

KHARANG

by Bruce Findlow

With an introduction by

Margaret Barr

THE LINDSEY PRESS



KIIIEK AND PHRIEN

WHO BELONG TO THE VILLAGE OF KHARANG AND ITS
UNITARIAN CHURCH AND WERE MARGARET BARR'S FIRST
PUPILS AT THE RURAL CENTRE

KHARANG

by
BRUCE FINDLOW

With an Introduction by Margaret Barr

*An eye-witness account
of the work of
Margaret Barr
among the villages of the Khasi Hills
Assam, India*

THE LINDSEY PRESS
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TO MY WIFE

MARY

the second visitor to Kharang

with much love



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INTRODUCTION

“The special characteristic of the Unitarian attempt to restore Christianity was, that they regarded Christianity primarily as a way of life rather than as a system of doctrine.” So writes R. V. Holt in *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England* and the whole of his inspiring book makes clear the power of the Unitarian faith to produce lives of service extending far beyond the bounds of the Church of their allegiance.

In all humility I claim that the work described in this book is in the same tradition. The dynamic that sent me to India was my Unitarian faith in God and man and in religion as a way of life. That it was the Khasi Hills in particular to which I came was due to there being an indigenous Unitarian Church here that needed help. But from the first, it was clear to me that there was a wide piece of humanitarian, social and educational work to be done, extending far beyond the bounds of Khasi Unitarian Church. As the work was in India it was natural, perhaps inevitable, that the technique of carrying it on should be learnt from Indians—Gandhi, with his nation-wide campaign of rural welfare, and Tagore, with his rural university where higher education is closely linked with village life and handicrafts. My indebtedness in these quarters puts the work in a second tradition as well, that of village uplift work in India; a tradition usually associated with Gandhi, which has claimed the services of many of India’s finest men and women.

I am glad to have the opportunity of recording my gratitude to the British Unitarians who, with some assistance from English-speaking Unitarians in other parts of the world, have generously provided the means for the work to be done. I know that they would be unwilling to support what is generally meant by “missionary work” and so I take their support to imply that they see the work as being properly in the Unitarian tradition.

The chapters of this book give a vivid and authentic picture of the centre, its environment and problems, as seen by a sympathetic yet critical observer who has given a year of his life to the task of understanding and helping others to understand the needs of this small "Unitarian contribution to social progress". But apart altogether from the value of the book in making my work known, and its special interest to Unitarians, I feel sure that it will command the interest of a far wider public as a very readable and, in places, moving account of an out of the way place and a little-known people.

MARGARET BARR

Kharang Rural Centre,
Khasi Hills, India.

CHAPTER I

THE APPROACH

*"Put in for a passage as soon as you
get this and come and pay us a
visit, preferably for a full year."*

Letter, M.B. to B.F.

THE JOURNEY began at Sydney on 30th January, five months after it was planned and nearly a week after I had said most of my farewells to friends in the Sydney Unitarian Church. I had had the privilege of conducting the service on my last Sunday there and afterwards was sent on my way over the usual Unitarian cup of tea. As the *Strathmaver* sailed under Sydney's famous bridge so near to my home of the last two years, on the following Friday afternoon, I needed a good reason to be leaving and felt sure I had it in this visit to Margaret Barr in the Khasi Hills for a year. By the next Sunday I was six hundred miles away spending a day with some of my oldest Unitarian friends in Melbourne's beautiful Botanical Gardens, hard by another old home of mine. We argued as usual, this time about the fundamentals of Unitarianism and about pacifism, and ended the day united in spirit by reading poetry together in the summer evening. A few days later, hundreds of miles further on, I went as a stranger among the Adelaide Unitarians and was as kindly received and royally entertained as if I was one of them. Margaret Barr is very well known here and I left laden with messages of goodwill for her. It was over a thousand miles to the next Unitarian congregation in Perth but here too there was a warm welcome, abundant hospitality, and the same spirit. My last picture of Australia was of a small group of Unitarians on the wharf at Fremantle and then there were ten days on the Indian Ocean in which to

reflect on the first by-product of the journey; personal contact with the congregations in Australia about which I had hitherto known very little.

After Colombo the sea section of the journey began to come to an end with our first sight of India early one morning when Cape Comorin came into view. What a fine first sight it is; the steep hills standing up out of the sea as if someone drawing a map of India had finished here in the south with a last heavy stroke of the brush. During the next two days the land came and went as the ship sailed a straight course along the Malabar coast. The land looked brown and old and long-inhabited, unlike the bushy headlands of Australia's coastline which almost persuade one that they are being seen for the first time. Finally, early on the morning of Thursday, 19th February, the ship scraped to a halt against the wharf at Bombay and it was time to disappear into Asia once again.

When the light of day revealed the stone buildings of the wharf and the walls and roofs of the city beyond, everything looked appropriate and usual and I disembarked with the relaxed feeling of one entering a familiar room. Bombay invited comparison with Alexandria, Cairo, Jerusalem, Damascus, Beirut and the cities of Japan which I already knew as a soldier, but there was insufficient time to become acquainted with my first Indian city as arrangements had been made for me to leave by train for Calcutta on the evening of the day of my arrival. Most of the hours of waiting were spent in the beautiful penthouse flat of the friends of Margaret Barr who had met me at the ship. From its terrace I could look out over the bay and down to the left to the famous Gateway of India and late in the afternoon, with borrowed field-glasses and a telescope, I watched the *Strathnaver* sail on for Aden and the Red Sea, its outer whiteness suggesting the comfort and luxury I had enjoyed within. The moment held a certain significance; the breaking of the last link with my own country as the ship went in one direction and I prepared myself mentally for a fifteen hundred mile journey over land in another. I was suddenly very aware that I knew little of the place to which I was going and had accepted the invitation to go there for a year without making any plans or promises about what I would do when that year came to an end.

As the sun set with an apparently angry determination, we sat on the terrace in the mellow air listening to recordings of chamber music and talking of poetry, India and my final destination until it was time for dinner. There were stars over the terrace now so we stayed where we were and the food came to us. But this Indian summer of luxury and comfort could not last and at 9.30 p.m. I was borne away from Bombay in an austere-looking second class compartment, after half an hour of the usual strain and stress of maintaining some sort of harmony between baggage, coolies and remunerations, and the unnatural quiet of farewells of a formal kind. The rail journey to Calcutta via Allahabad occupied fifty hours and proved to be uneventful and exhausting. I began it with a tall, white-robed bishop as my companion and concluded it with four hours of the company of a rather gay Anglo-Indian lady on her way to the afternoon races in Calcutta, for by then it was Saturday. In between these two, several other travellers shared the compartment for a few hours each and then left as anonymously as they had come, but more constant companions were the dry, eroded barrenness of the landscape and the consequent cloud of dust which penetrated everywhere. At each major stop there was a sweeping out but within an hour new dust lay as thickly as the old on seats, window ledges, suitcases and passengers. There was one brief interlude of clear beauty when, about twenty-four hours after leaving Bombay, the train crossed the Ganges in bright moonlight just before reaching Allahabad. The experience had the transience of a dream and the trickery too, for half an hour later we recrossed the holy river and headed south-east for Calcutta through the dry night. It is perhaps permissible to cherish the idea that, in India, paradise lies to the north of Mother Ganges.

Calcutta's Howrah Station is no beauty spot but after two nights and one and a half days of train travel it was a very welcome sight. Welcome too were the smiles of two young Indian students who showed signs of having come to meet me, as at the time of leaving Bombay it had not been certain that I would be met at the Calcutta end. The baggage was re-assembled on solid earth once again and after a tumultuous argument with the coolies a taxi took us to the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in Russa Road where I was to be a

guest for four days while arrangements were being made in the Khasi Hills for carriers for the last stage of the journey. The Institute of Culture is one of many activities carried on by the Ramakrishna Mission and "works for the interpretation and application in modern life of India's ancient ideals, the divinity of man and the spiritual oneness of the universe. It also works for an exchange of thought between India and other countries to help to provide a basis for mutual understanding and goodwill and to pave the way to a world culture founded upon a synthesis of Eastern and Western thought. Lectures by Indian and foreign scholars, international symposia and conferences, classes, study circles, publications, and a library are some of the main avenues through which the institute seeks to fulfil its purpose." So it describes itself in its monthly bulletin, omitting the one fact relevant to this narrative; that it maintains a small section for foreign guests in its four-storey building, as another contribution to East-West understanding. A four-day hiatus in almost a month of travelling was not the most suitable occasion for rising to the opportunities of such an immediate introduction to a wholly Indian atmosphere and a religious movement with the rather un-Indian, dynamic qualities of the Ramakrishna Mission; but it was an intensely interesting experience nevertheless, leaving me with a strong desire to have a longer and closer association with this new-old religious order and its members.

The Unitarian movement was not to be outdone however although 'playing away', and on the third day of my stay in Calcutta my hostess at a tea party (herself a Unitarian) achieved the social triumph of bringing together two bearded Unitarians from opposite sides of the world to represent the movement in a cosmopolitan gathering and exchange ideas about churches and beliefs and news of mutual friends. Early the following morning I took up the journey again with a tedious wait at Dum Dum airport for a plane delayed by fog. Coming after a breakfastless ride through Calcutta, first in a faulty taxi and then in a surprisingly utilitarian airways bus, the delay at the airport might have seemed the last straw, but once again I had a bishop as travelling companion and this time a bishop eager to talk about my country which he had visited years before I was born. The fog lifted while we were still counting

Australian sheep, and very soon we were chewing butterscotch in the isolation of separate seats in a half empty Dakota which set a sure course across East Pakistan to Gauhati in the Brahmaputra Valley. Heavy clouds hid this prodigal son of the Indian sub-continent for most of the two-hour flight but the sari'd hostess did her best to keep us occupied with cheese sandwiches and coffee and assorted magazines, and we were chewing butterscotch again and sweeping down over the paddy fields of the valley towards an airfield and hangar in what seemed a minute segment of time in a journey which was working itself out in time-wasting half circles. To go from Sydney to Calcutta via Bombay is to go the longest (but cheapest) way round. To go to Shillong via Gauhati is equally circuitous as we were now sixty miles to the north of Shillong after starting two or three hundred miles to the south of it. In this case however there was some consolation in the fact that there is no shorter route and that the railway describes so wide a circle that it takes two days to reach the point we had just achieved in two hours.

