PREFACE

It is always easier to talk about poverty than write about it. At political level eradication of poverty and the emancipation of poor remain at the forefront of all the manifestos of the political parties contesting elections. In planning circles - whether economic, social or regional - ‘poor’ constitute the basic theme around which much exercise is undertaken. Themes of a majority of films and literary works centre around issues concerning poverty. Not to be left behind, a large number of social scientists of the post-second world war era too have committed themselves to an understanding of the phenomenon of poverty and are suggesting means and ways of ‘scientifically’ combating the problem which continues to baffle politicians, planners, novelists or the scientists alike.

The present work is no exception. The compelling needs for undertaking a research of this kind flow on the one hand from the societal concern for the poor and the professional requirement of committing the discipline of one’s own training to an area of social concern on the other. One does not know which one came earlier; however, it would suffice to say that both seem to be equally rewarding and scholarly pleasing.

Geographer’s concern with social well-being dates back to early seventies. A number of books and many research theses have devoted attention to geographers’ analysis of poverty in its different manifestations. The present work is only a humble addition to these already existing geographical treatment of the subject. While it is similar to such works in a
variety of ways, it is dissimilar in a few respects. It may be worthwhile to emphasise on the latter.

While dealing with urban poverty, most social scientists consider it as a special feature of large metropolitan centres, ignoring the specificities of smaller order urban centres. Likewise, in Indian context, when it comes to poverty, the towns of the North-East region are merely brushed aside as under tribal problem. The present work rejects both the propositions as it takes up for an intensive investigation, the case of Shillong, located in the tribal dominated region of North-East India. The study is based on an exploration of the form, content and structure of urban poverty and the poor in a regional setting characterised by a tribal ethos. When one talks of tribal ethos one is only too conscious of the egalitarian, unstratified and the communitarian social structure which is unlikely to breed poverty. But poverty and its associated features are by now too obvious and apparent in most towns located or emerging in the tribal areas. What can provide a better regional ground for understanding and exploring the form, context and structure of poverty than the towns in the North-East India which are only recently witnessing a transformation of the earlier tribal social ethos?

Nandini Chakravarty