

INDIAN HILL STATION
SHILLONG IS HOME TO ROCK
AND ROLL, TUDOR-STYLE
COTTAGES, BRITISH AIRS AND
AN UNPUTOWNABLY COOL
ATTITUDE

BY **KALPANA SUNDER**



IN MUSIC-LOVING Shillong, in India's northeast, Bob Dylan's birthday has been celebrated for years; it's a major event with thousands of fans converging here. Shillong was developed as a garrison town by the British, and dotted with schools and Presbyterian churches founded by Scottish missionaries, Tudor-style cottages and waterfalls with names like Bishop and Beadon. To the home-sick expatriates, the sight

of the cottages with vines and pansies and roses must have reminded them of Devonshire or Sussex. My first impression of Shillong is disappointing: overcrowded bright yellow tourist vehicles, Tata Sumos and dusty trucks clog the streets and it does not seem to meet its moniker "Scotland of the East". Shillong is not your average Indian hill station, though. The town has a huge influx of tribes, as well as people from neighbouring states like



THE BIG CHILL

DID YOU KNOW
BOB DYLAN IS
ALMOST LIKE
A LOCAL HERO
IN SHILLONG?



THE VIEW FROM UP THERE:
(clockwise) Barapaani or Lake Umiam; the crowded Bara Bazaar; counting begins for the archery lottery; the matrilineal Khasis have women playing a dominant role in the society



Nagaland, Tripura and Mizoram because of the educational facilities it offers as well as job opportunities. Most people here are Khasis, a matrilineal society where the women are powerful and property passes to the youngest daughter of the family. I see them everywhere, in their signature tartan *jansiems*, carrying heavy loads, with their babies strapped on their backs.

My retreat on the Umiam Lake is the Ri Kynjai resort set in a grove, where the cottages have traditional Khasi roofs like upturned boats, to weather the heavy rains. Legend has it that, this lake, also called Barapaani, was formed from the tears of a sister who lost her sibling. The resort has honey-coloured wooden interiors with local crafts and art, drawing from the region's rich architectural heritage.

To get a real feel of Shillong town, I trawl through Bara Bazaar, a gargantuan, and rather unique, local market. I see abattoirs manned by women who slice the meat fiercely and chew *kwai*, the local betel leaf and areca nut, turning their lips a deep shade of vermilion. The prepon-



derance of women is obvious: they are the workers and the decision-makers. Porters bend double, with heavy loads of vegetables and other heavy burlap-wrapped loads strapped on their backs. Roosters inside wicker baskets await their end, alongside other specialties like larvae and maggots. There is a section for just chillies. You can buy the small but fiery Naga chillies called

Bhoot Jolokia in Assam, which was declared by the *Guinness Book of Records* to be the hottest chilli in the world.

Shillong and music are linked inextricably. I see posters for concerts, restaurants with thumping music, youngsters carrying guitars and bars with live bands. I meet William Richmond, part of the Shillong Chamber Choir, the local musical group

KHASIS ARE MATRILINEAL: THE WOMEN ARE POWERFUL AND PROPERTY PASSES TO THE YOUNGEST DAUGHTER OF THE FAMILY



that attained celebrity status by making it to the top of the popular TV show *India's Got Talent*. The choir is a motley lot of individuals living together, supervised by their coach fondly called Uncle Neil. "What is the connection between Shillong and music?" I ask Bill Richmond, a retired police official and William's father. "Maybe the influence of the Christian missionaries who

came here during British rule, or just an innate sense of rhythm like the Africans have," he says. To get a bird's eye view of the town, I go up to Shillong Peak inside the Air Force Base — the highest point here. Legend has it that the deity Shyllong, after whom Shillong is named, once lived here, and the place was sacred to spirits and gods in days of yore.

Today, families picnic here and lovers canoodle as they take in the misty views of this sprawling hill station. I notice small kiosks dotting the town displaying black boards with two digit numbers which piques my curiosity. It's a local obsession called *Teer* or *Siat Khnam* — people betting on a lottery by archery. Sixty archers shoot arrows in a

TO GET A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE TOWN, GO UP TO SHILLONG PEAK INSIDE THE AIR FORCE BASE. IT IS THE HIGHEST POINT

target for four minutes and the last two digits of the number of arrows is the winning number.

I talk to my driver Bado about wanting to see the actual shootout. He is quite surprised, "Are you sure madam? Ward's Lake is a better place," he says. Seeing my determination, he leads me to the grounds. I buy a ticket and bet on the number 56 after some consultation with Bado and his friends. Some sixty archers of various ages, from young boys to wrinkled elders, kneel on their haunches in a grassy field surrounded by betting booths and small shops selling the fiery local brew called *kyat*. Some of them are in deep thought puffing on a pipe;



TO GET A REAL FEEL OF SHILLONG TOWN, I TRAWL THROUGH BARA BAZAAR, A GARGANTUAN LOCAL MARKET LIKE NO OTHER

others arrange arrows in a neat pile with a lot of reverence or examine the tips of their bamboo arrows. I understand that each archer must belong to a local club, which is affiliated to the Khasi Hills Archery Sports Institute.

There are many people thronging behind the archers. Bado tells me the archers often seek divine inspiration from their dreams. Archery is connected to dreams? Yes, the locals sleep during the afternoon to dream of magical numbers. If you dreamt of eggs, then that is zero, a horse is number three as the word for horse *kulai* rhymes with *lai* which is three. If a person is seen in a dream then the number is six, an umbrella is seven and so on... It's 3.45 pm and time to begin.

The master of ceremonies signals the start and a shower of pencil-thin bamboo arrows, with kite feathers at the end, start whizzing like missiles at a cylindrical drum made of bamboo which is the target. People nudge me as they jostle one another to get a better view of the proceedings. Arrows fly, some securing themselves firmly, others falling to the floor. Soon the mandatory time is over, the close of the first round is announced and a canvas sheet hides the target. The crowd moves forward in excitement as the organisers start counting the arrows that are embedded

in the target.

People who have bet substantial sums wait with alert looks, some having discussions on mobile phones as the chief organiser, with a flourish, throws arrows on the ground in front of him. Seven and eight are the winners of the first round. The result is immediately flashed to the betting booths and cell phones rings across the state with the results. I just imagine people in their small booths all over the state writing these results on their blackboards and changing people's fortunes.

"Is this legal?" I ask.

"Of course, the government itself made it legal from 1982 and now private clubs run the lottery," says Bado.

I save the small scrap of paper with the number that I had bet on. It reminds me of that surreal afternoon in Shillong...

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WANNA BET?: One of the betting booths for the archery lottery that dot Shillong