After a wait in Gauhati airfield's single, all-purpose hangar, during which the bishop and I meditated on what would happen next and continued our discussion of sheep and servants in Australia, an ugly airways' bus with hard wooden seats and a crew of six took us to the Assam State Transport Depot in Gauhati and left us to the mercy of the inevitable crowd of coolies. Shillong was now only a sixty-mile bus ride away and after unravelling the mystery of first, second, inter and third class bus travel and securing a ticket for the mail bus (second class) from a well hidden office, I boarded the appropriate vehicle and, with a bag of biscuits to sustain me, was ready for the drive about which I had already heard horrifying accounts. The road rushed straight across the valley and the drivers of the various classes of transport jockeyed for position but settled down to skilful and courteous driving as the winding ascent began. The road certainly turned and twisted like a snake in agony but the driving was sound, the traffic all going in the same direction (thanks to a system of gates), and the air cooled pleasantly as we mounted higher. An Indian Army medical officer, a Ghurka soldier and I were the only passengers on the mail bus and we made the journey in a comfortable,

un-horrified silence. There was a halt halfway where the bishop, a first class passenger, allowed me to share his tea and then the cavalcade moved off again through another gate, past bare hills on which cattle, sheep and goats grazed in a common herd, past pine plantations and thick pockets of jungle until, soon after three in the afternoon, we reached another bus depot in the heart of Shillong, the capital of Assam, set five thousand feet above sea level in the Khasi Hills.

With a mere sixteen miles left to cover, an overnight stay in Shillong was not greatly appreciated but was unavoidable as this last stage was a matter of walking and having baggage carried on human backs. Friends met the bus and took me to the Lady Reid Basic School which Margaret Barr established twelve years ago and subsequently handed over to the government, and here I was hospitably entertained and made comfortable for the night. Early the next morning a friend's jeep carried us to the village of Smit, south of Shillong, where the motor road ends, and left us by the side of the road in the cool of the new day to wait for carriers to arrive from Kharang. They did not keep us waiting for long and after having food they sorted the baggage into loads and we set out on the final ten miles over the foot track east to Kharang. It was a leisurely walk for the unburdened newcomer but it was nevertheless good to arrive in mid-afternoon, twenty six days almost to the minute after leaving Sydney. Margaret Barr was waiting near the house, with the geese making noises of alarm as we arrived. We had not met until now but that did not seem to matter and we were soon talking eagerly and rapidly over cups of tea and a special cake which had failed to rise to the occasion. The talking has continued at a slower rate ever since, and from it and observations and the experience of living and working at Kharang has come the material for the chapters which follow.

CHAPTER II

OFF THE MAP

"Then I sat down for a little."

Bung's diary.

THE FIRST thing which any newcomer to Kharang notices is the view to the east. The track from Shillong brings you to the back of the main house set on the very top of the hill, and once you have taken the last few steps around to the front with its long verandah and flat open space in front of it, your eyes meet for the first time the rolling expanse of hills and valleys to which they will turn many times in subsequent days. It is a long view uninterrupted by any nearby hills higher than that on which the Kharang Rural Centre stands, and it ends in the haze of the horizon with a long level range not unlike a desert escarpment in some lights. The whole extent of the view displays an area of round, undulating land with small pine forests here and there but generally covered with short grass or outcropping rocks or the parallel lines of the furrows which run up and down the slopes. It is easy to forget that the general height above sea level is between five and six thousand feet.

In the middle distance there is one hill which stands out on its own a little north of east. It has a long straight edge giving it the appearance of a flat plateau broken only by a small forest which begins and ends abruptly with sharp vertical lines. The village of Nongjrong (which means "high village") is situated on the top of this hill, and toilsome indeed is the track going up to it. At a distance, the pine trees scattered about the hills have the appearance of tall palms because the lower branches either fall away or are cut off for fuel leaving the slim black trunk and a tuft of branches at the top. Also in

the middle distance, a little south of east, there is an area of small, low hills very similar to sand hummocks in shape. They gain in height gradually towards the south and then seem to end suddenly with the land dropping away into the darkness of a large valley which is a special landmark. This is the valley of the Umngot River and apart from being noticeable for its size in country with small features it marks the boundary between the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. It runs roughly east to west here and passes within a few miles of the hill on which the centre stands, before its dark shadow disappears into a medley of hills to the south. It helps to fix the position of the centre because Kharang village is literally 'off the map' and can only be placed on it by calculating distances from it to better known features and villages. The view to the west is limited by a nearby ridge of treeless hill, while less than a mile away to the north the view ends with a long wooded slope on which can be seen the thatched houses of the main part of Kharang village.

This varied hill scenery is given added interest by the swiftly moving cloud shadows which chase each other across the landscape particularly in the windy month of March. If the little hills and valleys tend to make one forget that this is high level country, the clouds which play in the hollows and often sweep up the slopes into the house itself help to recall the fact. The Kharang Rural Centre is one place where it is frequently possible to have one's head in the clouds and feet on the ground at the same time! Balancing the splendid view which the centre's situation provides is its exposure, with equal expansiveness, to weather conditions which are best described as "plenty of everything". There is always a breeze at the top of the hill and often a gale, and the whole area is visited by electric storms, torrential rain, mists which stay for weeks at a time and sudden, short hailstorms. There is also a long spell of fine sunny weather in the dry winter months. It is a rugged climate which seems appropriate to the primitiveness of life in the villages and, to a slightly lesser degree, at the centre itself.

The land of the centre is like a small isolated hill, bounded at the back (the west) by the main track and on the sides by small valleys which meet at the eastern end of the ground. The main house sits on the highest point with the land falling

away around it into the valleys, sharply to north and south and gradually to the east. Some of it is under cultivation, the crops being maize, millet, sweet potatoes and vegetables, and these parts are fenced with bamboo or brush fences because the village livestock are allowed to roam at will in the dry months of the year. Moving from the main house to the eastern end of the land, there is a vegetable garden near the house and then a field of sweet potatoes and a long thatched cowshed on the left and a latrine compound disguised by small trees lower down the slope on the same side. A little further to the east on a site cut into the hill is a new house, and stretching east to the end of the land from the left hand corner of this house is a long spur covered with closely growing young pine trees. There are beehives among the trees, a pig pen beside the cowshed and a yard behind the main house for fowls and geese. The two houses are built of wood with iron roofs and the woodwork has been treated with black oil inside and out to protect it against the extremely damp conditions. The new house is a long narrow building with four small bedrooms, two of which are roofed with thatch because they were an afterthought and iron is a controlled commodity and obtainable only at the leisurely pace of civil service activity. Around each house are strategically placed drains to carry off the heavy summer rain and here and there are concrete tanks, set into the ground, in which to store some of the rain for the dry winter months when water must be carried up the hill from a small stream.

. . .

An artist visitor to Kharang would not be able to resist for long the temptation to set up his easel and express with his brush what he could see and how he felt about living in such surroundings. A composer too, would soon be working on a rhapsody or sketching in his mind the framework and melodies of a symphony of these hills. How natural then, that one whose business lies chiefly with words should be found, after a month or two, fitting them together in attempts now to paint a picture, now to sing a song! The characteristics of life at Kharang are best summarised in these terms: beauty of place, simple and self-contained living, remoteness from the day-to-day rush of

affairs elsewhere. Clearly an epic description would be inappropriate, but perhaps these twelve snatches of verse catch something of the place and the life and one person's response to them.

First, some observations of living things—birds and children.

I

Four minahs sit upon the roof,
Not silent, but a shade aloof;
They scratch their feet on tin as proof
That they are there.

I go outside to say hello
To this quartet in a row;
They look at me, decide to go,
And take the air.

II

The children, with their flock
Of cattle, sheep and goats,
Know nothing of the clock
Except the cuckoo notes
Which tell the seconds' steady stream
From a nearby tree
While they sit and stare and dream
And let the herd graze free.

But do they dream, or only stare
Blind, at the beauty, lovely fair
Around them there?

The cuckoo insists that he be noticed more fully but it is difficult to treat him seriously.

III

The notes I sing are only two,
That is the best that I can do;
I sing them once and when I'm through
I sing again, "cuckoo", "cuckoo" . . .

IV

Look! There's a cuckoo on the bough
there now
with a caterpillar in its beak
swinging to and fro.
Oh! Why did I have to speak!
It heard
and, frightened bird,
it's flown away and spoilt the show.

A picture and a song of early morning:

V

The green pines stretch green arms
To cloak themselves in early mist
Then turn their backs upon the east
And shiver at their morning psalms.

Would they now discard their shrouds
And turn their eyes towards the day,
They would see and share with me
Morning's herald-golden clouds.

VI

Clear crystal crackles in the grass
and softly slim, keens in the pine;
the cuckoo sings in joy because
the dew's voice will be silenced soon
by warm whispers from the breeze.

We are intimately acquainted with the weather at this altitude and notice the bad more often than the good:

VII

Thunderous the day, and all about
Violence is stirring on the ground,
The trees are restless with the sound
Of the storm's approaching shout.

Heavy the sky, the dark clouds fill
The space above with black-banked shelves;
The distant hills withdraw themselves
And wait, blue-glum, for rain to spill.

Spring's sun is gone, gone too the hope
It gave of warmth and bright blue light;
The grasses shake in chill and fright
And flee in whispers down the slope.

VIII

Rain-dust is mist;
A surging seeping cloud
Which eddies round our hill
And seeks to crowd
With scarce a whispered sound
Into each hidden place.

A pest is mist;
A gloomy, clammy shroud
To garb the light it kills:
But it must be allowed
That, unlike dust of ground,
It leaves no dulling trace.

