

# The Mercy Home

## The Living Conditions in an Old Age Home at Shillong, Meghalaya

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Increased longevity means natural addition in the number of old persons in the society, dependent on scarce resources. After an active and productive phase of their lives, the old persons find themselves socially marginalized as more promising social segments attract attention. Moreover, society is undergoing a phase of social transition in which traditional pattern of caring and according status to the aged is vanishing fast. No wonder, they find themselves neglected, homeless and without means to take care of themselves. This phenomena is more prevalent in the urban areas than that of the rural ones. Some voluntary agencies, aided by the Government and private bodies, have established institutions (homes) to take care of such needy senior citizens. We have examined the social background, economic and financial base, food and dietary provisions, health status and expectations of the inmates and the facilities and services available at an old age home at Shillong.

### The Mercy Home

The Mercy Home, the old age home located at Alugodam, Nongthymmai, Shillong was started in 1973 by the Roman Catholic Missionaries with a view to serve the aged destitutes. Prior to that, they

had an old age home at Dimapur, Nagaland, which was not patronized by Naga destitutes, as they believe to die under their own roof under the care of their clansmen. Since then in a way, the home was shifted to Shillong with Sr. Anjaline (78), a missionary trained in nursing. It has a total staff of 7 (Administrative - 1, Professional - 1, Clerical 1 and 4th class supporting staff of 4) and a capacity to house 50 inmates, though there were 54 residing on the occasion of the study. It has its own concrete imposing building with 51,000 Sq. feet built in area. It has its own kitchen, bath rooms, reading room, common room, radio & TV. set. first hand aid box, portable water supply, electricity, adequate furniture and the Home provides satisfactory bedding & clothing to the inmates. It has no provisions for the indoor games and curative facilities for those who get serious infectious disease. The Home runs a school with boarding house attached to it and its income, if any, goes to the Home. It receives annual grants from the Ministry of Welfare, Government of India, besides the occasional contributions received from the individuals, institutions, etc. The grants received and the expenditure incurred during the last three years is given below.



Table 1. The Statement of Income and Expenditure of Mercy Home 1988-91

Year	Source	Income	Expenditure
1988-89	Social Welfare	Rs. 34,000.00	Rs. 51,172.55
	Other Sources	Rs. 40,314.60	
1989-90	Social Welfare	Rs. 50,000.00	Rs. 85,034.69
	Other Sources	—	
1990-91	Social Welfare	Rs. 60,000.00	Rs. 85,460.17
	Other Sources	Rs. 26,949.00	
		Rs. 2,11,263.60	Rs. 2,21,667.41

The above figures work out an average monthly income and expenditure of Rs.108.67 and Rs. 114.02 per person respectively. It means that on an average daily personal income of Rs. 3.60, the Home spends Rs. 3.80 per person per day. These ludicrously insufficient figures themselves exhibit the hopeless state of affairs in the Home. With the above budgetary provisions much improvement in the present condition of the Home can not be expected.

#### Personal Background of the Inmates

With a capacity of 50, the Home has housed 54 inmates in 1991. Out of them, 61.12 percent were male and 38.88 percent were female and 94.45 percent Christian, 2.7 per cent Hindus. 1.85 per cent (i.e. one individual) were Muslims. About 60 per cent of them were between 60 and 70 years of age, while 18.5 per cent were above 80 years of age. As much as 74 per cent spoke Khasi, 14.8 per cent Jaintia and about 10 per cent spoke other languages. As much as 94.45 per cent belonged to the scheduled tribes, and 5.5 percent were others. About 1/4th of them (18.5% male & 7.4% female) claimed to be married, 14.8 per cent males and 5.5 per cent females were unmarried, only one person (a female) claimed to be divorcee, 25.9 per cent females were

widows, 22.2 per cent males were widowers and 2.7 per cent each males reported to be separated and deserted by their spouses. About 1/5th of the respondents (18.5%) between 60 & 65 years of age were unmarried, while about 1/3rd of them (35.15%) were widows and widowers. Divorced (1.85%), Separated (3.7%) and deserted (3.7%) were in the age group of 64 years & above. As much as 70 per cent of the respondents were illiterate one each was a graduate and an intermediate degree holder, 7.4 per cent each studied upto middle school and matriculation and 10 percent were just literate.

