

# Youth Culture in a “Faraway Place”

*Murray Milner, Jr.*

## *A Faraway Place*<sup>1</sup>

My wife Sylvia and I first visited Shillong in the summer of 1962. I was directing a relief and development program in what was then East Pakistan and is now Bangladesh. I had developed a serious case of amebic dysentery and had lost about fifteen pounds, and it was recommended that we go to a “hill station” in Shillong, India for both medical treatment and rest. Sylvia was several months pregnant with our first daughter so we had delayed the trip a month or so until she got over morning sickness.

The trip began with an overnight train from Dhaka, where we lived, to Syhlet, a district town in the northeast of then East Pakistan. From there we took a “country bus” to the Indian border about forty miles away. The bus had a largely wooden cab built on the chassis of a World War II Dodge army truck—whose suspension systems were designed to carry heavy equipment, not cushion the ride of passengers on wooden benches. At the border we spent the usual two or three hours going through the “formalities” of Pakistani and Indian immigration and custom officials. Finally there was another five-hour bus trip from the Indian side of the border to Shillong.

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<sup>1</sup> Notions of “faraway” suggest a form of provincialism; they assume that where you are is the baseline or center of things. But since this essay describes a youth culture that is geographically and culturally distant from most Americans, it seems an appropriate term.

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We spent a wonderful two weeks there, and I gained nearly a pound a day. Unsurprisingly, we became very fond of this place, and we took brief trips back there in the mid-1970s and again in the mid-1980s. In 2007 I returned once more as a visiting Fulbright Fellow. While there, I began a study of Indian youth, which is in some respects parallel to an earlier study I did of American teenagers, which was reported in a book entitled *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* (2004). This essay is a “first report” of part of the current study, which is now underway.

### *The Region and the City*

Even today, Shillong is a “faraway place.” It requires a two-and-a-half-hour plane trip—if the flight is nonstop—from Delhi to Gauhati, Assam. From there it is at least another three hours by car or bus along a narrow, winding, crowded road full of large diesel trucks, buses, and automobiles whose drivers often seem to be convinced that they are immortal. (Occasional rusting-out shells of vehicles in the ravines below the road belie this assumption.)

Shillong is the capital of the state of Meghalaya. This area is part of North East India (an official government category), which includes seven states located mainly north or east of Bangladesh, and hence relatively isolated from the rest of India. Many areas are hilly or mountainous, and slash-and-burn agriculture has been the most common traditional form of production. It is a tribal region, which means that the indigenous population is composed mainly of tribes whose languages are Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic in origin (rather than the Indo-European and Dravidian languages common to most of India). The population is traditionally animist rather than Hindu or Muslim. Roughly half the population has become Christian, though this varies by state and district.

In the North East, resentment against those whose cultural origins are from other regions of India is common—even though many of them have lived in the North East for multiple generations. In part, the resentment is because these “outsiders” have been vastly overrepresented in commerce, government bureaucracies, and educational institutions. Moreover, many think the central government has neglected the region, especially with respect to development funds. Many areas have long had armed insurgency groups demanding greater autonomy or independence from India. In some areas, though not in Shillong, bombs go off with some regularity. There is a large military presence in the area, and it is not unusual to encounter police and soldiers with automatic weapons on the street. People from other parts of India often consider the region backward, underdeveloped, and troubled.

Historically, interpersonal relationships have tended to be more egalitarian in this area than in most of India, though there are petty kings, local chieftains, and village headmen who dominate others in certain respects. The caste distinctions that are so central to most of India are much less prevalent or nonexistent. Moreover, gender relations are significantly different since several of the tribal groups are matrilineal with



[Khasi] Woman merchant in Shillong. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Milner (2007).

property being inherited through women. In general women are freer to move around on their own rather than being confined to their homes or watched over carefully by male members of their family. For example, tribal women are often the ones who take produce to the local bazaars and act as the family sales persons.

