

Chapter 4

DISTRICTS OF UTTAR DINAJPUR, DAKSHIN DINAJPUR AND MALDA AND
THEIR URBAN CENTRES

(Growth of urbanisation is very rapid all over the world. In developing countries it is taking place at a steadily increasing rate. Urbanization, in terms of sheer number of people living in towns and cities, is quite remarkable in India. India ranks very high in the world for its total number of cities and towns as well as the absolute number of urban folk.) However, paradoxical though it may seem, India remains, even today, one of the least urbanized regions of the world.

In 1991, India's urban population was over 212 million (212,867,737) or about 36.19 per cent of the total population. This is distributed over 3,609 urban places, 65.20 per cent in 296 class I cities, and the remaining 34.80 per cent in small and medium towns of less than 1 Lakh population.¹ (West Bengal is one of the most urbanised states in the country with its high density of population in urban areas. Judged by the percentage of urban to total population, the city of Calcutta occupies the first position in West Bengal with 100% of its population being marked as urban.) If we try to regionalize the growth of urban population, we shall find that urban population as a percentage to total population has grown significantly in the year 1991, in the districts of Calcutta (100%), Howrah (49.54%), North 24 Parganas (50.83%), Hooghli (30.94%), and Burdwan (35.43%). The rest of the

districts in South Bengal, namely Murshidabad and Nadia, have maintained their individual rates of growth of urban population 10.41% and 22.65% respectively.²

(Compared to the southern part of Bengal, the growth rate of urbanization in the northern districts of Bengal has been generally normal.³) In the present Chapter, the new nomenclatures Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur have been used as the urban centres of previous West Dinajpur District have been included in newly formed Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur districts.

Table 4.1

Distribution of Urban Population as Percentage of Total Population, Decennial Growth Rate, Sex Ratio and Density of Population by Districts of North Bengal.

Sl. District No.	Urban Population as % of total population		Decennial growth rate of population (%) 1981-91		Sex ratio 1991 (Females /1000 males)		Density of population/sq.km.	
	1981	1991	Total	Urban	Total	Urban		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
West Bengal	26.47	27.39	24.55	28.50	917	856	766	
1. Cooch Behar	6.90	7.85	21.82	38.49	934	949	637	
2. Jalpaiguri	14.05	16.40	25.96	46.97	928	917	448	
3. Darjeeling	27.55	30.71	30.40	35.38	923	842	424	
4.*Erstwhile West Dinajpur	11.17	13.33	30.25	55.37	930	899	585	
5. Maldah *West Dinajpur (Presently known as Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur)	4.78	7.08	29.63	91.75 (1993-94)	938	923	706	

Source : Urban West Bengal (1993). Institute of Local Government and Urban Studies, ^(Calcutta) Government of West Bengal, p.38.

The above Table gives a full picture with regard to the urban position of the districts of North Bengal. As the present study

is concerned with urban development and urban governance in the districts of erstwhile West Dinajpur, (presently bifurcated into Uttar Dinajpur district and Dakshin Dinajpur district) and Malda, this chapter is devoted exclusively to such questions specific to the districts.

Section 1 : ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF URBANIZATION IN NORTH BENGAL IN GENERAL AND DISTRICTS OF UTTAR DINAJPUR, DAKSHIN DINAJPUR AND MALDA IN PARTICULAR

(Urbanization and urban development in North Bengal is a recent phenomenon, where a good number of towns have emerged as urban centres only after 1951. The region under study retained its cultural prosperity for a long time, and the Princely States prevailing over this region since antiquity helped greatly in the establishment of some urban centres in the form of capitals or royal citadels.) Gour, for example, found in ruins to-day in the district of Malda, had once attained great splendour during the reign of Pala and Sena dynasties (750 A.D. - 1203 A.D.). The recorded history of Gour, however, begins in 1198 when it was conquered by the Muslim rulers, who kept it as the Centre of power in Bengal. During the reign of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Iwaz Khilji (1213-1227), the capital or Centre of government was actually removed from Devkot, located in the district of erstwhile West Dinajpur to Gour and the final settlement of Gour did not take place till the seat of government was shifted later by the Mughal Viceroys to Dacca, and still later to Murshidabad.⁴

According to Buchanan Hamilton who visited Gour in 1810, "the city with its suburbs covered an area variously estimated at from 22 to 30 Sq.miles and the dimensions of the city proper were about $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles in length from north to south and from 1 to 2 miles in breadth, giving a total area of 13 sq.miles. By far, the greater portion of the city appears to have been densely inhabited. Broad roads from east to west traversed the northern portion at irregular intervals and there were also water channels affording easy communication between different parts of the city, as well as a regular system of drainage for carrying off the rain water to large natural and artificial reservoirs."⁵