#### Approach to the Home

About one-sixth of the respondents (16.65%) had been in the Home for as much as nine years and above, 3.7% for 8 to 9 years, 14.8% between 6 to 7 years, 18.5% for 4 to 5 years, about one-fifth of them (20.35%) resided in the Home for less than a year and the maximum number of the respondents did not wait for admission to the Home and only 5.5% had to wait for getting admission to the Home. 16.65% respondents informed that nobody had approached Home for the admission on their behalf, while 77.7 percent of them reported that some one approached the Home for them. Among them 16.65



percent were friends, 55.5 percent were the missionaries and the rest were the relatives (Table-3). The Home functionaries reported that it were village pastors, who selected the inmates on the basis of their overall conditions and once they were convinced that old individual would be better off in the Home they recommended the case for admission to the Home. In fact, the Home functions as a link between the

**Table 2. Senior Citizens' Length of Stay at Old Age Home**

No. of Years	No. of Persons	Per cent
1. Upto 1 Year	11	20.30
2. 2 to 3 Years	14	25.90
3. 4 to 5 Years	10	18.50
4. 6 to 7 Years	8	14.80
5. 8 to 9 Years	2	3.70
6. 9 Years & Above 9		16.65
	54	98.95

**Table 3. Approached the Home on Behalf of the Inmates**

Agencies	Nos.	Per cent
1. Friends	9	16.65
2. Missionaries	30	55.50
3. Sons/Daughters	4	7.40
4. Relatives	6	11.10
5. Neighbours	1	1.85
6. N. A.	4	7.40
	54	99.90

various missionary institutions with their Headquarters at Shillong and other Church activities spread through out the different villages.

## Family Background

Out of 70.3 per cent illiterate respondents 27.75 per cent were cultivators, 20.35 percent were labourers and 9.25 per cent reported no occupation (Table-4). As much as 37 per cent respondents reported no occupation. Out of 30 respondents claiming to be cultivators, 2/3rds were males and both the sexes had almost equal representation in no occupation and labourer categories. 57.35 per cent of them reported that they had a monthly income upto Rs. 1000 a month and only one informed that he had an income between Rs. 1000 to 2000 per month and last of them had no income of their own. 44.4 per cent of the respondents found nobody to look after them (Table-5), 24.05 per cent were physically too weak to look after themselves, 9.25 per cent had no one at home, 5.5 per cent had no home of their own, 5.5 per cent had difference of opinion with other members of their families and the rest gave the reasons such as for 'happiness', 'children force me go out', 'desire to stay with needy people', and 'to be with my husband (at the Home)'.

As many as 79.55 per cent respondents did not possess any property. Only 14.8 per cent respondents reported to own landed property and among them, 2 (3.70%) had property worth less than Rs. 30,000, one (1.85%) had upto the value of Rs. 50,000, 2 (3.7%) had land and property above Rs. 91,000 and the rest decided not to respond. Out of the total of 54 inmates, only 4 (7.4%) had received the gratuity amount, 3 of them gifted away the amount between Rs. 10,000 to Rs.20,000 and another one gave away Rs. 51,000 as gift to the relatives. Only one (1.85%) reported to have received old age pension between Rs. 401 to Rs. 500, which he spent on the food for the family. Again 4 out of



Table 4.

## Occupation of the Mercy Home Inmates

Occupation	Male		Female		Total	
	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%
1. Cultivation	10	18.50	5	9.25	15	27.25
2. Manual Labour	6	11.10	5	9.25	11	20.35
3. Others	7	12.95	1	1.85	8	14.80
4. No Occupation	10	18.50	10	18.50	20	37.00
	33	59.15	21	38.75	54	99.90

