to bring the materials for a local shop – made of an extension of a cottage where you can find even toilet papers!

You need to get accustomed to rain everyday if you stay here. Almost every 10 minutes, it was raining during my visit in the middle of May. It rained the whole night. Although I saw burnt trees from thunder, I don't think they got heavy storms. Otherwise it would have been difficult to live in a hut-like structure. Unfortunately, I could not effectively communicate with the owner or her husband (who never came out to meet me) to extinguish my curiosity. Anyway, when I woke up in the morning, the sky was very clear. Everything was nice around. We saw teenagers (both boys and girls) collecting fallen leaves and dirt from the road and putting those in the ice-cream cones like bamboo baskets. Later, one guy came to collect from those in a larger container for disposal somewhere else. Later, I learnt that those are collected in a pit and the decomposed are used as fertilizers. When the rain stopped in the morning, I went out to see the surroundings in the village. Roads are made of concrete or stones and kept very clean (see, Picture 3). Amazingly, I could not find any earthworms on the roads, nor heard of any frogs. People told me that they don't have any snakes either. It is hard to believe, especially when this village is surrounded by dense forest. Someone explained to me that it is due to its location above the sea level (about 5000 ft.). One plant, however, attracted me – it was a pitcher plant (Picture 5). I read about it, but never saw it live. Later, I came to know that the San Diego zoo, in my hometown, houses similar kind



Picture 5: *left*, the pitcher plant in Mawlynnong – waiting for the next meal. *Right*, multicolored flower plant in Mawlynnong – proving Mother Nature is the best designer and artist. This author (not a botanist) is ignorant about the name of this species.

of carnivorous trees. I found that those trees, mostly one kind, are quite abundant in Mawlynnong. Well, after a short tour, I felt hungry and so asked for breakfast. Our host did not serve breakfast. So, I went to a nearby place, a restaurant-like facility made from the extension of a house. I asked the owner for toast and an omelet. Bread was unavailable. I got an omelet without onion or any other ingredients and it was not tasty at all. It was dark fried and full of oil. I wonder what do the foreign tourists take here when even toast and omelet are not easily available. Mawlynnong offers a couple of attractions besides its picturesque natural beauty with colorful flowers. This place has abundant waterfalls and rivers, and, therefore, needs bridges to cross the lands over water. In the past, lack of infrastructure made it difficult to build concrete bridges. The high humidity made the dead wood rot away when used. The local tribes solved this problem in an innovative way. They used indigenous materials - living vines, roots and branches to build the bridges that grow stronger over years, so strong that they can support a large

group of people when they cross. You can see one such living roots bridge in this area. I also saw a large rock perfectly balanced on a tiny rock – an amazing creation by Mother Nature. Another attraction is an 85 ft. high tree house built using bamboo and other indigenous materials. I don't know whether you can see Russia from Alaska, but you will be thrilled to see neighboring Bangladesh in the valley from this 'Sky view', when the sky is clear. Several documents have now been written on this village and its people, particularly on their 'green' culture as recently as in June 2015 by *The New York Times*. This has attracted people from different worlds with different cultures, perhaps bringing better prosperity to these tribal people, but also threatening this cleanliness. Anyway, as soon as the rain took a pause, we started our car after saying good-bye to our host (Picture 6) and returned to Guwahati, the Gateway to the seven sisters. I like to suggest that next time you are in Shillong, don't forget to spend at least one night in that village.



Picture 6. This author stayed in this guesthouse in Mawlynnong. The hosts in the background are silently expressing good-bye.

Note: A shorter version was published in the magazine of Saikat (saikat.org) in 2017.