

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Region of North Bengal in
Geographical Perspective

I N T R O D U C T I O NThe Region of North Bengal : In Geographical Perspective

The region of North Bengal comprises the northern half of West Bengal, and is composed of the five districts of Darjiling, Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar, West Dinajpur and Maldah lying north of river Ganga. The region is basically shaped like 'Γ', the greek alphabet 'gamma'. The upper prong of this is thicker than the lower one. It is surrounded by foreign countries almost on three sides of its political boundary with Nepal and Bhutan in the north, and Bangladesh in the south and east. Besides, it immediately borders on the Indian States of Sikkim, Bihar and Assam, the latter tagging six other states of the North-East India, along with it, namely, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Manipur and Tripura which ultimately come to be dependent on the land-corridor provided by the region for maintaining link with the remaining part of India. Thus, from the perspective of the four major cities of India, namely Delhi (Northern India), Bombay (Western India), Madras (Southern India) and Calcutta (Eastern India), the two prongs of the region of North Bengal can be treated as the 'gateway' to North-Eastern India. Interestingly enough, it will be seen in the following chapters that an important urban centre named Siliguri is really located at the area justifying in full sense the term 'gateway' to North-Eastern India.

NORTH BENGAL: LOCATION AND PHYSICAL UNITS

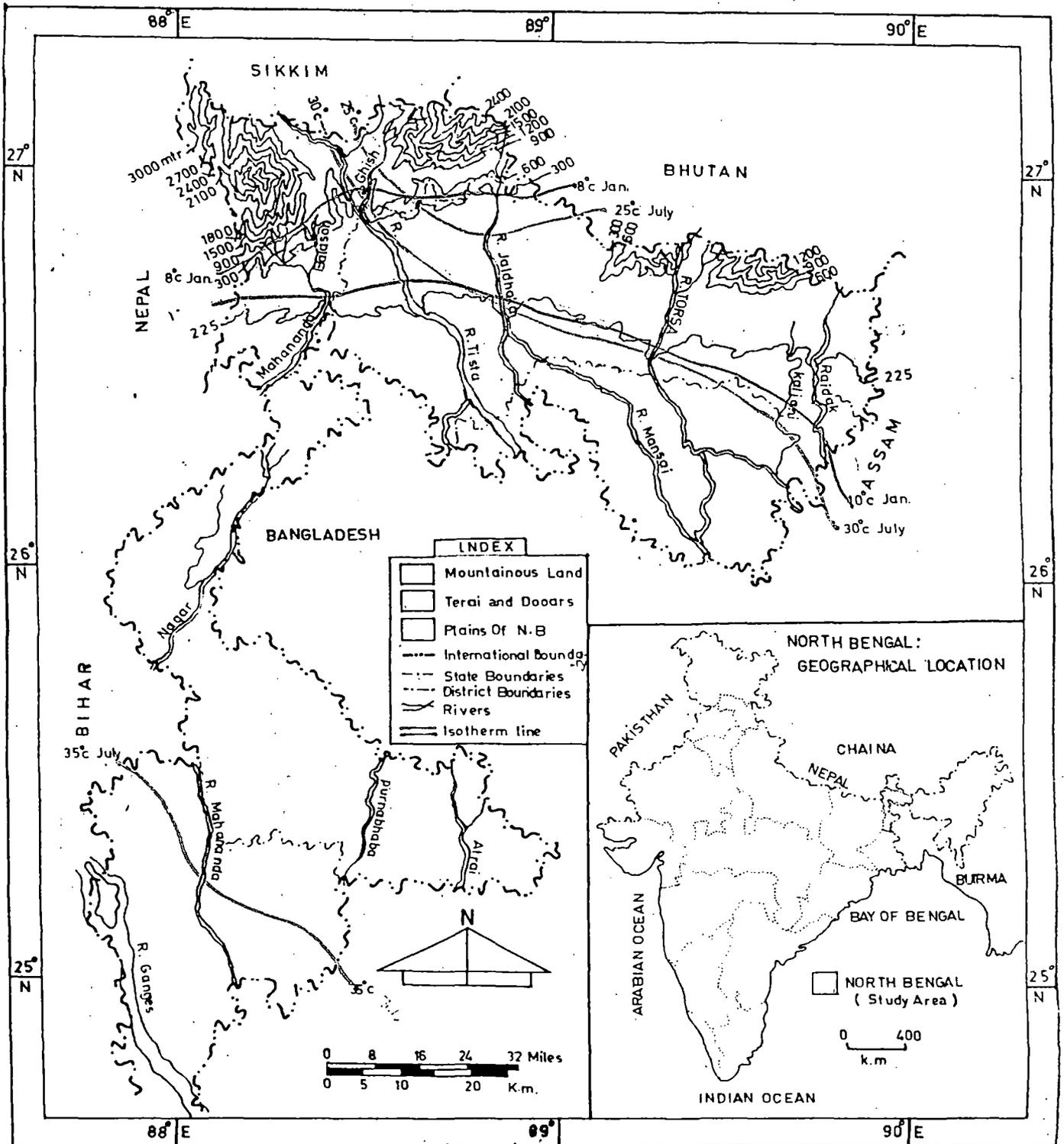


Fig. - 1

The region has five districts as mentioned above. At the intersecting area of the two prongs, there is Darjiling district. The district consists partly of mountainous and hilly areas and partly of plains (Fig.1). The district headquarters is located on the hill top at Darjiling, an internationally famous tourist spot. The urban centre 'Siliguri' is located within this district on the plains. The northern portion of the upper prong forms the district of Jalpaiguri. The district headquarters is at Jalpaiguri town, relatively nearer to 'Siliguri'. The northern part of the district is interspersed with extensive forests and tea gardens. In the southern half of the upper prong of the region lies the district of Koch Bihar which is basically a plain stretch of land. The plain continues southward uninterrupted without any decipherable undulations except in extreme south where a small bulge at the lower end giving rise to an undulating topography, just after the river Ganga. The major portion of the bulging forms the district of Maldah. Its district headquarters 'English Bazar' is popularly known as 'Maldah town'. The remaining part of the lower prong is the district of West Dinajpur. In short, except for some mountainous and hilly parts, the major portion of North Bengal is basically a plain land. It is true that the rivers flowing through this land are hilly and shallow. But deficit of water has been compensated for by a higher degree of rainfall in

