

CHAPTER THREE

DARJEELING

DISTRICT

Darjeeling District

Siliguri is a Sub-Division of Darjeeling District. Darjeeling, with its mountains and valleys of the Himalayan Range and the picturesque landscape of snow-capped Kanchanjanga, is well known as a summer resort for its natural beauties and pleasant climate. The Darjeeling hills are also famous as the producer of the finest quality tea. The district has got other resources and activities too like Agriculture, Small-Scale and Cottage Industries. A brief description of the resources and economic activities of this district will help to understand the financial strength of the people who are involved in retail trade of this region.

History of the District

The district of Darjeeling was formed in the middle of the 19th Century with territories which were previously parts of Sikkim and Bhutan. It is the northern most district of West Bengal. The district has been so named after its chief town Darjeeling, a picturesque hill resort on the Himalayas.

The entire area now covered by the district of Darjeeling was part of the dominions of the Raja of Sikkim upto the beginning of the 18th Century. In 1707, the Kalimpong area of the district was taken from the Raja of Sikkim by the Bhutanese.

Under a treaty, the Raja of Sikkim was bound to refer to the East India Company all disputes between his subjects and those of neighbouring States. In 1827, disputes on the Sikkim -- Nepal Frontiers, ^{which} arose were referred to the Governor General. Two Officers were deputed in 1828 to deal with the disputes. They were attracted by the beauties of Darjeeling. The two Officers reported the advantages of Darjeeling as a site for a Sanitorium to the Governor General and also recommended its occupation for military purposes as the key of a strategic pass to Nepal. Negotiations were accordingly opened with the Raja of Sikkim and finally the Raja executed a Deed of Grant in favour of the East India Company in 1835. Darjeeling thus came under the administration of the East India Company. The Company developed a few places like Darjeeling, Lebong and Kurseong. But most of the ceded area was under forest and practically uninhabited. The Government gave encouragement to immigrant cultivators and population rose from about 100 in 1839 to 10,000 in 1849. The Kalimpong area was annexed by the Company in 1865 by a treaty with the Raja of Bhutan. The district of Darjeeling was thus formed with the hill areas of Darjeeling, Kurseong, Kalimpong and the Terai area.

Before the partition of Bengal in August, 1947 the district was included in the Rajshahi Division. After the partition, this district was placed in the Presidency Division.

In 1963, a new Division named Jalpaiguri Division was formed with the five Districts of North Bengal. The district of Darjeeling is at present under the newly formed Jalpaiguri Division.

Geographic features

Darjeeling is the northernmost district of West Bengal. In shape, the district is an irregular triangle. The northern boundary of the district commences on the west at the peak of Phalut nearly 12,000 feet high, the tri-junction of the boundaries of Nepal, Sikkim and India. The district is bounded by Sikkim in the North, Bhutan, the district of Jalpaiguri (West Bengal) and Bangladesh lie in the East. On the South, the district is bounded by West Dinajpur (West Bengal) and Purnia (Bihar) district. On the West lies Nepal.

Darjeeling district consists of two distinct tracts - the hill areas in the North and the Terai area at the foot of the hills. The elevation of the terai area is only about 300 feet above mean sea level and the topography of the area is almost the same as that of the plains of West Bengal. The mountains in the hill areas have heights varying between 6000 and 12,000 feet. The valleys have a great range of altitude and climate and some are several thousand feet deep. The hills and valleys are covered in many places with dense forests. Forests in some areas have been cleared for tea plantation and

agricultural operation. The area of the district is, therefore, not marked by any natural feature as a region complete in itself. The soil composition of the two areas differs. The climate also varies from place to place. Darjeeling is a heavy rainfall area.

Economic features

Tourism and tea production are the two most important industries of Darjeeling on which the economy of the district depends to a great extent. A large number of tourists visit the Hill Stations of Darjeeling district in summer and autumn every year and the expenditure by the tourists is a source of income for the hill people. Darjeeling district produces large quantities of tea - one of the most important cash crops of the country. Tea production was first experimented in Darjeeling in 1841 and the first tea garden in the district was opened in 1856. At present there are 140 tea gardens in the district employing about 69,000 workers. The total acreage under tea plantation is now 63,000 acres.

The economy of the district is, however, ill-balanced and the local population is economically weak. Because of the Geographical situation, the hill people rely on agriculture as their main economic activity. The cost of living is very high in the hill areas. The three hill sub-divisions are deficient in food grains and have to depend on the plains for import of

food grains. The hill people have also to import their other requirements like textile articles, coal, petrol, kerosine, iron and steel materials, cement, etc. from the plains. Transport cost in the hill is very high which raises the price of articles to a great extent. Mixed husbandry (agriculture and animal husbandry) is the common feature of farming in Darjeeling hills. Most of the farming families carry on Dairy/Piggery/Poultry farming along with cultivation of land.

Cottage and Small-Scale Industries also play an important role in the economy of the district. The State Government is taking active interest in the development of rural industries under the Community Development Project.

