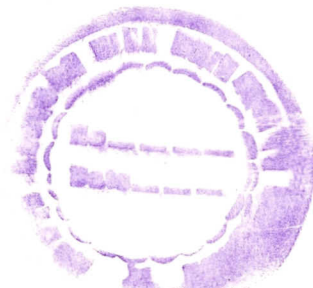


**URBAN POVERTY AND THE POOR  
IN SHILLONG: EXPLORATIONS IN FORM,  
CONTENT AND STRUCTURE**

**ABSTRACT**

*By*

**Nandini Chakravarty**



*A Thesis*

**SUBMITTED IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR  
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**TO  
THE DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY  
SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND ENVIRONEMNTAL SCIENCES  
NORTH EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY**

**SHILLONG**

**1998**

## ABSTRACT

# Urban Poverty and the Poor in Shillong: Explorations in Form, Content and Structure

### 1.1 Introduction

Broadly speaking poverty is a condition represented by the inability of the poor to meet their basic needs for physical survival and well being. Poverty is living at or below the subsistence or any other defined criteria which implies inadequate income to fulfil the basic minimum needs of life such as food, nutrition, shelter, clothing medicines and education etc. Failure to meet the minimum needs whether biological or otherwise results in poverty. Robert S. MacNamara describes "poverty a condition of life so characterised by malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, high infant mortality and low life expectancy, as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human decency.

Poverty is multi-dimensional a wide variety of interrelated factors cause it and perpetuate it. If the objective is to reveal the components and characteristics of poverty with a view to identifying the urban poor, it becomes imperative to understand the meaning of poverty in its wider context. Since it is a phenomenon that is complex in its genesis as well as in its manifestations, understanding of poverty is some time hindered by introduction of variables and parameters that do not accord with complex socio-economic situation in typically poor countries of what is now called the third world.

It is in these countries that one encounters extreme disparity in levels of living among social classes and across regions at all levels macro, meso and micro. Prosperity

and poverty coexists in the society that engender extreme inequality and deprivation. Spatial manifestations of social and economic inequality take concrete forms of cities where slums and poverty pockets bear testimony those inequities.

The problem of urban poverty in a particular situation however needs to be viewed separately because of the different spatio-temporal characteristics of the cities having varied contents and structural attributes. To analyse and understand these variations, a specific area needs to be taken to draw the contours of poverty conditions that could provide empirical verifications to concepts and theories connected with the variations.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Poverty is and remains the most important concern for all developing societies. India is no exception. Whereas in recent times, there might have been a marginal fall in the level of general poverty as indicated by various official and unofficial assessments, the absolute quantum as well as level remains alarmingly high. For example, it is generally agreed that the overall level of poverty in India is not less than 30 percent of the population - that would mean an absolute quantum in excess of 300 million people. Whereas the alleviation or even identification of poverty remains the central concern in the development efforts of the country from policy perspective approaching this issues and designing a appropriate poverty alleviation schemes to be implemented needs an approach that is spatial, i.e. by dividing the incidence either by rural or urban or between the administrative divisions of the country, since the reasons of incidence could differ substantially in the regional context.

Incidence of poverty in urban areas could be viewed as originating from various sources for various reasons.

- (a) The level and nature of urban poverty would depend to some extent on the nature and level of poverty in general in a given situation.
- (b) The incidence of urban poverty could be accumulated through the classical migration stream, i.e., through migration of people from rural to urban areas due to various reasons like perceptions of better avenues of earning and employment in urban areas, deterioration of conditions of living in rural areas due to natural calamities, or due to individual misfortunes.
- (c) The incidence of urban poverty could also get accentuated due to depressed economic climate, de-industrialisation, high inflation, and shrinkage of avenues of employment, and earning either in the formal and informal sectors of the economy.

Qualitatively the nature of incidence of poverty in urban or rural areas also could be different.