Table 5. Reasons for Inmates Coming to the Mercy Home

Reasons	Nos. of Inmates	Per cent
1. No House of My Own	3	5.50
2. No One at Home	5	9.25
3. For Happiness	1	1.85
4. No One to Look After	24	44.40
5. Children Force Me to go Out	1	1.85
6. Physical Incapability	13	24.05
7. Desire to Stay with Needy	2	3.55
8. To Stay with Husband	1	1.85
9. Difference of Opinion	3	5.50
10. No Response	1	1.85

the total maintained bank accounts and among them 2 (3.70%) had less than a Rs. 1000 as balance, one upto Rs.4,000 and another one upto Rs. 5,000. None of them had any paid work and the income from any other sources. 4 of them, who got monthly pension, received the amount upto Rs. 400, Rs. 500, Rs. 900 and Rs. 900 & above in one each case. Only 9.25 per cent inmates of the Home (7.4% males & 1.85% females) contributed to the Home for their maintenance among them one female and a male matriculate paid to the tune of Rs. 600 per month, one intermediate educated paid upto Rs. 400 a month and the graduate inmate of the Home contributed upto Rs. 200 per month for his upkeep. While 4 pension holders paid out of their pension amount, one respondents reported that his brother

provided him amount for the payment. As much as 79.55 per cent of the respondents did not spend any amount on soap, clothes, medicine, smoking etc. Among 20.35 per cent respondents who spent on non-food items, 33.7 per cent spent their pension amount, 1.85 per cent from the mission hospital (on medicine) and the rest received the amount to spend on medicine, cigarettes, tobacco, etc. from their relatives such as brother (1), husbands (2), wife (1) etc.

Only 22.2 per cent respondents reported that they had no other item of expenditure held up for want of money and as much as 75.85 per cent felt otherwise. More than half of the respondents (53.65%) realized that they could not have delicious food for want of money. 3.7 per cent each felt that their medical needs, clothes, tobacco and smoking could not be attended to for want of money (Table-6). Similarly, 1.85 per cent each could make no ritual arrangements, better maintenance, spectacles and have a harmonium for lack of money. 55.5 per cent of the respondents would like to spend an additional upto Rs. 49, 5.5 per cent between Rs. 50 to Rs. 100 and another 5.5 per cent beyond Rs. 501 on items of their own choice. As much as 72.15 per cent respondents informed that they had no source to meet these additional expenditure Only in one case (1.85%) a resident reported that his sister



might provide him with money for the purpose.

**Table 6. Inmates Needs Held up for want of Money**

Unfulfilled Needs	Nos	Per cent
1. Delicious Food	29	53.65
2. Medical Care	2	3.70
3. Clothes	2	3.70
4. Land/House	2	3.70
5. Tobacco Smoking	2	3.70
6. Rituals	1	1.85
7. Maintenance	1	1.85
8. Spectacles	1	1.85
9. Harmonium	1	1.85
10. Not Applicable	13	24.05
	54	99.90

### Issues Pertaining to Health

More than half of the inmates of the Home (55.5%) used to go for morning & evening walks and 40.07 per cent did not do so. They did not play any outdoor game regularly. The inmates of the Home were asked whether they received Chapatis, Rice, Dal, Paneer, Eggs, Milk, Meat, Vegetables and Fruits regularly as part of their diet. Paneer (14.8%), eggs (24.05%), milk (25.90%), meat (24.05%) and fruits (24.05%) were not available to them as they desired (Table-7). They were also asked to inform whether they used biri/cigarettes, alcohol, chewing tobacco and other intoxicants. As much as 40.7 per

cent of the inmates smoked biri/cigarettes, 31.45 percent chewed tobacco and only 18.5 percent used alcohol (Table-8). Only 5.5 percent inmates on quantity and 3.7 percent on quality of food supplied by the Home were dis-satisfied, possibly it were those, who contributed some money for their up-keep.

