

Introduction

As a student of sociology, the author's interest was primarily confined to the sociological aspects of urban life in the city of Siliguri which, enjoying an inter-state location in national as well as international perspective, has witnessed a phenomenal growth within the space of a few decades. Siliguri is the subdivisional headquarters of its namesake, lying in the plains of Darjeeling District in West Bengal. Situated on the bank of river Mahananda, Siliguri, as an urban centre, has developed fast since post-Independence (mid- 1947) days from its unique location on the only land-corridor connecting the north-eastern states with the rest of India, and its very close situation with neighbouring foreign countries like Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and China (Tibet)- some of them lying within a reach of less than 20 km. which together have a profound role in defining the urban character of this boom-town, recording a feverish growth in the size of its population, in the spatial sprawl of its urbanscape, in the changing character of the social composition of its population, and in the growing complexity of its economic functions.

In the absence of relevant material, particularly data on urban life in the perspective of its socio-economic parameters, the study had to depend mostly on field investigations based on questionnaire (Annexure I) prepared for this purpose and carried out by the author on the basis of a house-to-house survey. And in this connection it is necessary to

mention that the study was mostly confined to the thirty wards (I-XXX) of the municipal area of Siliguri which represented the city of Siliguri prior to 1994 after which 17 more wards representing Dabgram and other mouzas were annexed to form Siliguri Municipal Corporation. But at the time of this study - and even now - no official data were available for the newly annexed area. For instance, my work is primarily based on the Electoral Roll of 1993, prepared by the Election Commission (Govt. of India) for the Assembly Election in which the area under those 17 wards was not included as it lay beyond the jurisdiction of the urban area of Siliguri city. Hence, the entire focus on the sociological aspects of the urban population of Siliguri remains largely confined to the original 30 wards of the city.

Needless to say that it had been a very hard, painstaking and difficult task, more in view of a general lack of trust and co-operation on the part of the respondents in every sphere of urban life than other factors which ultimately could be tackled by the author with time and patience and this was possible for the primary reason that having been born and brought up in this city, the author could finally make the point of his investigation meaningful to the city-residents in general.

Before we set out on a detailed study of the sociological characteristics of the city, a brief historical sketch tracing the growth of Siliguri and the factors contributing to its sudden emergence as the premier seat of urbanization in the entire region of North Bengal lying north of river Ganga, may be helpful in understanding how it came into the limelight.

Historical Background

The district of Darjeeling was formed in 1850 (W.W.Hunter, 1876) and it was expanded with the inclusion of the Terai region in 1866, as a result of which 'Siliguri' was included in the district. Before 1866, (W.W.Hunter, 1876) the road communication between the district of Darjeeling and the plains was not so convenient because there was only a narrow road at that time built in 1841 running through Pankhabari which still exists. The present Hill Cart Road was constructed in 1861 which provided a wider road for wheeled traffic from the hills to the plains. Another road originating from the northern part of river Ganga was simultaneously constructed which was connected with Siliguri as a result of which Siliguri came into prominence. (O'Malley, 1907)

✓ Prior to 1878, there was only one communicating route between Siliguri and Calcutta which went via Bihar through Khana junction, Bolpur and Kiul junctions, along with a ferry crossing at Ganga (Sahebganj) and another road from Siliguri to Purnia for a stretch of about 125 kms.

Subsequently, the railway line was constructed by the Eastern Bengal State Railway Company connecting Sealdah (Calcutta) with Damukia Ghat, presently lying in Bangladesh near the bank of river Padma. It was extended further from the opposite bank of Padma river at a place known as Saraghat to Siliguri through Nator, Santahar, Parbatipur (all of them lying in Bangladesh today) and Jalpaiguri in 1878 (O'Malley, 1907).

Accordingly, this provided an uninterrupted railway communication

between Siliguri and Calcutta. Subsequently, this meter gauge line was changed into a broad gauge line in 1926. Another railway line constructed in 1881 and known as Darjeeling Himalayan Railways, connected Darjeeling with Siliguri and thus added further importance to the latter.

In 1835, Darjeeling as a small settlement hardly had one hundred people (O'Malley, 1907). The population in Darjeeling gradually increased and in 1849 it crossed the mark of 10,000. After 1849, however the population of Darjeeling did not increase fast and at that time Siliguri was nothing but a tiny village with a railway station and a population of mere 500 heads was recorded in 1901. In the Gazetteer of Darjeeling 1907, Siliguri was declared as a 'swampy malarious village' with a population of only 784 (O'Malley, 1907). This place was declared by the authority as unhealthy and unhygienic and it was considered as a 'depot of malaria, typhoid' etc. In spite of these demerits, Siliguri was declared as a Sub-Divisional Headquarters under Darjeeling District in 1907.