- (a) The high real-estate price differentials between the urban and the rural areas means that a substantial part of urban poor even in the developing countries have no access to the land market. Therefore, they tend to live in either authorised or unauthorised urban land belonging to either the ULB, the government or even private land which in large cities take the form of slums. These slums are environmentally unsuitable or even dangerous for the life of the slum dwellers, because they are not only highly congested but lack basic physical amenities, like water sanitation etc. This situation may not be as with in rural areas.
- (b) It is also generally observed that there is a greater deprivation of the urban poor in terms of critical social sector achievements like, education, health and nutrition compared to those among the poor in the rural areas.

(c) There is also a great degree of uncertainty in the sphere of their employment and carrier avenues since a majority of the slum dwellers are in the informal sector of the urban economy.

(d) It is also found that compared to the rural areas, there are many more broken families in urban slums, and are headed by women. There is a perceptible lack of security and psychological assurances of the family.

The problematic of the urban poor in developing countries like in India could be viewed in relation to; (i) the incidence of large number of poor in the urban areas, (ii) the congregation of the poor in large cities, as a specific social space-specific feature or in Lefebvrian sense a 'product' of specific types of capitalism; (iii) the relationship of the poor and poor localities with rest of the urban space, functions and activities, (iv) the question of ethnicity and poverty-ethnicity relation in the perspective of urban social space, and (v) finally, the question of functionality of the urban poor in relation to their employment, occupation and earning to the urban economy itself.

One could conclude that the urban poor is placed in terms of a competitive social situation where each group is considered free to choose from among given endowment of resources. However, this kind of urban analysis is based upon the assumption of consensual society, with communality of interest. In reality, urban deprivation is a product of cumulative processes concerning all urban services by the class, that has access to both economic and political power. Urban poverty, therefore, can be seen in the context of social process is that continually marginalises certain groups that are deprived of access to urban resources.

However, these process may not be applicable to smaller order urban centres, or those located in the tribal areas. Concept of poverty and deprivation in a tribal setting

cannot be compared with that of the non-tribals. The tribal social structure is far more egalitarian in nature and the poverty and deprivation is conditioned by social organisation and technology in relation to these societies are natural resource endowments. These are non-structured, non-stratified societies. On the other hand, the non-tribal societies are highly structured and hierarchical and engenders deprivation, inequality and perpetuates poverty. However, urban centres in tribal areas sustain a significant segment of non-tribals and this factor alone, brings it closer to a generalised understanding of poverty. Moreover, an important area of study many relate to examining the role of the urban centre itself in creating conditions of poverty through its impacts on the tribal social structure.

### 1.3 Objectives

The main objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To develop a framework to study structural reasons of urban poverty;
2. To place the genesis and perpetuation of urban poverty in the specific regional and social context;
3. To analyse the ethnic, social and economic roots of urban poverty;
4. To analyse the structural attributes and relation of the urban poor in Shillong.

### 1.4 Hypotheses

The study puts before itself the following hypotheses for evaluation:

1. *“Ethnic identity and spatial segregation are the most important forces of the poor in Shillong, i.e., the way they reside in specific slums and in the manner the urban space is organised.”*

The general theoretical expectation is that poverty of the poor is an integrating factor, i.e., the poor irrespective of their ethnicity and other primordial relationship would cling together and develop social networks on common consideration of their deprivation.

Other considerations could only follow. However, because of its long history, the divide or perception of a divide between the tribal and the non-tribals, slums develop on ethnic lines. This provides a certain degree of uniqueness to the situation.

2. *“The ethnic divide in the spatial manifestation of poverty spills over to the proportion of poor in the ethnic groupings, generally the proportion of poor among the tribals (ST population) is less than the non-tribals among the poor”.*

It is assumed that a township containing a very large proportion of tribal population will not have social and economic inequalities of very high order, primarily because of more egalitarian tribal social structure. Ethnic solidarity and clan consciousness are likely to prevent the process of complete pauperisation among the tribal population. On the other hand, the non-tribals, largely migrants come from a stratified economic and social situation and that process continues not only among themselves, but also between them and the tribal population.

