

Shillong: tribal urbanity in the Northeast Indian borderland



*When heat became hard to beat 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.¹*

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 persons 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).

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A FEW YEARS AGO the heritage building, the Sidhli House, where Tagore stayed during his last visit in 1927, was knocked down to give way for a larger concrete building. The house originally belonged to an Italian, and later to the Queen of Sidhli and friend of Tagore, Rani Manjula Devi. A relative of the Rani later sold the house to Philip Pala – a coal baron from Jaintia Hills, the new tribal nobility of the city² - who subsequently destroyed it.³ In this short essay, I will try to outline a few key traits or characteristics of present-day Shillong, a city I have come to love and feel at home in. As will be clear, not all are equally welcome or allowed to belong to the city. Some forever remain *dkhars*, outsiders, despite being born and raised in Shillong. The author Anjum Hasan struggles in her novels *Lunatic in my head* (2007) and *Neti, Neti / Not this, Not this* (2009) with such a predicament; that is, growing up as a Bengali, a non-tribal, in a city that has become increasingly ethnically exclusivist. Despite this, she also asserts, "I Love this Dirty Town".⁴

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 officers, ailing 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".⁵ The cognitive 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 'wards' and the latter 'bazaars'.⁶ 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".⁷ Shillong seems indeed to be a place where the Indian elite could trespass 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.⁸ Of the many old photographs I have seen of people playing golf, cricket or polo, none of them display any Indian sportsman (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.⁹ 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 McDuie-Ra's 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.¹⁰ My thesis here is that Shillong still awaits a similar type of ethnography of the inner-workings, the metabolism, of the city.¹¹ The Anthropological Survey of India held a seminar on Shillong that resulted in the edited volume *Cultural Profile of Shillong* (1979), and a similar seminar some thirty years later resulted in *Shillong: a Tribal Town in Transition* (2004).¹² 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 *Raiot* is exemplary here, publishing essays, personal memories and political reportage about Shillong, for example, regarding the controversies about the new township development.¹³

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, curfews, rallies and underground activities. The past – the 1960s and 70s – appears as a time of innocence, freedom and possibilities 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,¹⁴ Shillongites seem especially besieged 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 stasis and regress. Anthropologists have had reasons to engage with it, however, often reluctantly.¹⁵ In my earlier work among the indigenous Rabha community in forest areas of northern-most 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 *bangla sarkar* (the government of the Bengalis), had brought nothing good 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 critique of the present; having to endure what was perceived as a highly oppressive state.¹⁶ The present nostalgic ramblings among the Khasis in Shillong, however, seem more difficult to account for. The Khasis, along with the other two main indigenous or tribal communities, the Jaintias and the Garos, have a rather privileged position after being granted a separate state with control over politics, land and natural resources.

Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo points to what he describes as a common paradox in nostalgic yearnings, especially recurrent under imperialism: "people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed". Agents of colonialism, Rosaldo argues, tended to display nostalgia for 'traditional culture', the native society as they existed when they first encountered them, hence oblivious

Fig 1 (above): School mess, Pine Mount School, Shillong, 2016 (photo by Tarun Bhartiya). An example of the typical old style of housing in Shillong, slowly being replaced by concrete high rises.

to the fact that these were “forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed”.¹⁷ 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 after 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 seemed 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 Nepalis, and then against various other ethnic groups; even smaller indigenous communities like Karbi and Rabha were targeted as outsiders (*dhkars*). 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 ‘influx’ of foreigners. For the non-tribals, the ILP movement stirred up fears of a resurgence of ethnic violence, which indeed has occurred.¹⁸ 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 study.

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 majority belongs to indigenous or tribal communities, formally designated in India as scheduled tribes. The city, or most of it, is further under a tribal governance structure and with customary laws as the key legal instrument. Traditional political institutions among the Khasis revolve around the elected headman, *rangbah shnong*, and his council, the *dorbar shnong*. What historically developed in the context of village life now constitutes a central institution within the city, evolving along with two other – partly overlapping and competing – administrative structures, the district council (established under the sixth schedule of the constitution) and the civil, state bureaucracy. The situation, as we will see, is highly complex and confusing for both experts and laypersons. Pressure groups, like the powerful Khasi Students Union, also play a critical governance role, intervening with calls for strikes and civil uproar whenever community interest is perceived to be compromised.