The population between 1907 and 1930 increased gradually but its overall development was not noteworthy, because till that time there was only one single two-storied pucca (brick-built) building, which proves that 'Siliguri' though had by then a larger population, there had been little improvement in its performance.

In 1920, a club was set up called the 'Sporting Union', which laid importance to the development of sports, mainly encouraging football game in the area. This was followed by the the setting up of schools and libraries between 1910 and 1930. There is also enough evidence of

Swadeshi (Independence) movement in Siliguri, and 'Gandhiji' visited Siliguri in 1925 in this connection.

(In 1931, Siliguri, for the first time, was declared as a town by the Census of India, when the population of this town had increased to nearly 7,000. From then onwards this town also began to flourish culturally, and in 1935 a film was shown in the Mitra Sammilani Hall (established in the year 1909 as Bijalee Talkies and later known as Tripti Talkies) for the first time. A good number of standard plays were also performed on the stage in 1937 which further reflects the cultural development of this town.

During the period from 1931 to 1941, the population of Siliguri increased faster, mainly due to the flow of immigrants from surrounding districts in the south and nearby hills in the north. However, the increase of population during the next decade was the highest so far in any single decade for 'Siliguri' (219 % in 1941-51). ✓

(In 1949, Siliguri municipality was formed with 15 wards, each having a nominated Commissioner. Though Siliguri was declared a town in 1931, the local transport was not at all good. Only one hand-drawn rikshaw was there till 1951. In 1952; the municipality started issuing licence for rikshaw pullers, giving licence to 450 rikshaws. The electricity was introduced in this town for the first time for public use from Kurseong Hydro- Electric Power supply in 1951.)

A college was also set up in the same year(1951) named as 'Siliguri College' which was the only college the people of Siliguri had till

1971. The 'Siliguri College of Commerce' was the next to follow. In 1981, 'Siliguri Mahila Mahavidyalaya' was set up as a girls' college.

Many schools, libraries, recreation/sporting clubs and some important organisations and services set-up were established during the period 1948 to 1955, like the Terai Harasundar Public Library, the Fire Brigade (1948), the Telephone Exchange (1948), Siliguri Girls' High School (1947-48), Siliguri Sports Association (1948), Vivekananda Club (1952), Ramkrishna Byam Siksha Sangha (1948) etc. One strong indication that Siliguri was developing culturally is that one of the leading dramatists of that time, Sri Tulsi Lahiri and his troop in Calcutta gave a number of stage performances at Siliguri.

(After 1947, due to the large inflow of people from East Bengal (East Pakistan), slum areas started developing in and around Siliguri. It was during this time that the market also started to grow here and increased the flow of essential commodities. In 1949, Siliguri railway junction was built, thereby opening a new route for direct contact with Bihar and the adjoining regions. The construction of Siliguri junction facilitated the connection between the former and Siliguri Town Station via the existing narrow gauge line which ran along the Hill Cart Road. However, the narrow gauge rail line between Siliguri and Gaikholia Railway station near Kalimpong was completely washed away by the flood of river Tista in 1950, thereby ending the train link between Siliguri Town and Kalimpong.

At the time of Chinese aggression in 1962, the roads in and around Siliguri were extensively used for the movement of tanks and army vehicles, thereby improving the transport system owing to the importance it enjoyed during the war. For instance, the width of the Hill Cart Road was increased largely by evacuating the various stalls which existed on both sides of the Hill Cart Road. The Chinese aggression in 1962 brought the strategic importance of roads into correct focus and real improvement of them started since then which made Siliguri the major nodal point of the region.