3. *“The incidence of poverty being less severe among the tribal slum-dwellers is due to their being better placed in terms social sector indicators like in health, sanitation and education and also the asset profile of the tribals compared with non-tribals.”*

Due to legal restrictions, non-tribals cannot own land. Due to Christian missionaries, the tribals are better educated and have better access to health measures. Education, especially girl child education is quite prevalent due to matriliney and matrilineal systems among the Khasis, Garos and the Jaintias.

4. *“The incidence of poverty is more spatially dispersed within the city and the areas of concentration (the slums) are less profound”.*

Unlike large metropolitan cities where incidences of poverty has clear spatial manifestation in slums, smaller order towns are not likely to develop a large number of

poverty pockets in select areas within the city. The poor is more likely to be intermixed with the non-poor in different areas within the city rather than forming pockets of its concentration.

5. *"Poverty is more endemic among the recent migrants (in slums) than among old migrants."*

This is largely because the new migrant especially those from rural areas live in low paid, uncertain vocations like wage work and live within an uncertain psychological framework. The longer they stay, the better they carve out a niche within the urban situation. Their children may get educated and skilled, and get better paying jobs.

6. *"Secondary poverty is more widespread among the slum-dwellers. Rising unemployment, ethnic strife can affect the situation of the poor for worse, i.e., they are likely to become poorer."*

With growth of the city without any change in its economic base, unemployment, uncertain social situation, discriminations indicate possibilities of change of secondary poverty to primary poverty.

7. *"The society making a transition from an egalitarian milieu (of the tribal society) and market economy (and capitalism) making a dent in the traditional social structure, the stratification will manifest in further impetus to poverty-- poverty to more slums. This can be interpreted in terms of the nexus between the structure and the morphology of the city."*

### 1.5 Study Area

Shillong is the capital of Meghalaya at an altitude of 1561 m above the mean sea level. On its west and south lies Bangladesh plain, to the east the Barak valley and to the north the valley of Brahmaputra (Assam plains).

The region enjoys sub-tropical monsoon climate. The amount of rainfall varies within the region, ranging between an average 300 to 400 cm, annually. Despite its senile topography, the rejuvenated parts of the plateau lends to quick soil formation combined with high average annual rainfall that permits thick and quick vegetal growth.

The analysis of the ecological setting and pattern of the land use reveals that the ecological conditions are not very favourable for generation of agricultural surplus. The available area for cultivation and the actually cultivated area constitute only a negligible proportion of the total geographical area. The technique of cultivation as well as the cropping pattern too indicate a highly subsistence nature of agricultural production barring a few areas of notable exceptions, particularly adjacent to the townships. The region has some important natural resources, the forest resource being the most significant. Some amount of coal, lime stone, silliminate and clay is also available in some areas. But there is hardly any evidences of industries linked to such resources. The structure of the work force in the state shows little diversification with more than 80 percent of the workforce concentrated in the agrarian sector alone. The development of rural wage market too is negligible. Broadly speaking the region by and large is characterised by traditional agricultural practices. There is very little evidences of any structural transformation necessitating the development of a large city. The growth of the city and its enormous size bears little symbolic relationship to the rural areas around it.

The city may be envisaged as having an enclave character, a common feature of most cities developed in the hands of colonial administration which sustains without having to depend on the structural requirement of the region.

### Secondary cities

#### The industrial

#### occupational

## 1.6 Data base:

The study has been conducted based on various primary and secondary sources.

### *Primary sources:*

Data regarding, the indices of poverty in the selected study areas is collected through structured questionnaire at household level, as per the sample design. of the total 24 declared slum areas of Shillong city six (6) slums were selected after pilot survey, depending upon the ethnic concentration in the area, distance from the CBD and locational aspects.

The sample was designed in the following manner.

### A. Sample design.

Characters	No. of Slums	Duration	Ethnicity
(a) Old Slum	2	more than 50 years	Dominantly Punjabi
(b) Not very old Slums	2	Between 20-50 years	Dominantly Nepali, Bengali
(c) New Slums	2	Less than 20 years	Dominantly Bihari

Depending upon the duration of existence slums have been classified as new and old slums and not very old slums. Care has been taken to ensure that the selected areas represent dominance of at least one ethnic community each. The communities represented are (i) Punjabis, (ii) Nepalese (iii) Bengali (v) Bihari and (vi) Tribals (Khasis, Garos, and Jaintias).