Social features

Darjeeling district has got a mixed population of Nepalese, Lepchas, Bhutias, Tibetians, Marwaries, Biharies and Bengalees. About 90% of the people in the three hill subdivisions of Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong speak Nepali. Nepali is the official language of these three subdivisions in addition to Bengali. The inhabitants in the Terai area speak mainly Bengali.

Political features

The district of Darjeeling, with international boundaries on three sides, has a strategic position. The neighbours in the North & East are Sikkim and Bhutan. In the West lies Nepal. There are no travel restrictions in respect of the above States and there is a great deal of intercourse between Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan on the one hand and Darjeeling on the other. The southern part of the district is connected with Bangladesh in the east.

Natural Resources

The total area of the district, as per computation made in the Census Office from the last published Jurisdiction List is 1256.6 square miles (3,254.7 sq. km.). The district ranks thirteenth in terms of area among the sixteen districts of West Bengal. This district consists of two distinct tracts - the hill areas in the north and the Terai area at the foot of the hills. The rivers of the district are not navigable. The minerals of the district include coal, graphite, iron, copper ores, lime, etc. But none has so far been exploited with profit.

On account of the varying topography of the district, the climate varies from place to place. Broadly, the district has two climatic regions - the hilly tracts in the north and the terai in the south. The climatic characteristics of the terai area under Siliguri Sub-Division are almost the same as those of the adjoining districts in West Bengal and Bihar. May is the hottest month. The hill areas have a very cool climate. Darjeeling is a heavy rainfall area. Over one-third area of the district is covered by forests. The total population of the district, ~~was~~

according to 1971 Census, is 7,65,677. As per 1971 Census the urban population of the district is 1,79,891.

District

Darjeeling has altogether four towns -- three in the Hills and one in Terai. The Hill towns are Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong and the town in the Terai is Siliguri. The population in the three Hill towns are subject to considerable seasonal variation. During the months April - May and from middle of September to the middle of November, a large number of tourists visit the three Hill Stations. In winter, many people from the hills go down to the plains. At Siliguri, however, a remarkable urban expansion has taken place.

Transport and Communications

On account of the difficult hill terrain Darjeeling is not well developed from the point of view of communications. Excepting a few main Roads, the district has no good all weather Roads.

Roadways of the District

(1) National Highway	128 Km.
(2) State Highway	322 "
(3) Other metalled Roads	575 "
(4) Un-metalled and Kutchha Road	1,510 "
		2,535 Km.

The district has got 31 km. Broad-Gauge Railway, 67 km. Metre-Gauge Railway in the Siliguri Sub-Division and 79 km. Narrow-Gauge Railway on hills from Siliguri to Darjeeling. The important Railway Stations are :

- On Hills : Chunbathi, Rongtong, Tindharia, Gayabari, Mahanadi, Kurseong, Tung, Sonada, Ghoom, Darjeeling.
- In Plains : Sukna, Siliguri Jn., Siliguri Town, Matigara, Bagdogra, Naxalbari.

P O W E R

Electricity is the only source of power in the district. The Suppliers of electricity in the district are Darjeeling Electric Supply owned by the Darjeeling Municipality, Kalimpong Electric Supply Co. Ltd. and the West Bengal State Electricity Board. The district is suffering from acute shortage of electric power. The voltage of the power supplied is also very low.

Trade and Commerce

The district is mainly an agricultural district. Besides the production of agricultural products, large quantities of tea also grow in the district. The other important products of the district are fruits, medicinal herbs, milk and milk products and forest products. The district is, however, deficient in food grains and the entire production of food grains is consumed within the district.

The major imports to the district are food grains and other consumer goods. The main items are rice, wheat, sugar, edible oils, cotton piece goods, woolen textiles, iron and steel materials, cement, coal, kerosene oil, etc. etc. The exact quantity and value of the imports to the district are not ascertainable. The approximate value of the imports is about Rs. 5 crores per year.

The main items of export from the district are timber, tea, ginger, cardamon, oranges, pineapples, hideskin and jute. The total value of the exports of the district is about Rs. 16 crores.

Agriculture

The physical features of the district make conditions for agriculture extremely difficult and diverse. The methods of cultivation in the terai are the same as are found in the plains of ^{West} Bengal. But in the hill areas, the methods are quite different. The most distinctive and important feature of cultivation on the hill slopes of the district is the bench terracing of the land. About 35% of the district's total area are available for cultivation. The hill areas suffer from landslides and the plains are subject to flood almost every year.

Industry

Except the production of tea, no large-scale industries have developed in the district of Darjeeling. The geographical factors are not conducive to the establishment of large scale industries in the district. The mountains and valleys are great

obstacles to easy movement of men and materials. The transportation costs on the hills are too high. There is dearth of raw materials and the district also suffers from inadequate power supply. The neighbouring areas too do not offer any scope for marketability or suitably disposed of large scale industrial production.