Another achievement of great importance in the field of communication was the setting up of New Jalpaiguri Railway station in 1964. Siliguri Junction and Siliguri Town station were connected with New Jalpaiguri railway station. The main motive behind the building up of the New Jalpaiguri Railway station was to connect Siliguri and the adjoining areas with Calcutta by a broad-gauge railway line. The narrow gauge railway track over the existing Mahananda bridge was removed and shifted to the railway bridge and a new 32-feet wide road-bridge was built across the Mahananda river with pavement on both sides. Since the communication with the neighbouring states developed with the increase of traffic, the roads of Siliguri had to be widened and the example of such enlargement of roads was the construction of the new Mahananda Bridge replacing the old one. The construction work started in 1964 and was completed in 1967. But as the Farakka Barrage with road-cum-rail carriage ways had not come up till then, the railway link was maintained

between Siliguri and Calcutta via Khejuria Ghat on river Ganga which needed to be crossed by a ferry. After the building up of the Farakka Barrage in 1974, train communication became an uninterrupted feature between Siliguri and Calcutta. It may be noted that New Jalpaiguri became the first railway station in India to have all the three gauges (i.e. broad, middle and narrow).

In 1960, a political agitation started in Assam over the language issue as a result of which many people belonging to the Bengali community started migrating to Siliguri and settling down in the town. In 1971, the Bangladesh war triggered the flow of people comprising primarily non-Muslim Bengalis, and many of them arrived in Siliguri and other towns of North Bengal.

Myanmar (Burma) became politically independent in 1948 and since then the Myanmarese authorities had started sending back all Indians from Burma and the process was completed in 1964. A major section of the Indians were Bengali many of them originally hailing from Sylhet and Chittagong lying at present in Bangladesh. Some of them migrated to this town and started business mostly in retail shops dealing with medicine. They are popularly known as the 'refugees from Burma'.

The beginning of the ULFA agitation in Assam in 1980 has set off another flow of migrants consisting of the Bengalis, a section of them having settled down in and around Siliguri, specially after 1985, thus increasing the population of Siliguri, and all this having a deep impact on the land price of this town.

The growth of urban population in Siliguri in the decade 1981-91 was 46.83 per cent which is a noticeable increase but compared to that of the previous decade i.e. 1971-81 it is less (58.36%). But one important factor is that Dabgram (N.M.) comprising an area of 21.80 sq. km. was annexed to the urban area of Siliguri city, showing both Dabgram and Siliguri as one unit and later this additional area along with the Municipal area of original Siliguri was formed into Siliguri Municipal Corporation in 1994. It may be noted that at the time of the Census count of 1991 Dabgram previously treated as a separate town, showed a striking increase of population of 92.29 per cent which reflects that the people who immigrated from Assam mainly settled down in the Dabgram area as a result of which Dabgram increased so fast in population.

B. Review of the Existing Literature

There has so far been no exhaustive work on the city of Siliguri particularly focusing on its sociological transformation. Of the three Ph.D.theses, unpublished, one was done by an economist, R.Roy, entitled, "Economic change in Siliguri and problems of its urban development" (1985), and another was done by a Geographer, P.Saha, entitled "Problems and prospects of Development of Siliguri and Jalpaiguri towns", (1991), while the third was "A Study of problems and prospects of Retail Trade of Consumer Goods in, Siliguri, District of Darjeeling, North Bengal" (1981), done by S.Chakraborty.

The first of them, "Economic Change in Siliguri and problems of its

bringing about the economic changes in the overall activities of the town where as in the recent thesis Saha has confined her studies to highlighting the infrastructural situations and the associated problems. The study made by Chakraborty is, on the other hand, has retail trade as its major focus. In the first two theses, social problems have featured, no doubt, but then make a minor issue and do not take into account the sociological implications of the growing nature of the present community - mix.

Besides these three, there are a few short articles on Siliguri, such as ("Some Considerations of Urban Aspects in and around Siliguri", in the Indian Journal of Landscape systems and Ecological studies(1987), by H.Dutta) which also did not consider the sociological aspects of this city. Further, the very nature of the work demanded data and information not available in any published form. They needed to be collected from the area of study through personal investigations. These were to be supplemented with data and information available from secondary sources for which purpose the publications of the Census of India for different censal years have been profusely used. Books and some articles in journals offering peripheral instances having come useful at various parts of this study, may be mentioned. They are: "Social Geography" by Michael Pacitone(1987) highlighting the pattern of geographical location and socio-spatial changes;"Readings in Social Geography"(1975) edited by Emrys Jones analysing sociological manifestations of urban behaviour; " Migration and Urbanization "(1975) by Brian M. Du Toit stressing on the effect of Migration on Urbanization; "Urbanization in India:Problems