IX

Beyond the mist there lie,
I know,
Blue hills and bluer skies;
But still I see them with surprise
When the mist does rise
And go.

Night has something of the silent blankness of mist but holds, as well, some music not easy to capture and record:

X

Softly the stream of sleeping sighs
Breathes through the silent room
And quietly falls away before
The farthest corner's heavy gloom;
Or washes at the mellow shore
Of the lantern's isle illumed
In the night's unheeding seas.

XI

Untroubled is the breathing of the young
At sleep;
Thick the blanket of the mist is hung
And deep;
The day's climb has been hard, far-flung
And steep,
But now the level night has strung
Its hammock bed of calm
Where emptied day elects to heap
In pillowed dark its aching frame,
While eager-dying moths and I
Are left to share the lantern's flame
Beneath a weeping, sighing sky.

Finally, a song of praise and thanksgiving for so much beauty and peace:

XII

Children's laughter,
Sunshine smiling,
Sweet bird notes on sweeter piling;
Nestled rafter,
Pine trees singing,
Eagles, high on high winds winging;
Rainbow after
Gentle rain,
New grass springing green again:

From whence does all this life-joy stem
If not from God, and God in them?

CHAPTER III

ROLL CALL

"Then we had an Assembly."

Phrien's diary.

IT IS SIX O'CLOCK in the morning and heavy rain beats down on the tin roof of the kitchen where eight children¹ sit on low stools around the fire with their brown eyes fixed on the figure beyond the small table of teacups. If you were to ask them, "Who is this lady in a dressing gown, her greying hair hidden in a scarf, who reads through dark-rimmed spectacles from a little typewritten book of devotional readings with an orange cover?" they would reply, in tones suggesting that the answer is obvious, "That is Kong² Barr, of course." They would describe her in terms of her teaching, her cooking, her walking capacities and the way she speaks Khasi, and they would have great difficulty in believing that she is the person described in the Year Book of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches as:—"Ed. Girton Coll., Cambridge, 1920-23; Homerton Coll., Cambridge, 1924-25; Manchester Coll., Oxford, 1926-27; B.A. (Cantab., 1923); M.A. (1927); Lay Charge, Rotherham, 1927-28, Minister 1928-33; Khasi Hills, Assam 1936 —". This is not surprising because it is only at the end of the final dash in the record that the Reverend Margaret Barr and the Kharang Rural Centre come together in such a way that to speak of one is to include the other as well.

¹ Actually there are nine children, the additional one being nine year old Phinos Rani whom Miss Barr is bringing up. For her the centre is home rather than school, and although she is too young for the schoolwork the others do she is one of them in most other activities.

² Khasi for 'Sister'.

On 14th February, 1951* Margaret Barr brought to an end a world tour with a sixteen mile walk on the brown earth and rock track to Kharang and entered upon the new venture of bringing life and value to the newly established Kharang Rural Centre. The walk was no hardship, although she was out of condition after so much civilized travel in cars, trains, ships and aircraft, because she prefers earth tracks to modern highways and open, windy hills to city canyons. Her career in India was in its eighteenth year and now, after twelve years in the pleasant town of Shillong, she was going to live among the villages which she knew only from her tours of the scattered Unitarian churches in previous years. The curious and statistically-minded will have already deduced that she was no longer young, but the prospect of living and working in a village environment was an alluring one for one who has a Gandhian faith in the virtues of village life and a deep awareness of the urgent needs waiting to be met in almost every Indian village whether in the hills or on the plains.

One is tempted to ask whether Miss Barr would have gone so cheerfully, or indeed gone at all, had she known all the difficulties she would meet or the barrenness which was to characterize the first two years. The answer probably is that the combination of her beliefs about village life and village needs, her personal feelings about city life, and the courage and tenacity she brings to any cause she believes in would have taken her there nevertheless. The single factor which might have held her back could only be discovered by experience—the unimaginable loneliness of life as an educated European among people completely uneducated and probably amongst the most backward in the world.

Apart from her inner qualities which enabled her to triumph over even this (but only just, she would be the first to admit) she took with her years of experience as an educationalist in Shillong, a sound knowledge of correct Khasi which proved to be vastly different to the more slovenly speech in the villages, and a stout faith in the goodness of human nature which manifests itself in a spirit of incurable optimism. She had also had six months midwifery training in Shillong and had earlier studied Basic Education and other aspects of

* For the story of the years leading up to 1951, see Chapter VII.

village uplift work at the Gandhian centre at Sevagram. In every way except one she was willing to enter into life of the villages. Certainly she would go barefoot—she preferred it. She would live with the low Khasi furniture—she had been doing so for years. She would eat with her hands and eat the ‘jungly’ vegetables without names and the red rice peculiar to the hills. All this and more she would do—very little of it was new to her—but dress like a Khasi woman she would not! This had been the subject of a debate with Gandhiji himself because he believed that those who were going to help the villages must enter entirely into their life and customs. With Khasi women, the principle governing their dress seems to be to cover every part of themselves except face, hands and bare feet and to wear so much clothing with so little shape that nobody will be able to tell whether their figures are good or bad. Margaret Barr still looks in wonder and asks, “How do they ever manage to do any work or walk anywhere wearing such clothes?” and continues to dress in western style. In principle she agrees with Gandhiji’s view, but Khasi dress just isn’t functional or healthy from the point of view of a westerner accustomed to leading a busy life.

The eight children sitting on low stools around the fire waiting for their early morning tea are Kiiek, Phrien, Klis and Blin (the girls); Bung (pronounced *boong*), Kantiram, Yankee and Bill (the boys). All eight have in common their Khasi nationality, black hair and brown eyes and the narrow environment in which they normally live. Not one of them has ever seen the sea, a railway, a city, a lake; they have little or no acquaintance with telephones, radio, electricity, newspapers, films, made-up roads and glass windows and they have no books to read or handicrafts to employ their hands in their leisure hours. In their villages, their elders spend their spare time gossiping or just sitting; except for frequent visits to church where hymn singing is the great attraction, usually from memory because most people are unable to read.

The children’s ages range from twelve to eighteen with Yankee the youngest and Bill the eldest. Under the influence

of life at the centre they have lost the colourless vacancy of the average village child and now appear surprisingly individual. Kiiek and Yankee are short and slim, Kantiram exceptionally tall for a Khasi and growing almost visibly; Blin and Bill are of stocky build and share a passion for learning; Bung is quiet but bright-eyed and has an affectionate disposition, while Phrien and Klis are inclined to be casual about their work and are neither too fat nor too thin, too short nor too tall. Phrien, Kiiek and Bung are Unitarians; Klis, Blin and Bill are Christians; Kantiram and Yankee are ‘just Khasi’ but the former goes to church with Bill and the latter with Bung! Kiiek and Phrien are Kharang girls selected some time ago for education to prepare them for special training for midwifery work in their village; Klis also belongs to Kharang and Blin to the next village. Kantiram comes from a distant village where there is neither school nor teacher of any sort. He has a small scholarship and is being encouraged to work towards teacher-training so that in due course he will be able to go back and open a school in his village. Bung was the first of this group to come to the centre and was sent by his Unitarian parents who knew of Margaret Barr’s earlier educational work in Shillong. Yankee is the only genuine town boy at Kharang and is here because his mother, too poor to provide her children with proper schooling in Shillong, walked the sixteen miles to Kharang when she heard that the school was to be started to ask that one of her sons be admitted to it. He is younger than the other children but he has the quicker wits of a town boy and manages to hold his own fairly well. He seems to revel in the rural surroundings.

Bill’s village is on the western edge of the Khasi Hills about five days journey by bus and on foot from Kharang and he found his own way to the school after trying in vain to get an adequate education elsewhere. Bill is not his real name. He came to Kharang with a longer and more difficult given name and the surname Singh (the ‘Smith’ of India). One evening soon after his arrival when the conversation around the fire was of names, he said, “I’m tired of mine. Give me a new one.” The Australian, casting about for something appropriate, decided that Bill Singh would be a unique combination of the commonplace. The new name stuck and

Bill wrote solemnly to his relatives warning them to address letters to Mr. Bill as his other name is not known at Kharang. He has another link with Australia because just when he arrived at the centre there also arrived a "token gift" of a few pounds from Melbourne members of the Unitarian Fellowship of Australia and this was set aside to help provide the cost of Bill's keep for six months. A little money goes a long way in these simple surroundings. The story of Bill's earlier attempts to secure an education is instructive not only for what it reveals of his character but also because it is a fair illustration of the difficulties which face village children without the means to pay for higher education. It is a sample of the kind of evidence which led to the establishment of a Senior Basic School at the Kharang Rural Centre.

. . .

Bill, whose village of Nonghawe is small and poor and situated in an area of jungle and paddy fields, decided very early in life that he wanted to go to school but his father was opposed to the idea, perhaps because village education was then entirely in the hands of Christians. Bill was converted to the Christian faith along with a group of other youngsters at a large district rally before he was ten, but the rest of the family clung to the Khasi religion. When a teacher came to the village soon after this Bill asked him to take him away to some place where he could go to school. Being a Christian must have served as a recommendation or perhaps, even then, his enthusiasm for learning was compelling, because the teacher took Bill to the large village of Nongstoin and there, when he was about ten years old, his education began. After four months he was drawn home by a letter from his father telling him that his mother was ill and near death. He found his mother well and the letter a device of his father's to secure his return home, but when Bill attempted to go back to Nongstoin and school there was a bitter quarrel and for the time being he stayed at home.