(Thus we find that Gour, perhaps, the first urban centre or city of what is popularly known as North Bengal, grew up as the royal capital of Bengal Kings and Muslim Rulers; and after the Afghan Kings of Bengal established their independence, they founded in about 1350 another capital called Firozabad at Pandua, which became the Capital during the reign of Shams-Ud-Din Ilyas Shah (1342-58).⁶ But after a short period, the capital was shifted again to Gour, when Pandua was the Capital of Bengal, then known as Maldah, which flourished as a port town and remained as the most important urban centre in the district, prior to the coming of the British in 1690. The importance of Maldah as an urban centre has been described by Hunter in the following way, 'Maldah is situated at the confluence of the Kalindi with Mahananda. It has an admirable position for river traffic

and probably rose to prosperity as the port of Mahananda, Capital of Pandua.⁷ The urban heritage of the erstwhile West Dinajpur may easily be traced to the early past when Laksmanavati or Gour succeeding Pataliputra as the principal city of the Magadha country, and later on becoming the Capital of Pal and Sen Kings of Bengal, sprawled on the bank of river Ganga for nearly nine miles.⁸ But at that time, the city in a modern sense did not exist. The spread of urbanization, north of river Ganga, did not take place for a long time and did not make an effective start till district jurisdictions took shape during the early part of British rule. In this region, physical constraints and lack of transportation facilities discouraged congregation of people for a long time.

Urbanization in both the erstwhile West Dinajpur, and Malda started in the latter part of the eighteenth century. When Rannell was preparing his Memoir of Hindustan (1880), he recorded only two towns, worth the names, in the Atlas. They were only Old Malda and Koch Bihar. It is thus true that Malda had a well-developed tradition of urbanism during the pre-colonial period; although, all over North Bengal, the dragging feet of urbanization remained bogged down in the mire of economic backwardness and there was no visible change in the situation till new districts came into existence for administrative purposes. Among the newly formed districts, Darjeeling took the first place (1850). Its present area was settled in the year 1866. Malda was created in the year 1859, and Jalpaiguri appeared as a district

in 1869. Although Dinajpur as a composite district in undivided Bengal was born in 1786, the new district of erstwhile West Dinajpur came into existence in August, 1947, with the partition of Bengal. The district was reshaped in 1956.⁹

The formation of new districts did in no way cause any spurt in urban activity. There was no communication between the town and the leading life of the people of the surrounding villages. District towns, however, got some importance only from the administrative point of view. Almost, all the towns in the districts of Malda and the present Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur came into being as administrative functions increased the importance of the towns, which generally added to them commercial and others activities. All such activities provided economic support to the growth of the towns of this region. However, what is important to note here, is that the rate of urban growth in these districts as well as in North Bengal, was almost in a freezing state or in a stagnant position at least upto 1947 after which condition had considerably improved.¹⁰

Section 2 : GROWTH OF URBAN POPULATION IN THESE DISTRICTS

Population size is an important factor in urban development, because to permit any agglomeration of human beings, there must be some minimum numbers to sustain group life.¹¹

Urbanization, in the true sense, in the districts of Malda and the

present Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur (formerly known as West Dinajpur) is still slow. The Table given below will substantiate this fact.

Table 4.2

Districtwise Percentage of Urban Population to Total Population between 1901 to 1991

District	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991
Malda	2.88	2.58	2.51	2.73	2.21	3.75	4.15	4.21	4.78	7.08
Erstwhile West Dinajpur (presently known as Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur)	-	-	-	-	0.83	4.29	7.48	9.37	11.19	13.33
Darjeeling	8.04	8.78	9.82	13.09	14.87	20.55	23.16	23.05	27.86	30.71
Jalpaiguri	1.77	1.72	2.08	2.55	3.27	7.21	9.11	9.60	14.95	16.40
Cooch Behar	2.48	2.67	3.09	3.06	4.19	7.50	7.01	6.84	6.90	7.85

Source : The figures given in this Table have been compiled from Census of India (1961), Vol. XVI, Part 11 A, General Population Tables, Census of India (1971), Series 22, West Bengal.

Urban West Bengal (1993), Institute of Local Government and Urban Studies, ^{Calcutta} Government of West Bengal.

Table 4.2 reveals that except in Darjeeling, increase of urban population is a pittance in all other districts. The district of erstwhile West Dinajpur witnessed the most remarkable growth of urban population between 1951 and 1991, while in 1941, only 0.83 per cent of its total population were living in urban areas. The Table shows that urban population in this district is not far behind that of the district of Jalpaiguri. On the other hand,

growth of urban population in Malda is very slow in comparison to that of North Bengal average or the state average.

From the above Table, two important facts emerge. In the first place, most of the districts exhibited a very low percentage of urban population till 1941, and out of five districts, three present an increasing trend in the development of urbanization, secondly, besides in the erstwhile West Dinajpur, progress of urbanization has been insignificant during the last two decades in comparison to the decade immediately after the partition.

