

## Conclusion

Recorded, for the first time in 1881 as a small settlement (rather a village) and mentioned again (1901) as a small railway station with a population of barely 500 heads, Siliguri has just completed its first century of existence, the said village having now developed into a city with a spectacular increase in its population touching almost 0.5 million, to be up graded from a 'C' grade to a 'B' grade city, as decided by the Government. Siliguri was declared as a town for the first time in 1931, and since then the growth rate of population has been very rapid and recorded the highest in 1951 for all time when the decadal variation was 209.72 per cent as recorded in 1951 census, for the period 1941 and 1951. The growth rate, however declined in the following decades, remaining lowest in 1991 with 39.51 per cent.

According to a news agency (Bartaman, Siliguri city, edition, 27 July 2000), the major part of this increase is taking place in the peripheral areas of the city and more recently in the newly annexed 17 wards which increased the total area of Siliguri city from about 14 sq. km to 42 sq.km in 1994. According to this report while the population has increased hardly by 2 per cent to 3 per cent in certain wards, like ward XXII and XXIII of the Siliguri city - proper (consisting of I - XXX wards) in the last 10 years, it has been about 200 per cent in some of the newly annexed wards, such as ward XLVI and XLVII.

During the course of my study of this city I have come to the conclusion that it is very much rather, an 'Indian' city, than a 'Bengali' city which is truly reflected in its population composition where the Bengalis as the earlier inhabitants comprising 64.25 per cent of the total urban population are slowly giving way to the pressure of other communities, gradually increasing in overall numbers as well as in different life-supporting and life-enriching activities carried out in this city. Besides, the nature of concentration as witnessed by me shows that some sort of segregation is already in the process of developing where people of a particular community prefer residing in a particular area chosen earlier by its own community. This has been elaborately discussed in chapter II of the Thesis. As for example, the Muslim-dominated areas are ward No. IV to VIII and the trend shows that the Muslims are in favour of living in these wards only.

Side by side the Marwari community is found to be concentrated in ward nos. VII, VIII, IX, X, XI and XII. In the first 30 wards under the Siliguri Municipal Corporation, it is found that the Bengali Community comprises around 65 per cent of the total residents which clearly shows the dominance of the Bengali-speaking people. But in the remaining 17 wards under the Siliguri Municipal Corporation the proportion of Bengali population is less than the 30 wards representing the older part of the city.

Of the last seventeen wards annexed recently, the Bengali population in ward nos. XL1, XLII, XLIII and XLVI shows less than 50 per cent.

By the end of the year 2000 as it seems from the survey done by the author, considering all the factors, the percentage of Bengali population within the Siliguri Municipal Corporation area, that is the proper area of the city, is likely to come down to around 60 per cent or even less. The main reason for this lies in its unique geographical location, as discussed earlier. Acting as the principal transport point for traffic originating in the northern hill areas and the north-eastern states or going in reverse direction, its role is becoming more and more important with further development in those areas and states which is clearly witnessed in its growing and ever-expanding activities in the field of trade and commerce. This particular role of Siliguri as the major link between the hills and the north-eastern states on the one hand and the rest of the country on the other has boosted its attraction for people outside the region and many of them taking a direct part in these activities find it natural for making the city their 'home'—either on a temporary or permanent basis which is at the root of changing the proportion of non-Bengali residents in the city-proper.

The fact that people belonging to different communities hailing from distant areas having settling down in the city over a considerable period further strengthens the view that the greater affluence of the city, as clearly evidenced in its fast growing large—quite massive at many instances—commercial as well as residential complexes, phenomenal increase in land price over a few decades(chapter VI), the spatial urban expansion along the major arteries like the Sevoke Road, the National Highway and the Burdwan Road etc. have acted as a strong 'pull'.

