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People and Places

Shillong — the Scotland of the East

by Aasha Mehreen Amin



With fascinating purple hills, soothing lush green pines and also serene lakes, Shillong has retained its mystic beauty for over a century.



WHEN life is at its most enravating point in scorching Bangladesh it is just right in Shillong, now the capital of Meghalay. While May usually is warm, even at this time the cool, gentle breeze of the mountains is a welcome change for the visitor from the plains. But it is not just the weather that beguiles. It is the feeling of timelessness and nostalgia that grips one as suddenly as the tropical vegetation changes into an evergreen haven of pines and oaks. Something in the way the winding roads seem to disappear into the mist, the way waterfalls gush out in the middle of nowhere and the shower of wild flowers spraying the purple hills, transforms one into a fairy tale world with hidden mysteries at every corner. Perhaps it was this inexplicable feeling that inspired Rabindranath to write his 'Shesher Kabita' in this idyllic hill station. After more than half a century since then, Shillong has retained its mystic and breathtaking beauty.

According to tradition, this hill station at an altitude of 1500 metres above sea level, derives its name from a 'Khasi' named U Shillong who is said to have met a god on Shillong Peak where the capital is situated. The god was then named U' Lei Shillong or a god first seen and owned by U Shillong and is held in great reverence by all the Khasis — the majority tribal population of Shillong.

The best way to get to this land of legends is to drive up to the Tamabil border in Sylhet after which the journey to Shillong is a mere three hours. Curiously, it is only a strip of land called 'No Man's Land' that separates Tamabil on the Bangladesh border from Dawki on the Indian side. No one seems to know how this originated.

The drive up the steep hills is exhilarating. Looking down one can see hundreds of Bangladeshi boats collecting boulders from the river banks and feel a little sorry for the fishermen who cannot breathe the crisp, virginal air of the mountains. The road, after passing a long and spectacular bridge, becomes steeper as it goes through a sharp bend appropriately called the Devil's Elbow, proceeding to Pynursula, a small village

where one can stop to have sweet, fragrant tea made by the local women who are usually referred to as 'kong' (sister).

As one drives on the pines become denser, the roads steeper and the pleasingly air cooler. Entering Upper Shillong it is easy to see the reason for its appellation — 'Scotland of the East'. Delightful little cottages with soothing green corrugated roofs scatter the hills; the hedges, trellises of rose bushes and sprays of pansies, daisies, petunias and rhododendrons in a medley of rainbow colours — make this perfect little hill station right after the English heart. It must have been hard for the British to give up this cool haven that they had once created so lovingly and possessively.

There are many places of interest in and around the capital. The closest is Ward's Lake named after an Englishman named Ward and located right

in the heart of the town. Here one can just lie around the flower beds, stand on the bridge to feed the orange-gold fish or go on a romantic boat ride. There are always people near the lake especially in the late afternoons when the sun is less fierce. But many locals believe that the lake harbours an evil spirit that claims at least one life every year by luring people to commit suicide. Shillong is full of tales of ghosts, haunted houses, restless spirits and black magic — things to ponder on when one lies at night in a cosy cottage listening to the crackling fire place against the wailing winds and creaking doors.

Another man-made lake, only 20 minutes away from the town, is Bara Pani. About 300 to 400ft deep, it is one of the most beautiful places in Shillong. The water is a silvery greenish blue against the strips of land here and there. With mist covered hills surrounding it, Bara Pani, espe-

cially at sunset, is supremely romantic. The tranquillity is only slightly marred by stories of people disappearing into the treacherous waters, their bodies never to be found. But in spite of grisly stories there is never a dearth of people at Bara Pani which is ideal for picnics. Motels and restaurants overlook the grand lake and attract many tourists.

Gushing waterfalls with curious names are also in abundance all over the mountains. There are the Beacon Falls, Bishop's Falls, Spread Eagle Falls, Crinoline Falls and Elephant Falls — so named because the rocks resemble the backs of elephants. The falls look their best during the monsoons, when the water flows with amazing speed and the surrounding forests become lush green.