### *Secondary sources:*

The information pertaining to the evolution and growth of Shillong, analysis of occupational pattern, distribution and density of the people, data regarding various

### *Methodology for Data Analysis*

The data so collected is tabulated and is aggregated in the following manner to understand the three aspects of the research. The specific form i.e. the spatial forms, the content and the structure of poverty manifested in the slums of Shillong city.

I Morphology of slums: This has been analysed with the following variables:

- (i) Site and location of the slums
- (ii) Size of slums
- (iii) Morphology of the slums
- (iv) Residential density, house types and building material
- (v) Physical amenities
- (vi) Income levels.

II Content of poverty:

This section has been analysed with the help of the following variables:

- (i) Migration
- (ii) Rural-urban background of the slum dwellers.
- (iii) Age-sex composition
- (iv) Ethnicity and language
- (v) Education and literacy status
- (vi) Social disabilities
- (vii) Religion
- (viii) Occupations
- (ix) Women in slums
- (x) Status of children (nutrition, health, education)

III Structural roots of poverty is analysed with the help of

- (i) Ethnic plurality,
- (ii) Migrants and the slums

- (iii) Education, occupation and income classes
- (iv) Indebtedness among the poor
- (v) Position of the child in the slum

Demographic variables-such as size of the family, birth rate, death rate, sex ratio age structure etc. Economic variables-such as occupational structure, occupation mobility, income etc. Social variables-such as educational levels, morbidity pattern, housing, portable water etc.

In order to understand the levels of disparity in all the above variables the data was processed with the help of disparity indices. In order to understand extent of inequalities, cross table calculations were made to identify various co-relates of poverty and its causes. Suitable cartographic technique is employed to present the data to indicate spatial, temporal and social characteristic of the study area.

### **1.8 Organisation of the study**

The study has been organised into the following broad chapters.

- (i) The First Chapter, Introduction, of the thesis deals with the research setting, statement of problem, objective, methodology and a description of the study area. It also tries to reflect on the utility and relevance of the present study.
- (ii) The second chapter, Literature, is an assessment of various theoretical attempts to understand the growth and sustenance of poverty. The chapter also reviews various approaches and concepts of poverty.
- (iii) The third chapter, Shillong - A General Background, is an endeavour to trace the nature of development of Shillong city through historical past and the contemporary settings and spatial restructure of the city.
- (iv) While the historical aspects are focused in third chapter, the fourth chapter, Morphology of the Slums, deals with the spatial manifestation of poverty in the slums

and the existing physical conditions. The chapter also attempts to give an idea of the specific location of these slums and the existing ethnic concentrations in them.

- (v) The fifth chapter, Social and Economic Composition of the Poor, is an attempt to recognise and analyse, the broad characteristics of the socio-economic status of the slums in terms of their quality of life, basic amenities, income and other associated aspects. It also attempts to understand the problems associated with the availability of urban infrastructure.
- (vi) The sixth chapter, Structural Roots of Poverty, highlights the existing and the emerging structure of poverty in the slums of Shillong city with an attempt to understand the ethnic and the migrant non migrant aspects and its consequence on the growing instances of poverty conditions among the slum dwellers of the city in being manifested in the form of increasing number of slums.
- (vii) The last chapter, Conclusion, presents a brief resume of the study along with the main findings. The chapter also comes out with probable suggestions to deal with the space specific phenomena that differentiates the slums of Shillong city from their counter parts in other areas in the country.

### **1.9 Relevance of the Study**

Slum conditions in urban communities have drawn the attention of a large number of scholars, besides social workers and social organisations, economists, urban geographers, city planners and others. However they have studied this problem from different angles, mostly taking a partial component of the slums-for e.g. either, health or nutrition, or income, or social structure etc. very rarely a wholistic study has been attempted to understand the process of slum formation itself, i.e., causes that accentuates poverty conditions and continues to contribute towards the growing cycle of poverty and deprivations.