But the call of school was strong and being a youthful Christian in a non-Christian family was perhaps a source of friction, for Bill finally ran away to another village. Here he

obtained food and a place to sleep by fetching wood and drawing water and husking grain for the family with whom he stayed, and for an hour or two each morning he was able to go to school. After two years he moved on to another village and, being older, worked in the fields and herded cattle for his keep so as to be able to enjoy the same brief early morning periods in a village school. Two more years passed in this way and then, when Bill was fourteen, his father died and he had to return home to help support the family. As the eldest boy among four children the main burden fell on his shoulders and as he had already had more schooling than most people in his own village he became a teacher in the mission school there. From his own scant store of knowledge he taught reading, writing and arithmetic to an average class of twenty children. After three years the family was able to manage without him. He was quite ready to step down from the position of teacher to become a pupil again but the problem was to find a teacher who could take him further. He set about finding one by an act of pure faith. Without any money for food or bus fares he set out on foot with little or no idea of where to look. On the road he encountered a man from a place called Saiden who told him that if he wanted more education that was the place to go as there was a Senior Basic School there. But Saiden was many miles away and Bill had to disclose that he had no money to take him there. Once again something must have recommended him to the stranger for he offered to help, and another man also offered Bill a loan to take him to Saiden.

He reached there eventually but still had the problem of how to support himself and yet have time to go to a day school. He was not able to go to the Basic School but found lodging with a teacher in a village nearby. He stayed there a year but became increasingly dissatisfied. The years were being wasted when he could only get two hours schooling a day and moreover, often the teacher knew little more than he did. He put his problems to the headmaster of the Basic School at Saiden and was advised to go to Kharang where Miss Barr had started a Senior Basic School for village children; a residential school where those who were poor had nothing to pay and worked on the school land in between

lessons. He was warned that Kharang was much higher in the hills than his own village and therefore much colder, but this mattered little to Bill if it was a place where he could get along more quickly with his education. By February 1953, now eighteen years old, he had become a pupil at Kharang and now, after six months, he is happy in the knowledge that he has learnt more in that time than he did in six years elsewhere.

CHAPTER IV

RECORDING ANGELS

*"We wrote our diaries with some help from
Kong Barr with the new words."*

KEEPING a diary is part of one's schooling under the system of Basic Education which is broadly followed at Kharang. Moreover, as an experiment in teaching English, the pupils have been encouraged to make their entries in that language, seeking help when they want to say something new or simply repeating the same sentences day after day if they wish. When the day's events have been recorded the entry is checked and corrected but sometimes odd expressions and mistakes creep past Margaret Barr's overworked eyes.

The entries tell of many things: of mundane tasks ("we washed clothes"), new knowledge ("I taught Bah Bill to milk the cow. Kong Barr told us about Joan of Arc"), of the ordinary ("I cooked rice") and the bizarre ("while the children chopped up the dead pig"); of church-going, hard physical work, endless meals and sessions of washing up, marketing, manuring and mixing mud and cow-dung for a new oven. And the highly improbable appears by accident ("Then I cooked rice and knitting for my little brother"). In their diaries the children have provided, all unwittingly, quotations for some of the chapters here and it is fitting that they should contribute the headings in this particular one for the descriptions of their day-to-day life at Kharang.

"As soon as we got up we had tea!"

It is six o'clock in the morning and rain beats down on the tin roof of the kitchen where eight children sit on low stools around the fire with their brown eyes fixed on Kong

Barr, similarly low-seated on the other side of the small table of teacups. This morning she reads carefully in soft tones an extract from the Koran (it is her selection and her translation into Khasi) and then, for a minute or two, there is silence, broken only by the crackle of the fire, while each person thinks on what has been read or prays silently. In this way the spiritual day begins at Kharang and then, after some efficient work with the teapot and milk jug, the material day also begins as, with the word "Shim!" (take) from Kong Barr, hands reach out for the cups and into the dish of sweet potatoes. When all the cups have gone there remains a large enamel mug in which the lady of the house has her 'two cups at once.'

"I taught String until time for food."

One of the barriers to village education is that from a very early age the children are employed from morning until sunset in herding the village livestock over the hills in search of food. For this reason, village schools usually open for only an hour or two early in the morning and the herding begins when school is over for the day. In Kharang there are barely enough children for the various herds and there was some difficulty in finding someone to look after our three animals as the centre is, paradoxically, on the outskirts of the village and the children object to the "travelling to and from the job." The matter was solved by giving some education as a bonus and so early each morning either Strik or String (they are brothers) comes for an hour or more of schooling given by the older children living here, and then after food at home, spends the rest of the day with his mixed group of animals. In the dry winter months the animals roam where they like without their diminutive attendants. Then is the time for repairing or erecting fences around the vegetable garden and other places which are out of bounds to cows, sheep, goats and pigs.

"First we did mental arithmetic."

The cow had been milked, the poultry fed, the house swept, and a large meal of red Khasi rice, vegetables and meat, prepared and consumed. Now, at half past eight, Kieek, a

short slim attractive girl of sixteen, is standing before the blackboard in the main room of the big house reading out mental arithmetic questions from a large sheet of paper held firmly and squarely before her. Around her in a low semi-circle are the other children, gazing sightlessly at the wall as they reckon in their heads, and there on the flank, clasping slate and pencil like the rest and knitting her brows with concentration, is Kong Barr. When Kieek has given all her questions she seeks the answers around the class. There is great joy this morning when it is discovered that she had one wrong answer herself, but a moment later she too is laughing with the other children because Kong Barr is also found to have a mistake. "When it comes to Indian measures—maunds and seers and rupees and annas—these children are too good for me," she admits; to which it might be added that the questions being in Khasi is an extra handicap for one who counts in English. Every morning two boys and two girls conduct this first class of the day with Kong Barr sitting with the other pupils; but when there is a need to explain the best method of tackling a problem or an opportunity to show the class a shorter way, she is on her feet teaching in Khasi as eagerly as if this was the first chance she had ever had to do so.

"We did the accounts for the month of May."

One of the fundamental principles of Basic Education is that class work should be correlated with practical craft activities. Where a basic school has a garden the business of marketing the produce, calculating the profit and so on becomes an integral part of arithmetic. At Kharang the pupils learn to calculate averages from the monthly weather statistics and to graph the changes in temperature and rainfall. They also keep a daily record of the amount of food consumed and at the end of the month as part of their arithmetic lessons they calculate the cost per month of each item and the overall cost per head for food. On market days one of the boys, or occasionally two or three of the girls, walks to Smit ten miles away and buys eight days' supply of vegetables, meat, flour, sugar, tea and other items and then carries the load of forty or fifty pounds the ten miles back to the centre. The boys who make occasional trips to Shillong are also learning how

to shop in a variety of shops there and how to do business at the post office. Bill's entry, "Then I went to Smit to buy some things," is, therefore, not only a masterly piece of understatement but also a report on the kind of education he is receiving. He probably does not realize that it is either.

"I began to write my composition."

Bill's composition was a piece of autobiography to which he returned at every spare moment during the day and completed by evening. Translated from Khasi into English, altered from first person to third and added to as a result of asking questions, it appears here as the last section of Chapter III.

"After tea we did English and read a Khasi book."

Phrien does not know that her entry contains enough material for a book of its own. It might well be asked, "Why teach English to Khasi children who are being educated for work in Khasi villages?" The answer is that at present there is little chance of their getting even the knowledge they need for village work entirely through the medium of their own language. In the towns there are Khasis with the necessary knowledge, but the gulf between town and village standards of life is so great that it is rare indeed to find a town Khasi working in a village. The village children could be sent to the town for education if their parents can afford this, but if this were done it is almost certain that the children would ultimately find town employment and never return to the villages. Moreover (and this brings us to the second part of the sentence) the number of books in Khasi is pitifully small and there is no real effort to write original books or translate extensively from other languages. There is only a handful of good textbooks in Khasi and at Kharang most of the teaching is done through manuscript copies of a few unpublished books or through material in English. Perhaps in a generation or two a centre such as this will be staffed by Khasis with the necessary width of knowledge and the necessary supplies of Khasi literature to train village people wholly in their own language. In the meantime, English or some other foreign language seems essential if these children are to have the width and depth in their education which they so badly need.

"Kong Barr said, 'You have made some mistakes.'"

When Bill first recorded this fact in his diary he was faced with a problem. He knew what had been said in Khasi but he did not know how to express it in English. With that willingness to try anything once which makes him such a joy to teach he did the best he could and presented his diary to be checked with the entry, "Kong Barr said, 'Wrong.'" This was too much for Kong Barr who had visions of herself appearing in Khasi village history a hundred years from now as a thoroughly ruthless schoolmarm who condemned in monosyllables. With a little tact Bill was persuaded to accept some help and this resulted in the moderate, sweet-patient-sounding statement of this entry.

"While Kong Barr was resting in the new house."

From half past two until four o'clock is afternoon tea time in the new house where the Australian acts as host. Class work is over for the day and now Kong Barr comes bearing a jug of milk and in search of relaxation. Being a guest is the first part of the treatment for her weariness, having tea, chappatis and guava jelly is the second part, and talking only English or listening in silence to the singing of the pine trees is an additional balm. The treatment never fails to effect a cure and then a revived Margaret Barr is ready to talk about something bearing on life here or something which takes her thousands of miles away. Sometimes there is a new poem to read and criticize, or, in light mood, there will be verbal fooling or some sustained fantasy—what would we do if a herd of elephants suddenly appeared below the house? It is much the same as a tea party anywhere except that real toast is an infrequent luxury, the butter is served in its tin, the table is innocent of cloth or saucers, the company is always the same, and the last-minute world news is not discussed because it will not reach us for another week or two, if at all.

"Kong Barr explained the new geography game."

This game, which the children now play almost every night, is in the true sense, unique. It was conceived and manufactured here at Kharang and only one set of its eighty-five

cards exists. The idea was to find a pleasant way of teaching the children how to recognize different countries on the map and to associate with them their principal cities, products and physical features. For each of twenty countries there are four cards; one with the name and a map, a second for a physical feature, a third with the name of a capital and perhaps another city, and a fourth card giving two or three important products. The game is to secure as many full sets as possible by asking for the missing ones and at the end of the game the winner is the player with the most sets. The five extra cards are for five continents and the player must know the right continent for the country of his full set to be able to use one of these cards, which doubles the value of a set. At first the children found it difficult, but it quickly became an enjoyable game for them and now it is difficult to persuade them to do anything else in the leisure time between the evening meal and bedtime. At present a second game is being created on broadly similar lines in which sets of cards will tell in brief the stories of the great figures of history of whom the children hear in class. This time the game will be to fit together the appropriate five cards on the table to make a consecutive story. When the school began "checkers" was everybody's favourite but now it is difficult for the visitor (who made only two mistakes in creating the geography cards and therefore claims to be already educated) to find someone to give him a game!

