
Shillong – A Story of Evolution

Vinetic C.S. Dkhar

Asstt. Prof. History Deptt.

Shillong College, India.

Abstract: Shillong, a hill-station nestled in the bosom of the sub-Himalayan terrains of North-East India boasted of such picturesque landscape and pristine climatic conditions that it was christened ‘The Scotland of the East’. The Britishers who sojourned there during the hey-days of the Raj vindicated this little obscure hamlet when they shifted their civil administrative headquarter here from neighbouring Cherrapunjee. Eventually it was elevated to become the capital of the Assam Province and later the state capital of Meghalaya. The original natives of the area known as the *Khasis* practice a matrilineal society and were animistic in their traditional beliefs. However with the onset of a rapidly growing mixed population and the need for a fast-paced lifestyle, modernity is exacting a heavy toll on the socio-cultural ethos of an erstwhile untouched society.

Keywords: Scotland of the East, Khasis, seat of government, cosmopolitan town, different mission bodies, rapid growth, climatic and social serenity, cultural identity, grim realities, modernity.

Nestled within the sub-Himalayan terrains of North East India, Shillong which is widely recognised as one of the most picturesque hill stations in these parts of the world was once christened as “Scotland of the East”. The Britishers who were based here before Independence swore that the countryside and the climatic conditions uncannily reminded them of their own homes. It is situated at an altitude of 4,908 feet (1,496 m) above sea level on a plateau of rolling hills, with a geographical positioning reading of 25.57 degrees North latitude and 91.88 degrees East longitude. The neighbouring lofty peaks, the winding streets and lanes, the cascading waterfalls, the entralling flowers of myriad colours, the majestic colonnades of tall pine trees clad with whispering evergreen leaves glistening in the sun, and the ever changing landscape present a tale of awe and wonder to any outsider who visits it.

Prior to the 1800s, there was no organized settled habitation by the name Shillong until the British selected the area for their official headquarters. Erstwhile it was a mere village with a few hamlets scattered here and there. In fact some have noted that it was almost a wilderness with nothing much to show for a settlement. The area where the town stands today was sparsely populated with very few houses located predominantly on the slopes of *Iewduh* which is presently one of the main bustling markets. For a very long time, Shillong was known to the local people as *Laban*, one of the localities in the town today, since it was the first station on the journey from Cherrapunjee (a village renowned for being one of the wettest places in the world). Shillong is predominantly home to the *Khasis*, which some scholar believed to be of the Mon-Khmer group and they are a matrilineal society. The life of the Khasis in those early days was

simple, since they were mostly a pastoral group and lived in small thatched houses. For the early Khasis, land was the only thing which they could call their own, as they consider it literally gifted to them by God. The early Khasis were animistic in their belief, called *Ka Niam Khasi* and *Ka Niam Tre* in the *Jaintia* region entailing animal sacrifices as part of their rituals.

However, with the arrival of the British and others, a number of changes and influences were ushered in. Since the second decade of the nineteenth century, the British administrative authorities in the North Eastern region of India, abandoned their policy of non- intervention and began a policy of gradual and steady penetration. The new political and administrative set-up demanded the settlement of the British and other European officials in the area.

Shillong town came to the limelight in 1866 when the British shifted their headquarters from Cherrapunjee to the drier plains of Iewduh at the foot of the Shillong range. Immediately this was a harbinger of manifold promises for future development, since the British found Shillong to be more centrally located than Cherrapunjee, especially when it comes to closer connections with other parts of the North Eastern Frontier. Above all the British found the climate to be most suitable to them and so since 1866 Shillong began to grow exponentially and its history gradually unfolded.

The development of the town started with a few buildings constructed by the British for administrative use of the government. The bungalows of the European officers were clustered on a particular area known as ‘European Quarters’. Residential buildings for the inhabitants however,

at that period of time were clustered mostly round the area of Laban.

In 1874, Assam was separated from the province of Bengal, and was constituted into the Chief Commissioner's province, with Shillong being made the headquarters and capital of the new province. The visit of the then Viceroy of India, Lord Northbrooke was a shot in the arm for Shillong in shaping and moulding it into a province capital politically, economically and socially. It would not be wrong therefore to conclude that Shillong was entirely the creation of the British administration.