In analysing the urban population, one can not ignore the factor of immigration of refugees after the partition of India, in 1947, as one of the main causes for increasing the percentage of urban population in the districts of North Bengal particularly during the decade 1941-51.¹² Urban growth rate in this decade has exceeded the normal trend and jumped to an unexpected point mostly caused by the partition.

In order to obtain an unbiased idea about the growth of urban population, it is necessary to look at the growth rate of urban population in different periods in these three districts, as well as in other districts of North Bengal.

Table 4.3

Percentage Variation of Urban population of the Districts of North Bengal, (for increase - for decrease) between 1901 to 1981

District	1901-11	1911-21	1921-31	1931-41	1941-51	'51-61	'61-71	'71-81
Malda	+ 3.8	- 4.8	+14.4	+38.0	+29.7	+44.4	+33.9	+42.88
Erstwhile West Dinajpur (Presently known as Uttar Dinajpur & Dakshin Dinajpur)					+503.3	+135.3	+75.4	+34.04
Darjeeling	+14.9	+16.7	+15.4	+33.7	+62.4	+53.0	+24.6	+55.58
Jalpaiguri	+14.3	+26.0	+28.0	+46.4	+138.2	+87.2	+35.7	+84.34
Koch Bihar	+12.3	+ 9.2	+ 1.2	+48.7	+ 87.7	+42.4	+35.3	+26.38

Source : Compiled from Census of India (1961), Vol.XVI, West Bengal and Sikkim Part I, 12, General Report Book, Census of India(1981), Series 23, West Bengal, Paper I.

A comparative study of the differential growth rate of the districts of North Bengal shows some interesting features. The decennial growth rate of erstwhile West Dinajpur, is too high in comparison to the decennial growth of other districts. The period 1941-51, marks the major watershed in the increase of urban population, recording the highest increase in this district. This is primarily due to the influx of refugees from the then East Pakistan¹³ (now Bangladesh). As a whole, all other districts except Malda had their highest growth rate in the period 1941-51. One of the important reasons for such an insignificant growth rate in Malda is that in this district, the number of urban centres (only two) had remained unchanged.

On the other hand, the most phenomenal increase took place in the district of erstwhile West Dinajpur, 503.3 per cent in 1941-51 and in the succeeding decades i.e. in 1951-61 and 1961-71, the highest increase of 135.3 and 75.4 per cent respectively were recorded by it. The growth is quite significant in view of the fact that prior to 1941-51, the district had no urban population, and Hilli appeared as the first urban centre in 1941. As a matter of fact, the refugee influx from the erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) from 1947 onwards, accompanied further by the economic growth, during the Post-Independence period, have jointly contributed to such an unprecedented rate of urban growth.

Section 3 : CURRENT FACTORS AND FORCES RESPONSIBLE FOR THE GROWTH OF URBANIZATION IN THE DISTRICTS OF MALDA, UTTAR DINAJPUR AND DAKSHIN DINAJPUR.

In considering the character of urbanization in the districts of Malda and Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur, we need to focus on two points, one of them being the formation of urban agglomerations, and the other, the development of towns. The concept of urban agglomeration had been introduced for the first time in the 1971 Census, replacing the town groups. The term 'Urban Agglomeration' can be used in the situations described as follows:¹⁴

- (a) a city with a continuous growth;
- (b) One town with a similar outgrowth or two or more adjoining towns with their outgrowth as in the first case, and
- (c) a city and one or more adjoining towns with their outgrowths all of which form a continuous spread.

Today, urban agglomeration plays a significant role in the urban development of Malda and Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur as well as in other districts of North Bengal. There are 32 urban agglomerations, in West Bengal, 6 in North Bengal and 26 in South Bengal.¹⁵ These six urban agglomerations consist of 18 urban units which include 6 'outgrowths', the latter being a new feature, recognised for the first time by the Census as the quasi-urban units lying beyond the actual boundary of the mother town where urbanization had already started. The importance of urban agglomeration has been revealed also in the fact, that not only has their number increased; there has also been a substantial increase in the total number of units which they hold within their fold. These create a great advantage to certain centres, in giving rise to subsidiary urban centres dependent on the mother city. Generally, a town extends beyond its legally defined limits on account of the natural process of extension, or the coming up of new settlements such as fairly large colonies, industrial colonies, educational institutions, port areas and military camps.¹⁶

Table 4.4

Statement showing Urban Agglomeration in the Districts of Malda, Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur.