"Bah Bruce played the gramophone."

The gramophone is the one thing which can draw the children away from their game of geography although there is still a minority which would choose the latter even in this case. The machine was a gift to Margaret Barr from the Women's League in 1935 and it has been everywhere with her in the Khasi Hills for eighteen years, providing instruction and entertainment with records ranging from nursery rhymes to the classics. As a result, it is in its old age now and breaks down fairly frequently and usually when it is most needed. When it is working it requires constant attention and it has become the custom for the visitor to be its operator and nurse, once or twice a week in the evenings for the chil-

dren's pleasure and for an hour on Sunday mornings for Margaret Barr's benefit and his own. Most of the records are old and the only available needles produce the sound at a volume suitable for a football ground, so those with a fondness for music prefer to listen at two or three rooms distance if possible. The children however, usually gather in a tight semi-circle near enough to breathe down the operator's neck. Their taste in music runs to military bands, nursery rhymes, the few available Khasi records, bagpipes and strict tempo dance music, but they will also listen to Caruso, Schumann, Paderewski and a full recording of the music of Les Sylphides, albeit a little like children sitting through a sermon. When they discover a record they like they would be quite content to have it played over and over again until it became unplayable or bedtime intervened. The Sunday morning hour of music (to which they are invited but never come) is in some ways a substitute for a church service in English and has as its core four recordings of choral music of Bach. These also are becoming very worn from long use but for both operator and solitary listener they nevertheless provide one of the richest pleasures Kharang has to offer.

"We have had sixteen inches of rain in four and a half days."

The table at the end of this book gives the statistical evidence that the climate of Kharang is equally rich in sunshine and rain. For those who do not like columns of figures the pertinent facts are as follows. The year falls into four seasons of three months each, beginning with a dry winter during December, January and February when less than an inch of rain falls. The days are cool but sunny, there are some frosts and a chill wind blows off the Himalayan snows in the north. A temperamental spring occupies March, April and May providing higher temperatures and some really warm weather in April and May if the rain is not too consistent. A foot and a half of rain is the average for the season. Then comes a wet summer for June, July and August when the monsoon brings between six and ten feet of rain and Kharang is sometimes hidden in the clouds for three or four weeks at a time. It is a season of mildew and half light and the temperatures are held down by the rain and cloud although there

may be some bright clear days when the thermometer registers ninety degrees. Finally there is a drying-out period from September to November called Autumn and characterized by a good number of bright sunny days, moderate temperatures and bracing nights and early mornings. The rainfall gradually decreases to a few inches in November. At over five thousand feet there is always a breeze of some sort and at times a gale. This moderates the temperatures, discourages mosquitoes and quickly dries the laundry. One day it may also turn a windmill to provide electric power for light and heat.

"A service at Dienglieng for the dedication of a new church."

A new Unitarian church in these hills is a comparatively rare event nowadays so naturally one asked why the new church had been built. Two alternative reasons were offered. The first was that by some odd combination of circumstances the small group of Unitarians in Dienglieng found themselves living at one end of the village with their church set on a hill at the other end and, therefore, a new one was built as a matter of convenience. The second reason was that the old church was blown away by a high wind and the new one, therefore, a matter of necessity. Whatever the true facts may be it is greatly to the credit of this tiny congregation of Unitarians that they set to and built the new church themselves without asking for either help or funds from anyone else.

"Yesterday morning I went to service . . . then I went to service again . . . the evening service was held in our house."

The Kharang church is a small galvanised iron building with a mud floor and planks on the left of the aisle for the women and forms on the right for the men. It has a bell, as have all churches and schools in these parts because of the absence of clocks, and this is rung with the urgency of a fire alarm about half an hour before a service is due to begin. If you live nearby, this is the signal to begin to dress; if at a distance, it is time to start out over the hills. It is rung again even more imperatively just before the service should begin, effectively scattering the thoughts of any early comer who may have been meditating. But it is after this that

most people arrive and if they are long in coming there is some hymn singing for the waiting few. There are no musical instruments, so the singing is led by some leading member of the church who will also choose the hymns. Only a small number of the congregation have hymnbooks but the older members seem to know the contents sufficiently well not to need them, even if they were able to read. All the services are conducted by members of the congregation. The latest 'plan' for Kharang shows the thirteen names of those who will conduct the morning service (without sermon) and the afternoon service (with sermon) for the next two months. A 'plan' such as this is the exception rather than the rule, perhaps because the weather has a way of defeating such confident anticipation. In addition to these two services there is usually a children's service early in the morning, sometimes a women's service after the afternoon preaching service and generally a house service in the evening. With so much worship entirely in the hands of the congregation it is inevitable that the quality falls short of the quantity. Leaders are inclined to make up the services as they go along and remain entirely within the limits of the book of hymns, prayers and responsive readings which their founder left them. Moreover, these Khasi Unitarian churches exist in intellectual and linguistic isolation because few of their members have the education or knowledge of other languages to give them access to literature. This in turn leads to a lack of any sense of membership of a wider movement and to a complete lack of curiosity about any other Unitarianism but their own. The Unitarians share these lacks (as well as the practice of frequent services) with the many Christians in the villages, and therefore, it seems to be a case of imported religious practices and principles being assimilated into the uniform grey dust of traditional village life in these hills.

CHAPTER V

SLOW MARCH IN TIME

"Could you . . . encourage educational efforts in this country literally perishing for the lack of knowledge, I should most sincerely rejoice not to speak besides of the deep gratification your own mind would experience, in witnessing the felicitous results of the same in all future time."

Rev. Mr. W. Lewis in a letter to Officiating Judge A. J. M. Mills in 1853.

ONE WONDERS what Mr. Lewis (one of the first Welsh missionaries in the Khasi Hills) would say to a visiting judge today if he were alive and familiar with the human situation in the hills. He would know that in Shillong, Cherrapunji and Jowai there are Khasis who are university graduates working as doctors, teachers, and at all levels in the civil service. These are indeed 'felicitous results' of the work which the Welsh missionaries began and have sustained with government help and Roman Catholic competition to this day. But if Mr. Lewis were to leave the motor roads and go among the villages on the foot tracks he would be forced to recognize that a hundred years have made little difference to village life; that the villages, if not perishing at any measurable speed, are stagnating 'for the lack of knowledge.' He would find that there are mission schools and some government schools and an abundance of churches in most villages, but he would also find that a majority of the village people still lack the ability to read and write. He would find that the people have virtually no music, no art, no literature, no drama, no dance of their own; no wheeled vehicles, no ploughs, no beasts of burden but themselves and their children,

no medical services, no postal services, no newspapers, few crafts, and only the vaguest knowledge of their own history and place in the world. And yet, no more than twenty miles away is the capital city of Assam with all the apparatus of democratic government and all the amenities and burdens of modern civilized life. To walk from Shillong to Kharang is to walk out of the twentieth century back into the past to a time when men knew no life but the triangular path of work, food, rest.

The circumstances which have brought into being this sharp contrast between the town and village life of the Khasis seem to fall conveniently under three heads. First there is the circumstance of progress, the developmental factor. Before the British came to the hills all the centres of population were villages of various sizes and everyone, from the Khasi rulers downwards, was uneducated. Officiating Judge A. J. M. Mills who was sent to report on the administration of the hills in 1853, described the Khasi people and the first impact of civilization upon them in these words:—

The character of the Khasia people is said to have undergone much change. They were formerly described as an upright, simple people but from an association with civilization and wealth have become arrogant, deceitful and untrustworthy; but however their moral character may have deteriorated, the advantages they have derived and are deriving from their connexion with our Government are great, and numerous civil wars, which continually distracted the country, have been put down. Their trade has been augmented. There is an increasing demand for their produce, and there is a striking improvement in the condition of the people to say nothing of the benefits which they have derived from the attempt, feeble though it has been, to diffuse amongst them the advantages of education. We have also reaped the benefits of our position in having obtained an entire cessation of the murderous inroads which these mountaineers constantly made in the plains, murdering our subjects and pillaging our villages."

The narrow perspective of a representative of the British Raj in 1853 is obvious, as is the gilding of the colonial lily, but

the statement also shows how it was possible then to generalise about the whole people where today it is necessary to speak of town Khasis and village Khasis as of two different races. At the time the judge was making his report, Cherrapunji on the southern edge of the hills and still famous as the place with the highest rainfall in the world, was the military station and the only centre of any importance. Later, the village of Laban was found to have a good climate because it lies under the lee of the highest point in the hills, Shillong Peak, and it became the seat of government and a popular hill resort under its present name, Shillong. It was linked by a motor road with Cherrapunji and Sylhet to the south and Gauhati in the Brahmaputra Valley to the north and grew into a pleasant town as the years passed. Occasionally a new road branched out from it in some direction but whole segments of the hills have been left to this day with only foot communications and the primitive living of an earlier time. The missionaries took education into many such places but it has helped to establish a drift of village people to the towns and, unwittingly, to plant in village minds the idea that the end of education is simply to secure the necessary qualifications for work and life in a town.

Secondly, there is the economic factor. Unlike most parts of India, there is no shortage of land among the villages of the Khasi Hills. Each village has its own area of land which only members of the village can use and in addition there is open land which any Khasi can cultivate if it is not in use by someone else. Government regulations have prevented any encroachment by non-Khasis into the rural parts of the hills and the traditional village rules regarding the distribution of land have, on the whole, prevented its falling into the hands of educated outsiders and absentee landlords. With sufficient land for all, the result is that it is used wastefully and unimaginatively. Each year an abnormally large amount lies fallow and the parts which are cultivated are hoed (there are no ploughs) in such a way that the furrows run down the slopes and the heavy rain washes away the top soil with ruthless efficiency in the months of the monsoon. There does not seem to be any systematic attempt to grow good pasture for the herds which the village children must drive over hill

and dale in search of food from dawn to dusk for about nine months of the year. This prevents the children having adequate schooling or being productively employed in other ways.