The present study aims at understanding the causes of poverty, their manifestations in the formation of slums. The study is also different in a way, since it set

up is within a tribal social order, where the typical forms of exploitation does not exist and the city supporting the slum formation has a hegemonic rural urban relationship.

Some of the other broad difference and relevance of the study becomes clear from the following

- (i) While most of the studies conducted earlier, give us descriptions of either physical, demographic health and social conditions only, this study aims at understanding the forms, content and structure of poverty, manifested in the form of slums within an subsistence economy.
- (ii) So far most of the studies have been aimed at big urban centres or metros, while very few studies have been conducted on medium sized cities, particularly within tribal set ups where relations of production still exist at a subsistence level. The present study is an attempt towards this direction.
- (iii) Northeast in general and Shillong in particular, are known for its diversity in its cultural and social life, that is conditioned by many historical, social and cultural factors. Historical analysis indicates that the growth of the city as a super-imposed one, with minimum link with its rural hinterland. Under such conditions, growth or sustenance of the city itself is a questionable phenomenon. Emergence of slums as manifestation of poverty further adds to this, and therefore, needs an in-depth understanding.

### **1.10 Summary of Findings**

The study reveals the following broad findings

1. The site and location of slums usually display marginal locational conditions and slums of Shillong are no exception to this. Due to spatio- temporal and social restrictions, the scope for physical expansion of the slums is limited. Despite being incorporated within the city limits, most of the slums remain in comparatively marginal and difficult locations like ditches, lowlands or along steep slopes and have difficult accessibility.

2. The slums of Shillong contain almost 35 per cent of the population of the city and are segregated on distinct ethnic lines. They can be categorised in to two types - old and new. New slums are generally smaller in terms of household size and physical extension. This is because these new slums are inhabited by recent migrants, mostly individuals. In contrast to this, in the older slums the household sizes and the total population are larger.
  
3. The residential conditions like density per household, and area per person is very similar to that of any other slum in the country. The huts/tenements are mostly of Kuchha or temporary type made mainly of wood pieces, tin, or tarpaulins clothes and plastic sheets, and are also exposed to all kinds of hazards. However, the house types, materials for construction and the patterns, i.e., alignment etc. vary from one slum to another and depend mostly on ethnic composition of the slum-dwellers, nature of occupation and income and other socio-economic factors.
  
4. From the view point of health and hygiene majority of the slums are characterised by unhygienic conditions and severe congestions. Minimum facilities like potable water, sanitation and electricity are woefully inadequate, although the launching of schemes like EIUS (Environmental Improvement of Urban Slums) have brought some amount of succour to slum-dwellers.
  
5. A large section of the slum dwellers are inter-state migrants. Intra-state migration is still at a low key level and it is mostly from nearby rural areas. Almost 89 per cent of the migrants inhabiting the slum are from rural areas and only 11 percent are from other urban areas. The inter-state and intra-state migrations are indicative of age and sex selectivity. More than 50 percent of the migrants belong to the age group of 15-50 years and are predominantly male, indicating recent nature of migration, and a very high dependency ratio. A large section of the inter-state migrants inhabiting these slums belong to either Scheduled Caste or OBC, whereas only a nominal per cent belong to high caste. This is indication that mostly socially and economically deprived sections are the migrants because of the impact of push factor in places of their origin.