Name of the District	Name of the Town	Population 1981	Population 1991
Erstwhile West Dinajpur/Dakshin Dinajpur(South Dinajpur)	<u>Balurghat U.A.</u>		
	(a) Balurghat (M)		
	(b) Chak Bhrigu (OG)	1, 12, 531	1, 26, 199
	(c) Baidyanathpara(OG)		
Erstwhile West Dinajpur/Uttar Dinajpur(North Dinajpur)	<u>Raiganj U.A.</u>		
	(a) Raiganj (M)	65, 688	1, 59, 675
	(b) Kasba (NM)		
Malda	<u>Englishbazar U.A.</u>		
	(a) Englishbazar(M)		
	(b) Old Malda (M)	93, 244	1, 76, 991
	(c) Jhaljhalia (NM)		
	(d) Sherpur Makimpur(OG)		

M = Municipal Town

OG = Outgrowth

NM = Non-Municipal Town

U.A.=Urban Agglomeration.

Source : Census of India, (1981), Series 23, West Bengal Paper 1 and URBAN WEST BENGAL, (1993), Institute of Local Government and Urban Studies(Calcutta, Government of west Bengal), p.70.

Balurghat urban agglomerations in erstwhile West Dinajpur now included in Dakshin Dinajpur District, Raiganj Urban agglomeration under Uttar Dinajpur District today and Englishbazar urban

agglomeration in Malda district appeared as new in the list of 32 urban agglomeration of West Bengal in 1981. Balurghat urban agglomeration, as shown in Table 4.4 consists of Balurghat Municipal town, Chakbhrigu and Baidyanath para outgrowth. (In the year 1981, it appears as a Class I urban agglomeration, and holds the first position in North Bengal with a population of 1,12,531 persons. But, in the year 1991, it has lost its position, and its urban growth rate becomes lower rather than Raiganj and Englishbazar urban agglomeration. This is largely due to its precarious geographical location near the international border. Further, no industry had emerged during the decade 1981-91 to give a booster to the economic activities of the region. (Raiganj urban agglomeration is constituted with Raiganj Municipal town, and Kasba non-Municipal town, in the year 1981, with a population of 65,688. It was a Class II urban agglomeration in 1981. But it maintains a significant increase in the growth of urban population. Raiganj urban agglomeration has more than doubled its population in 1991. Its importance lies in its role as a commercial centre. As a Subdivision, Raiganj has witnessed many activities and among them 'trade and commerce' takes the first position in terms of employment. The location of Raiganj on the principal highway, (N.H. 31) in the midst of rural countryside stretching for a considerable distance on all sides, has made it a major place of exchange. (The agricultural output of this district, based on the production of various crops has to find a market which is provided generally by the urban centres like Raiganj.¹⁷ The growing

importance of Raiganj as a trading centre, is therefore, entirely circumstantial. The urban agglomeration of Englishbazar consisting of old Maldah (MT), Jhaljhalia (NM), Sherpur Makhimpur (OG) and Englishbazar (MT) shows a steep rise in urban population. The urban population of this agglomeration was 93,244 in 1981, now the number has increased to 1,76,991 in 1991, near about double from the previous decade.¹⁸ The tertiary sector has grown up significantly in order to absorb the growing labour force. Further, Malda plays a very significant role in respect of flow of goods as it is served with both railway and roads. Again, Malda, very recently, has developed some industrial establishments, which not only meet the needs of local people, but also the demands from outside. It thus emerges as one of ^{the} largest urban centres of North Bengal in 1991.

The second most striking feature of urbanization in the districts of Malda and Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur is the appearance of three municipal towns as a First Class town.¹⁹ Balurghat had already gained this status in the Census Report of 1981. From the view point of the size of the town, Balurghat is not very large and falls below the size of many other towns of South Bengal, but what is highly significant is that, barring Durgapur, there is perhaps no other case in West Bengal in which a town could attain this status within a space of barely three to five decades. However, it maintains a normal urban growth rate in 1991. On the other hand, from the very recent date, Raiganj has appeared as a Class I town in 1991, with a population of 1,51,449.²⁰ Raiganj, emerging as a town only four decades ago,

has developed into a First Class town mainly through its activities in the field of trade and commerce facilitated by road transport. The gradual expansion in its area of economic intercourse is likely to contribute further to its phenomenal growth. In 1991, Englishbazar emerged as one of the largest urban centres second to Siliguri of North Bengal, surpassing other urban centres like Darjeeling, Kochbihar and Balurghat. Malda's geographical location is very important to understand its phenomenal growth in the post-partition Bengal. Its importance lies in its role as a commercial Centre as the gateway to Raiganj, Siliguri, Duars, Bhutan and other hill areas of Bengal and Assam, Arunachal and other States of North East India and it also provides a vital link to Calcutta.

Rapid growth of urban centres is another definite indication of urbanization in these three districts. Table 4.5 represents the growth of urban population more illustratively as it presents the percentage of decennial growth rate of urban population in the towns of the districts of Malda and Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur. The Table indicates that except Hilli, all the towns in these districts, have stabilised their position from 1931, since when they have maintained an uninterrupted growth.²¹ It is argued that Hilli's gradual decay in population is largely due to its precarious geographical location.²² Table 4.5 shows that its population has decreased in the decade 1971-81. Its percentage of decade-variation has decreased from 1.06 in 1961-71 to 0.57 in 1971-81. Its population has just slightly increased in 1991. Hilli, situated just at the border of Bangladesh, became a Centre

of illegal trading. The people like to live in the nearest town Balurghat, 26 km. away, rather than at Hilli, because of the municipal advantages and security.