Because of this haphazard use of the soil and the available labour the amount of food produced from the land is much less than could be produced and, at the same time, the fertility of the soil is being quickly reduced by the inefficient methods.

The justification for such a situation from the Khasi villager's point of view is that his is a man-load economy. Certainly he must produce enough for his own needs and this he does. He must also produce a certain amount for selling in the market so as to be able to buy there the few things such as clothing and lamp oil and the like which he cannot produce for himself. But whatever he takes to market to sell, whether it be eighty pounds of potatoes, a fat pig or a basket of eggs, it must be carried on his back or his son's or his daughter's or his wife's back. For the potato grower of Kharang whose nearest market is at Smit ten miles away, this means that a whole day must be given by one man to moving eighty pounds of potatoes to market. This state of affairs just doesn't encourage the making of money for its own sake or even for the purchase of many luxuries. Village life is therefore simple, and occasionally Spartan, because few people have an adequate reserve in cash or produce for the bad times when the man of the house is ill or dies. Because of lack of knowledge or perhaps some superstition, the villager does not always receive the maximum benefit from what he does produce. Everyone who can afford it, keeps a cow or two as well as goats and sheep but few if any Khasi villagers take milk from the cows and goats for their own diet.

The third circumstance which keeps the villagers in a state of backwardness while the town, less than twenty miles away, shows another standard of living is what might be loosely described as the human factor. A terrible inertia afflicts the village people so that, with notable exceptions, they are content with their barren lives and in many cases turn a blind eye to the evidence which would show them that barrenness. A leading man in the village receives a deep wound in his

foot. He and his family know that there will be some treatment available at the centre less than a mile away but he lies for a week in his house doing nothing to prevent the infection and pain until his state is accidentally discovered and his foot treated. A grown-up man is entrusted with a note to be delivered to the centre. He loses it but instead of reporting the fact he pretends, like a small child, that he never received the note. The village congregation has a limited amount of material for its services contained in one book. With the advent of someone from outside with an infinitely wider range of material and knowledge and experience at her disposal there is an opportunity for the young people, at least, to extend their own knowledge and help make the services richer and the religious experience of the congregation deeper; but the opportunity is ignored and the same ground trodden week after week as before. The children at school faithfully perform the work they are given but hardly ever show any curiosity to know other things; seldom reach out after new knowledge or experience. A foreigner comes to the village for a while. The usual questions are asked. "How old?" "How many children?" but nobody wants to know what his country is like. It is assumed that he speaks Khasi like everybody else in the villager's world. Most of the adults have been far enough from home to know that there are wheeled vehicles for carrying things and that bullocks will pull carts and draw a plough through a field, but nobody has attempted to make use of any of this knowledge. Fields are still dug with back-breaking, short-handled hoes and everything that must be carried is still carried on a human back in a conical basket supported by a wide band which passes over the forehead.

The tale could be extended almost indefinitely but enough has been set down to show that, although inertia may not belong exclusively to the Khasi villager, he and the life of his village stand still just above a self-sufficiency level because there is no will to lift the village to a higher kind of living. In some ways it might not matter very much if village life did stand still in its present condition. People are happy in a moderate way and they usually have sufficient to eat. Their wants are reasonable and not far above their needs and they are usually able to satisfy them. Those who feel crushed under

the complications and pressures of modern city life may feel tempted to advise, "Let them be," but there are other things to suggest that these people should be helped to a better kind of life, not least of which is the fact that the rest of the world will not "let them be" indefinitely. The isolation and protection which the foot track provides cannot last for ever and indeed is already being broken down in some places. Since India became independent, new motor roads have begun to reach out into the formerly isolated villages and along these roads go the non-walkers, the town dwellers with an eye for business, to use the villages for their own purposes and incidentally show the village people new ways of living and behaving—both good and bad. Ultimately there will be few places untouched by the urbanisation which the motor road brings and there is, therefore, a good case for educating the villagers in advance to meet this new experience; for attempting to equip them to distinguish the good and bad things of urban life.

Most visitors to these villages would find the best reason for bringing knowledge in from outside in the amount of unnecessary suffering which goes on under the thatched roofs of the village homes. There is some tradition of herbal medicine but very often people suffer needlessly in childbirth, in fever and from wounds and minor illnesses simply because they do not know what to do or where to go for help. There will always be the serious cases requiring all the facilities of a modern hospital but there is so much lesser suffering which can be cured on the spot with the simplest techniques and materials. But the outsider who comes to do this work will find himself baffled by the fact that the village people do not seem to know that so much of this suffering and waste of days is unnecessary and preventable. Here then is a second reason for the slow task of bringing knowledge into the village; to educate some of one generation of children to be teachers, so that more of their children can have more and better schooling, so that their children in turn can perhaps make a richer and happier life for themselves in the villages in which they are born.

If the visitor is an Indian he will find a national reason for bringing knowledge to these hill villages. He will see good land

being spoilt and wasted because of the inefficiency of the village economy, because of the lack of knowledge of better methods, and because of the lack of a sense of membership of a nation which needs all the land it has and all the food it can grow to feed its people. This visitor will note that the Khasi villager puts nothing into the life of the nation nor draws anything out to enrich his own life from beyond the hedges which surround his fields. This visitor will want to see the standard of village life raised because in the long run it will be good not only for the nation but also for the village as well. Finally, an educated Khasi with some pride of race would see a need to raise the life of the villagers to try and preserve the unity of his people and the remnants of its traditional culture. Already he has seen the race split into two, into Christians and Khasis, by the activities of the missions; and with the towns rushing ahead as they must and the villages standing still in their isolation, he will see the possibility of his race being quartered by the ever-widening gulf between town and village.

The western visitor will endorse all these reasons for village work here and now. He may wonder why they are not all being acted upon by people near the scene and only gradually will he realize that the foot track which he walked to reach Kharang not only governs the village economy but also keeps the outside world as ignorant of the villagers' needs as it keeps the villagers unaware of that world's capacity to assist.

CHAPTER VI

FEET ON THE GROUND

*"This morning I got up very early because
Bah Bruce was going to Shillong."*

Bill's diary.

THE FOOT TRACK dominates life both at the Rural Centre and in the villages beside it, but it means different things to different people. To the town dweller it is a sufficient reason for never going near the villages. To a social worker it is the bottle-neck in town and village communication. To the visitor from abroad, once he has become used to the idea of walking as a necessity rather than a form of exercise, it is the barrier between him and the mail from home. To the villager it is everything and yet as unremarkable as a footpath in a suburb. In the wet season it is a thing of thick mud and barely fordable streams and the journey a slow careful walk in continual mist or rain. In the dry winter it is hard and dry and the walk is a pleasant one in bright sunshine tempered by a cool breeze off the Himalayas. In an emergency it is simply a path which must be traversed and re-traversed at a maddeningly slow speed until death has been beaten back; for when it has been defined, thought upon, described yard by yard, the foot track is still the single, slender link between primitive villages and all the things of the modern world which they need. A true story of a village emergency will serve better than any visitor's account of his own journeys to show what it means to live in a village accessible only on foot.

. . .

One of the minor tasks at the Kharang Rural Centre is the keeping of the weather records in a simple exercise book with an unpleasant cover design in black and red now overlaid with smoke stains by the book's long residence on a shelf over the fireplace. This record was begun on 17th February 1951 and continues to the day on which this is being written, 14th October, 1953: almost thirty-two months, about nine hundred and sixty days, broken only once for a period of three days. For 11th December 1952 the morning temperature is shown as 47° but then there are no more entries for that day or the two following ones. Across the blank space has been written "Shillong" and then, on the 14th, the stream of figures begins again. What happened? The simple answer is that there was nobody at the centre on those days to keep the record but the reason for that is the story of a struggle to save the life of a young mother in childbirth.

During the cold clear early hours of Thursday, 11th December, a boy was born in one of the largest houses in Kharang village. His mother, Lyngien, was attended by her mother and elder sisters while her stepfather and Philhope, her husband and also village teacher, hovered in the background. Soon after the baby arrived it became clear that there were to be complications—a retained placenta. None of those attending the young mother were capable of dealing with the situation and they could only sit helplessly by. The news spread around the small village and people began to drift into the house as is the custom in time of trouble. But nobody in this or any other village nearby knew what to do and morning found the new mother lying still, surrounded by worried relatives and friends and waiting for she knew not what.

About an hour after sunrise, Daniel Lamin called at the house to see his friend Philhope (they grew up together in a village on the other side of the hills) to ask if the baby had arrived. He it was who had looked at the thermometer that morning and written 47° in the record book at the centre where he was temporarily in charge. Daniel was much more a man of the world than the simple village folk. He could not only read and write Khasi but had had a good all-round education and could speak fluent English. Moreover, he did

not share the usual village fears about doctors, hospitals and medical treatment.

Hearing of the condition of his friend's wife, Daniel offered to go for expert help and quickly set out with the step-father for Shillong, a walk of sixteen miles over rocky hill tracks to west and north. There had been no rain for a month so the track was in good condition and in a few hours these tough hill men had covered the distance. Dan went straight to Miss Barr who was working temporarily in Shillong at that time and explained the situation to her. She gave him a note to the doctor at the Maternity Welfare Centre, asking that expert help be sent to Kharang and guaranteeing all expenses and fees. The Maternity Welfare Centre was not able to help and sent Dan to a midwife. She was not able to go and thus began a search for help which lasted until the short winter day was ending. Then he found a young Khasi doctor who was willing to make the journey. It was already dark by this but they set out without delay; the doctor, a boy to carry his bag, Dan and the step-father. Luckily they secured a ride on a truck as far as Smit (where the motor road ends) and then had ten miles left to walk in the dark over the rough foot track, with only one hurricane lamp between them.