**Table 7. Items of Their Daily Diet**

Items	Yes		No	
	Yes	%	Yes	%
Chapatis	15	27.60	15	27.60
Rice	29	53.65	1	1.85
Dal	15	27.60	15	27.60
Paneer	8	14.80	23	42.50
Eggs	13	24.05	17	31.30
Milk	14	25.90	16	29.60
Meat	13	24.05	17	31.30
Fruits	13	24.05	17	31.30
Vegetables	29	53.65	—	—

So far the physical conditions of the inmates were concerned, with cultivation background in atleast 2/3rd cases memory, trembling, bowel habits remained unchanged. More than half of the cases of hearing, sleep and bone joints also remained unaltered and 80 per cent cases vision was gone. All the labourers had lost their vision, more than 50 per cent had lost their hearing, sleep, memory and had pain in their bone joints. The most common health complaints the inmates has was

**Table 8. Inmates of the Home in Habit of Intoxicants**

Items	Yes		No		N. R.		Total
	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.
Biri/Cigarettes	22	40.70	27	49.95	5	9.25	54
Alcohol	10	18.50	39	72.15	5	9.25	54
Chewing Tobacco	17	31.45	32	59.20	5	9.25	54



that of coughing. Possibly because of the fluctuating weather condition at Shillong.

The most significant and common ailment for which inmates of the Home were admitted to the hospital during the past two years was coughing in 02.35 per cent. There was no significant common ailment for which they were to be hospitalised. As much as 64.05 per cent inmates were concerned with some of other personal or family matters. The reasons of

their concern was no body looks after (20.30%), worry about money (16.65%), about ill-health (11.1%), being handicap (3.7%), death of wife, loneliness, conflict with wife in each of 1.85 per cent other reasons (Table-9). So far their daily habits were concerned, as much as 68.45 per cent of the inmates were in the habit of going to bed between 7 to 9 p.m. and arise between 4 to 6 A. M. and 3.7 per cent cases they used to go to bed after 10 P.M. and get up between 7 to 9 A. M..

Table 9. Physical Handicaps of the Mercy Home Inmates and Their Past Occupation

Physical Handicaps	Past Occupation								Total
	Cultivation		Labour		Others		No Occupation		
	Unaltered	Gone Down	Unaltered	Gone Down	Unaltered	Gone Down	Unaltered	Gone Down	
1. Vision	3	12	0	11	1	7	9	11	54
2. Hearing	8	7	5	6	4	4	13	7	54
3. Sleep	8	7	3	8	6	2	11	9	54
4. Bone Joints Pain	9	6	2	9	2	6	10	10	54
5. Memory	10	5	4	7	5	3	16	4	54
6. Trembling	12	3	6	5	5	3	18	2	54
7. Bowel Habits	13	2	4	7	5	3	18	2	54

Table 10. Reasons for Mercy Home Inmates' Worries

Reasons	Nos.	Per cent
1. Nobody Looks After Me	11	20.3
2. About Money	9	16.65
3. About Ill-Health	6	11.1
4. Handicap	2	3.7
5. Death of Wife	1	1.85
6. Loneliness	1	1.85
7. Conflict with Wife	1	1.85
8. Not Applicable	21	38.95
9. No Reply	2	3.7
	54	99.95

### Facilities at the Home

11.1 per cent inmates had their rooms with 23'15" floor area, while 85.1 per cent of them shared rooms with a floor area of 3 Sq. feet each. Except one, all of them felt that beddings were adequate. Again only one respondent reported that he never got the medicine, while 48.1 per cent each of them informed that they got the medicine sometimes and always, when they needed. The inmates had no idea when did the doctor visit the Home or



how competent he was or how much attention did he pay to the patient. As much as 68.45 per cent inmates were occasionally upset, anxious or nervous, in one-third cases (33.3%) it were the fellow inmates, who consoled the patients in such situation and in another one-third cases (35.15%) it were the sisters, functionaries, nurse etc. who consoled them. About half (49.95%) of the inmates informed that such consolations were really helpful to calm down the patients.

### Programme Activities

Library (94.5%) and news paper reading room (88.8%) were universally not used by the inmates. 3/4th of them (78.3%) did not listen the radio and watch TV. (79.55%). None of them participated in the adult-education programmes, etc. 18.5 per cent informed that some of them would want to learn something. Only 7.4 per cent felt that inmate wanted to learn some crafts. As less as 16.65 per cent inmates participated as audience in the functions organized at the Home such as X' Mass, New Year Eve, Concerts or Cultural programmes. They did not participate in either indoor (as there was no provision) or outdoor games. About 31.45 per cent inmates claimed to have once participated in the picnic organized at the Home.

