

## New Lives, New Possibilities Because of Kong Barr

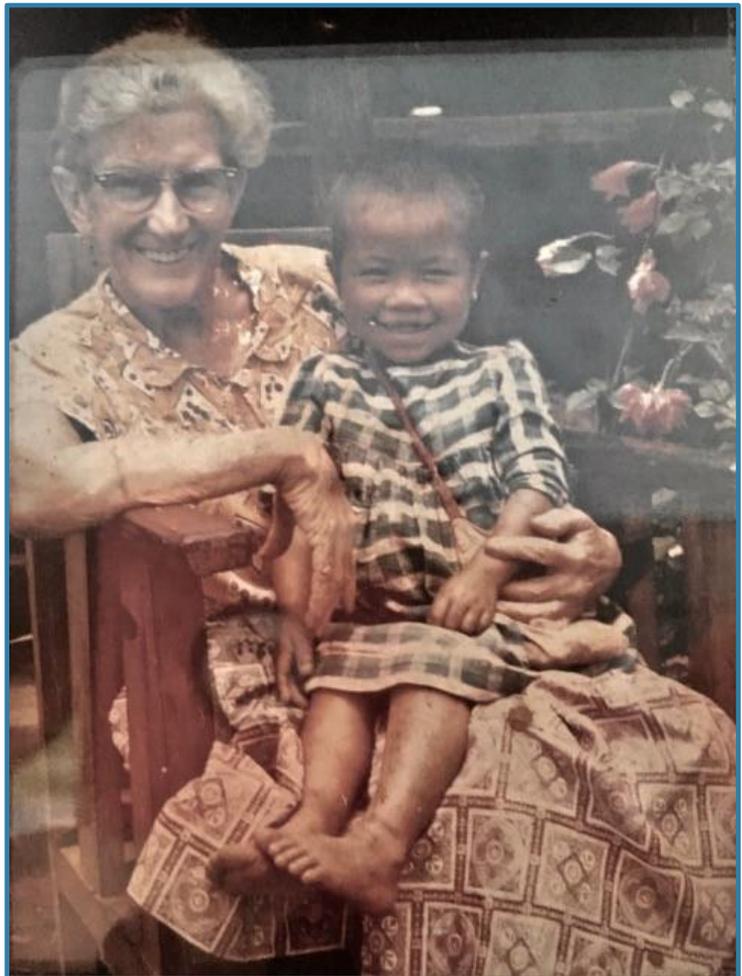
*Interviews with former Annie Margaret Barr students in the Kharang area of the Khasi Hills, NE India, September 2018*

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**Back in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in the remote village of Kharang in Meghalaya, NE India, there lived an intrepid British Unitarian minister and teacher named Annie Margaret Barr (*pictured below*). Her story is remarkable.**

Born in 1899, Kong Barr – as she is still called in Meghalaya – became an avid Unitarian while at Cambridge University and served as a minister in Britain for 6 years. (“Kong” is the term for the feminine used in front of a first name. For example, I was called “Kong Barb.” But Annie Margaret’s name was hard to pronounce, so the Khasi called her “Kong Barr.” All Khasi women are addressed that way. Men are called “Bah”, followed by their first name.)

During that time, she heard about the small but vital Unitarian movement in the Khasi Hills in NE India. Learning more about its founder, Hajom Kissor Singh, she heard an unmistakable “call” to live and work with the Khasis as her life work. This took years of toil and persuasion to fulfill, as British Unitarians were at first unwilling to fund her work; after all, what would a WOMAN be able to do on her own?? Undaunted, Kong Barr sailed to India in 1933, stopping first to see her sister, who worked for none other than Mahatma Gandhi, in the mainland of India. When Kong Barr asked the latter what he would suggest for her to do in India, he said, “Don’t get mixed up in politics. Find some constructive work to do...in villages... What else is worth doing in comparison with serving those who need you most?” But to get funding, Kong Barr had to prove herself. Fortunately, she found very satisfying work at a “progressive” school in Calcutta, where they asked her to create a curriculum for World Religions alongside teaching classes. After two years of working there and, during school holidays, trekking to the Khasi Hills several times, she finally got funding she needed from the British Unitarian organization in 1935.



