

ABSTRACT**FROM OBSCURITY TO A METROPOLITAN: A HISTORY OF THE GROWTH AND EXPANSION OF SILIGURI TOWN WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO ITS GEOSTRATEGIC IMPORTANCE (circa 1835-2014)****MINAKSHEE KUMARI**

This thesis looks at the spatial, locational, economic, physical, and geo-strategic manifestations that combined to make Siliguri, which was once a village, a metropolitan city. The uniqueness of Siliguri city lies in the fact that it has no stories of the past to recount. It had no ancient or middle age lineages that it could endorse to historians and other researchers. It had no royal heritage like Hyderabad or Coochbehar or any trace of feudal prowess to boast of. It was just a halt station for the passengers to board narrow gauge trains to Darjeeling Hill station. A mere village ‘unhygienic and full of jungles and mosquitoes’, dreaded by Europeans, marauded by outlawed sanyasis, contested by Bhutanese and Kooch Rajas in the second half of the 19th century emerged as one of the largest and most developed towns of North Bengal. Siliguri has no industrial fundamentals yet the population of Siliguri metro area in the year 2014 was more than 8 lakhs and according to United Nations World Population Prospects it is projected that the metro area population would be above 10 lakhs.

Siliguri emerged as a migrant town and the profile and the nature of migration have considerably changed throughout the years. The bulk of migrants not only constituted the Bangladeshi refugees but also the persecuted Bengalis that migrated from North Eastern states like Assam etc., and the non-Bengali speaking population like Marwari, Bihari and Nepalese that came from nearby areas in search of employment and new homes. The City was kind enough to accommodate all these migrants. A large number of rural people from different districts of West Bengal and other states in India have come into Siliguri city to search for jobs, betterment of life style, better medical facilities, better educational facilities and others. The heterogeneous population composition of Siliguri was one of the spin-offs of urban transformations. The growth of population was accompanied with the growth of economy and communication.

The economic space as well as the transit spaces passed through colossal changes in context to Siliguri. The market of Siliguri caters to a large hinterland of *Duars*, Darjeeling, the entire state of Sikkim, parts of the Kingdom of Bhutan as well as parts of North-East India. Apart from trading, the ‘Tea, Tourism and Timber’ have accounted for major economic

produce. Siliguri has a large number of trade centres and readymade markets for consumer goods and is thus home to myriad retailers, wholesalers, dealers, distributors and small-scale entrepreneurs. It is the commercial nerve centre of North Bengal. The city's strategic location makes it a base for commodity supplies to the North-East region.

The main part of this thesis deliberates the geostrategic importance and military establishments of Siliguri and its role at geopolitical level. It highlights the role of militarization in the growth and development of the region. It was the Britishers who first understood the strategic importance of this location when they were formalising their bilateral relations with Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal. Sino- India war, The Indo-Pak war and the creation of Bangladesh highlighted the Strategic importance of Siliguri as reflected in declassified CIA secret files. The Siliguri corridor became one of the most military-sensitive spots and this led to the militarization of the region (recent Dokhlam issues are one such example that reintroduced the international distinctiveness of Siliguri).

Siliguri is landlocked with international boundaries like Nepal in the North and West and Bangladesh in the South and East. Bhutan is not very far from Siliguri as it is approximately only 93 miles. It has no access to the sea and is traversed by NH-31, the only road that connects Sikkim to the Indian mainland. This highway also connects the North Eastern States with India peninsula through the Siliguri corridor making it one of the most strategic areas. It is also linked with the traditional trade routes of Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet, now a part of china. Siliguri corridor connects North East India with the rest of India. This piece of land lies between two international boundaries of Nepal and Bangladesh on either side of the corridor. Siliguri corridor also called 'Chicken's neck' is an example of Colonial delusions created in 1947 during the partition of India and Pakistan. It is a very narrow stretch of passage of about 23.5 miles. The Corridor serves Indian military bases established in North East India and Sikkim with supplies, reinforcements and other military formations. The security forces operating in these areas point out that as geographical configuration puts the North Eastern States of our country at a disadvantage for a lack of strategic depth and the Siliguri Corridor is considered as an indispensable area to provide a buffer. The Corridor is the hub of road, railway and air networks connecting West Bengal to other North Eastern states of India. Geo Strategically it is also the nucleus of existence of Seema Suraksha Bal, Indian Army, and Border Security Force and is a spot to receive all the information related to Line of Actual Control with China. Any military development in the Eastern Front from the Chinese would be carried out with an eye on incarcerating the Siliguri Corridor to cut off Northeast India from her mainland. The Siliguri Corridor is as important for China as it is for India. Given the strategic importance of the corridor it is heavily patrolled by India troops with different state and central border forces

separately. The Indian government needs to look inwards to strengthen its military defence and infrastructure near Siliguri Corridor in order to counter a plausible Chinese military in future. The strategic location of the Town and the subsequent setting up of the military bases all over the region has certainly accelerated the pace of urbanisation and overall development of the region.

In retrospect we can say that the strategic location of Siliguri made her cynosure of all eyes. The locational advantage of the region incited the proponents that led to urbanisation. The city has witnessed a rapid urban expansion. It has gobbled up the tea gardens and neighbouring rural areas evicting in a large way the tea labour and the marginalised and pushing them to fringes of the city and the adjoining rural areas.

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