



The Exodus and Influx: Unveiling the Urban Transformation in Darjeeling Plains

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Abstract

The Terai region, situated at the base of the Himalayas, was covered by dense forests, abundant wildlife, and insects, making it unsuitable for human habitation due to its adverse conditions during the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries. After the Anglo-Nepalese War in 1816, the British acquired control over the entire Terai region, spanning from the east bank of the Mechi River to the Teesta River, following the Tetulia Agreement signed between the East India Company and Nepal. Initially, the governance of the area was entrusted to the King of Sikkim. However, recognizing its political and economic significance, the British permanently annexed the Terai from Sikkim in 1850. Since then, The British, driven by economic interests, implemented distinct policies in agriculture, land revenue, trade, and commerce, leading to rapid changes in the demographic and socio-economic landscape. The influx of outsiders not only resulted in overpopulation but also brought about economic and moral shifts in the lives of the predominantly agrarian population. Simultaneously, as various landowners began selling their land to tea garden owners at higher prices, the plight of agricultural laborers, such as Adhiars, became increasingly precarious. This paper endeavors to delve into the intricate relationship between land devolution and demographic patterns in the Terai region, particularly focusing on the Siliguri sub-division within the Darjeeling district. By examining the colonial and post-colonial legacies, it seeks to unravel the multifaceted land-related challenges that continue to shape the socio-economic fabric of the region.

Keywords: *Siliguri, Migration, Immigration, Urbanization.*

Before the British control in 1850, the Terai region had been under the authority of Nepal, Kochbehar, and Sikkim at different times. In 1780 AD, Nepal seized control of the Terai, also known as 'Sikkim Morang', owing to Sikkim's vulnerability. Following the Anglo-Nepalese War's conclusion in 1816, the British took possession of the entire Terai region,

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stretching from the east bank of the Mechi River to the Teesta River. This acquisition adhered to the terms outlined in the Tetulia Agreement, signed between the East India Company and Nepal, and the territory was subsequently handed over to the King of Sikkim (Dash,1947). During the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Terai region was shrouded in dense forests and inhabited by an array of wild animals and insects, rendering it inhospitable for human habitation. Nonetheless, despite these daunting conditions, the indigenous tribes residing in this area primarily comprised the Mech, Dhimal, Tharu, and Rajbanshi peoples. However, as the British recognized the political and economic significance of the region, they established permanent control over the Terai in 1850, displacing Sikkim. The imposition of British rule precipitated significant changes in the land revenue system within the Darjeeling-Terai region. Yet, due to the absence of clear governmental oversight, no coherent land settlement initiatives were implemented in this region. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, agricultural practices in the Terai region diverged markedly from those prevalent in other parts of Bengal. Agriculture served as the primary occupation for the majority of the Terai population. Following the British annexation of the Terai in 1850, initial plans entailed placing the southern portion under the jurisdiction of the Purniah Collector, while attaching the northern portion to Darjeeling. However, due to vehement opposition from the inhabitants of the southern Terai to being transferred to Purniah, the British government opted to unite the entire tract with Darjeeling. Before this consolidation occurred, the Collector of Purniah had reached a three-year land revenue settlement with the Rajbansi and Muslim inhabitants of the lower Terai. Simultaneously, Dr. Campbell facilitated a similar settlement for the upper Terai, predominantly inhabited by the Mech community at the time (Hunter,1876). Thus, while the Terai region presented formidable challenges to human settlement due to its rugged terrain and inhospitable conditions, its strategic importance led to its eventual integration into British-controlled territories. This integration brought about changes in governance and land revenue systems, albeit without comprehensive land settlement initiatives, reflecting the complex socio-political dynamics of the region during that era.

Darjeeling-Terai, being a non-regulated area, did not adhere to the provisions of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 for granting land settlement to tenants. Instead, the Company's Waste Land Rules, applicable elsewhere in India, were enforced in this region. However, the Permanent Settlement Regulation of 1793 governed fifteen mouzas under the Siliguri Police Station and three mouzas under the Phansidewa Police Station (Sharma,1993). The Siliguri Subdivision encompasses 22% of the district's area and is home to approximately 24% of the district's population. With a population density of 349, slightly higher than the district average, population distribution is uniform across the subdivision, ranging from 342 in Siliguri to 366 in Phansidewa. Although the subdivision has limited forested areas and some wasteland, a significant portion is well cultivated, particularly for tea production. Despite being predominantly situated in the plains, the population density remains lower than expected compared to the neighboring Sadar Subdivision in Jalpaiguri District, which hosts a population density of 540 individuals per square mile despite sharing similar characteristics. The historical lack of healthiness associated with the Terai has been identified as a factor contributing to its limited population growth. This highlights the importance of involving

indigenous tribes from areas such as Chota Nagpur and the Santal Parganas in the establishment and operation of tea plantations in the region (Dash,1947).