Various types of small scale and cottage industries are found in the district. The important existing industries are Rolling Mills, Aluminium Utensils Factories, Soap Manufacturing Units, Saw Mills, Aerated Water Manufacturing Units, Bakery, Fruit Processing, Bricks and Tiles, Candles, Handicrafts of Wood, Bamboo, Silver, Copper, Brass, Embroidery, etc., Sericulture, Bee-Keeping, Woolen Carpet Weaving, Footwear, Village Potteries, Rice Milling, etc. etc.

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Retailing in Hill areas of the Darjeeling District.

Our venture is an attempt to study the problems of retailers in Siliguri town. Siliguri town is the headquarter of Siliguri Sub-division of Darjeeling district. The district has two parts :

(a) Hill area

and

(b) Plain area.

Siliguri is the main town of plain area and Darjeeling is the main town of hill area.

In our first Chapter we have mentioned that we shall study the problems of retailers in Siliguri town only, but because of the district's peculiarity in physical feature we shall make a little attempt to study the problems of retailers in hill area also.

There are three towns in hill areas of this district namely, Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong. Of these three towns, Darjeeling is the biggest in size. It is also the head quarter of the district. In this Chapter we shall try to examine the features of retail trade in Darjeeling town, which we hope may reveal the true picture of retail trade problems in hill area. Though the scope of our study is limited in Siliguri town only,

a brief discussion on the problems of retail trade in hill area may provide scope for a comparative study of trade problems in hill area and plain area. With this object in view we are making an attempt to study the retailing in hill areas. Our main effort is to know the problems of small retailers in Siliguri. Therefore, for obvious reasons our discussion on trade problems of Darjeeling town will be very short. In the subsequent Chapters an elaborate discussion will be made on the various aspects of retailing in Siliguri.

Chowkbazar is the main market area of Darjeeling town. It is situated near the Bus stand of the town. In this market consumer goods, vegetables, fish, meat and other essential goods are available. Mini market of Darjeeling is still under construction. It is a planned market. It is expected that it will help the traders and consumers of Darjeeling town in future. The local people of the town procure their requirements mainly from Chowkbazar. It is an unplanned dirty market. A market near Nehru Road near Mal is the main attraction to the tourists. The shop keeper of this road keep costly goods. Tourists who visit Darjeeling are the main customers of these shops. Tourists do not visit Darjeeling during December to February because of severe cold. Tourists are scanty in Darjeeling during June to September because of heavy rainfall. During this time some of the shops remain

closed. One important point to be noted here is that the owners of these shops mainly belong to Marwari community. More than 90 per cent of the inhabitants of the hill areas of this district are Nepali People.

The traders of Darjeeling have some problems. They are dependent on suppliers of plain area, mainly Siliguri. These traders purchase their goods from Mahabiristan and Nayabazar market area of Siliguri. These traders do not prefer Railway train for despatch of goods from Siliguri. Toy train on the narrow gauge line between Siliguri and Darjeeling is losing its popularity even in carrying passengers. Before independence this toy train was a very popular means of communication between Siliguri and Darjeeling. At present goods are carried to Darjeeling by Road. This road is not suitable for large trucks. Mini trucks carry goods from Siliguri to Darjeeling. The cost of goods increase because of the high transport cost. Very often this road remains closed due to landslide which is a regular feature. Sometimes the damage to the road is so heavy that a considerable long period is required to repair it. During this time people of Darjeeling suffer due to want of essential goods. Because of this abnormal situation prices of goods become too high.

Darjeeling cannot attract visitors during winter and rainy season. Local people of Darjeeling is very poor. Economy of

the town is mainly dependent on income from tourists. The sales ~~bank~~ of different shops, particularly of Nehru Road Market, sharply fall during the winter and rainy season.

A comparison between the prices of different consumer goods in Siliguri and Darjeeling market has revealed that the the prices of goods is higher in Darjeeling than that of in Siliguri. Whenever the road is closed for any natural cause, the traders increase the prices of goods, taking the opportunity of this situation.

In Darjeeling the consumers do not get facility of conveyance. There is no Bus or Taxi service inside the town because of its geographical features. Whenever they want to go anywhere they shall have to go on foot. The traders also depend on manual labour for carrying their goods from truck stand to their shops. It has been found that people of Darjeeling prefer noon as their shopping time. Female members of the family prefer to visit the shops. Most of the consumers purchase goods as and when they are required. Climate condition of Darjeeling town does not permit the shopkeepers to keep their shops open in the evening or in the early hours of the morning.

Therefore, ~~the~~ customers have ^{no} opportunity to purchase their requirements from their shops in the evening or in early morning. During the day, male members of the family remain busy in

their offices and working places. They get no time to spare for going to shops for procurement of goods. Therefore, the responsibility of purchasing goods lies with the female members of the family.

Sources :-

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3. District Handbooks - Darjeeling Census
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