

# The Fair Maiden of the Highlands

In the far eastern parts of India is the land of the famed Siroy Lily—the fair maiden of the highlands, which people from far and near come to see. The flower is said to cast such a spell that one is tempted to visit the Shirui hill year after year to see it. Avijeet had heard so much about the lily that he was hoping some day to visit the Shirui hill where the flower blooms. Luckily, one fine day in mid May, Avijeet and his friends Vikram and Anil got a golden opportunity to join a group of young people from Imphal, going to the Shirui hill. The hill is located in Ukhrul, the hill district of Manipur, and is at a distance of 82 km from Imphal, the State's capital city.

Looking out from the window of the bus that was winding up the steep, meandering mountain road, Avijeet could not hold back his excitement. He was taken in by

the breathtaking mountain scenery. Crisp, cold air lashed at their faces, their hair blowing wild with the wind. It was a wonderful feeling to ride in the wind.

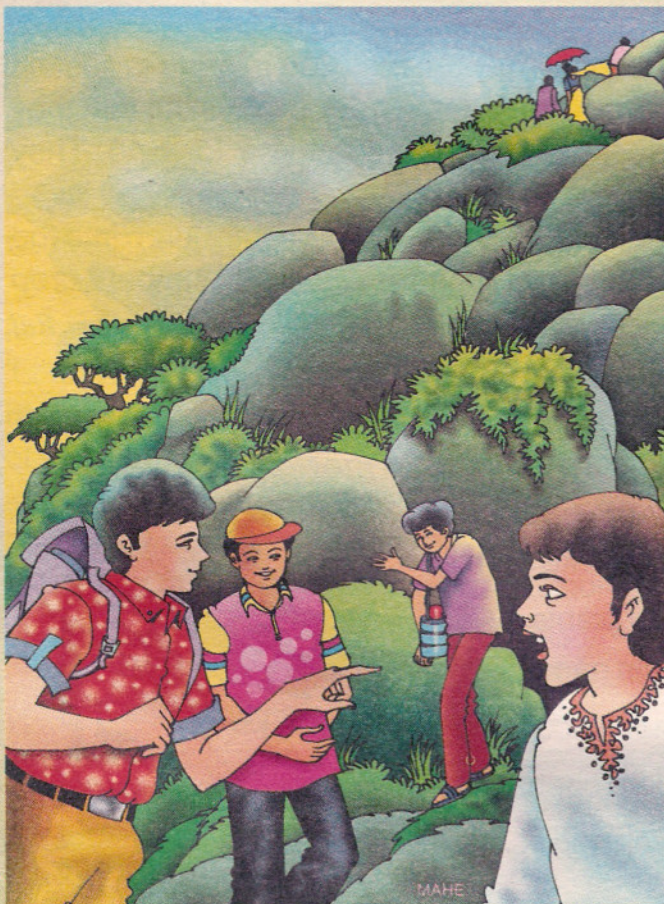
"There's Ukhrul!" Anil, his friend, yelled out. Avijeet glanced up and saw the hill town in the far distance, half hidden by the morning mist. Even in summer, when it rains, Ukhrul town is wrapped in a blanket of thick mist. How he wished Imphal, which is sweaty and dusty in summer, was cool like Ukhrul! Siroy village is 14 km further east from Ukhrul. Halting briefly for a sip of red tea in the town, the bus drove on to the village. As they neared the village, they saw Shirui hill looming large in the distance. They could not see the peak as it was shrouded in thick mist. Soon they reached the Shirui foothills. Alighting from the bus, Avijeet saw the Shirui hill towering over his head. "Wow! We've a long way to climb," he remarked to his friends.

There were some young men at the foothills manning a checkpoint near the trekking point. While some of them were issuing tickets to the visitors to go up the hill, some others were halting the trekkers coming down the hill and checking their rucksacks. "What are these guys doing?" Avijeet wondered. Very soon Avijeet and his friends got talking to them and realised that they were from the nearby village and belonged to the Siroy Youth Club. They were a group of volunteers who had come together to protect and conserve the Siroy Lily and its habitat.

"Why does the flower and its plant need protection?" asked Vikram.

"During the flowering season in May, hundreds of visitors come to the hill from all over Manipur and beyond," one of the Club members explained, "but some years ago we realised that these visitors were also spelling doom for the Siroy Lily. The visitors would carelessly destroy the lily plant by trampling on them or by simply uprooting them as they trekked along. They would mindlessly pluck the flowers and later crush or tear them to bits."