Shillong has long been characterized as “the Scotland of India” because of its scenery and moderate temperatures. It has a number of colleges, schools, and the most prestigious university in the region, North East Hill University (NEHU). The tribal group



College students who served as field workers at St. Mark's Higher Secondary School. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Milner (2007).

known as Khasis (and closely related groups) makes up about two-thirds of the population in the state and is dominant in the Shillong area. Yet, because of its educational and military facilities, large numbers of non-Khasis live in Shillong.

### *The Data*

The data for the study were gathered by informal interviews and direct observation. In addition to my own fieldwork, 24 college students who were third year sociology majors conducted fieldwork under my direction. All fieldworkers participated in an all day workshop funded by the United States Education Foundation in India (Fulbright Program), where they were trained in how to carry out participant observation in a secondary school system. The observations were conducted primarily in the months of May and June 2007. I also interviewed the principal, vice principal, and several teachers.

### *The School*

St. Mark's Higher Secondary School (a pseudonym) was founded in the early years of the twentieth century. It has about 3,000 students from grades one to twelve. It was founded by a Catholic order that operates schools in a number of other locations in India and in over one hundred other countries. St. Mark's is an all-male institution through grade ten, but it admits women into grades eleven and twelve and requires all students in these grades to choose either a science or a commerce stream. At St. Mark's there are usually two or three class rooms for each grade for each of the two streams. For example, students in grade twelve of the science stream are divided into three different sections with about 68 students in each section and each in a separate classroom.

### *Friendship Groups*

To give the flavor of the school, I will briefly describe a number of different groups.

*Group 1:* Five Khasi girls, all seventeen, said they always hung out together as a group: ate lunch, went to the washroom, sat together. They did not meet after school as they lived quite a distance from each other and had little spare time. Friendships seemed to be limited to the school setting, and the "closeness" of the group seemed

to be limited: “when [the fieldworker] asked a girl what music another girl liked to listen to, she said she didn’t know. In addition...the girls didn’t remember each other’s birthdays.” “They did not mix...much with other groups of non-Khasis girls. When asked why, they simply said that they did not get along very well.” They perceived the nontribal students as “much smarter and more intelligent.”

*Group 2:* Five boys who were Hindu Bengalis claimed that they “were all quite cool.” They said they were not interested in having girlfriends because it would mean they could not concentrate on their studies. During holidays they spent time together and sometimes went to parties but did not drink alcohol because they were all “good boys.” This group seemed to be very concerned about their grades and their future profession.

*Group 3:* Six boys conversed in Nagamese, the language of one of the states in the North East. They liked to party on the weekend, which could include drinking and smoking. Since they lived in a hostel, they said their parents could not control this, but some parents asked them to keep this within limits. Yet when the fieldworker asked if they pressured their parents to buy them clothes, bikes, cell phones, etc., “They told me that their parents know what is good or bad for them [and that] they could rely on their parent’s decision.... [They said] parents were the culprits if their children got spoilt. Four to five go out on dates, but none are into a serious relationship.”

*Group 4:* This group of two Bengali and two Khasi girls said that they were friends with everyone, but had one or two “best friends.” They used Khasi when speaking to other Khasis, but English for everyone else. They said they had no leader and were all equal. They lived in different neighborhoods and didn’t hang out after school. They didn’t have boyfriends because they didn’t have time; they had to get younger siblings ready for school and go to tutoring classes at night from 7:00–10:00. They all followed the latest fashions as much as they could with respect to dress, earrings, and hairstyle. They went to friends’ birthday parties and other special occasions, but not to clubs.

*Group 5:* A group of five Nepali boys in the grade twelve commerce class said they “were naughty, but cool. Claimed to be...‘very freaky.’ They partied a lot, but most of the time only with guys. Two had girl friends. Style and fashion was considered very important and they said [they were] big fans of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” When asked what was cool, they replied “the environment,” (the environmental movement). They complained that some girls were “very touchy” and considered themselves to be “like Queen Elizabeth.”