Kong Barr passionately disassociated herself from a “missionary” mindset, not taking on

**“the leadership of the Khasi Unitarian Movement, but by improving educational opportunities to enable them to get educated leaders amongst themselves, and so strengthen the self-reliance which had been one of the outstanding qualities of their founder, Hajom Kissor Singh...”<sup>1</sup>**

Thus began her immersion in the world of the Khasis. During the next 20 years, Kong Barr took on various teaching projects in larger towns in the Khasi Hills, such as Shillong and Jowai, and learned to speak, read, and write the Khasi language. With encouragement from Hajom Kissor Singh’s son, Ekman, she then settled in the late 40’s in the area of Kharang, about halfway between Shillong and Jowai – fulfilling Gandhi’s suggestion. There, in the early 50’s, she started her own school based on principles that honored the child and included not only traditional subjects like English, math, geography, history, hygiene, and science, but also learning crafts like knitting and weaving, and skills such as farm work, keeping weather records, house-keeping, cooking, and even star-gazing. Here she was again influenced by Gandhi, whose education program had inspired her. A British inspector, after visiting her school, reported, “I could never have believed that Khasi children could be so alert and so happy.”

Fast forward: In 2011 I took my first trip to the Khasi Hills to meet our partner church members in the village of Kharang, the very area where Kong Barr lived and had had her school. A high school bearing her name was in full operation nearby. It was the time of the Anniversary of the founding of Unitarianism in the Khasi Hills, and I was staying with a wonderful family. One of my first conversations was with my hostess who, it turned out, had been one of Kong Barr’s very first students! I had somehow not expected to meet any of her students, but here she was, a well-known midwife in the community, thanks to the educational opportunities that Kong Barr gave her! Later I became friends with others in the Kharang area who had also been her students. The germ of an idea started to grow: why not interview as many of her former students as possible and find out what kind of experiences they had had with her? What made a difference in their lives?

Four trips later - last September 2018 - I again traveled to Kharang with other Khasi Hills Ministry Team members from East Shore Unitarian in Bellevue, WA, and my partner John. We spent two days interviewing 13 former students of Kong Barr. My friends in the village had put out the word that I wanted to interview them, and several came from afar. Of the 13, seven began their studies with Kong Barr in the 1950’s, and the rest in the 1960’s. There were 11 women and 2 men. They were all eager to share their stories, calling on vivid memories. Sometimes several of them were in the room at the same time, often sparking more conversations. His fingers flying over the keyboard, my partner John took down everything said.

What the interviewees all noticed right away was how well Kong Barr spoke Khasi. When she led Unitarian services, she spoke in Khasi. She even wrote a primer in Khasi on the history, principles and historical events and people in Unitarian history (from Servetus through England and the US) to share with the Khasi people. Those interviewed also reported that she loved singing nursery rhymes and songs like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” with children. She sometimes danced, waving her arms, on special occasions like the Anniversary or on a Saturday evening. She loved to swim and had a small pond dug for that purpose. In the early days she would often walk all the way to Shillong (16 miles), carrying a small backpack with what she needed. She dressed very simply, often wearing Khasi-style clothing.

Kong Barr had her ear to the ground and sought out students who seemed interested, even eager, to learn. There were no other educational opportunities in the village at that time. The students who came into her house to live, work, and take classes came from poor families or were orphans. Some were from the village of Kharang, and others came from neighboring villages. Their religion made no difference; in fact, she wanted a diverse student body in that regard. As two interviewees reported, “She hated the word ‘missionary’... She wanted us to understand that all religions were the same.” Student ages varied too, with one student starting his schooling at age 18! Others

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<sup>1</sup> (*A Dream Come True: The Story of Kharang*) by Margaret Barr, p. 37)

were young children or teenagers when they started school with her. “We were all like brothers and sisters,” said one interviewee. Kong Barr charged no fees but was paid a small sum by

Unitarian bodies outside the Khasi Hills. Later some students were asked to pay with a quantity of rice to share among the others.

On the compound were several buildings including three houses – one for Ekman Singh, the son of the founder of Unitarianism in NE India, who sometimes helped out; one for frequent guests (including foreigners, usually Unitarian), and the last was the house where Kong Barr lived with the students. There they took classes, cooked, ate, and slept. Other buildings were a cowshed for cows, pigs, and chickens and a storage shed for extra food and supplies. Part of the land was cultivated for growing crops to eat, and the rest was left for grazing. There were woods on the land as well.