There are innumerable exciting places in and near Shillong which has always been one of the best tourist spots in

India. There is, of course, famous Cherrapunjee, 35 km south of Shillong, which is the wettest place on earth during monsoons. Mawphong — a village about 24 km southwest — is situated around the peak called 'Ryngkew Mawphong'. Apart from being an ideal picnic spot, it is famous for its Cherry Brandy served at a bar which was originally started as a pub by a retired British army officer called Captain Hunt. Other spots worth mentioning include Mawjymbuin Cave, Kmaunan, Mawsynram, Mairang, Thum-Thum Falls and Shillong Peak — the highest peak in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

Shillong is also famous for its public schools such as St. Edmund's, Loreto Convent and Pine Mount which have huge playing fields and built with the same Gothic architecture as old schools in England.

But a visit to a new place is incomplete without knowing a

little about the people. Shillong is a town of mixed population of Khasis (the majority), Assamese, Marwaris, Sindhis, Bengalis and a few tribals.

The Assamese, who were once a majority in this town, the former capital of Assam, remember Shillong as a vibrant centre of Assamese art and culture. They are a gentle and refined race, very similar to their Bengali neighbours. Apart from being avid fish eaters, the language they speak is close to Bengali and their script is of Sanskrit origin. Their distinct culture is displayed in their beautiful jewelry, in the exquisite embroidery of their 'mekla chaddars' — the Assamese counter part of our sari, and in their art and literature. Now a subdued minority in Shillong, the few remaining

Loreto Convent

through Police Bazar or Bara Bazar — the main thoroughfares in town, one constantly hears exchanges in Bengali and Bengali songs being played randomly and see signboards in Bengali that say Montu Jewellers, Jharna Restaurant — where they sell delicious 'muri ghanata' and 'bhat'. Most of the shopkeepers are Bengalis who migrated from Sylhet, Comilla and other districts of Bangladesh long before it was born.

It is hard to tear oneself away from pretty Shillong when it is time to go back home. With reluctance one leaves behind the fairy tale hill station made for the philosopher, artist and romantic in you.

A nation's old tradition and civilization can be seen through its art and culture. Although the concept of icon art is absent in Asia, the icon art which is still kept as a treasure in most of the churches in Romania reflects the influence of religion in the society. As a matter of fact archaeological evidences show that old European civilization emerged and developed in the Carpatho-Danubian-Pontic area in Romania which witnessed the emergence of culture and

Icon Art in Romania

by Mohammad Amjad Hossain

hostility of some big empires, emerged as a distinct entity in 9th century BC. They also put up stubborn resistance against the encroachment of their own territory which stood out as defining trait throughout their history. Some parts of Romania particularly Transy-

lavia felt the impact of western influence in its culture and art while Romanians in general remained faithful to the Christian Orthodox church and to the Byzantine rites. The Byzantine type of culture and art dominated some parts of Romania and did not face any resistance because Byzantine art form was promoted by the orthodox churches. Three

that paintings or mosaics representing Christ, the Virgin Mary and the saints were found in churches, monasteries, houses, shops and public places during the Byzantine era. These icons were particularly venerated in the monasteries established throughout the Empire. It goes without saying that icon art became a valuable asset to the monaster-

ies and churches. A monastery wielded great political influence if it possessed a famous icon. Wherever the Byzantine culture had left an imprint, one can find domed churches and monasteries and the brilliant mosaics of the Byzantine architects and artists.

One of the Byzantine icons which escaped destruction following the imperial decree in 726 AD, ordering that all icons in the empire be removed, was the Madonna Nicopeia painted in the style of Byzantine artists. The thirteenth-century churches of Streisingorgiu, Densus, Strei, Gura Sada and Stinta Maria Orlea are worth mentioning, where the earliest monuments of art were found. The two scenes on the nave walls of these churches — one depicting the passion of the Christ and the other devoted

developed gradually along with the icon art. During the fifteenth century Transylvania produced good painting while the church painting in northern Transylvania was of rather crude form. At Crisator several paintings on the Last Supper, The Calvary, the dormition of the Holy Virgin showed human figures in relaxed postures displaying emotions. Apart from paintings that belonged to Byzantine trend, another trend was noticeable in decoration of catholic churches which followed initially Gothic style and subsequently these paintings concentrated on subject matter. Madonna of Mercy, Jesus in the Tomb and St. Ursula's legend reflect catholic iconology in terms of composition and form.

The Writer had been to the church in Curtea de Arges

writer was told that icon paintings are also preserved in the churches in Wallachia and Moldavia. In Moldavia, arts developed in a quite different way and the iconology of the Moldavian churches followed strict pattern. Mural painting in Moldavia introduced a new trend in art specific to that geographical area.