Table 3.5

Percentage of Decadal Variation of Urban Population in the Towns of Districts of Erstwhile West Dinajpur (Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur) and Malda

District	Name of the Town	1941- 1951	1951- 1961	1961- 1971	1971- 1981	1981- 1991
Malda	Old Malda	+16.98	+25.00	+36.97	+28.22	+51.78
	Englishbazar	+31.42	+33.62	+33.62	+34.04	+64.20
	Jhaljhalia	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	-	-
	Mangalbari	-	-	N.A.	N.A.	-
Erstwhile West Dinajpur/Dak- shin Dinajpur	Balurghat	-	48.99	+148.41	+55.98	+14.51
	Gangarampur	-	-	+53.13	+53.74	+36.88
	Hilli	20.05	-27.73	+ 1.06	- 0.57	+12.18
Erstwhile West Dinajpur /Uttar Dinajpur	Raiganj	-	108.69	+33.76	+39.71	+150.99
	Kaliaganj	-	-	+46.21	+26.39	-
	Ialampur	-	-	+65.44	+67.65	+ 71.54
	Dalkhola	-	-	-	+31.66	+ 44.22
	Kasba	-	-	-	-	+ 29.22

Source :

Compiled from Census of India, 1961, Vol. I, West Bengal and Sikkim, Part II A.

Census of India, 1971, Series 23, West Bengal, Paper 1.

Census of India, 1981, Series 23, West Bengal, Paper 1.

Urban west Bengal 1993-94, Institute of Local Government and Urban Studies, Government of West Bengal.

Table 4.5 reveals that growth rate for a single decade has been recorded above hundred per cent in case of Balurghat (148% in 1961-71) and Raiganj (108% in 1951-61). Both these towns have doubled their population in a single decade. Further, in 1991, Raiganj has recorded an unprecedented growth rate of 150.99%. Both the Englishbazar, and Old Malda Municipal towns almost doubled their growth rate in the decade 1981-91. Thus Raiganj, in Uttar Dinajpur and Englishbazar, in Malda district, have been promoted to Class I towns in 1991. Taking an overall view of the rate of growth, it can be said, that the towns like Englishbazar, Raiganj, Islampur, Gangarapur and Dalkhola are maintaining a high rate of growth, over 30 per cent, through all the decades since independence. Although Balurghat, which, at present is included in Dakshin Dinajpur has maintained a high growth rate in 1981 but in the year 1991, its growth rate has significantly decreased. On the other hand, Old Malda shows a trend of unsteady growth throughout the eight Census years (from 1901 to 1971). From 1981, its growth rate shows an upward trend. The growth rate has been lowest in the case of Hilli, as already explained elsewhere. Table 4.6 shows the population in all these towns of Malda and erstwhile west Dinajpur (presently known as Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur) between 1941 to 1991.

Table 4.6

Population in the Towns of the Districts of Erstwhile West Dinajpur (presently known as Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur) between 1941 to 1991

District	Town	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991
Malda	Old Malda	3,847	4,275	4,933	6,606	8,579	13,021
	English Bazar	23,333	30,663	45,900	61,335	79,014	1,39,018
	Jagannathpur					3,952	N.A.
	Jhal Jhalia					3,359	N.A.
	Sherpur Mulkhimpur					2,296	N.A.
	Mauçalbani Samandi						25,000
	Sahapur						9,000
West Dinajpur/Dakshin (Erstwhile) Dinajpur	Hili	6,952	8,343	6,032	6,096	6,061	N.A.
	Balurghat		18,121	26,999	67,088	1,04,646	1,26,199
	Gangarampur			9,671	14,809	22,767	31,000
	Baidyanathpara						
	Chak Bhriqo						
West Dinajpur/Uttar (Erstwhile) Dinajpur	Raiganj		15,474	32,290	43,191	60,143	1,51,449
	Islampur			9,499	15,715	26,253	45,000
	Kaliganj			14,499	21,169	26,817	38,000
	Dalkhola				5,622	7,402	11,000
	Kasba					6,362	8,226

Source : Compiled from (i) Census of India, 1971, District Census Handbook, West Dinajpur. Series 22, West Bengal, Part X, A & B
(ii) Census of India, 1981, Series 23, West Bengal, Paper I, Supplement, Provision population
(iii) Urban West Bengal, 1993-94 (1993), Institute of Local Government and Urban Studies, (Calcutta, Government of West Bengal).

