

# KHWENG: Weaving Memories



**Text and Photographs:**  
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The name of Khweng village comes from the Khasi term *khongweng*, meaning curved around. This is apparent when one enters the village – the road turns so sharply as to afford a full view of the entire community. Over time, Khongweng was shortened for ease to Khweng. The first thing that strikes one when entering this village of 100 households is how well-kept and clean the streets are. With the verdant mountains as a backdrop, the streets are lined with a series of traditional cane and modern tin cans that act as waste bins. An encouraging sign is that they are moderately full, evidence that the villagers actively use them and that they aren't just for display.



MAIN VILLAGE STREET

Khweng is an active weaving village, so a must-do on a trip there is a visit to the Eri silk weavers' quarters. There one can see the process of silk weaving on frame looms. The village has silkworm rearers, spinners and weavers, but the lack of space means that large amounts of silk cannot be produced at a given time. Another issue facing the Eri producers is the sufficient production of plants for the silkworms to eat and subsequent production of Eri cocoons. In the past, villagers relied solely on the forest for this, since their lands were too small to grow these plants. However on 6 June 2015, on the occasion of World Environment Day, NESFAS initiated a Plantation Day project, whereby government-given saplings were planted on community plantations, to increase Eri food plant production. The most heartening part of this initiative was that the idea stemmed from the community itself.



THE WEAVERS' QUARTERS

The villagers practicing the art of Eri silk production often do not do this exclusively; they are farmers and use their spare time for Eri-related activities. However, they are slowly coming to understand that keeping these fading traditions alive is an important investment for the future – an activity which they can keep practicing long after they have lost their strength to labor in the fields. For instance, one of the elders in the village suffers from arthritis, but is able to continue her spinning activities to support her household.



CLOSE UP OF THE FLOOR LOOM

A highlight of a trip to the village is the Mei-Ramew Café run by Kong Plantina Mujai, who has been in business for 30 years. In 2011, she expressed interest in becoming a part of the Slow Food and NESFAS initiative of promoting “good, clean and fair food”, and has since been running the café on these principles. It is a small establishment, serving simple traditional food with local ingredients, but the care taken in preparing it and the generous, affectionate manner in which it is served will surely win one over. Traditionally the meal ends with *kwai*, the local variety of betel nut, which is much beloved and consumed faithfully after every meal. One can also enjoy some of the fresh seasonal produce at the Mei-Ramew Café. Additionally Kong Plantina grows her own mushrooms in a room dedicated to this activity. Another culinary specialty of the village is a type of fish that spawns in the freshwater streams of the paddy fields and is caught by the villagers to be cooked into delicious dishes.



The love and respect that the community members have for one other is the foundation for the unity among them. The villagers say that they are living in peace and harmony. This is not merely lip service but is directly linked to their worldview, as expressed in the concept of *ka rep bara*, a Khasi-Bhoi term which means working together, particularly in agricultural activities. There is a strong tendency to mention a connection with tradition when talking about wellbeing, for themselves and the community. The agricultural activities of farmers include plowing, *jhum* (shifting cultivation), paddy planting, and many more tasks. An important advantage of *ka rep bara* is that it encourages teamwork and villagers to support one other, particularly in generating employment activities and helping the disadvantaged members of the village. This not only benefits the land owner, but it also assists those who work in the fields of their neighbors, since they are paid for their time. Owners never pay cash beforehand but only an advance according to an agreement called *ka klong pain*. This is equivalent to Rs.100/- for any kind of work, after which the remainder is paid during the last month of the year.



TOMATO PLANT



MUSHROOM GROWING

If one has prior experience visiting rural India, one knows that it is a society where men are dominant and women are generally kept in the shadows. A visit to Khweng makes apparent that this part of the country is an exception. The men and women are both equally forthcoming and greet you immediately with a handshake. In fact, in discussions the women lead the conversation and are as adept at reading and writing as their male counterparts. The women actively conduct the Eri silk production as well. While communication with the Khasi-speaking villagers must be through an interpreter, taking in the unique sights, smells and sounds of Khweng proves that language is not a barrier when it comes to understanding this vibrant and rich culture.



# What to expect on a visit to Khweng:

- Local songs and tales (Phawar) accompanied by traditional instruments
- Visit to farms and the school garden
- Demonstration of the traditional method of catching paddy fish
- Eri silk weaving
- Traditional dance
- Local food



**WHERE:** Village Khweng, Ri-Bhoi District, Meghalaya

**DISTANCE:** 38 km from Shillong

**TRAVEL TIME:** 1 ½ hours each way

**HIGHLIGHT:** Seeing the Eri silk weavers use the frame loom