

# **NONGWAH:**

## **In the Valley of the Five Clans**



**Text and Photographs: Ajay Nayak**



If you are lucky enough to arrive to Nongwah Village on the auspicious day of the Seng Khasi lunar calendar, you will be able to witness the deep-rooted faith in the powers of *Mei-Ramew*, or Mother Earth. To witness the ceremony is to be transfixed, as prayers are recited over a hen in preparation for the sacrifice that will reveal the fate of Nongwah and neighboring villages in the upcoming year.







Nongwah means “the land by the riverside”, and visitors discover exactly this as they descend down hillsides to a glistening tributary, which feeds the farms and pastures of the settlements on its banks.

Eight decades back, the five clans that settled this hamlet came down these same hills. They were inspired to move by the bounty that the valley offered. Today Kong Dulan Khasain is the eldest surviving member of the last of the five clans to come to this valley. Kong Dulan remembers when her husband’s clan settled here, and how their fields flourished with time. Slowly a settlement of a few grew to a thriving community of 133 households.





Each crop has a season, and they are honored in turn with prayers and drumming. Prayers are whispered as rice is poured on the drums and tumbles on the surface to the rhythm of the beat. The prayers are to appease the gods, while the drumming and accompanying dances are performed to entertain guests and friends.





The villagers believe their distinctive cultural practices are the reason why the rich lands have given them bountiful crops and a good life. Crops includes rice, *riewhadem* (maize), *phan karo* (sweet potato), *shriew* (yam), *sohplang* (tuber), *muli* (radish), *phul kubi* (cauliflower), black potato, *soh phoh* (pear), *soh phareng* (peach) and other local plants. Initially the mainstay crop was corn, but with an increase in the population, rice has become the most popular harvest. The *Sirdarship*, or chief, of the village, Desha Roy Khasain believes that Shillong and other towns are a safe distance from the village – close enough to connect for emergencies, but far enough for them to maintain close bonds with their landscape.





Tilat Sing Khasain, Kong Dulan's 22 year-old grandson, returned to the village to farm and start his own family after completing his studies in Dehradun, North India. When asked why, he replied that having seen both sides, life in his village is healthier, the relationships deeper and the land richer. His relationship with the land, with the trees ripe with fruit, and with the fish in the paddy fields is what makes him stay here, unlike many other youth who are migrating to urban centers.

The village school of about a hundred students, which has a garden developed with NESFAS support, is a way for the children to be tied to the land. Plus, the garden's harvest is what makes the midday meal at the school more nutritious.

The garden also prompts the village elders and knowledge holders to share stories of the land and their farming heritage. This richness of biocultural diversity where traditions are born from close bonds with the environment is what makes Nongwah a village to behold.





## What to expect on a visit to Nogwah:

- Local songs and tales (*Phawar*) accompanied by traditional instruments
  - Visit to farms and the school garden
  - Walk in a sacred forest
  - Traditional dance
- Demonstration of indigenous rituals
  - Local food

**WHERE:** Village Nongwah, East Khasi Hills District, Meghalaya

**DISTANCE:** 38.9 km from Shillong

**TRAVEL TIME:** 1 ¼ hours each way

**HIGHLIGHT:** Close cultural bonds to the environment