As discussed earlier (chapter II and VI), people migrating from Assam, Burma or even the adjoining economically backward states like Bihar or Sikkim seem to have been tempted by the prospective situation related to these trade and commercial and transport activities in this city which has so far been a very strong reason for them for preferring it to any other urban centre in the whole of the region north of river Ganga as a place for finding a dependable livelihood. The presence of people belonging to their own communities and settled down in this city prior to the arrival of the later migrants naturally had been an added factor for encouraging in-migration into the city. This has been the main reason behind the changing character of the composition of the city - population, with a direct bearing on its sociological behavior. The sociological transformation brings out its deep impact on different spheres of urban life, making it more and more different from all other urban centres of North Bengal.

As has been observed earlier, the business activity is still dominated by the Bengali community and as stated in chapter III, the Marwaris are also a leading partner. They, i.e., the Marwaris mainly dominate in the business of electrical and electronic goods, hardware and cloth while the Bengali community has greater interest in businesses like hotel, contract/supply and grocery. Some other businesses like making of furniture and medicine which were once upon a time dominated by the Bengalis are now fast changing hands and gradually the Marwari Community is exercising a greater control on them. While discussing about the economic domination of different communities some facts have

to be stated regarding the concentration of the Nepali and the Bihari communities. For example the concentration of the Nepalis in ward nos. I, II, III, XI, XL, XLI, XLII, XLIII, XLV and XLVI are noticeable and that of the Biharis in ward nos. I, II, III, IV, V, VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XLI, XLII, XLIII is remarkable while ward no. V has the highest concentration of the Biharis (65.40%). As regards the economic activity, the Biharis have advanced a lot in this regard and ward nos V and VII are a living example of their domination in this sphere. Other than the above mentioned wards they are also dominating in economic activity in ward nos. I, II, III, IX and XXVII. The business which the Marwari community are mostly engaged in are situated in ward nos. VIII, IX, X, XI although they have a dominance in ward nos. IV, VI, VII, XI, XXV and XXVIII as well. The Bihari community in Siliguri prefers mostly the business in medicine, electrical goods, stationery, rice and also tea. Other than the mentioned ones it was found by the author that all the work under Government contracts like the maintenance of roads, the construction of dams and bridges are being taken over mostly by the Marwari community which was earlier dominated by the Bengali community.

Although still now the overall domination in the business world is enjoyed by the Bengalis, the developing trend indicates an unavoidable change in this sphere taking place in a couple of years or so when the overall control on business activities, which means trade and commerce, will slip away from the hands of the Bengalis into the hands of the non-Bengali communities, represented largely by the Marwaris.

In the sphere of religion and language, noticeable changes are observed. In spite of the fact that religion-wise, the Hindus formed the

largest section of the urban residents of this city both in 1981 and 1991 with 94.58 per cent and 93.08 per cent respectively for the two censal years, there is sufficient indication that however slight the fall in the percentage of Hindu population in this city can not be ignored. In contrast, the Muslim and the Buddhist population of the city has increased in the city during the same period as is reflected in the figures available for 1981 and 1991 census (3.96% and 5.42% in respect of the Muslim and 0.48% and 0.51% in respect of the Buddhist). The field survey undertaken by the author also gives the impression that the percentage of the non-Hindu population in the city is on the rise.

In the field of languages as per 1981 Census, Bengali is the leading one (70.80%) followed by Hindi (22.99%) and Nepali (4.61%). The field survey undertaken by the author shows that the percentage of Hindi and Nepali is on the rise resulting in the fall of the number of people speaking Bengali language. Although the data for 1991 census on language is not available, the field survey done in this respect indicates that in a few years the percentage of people speaking Bengali language and those speaking non-Bengali languages is likely to be in the ratio of 50:50.

There are as many as 50 establishments engaged in social, cultural and religious services and the Marwari community, in fact, runs the majority of them involved in various types of social and welfare activities followed by the Bengali community. For instance, holding of free eye operation camps, arrangement for artificial limbs fittings etc. are done by organisations like the Lions club, the Marwari Yuva Manch,

in which the Marwari community takes a leading role. On the other hand, the Siliguri Welfare Organisation which is mostly controlled by the Bengalis, provides a large number of facilities in medical care involving people belonging to the poor and down-trodden sections of the society. These organisations also offer services at the time of severe floods, fire or similar natural calamities.