6. Slums of Shillong show a strong religious affinity, characterised by the dominance of two religious groups, namely Sikhs and Hindus. Whereas Christians are also found in the slums, Muslims are almost negligible.
7. In the slums of Shillong the structural differentiation is at two levels - at primary level of income/class differentiation (that engenders slums) and at the secondary level of ethnic differentiation. Almost all the slums are differentiated on the basis of ethnicity. Socially these slum dwellers remain confined to themselves, with little or no interaction with the tribal population, and on a thin line with the non tribals. Caste and language factors play a dominant role in these relations. The slums of Shillong have a clear differentiation on ethnic lines forming the basis of differences in language, culture and socio-economic patterns. Language is the most important binding force among the slum-dwellers and there is a strong tendency to cluster and concentrate in places having common linguistic affinity.
8. Slum-dwellers are in general educationally backward. A very high percentage (77%) of them are illiterate, whereas a very small proportion (5.4%) only have education up to high school level. The degree however, varies between one slum to another and is mostly determined by ethnic segregation and nature of occupation of the head of the household. Ethnicity, occupation, and migrant or non-migrant status create differentiation in the degree of literacy status in the slums. Percentages of illiterates vary from 38 percent among the Bihari slum-dwellers to 15 percent among the Khasis. A major section of these illiterates are new migrants and have occupations in the informal sectors with irregular incomes and uncertainty of job conditions.
9. Occupation plays a very important role in determining the income of households irrespective of their ethnic differentiation. However, the migrant and the non migrant aspects do determine, to a large extent, the nature of job itself. While the new migrants generally get engaged in the informal sectors and constitute the unskilled and semi-skilled labour force, the non migrants to large extent get employed in the organised sectors and are comparatively in a better position.

10. The slums of Shillong comprises of a very large section of inter-state migrants accounting for almost 59.7 percent of the total slum population of the city. Migration to city is with a motive for and in search of economic opportunities of either employment in organised sectors or some form of self-employment activities in the informal sector. Both migration and nature of occupation is strongly dominated by factors like caste, kinship, language and religion and varies between different ethnic groups and localities. A clear distinction can be drawn between the migrants and non-migrants inhabiting in the slums in respect of their socio-economic conditions, occupation patterns and living standards. It can be said that non-migrants enjoy a better position vis-à-vis the migrants which is reflected through indicators like literacy, indebtedness and occupation structure.
11. A considerable section of the slum-dwellers are either unemployed or under-employed or engaged in the informal sectors. They have irregular income and insecurity of tenure of jobs. This leads them into perpetual indebtedness for meeting their requirements like family illness, marriages or even day to day needs. The degree of indebtedness, however, varies among the different ethnic groups and between the migrant and non-migrant sections.
12. Occupation and migration play an important role in determining the poverty conditions of the slum-dwellers. This is clearly reflected through health conditions of children in the slums. A major section of the migrant slum dwellers are generally engaged in low paid un-skilled jobs and they also remain highly indebted. Both low income and indebtedness affect their purchasing capacity and renders them unable to be able to provide nutritious food to their children, resulting in the prevalence of malnourishment of the children in the slums. Unhygienic living environment and lack of adequate health care leads to perpetuation of frequent illness of the children. The degree, however, varies between old and new migrants, and migrants and non-migrants.
13. The family and the high gender structuration in most of the slums are unfavourable to women. Though women work along with their husbands and contribute to the economy of the household, they do not enjoy the equal status. Early marriages,

illiteracy and social backwardness dominates the social life of the women in the slums. Thus, the content of the social structure in the slums depicts the important components that are interdependent giving a meaning to social institution and association.

14. The issues of employment and income of slum-dwellers were found to be highly complex in nature. One aspect of the complexity as confronted in Shillong is also the nature of inter-slum income distribution that also indicates strong ethnic orientation. This is not the expected situation (Chapter 4). This ethnic divide appears to be structural in nature and is quite deep-seated.

It emerges, therefore, that apparently the slums of Shillong city show all the characteristics similar to slums as in any other urban centre of the country. However, there exists a broader difference within these slums, being segmented on the ethnic line they indicate varying degrees of poverty conditions. On the other hand, the socio-economic strictly of tribal society, the kinship and the community identity and the absence of caste system factor allows the non-migrant tribal slum dwellers to be at a better position than the migrant non-tribal who being alive to the place usually suffer from conditions of insecurity, lack of regular income, heavy indebtedness, illiteracy and extreme poverty conditions.

LIBRARY

Acc. No. 103249

Acc. by

Date

Class by

Sub. heading by

Enter by

Transcribed by