"Some of us from the nearby village felt this had to





stop, otherwise very soon the Siroy Lily would be wiped out from the Shirui hill,” another member added. “We now issue tickets to visitors and also request them not to destroy the plants and to keep the hill clean. And as they come down we check their bags for plucked flowers or uprooted plants. We fine violators Rs.50 for each flower plucked, and Rs.500 for each plant uprooted.” On further inquiry, the Siroy Youth Club volunteers told Avijeet and his friends that it was difficult for them to stand guard atop the hill and provide round-the-clock protection for the lilies, because of frequent rain and strong winds on the hill. Avijeet and his friends were very impressed and were even more eager to reach the top of the hill and see the results of the good work the Siroy Youth Club members had taken up.

“By the way, Itao (meaning friend in Manipuri), it is incorrect to say ‘Siroy’. It should be pronounced correctly as ‘Shirui’. That is what people in Ukhrul call the lily.” The young man, who was preparing the visitors’ fee receipt, told Avijeet. “The Britishers who visited our village during the Second World War called it ‘Siroy’. Actually, in our Tangkhul Language, we know the lily as Timrawon. ‘Timra’ means lily and ‘won’ means

flower,” he added.

Avijeet thought about the wonderful diversity of languages within Manipur as he and his friends started trekking up the steep Shirui hill. Soon they were puffing and sweating. “Whew! We people from the plains are certainly not adapted for mountain climbing,” he told Anil between long gasps for breath. “Yes, this steep mountain path is killing me,” replied Anil.

As they approached the top of the hill they were awestruck by the beauty of what they saw! In the distance, was a large green and pink coloured carpet! Hundreds of pretty Siroy lilies were swaying with the wind. The grinding and puffing was all forgotten now. There, more than 8,300 feet above sea level, amidst strong winds and a light drizzle, and the green carpet of sub-

alpine grass, Avijeet and his friends felt at home among the fair maidens of the highlands. They felt proud that nowhere else in the world, except in Manipur, was this lily found. Avijeet closed his eyes, stretched out his hands and took in the pure mountain air. Oh, it was so refreshing! They were so happy that they could make this trip to the Shirui hill.



The Siroy Lily was discovered on the Shirui hill in 1948 by an Englishman, Captain Frank Kingdonward. A World War I veteran, Kingdonward was commissioned by His Majesty King George VI of England to locate warplanes that were believed to have crashed into the Shirui hill during the Second World War. Charmed by the gracious beauty of the lily, Kingdonward took a few of the lilies with him to England where he exhibited them at major flower shows including the Chelsea Flower Show, London, in 1950. Kingdonward was given a reward of £50,000 by the Royal Horticultural Society, London, for discovering the Siroy Lily. Kingdonward fondly named the lily as *Lilium Macklineae Sealy*, in memory of his wife. Today, the Siroy Lily is the State Flower of Manipur.



Avijeet and his friends looked around and were overjoyed at not finding any broken flowers or uprooted plants.

“Oh, those Siroy Youth Club members are saviours of this hill. Thank god there are at least some people who are zealously safeguarding the lily,” Avijeet said aloud. He and his friends spent some more time exploring the hill and savouring its beauty.

On their way back they met the Club members once

again, this time to congratulate them on their efforts at saving the Shirui hill and the flowers. “We’re proud of you. You’re doing very good work. Keep it up!” Avijeet and his friends cheered the volunteers. They parted with happy words of exchange between newfound friends and the promise to help and support the Siroy Youth Club volunteers.

- *Salaam Rajesh*

*Courtesy: Kalpavriksh and the National Biodiversity and Strategic Action Plan*

## Meet the ...

# Yequana tribals of Venezuela

The Yequana tribals of southern Venezuela are far removed from 'modern' civilisation. Known locally as *makiritare* or 'men of the river', they are famed and respected for their skill as canoeists and fishermen and their life is closely associated with the river. But what has drawn the attention and commendation of the 'civilised' world is the Yequana's unique method of child-rearing.

From the moment a baby is born, it is constantly in the arms of either its mother, or some other adult. Never left alone, it is carried about everywhere and thus, the child is constantly in touch with the sounds, sensation, and pace of human life. Once it is old enough to walk, the adults — having great faith in the child's self-preservation instincts — leave it alone to play without supervision. The child is not forbidden from doing anything, and is even allowed to handle sharp instruments and climb over fallen trees! Surprisingly, there are no accidents! As the child enters into adolescence there is no adjustment problems whatsoever.

The success of this method of baby-care is borne out by the fact that the Yequanas are a happy and well-adjusted people. Children and adults alike have a remarkably equitable disposition.

The tribe shot into prominence only recently when an American anthropologist conducted a study and published these amazing findings. According to her, the tribe, though far removed from civilisation, is much happier than the civilised world. Daily life is spent in an extraordinarily pleasant atmosphere, with no quarrels or even sibling rivalry. Even babies never cry but are always content!

Obviously, the modern world with all its medical and technological advancement still has a great deal to learn from these tranquil tribals.