It is, however, the Christian community which seems to be the most devoted one in this respect, providing help to the destitutes and notable among the establishments run for such purposes is the 'Jesu Ashram' where one can get his or her treatment in a homely atmosphere with a motherly care. The Christian community mainly deals with leprosy and mother and child care. Hindu institutions like the 'Bharat Sebashram Sangha' which has its branches all over the country and abroad, and the 'Ramkrishna Vivekananda Ashram' at Sahudangi are also taking an important role in helping the poor and the needy.

In the field of culture and sports the Bengali community is the leading one and the only community which has considerable activities in this arena though the facilities are made available to the willing participants of the other communities as well. Another community to have these types of activities, though on a small scale, is the Nepali community which promotes mainly cultural activities.

In this connection it is worthwhile to mention that Siliguri has produced national-level players for indoor games like Table-Tennis for a number of years for which the entire credit may be claimed by the clubs

patronised by the Bengali community alone.

A very important insight one obtains from the investigation of the activities of these organisations is that the majority of them have a clearly defined purpose which is - social welfare. In a country like ours where a considerable section of the population living below the 'poverty line' can not often afford two meals a day for his family, treatment, education, an artificial limb or such other aids are far beyond their extremely limited means. Further, when nature strikes in the form of severe floods, earthquakes or landslides in the neighbouring areas, people dislodged rush to the nearly urban centres for help. All these organisations, housed in the city do not hesitate in coming to the aid of these people in dire need. Thus, although situated in the city, their activities never remain confined to the city-population, but spread out far beyond. Second, whether it is a social, or cultural or a religious organisation, most of them consider social welfare services as their primary aim and responsibility. Third, and perhaps, very enlightening is that in offering services religion, caste or belief are ignored. The services cut across all barriers except poverty and need. Hence, these organisations have a deep impact on the society as a whole.

Although Siliguri has made visible progress in many ways, the author, during his field investigation, has felt that there are three acute problems making life in the city difficult and these are transport, medical services and recreational facilities.

For instance, cycle-rickshaws (Numbering 7368) form the only transport available for the people in the city for internal movement and that too is insufficient in number, causing a serious problem at times of need. It may be mentioned here that for a city covering 42 sq.km. in its areal spread, a cycle-rickshaw is far from an adequate means of transport over long distances, especially when people move with their families carrying considerable amount of luggage to the railway stations - the major one lying beyond city-boundary-or bus-terminus for long-distance travels. Besides distance, time and money involved in such movements make them prohibitive. On the other hand, most of the roads in the city are not wide enough and in the absence of proper rules for parking and traffic control in the major part of the city, the rickshaws create traffic jams frequent occurrence of which causes immense difficulty specially for office-goers and school-children. There are a few auto rikshaws plying in and around the heart of the city but people living in the out-skirts have got no access to them. Bus plying on only two different routes plays a negligible role in internal movement. To improve the transport facilities of this city, the Government has to take initiative to introduce more and more city buses and auto-rikshaws in the city. Further, for rikshaws and cyclists separate passages have to be made on the main roads for avoiding unnecessary jam, and accidents the latter being a very frequent affair in this highly crowded city.

There is only a Sub-Divisional-hospital available in Siliguri which has to bear the entire pressure of about five lakh people of the city. Although there are some private Nursing Homes in the city, they do

not have the facilities of treatment for all kind of diseases, and whatever facilities are available there, they are too costly to be afforded by the common people. There is of course a Medical College and Hospital in the out-skirts of Siliguri but it being the only Medical College in the whole of North Bengal, has to bear the pressure of patients flocking from the six districts of North Bengal.