Kong Barr developed ways of teaching that centered round a rigorous daily schedule. This way of living was new to the Khasis, but I heard no complaints. All of those interviewed described their daily schedules similarly: Up at 4 am, with Kong Barr waking up the boys first (sleeping in quarters separate from the girls) so they could go out and tend the cows, getting milk for morning tea at 5 as well. The girls started small fires to heat tea water. There was a morning prayer and a song. Breakfast at 8. Classes were held – no desks, just low stools on the kitchen floor – between 9-12. At noon everyone had a job to do, organized by the student “housekeeper” for the week. This would include getting the fire started for cooking, preparing vegetables, washing clothes, sweeping, cleaning up after lunch, collecting eggs from the hens, and working in the gardens. Kong Barr did the cooking of very simple meals. Sometimes students were sent out to buy some food they still needed. Dinner came at 4, after which they studied or read. Before 8 pm bedtime, the students and Kong Barr would gather to share – in Khasi – a collection of readings from the scriptures of the world’s greatest religions: Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Confucian, Taoist, Sufi, Egyptian, and Christian. Kong Barr wrote that book in Khasi, and students remembered it fondly.

Weekends varied in that there were no classes, but house and garden chores continued. “I remember the times when she used to collect us on Saturday evenings to enjoy dancing and singing.” On Sunday evenings, “we had services conducted by students according to their religions. Not all were Unitarians. Everyone took part as though they were really in church. One week the service might be Presbyterian, then Catholic, then Khasi<sup>2</sup>. “On Sundays we could go to any church we wanted. We could have our own beliefs.” There was no time to be bored, one reported.

As students moved up in classes, she asked older students to teach the younger ones in the ways that she had taught them – save English and Mathematics, which she taught. Thus she was freed up to prepare lessons to teach these “pupil-teachers” after breakfast and dinner while the younger students did the clean-up. In this way she was able to prepare the older students to succeed in upcoming government exams that would lead to further education and careers.

Learning was incorporated into every activity they did. The “housekeeper” had to organize others to get the chores done. Students who collected eggs had to keep records of how many were brought into the house. They learned how to read a thermometer and kept track of changes on a chart; they read a rain gauge and recorded results. Each student kept track of how many hours a day s/he spent reading, knitting, working in the garden, etc. Writing down notes during class became a familiar, useful task.

“Regular” lessons were not the usual rote learning in India then, where teachers read from the text and students repeated groups of words when the teacher paused. Instead she gave them notes to take down on the subject at hand. That meant a LOT of preparation the night beforehand! To learn geography and economics, she created empty maps of the separate states of India and

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<sup>2</sup> Khasi: indigenous religion

asked students for names of the capitols of the various states as well as its products. Then students put all the information together on one giant map, requiring some cooperation with one another. They created card games to learn names of places and other information. When learning their “times tables,” Kong Barr would group sticks, beads, or stones in various combinations to show how the total was created: 2 groups of 3 = 6, 4 groups of 2 = 8, or 2 groups of 4 = 8, etc. For the younger students to learn the alphabet, she would sing the English Alphabet song.

“So it was fun. In the Khasi schools, they read only with books. Kong Barr would make you see examples, with your eyes, to learn.... Her teaching was very easy to understand. There was something about her – deep down in my heart I admired her, so anything Kong Barr said or did affected and inspired me. It was so special to me. When I saw how much more we learned than others in the village, I thought of helping them.”

“I felt I could use my common sense very nicely, the way she was teaching... She taught the foundation. After that it was very easy to learn, to remember, to catch, to think.”

To a person, the interviews shared that her sense of discipline and especially punctuality were key to the whole educational experience.

“One week we came late to the church service and she punished us by not serving special rice, just the basic rice. To this day I want to be punctual. You had to tell the truth. If you did something wrong, you would tell her. You would get punishment – you would not get the pudding, the sweets that others got.”

“If someone threw away their uneaten food, that much less you would get later. You had to clean the plate.”

