

Contested Spaces: Population Dynamics, the Refugees and Changing Social Landscape of Siliguri (1835 To 2011 C.E.)

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***Abstract:** The East India company in 1835 first acquired the nucleus of Darjeeling district from Raja of Sikkim, it was almost entirely under forest and particularly uninhabited. Although it was stated to have been inhabited probably a more accurate estimate was that these Hill tracks of 138 square miles contain the population of 100. The heavy forest and no communication facilities must have discouraged development and could have been a big obstruction for any increase of population.¹ This research article traces how the population of Siliguri changed after independence and especially after the Indo Pakistan war when there was a huge flow of migration of people from surrounding areas and this totally altered the social landscape of the region.*

Keywords: inhabitants, population, Tea industry, Refugee, migration,

General Lloyd and Dr. Chapman were sent in 1836 to explore and investigate the climate and capabilities of the Darjeeling. They spent the winter of 1836 and part of 1837 trying to inquire about the place and finally they decided to develop the place as a sanatorium. General Lloyd was appointed as the local agent to deal with the applications for land which began to pour in from Calcutta. There was rapid progress and this could be inferred from the fact that in 1836 there was only few huts erected by the Raja of Sikkim and by 1840 a road was built from Pankhabari, a hotel was erected at Kurseong, there as a staging bungalow at Darjeeling, and there were at least 30 private houses of migrants from outside and many building site had taken up at lebung.²

The decision of the company to develop Darjeeling as a Hill Resort was a big boost for the region as it gave opportunity to the neighbouring people to immigrate and take part in development. The original inhabitants, probably Lepchas, were rapidly outnumbered by settlers from Nepal and Sikkim³. By the year 1850, Dr. Campbell the first Superintendent reported that the number of inhabitants has risen to 10000. The Rapid influx was noted by Sir Joseph Cook when he visited Darjeeling about that time. When 1859 a rough census was taken of the inhabitants of this tract, the total was found to be over 22,000. It is not clear what the population of Terai was then but it can be assumed that it was considerable for the fact that, in 1874, it was reported that at the time of

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annexation there were 544 jotes which brought the revenue of Rs 19,000. The census of 1872 shows the total population of Terai to be 47,985.⁴

THE URBAN POPULATION DYNAMICS

The first regular census took place in 1872 when annexations were over the District had reached its present area. The total number of persons in the district at each of the census is shown below⁵:-

TABLE 3.1: Showing the population growth from 1872-1941

YEAR	POPULATION	Increase	Percent
1872	94,712
1881	1,55,179	60,467	64
1891	2,23,314	68,135	44
1901	2,49,117	25,803	12
1911	2,65,660	16,433	7
1921	2,82,748	17,198	6
1931	3,19,635	36,887	13
1941	3,76,369	56,734	18

Source: census reports.

The large increase in 1881 has been attributed in a part at least to the incompleteness and inaccuracy of the first census. There is no doubt however that the expansion of population between 1872 and 1890 was remarkable in spite of the vague alarm which caused numbers to escape across the border into Nepal rather than face the 1891 enumeration. Main cause of the rapid increase of population has been the development of the tea industry and the influx of settlers to cultivate the waste lands of the District. The steady improvement in communications due to the building of Railways and Roads also facilitated development generally and made possible a seasonal tourist traffic, encouraged the Provincial Government to stay longer and more often in the town and made Darjeeling a centre of educational activity for Europeans. The increase in the expansion of agriculture can be understood from the study of the increase in the number of general population. The expansion is due to the development of tea as said earlier, because we see that in 1872, there were 74 tea states in District with 14000 acres planted. This increased in 1881 to 153 tea estates and 30000 acres and in 1891 to 177 tea estates and 45000 acres of land⁶.

The 1931 census report it stated that the mother-tongue of 37444-person resident in the district was Bengali. The census of 1931 reported that those born in Bihar counted 24,540 in number, born in Sikkim 5,321, Born in Nepal were 59,016, born else were in Asia 2,052 and the Europeans who were born in and outside United kingdom and Ireland counted as 616 only. As many of those whose mother tongue was Bengali were probably

born in the Terai as per the record of A. J Dash. The population of the hill areas was more permanent than that of the Terai. ⁷ Increases in the Siliguri Subdivision had also been continuous⁸:-

TABLE 3.2: Showing the population growth and increase percentage of Siliguri Subdivision from 1872-1941

Year	Population	Increase Percent
1872	47,985	
1881	63,038	31
1891	72,993	16
1921	75,787	4(for three decades)
1931	82,258	6
1941	90,014	12

Source: census reports.