Progress was necessarily slow and they arrived at Kharang at about midnight to find Lyngien's condition unchanged. The first thing the doctor did was to give the baby an independent existence in the world. (It is the custom in these villages not to separate the baby from its mother until the placenta has been delivered. In this case therefore, the baby was still joined to its mother when the doctor arrived, nearly twenty four hours after it was born.) As he had feared when he set out, the doctor found that hospital facilities would be needed and so after completing his examination he told the relatives that it would be necessary to have Lyngien taken to hospital in Shillong as quickly as possible. Immediately there was an outcry. "They will operate and kill her." "She will die on the way." All the superstitious fear of hospitals (the unknown for most of them) came to the surface of the villagers' minds and the women relatives flatly refused to take the doctor's advice. He argued and pleaded through the small

hours of the new day supported by Dan and Philhope, but to no avail. Finally he told the womenfolk, "If she stays here she will die. If she goes to hospital there is some chance of saving her life. If you won't let her be taken to hospital you will be responsible for her dying here. As soon as it is light I am going back to Smit where I will arrange for transport to take her to Shillong. You make up your minds what you are going to do."

By the time he was ready to leave with the first light, the women had reluctantly agreed to the doctor's plans and an hour after he left with his boy a second party set out. Lyngien had been given injections and she was placed in a carrying chair which a man can carry on his back, taking the weight on the usual wide straw band which passes over the forehead. Usually the carriers take turns hour and hour about when carrying the chair but on this occasion, to avoid unnecessary movement, one carrier carried the patient the whole ten miles to Smit. With him went Dan and Philhope, the girl's mother and step-father and a young woman who carried the newly born baby. The party arrived at Smit late in the morning to find the doctor waiting. He gave Lyngien another injection and after a short rest she was placed on the front seat of a truck, the only vehicle available in Smit that day. Then, with the doctor supporting her, she sat up while the truck slowly covered the ten miles of rough road to Shillong and finally, soon after midday, she was safely in the Women and Children's Hospital. It was almost thirty six hours since it had become apparent that she needed expert medical attention. To secure it some of the men had had to walk as many miles and still had the return journey of sixteen miles to do the following day.

The story has three happy endings and a hint of what might have been. The young mother received the attention she needed and after spending Christmas and New Year in hospital she was able to walk back to Kharang in the first days of January. There, with her baby, she is happy and well (it was her baby which cried lustily through much of Kong Barr's sermon in the little village church last Sunday!). The Kharang Rural Centre's weather records resumed their march on 14th December and have not been interrupted

again. The young Khasi doctor who risked his limbs in a difficult night walk, and whose persuasiveness and skill saved Lyngien's life, refused to take any fee for all he had done, explaining as he did so that only four months earlier his own wife had died in childbirth.

CHAPTER VII

ASCENT TO THE PRESENT

"I'm beginning to doubt the wisdom of this idea of bringing village children and young people into Shillong. Am inclined to think that what I must aim at is a village centre."

Margaret Barr's diary, 23rd May 1938.

LOOKING BACK over her journey in time to Kharang on the twentieth anniversary of her first departure for India, Margaret Barr wrote, "Ever since I had heard of Gandhi I had been conscious of a vague but steadily deepening conviction that somehow my life work was to be bound up with his. And ever since I had first heard of Hajom Kissor Singh, founder of the Khasi Unitarian church, I had been conscious of a much less vague and still deeper conviction that my life work was to be bound up with his. The two together carried the divine command which took me to India." One did not have to be in any special situation to hear of Mahatma Gandhi twenty years ago but only a Unitarian (and an enthusiastic one at that) would come to know of Hajom Kissor Singh. The first step of Margaret Barr's journey to Kharang was, therefore, her becoming a Unitarian, and for this most of the credit must go to a third man standing behind the other two.

When she went up to Cambridge as an undergraduate she was a conforming but unconvinced Methodist and it was not until her second year there that she first worshipped with the small group of Unitarians who at that time had a minister but no church of their own. The minister, the Rev. Dr. J. Cyril Flower, was the third man who unwittingly helped to bring the Kharang Rural Centre into being. Margaret

Barr found that worshipping under his leadership satisfied both her devotional needs and her reason but she did not at once become a Unitarian. "Dr. Flower was the perfect host in things religious", she said in recalling her Cambridge days, "to me and to many others. Patient and helpful always, he advised us when we had problems to thrash out but he never pressed anyone to join the church." When she left, after graduating, to spend a year in Wales, they kept in touch with letters and on coming back to Cambridge for teacher training she entered more fully into the life of the church and eventually went down to London to teach, an ardent Unitarian. When she applied for entry to Manchester College Oxford to train for the Unitarian ministry it was Dr. Flower who supported her; he was tutor in Psychology during the time she was in training and he came to Rotherham for the service at which she was inducted to the ministry of the Church of Our Father. She had now entered into the circle where she would feel the call to be delivered jointly by the two other men, so the part of the third man in this matter was finished; but the fact that it is recorded here is proof that it is still gratefully remembered.

Hajom Kissor Singh and Mahatma Gandhi continue to exercise an active influence, in spirit, over the work of Margaret Barr to this day because it is carried out in the country and among the followers of the former, on principles which she learnt largely from the latter. Gandhiji is too famous a figure to need any description of his views or saintly character here but the Khasi, Kissor Singh, who gave all his adult years to the cause of liberal religion among his own people, has yet to secure the place in the sun he deserves.

Unlike those of us who have fallen among Unitarians after leaving the orthodox fold, Hajom Kissor Singh had nowhere to go when, not yet twenty-one years old, he felt compelled to leave the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church of which he had been a promising young convert and in which he had received a good education. Through a Brahma friend in Shillong he came to know of the presence in Calcutta of the Rev. C. H. A. Dall, an American Unitarian missionary, and correspondence with him convinced the young man that

he belonged with the Unitarian Christians of that time. He resolved to bring this kind of religion to others of his race; and on 18th September 1887, at the small town of Jowai (it is sixteen miles across country from the present centre at Kharang) the first Khasi Unitarian church had its first anniversary. Its founder was then twenty-two years old. His journal for 1886 shows how in these early days Kissor Singh turned to Dall for help in almost everything but then, suddenly, there is a page with a border of black ink and the heading, "The Death of Rev. C. H. A. Dall."

I am very grieved to write here as a permanent record of the death of Rev. Dall my dear teacher, benefactor and helper . . . For nearly a year now I have been writing to C. H. A. Dall and I confess that I have got great light from him . . . I hope to further the cause of . . . Unitarianism in the Khasi Hills but now that my helper has died it will be very difficult to do this alone . . .

The years that followed showed that power was given to him to accomplish a great deal and he was to find colleagues among his own people and receive help from abroad, but in the beginning he had far to travel and had to travel alone. Early in 1887 he wrote, "In the Khasi Hills at present there is not yet any one, I think, who knows of this religion of the living God." Today there are several hundred people in these hills who call themselves Unitarians and it was chiefly the courage, zeal and intellectual leadership of Hajom Kissor Singh from 1886 until his death in 1923 which brought this about. Not only did his example bring Margaret Barr to work among the churches he had established but his spirit and his deeds have continued to be the light on the hill "when courage fails and faith burns low"; an example of solitary determination and patience and proof of what a Khasi can become when given the opportunities which the majority still lack.

After two years in Calcutta Margaret Barr knew that she must go and work among Kissor Singh's group of churches which were lost without their leader. "The Voice that sent me to India spoke even more clearly when it sent me to the Khasi Hills. The passage of years has proved that the decision

was the right one and that there all the broken threads could be united and the Unitarian minister, educationalist and Gandhian rural worker become one person with a single, if many-sided, task to perform." She was appointed the representative in India of the General Assembly late in 1934, in succession to the Rev. Magnus Ratter, who had given two years' devoted service to the Khasi churches especially, from 1930 to 1932, but whose health forbade his remaining longer in India. However, her services were needed in Calcutta in 1935 and it was not until early in 1936 that the hills were attained.

As the quotation at the head of this chapter shows, the idea of establishing a rural centre in a place some distance from the large towns such as Shillong and Jowai, to serve as an educational centre for the Khasi Unitarians, was conceived quite early in Margaret Barr's career in the hills. But first it was necessary to build up the two schools already established in Shillong, to provide them with a sufficient number of trained teachers to take over the work and free her for this new venture. In due course the Sunderland Memorial School was put into the hands of Khasis and later the Lady Reid School at Malki was taken over by the Government and finally left in the charge of Khasi teachers who had been to Sevagram for training in Basic Education. During this period of transition Miss Barr set about finding a suitable site for the new centre and after thorough investigations it was decided that the village of Kharang, about half way between Shillong and Jowai, would be the best place of those available. It was accessible to a good number of surrounding villages and centrally located in relation to the scattered Unitarian congregations. Moreover, the area was one in which there were no large mission schools or other rural centres. The village of Kharang was asked to provide land and after Margaret Barr had paid a fee and become a member of the village, an area was provided about a mile from the village on a small hill. This was in 1946 and immediately plans were made for building houses and taking possession of the site.

Margaret Barr's report on the history of the centre, written in March 1953, takes up the story. "I returned to the Khasi

Hills in February 1951 from my world tour and, as a house was now ready for me at Kharang, went immediately to live at the centre. Early in March I went to Raliang for the Annual Conference of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills Unitarian Union and told the assembled delegates of the establishment of the centre and invited young men to come for training as leaders in their own churches. Scholarships would be provided in proportion to the degree of financial sacrifice involved in their coming. I explained that there would be two levels of religious education: work with me based on material in English for better educated young people from places such as Shillong and Jowai, and work with Ekiman Singh for less educated village Unitarians. This was the original plan agreed upon by Ekiman Singh and myself and our hope was to provide the educated leadership which the churches needed. It was also intended that, where necessary, general education would be given also so that Unitarians could conduct small schools in their own villages and so that some of them could go on to become salaried government teachers in village schools.

