When heat became hard to bear with fresh drink and fan
To cool myself, hastily to Shillong I ran
Where pine-decked hills and deep dark forest
Afford tired souls their much needed rest.

These lines are by no one less than Rabindranath Tagore. The famous poet was fascinated by the beauty and serenity of Shillong and visited several times in the 1920s. Many of his well-known stories and poems were written in Shillong or were set there. Several other prominent personalities have made the hill resort their home for shorter or longer times, contributing to the special charm or romance of the small town. Despite the town turning into a modern, bustling, crowded and polluted city with a metropolitan population of around 350,000 people during the last few decades, the idea of that originally serene place seems to linger on in people’s imagination. Such nostalgia, however, cannot prevent the rather ruthless development taking place today. The Assam-style bungalows that many associate with Shillong are becoming increasingly rare (fig.1).

The colonial hill station
To understand Shillong, the particular history of a hill station is especially critical, and like with other hill stations in India, the founding idea was to create a home away from home for colonial officials, army men and the wider expatriate community. As Dave Kennedy puts it in his study The Magic Mountains: Hill Stations and the British Raj, “the replication of particular features of the natural and social environment of Britain was central to the hill station’s distinct identity.”

The colonial model was that of an English village, and compared to the carefully planned and regulated cities in the plains, the hill station was allowed to grow in a more organic and unplanned manner, according to Kennedy. The one feature that was emphasized, however, was the separation of European and Indian residential areas, the first referred to as ‘walled’, and the latter ‘bazaar’. This spatial separation along racial lines has rightly been stressed in scholarship on colonial and postcolonial cities. Yet, as more recent research shows, the separation was never as absolute as one was made to believe.

As A.D. King aptly put it, “there were charged interconnections between the two spaces.” Shillong seems indeed to be a place where the Indian elite could escape into social spheres supposedly reserved for the Europeans. Sports, the favorite pastime of the Europeans in Shillong, however, seems to have been an arena where the racial privilege remained the strongest. Of the many old photographs I have seen of people playing golf, cricket or polo, none of them display any Indian sportsperson (fig. 2: Colonial cricket). Regarding sports it is interesting to note that what captured the imagination of the people of Shillong, as well as Northeast India more generally, was not cricket but football. The town today hosts several prominent teams, the most successful one recently being Shillong Lajong FC.

Nostalgia
Despite the rich 150 years history – founded in 1864, becoming a famous hill station, capital of the undivided province and later state of Assam; and since 1972 the capital of Meghalaya – relatively little research has been carried out with a direct focus on Shillong. I find this surprising. There are of course a wide-range of scholarship concerning the history, culture and economy of the Khasi people and other communities in the area, and more general about the politics, demography and environment of the region, which in different ways touches on urban developments in Shillong as well. But it is hard to find research where the city itself is the key object of study. This is also the case for Northeast India more generally. Duncan McInnis’ new book on Imphal, the capital of Manipur, is groundbreaking, showing the way for theoretically informed and empirically grounded urban studies of these frontier tracts.

My thesis here is that Shillong still awaits a similar type of ethnography of the inner-workings, the metabolism, of the city. The Anthropological Survey of India held a seminar on Shillong that resulted in the edited volume Colonial Profile of Shillong (1979), and a similar seminar some thirty years later resulted in Shillong a Tribal Town in Transition (2004). These volumes provide important beginnings, but remain rather thin in content. Today, however, I sense a growing public interest in exploring what Shillong is, has been and is becoming. The web-based activist-scholar collective Raisi is exemplary here, publishing essays, personal memoirs and political reportage about Shillong, for example, regarding the controversies about the new township development.

An aspect that I have come to associate with Shillong is nostalgia, a longing for a city that once was. This relates to the colonial past, when the city was less populated, greener and cleaner, but also to a more recent postcolonial past. Among middle-aged people – those I mainly socialise with – this longing is mainly for the city of their youth; a city prior to violence and protests, a peaceful and friendly place where you go to meet a friend or watch a movie late in the evening without fear. But as many of my interlocutors lament, this ended in the 1980s with increasing ethnic conflicts, conflicts, rallies and underground activities. The past – the 1960s and 70s – appears as a time of innocence, where one could be oneself in a world that was opening up. While I suppose it is a universal feature to cling to memories of the formative period of one’s youth, Shillongites seem especially touched by a nostalgic mood, a collective commemoration of the past. That life for many in the city has improved materially doesn’t seem to alter such cravings for the city that once was.