The year 1872 witnessed population of 47,985 and in 1947 the population was 90.014. The Kharibari Thana showed the lowest increase and the Siliguri thana the highest. The high rate of Siliguri thana was no doubt due to the abnormally rapid expansion of the Siliguri urban area⁹.

TABLE 3.3: Showing the population growth and percentage of decadal variation of Siliguri Subdivision from 1941-2011.

Year	Total Population	Percentage of decadal variation
1951	32480	209.72
1961	65471	101.57
1971	97484	48.9
1981	154378	58.36
1991	216950	40.53
2001	284602	31.18
2011	509709	44.16

Source: Annual Report of Siliguri Municipal Corporation, 2013

The Darjeeling District in 1947 had an area of approximately 1,192 square miles and the density of population is 316 persons per square mile. The Sadar Subdivision was about 19 percent, of the area of the District and held 39 percent of the population thus having the higher density (408) than that of District. The Kurseong Subdivision with area 14 percent of the District, held a population of 16 percent of the District population and thus had a density slightly higher (364) than that of the District. Mirik thana (38 square miles) has 44 persons per square mile, a considerably higher figure than that Kurseong thana (339) although this last contains an urban area. The Kalimpong Subdivision with an area of 35 percent of the District, held only 20 percent of its population. The density of

population appreciably lower (194) than that of the District. This is accounted for by the large areas of Government forest in the Subdivision and particularly in the Gorubathan thana where density as low as 88 per square mile.¹⁰

The Siliguri Subdivision had an area of 22 percent of the District area and a population 24 percent of the District. The density of population (349) was thus slightly higher than that of the District. Population was evenly distributed throughout the Subdivision, density varying from 342 in the Siliguri to 366 in Phansidewa thana. The Subdivision had only small areas of forest and although there were waste land, large area were cultivated, much being under tea. As it almost lies wholly in the plains, it witnessed a much higher density of population of 540 persons to the square mile. One of the cause may be, the unhealthy reputation of terai as the reason for a low population development, rendering necessary the importation of aboriginal tribes form Chota Nagpur and the Santal Parganas to develop and work in tea gardens.¹¹

The areas of this region fall into two main categories, firstly, what may be described as plantation areas and secondly, lands where the small cultivator worked and these lands were controlled by the Revenue Administration or the Terai jotedar. The plantation areas included reserved forests of Government, the Government Cinchona plantations and tea gardens. The population on Government Cinchona plantations in the District was 13,507 in the year 1947. The density of population was not high but the density on Government Forests which have a population of 10,014 was lowest. On the other hand areas leased for tea hold a population of 1,463,508 persons or about 39 percent, of the population of the whole District. As 1.673680 acres of land (258.75 square miles) were leased out for tea, the density of population in tea areas was over 560 persons per square mile, appreciably higher than the density rate for the District. Of the areas worked by the small cultivator by far the largest part was Government Khas Mahal land the only appreciate area not described as Khas Mahal is the Kumi Estate in the Sadar Subdivision. But the Terai Khas Mahal had little resemblance to other Khas Mahals in the District because Government did not deal directly with cultivators but only with middlemen.

MIGRATION AND POPULATION GROWTH

The Darjeeling district offers the most remarkable example of growth of population immigration from outside. At the time of the cession of the great part of Darjeeling subdivision comprising 357.4 sq.km by the Raja of Sikkim in 1835 AD, the tract was covered by forest and very sparsely populated. It has been said that there were not even 20 resident families or households in that area¹².

The period of Dr Arthur Campbell's superintendent-ship from 1839 A.D. saw the growth of settlements and increase in populations in the district. Campbell took vigorous progress steps to attract settlers to the region and his measures proved so successful that

by 1849, that is, seven years before any tea garden was established in the district he was able to report that the number of inhabitants had risen to 10000. In understanding the quantum of population growth as revealed by the census counts we find that the Census of 1872 was considered defective. There was concealment of females in 1881. Many of them fled on the census night over into Nepal. Labourers absconded from tea gardens from panic and other causes. It was believed that the Census of 1891 for the first time took a satisfactory count. During 1891 to 1901 the Hills were very healthy. On the other hand Terai was notoriously malaria and mortality was very heavy¹³.

The early settlers were mostly agriculturists. Campbell gave them every encouragement to reclaim forest lands and settle down there. Urbanisation through the establishment of a Sanatorium at the nucleus town also led to the growth of employment opportunities and hence the population increase. By 1852 there were 17 European houses in Darjeeling town besides a Bazaar and jail. A Hill Corps was stationed there to maintain law and order and the revenue raised from the settlement amounted to Rupees 50,000 in 1852.