As such recreational facilities available for the people of Siliguri are not at all satisfactory. Although Siliguri has produced a large number of players for different games the facilities appear to be very limited. Kanchanjangha stadium is the only one of its type which is capable of holding some games of National stature but very few events of sports are allowed to be held here. An indoor stadium coming up at Deshbandhu Para may partly fulfil the aspirations of the sports lovers in particular in future, provided its construction does not take long.

Thus, cinema becomes the only means of recreation available for the people of this city who otherwise forced to stay indoor glued to their television sets which has become the only mode of indoor recreation. The scope and extent of other avenues of recreation in the form of staging plays etc also appear to be quite limited in spite of the fact that achievements of local people in this respect is quite praiseworthy. The existing clubs entirely privately owned and managed, have proved their worth time and again earning recognition, even at times at the national level. This is proved further in the establishment of the public theatre by the local Government.

Parks and other recreational options have yet to be opened so that there are more green and open space absolutely lacking at the moment, which are always considered the most important environmental elements keeping the health of the city unimpaired.

Though Siliguri is being provided with running water supply by the Siliguri Municipal Corporation and the roads are being widened, the rail-gate at Mahabirasthan is a major handicap creating lots of traffic jam which can only be solved by the construction of a flyover adding, perhaps, a glamorous look to the city.

To sum up, one cannot ignore the overall significance of the geographical factor that the location of Siliguri guarding the entry and exit from the northern hill areas and the north-eastern states defined its emergence as the largest urban centre in the entire region of North Bengal, gaining fast its present position soon after the link was established between the northern and north-eastern regions and the rest of the country.

Particular location again, has a decisive role in determining the major functions of this city which are, by and large, trade and commerce followed by transport and supplementary activities. The very nature of activities on the other hand have been instrumental in attracting people from outside taking a direct hand in them. Even, as discussed earlier, people migrating from other places since Independence (mid-August 1947) have chosen this urban centre for settling down as permanent residents largely guided by the scope it offered in the expanding area of

activities related to trade-commerce and transport which however competitive, kept the opportunities open unlike it is in the case of the 'Service' (office employment) sector which happens to be a very important employer in the urban places of India.

The economic development and improvement in surface transportation with the construction of more and more traffic-worthy roads, bridges spanning the turbulent rivers, and railways providing direct links, especially with the north-east since Independence naturally eased and largely increased the movement of merchandise, the latter having greatly multiplied in amount in the meanwhile. These, along with passengers making their way in any direction, had to go via Siliguri city which had a tremendous effect on widening the scope of activities related to trade-commerce-transport and in the allied fields as is witnessed today not only in the nature and volume of merchandise handled in the city rapidly increasing the number of commercial establishments but also in the emergence of a large number of transport agencies with national permits, maintaining a large fleet of trucks and the proliferation in the number of nationalised as well as private banks within a few decades, some of them like the State Bank of India etc, having their zonal headquarters in Siliguri and the Life Insurance Corporation of India which maintains its Divisional office in Siliguri. Besides, the city makes a major transit point for road traffic and its importance may be realised from the fact that recently a 'Transport City' providing parking and other facilities and to ease traffic congestion in the city has come up in the fringe area of the city.

The resulting community-mix along with various socio-cultural and socio-economic activities have given rise to some sort of a composite society with a growing degree of interdependence between different communities. The apparent segregation witnessed in some of the residential wards arises more from affluence or the lack of it than any other factor though it is true that people coming from outside and belonging to a non-Bengali community would very much prefer living close to its own community. Nevertheless, this has no jarring effect on social cohesion exhibited on many occasions of natural calamities.

Lastly, although the city is gradually losing its character as a 'Bengali city' and adopting more and more the national character of an 'Indian city', the mixture of its population with growing addition of non-Bengali residents as the trend shows, has a positive as well as decisive role- as the author feels and understands through his experience gathered in this work - in making the society more open, more practical, more diligent and as such making it more stable.