### Inter-Personal Relationship

About one-third of them (34.2%) were of lonely type, while 62.9 per cent were friendly lots. Even among the friendly lot they felt that some of them (24.05%) were friendly, while one-third of them (33.3%) felt that most of them were friendly. Maximum number of inmates (35.15%) engaged themselves in gardening, 11.1 per cent liked talking and telling stories, 22.2 per

cent used to talk about their ill-health, handicaps, 5.5 per cent enjoyed nothing in particular, 3.7 per cent enjoyed any work assigned to them by the functionaries (Table-10). 7.4 per cent respondents felt that the inmates regularly disagreed with each other, while 29.6 per cent felt that it did happen sometimes. Most of the quarrels were on minor things (27.75%) and in the event of telling lies (3.7%).

Table 11. Activities Enjoyed Most by the Mercy Home Inmates

Activity	No.	Per cent
Gardening	19	35.15
Talking & Story Telling	6	11.10
By Doing Any Work Assigned To	2	3.70
Not Enjoying Due to Ill Health	12	22.20
Enjoyed Nothing In Particular	3	5.50
N. R.	12	22.20
	54	98.41

### Attitude to the Functionaries

The inmates were asked to reflect on the superintendent, sister and the Home administrator against certain human qualities. 66.6 per cent respondents ranked the superintendent as the duty conscious, while 26.25 per cent felt that the sister was interested in the residents' welfare, 20.30 per cent ranked the superintendent for being interested in the welfare of the inmates. Similarly, 7.3 per cent found the superintendent, 27.60 per cent ranked the sister and 46.25 per cent felt the administrator to be sympathetic to the residents (Table-11). Among functionaries Sr. sister was liked most by inmates for her kindness & sympathetic and honest approach to the inmates. Table-11 suggest that Mother Rose, the superintendent of the Home remained aloof and distant from the inmates, while Sr. sister had been



Qualities	Superintendent		Sister		Administrator		Other		N. R.		Total
	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	
Duty	36	66.6	5	9.25	—	—	—	—	13	24.05	54
Conscious Interested in Welfare	11	20.03	25	46.25	—	—	—	—	18	33.30	54
Bossism	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1.85	53	98.15	54
Sympathetic	4	7.30	15	28.60	23	46.25	—	—	11	20.03	54
Indifferent	—	—	—	—	1	1.85	—	—	53	20.03	54
Honest	—	—	2	3.70	7	12.95	6	11.10	39	72.15	54
Unmindful	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	54	100.00	54

always around with them to console, when occasion demanded and provided for when needed. More than one-fifth (31.4%) respondents refused to identify any body from the Home, whom they did not like.

#### Service for the Aged

A considerable number of respondents (42.55%) felt that the family and community could do a lot to help the aged. Among the reasons suggested were better understanding (5.5%), friendliness (16.65%), kind words (3.7%), food, cloth & financial help (5.5%), praying for them (1.85%). Only one inmate was emphatic that family and community could not help them in any way (Table-12).

Table 13. What can Families/Communities to Help the Old People

Response	Nos.	Per cent
Better Understanding	3	5.5
Friendliness	9	16.65
By All Means	2	3.7
Kind Words	2	3.7
Food Clothes/Funds	3	5.5
Prayers	1	1.85
Can Not Help	1	1.85
No Response	3	5.5
N. A.	31	57.35
	54	101.60

Similarly, about one-third (29.6%) inmates felt that the neighbours could do a lot to help out the old people. Among such acts taking care (12.95%), co-operation with each other, kind words & looking after their physical needs (3.7% each cases) and prayers were enumerated (Table-13). Here again one inmate of the Home was emphatic that no neighbour could do good to them. The Home inmates were asked to think whether the senior citizens could do something for themselves. One-third of them felt that they could do nothing for themselves, better than one-third (35.15%) had no opinion on that, 3.7 per cent did not reply and 27.75 per cent of them felt that they could do something for themselves, but they were so-overwhelmed with their problems that they failed to identify the ways through which they could help themselves. Only 16.65 per cent of them were aware of the old age pension scheme. While 11.1 per cent felt that the sum to be inadequate and only 5.5 per cent of the total felt that it was sufficient.



