

CHAPTER ONE

North Dinajpur : A Geographical Outline

The district of Uttar (north) Dinajpur was created by the partitioning of the West Dinajpur which came into effect from 1st April 1992². Therefore, it is the youngest of all the districts of West Bengal. But it has undergone several significant changes in its geographic limits. It originally formed a part of that portion of old Dinajpur District of undivided Bengal which fell to the western side of the boundary i.e. first in East Pakistan and presently in Bangladesh. Not only was it butchered in times, but also reshuffled many times. Some parts of the present district formed a part of the Purnea District of Bihar. The Purnea District Gazetteer states : "Kaliyaganj was a centre of jute trade, and an agent of the East India Company used to live here for the purchase of gummy bags"³. Asuragarh was another important place of historical importance belonging to this district, which also constituted a part of Purnea. Similarly, Islampur and Chopra Police Stations came to be included under West Dinajpur only after 1965. These two were again included within the newly formed present district. Therefore, now it stands between 25.5°N to 26.5°W latitude and 87.5° - 88.40° longitude.

The District of Uttar Dinajpur lies on the northern portion of the state of West Bengal. Its boundary gives it a crescent like shape. It is bounded by the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri in the north; in the south by Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda; in the West by the district of Purnea in Bihar and in the east by the District of Dinajpur in Bangladesh. According to the Census Report, 1991 it has a population of 1929980 with an area of 3100.66 sq. K.M. The district comprises of two subdivisions - Raiganj and Islampur, 9 Police Stations, 9 Blocks, 3 Municipalities, 2 Non Municipal areas, 99 Gram Panchayets and 1516 Mouzas.

The land is generally flat but has a general slope from north to south. This is evident from the course of its rivers which flow from north to south. The greater part of the district is covered by recent alluvial deposit consisting of sandy clay. "Khiyer variety of soil is found in this district and pali variety is also found in some areas of the district"^{4a}. The temperature is moderately

extreme. But recently it is getting an extreme climate. The "loo" (hot breeze) begins to blow all over the district with the commencement of March. During winter, westernly winds blow from the Himalayas and temperature goes down. The rainfall is excessive which brings floods over extensive regions.

The land is intersected by several rivers. The principal rivers in the district are Mahananda, Nagar, Kulik and Chhiramati. Mahananda, though the principal river of the district, only touches a few kilometres of the district and mostly serves as a boundary between the districts of Darjeeling and North Dinajpur in the north and Malda and North Dinajpur in the south. Originating in the hills of Darjeeling in the Himalayas, it completes its mountainous course in Siliguri. There after, it enters in to the district of Jalpaiguri and at last in to North Dinajpur. Then it forms a boundary between Darjeeling district and North Dinajpur. Passing a long course in Bihar, it again touches Makundapur in Itahar police station. Here, it forms the boundary between Malda and North Dinajpur for almost 40 kilometres.

The river Nagar is one of the tributary rivers of Mahananda. It has its origin in Bangladesh. It enters into the district where Raiganj and Karandighi police station meet with Bangladesh. Thereafter it serves as a boundary between Raiganj and Karandighi police stations and between Raiganj and Islampur subdivisions. It joins Mahananda at Mukundapur in Itahar police station. Just before joining the river Mahananda, the Nagar throws out a side branch called Sui near a village, called Damdalia. Its course is not a long one, only about 30 kilometres and follows almost parallel to the Mahananda and again joins the latter. Another main tributary of the Mahananda is Kulik. The district headquarter Raiganj is situated on its bank. It rises in a marsh about six miles west of Thakurgaon in Bangladesh. It enters in the Hemtabad police station and passes a few kilometres in between Raiganj and Hemtabad and after that falls into the Nagar at the south western junctions of Raiganj-Itahar police stations.

The river Shrimati or Chhiramati is another important river of the district. It passes through Kaliyaganj, Itahar and then enters into Mahananda in Malda. The river Tangan enters the district through the Kaliyaganj police station and then through South Dinajpur into Malda and joins Mahananda. Gamari, another river of the district, originates from Randhanipara marsh area in police station Kaliyaganj and flowing on a meandering course for about 16 miles in the

southern direction, meets the river Sui near Barot in the Itahar Police Station. The principal rivers in Islampur sub-division are Douk, Berong, Dalaucha, Sudani, Pitanu etc. The ultimate destination of all these rivers is the Ganga. The rivers are navigable in the rainy season.

There are some big and small marshy lands and water reservoirs. Two such large reservoirs are Nehali and Nowda *bills* (marsh). The former comprising of 500 Bighas, is located near Tenahari village under the Raiganj Police Station, whereas the latter lies near Kothagram under the Hemtabad Police Station. The irrigation facilities, however, are far from satisfactory. The Tista Canal Project undertaken by the Government of West Bengal and assisted by the Central Government is the largest Irrigational Project in the district launched in 1976 but has not yet been completed. It is however, expected that after completion it will irrigate 527,000 hectares of land in the six districts of North Bengal. Except some other minor irrigation schemes which cover a portion of the cultivable area, the cultivators are mostly dependent on rainfall and the natural reservoirs.

The district is predominantly agricultural. It was due to the favourable formation of the land and plentiful rain that favoured the growth of the district as agriculturally prosperous. The land is one of the chief rice growing districts in West Bengal. The main staple food is rice and a little wheat. Rape and mustered seed are largely grown and the production of jute has increased many times in the past few decades. Pineapple is also cultivated in a large scale in the Islampur subdivision. Betelnuts are grown in plenty. Very recently tea plantation is growing apace in northern part of the district especially in the Islampur and Chopra police stations. Moreover, all kinds of vegetables are available.

While the land is agriculturally prosperous, it is one of the most backward districts in the state so far as industrialization is concerned. There is no industry in the true sense of the term, except some small scale industries. There are few rice and oil mills in the southern part of the district mainly in the Raiganj subdivision. Dalkhola, Raiganj and Kaliyaganj are famous for these mills. There is one paper, one flour and one spinning mill in Karnojora, Raiganj. Apart from that, there are few saw mills, ply wood factories, brick kilns in different parts of Raiganj sub-division. The principal cause of its industrial backwardness is the lack of minerals and mining in the district. In fact, it does not enjoy any geographical advantage in this respect. The rich iron and coal deposits are far

away from the district. Another important criterion for industrialization is that of transport. The district is lacking in a well developed transport system. For transportation, the people chiefly depend on roads. The North Bengal State Transport Corporation (NBSTC), a West Bengal Government undertaking, is the chief agency for road service. The National Highways (NH) nos 34 and 31 passes through the district and connect most of the police stations. The state high way which interlinks some police stations with the headquarter, is SH 10A. The picture of the railway is also very dismal. It has only a few kilometres of railways. A branch of N.F. Railway, covering 20 miles, extends from Raiganj to Radhikapur. Another branch extends from Dalkhola to Islampur covering about 40 miles.

Literacy rate is also not satisfactory. Though in urban areas, 70% of the people are literate, in rural areas it shows a very retarded picture. Around 30% of the population are able to read and write^{4b}. There are 5 degree colleges, 1 Teachers Training College, 1 Polytechnic, 1 Basic Training Institute and 1 Technical Institute (ITI) and 150 secondary and senior secondary schools.

The Bengali speaking Hindus form the bulk of the population. Urdu speaking Muslims form predominant part in Islampur subdivision and the Koch who are the descendants of early inhabitants of North Bengal, widely live in this district. Santals are scattered in different places of the district. Christianity had also stepped in and a “Baptist Mission was founded in 1804”⁵