Nostalgia is a complex phenomenon. It obviously has a conservative ring to it, indexing societal states and regimes. Anthropologists have had reasons to engage with it, however, often reluctantly.

In my earlier work among the indigenous Rabha community in forest areas of northernmost West Bengal, I was commonly told that life had been much better under the sahibs. This seemed strange in view of the colonial appropriation of most of their shifting cultivation lands, turning these into tea gardens and forest reserves. But according to my Rabha interlocutors, the coming of the bengalis (the government of the Bengalis), had brought goods for them. The forest officers, who were the main agents of the state, and who they interacted with on a more regular basis, were considered corrupt and mischievous. My reading of this was that the nostalgic remembrance of the rule of sahibs had little to do with the past, but should rather be read as a present of the present; having to endure what was perceived as a highly oppressive state.

The present nostalgic ramblings among the Khasis in Shillong, however, seem more different. In my reading here, this is because of the present; having to endure what was perceived as a highly oppressive state.
to the fact that these were “forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed”19. Something similar might be at play in the yearnings for the Shillong of the past. As a hill station, Shillong attracted people from various backgrounds and was celebrated as a cosmopolitan place. This was also the idea of the city during independence and well into the 1960s and 70s. It was an educational hub with well-known schools and colleges that provided first-class English secondary education and further a place with a vibrant cultural scene, not least in the case of music, famously known as the Indian capital of rock music. This started to change with the formation of Meghalaya as a separate state in 1972. The idea of the city of Shillong seems to have started to shift towards a more exclusive understanding, that is, that only certain people belonged there. In the 70s the city also saw the first wave of ethnic violence, initially against the Bengali community, then later in the 80s, against the Naga, and then against various other ethnic groups; even smaller indigenous communities like Karis and Kaha were targeted as outsiders (Jhikan). More recently this sentiment has translated into a demand for the Inner Line Permit (ILP), a kind of internal visa regime that was used by the British to control movement of people between the hills and the plains of the Northeastern frontier. All except the indigenous tribes would hence require a permit to enter the state, this to halt the “efflux” of foreigners. For the non-tribals, the ILP movement stirred up fears of a resurgence of ethnic violence, which indeed has occurred.20 Even if most of the Khasis in Shillong support the idea that the rights of the indigenous tribes must be put first, they also seem to lament what the exclusivist ethnic politics has done to the open, cosmopolitan nature of the city. People from various parts of India used to send their children to Shillong to be educated, but now the Khasis who can afford to send their children for their studies elsewhere, preferably South India. As one of my friends explained, Shillong is no longer a place conducive for one’s youth.

The tribal city

So if no longer a cosmopolitan town, what would be the best way to characterize present-day Shillong? Perhaps the “tribal city”? First of all, the overwhelming majesty belongs to indigenous or tribal communities, formally designated in India as scheduled tribes. The city, or most of it, is further under a tribal city! First of all, the overwhelming majority belongs to the traditional political institutions are highly problematic yet most precious. In conclusion

To the surprise of many, Shillong failed again to be selected by the central government as a ‘smart city’, a status that would bring along a package of investments to improve the power grid, public transport, sewage, IT connectivity and other urban amenities. In a moment of critical self-examination, commentators asked why they failed when less prominent Northeastern capitals like Imphal and Agartala had been selected. The former deputy chief minister and leader of the main opposition party UDP, Bindo M. Lanong puts the blame on the history of the Congress-led Meghalaya government, stating that Shillong, with its history of a prominent hill resort and regional capital, and today hosting various prominent state and central institutions, and with its cosmopolitan population, had all the qualifications required.21 But most of the other commentators feel that the failure points to deeper structural problems, evoking a general uncertainty about where the city is heading.

Bengt G. Karlsson, Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University (bengt.g.karlsson@socant.su.se).

[Fig 2 (below): Shillong Cricket Ground in India. Copyright © Stop the Clipart, LLC. All rights reserved.]

References


2 This was reported in the local as well as national media; see for example, “Tagore’s abode in Shillong demolished”, Outlook, 7 July 2010.


7 Cricket like many other colonial games were played within the parameters of the club, which remained all-white bastions to the very end of colonial rule, cf. Ramchandran Guha. 2003. A Corner of the Foreign Field: The Indian History of British Sport, London: Pimlico.


13 I remember correctly Immanul Kant has made this point somewhere, that is, that nostalgia is above all a longing for one’s youth.


18 See www.census2011.co.in/census/India/177-shillong.html


20 UDP to pursue ‘Smart City’ issue with Centre’, Meghalaya Times, 22 September 2016.