In ancient times, the Terai region was sparsely inhabited by indigenous Koches and Meches, while the hills were occupied by the indigenous Lepchas. These groups adhered to animistic beliefs and practiced primitive agricultural methods, such as jhum cultivation. However, subsequent exploitation significantly altered the racial makeup and greatly increased the population. Initially, there were conversions of Koches to Islam in the Terai, along with a growing influence from Tibetans (including Bhutanese) from the north, leading to their dominance over the Lepchas. Ongoing conflicts between the Nepalis, Tibetans, and Chinese further marginalized the indigenous populations and positioned the Nepalis to exploit the region, a situation that intensified with British political intervention. British exploitation primarily focused on the advancement of tea cultivation, engineering projects, trade, and education, without leading to a significant permanent British settlement. This era witnessed substantial immigration, particularly in the hills, with the influx of Nepalis who proved to be more adept as tea garden laborers and cultivators compared to the indigenous Lepchas of the Terai. Additionally, tribes from Chotanagpur migrated to the region. Consequently, the influence of Lepchas and Tibetans in the hills waned. The development of infrastructure, communication, and trade attracted Marwari, Behari, and Bengali traders and professionals to the area. Despite their numerical superiority, these groups economically dominate the Nepalis. Consequently, the region exhibits a diverse population, including Nepalis, Lepchas, Bhitias, Tibetans, Bengalis, Marwaris, and Biharis in the hills, while the plains are inhabited by Bengalis, Muslims, Marwaris, Beharis, Rajbangshis, Santals, Oraons, and Mundas (Dash, 1947). The British administration introduced new agricultural and land systems, which were later abolished on April 15th, 1955. Before British rule, the region relied solely on agricultural laborers. However, starting in 1850, a diverse array of religious and ethnic groups migrated to the area. Notably, many Marwaris belonged to the Agarwal and Oswal communities, while among the Biharis were the Hazam and Benia. Tea cultivation began in the Darjeeling hills in 1840 under Campbell's initiative, leading to a rush for land acquisitions for tea plantations across the mountains. Commercial tea production commenced by 1856, with European owners and employees managing Darjeeling tea estates, while Nepalese workers formed the labor force (Sutradhar,2013).

In 1862, tea cultivation expanded to the Terai region due to the depletion of available land in the hills by 1860. Consequently, tea production expanded to the plains. During the nineteenth century, forest and government-owned lands in the Terai were leased for thirty years. Workers from various tribes, such as the Munda, Oraon, Kheria, Sauria, Malpaharia, Ghasi, and Turi, migrated from Santhal Pargana to work in the tea plantations of the Siliguri subdivision. This influx of laborers from diverse backgrounds reshaped the demographic landscape of the region, facilitating the growth of tea cultivation as a major industry and contributing to the cultural diversity of the area. After the advent of railways in Siliguri, a significant migration of Bihari people from North Bihar, particularly Saran, Muzaffarpur, and Darbhanga districts, began towards Darjeeling. Primarily engaged in trade and various occupations, they frequented markets in Siliguri, Bagdogra, Naxalbari, Phansidewa, and

Matigara. Many opted to settle in Siliguri, finding opportunities in commerce across the Terai region. By the late 1880s, extensive road construction projects in the area employed Bihari laborers. This migration pattern marked a significant demographic shift in the region, facilitated by the development of transportation infrastructure and economic opportunities.

Urbanization entails population concentration, structural transformation, and socio-psychological changes affecting both individuals and their surroundings. Siliguri experiences significant population growth due to immigration from neighbouring countries, as well as migration from adjacent states, rural areas, and nearby regions. Siliguri subdivision, acting as the gateway to North-East India, serves as a narrow land corridor connecting the mainland of India with its North-Eastern states and Sikkim. Situated at the convergence of four international borders (Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and China), it holds strategic significance as a crucial meeting point between various nations. In 1901, Siliguri's population was 738, which surged to 10,487 by 1941. Post-Independence, the town experienced accelerated growth, primarily driven by migration and immigration.⁷ This influx fostered Siliguri's structural transformation and socio-economic development, culminating in urbanization. Immigration began from East Pakistan following the partition, with thousands of refugees resettling in Siliguri. Subsequently, in the 1960s, Assamese refugees, displaced by anti-Bengali riots, sought refuge in the town. These demographic shifts profoundly affected both the population and the landscape of Siliguri, shaping its trajectory towards becoming a thriving urban centre (Chandan,2005). The Indo-China conflict in 1962 and the 1971 war with Pakistan, which led to the formation of Bangladesh, significantly contributed to a substantial influx of refugees into Siliguri. Between 1941 and 1951, the town witnessed a population growth of 29.4%, followed by a 36.4% increase from 1951 to 1961. Initially, rapid urbanization accelerated population growth until 1941. However, thereafter, the demographic composition of Siliguri and its surrounding areas underwent rapid changes due to the arrival of refugees from what is now Bangladesh, shaping the town's population dynamics in subsequent years (Ray Choudhuri,1999). Immigrants, particularly Bengali Hindus from former East Pakistan, emerged as a significant demographic in the Siliguri subdivision, as noted in the West Bengal district gazetteer, Darjeeling 1980. Additionally, Indian nationals who had settled in Burma were compelled to return to India in 1964, with many resettling in Siliguri as "Burma refugees," some venturing into the retail medicine trade. The Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship in 1950 facilitated substantial Nepali migration to North Bengal, including Siliguri. Following China's invasion of India in 1962, numerous affluent communities relocated from the north-eastern states to Siliguri, establishing homes and businesses. Furthermore, during the Assam riots from 1980 onwards, a variety of non-Assamese, including Bengalis, found refuge and opportunities for development in Siliguri. These successive waves of migration and resettlement have contributed significantly to the evolving social and economic landscape of Siliguri. (Chattapadhyay,2008) Many entrepreneurs from regions like Bihar and Rajasthan migrated to the town, drawn by its burgeoning business prospects. They sought to capitalize on the town's growing economic opportunities, contributing to its commercial expansion and diversity through their ventures and initiatives (Chattapadhyay,2008).