The most potent factor contributing to the growth of population had been the tea industry for the introduction of which into the district the credit goes to Aurther D. Campbell among others. Soon after his appointment as Superintendent of Darjeeling, Campbell began trial experiments in growing tea and also induced many other European residents to do so. This led to the establishment of the first tea plantation on the commercial basis in 1856 at Aloobari and at Lebong. These enterprises created a big demand for plantation labour in the district and by the end of 1866 that is only 10 years after the establishment of the industry on a commercial basis, there was no less than 39 Gardens with 10,000 acres under cultivation which by 1874 rose to 113 spread over 18,888 acres. From around 1856 immigration of plantation labour caused by opening of tea garden had been a major factor in the population increase in the district. In 1869 when a rough Census of the than district was taken it was found out that it contains over 22,000 inhabitants. The great part was played by the tea industry in this behalf is evident from the fact that according to the Census of 1901 tea garden labourers and their dependents accounted for more than two third of the total population of the district, despite the fact that industry was passing through a minor recession at that time. In 1931, the same category of labourers formed about 47.25% of the total working population of the district¹⁴. In 1971 the workers employed in plantation forestry, mining, quarrying, hunting etc constituted about 27% of the total working population in the district and an overwhelming majority of them employed in the tea industry. In the three Hills subdivisions in 1971 they formed 31.5 percent of the total working population.

An emphasis on the tea industry as the most potent factor for the growth of population in the district should not minimise role played by general agriculture which

also increased large scale immigration to the newly reclaimed lands and would be apparent from the following facts related to Siliguri subdivision.

THE REFUGEE INFLUX¹⁵

Regionally the district may be divided into two distinct parts- the Hills and the Plains comprising of Siliguri subdivisions. Rajbansis along with other Bengali scheduled caste also form the bulk of population of the Siliguri subdivision but the colossal immigration of Bengali Hindus from the erstwhile East Pakistan and other places since the Independence reduced the numerical superiority of the Rajbansis in this area.

During 1901-11 there was a decline in the rate of growth of population as O'Malley in his census report of 1911 observed "the explanation is that there is only unlimited area in which there is room for an increase in population over one third of the district is covered by reserved forest while the tea Gardens extended over about 17 of its area while they were being open out and developed, and a phenomenal growth of population resulted. All the land suitable for cultivation within the area reserved for it has been taken up on the tea garden therefore no considerable increase of population can be expected as it occupies a third of the cropped area and the tea garden employee in labour force of 53000 or one fifth of the total population of the district. As regards ordinary cultivation, one third of the district is cultivable and it cannot give false hope to support a team in agricultural reserved for native cultivation."¹⁶

Between 1872 and 1881 the population has increased by 63.8 % and during the next decade by 43.9%. The growth rate registered a drop to 11.6% during 1891- 1901 and a further drop to 6.5% during 1901 to 1911 which remained almost the same in the following decade. During 1901 and 1911 most of the population growth took place in Kalimpong subdivision which recorded in 19.3 % rise in population, the Sadar division 6% and the Siliguri Subdivision recorded 2.6%. During this decade the growth of population by immigration was caused by bringing wasteland into cultivation than by expansion of industry, trade, commerce. During 1911-1921 when the district recorded 6.5% population increase, the Darjiling (Sadar) showed a decline and Siliguri surprisingly showed a 4.9 percent increase. During'1921-31 the district recorded a 13 per cent growth in population, followed by a 17.7 per cent increase in 1931-41.

EAST PAKISTAN REFUGEES

From 1931 onwards Siliguri subdivision began to attract more and more immigrants, the bulk of whom were traders, white collar employees and transport workers from the Indian plains, who came in the wake of urbanization of Siliguri an entrepot market and the most important transport node in north-eastern India. During the 1941-51 decade, the District population increased by 18.3 percent; Siliguri, subdivision registering a 29.4 per cent growth while the Siliguri police station containing the town of

Siliguri recorded a growth of 61.2 per cent, which was largely due to the influx of refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan, following the partition of the country in 1947 and the communal riots in 1950. During 1951-61 the district population decreased by 17.8 per cent against an increase of 36.4 per cent for Siliguri police station and 101.5 per cent for Siliguri town. The fact, noted earlier, that a large number of immigrants into the district from Nepal remained unaltered in 1961. In the same year it was found that there were more immigrants from Bihar including tribals like Oraons, Santals and Mundas, than from any other State in India. Immigrant refugees, mostly Bengali Hindus from the erstwhile East Pakistan now become an important segment of the population of the district. Most of them settled in the plains portion of the district within Siliguri subdivision. A number of Tibetans also migrated over after the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