Icon paintings of exceptional quality are preserved in Caldarusani monastery museum, 60 kilometre south-west of Bucharest which was set up in sixteenth century. Originally it was a wooden church, but presently it was built of bricks and river stones by Prince Matei Basarab in 1637. The church which the writer of the article visited, is in three-lobed form with three towers. The bell-tower was higher than the usual pattern in any church, but it was partially broken by 1940 earthquake. In this Monastery Nicolae Grigorescu, a great artist of Romania, underwent apprenticeship under the patronage of the artist Evghenie Lazar. In 1861, he studied in France and made a revolutionary achievement in style, colour and contents of the art in Romania under the influence of French impressionist. Many remarkable wooden icons dating from sixteenth century are to be found in the monastery's collection of works of art; one contains icons painted on wood; another is the picture gallery with paintings by Sava Hentia, Tattarescu and Barulescu — all belong to 16-17 century and at last the collection of precious metal objects, such as gospels, chalices, crosses, tabernacles, buckles and gold coins, 8 icons painted by Nicolae Grigorescu from 1854-1855; the coronation of the virgin; Jesus Christ as a judge; the saint Emperor Constantin and Elena; the saint Martyrs George and Dimitrie; the saint Martyr Dimitrie medallions with evangelists; Jesus and Samaritan woman at Jacob's well; the saints: Stelian, Stefan and Patelmom; the well of healing; are well preserved in the monastery.

The icon art on glass gained popularity which is found in almost every houses of the villages and churches in Romania. This painting was done in naive style by non-professional local painters like the one painted on the back side of Rickshaws in Bangladesh.



The crucifixion (Nave)



The last supper

art dating back to thousand years. One can note a remarkable ethno cultural and linguistic entity which developed through contact of the most advanced civilization of the Persian, Greek and Roman. Since the beginning of history of Geta-Dacian people, despite confrontation with aggressive forces of some Nomadic or Semi-Nomadic peoples or

lvania felt the impact of western influence in its culture and art while Romanians in general remained faithful to the Christian Orthodox church and to the Byzantine rites. The Byzantine type of culture and art dominated some parts of Romania and did not face any resistance because Byzantine art form was promoted by the orthodox churches. Three

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where he found icon painting which may be regarded as one of the rich and coherent art displaying tenet of Christian dogma. A few icons are on display in the church. The icon on mourning of Jesus in unquestionably of good quality and 'remarkable by its balanced composition' which is now on display in the Art Museum of Bucharest. The

A Poet's Political Duty

Tarikul Alam

"As a poet, there is only one political duty and that is to defend one's language against corruption. When it is corrupted, people lose faith in what they hear, and this leads to violence," said W H Auden, the celebrated English poet.

The other day (on Baisakh 1, coinciding April 14, precisely) one of the reputed poets of Bangladesh added: "In our context, it leads to Revolution and the emergence of Bangladesh, an independent sovereign state, based on linguistic commitment. Nowhere in the present day world, such a phenomenal achievement could be cited. As a Bengalee, this is my precious pride. I pronounce this like billions of my countrymen on this auspicious day of 'Pahela Baisakh'."

We are at present at the threshold of a new year 1399's follow up. With this year's exhaustion of energy, potential and proliferation, we enter into Bengali Fifteenth Century. Let the New Year and not-so-far-away Fifteenth Century augur well to us, the 'alms' generation, and particularly to the new generation, who are surely not 'pessimistic' like us, but confident with conviction, commitment and courage.

A poet is a distinguished

personality in the society. He mirrors the past, holds the present and predicts the future. He is an oracle, stating the malady of the past, mundaneness of the present and optimism of the future. He is our hope and inspiration. So let us not compel the poet to lie. Let him be the preacher of truth and nothing but truth. His fundamental duty has been rightly pointed out by Auden, cited at the very beginning of this deliberation. Other duties of the poet are: (a) true to truth, (b) courageously committed, (c) abundant in love, (d) prone to people and (e) open to righteousness and justice.

Often we find a few of the poets are committed to these five-fold duties, others are not. In that case, who are not subject to their duties, can never be called poets in their true form.

In the Bengali context, we have many poets who are conscientiously committed. Tagore leads them all. Nazrul, Michael Modhusudan, Sukanta, Subhas Mukhopadhyay and many a few others (the list is avoided) including also — Shamsur Rahman — are names to be reckoned with.

I would like to elaborate on the poets and their commitments at a later period.