With the growing importance of Shillong as the seat of government for the Chief Commissioner of Assam, it became necessary to establish closer contact with other important places of the region specially with Gauhati, the principal town in the Assam valley. This would not be possible if the system of communication was not improved. The cart road to Gauhati had been opened in 1877, but only bullock carts plied on it. By 1887, horse drawn tonga service was opened along the Gauhati-Shillong road by which one could make the journey both ways within one day. Stables were placed at a distance of a few kilometres, where horses were changed for the sake of speed and convenience. It was in 1906 that motor services were opened on the road and the Alvim cars were the first type of motor cars used which ran on solid tyres. Besides the Shillong-Gauhati road, the government opened several other roads in other directions from the Capital. The opening up of roads paved the way for further development of Shillong into a full-fledged town.

With the development of communication, many non-tribals came up to settle in the town, either because their business enterprises required them taking up residence there or because they came to hunt for jobs with the new administration. Most of them were able to start their business at a very important market centre called *Dukan u Pulit* then, which eventually became the busiest business centre, the Police Bazar. The shops established by a monopoly of traders from East Bengal were mostly stationery shops. Strangely enough the Marwari traders who would monopolized commercial enterprises elsewhere were among the last to make Shillong their centre of business interest. The reason for this could be because of the keen competition that the Marwaris and other traders had to face from the traders of East Bengal specially those from Dacca and the Hoogly districts, who were so close to their own homes. Soon however, distance or competition did not exclude the other traders to come up to Shillong and today, the biggest business enterprises of the town are being held by the Marwari traders. The start of trade and business by the non-tribals was important in converting Shillong into what it is today, a cosmopolitan town.

Over the years the population of Shillong increased not only in size but also in its ethnic varieties, with dialects, cultures and customs of diverse origin. Among the Khasis who are the original inhabitants of the area, there are the Assamese, the Bengalis, the varied tribal groups from in and around the North-Eastern region and many others who came in later. With such a mix population, intermarriage of the Khasis with others was inevitable. Eventually Shillong became a large and important town and it was found necessary to have a clear demarcation of its boundaries and in 1910 it was brought under the jurisdiction of a municipality. However the concept of urban agglomeration was brought out much later at the 1971 census.

The multi-cultural background resulted in the growth of multi-religious faiths and dogmas. The British administration brought with it various Christian missions, specially the Serampore Baptist Mission, and later the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission. The influx of the non tribal population led to the establishment of non-Christian mission bodies as well like the Sadharon Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission, Harishabha at Laban and the Hindu Mission at Mawprem. Besides there was a steady in-flow and growth of the Muslim and the Buddhist faithfuls with their place of worship springing up at various locales. The *Seng Khasi* was later established which was aimed at the preservation of the traditional Khasi faith and culture. These different mission bodies also contributed much to the upliftment of Shillong to the status and prestige of a town on its way to modernity.

The onset of the twentieth century brought with it many changes in the history and the development of Shillong town. In 1905 Bengal was partitioned, and it was divided into Eastern Bengal and Assam on the one hand, and Western Bengal and Orissa on the other. This affected the development of Shillong as Assam was no longer an independent province. The new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam was placed under a Lieutenant Governor and the importance of the town underwent a temporary setback. The headquarters were shifted to Dacca and Shillong was recognised only as a summer capital. It was only on 31st March 1912, when the partition of Bengal was annulled that Assam was reverted to its old status of the Chief Commissioner's province. Shillong was then restored as the capital of Assam once again. By 1914, there were many areas in Shillong that were brought under municipal administration in accordance with the Bengal Municipal Act of 1884. Shillong remained the headquarter and the capital of Assam even when the latter was raised to the position of a Governor's province under the Government of India Act 1919. In 1933, Shillong was visited by another Viceroy of India, Lord Wellington. With the rapid growth of population and the expansion of the town, the need for representatives to the government was felt, and like

the rest of India, elections were held in Shillong for the very first time in 1937. When the Second World War ended in 1945, Shillong had to suffer the effects of the war. There was economic scarcity and life became hard and insecure. In 1946 it was clear enough that sooner or later India would be given independence and there would soon be political change. After independence Assam was raised to the status of a state and Shillong continued to be the capital of the state of Assam in Free India. By then the town had become the most desirable of all the capital cities in India in terms of climatic and social serenity.