It can be deduced from census data that 11.44 percent or 4,364 out of a total of 38,162 persons from Pakistan residing in the district in 1961 had come to settle there before the partition of the country. Between 1946 and 1951, a total of 15,738 persons (8,931 males and 6,807 females) emigrated from the former East Pakistan into Dārjiling district. The rush of refugees in the first two years was quite heavy; but 1950, the year in which there were widespread disturbances in the former East Pakistan, saw the largest influx, when 5,285 persons (2,946 males and 2,339 females) arrived. The influx of refugees was also heavy, in 1954, 1956 and 1960.

In 1961 it was found that 21,794 persons (12,053 males and 9,741 females) or a little over 57 per cent of the total of 38,162 persons and lived in urban areas (mainly Siliguri), while 16,368 persons, 9,141 males and 7,227 females) or a little less than 43 per cent had settled in the rural areas of the district.

The refugee influx helped Siliguri town to grow in many ways. The Refugee Rehabilitation Department made donations to the Siliguri College and the Siliguri Commerce College to construct buildings. Land was also granted to Siliguri Girls Higher Secondary School for its building as these institutions were needed to meet the ever-increasing demand for education from the new settlers. The State Government also advanced more than Rs. 1,50,000 to the Siliguri Municipality to construct roads, make sanitary arrangements and arrange water supply in the refugee concentrations within the municipal limits. The Refugee Rehabilitation Department opened a market on a 3-acre plot of land at an expense of more than Rs. 10,000.00 for the benefit of about 800 refugee traders and named it "Bidhan Market". Half of these 8 refugee colonies are within Siliguri town and the persons staying there were mostly employed in urban occupations pertaining to the tertiary sector of the economy. Two colonies were in the semi-urban area, the inhabitants of which are also employed more or less in the same sector. The other two colonies are in rural areas and engaged in the primary sector of the economy.¹⁷

THE TIBETIAN REFUGEE

With the annexation of Tibet by China, exodus of Tibetans Refugee to India began about the middle of 1951, which gained momentum and assumed fairly large proportions in 1956. But the main bulk of Tibetan refugees began arriving in India from 1959. The responsibility of rehabilitating the Tibetan refugees rested with an organization called the Central Relief Committee, under the direct supervision of the Ministry of External Affairs and the Ministry of Home affairs of the Government of India¹⁸.

There were five official production centre to which a number of Tibetan refugees were attached either as trainee-workers, trainer workers, wage labourers or as self-employed workers. Except where there was provision for residential accommodation within the Productive units, no special colonies were set for these displaced persons.

The five production centers with their respective lines of specialization were: (1) Tibetan Central Training (Handicraft) Centre of Lebung, at Darjeeling. (2) Agricultural Co-operative Farming Society at Sonada, Dariling (3) Lamahatta Agricultural Co-operative Society at Lamahatta, Kalimpong (4) Handicraft Self-help Co-operative Society, Kalimpong and (5) Sonada Handicraft, Dairy Poultry and Agricultural Self-help Co-operative Society, Sonada. But these units could provide employment only to a fraction of the Tibetan refugees and hence a great number of them had to work either as petty traders and pedlars of handicrafts or as day labourers. Since there were no specified colonies, excepting residential quarters attached to the productive units, the Tibetan refugees lived in small concentrations at various places, preferring sites near monasteries and those inhabited by the Bhutias. Thus they were found as small closed communities at Ghoom, Sukiapukri, Kurseong town, Sittong and Algarah. A large proportion of the Tibetan refugees who were not attached to the production centres constitutes a floating population. For instance, out of 6,292 Tibetan refugees who settled in Kalimpong subdivision between 1959 and 1967, only 606 persons (345 males and 261 females) were found living there in November 1967.