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comparison to South Bengal. This feature has made the economy of the region basically agriculture-based.

Some of the major resources of the small-scale industries are available from the agricultural sector, such as tea, jute, bamboo, tobacco, cinchona, silk, ginger, cardamom, orange, mango, plum, pine apple etc. Among forest products are timber, honey, medicinal herbs, rare orchids and flowers. There are, of course, some ill-maintained mines near the northern border of Jalpaiguri.

The markets of North Bengal and chiefly the exchanges in agricultural products is a further justification of the agriculture-based economy of the region.

Five of the urban centres namely, Darjiling, Kalimpong, Kurseong, Cart Road and Jaldhaka Hydel Power Project are located in the mountainous and hilly section and others of the remaining 38 (1981) urban centres are located on the plain land. The study has mainly been based on 1981 census according to which there are 38 urban centres in the region. According to the census authorities of India urban centres are 'towns (places with municipal corporation, municipal area committee town committee, notified area or cantonment board); also all places having 5000 or more inhabitants, a density of not less than 100 persons per square mile, at least three fourth of the adult male population employed in pursuits other than

agriculture and pronounced urban characteristics". (Census of India, 1981). In the spatial distribution the urban centres found in different districts are as follows. The district of Darjiling (District Headquarter), Siliguri, Kalimpong, Kurseong (sub-divisional town), Jaldhaka Hydel Power Project and Cart Road (town). The district of Jalpaiguri has twelve of them, namely Jalpaiguri town (District Headquarters), Alipurduar (sub-divisional town), Mal, Alipurduar Railway Junction, Dhubguri, Mainaguri, Domohani, Falakata, Dabgram, Gairkata, Odlabari and Uttar Latabari. In the district of Koch Bihar, there are seven towns, namely Koch Bihar town (District Headquarters), Dinhata, Mathabhanga, Tufangunj, Mekhliganj, Haldibari, and Guriahati. In the district of West Dinajpur, the number of urban centres ^{is} eight, such as Balurghat (District Headquarters) Raiganj, Kaliaganj, Islampur, Dalkhola, Gangarampur, Hilli and Kasba. The district of Maldah has four urban centres namely English Bazar (District Headquarters), Old Maldah, Jagannathpur and Jhaljhalia (Fig. 2).

In attempting any classification of the towns according to site, one may refer to Smailes (1961) who remarked as follows : "Towns grow in particular places to discharge necessary functions ... It may of course happen that the urban character, both in respect of size and