and Prospects"(1998) by Ummareddy Venkateswarlu; "Urbanization Trends in India : A Case Study of a medium town"(1981) by H.G. Hanumappa, "Rural Migrants in an Urban Setting" (1978) written by P.S. Majumder and I. Majumder have gone into the details of different aspects of urbanization in India."Migration"edited by J.A.Jackson,publications like "The World Population Conference" Vol- II (United Nations)(1967), "Urban Development Theory,Fact and Illusion"(1988) by J.Vernon,"An introduction to Social Geography" (1977) by E.Jones and J.Eyles, "Methods and Techniques in Human Geography" (1988), by G.M.Robinson, "Urban Planning Theory" (1975), edited by M.C.Branch, "The Indian city: Poverty, Ecology and Urban Development"(1978) edited by A.de Souza, "Migration Geography" (1996) by G.Kaur etc. are indirectly helpful in strengthening the ideas related to the study undertaken by the author.In this connection mention needs to be made of a few more publications having been helpful in explaining the situation in the area of study emphasising the sociological implications of the changing nature of urban character. They are "Introduction to the Sociology of Developing Societies" (1982), Ed.by H.Alvi and T.Shanin, "Social Relations and Spatial structures" (1985), Ed.by D.Gregory and J.Urry; "A Reader in Urban Sociology" (1991), Ed.by M.S.A. Rao etal,and "Urban Sociology in India" (1974), Ed.by M.S.A.Rao. Besides, two old publications, namely "Bengal District Gazetteer: Darjeeling"(1907) by L.S.S. D'Malley and "A statistical Account of Bengal", District of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri etc. Vol.X (1876) by W.W.Hunter were very much useful. Further, the author was benefited in many ways gleaning information of a wide range appearing in a number of

journals, occasional papers and reports, like the Journals of the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, North Bengal University Review, The Geographical Memoir, The Economic Times, etc. details of which appear in the 'Bibliography'.

C. Objectives of the Study.

The city of Siliguri having the third largest urban population for any city in West Bengal within its municipal area (ignoring the case of Durgapur which has a slightly larger population but that is in the whole of the 'notified area') which, recording an increase of over ten times within a space of four decades (1951-91), makes an unprecedented record for any city in the state, if not in India, and this apparently could not happen without steady immigration.

Hence, migration came to be one of the objectives of this study but the major objective was to focus on the Social Composition of the people residing in this city and their sociological behaviour based on the investigation of some important parameters defining urban life in general. Thus, the primary objective of this study was to identify and pin-point the role of different communities constituting the urban-social fabric in evolving the existing socio-economic character of this city.

D. Methodology.

The study was largely based on primary data collected from the field, using (a) The Electoral Rolls for Assembly Election, 1993, the

Electoral Rolls of Siliguri Municipal Corporation, 1994, and data available with the "Siliguri-Jalpaiguri Development Authority (Govt. of West Bengal)", which formed the basis for obtaining information on the social composition of the urban residents of Siliguri Municipal area; (b) this was followed by the use of questionnaire prepared for the purpose for eliciting information through house-to-house survey under particular heads relevant to different socio-economic parameters selected for the study. This was supplemented further by data and information provided by secondary sources like the Census of India, Municipal records, statistics available from various public and private organisations, and maps provided by the Siliguri-Jalpaiguri Development Authority (Govt. of W. Bengal). Simple mathematical and cartographic principles have been used for processing data and preparation of the figures included in the study.

E. Chapter Organisation.

The thesis has been structured in the following manner:

It begins with an 'Introduction' which apart from introducing the area on which the study was made, includes a brief historical sketch of the city under study, followed by statements on the 'objectives of the study', 'review of the existing literature', 'methodology' and 'chapter organisation'.

This is followed by the actual work divided into six chapters. In Chapter I the growth of the city has been discussed based on census data

comparing the growth with that of the district the city belongs to and the state in which the district lies.

Chapter II highlights the spatial distribution of the different communities living in the city in order to ascertain the nature of concentration or otherwise of people belonging to different communities.

Chapter III has been devoted to the identification of the major economic activities and the comparative role of different communities in them, bringing out community-wise position in the economic performances of the city.

Chapter IV focuses on the existing nature of religious disparities among different urban communities and how far this is reflected in the languages spoken by them.

Chapter V gives an idea about the social institutions functioning in the city, their allegiance to specific groups or communities and a review of their impact on urban life through their activities.

Chapter VI highlights the findings derived from field investigations based on selected social parameters, offering an insight into the social conditions of city life.

This is followed by " Conclusion ".