

NONGTRAW: **2500 Steps Back in Time**

A long, steep staircase built into a rocky hillside, surrounded by sparse vegetation and a clear sky. The stairs are made of concrete and lead up a steep, rocky slope. The surrounding area is covered in dry grass and some small plants. The sky is clear and blue.

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Photographs: NESFAS



The village of Nongtraw is nestled in a valley far from hustle and bustle of the city and can only be reached by hiking down 2500 steps. Though the walk is challenging, every step is a discovery, affording one a breathtaking view of the verdant mountainside.

The path is flanked with *jhum*, or shifting cultivation, fields. Despite the negative misconceptions of this form of agriculture, the community provides an excellent example of how it can be practiced sustainably. The people of Nongtraw currently maintain an ideal *jhum* cycle of 9 to 10 years, which gives the soil a chance to replenish itself through “rewilding”. Their *jhum* fields support a vast diversity of plant types. A single farmer of Nongtraw grows as many as 20 to 30 types of plants at one time. This provides for a steady supply of seasonal foods for the people of the village. Each household also has a kitchen garden, which is usually laden with fruits and vegetables.



Nongtraw was one of the first villages that voiced its concerns about the disappearance of millet from their diets in the first Mei-Ramew festival that took place in 2010. It was during this festival that Slow Food founder, Carlo Petrini, visited Meghalaya and suggested that it host a world-class festival like the Indigenous Terra Madre. So this was the site where the seed of ITM 2015 first took root.



The community actively promotes the use of millet as a climate-smart crop. Along with the Cooks' Alliance, the community hopes to develop millet recipes to revalorize this ancient grain that predates rice in the region. Through the Millet Network, the community works hard at preserving the grain. As of today, most of the villages surrounding Nongtraw now grow and promote millet. They have also participated in numerous seed exchange fairs.

The village stands apart for the fact that its traditional governing institution, the *Dorbar*, which is generally male dominated, has women members in executive positions.

At present three women are members of the Dorbar. Besides the Dorbar, Nongtraw also has a Development Council which looks at inclusivity in development initiatives, focusing on women, children and people with disabilities. The village has a primary school, a school garden, an Integrated Child Development Services centre, an Aganwadi centre and a football field.

Nongtraw was also the recipient of the Nirmal Gram Puraskar prize in 2011, an award launched by the Government of India for fully sanitized and Open Defecation Free communities.

Pius Rane, an Associate of NESFAS and native of Nongtraw, says that these many accomplishments are because Nongtraw is “a village with unity and vast traditional knowledge.” Villagers are still deeply connected to their lands and to each other, and have increasingly become aware of their impressive store of knowledge – knowledge that will continue to protect the environment and promote agrobiodiversity.



WHERE: Village Nongtraw, East Khasi Hills

District, Meghalaya

DISTANCE: 46 km from Shillong by car,
2500 steps

TRAVEL TIME: 1 hour each way by car

HIGHLIGHT: Views of jhum cultivation
and mountains

BE PREPARED FOR: A strenuous walk on
the steps to the village. Not suitable for
people with heart conditions or asthma.

What to expect on a visit to Nongtraw:

- Local songs and tales (*Phawar*) accompanied by traditional instruments
- Visit to jhum fields, the school garden and forest reserve
- Traditional dance
- Demonstration of traditional beekeeping practices
- Display of agricultural tools
- Local food