The pattern of urban growth, obtained in the towns of the region, can not be comprehended^{dad} without referring to the different classes of urban centres. In other words, the vitality as well as mobility of the urban centres may be realised from their changes in Class position. The Census of India makes six classes of urban Centres, taking population as the principal criterion for distinguishing between the different classes.²³

They are as follows :

<u>Class of Town</u>	<u>Population</u>
Class I	100,000 and over
Class II	50,000 to 99,999
Class III	20,000 to 49,999
Class IV	10,000 to 19,999
Class V	5,000 to 9,999
Class VI	below 5,000

Based on this classification, the distribution of towns to the different classes in the two districts may be shown from the following table :

Table 4.7

Statement showing the Change in Size - Class of Towns in the Districts of Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda since 1941

Sl. No.	District	Town	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991
1.	West Dinajpur (Erstwhile)/Dakshin Dinajpur	Balurghat	-	IV	III	II	I	I
2.	Erstwhile West Dinajpur/Uttar Dinajpur	Raiganj	-	IV	III	II	II	I
		Kaliyaganj	-	-	IV	III	III	III
4.		Islampur	-	-	V	IV	III	III
5.	Erst-while West Dinajpur/Dakshin Dinajpur	Gangarampur	-	-	VI	IV	III	III
6.	Erstwhile West Dinajpur/Uttar Dinajpur	Dalkhola	-	-	-	V	V	IV
7.		Kasba	-	-	-	-	V	V
8.	Erstwhile West Dinajpur	Hili	V	V	V	V	V	V
II.	Malda	Old Malda	V	V	V	V	V	IV
2.		Englishbazar	III	III	III	II	II	I
3.		Jhaljhali	-	-	-	-	VI	-
4.		Sahapur	-	-	-	-	-	V
5.		Mangalbari Samadi						

- Source : (i) Census of India, 1971, District Census Handbook, West Dinajpur, Series 22, West Bengal Part K, A & B.
- (ii) Census of India, 1981, Series 23, West Bengal, Paper I, Supplement, Provisional Population.
- (iii) Urban West Bengal 1993-94, Institute of Local Government and Urban Studies, Government of West Bengal, 1993

From the above Table, it is found, that most of the towns in the Districts of Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur have changed their class position within two decades. But in the district of Malda, progress of urbanization is not satisfactory. Old Malda has taken five decades to change its class position, although Englishbazar has moved from Class III in 1941 to Class II in 1971. Other towns in Malda are emerging as new urban centres. From this Table, it is clear that the towns in the present Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur districts are more viable than the towns of Malda district. In the last two decades, in these districts, five towns out of eight have changed their class position. However, the most striking feature in this regard is the appearance of Balurghat as Class I Town in 1981, and the emergence of Raiganj and Englishbazar as Class I towns in 1991. Balurghat took three decades (1951-1981), and Raiganj and Malda took four decades to change their class positions. The most encouraging record in this regard is presented by Balurghat, Raiganj, Islampur, Kaliyaganj and Gangarampur. In Uttar Dinajpur district, Kaliyaganj and Islampur and in Dakshin Dinajpur, Gangarampur, have appeared as towns for the first time in 1961. Islampur and Gangarampur have changed their position from Class V to Class III within two decades. But Kaliyaganj, after changing its position in 1971, could not upgrade itself even after two decades. Dalkhola has been declared as Class V town for the first time in 1971, and in the last decade, it has moved to only Class IV town. Hilli, as already mentioned, has remained stagnant in its original class from its emergence

for a space of four decades. In Malda district, position of Old Malda is slightly better than Hili.²⁴ After a long time, it has changed its position from Class V to IV in 1991. However, Hili can be regarded as a morbid town.

Now, on the basis of the above discussion, the towns in three districts may be divided into five broad categories.²⁵

(a) Dynamic Towns, which have experienced a rate of growth of population which is higher than the average in the towns of North Bengal. Balurghat, Raiganj and Englishbazar may be included in this category, (b) Normal-growth towns whose rate of growth conforms the average of other towns of West Bengal; three towns, namely, Kaliyaganj, Islampur and Gangarampur, belong to this group. Towns which are relatively static, where the rate of growth of population is less than the average for West Bengal, may be marked as static towns. Dalkhola and Old Malda may be regarded as relatively Static Towns, (d) Depopulated Towns, whose population has declined during the last forty years, Hili is a depopulated town as its population has decreased from 8,343 in 1951 to slightly above 6,000 in 1991, (e) Kasba, Manglabari, Samandi, Sahapur are newly emerging urban Centres.