However, after India achieved its independence in 1947, there were many political changes in the hills of Assam, and in the general elections of 1957, the demand for a separate state for the hill areas of Assam became a major issue. Soon thereafter, the official language Bill was moved in the Assam Legislative Assembly and in 1960 it was declared that Assamese should be the official language. This brought a lot of apprehension and resentment among the people of the hill areas who feared for the loss of their cultural identity, and thus the demand for hill state grew loud and aggressive across the hills of Assam. For more than a decade since then, the Garo hills along with the united Khasi and Jaintia hills struggled for a state of their own. Eventually on the 21st January 1972, the long cherished political aspiration of the people of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills was fulfilled and the state of Meghalaya was inaugurated by the then Prime Minister of India, Shrimati Indira Gandhi at Polo Ground, Shillong. Thus Shillong ceased to be the capital of Assam and since then took on the onus to function as the capital of Meghalaya. More efforts were then being made by both the government and the people for the development of Shillong and for converting it into a town which could catch up with other cosmopolitan towns of India.

Presently, the process of growth and development is a gruelling task in the midst of growing needs to ameliorate living conditions and lifestyle demands. Thus we find localities like Laitumkhrah which was considered a quiet rural neighbourhood only about sixty years ago, is now a busy centre in the middle of this bristling town. Even localities which were settled much later like Nongthymmai, Umpling, and Upper Shillong are now very much

parts of the town and are still expanding and swallowing up the suburban countryside. Mawlai and Mawiong are rapidly expanding along the national highway towards Gauhati. Shillong is renowned as an educational hub with universities, academic centres and professional institutes like the IIM, NIFT, NEGRIHMS, NIIT and many others vying with the best in the rest of the country for recognition and laurels. Therefore today it is quite appropriate to declare that Shillong is a cosmopolitan town, and like any other big town in India, different aspects of the town has been developing through the sacrifices and efforts of its leaders and citizens. Earlier the British and the non-tribal population were very much as responsible as the indigenous natives for developments whether it was in business and trade, education, medical work or religion. As a result, now, the town could boast of excellent educational institutions, hospitals, orphanages that are successfully catering to the needs of the populace. Tourism industry is growing tremendously as visitors are intoxicated not only by its natural resources but by the unique features of the culture and hospitality of this growing town.

However today the fairy tale nature of a once pristine hill-station seems to have suffered certain amount of drawbacks and disillusion of having to subsist under the grim realities of 21st century India. Modernity with all the glitz and glamour of globalization and economic niceties has brought in its share of woes into Shillong. Traffic congestion, pollution, deforestation, over-populated slum-like localities, proliferation of varied sicknesses and diseases, rampant unemployment, along with moral degradation among its citizens are just a few of the long list of dilemmas that a hill-station was never meant to bear. It could easily be justified that this is something that is commonly ailing the world today. But Shillong was Shillong not because it was like every other town but because it had a charisma and a uniqueness that made it different, different enough to be known as the 'Scotland of the East'. Perhaps there is still hope if some Shillongites (tribal or not but still a child of this town) would take heart to not only flip through the pages of history to reminisce. But more importantly to undo, to rebuild and to refurbish what modernity for the sake of modernity had robbed from what has always been a legacy of this once beautiful place.

References:

- Bareh, Hamlet. *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, Spectrum Publishers, 1985.
 Bhuyan, A.C. & Dey, S.(ed) *Political History of Assam Vol.II (Gauhati, 1978)*.
 Choudhury, J.N., *The Khasi Canvas, Shillong: J. Choudhury, 1978*.
 Gait, Edward A., Sir, *History of Assam, Thacker, Spink & Company, 1967 – Assam, India*.
 Gurdon, P.R.T., Major, *The Khasis, Echo Library, 2007*.
 Lahiri, R.M., *The Annexation of Assam, Calcutta, General Printers and Publishers, 1954*.
 Mackenzie, Alexander, *The North-East Frontier of India, Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1981*.