*Group 6:* One Khasi and four Bengali boys were all busy solving math problems. They were asked about girlfriends, and four claimed to have girlfriends. They complained about their parents apparently not wanting them to have girlfriends, and they asked the interviewer to explain to them the notion of “the generation gap.” They claimed, “Being ‘cool’ centers around having spiky hair styles, being stylish in walks and talks, and clothing fashions—and being good in studies.” When a female fieldworker asked them to characterize their group, they replied, “Sister, listen! We are like...like the title of the Hindi movie...*Good Boy, Bad Boy*; we are the shining gems and the rugged stones of our class.” Later, some girls nearby said they were “the most intelligent as well as the naughtiest boys in the class.”

### *Ranking, Romance, Cliques, and Consumption*

When students were asked about status differences within friendship groups, most claimed, “we are all equal.” A few groups acknowledged that they had a leader, but denied that there were significant status differences. Initially they said the same thing about status differences or ranking between groups. For example, a fieldworker talked with six girls eating lunch together in the grade twelve commerce classroom, one Bengali and five Khasis. They asserted that no ranking existed within or between groups, though they acknowledged that they shared their secrets and gossiped selectively. A second observer talked with another group of five girls in grade twelve. They claimed parents’ status and wealth did not matter for school friendships; they would mix with anyone provided they got along. A third fieldworker spent time with a large group of grade ten boys of diverse ethnic backgrounds. They said there was no ranking of individuals within groups or between groups. Yet, when the topic of fighting came up, they said, “Fights are invariably inter-group and often the issues are trivial.” However, “the fights are often brutal,” and according to the students, they often served as a way of asserting group superiority. The fieldworker noted, “This contradicts their earlier no-ranking claim.” A fourth fieldworker directly confronted a group about inequality:

They all said that there is no such thing [as ranking and inequality among the students]. I told them...I do not believe you...you’re saying there is no distinction between tribes...?! Two of them eventually went away and I was left alone with one boy. Gradually this guy began to open up... He said there is inequality between students, the smart, the average, the weak...the smart ones tend to show off and boast in class...even the teachers also tend to make them as the first priority when it comes to selecting participants for competitions. The weak are always left behind. He went on saying there is a gap between the rich and the poor also. The rich are always with the rich... and mostly [people] go with their own tribes...because of the security... He said for him it is to avoid being humiliated and abused by other tribes, and this is very much relevant from adolescence onward.

In short, there were identifiable cliques with relatively stable boundaries, and many groups were ethnically homogeneous. Yet, there were many friendship groups that contained members from varied tribal, religious, and linguistic backgrounds—and nobody seemed to care. Moreover, there seemed to be more cross group friendships and more relaxed boundaries than in many U.S. schools. The structure of groups in St. Marks seemed to come close to that of American pluralistic high schools, which have multiple student subcultures—preps, punks, skaters, jocks, etc.—but little agreement about how they are ranked. This is in contrast to more traditional, stereotypical schools in which most students try to copy the popular crowd, or they are given negative labels such as nerds, geeks, freaks, etc.

Romantic relationships were fairly common, but in school they were usually kept disguised. Perhaps because of the need for discretion in the school setting, a number of students seemed to prefer a girlfriend or boyfriend who went to a different school. This also seemed to make it easier for students to concentrate on their studies.

As the description of the various groups makes clear, a number of students were quite fashion conscious, but parents and the requirement of wearing school uniforms kept such concerns in check. On the other hand, these students were quite aware of forms of popular culture from afar. In the internet shops where I often went to check email, the most common music played by the owners was neither local folk songs nor Hindi film music, but American country and western. While there were no Starbucks, McDonald's, or Gap stores in Shillong, students were well aware of many of the international fashion brands.

### *Similarities and Differences—America vs. Shillong*

How do the youth cultures of these two settings differ? Of course, drawing a contrast between students at one school in Shillong and some notion of the “typical” adolescent in the U.S. is at best a very crude and problematic contrast. Despite this imprecision, certain tentative contrasts seem both defensible and useful, and there are both striking similarities and significant differences.

Peer relations in both settings are characterized by small friendship groups that usually have lunch together, share their individual concerns, and gossip about others. Cliques and concerns about status differences are not nonexistent, but are much less central to peer relationships. School friendship groups are more limited to the school setting, especially for girls, who have less freedom to move around on their own than American young women. Though romantic relationships occur, they are less common and generally surreptitious; seldom do couples have many opportunities to be alone in private. While many students are very fashion conscious, this seems to be less a determinant of peer status.