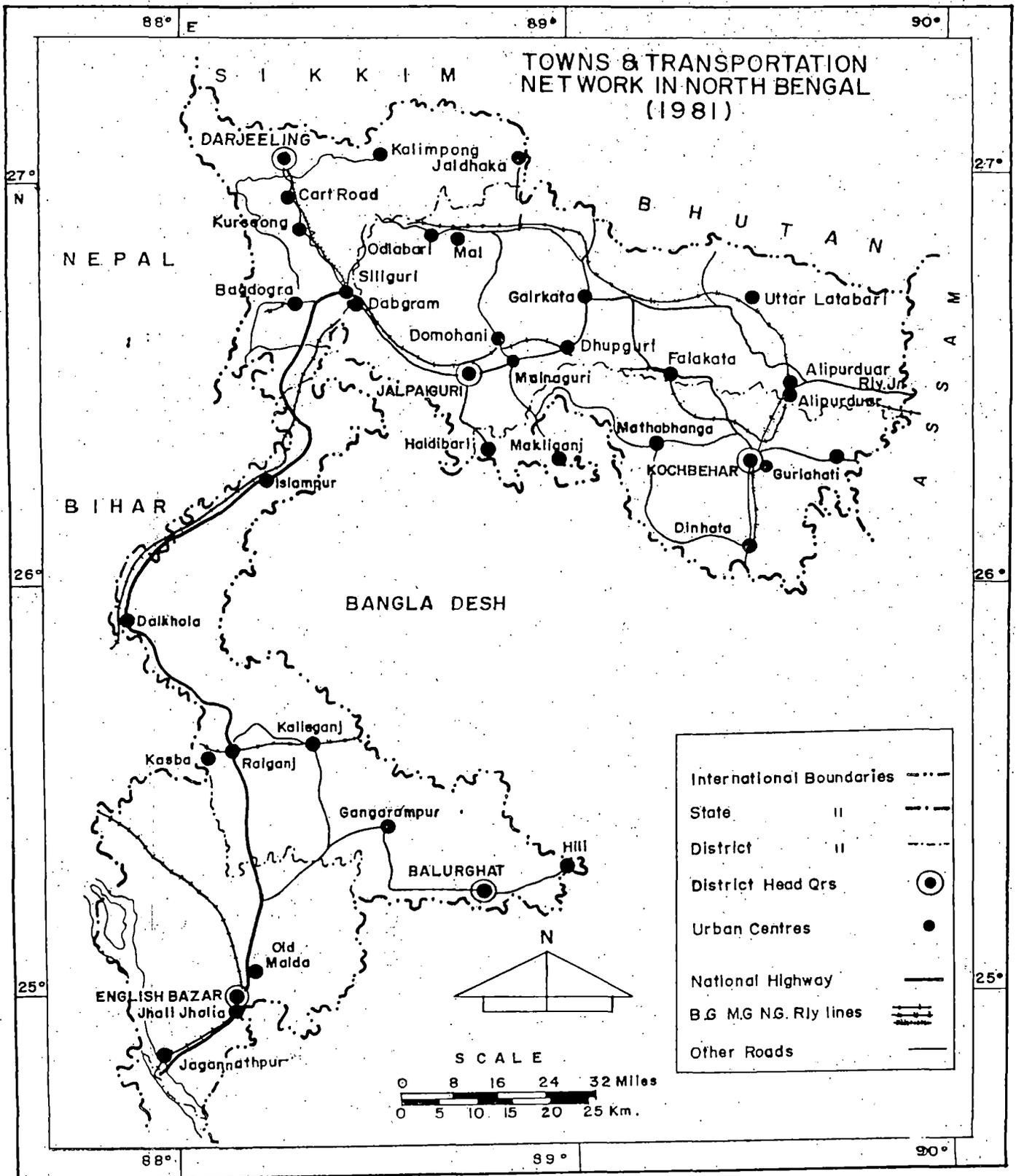


Fig.- 2

function emerges by growth and accretion about a pre-urban nucleus. In each case, however, it is the condition of site which have special importance in localizing the original function at a particular spot, fixing there the nucleus ... Any appraisal of the value and importance of a particular site must involve a reconstruction of the geography of a time past, that when the nucleus was established'. These points have been discussed for important urban centres in detail in the chapter 'urban growth and urbanization'.

In making a particular reference to 'Siliguri' in this connection it may be said that Siliguri is situated at the point of break-in-transportation, at the junction of plains and hills where the mode, means and bulk of transportation changes. Besides, its cross-roads location offers direct passage to Calcutta, Delhi and North-East India.

The urban centres of 'Darjiling', 'Kurseong' and 'Kalimpong' are situated on the saddles of the mountains, giving rise to trading points for the adjoining areas in a difficult terrain.

Among the 38 urban centres 'Koch Bihar' and 'Old Maldah' are the oldest. The former urban centre is located on the bank of the river Torsa and the latter is located on the bank of the river Mahananda.

Jaldhaka Hydel Power Project and Odlabari are settlements meant for specific projects. The former is located on the hill slopes and uses the waterflow of Jaldhaka river for the production of electric power.

Odlabari is located just on the plains where the river Tista has conveniently and partly been arrested by building a large barrage across the river. There is a project for the utilising the bounded water for irrigation and other purposes.

All the remaining urban centres studied are on the plain. Some are located on river banks like Jalpaiguri, English Bazar, Balurghat, Alipurduar and Mathabhanga. However, it may be noted that none of the rivers of the region is at present navigable.

Another important urban centre, 'Jagannathpur', may be mentioned separately. It is a settlement which has recently emerged near 'Farakka Barrage' project, the latter connecting North Bengal with the South Bengal over the river Ganga.