

# Mawphlang: Where time stands still

The sacred groves cast a spell over all visitors

By Seema Bhatt

Time Mawphlang has always been magical. I had heard about this particular sacred grove for many years, and had visualised a living sacred grove tucked away in a remote corner of Meghalaya. So it was a dream come true when I walked into Meghalaya's Forest Secretary's office in Shillong and was told that I was being taken to Mawphlang. Little did I know that Mawphlang was a mere 45



minutes' drive from Shillong. Tambor Lyngdoh, a knowledgeable, local crusader for the grove, accompanied us.

'Meghalaya' in Sanskrit means the 'Abode of Clouds'. How true this is. This north-eastern state comprises the South Garo hills, West Garo hills, East Garo hills, West Khasi hills, East Khasi hills, Ribhoi and the Jaintia hills districts. The state has many indigenous tribes – the Khasis, Garos and the Jaintias besides the Karbis, Mikirs, Hajongs, Kochs and Rabhas. The Khasi hills have a unique ecosystem. Air currents, rising from the

Bay of Bengal, generate summer storms in the Meghalaya Plateau, giving rise to the heavy monsoon rain, and turning these hills into one of the wettest places on earth.

The wet temperate forests here are a treasure trove of biodiversity. Mawphlang is also known for its 'berry wine' – the berry *Prunus nepalensis* (Sohang) is now cultivated by farmers.

Sacred groves of cultural and religious significance are scattered throughout Meghalaya. There are over 101 such areas throughout the state, commonly found in the Khasi and Jaintia hills. A few groves are also found in the Garo hills. These groves cover an area of more than 10,000 hectares.

Since these groves are hardly disturbed, they have, over time, become important repositories of local biodiversity. They harbour many en-

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Ritual spots in the grove. PHOTOS/AUTHOR

dangered and endemic species of flora and fauna.

Mawphlang is one of the many sacred groves found in the area. We drive through the clouds that hang low, and suddenly find ourselves in the midst of massive stone mega-

liths – a tribute to ancestors long gone.

These megaliths guard the 75-hectare sacred forest. The forest takes my breath away. It is magical, the way I had always imagined it. The forest inside the grove are dense and

dark, a complete contrast to the surrounding rolling grasslands.

Tambor takes us into the grove. There are pathways, but the entire grove is not accessible to visitors. He explains that even a twig cannot

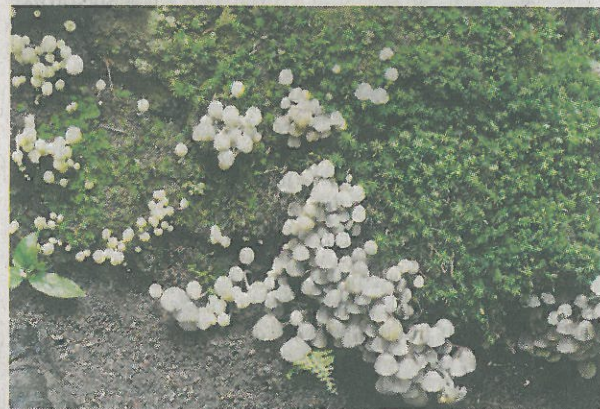
be taken out of the forest. The belief is that harm and misery will befall anyone who attempts to do so. It is also believed that the spirits and deities that reside in the groves protect the local population from various kinds of calamities.

While showing us the wonders of the grove, he gently picks up a seed, popularly called the 'rudraksh' which is used in religious ceremonies.

After telling us all about the seed, he puts it back in the same spot that he found it. As we walk along the path in the dense forest, sun streaks through the tree canopy in several places. We also see more stone structures where rituals are still conducted by the local people on certain occasions. These only add to the mystique of the place.

As an avid reader of Enid Blyton in my childhood, I imagine a few pixies and elves running around these structures. Add to this, the many different kinds of mushroom growing and the picture is complete. The trees are laden with a variety of orchids. The diversity of vegetation is amazing. Besides the rituals, the grove is also a place where schoolchildren gather. They are accompanied by Tambor or others. Mawphlang remains the most popular sacred grove perhaps because it is a popular tourist destination and just a day's trip from Shillong. There are now tourist facilities in the village.

Something tells me that Mawphlang will always remain magical, a living place. (The writer is a member of Kalpavriksh which coordinates this series.)



The sacred grove.