“At school we were not allowed to waste paper in exercise books but to use any available paper (letters, parts of pieces of paper).”

“She was a good person, but very strict. Even in the fields she would come and inspect and correct us if things weren’t done properly.”

“The thing I remember the most was Kong Barr said if you took something from one place, you had to return it to the same place.”

Asked if she was a warm person: “Yes, but there were times when we could not approach her as she was very strict and disciplined. We were sometimes scared.” But “we knew she cared about us...she treated us the same. She gave praise if we did something well that was hard.”

Each of these individuals went on to contribute to Khasi society in specific ways: 7 became teachers and/or school administrators, 3 were nurses, and 2 were midwives. The youngest student in this group is now a scientist who just earned his PhD in geology. Most of them are now retired, having had long, successful careers in their respective fields. None of these students would have achieved what they did without the further assistance of Kong Barr. She knew the education system and what colleges and training programs were available to her students. She would help out with fees on an individual basis. Several times she took major trips – to Britain, to Canada, to the US – and was a speaker at Unitarian meetings, sharing powerfully what she was trying to accomplish with her Unitarian audiences. She was always in search of sponsors for her students to get financial help for school fees or for their further studies. She flew to Delhi with one of the Khasi girls in order for her to meet her sponsor-parents. Students with sponsors wrote monthly letters to them, establishing close, lasting relationships.



**Barb with former Barr students**

Kong Barr started out educating young women in Kharang who were interested in midwifery. As one of the midwives pointed out, if you could not deliver a baby in the village, someone had to carry the pregnant woman to Shillong on their back! The midwife who stayed in the village for her whole career said, “I worked for 63 years and delivered more than 1000 babies. I could touch the stomach to determine the position of the baby, I could tell if there was trouble and would tell the mother to go to the hospital if things weren’t right. I could feel when the baby could not be delivered. It was important that people believed in me to be able to deliver safely.” The other trained midwife carried out her work in other parts of Meghalaya but moved back to Kharang when she retired.

Training teachers was next on her list. Without well-trained teachers, students would not flourish. She encouraged those with aptitude to complete their classes, even tutoring them, so that they would qualify to study in teaching colleges. She made several promise they would return to Kharang to teach after college, and many did just that. There are now several schools in the area.

Other aspects of Kong Barr’s teaching rubbed off on many of her students. A teacher now close to retirement is starting a new “career” in raising many chickens – she learned how to do that in Kong Barr’s school - with the goal of using profits to help others living near her to go to school, giving them money for books and uniforms and paying their fees. Two of Kong Barr’s most energetic students – each stayed in Kharang for their whole teaching career – are still teaching well into their 70’s. Ten years ago, after they had to retire (government rules) from teaching nearby at the Annie Margaret Barr School, they decided to start an English medium school in the village, starting with nursery school. It’s called the Friendship School. They are trying valiantly to use the methods and approaches that they learned from Kong Barr. This is the school that our East Shore Unitarian Khasi Hills Ministry Team is helping to support through internet communication, regular trips, and fund-raising for the school.

A few of the many comments that came through in the interview demonstrate the enormous influence of Kong Barr on her students and their lives.

“By the grace of God, I got to work with Miss Barr, helping many people later. Otherwise I would be working in the fields my whole life.”

“Kong Barr has been the shining star to me. Let her be in peace. Let this star lead us in the right and good way to a better life.”

“I always dream about her, about that time. Every week I had a dream that she came to meet me. She didn’t talk, she was just there.”

Kong Barr died in 1973 of cancer in Delhi, India. A bust of her was created for a location near the hospital that was later built in Kharang. Every birthday is celebrated by sending school children to see the statue and learn what this remarkable woman did for villagers, no matter their wealth or religion. Her name still rings in the valley and the hills, her influence on education still in evidence. While many have thought that Kong Barr must have suffered being alone so much, she heartily disagreed. She loved the quiet of nights in the village, the occasional mooing of a cow, the flutter of a bird’s wing. AND she was surrounded by children: “Children have been my salvation, each an individuality to be respect, developed and loved, each with his and or own special gifts, defects, needs, and potentialities... No, I have never had time to be lonely.” (*A Dream Come True* by Margaret Barr, pp. 100-101.)

**May the work continue!**

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