We enquired of the respondents whether they would suggest some means to improve the working of the Home. About one-fourth of them had no opinion. The first priority was accorded to recreation (37%), and the second highest priority was given to adequate facilities such as medicine, food, etc. and third to more frequent visit of the Doctor to the Home (Table-14). So, first and last concern of the old people appear to be health.

Table 14. Inmates Suggestion to Improve the Working of the Home

Suggestion	Response		
	First	Second	Third
1. No Improvement Needed	1	1	1
2. Facilities for Medicine, Food, etc.	2	21	2
3. Should be Friendly to one another	1	—	1
4. Govt. Monetary Assistance	8	5	4
5. Recreation Facilities	20	5	3
6. More Frequent Doctors' visit	—	2	12
7. Prayer to God	2	—	—
8. To Create More Happiness	5	1	1
9. No Opinion	14	14	14
10. No Response	—	5	16
	54	54	54

The inmates were requested for opinion on the main problems faced by the society in order of any three priorities. 40.7 per cent of them had no opinion. Among those, who held their own, non-concern of the people followed by rising prices appeared to be the most serious social problems (Table-15). An instructive response was the one on insignificance attached to the male—especially in the matrilineal Khasis.

Table 15. Inmates opinion on the Future of the Society

Response	Nos.	Per cent
Will Turn Worse	12	22.2
Will Remain Unchanged	3	5.5
Will Improve	14	25.90
No Opinion	25	46.25
	54	99.85

At the end, the interviewers were expected to comment on physical conditions, ailments and respondents' relations with other inmates. Similarly, the Home functionaries were requested to comment on respondents' personal qualities and involvement in some or other productive work: the responses have been tabulated below (Table-16). While 70 per cent were physically alright, 18.5 per cent were physically unfit, sick, inactive and handicapped. As much as 75.85 per cent were not well (18.35%), physically unfit (11.1%), sick (29.4%), inactive (1.85%) and handicapped (12.95%). As much as (90.65%) were reported to have right relations with other inmates of the Home, while some set of respondents had friendly attitudes to other inmates. The Home functionaries found 2/3rds of the inmates labourious in terms of any productive work assigned to them.

The picture one frames of the inmates after paying a visit to the Mercy Home is that of predominantly illiterate male farmhands around 70 years of age, lonely, unwell, without an income, shorn off their poor relatives and entirely at the Mercy of the inadequate resources of the missionaries. The imposing building by the National Highway is the home of destitute human vegetables, who appeared to have totally resigned to their fate. "The impression was grim and sombre.... Life



**Table 16. Inmates Condition, Attitude and Involvement**

Observation	Physical Condition		Ailment		Relation with Inmates		'RS' Characteristic Features		'RS' Involvement	
	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%	Nos.	%
1. Alright	38	70.30	1	1.85	49	90.65	—	—	—	—
2. Not Alright	1	1.85	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	3.70
3. Friendly	—	—	—	—	—	—	49	90.65	—	—
4. Labourious	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1.85	36	66.60
5. Physically Unfit	3	5.50	6	11.10	—	—	—	—	5	9.25
6. Sick	2	3.70	17	29.40	—	—	—	—	3	5.50
7. Inactive	4	7.40	1	1.85	—	—	—	—	2	3.70
8. Unfriendly	—	—	—	—	3	5.50	2	3.70	—	—
9. Handicapped	1	1.85	7	12.75	—	—	—	—	3	5.50
10. No Response	5	9.25	12	22.20	2	3.70	2	3.70	3	5.50
10. No Response	54		54		54		54		54	

seemed to have drained from them, all but the dregs. Their stoic resignation seemed attributable not only to infirmity and old age. They were like people who had taken so much punishment that they had become inured to pain and robbed of all initiative. They had the air of not worrying much about their problems

because of impossibility of sorting them out, or the difficulty of getting anyone to understand, or take notice". (Townsend, P. 1964:4). Peter Townsend's above impression of the British old age home immensely and appropriately describes the world of the inmate of the Mercy Home at Shillong.

*Reference*

P. Townsend, (1964) : *The Last Refuge* : Routledge Kegan Paul, London