In theory, Shillong consists of three main types of legal or administrative entities: (1) tribal areas, under a

headman and his *dorbar*, as mentioned above, and (2) the municipality area, supposedly under an elected civil board (but elections have not been carried out since the last board was dismantled in 1967 due to protests because the board is a non-Khasi institution), and (3) the cantonment area in the hands of the armed forces.¹⁹ Of the total metropolitan area population of 350 000, about 200 000 people live in the tribal areas, organized as separate villages, localities or townships with their respective headman and *dorbar*. These so-called ‘traditional political institutions’ remain a highly controversial matter in Meghalaya. For the tribal ideologues it is a celebrated form of grassroots democracy whereas for the critics these institutions are an exclusivist – debarring women, the young and non-Khasis to hold office or even speak at the *dorbar* – and ineffective form of rule that ought to end.²⁰ The latter commonly stress that the headman usually lacks appropriate education and skills and further that they lack financial and technical resources required for increasingly bureaucratic and complex urban administration, such as that relating to roads, power, water, sewage, education, health, policing and various other infrastructural arrangements that need to be in place. Another problem is a lack of transparency, which critics claim enables corruption. Vanessa Kharbudon Rynngnga asks, in the leading newspaper *The Shillong Times* (Feb. 20, 2015), “Does Meghalaya Need the Dorbar Shnong in the 21st Century?”. After investigations she has discovered that the *rangbah shnong* usually demand a share (sometimes as much as ten percent) of every property deal within their respective locality. Women’s participation in the *dorbar* is opposed as it supposedly violates tradition, yet as Rynngnga asserts, such a practice has no backing within Khasi tradition. Khasi tradition, hence, can be bent when it serves certain interests. Sheer hypocrisy, she writes. But instead of calling for the headman and *dorbar* to be scrapped, Rynngnga hopes to reform the *dorbar*. In this she agrees with most Khasis: 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-introspection, 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 incompetence of the Congress-led Meghalaya government, stating that Shillong, with its history of a prominent hill resort and regional capital, and today hosting various prestigious 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.

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References

- 1 The poem *Shillong-er Chitthi*, from 1923, is translated from Bengali by Moon Moon Mazumdar, and published in her essay ‘Tagore and Shillong: Between the Lines’, in S. Dasgupta & C. Guha (eds.) *Tagore: At Home in the World*, Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- 2 Cf. Karlsson, B.G. 2016. ‘A different story of coal: the power of power in Northeast India’, in K.B. Nielsen & P. Oskarsson (eds.) *The Industrialising Rural India: Land, Policy and Resistance*, Routledge: New York & London.
- 3 This was reported in the local as well as national media; see for example, ‘Tagore’s abode in Shillong demolished’, *Outlook*, 7 July 2010.
- 4 Anjum Hasan. ‘I Love this Dirty Town’, *Granta*, 7 June 2013. granta.com/i-love-this-dirty-town (accessed 5 June 2017).
- 5 Kennedy, D. 1996. *The Magic Mountains: Hill Stations and the British Raj*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p.3.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.99.
- 7 King, A.D. 2009. ‘Postcolonial Cities’, *Online Elsevier Encyclopedia*, accessed 12 January 2017, p.3.
- 8 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. Ramachandra Guha. 2003. *A Corner of a Foreign Field: The Indian History of British Sport*, London: Picador.
- 9 Imdad Hussain’s 2005 richly illustrated *From Residency to Raj Bhavan: A History of Shillong Government House*, New Delhi: Regency Publication, is an exception, but rather limited in scope.
- 10 McDuie-Ra, D. 2016. *Borderland City in New India: Frontier to Gateway*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- 11 Sociologist Daisy Hasan makes a similar point in her article ‘Shillong: The (Un)Making of a North East Indian City’, in J.S. Anjaria & C. McFarlane (eds.) 2011. *Urban Navigations: politics, space and the city in South Asia*, New Delhi, New York: Routledge.
- 12 Goswami, B.B. (ed.) 1979. *Cultural Profile of Shillong*, Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India, and Sengupta, S. & B. Dhar (eds.) 2004. *Shillong: A Tribal Town in Transition*, New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House.
- 13 See raio.tn/tag/new-shillong-township (accessed 7 February 2017).
- 14 If I remember correctly Immanuel Kant has made this point somewhere, that is, that nostalgia is above all a longing for one’s youth.
- 15 See, for example, William Cunningham Bissell. 2005. ‘Engaging Colonial Nostalgia’, *Cultural Anthropology* 20(2):215-248.
- 16 Karlsson, B.G. 2000. *Contested Belonging: An Indigenous people’s struggle for forest and identity in Sub-Himalayan Bengal*, Richmond: Curzon Press.
- 17 Rosaldo, R. 1989. ‘Imperial Nostalgia’, *Representations* 26:107-108.
- 18 See Lyngdoh, R. ‘Massive Rally in Shillong backs ILP’, *The Telegraph*, 1 December 2013. And *Times Now*, ‘Meghalaya: Innerline permit demand grow’, 20 October 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zpy1zvUoF5U (accessed 20 February 2017).
- 19 See www.census2011.co.in/census/city/187-shillong.html
- 20 See Karlsson, B.G. 2011. ‘Sovereignty through indigenous governance: Reviving ‘traditional’ political institutions in Northeast India’, in D.J. Rycroft & S. Dasgupta (eds.) *The Politics of Belonging: Becoming Adivasi*, London & New York: Routledge.
- 21 ‘UDP to pursue ‘Smart City’ issue with Centre’, *Meghalaya Times*, 22 September 2016.

Fig 2 (below): Shillong Cricket Ground in India. Pith-helmeted spectators watching a cricket match at the Cricket Ground at Shillong in Assam, India, circa 1900. (Photo by Popperfoto/Getty Images. All rights reserved.)