Section 4 : THE EMERGING URBAN CHARACTER IN THE DISTRICTS OF MALDA, UTTAR DINAJPUR AND DAKSHIN DINAJPUR

Urbanization in all these districts started as a result of administrative necessity. Almost, all the towns in these districts as well as in North Bengal, except a few, came into

existence at selected preferences as seats of administration. Among the towns, the first batch comprised the district headquarters, followed by the second batch of towns to take birth as sub-divisional headquarters or as the seats of police stations in rare cases. At present, three out of five in Uttar Dinajpur and two out of three in Dakshin Dinajpur districts have been developed as administrative centres.) In most of the cases political considerations got preference over economic or social considerations in the selection of towns. The influence of this administrative origin of the urban centres in North Bengal, still heavily lies on most of the existing towns and cities. (Balurghat, being the district headquarter town, has a good number of public and semi-public offices. All such institutions offer all the facilities normally expected in a district headquarter.) In the same way, Englishbazar in Malda being the district headquarter and sub-divisional headquarter at the same time, provides a large number of employees in several public, semi-public and private offices. During the British rule, choice for making a town out of a place having prospect in economic or cultural activities did not feature as a policy, rather, such a policy was carefully avoided. However, geographical locations of the towns, emerging for administrative purposes were made at suitable places. Thus, these towns failed to make an effective link with the surrounding areas and gradually turned into alien elements from its hinterland. As a result, they have not been prospered well for a long time. The languishing character of the urban centres in the region is

the direct result of the fact that they did not become service centres for the people living outside them. (The entire supply generally used to come from Calcutta. The characteristic absence of reciprocal relationship between the urban and rural areas did not provide the development of the urban centres as bases of exchange which is the real life-force for any town or city. Only some common activities were taking place in such towns which we generally see in any ordinary town situated in rural areas.²⁶ One town was just a replica of the other towns. These towns never displayed any specific or dominating character in any field. No fruitful change in the character of these towns took place till partition. From that time, increase in administrative functions increased the importance of towns which gradually added to them commercial and other activities. All such activities provided economic support to the growth of the towns of this region.²⁷ Urban centres in all these districts, thus, came out of their cocoons and started to perform an active role in the life of the people according to their capacities. After partition, road development and newly oriented transport system played a major role in bringing a change in the towns. Further, a new outlook in agriculture, along with increasing prominence of some commercial crops, the revival of cottage industries and introduction of small and medium plants, in the newer fields, mostly based on local raw materials and local demands, brought a new phase in the functional character of the existing towns. Such economic activities started in the places which, hitherto being market

places, turned into urban centres. Newly created roads gave a booster to such economic activities, as the outcome of which changes in urban character and urban development took place. Another external factor, the opening of Farakka bridge, and the construction of innumerable concrete bridges spanning over the major rivers, connected the different corners of the districts of Malda and the present Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur. These bridges have increased the importance of the towns both for the purpose of dwelling and commerce.²⁸ As a result, the towns by their own capacity collect the wealth and thus enter the give-and-take economy with other regions. At the same time, a fresh lease of life has started in these towns, due to a new outlook on the question of employment in the urban scene.

(In Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur, the transformation in urban scene has been more the result of roads than the railways. In these districts, it is the road which plays a more important role in the field of communication, rather than railways. Although there is a railway communication in the towns of Kaliaganj, Raiganj, Dalkhola, and Islampur, except for Dalkhola and Islampur, the other two towns have a very limited railway communication which does not play any effective role in respect of flow of goods or passengers. On the other hand, Malda is served both by roads and the railways. The railway station at Malda plays a significant role in respect of flow of goods. The National Highway 34 which runs from Calcutta to Siliguri passes through

Englishbazar town. Thus, the locations of various towns in these districts brings out the importance of transportation as the growth-factor of urban centres.

However, the development of transport-network could not have accomplished the task without simultaneous development of the power-generation, the supply of which remained extremely scarce and limited in nature before independence. The commissioning of the Jaldhaka and Chuksa Hydel Project, and Farakka Thermal Power Project has created a landmark in the history of urban development in this region. The impact of all this is quite evident from the growth-pattern of towns, the change in their functional character with increasing specialisation of the towns, the physical appearance of the urban scope in the larger towns, and the scarcity of space in urban areas.

From the above discussion, certain emerging trends in the urban growth rate of the towns in the districts of Malda and Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur can be observed. It is clearly seen that growth rate is not the same in all the towns. Towns larger in size have a greater rate of growth in general than those of the smaller size. For example, Balurghat, Raiganj, Islampur and Kaliyaganj maintain a long area in comparison with other towns of the district like Hili, Gangarampur and Dalkhola and thus have a greater rate of growth. In the case of the Malda district, Englishbazar has an area of 13.25 sq.km. which is higher than the other towns in the district. As a result, it

maintains a higher growth rate than the other towns like Old Malda (3.25 sq.km.), Jhaljhalia and Sahapur. In other words, the largest size of the town have recorded the highest growth during the previous three or four decades. Thus Balurghat, Raiganj and Englishbazar may be characterized as the 'boom towns' where the population has multiplied by about seven or eight times during the last few decades.