There are notable differences. Indian students in this relatively elite school are much more preoccupied with doing well academically, and academic performance is a key determinant of status among peers. Unemployment and underemployment have been long standing problems, and many students are not only under strong family pressures to do well, but are themselves acutely aware of the limited prospects they face if they do not. Students tend to be much more deferential toward teachers, school authorities, and parents. American teenagers grow up in a culture that places a heavy stress on egalitarianism and where the language of “rights” is frequently invoked by both students and parents. This is much less the case in both India as a whole and in this region. While tribal regions in North East India tend to be more egalitarian than other parts of India, youth are still expected to give considerable deference to elders and teachers. This is reinforced by several factors. First, both secondary schools in general and private English-language schools serve a relatively elite group of youth—most Indian youth do not complete secondary school. Second, such private schools can easily expel student who are disrespectful or fail to live up to what the school authorities expect of them. Third, schools like St. Mark's, founded and operated by a Catholic brotherhood, are noted for maintaining relatively high levels of academic performance and student discipline—and parents often decide to send their children to such schools (and pay the



Classroom assembly and exercise period. Photograph courtesy of Sylvia Milner (2007).

not-insignificant school fees) precisely because of this. This does not mean that students do not resist the authority of teachers in various ways: talking in class, trying to circumvent school dress codes, mocking teachers behind their backs, etc. On average, however, students are considerably more deferential than students in the U.S.

Nonetheless, the similarities between the two settings are probably greater than the differences. I base this conclusion on the following mental experiment: If you took students from St. Mark's and placed them in a school in the U.S., especially a private Catholic school—they could probably function quite satisfactorily in a short period of time. They would, of course, have to get used to American English and the details of what fashions were “in” and “out” for their peers, but the broad outlines of the new social context would be quite recognizable. It would be more difficult for an American student to make such a move, in part, because of the lower economic level of India, the multiple indigenous languages, and the higher levels of discipline that are expected. But such a move would certainly not be impossible. In fact, my own daughters experienced such a move to a similar school in another part of India more than thirty years ago, long before Indian teenagers had access to television, the internet, *Facebook*, or *YouTube*. This does not mean, of course, that in this “new world,” cultural differences are irrelevant. In many ways they are deeply important. Many if not most youth in the developing world live in places much more remote from the U.S. than the students at St. Mark's. Moreover, the students at St. Mark's are not representative of all of the youth in the North East, much less India. They are, however, a reasonable representation of the future educated elites in this part of the world. Hence it seems fair to conclude that a new kind of world youth culture is emerging—even in “faraway places.”



The exact nature that this global youth culture will take is still unclear, but it seems to involve two countervailing processes. First is the general trend towards globalization, which includes several different facets: familiarity with and adoption of global technologies, such as mobile phones and the internet; the globalization of forms of organizations such as NGOs, secondary schools, and fast-food restaurant chains; the growing influence of the world media; and, subsequently, a consciousness of global fashions for clothes in particular and lifestyles in general.

At the same time, however, the sheer scope of these global networks and trends produces pressures toward the development of more particular and local social and individual identities—and hence cultural pluralism. These pressures toward pluralism operate at the level of the school, the nation state, and the world. Often they emphasize various forms of nationalism, ethnicity, or regionalism—such as the attempts of the tribal groups of North East India to maintain at least key elements of their traditional cultures.

But some young people make themselves more distinctive locally by adopting foreign models. One clear example of this is the internationalization of gangs such as the Latin Kings, which has spread throughout much of Latin American and Spain. This is a form of globalization that is not in any direct way created or perpetuated by Western or multinational corporations—though perhaps they are, in part, the indirect result of the global economy. In short, there are pressures and trends toward certain kinds of uniformity as well as differentiation and pluralism. The most likely outcome seems to be that youth cultures will become both more similar and “faraway” in new and distinctive ways.