MIGRANTS FROM NEIGHBOURING STATES

The males accounted for 53.14 and the females 46.86 per cent of the district population according to the 1971 Census. But the percentage of females in urban areas is much less, being only 44.22 while in the rural areas females constitute 47.64 per cent of the total population. Women composed 48.25 per cent of the total population of the three hill subdivisions while in Siliguri subdivision the corresponding percentage was 44.63. The disparity of sexes is more marked in Siliguri town than in the urban areas in the hills. While in the urban areas of the Hill subdivisions the women composed 44.82 per cent of the population, in Siliguri town they form only 42.41 per cent of the population. The reason for this is not far to seek ; most of the immigrants into the urban areas of the hills, except traders from Bihar and Rajasthan, were permanent settlers and, as such, lived with

their women folk, whereas a great number of immigrants to Siliguri town were traders, skilled or unskilled workers and day labourers who were non-permanent residents. In the rural areas of Siliguri, too, especially in the tea gardens, more non-permanent residents were to be found than in the hill subdivisions. But in the rural areas in the hills, except some traders and white-collar workers, few people lived as non-permanent residents.

But the growth of population in Siliguri may be ascribed to partition of Bengal 1947. There was huge influx of population from the adjoining areas of East Bengal (Pakistan, now Bangladesh) to Siliguri Town. Geographically Siliguri is very near to Bangladesh and refugees entered into this town. Furthermore, after partition Assam lost its link with the rest of India via Bangladesh and Assam traffic must pass through Siliguri. Gradually, it was established as a trading centre and thousands of refugees flocked to this town for shelter and for rehabilitation. Siliguri's importance was further enhanced by the Since-Indian border war 1962 and Siliguri became a very important centre for military concentration. Along with the heavy military concentration in the Terai forest area, new Railway Stations were developed and an Airport was also came into existence. Trade and Commerce flourished. Transport because a very important occupation for a large number of people.

CONCLUSION

The heterogeneous population composition of Siliguri was one of the spin-offs of urban transformations. This issue will be taken into consideration in detail in the next chapter. The social system of this border town took shape through migration of various groups from the neighborhood following different political developments. Massive migration led to differentiation of social and economic space. The illegal cross border movement of goods further led to expansion of urban markets. The region faced both internal as well external threats leading to heavy militarization. The establishment of many army cantonments added to the urban growth of Siliguri. The social, military and the economic spaces of Siliguri were re-defined in phases after independence.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Dash A.J. *Bengal District Gazetteer: Darjeeling* (Alipore: Bengal Government Press, 1947), p 49

² Mitra. A, *District Handbooks Darjeeling* , West Bengal Government Press, Alipore, West Bengal 1954, p 93

- ³ O'Malley, L.S.S. (1907): *Bengal District Gazetteers*, Darjeeling, The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, (Reprint, 1985).
- ⁴ Ibid., pp 49-50
- ⁵ Census Reports from 1872 to 1941.
- ⁶ Local labour could not meet the resultant demand and immigration on a very large scale made up the deficiency.
- ⁷ Census Report, 1931.
- ⁸ Census Reports from 1872 to 1941.
- ⁹ Annual Report of Siliguri Municipal Corporation, 2013
- ¹⁰ Census , 1947
- ¹¹ Census 1950
- ¹² Banerjee, Amiya Kumar et al, *West Bengal District Gazetteers, Darjeeling*, Government of West Bengal, 1980
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Chattopadhyay, Shivaprasad (2000): *Siliguri, PurnangaItihas*, Goodwill Press, Siliguri.
- ¹⁵ For a detail picture of Tibetan refugee please see Ahir. D.C.- *Himalayan Buddhism :Past and Present*, Sri Sadguru Publications, 1993, Awasti. Indira- *Between Sikkim and Bhutan (The Lepchas and Bhutias of Pedong)*, B.R.Publishing Corporation, 1978, Coleman.Graham (ed)-*A Handbook of Tibetan Culture: A Guide to Tibetan Centres and Resources Throughout the World*, Dider, 1993, Datta . Karubaki – *The Buddhist Monasteries of Darjeeling Hills*, Occasional Paper No.13, Centre for Himalayan Studies, North Bengal University.Gobinda. Lama Anagarika – *The Way of the White Clouds : A Buddhist in Tibet*, B.I. Publications, 1960 Lorie Peter and Julie Foakes : *The Buddhist Directory*, New Leaf,1996
- ¹⁶ O'Malley, L.S.S. Census of India, 1911. Bengal and Sikkim General Report Volume, Calcutta 1912.
- ¹⁷ Report of subdivisonal officer, Siliguri discussed in Mitra, Jogesh Chandra, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement operation in the Darjeeling Terai (1919-1925)*, Calcutta, 1927.
- ¹⁸ The expenses of running the colonies and the self-help centres for the Tibetan Refugees are borne jointly by the Central Relief Committee, Government of India and Dalai Lama's Council at Dharmasala in Himachal Pradesh.