

## **Live at the Border**

### **The Dawki-Tamabil border and Mawlynnong Village: India-Bangladesh**

The rolling Khasi Hills - between the floodplains of Assam and Bengal - were described by the British as “the Scotland of the East,” and provided the natural connection for people between these two plains until the British-ruled Indian subcontinent was partitioned into India and East and West Pakistan in 1947. It was an important point of commerce between Assam and Bengal and the Dawki Bridge, built by the British over the Umngot River in 1932, connects the Khasi-Jaintia Hills and South Assam, in present day Northeast India, with Sylhet district of present day Bangladesh. Today, on the Indian side of the border is Dawki town in the Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya - 80 kms from the state capital of Shillong - and on the Bangladesh side is the border town of Tamabil - 55 kms from the provincial headquarters of Sylhet, Bangladesh.

The beautiful and verdant Khasi Hills today sit on a maze of limestone mines and coal mines, frequented by diesel fuming trucks ferrying the coal and limestone out of the place, and a huge ugly cement factory. The factory and the mining have obliterated many of the Khasi monoliths which are the symbol of the Khasi animist belief-system. There has been a huge environmental impact of such coal and limestone mining in Meghalaya, which forms a substantial part of the border trade at the Dawki-Tamabil crossing.

The road leading to Dawki, away from the maddening traffic of Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya, is one of the most beautiful hill roads in this part of the world, and is busy with local taxis, private cars and buses ferrying tourists. The impact of tourism is seen clearly at “Police Bazaar” in downtown Shillong, where taxi drivers jostle to attract tourists to visit Cherrapunjee and Mawlynnong, mostly for day-visits. A growing number of tourists have started coming from Bangladesh through the Dawki-Tamabil border crossing. The revival of people-to-people contact on a formal basis between India and Bangladesh holds a lot of promise for the development of this sub-region.

Mawlynnong is a small village in Meghalaya near the Dawki-Tamabil border, 18 kms from the state highway, now assigned to be the international highway between India and Bangladesh. The village is at the end of the arterial road and the vast plains of Bangladesh can be easily seen from any high point in the village. There are around 95 households in the village and the people belong to the War sub-tribe of the Khasi people. All the villagers are Christian by faith and are almost equally divided into two churches, one being the Church of North India and the other being the Protestant Church. The village livelihood is sustained by

farming in their plots of land in the community forest adjoining their village, and the major crops are betel nuts and betel leaves, pineapple, jackfruit, bay leaves, broomsticks, and honey. The villagers work in their fields and regularly contribute to community work, which is a major part of their daily life. Their favourite activity is fishing and they go in groups along trails to crystal clear streams with their fishing rods, often entering Bangladesh.

The people of Mawlynnong have been in many ways connected to ideas from around the world, and the values and growth of this community has not been isolated due to lack of proper road infrastructure. For example, villagers from Mawlynnong even participated in the First World War in the British Army, fighting for them in Europe. The village is situated very close to the border-trading town of Dawki, which had connected them to the outside world, much more than other Northeast Indian tribal communities. Mawlynnong was part of an active corridor for the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC) insurgents during the height of the Khasi insurgency against the Indian state, due to the unhindered access through the porous borders across to their insurgent camps inside Bangladesh.

Now these paths, with amazing living root bridges (*ficus elastica* or the Indian rubber plant), clear streams and gushing waterfalls have opened up the village of Mawlynnong to their newest community activity, which is tourism. Mawlynnong is now known by tourism as much as by their sweet pineapples and the strongest betel nuts in the entire East Khasi Hills. Known as the “cleanest village in Asia,” tourism has been ushered in here in a big way. The border is now a harbinger of trade and tourism to the people of Meghalaya.

Mirza Zulfiqur Rahman (Research Scholar, IIT Guwahati, Assam)



Cross border interactions



Cows without borders. Cattle cross into India from the Bangladeshi side.