“To my great surprise, it was not until May that a Unitarian came to the centre for training. It was never thought that a large number of students would be able to come but it was believed that, if provision was made to prevent them from suffering financial loss by their coming, there would be a few young people in the villages and towns prepared to equip themselves to serve our movement. In May, Carley came from Jowai and remained for three months after which he left with the intention of returning to college. He received religious education with my help and guidance, based on material in English, and at the next conference he spoke to the young people of the benefit he had received from his time at the centre. After his departure I was alone again with the task of maintaining the centre but without the students for whom it was intended. In November a young Bengali of a Brahmo Samaj family came voluntarily to help with the farm work and he remained with me as Farm Manager, doing excellent work, until July 1952.

“Towards the end of 1951 I decided to hold a conference at the centre of all the young Unitarian people who knew

English and a few young members of the Brahmo Samaj, and invitations were sent to about fifteen. The object was to bring the young people together to explore the possibility of using their knowledge of English to translate religious material into Khasi for the benefit of the cause of liberal religion. The officers of the Union were purposely not invited so that the young people would feel free to talk and plan without restraint, and using their own initiative. The venture was a complete failure as only three people came, most of the others sending last-minute excuses.

“By now it was apparent that the centre was not fulfilling the purpose for which it was established. In looking for the reasons for this I was surprised to hear, nearly a year after the event, that some of my remarks at the Annual Conference in 1951 had been misunderstood and that it was believed that I intended to work only with educated young Unitarian people, making no provision at the centre for the training of young villagers. At the Annual Conference at Puriang in March 1952 this misunderstanding was quickly cleared up. A new spirit seemed to have emerged and I went back to Kharang believing that now the work could really begin. In the next two months something was achieved. A Brahmo boy came for two months and a Unitarian from Nongthymmai also came to live and work at the centre for a while. In addition to daily study with these two, I held a weekly class to which Ekiman Singh and two local village teachers (both Unitarians) came. A third who lived three and a half miles away came occasionally.

“I decided that as it was unlikely that there would be any students for me to teach during the bad weather from May to August, my time would be better spent in helping the schools and churches in Shillong during that period. I duly went to Shillong in May and remained until September except for a brief visit to Kharang in July when there was a change of farm managers. I worked in the schools in the day time and with the young church people in the evenings and one result was that the young people of the Laban church put on a special feature “Our Unitarian Heritage” at their anniversary celebrations. The rest of the year found the centre still without students and it became clear that its scope would

have to be widened if my time was not to be wasted altogether and the materials and money already put into the centre not written off as a complete loss.

“Without abandoning the original plan, I decided that the centre could best serve the surrounding village communities (and, incidentally, advertise the spirit of Unitarianism) by serving as a residential Senior Basic School. The idea received support from his Excellency the Governor of Assam, the Syiem Khyrim (the local Khasi ruler), the Assam Government Rural Development Officer and others, and was recommended to the village people at a durbar held on 1st November 1952. A new building was begun to serve as a girls’ hostel and guest house and by the end of January 1953 we were ready to begin teaching. By then, one Unitarian boy had been sent by his parents from Nongthymmai and two Unitarian girls who had been receiving schooling in Shillong but who belonged to Kharang village were coming daily for lessons. In February other village boys began to come from various places. . . .”

Thus this unemotional report of a bad beginning and crushing disappointments which were turned to good account in the end brings us back to the present and the eight children, unwitting representatives of all the uneducated village boys and girls and all the needs of village life, whom the Kharang Rural Centre and Margaret Barr now serve.

CHAPTER VIII

ABOVE AND BEYOND

“Then we looked at the stars.”

Blin’s diary.

NOW THAT the stars have names they seem more real to Blin, and nearer too; nearer and more real perhaps than the things of civilized Shillong for which she knows the names but which she has never seen. But the fact that she will go out at night and look at the heavens is itself an indication that she is nearer to the kind of life that Shillong represents than she was before she came to Kong Barr’s school at Kharang a few months ago. In villages such as hers, people close their doors on the night and shut themselves into their small windowless houses after dark because there are evil spirits which roam about and bring sickness and all kinds of misfortune to those whose homes they enter, and there are the servants of the great serpent seeking human sacrifices for it.

To have established a rural centre among the more isolated Khasi villages is to have slipped a foot inside the closed door of village life. It is the first act in a very long task and even now, with a residential school operating smoothly, some cattle in the barn and crops in the fields, a Khasi midwife living at the centre and beginning to make contacts in the villages and a visitor writing a book about it all, the ultimate goal of a many-sided centre, meeting a wide variety of village needs and slowly raising the quality of village life, is still as far off, seemingly, as Blin’s furthest star.

On the one hand, the important needs of the villagers are becoming clear:—medical help of an immediate kind and a campaign to educate the people to accept modern methods of treatment and to discard both their superstitious fear of

hospitals and doctors and also their tendency to assume that nothing can be done for illness. Instruction in food values with the aim of converting the perpetual potatoes and red rice into a more balanced diet which makes full use of the local resources. A campaign to make the village people literate and to supply them with reading matter in Khasi which will give them practical knowledge useful for their day to day life and also news of other places and people to broaden their knowledge and bring them back into the world. Research in agricultural methods so as to help and encourage the village farmers to make better use of their land. An investigation into the problem of livestock feeding with a view to making it possible for village children to spend more time in school and less time herding the animals. The seeking out and encouraging of those who can teach simple crafts or who retain some knowledge of the fast-dying Khasi culture. Education of village children towards teacher training and midwifery training in such a way that they will want to complete their training and yet remain content to work in the villages rather than the towns.

On the other hand is the loose plan for meeting these needs by trying to attract a series of young people with some appropriate special knowledge to come from elsewhere in India or abroad, one by one, for six months or a year to pass on their knowledge to the older children in the school and to any villagers who know English; and at the same time provide the intellectual companionship so much needed as long as the centre remains a 'one woman show'. More buildings will be needed, more equipment of many kinds and more funds for maintaining the children who come for education. But when these three things, men, materials and money, have been secured there is still a local factor which governs the rate at which they can be used. Each new step must wait for the villagers themselves to discover that they have a particular need and want to do something about it. The village can only be helped to raise its life slowly and smoothly to a new level—not to a new kind of life—at its own speed and in terms of its own capacities. Because the work must begin so much farther back than even the most pessimistic theorist would assume, proceeding at village pace sets the fruits of action

so far beyond the gaze of the village worker that it is not too much to say in all seriousness that the first qualification for work at a centre of this kind is to be non-attached to the fruits of action.

In the matter of education alone, nothing advances at the rate one is accustomed to in the western world or even in Shillong. Parents do not readily yield up a son or daughter for some years in a residential school even when there is nothing to pay out, because they lose that child's services in field and home. When the right children have been obtained they come with little beyond a knowledge of reading and writing and simple arithmetic. To get them started on such things as geography and history calls for much ingenuity and unlimited patience. Weeks go by and still the difference between cities and provinces and countries is but dimly realized. History, through the stories of great lives, remains just a series of stories of varying degrees of interest for a long time before it takes shape as a panorama of events in time and space. The higher stages of arithmetic seem to be absorbed slowly but surely as theory but when the theories have to be applied to a practical problem there are blank looks and long silences.

The arithmetic class reflects in miniature the whole nature of the task of the rural worker in these hills. First find someone who wants to learn. Then devise methods of teaching of the utmost simplicity and relevant to the pupil's extremely limited experience. Then teach by these methods at a slow rate and with frequent revision. Next relate the new knowledge to a practical problem and try to help the pupil to see the connection and to recognize the practical value of the new knowledge. Stand by to go over the whole procedure many times more and keep hoping that the learner will have as much stamina as the teacher. Whether it is a matter of multiplication or dressing a cut foot or relating religion to life for a fellow-Unitarian, the method is basically the same and calls for patience and optimistic faith far in excess of any normal measure.

The Kharang Rural Centre came into being because one person saw the need for it and found the strength to turn a vision into solid fact. Behind her was the example of two

men who followed their own visions with courage and fidelity and ahead now lies a long long vista of unromantic, unrewarding, day to day work stretching far beyond the limits of one lifetime or one generation. As Margaret Barr in her generation, in one of the loneliest and toughest jobs in the world, pays practical tribute to Gandhiji who loved villagers and Kissor Singh who brought his people a religion of love, may there be somewhere, someone of a later generation fired by her example to look, in turn, at the stars, and take the path which leads above and beyond any call of duty to a life of unlimited love, expressed in unlimited work.

Kharang,
3rd February, 1954.

THE CLIMATE OF KHARANG (See page 37)

Year	TEMPERATURES									RAINFALL		
	Average max. daytime temp.			Range of daytime max. readings			Mean average for month			Monthly totals (in inches)		
	1951	1952	1953	1951	1952	1953	1951	1952	1953	1951	1952	1953
January ...	*	69	67	*	61-73	54-73	*	57	55	*	Nil	·48
February ...	71	74	72	68-76	68-81	61-81	61	61	60	*	·10	·30
March ...	74	75	74	57-83	54-84	58-81	64	63	65	1·81	2·56	5·71
April ...	77	80	80	65-89	72-91	72-86	67	69	69	3·89	3·48	8·38
May ...	79	78	80	65-89	70-84	72-88	70	70	71	6·91	18·53	7·01
June ...	74	77	79	65-84	70-84	68-87	70	71	72	56·63	37·63	22·89
July ...	74	77	76	65-88	68-82	68-85	70	72	71	76·88	47·28	39·70
August ...	81	76	74	68-91	73-81	73-88	73	72	74	36·92	35·86	18·31
September ...	80	77	77	66-91	66-84	65-88	72	70	71	17·58	20·54	35·64
October ...	77	79	78	65-85	69-87	70-84	69	70	69	19·93	22·15	5·29
November ...	73	71	73	55-78	66-79	60-81	62	62	63	2·24	2·81	·46
December ...	68	67	70	58-74	62-71	62-75	58	57	59	·04	Nil	·02

* Indicates that no records were available.