One of the most important determinants of urbanisation is the growth-pattern which has a relevance to the development in the transport system. The greater the accessibility, the larger is the rate of growth, the latter having been commensurate with an acceleration in activities. The development of transportation network increases the accessibility which is not only a key factor in spreading the effects of urbanization in the hinterlands but that there exists a grading of the degree of urbanization with accessibility.²⁹ Opening of Farakka Bridge has made transportation easier, as a result of which mobility of goods and people in the towns of these districts has increased very much. Due to improved transport network, the relation between the towns and their hinterland has intensified to a great extent and thus rural and urban areas have come closer for longer and frequent exchanges between them. The towns, which possess maximum accessibility to their hinterlands have flourished more than the others. For instance, Raiganj, Dalkhola, and Islampur in Uttar Dinajpur and Englishbazar in Malda district, are located on the principal

highway (N.H. 34) in the midst of rural countryside, stretching for a considerable distance on all sides, and have every possibility to emerge as the largest urban centres in this region.

(The growth pattern of an urban region is also determined by some other factors. The visible spurt in urban activity as initiated by improved transport, power supply, availability of raw materials and an over all improvement in agricultural economy have been instrumental in giving rise to industrial activities in a selective manner. In most of the cases, except one or two, the basic character of such industrial activities is confined to small scale industries. However, in these three districts, urban centres have developed mostly to serve the local needs of the growing urban population. Moreover, some industrial units have a strong tendency for location in centres having a greater accessibility. For instance, (such activities have increased in Raiganj urban centre as it is situated on the National Highway and thus becomes a major place of exchange.) Gangarampur and Kaliyaganj lying off the track of the main traffic have failed to bring about an effective change in trade and commerce. Englishbazar, having the privilege of good communication, offers 41 types of small scale industrial units within its urban area which includes an annual turn up over Rs. 1, 21, 35, 000/-³⁰. On the other hand, although Balurghat has been promoted to a Class I town, it can not still be regarded an affluent town. From the materialist view point, it may be said that until and unless industrial development takes place as industrialization and urbanization go hand in hand, Urban

development in Balurghat cannot take a strong foothold. But the picture of Old Malda town, once a busy commercial centre, becomes unhappy and gloomy. Its importance began to wane after the establishment of the town of Englishbazar (1680) by the British East India Company.³¹ Due to its geographical location, poor transport system, and lack of infrastructural facilities the town plays a very insignificant role in the field of 'trade and Commerce'. However, other small and medium towns in these three districts have improved their growth rate during the last few decades and it seems that improvement in regional economy have made their position more stable and dynamic than it had been earlier.

(One important change in the urban sector is the growing trait of functional specialisation. It initiates a distinct change in the urban process. It is hoped that most towns, particularly those situated on the National Highway would no longer be identified with the administrative functions. (In fact, many of them are today thriving centres, bustling with activity in many fields and developing further specialisation in certain fields like trade, transport, education, recreation, small and medium scale industries etc.) Regarding industries, we can say that printing of cotton textiles, bakery and confectioners, wood and steel furniture, chemical products, printing press, manufacture of shoes and other leather work, have already taken a strong foothold, giving rise to noticeable concentrations in a number of towns. All these have naturally added a new element to their

role in the regional economy, holding at the same time a greater prospect, because of the aspirations of some for taking a direct part in its take-off for a still higher goal.

(The growing complexity in the functions of some of the large towns has brought about a visible change in their physical character. What is true is that some characteristics of a city which we see elsewhere in the country are also present in some of the towns of these districts. The constructions of multistoried, spacious buildings, the fast appearance of super-markets, well-decorated hotels, expensive tourist lodges, bus and mini-bus terminus, sports stadium, waterworks and the widening of the roads - all these are adorning some of the towns of these districts.)

As a result of this, there is a land scarcity in many of the towns and land price has become sky-high. This is a systematic process of elimination which has already started in many of the larger towns, making a permanent transformation of the urban scope.)

However, all the characteristics including demerits of modern cities are present in some of the towns of these districts, but all these would be a temporary matter until and unless these towns become economic centres. It is often argued that if urbanization in the true sense of the term stands for overall progress, then perhaps the roots of urban growth are traceable more in the expanding economic base than in the demographic base. (No doubt, progress in local economy brings a change in many towns, but inducement to sizeable urban growth comes primarily through

industrialization, because urbanization needs some sort of surplus and it is only industrialization which can give to such surplus. (But such hinterland surplus through industrialization is absent in the towns of Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur, and Malda districts. Thus a balanced development becomes essential in order to keep a balanced character of urbanization in this region.)

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- 24 All over North Bengal a good number of towns are administrative
Centres. This is because during the British rule in most
of the cases political considerations got preference over
economic or social considerations in selection of towns
for administrative purposes. The influence of this
administrative origin of the urban centres in North Bengal
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