Shillong: tribal urbanity in the Northeast Indian borderland

A FEW YEARS AGO the heritage building, the Siddhi 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 Sikkim and friend of Tagore, Kani Manjula Devi. A relative of the Kani later sold the house to Philip Pala – a coal baron from Jaintia Hills, the new tribal nobility of the city2 - who subsequently destroyed it. In this short essay, I will try to outline a few key traits or characteristics of present-day 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 have been popular here as long as the colonial period are becoming increasingly rare (fig.1).

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 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).

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, 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 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’. This spatial separation along racial lines has rightly been stressed in scholarship on colonial and postcolonial cities. Yet, 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 McCue-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. 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 Cultural 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 Raiot is exemplary here, publishing essays, personal memories 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, 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 it is true a universal appeal to cling to memories of the formative period of one’s youth,7 Shillongites seem especially beset 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 stigma and regress. Anthropologists have had reasons to engage with it, however, often reluctantly. 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 bangle seller (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. The present nostalgic clichés among the Khasis in Shillong, however, seem more difficult to account for. The Khasi, along with the other tribal communities, the Jaintas and the Garos, have a relatively privileged position after being granted a separate state with control over political, 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, tend to display nostalgia for ‘traditional culture’ or ‘traditional society’ as they existed when they first encountered them, hence oblivious
to the fact that these were “forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed.” Similar something 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 1970s. 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 1970s the city also saw the first wave of ethnic violence, initially against the Bengali community, then later in the 1980s, against the Nagas, and then against various other ethnic groups, even smaller indigenous communities like Karbi and Rabha were targeted as outsiders (dhobis). 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. Even if most of the Khias 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, to the surprise of many, Shillong failed again to be selected as an educational hub (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. 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-Khias to hold office or even speak at the dorbar – and ineffective form of rule that ought to end. 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 Khabudon Ryngaerts 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 Ryngaerts 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, Ryngaerts hopes to reform the dorbar. In this she agrees with most Khias: 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-reflection, 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. Lunog 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. “But most of the other commentators feel that the failure points to deeper, structural problems, evolving a general uncertainty about where the city is heading.”

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References

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 Anuj Basu, ‘I Love this Dirty Town’,_greater, 7 June 2013, granta.com/love-this-dirty-town (accessed 5 June 2017).
6 Ibid., p.99.
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.
10 McAulay, D. 2016. Borderland City in New India: Frontier to Gateway, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
14 If I remember correctly Iqram Khan has made this point somewhere, that is, that nostalgia is above all a longing for one’s youth.
19 See www.census2011.co.in/census/city/187-shillong.html
21 ‘UDP to pursue “Smart City” issue with Centre’, Meghalaya Times, 22 September 2016.