The migration influx has resulted in a disproportionately rapid population surge in Siliguri:

Year	Population of Siliguri City
1901	738
1931	6037
1941	10487
1951	32400
1961	65471
1971	97484
1981	131820
1991	216950
2001	472374
2011	509709

Source: As per S.M.C. and Census report

According to the 2011 Census data released by the Government of India, Siliguri is categorized as an urban agglomeration (UA) with a total population of 701,489. Currently, it is estimated that the urban agglomeration population of Greater Siliguri exceeds approximately 1.5 million. Siliguri Municipality was established in 1949. Situated within the Darjeeling district, a portion of the city extends into the neighbouring Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. The city spans a total area of 48 square kilometres. This growth underscores Siliguri's evolution from a modest town to a bustling urban centre, reflecting its significance in the region's socio-economic landscape. Siliguri has witnessed significant waves of immigration over time, shaping its demographic landscape into a vibrant mosaic of diverse cultures and linguistic traditions (Dey, 2009). From this perspective, it can be observed that a significant portion of Siliguri's population originates from elsewhere. Historically, Siliguri has served as the educational nucleus of the Terai and Dooars regions. In addition to residents, students from states like Sikkim, Nagaland, and Assam flock to Siliguri for superior education opportunities. Moreover, the region has witnessed an influx of students from neighbouring countries such as Bhutan, Nepal, and Bangladesh, further enriching its educational landscape and fostering cultural exchange on an international scale (Basu Ray & Saha, 2011). Siliguri, as a commercial hub for North Bengal, attracts migrants from various states and regions. The presence of CRPF, BSF, SSB, Assam Rifles, and Army base camps surrounding the city significantly contributes to the local economy. However, alongside legal migration, Siliguri experiences a substantial influx of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and Nepal, as well as migrants from Assam. Additionally, people from other cities seek employment opportunities, further swelling the population. This burgeoning population necessitates the development of essential facilities such as education, drinking water, healthcare, and transportation. According to excerpts from the West Bengal district gazetteer, Darjeeling, refugee influx has played a pivotal role in the growth of Siliguri, catalysing its development in various aspects (Dasgupt,2010). These trends underscore Siliguri's dynamic demographic landscape and its vital role as a magnet for both legal and illegal migration, shaping its economic and social fabric in multifaceted ways.

The Refugee Rehabilitation Department extended support to Siliguri College and Siliguri Commerce College for constructing buildings. Established in 1950, Siliguri College was followed by Siliguri Commerce College in 1962, with the subsequent establishment of several more colleges. Land grants were allocated to Siliguri Girls Higher Secondary School to address the escalating demand for education among newcomers. The state government provided over 1.5 lakhs for constructing buildings for Siliguri Girls Higher Secondary School, recognizing the imperative to cater to the educational needs of the growing settler population. In 1962, North Bengal University, the sole university in the region, was founded near Siliguri at Shivmandir. The Medical College and Hospital came into existence in 1967. Siliguri Municipal Corporation was established in 1994, with the state government allocating over 1.5 lakhs for road construction, sanitation, and water supply within municipal limits, especially in refugee-concentrated areas. Moreover, the Refugee Rehabilitation Department facilitated the creation of Bidhan Market, spanning three acres and costing over Rs. 10 lakhs, to accommodate approximately 800 refugee traders. This market initiative aimed to provide a platform for refugee traders to conduct business and contribute to the local economy. These developmental initiatives underscore the concerted efforts to address the infrastructural, educational, and economic needs arising from the influx of refugees and settlers in Siliguri, transforming it into a vibrant urban centre with enhanced facilities and opportunities. The rapid population growth in the town by migration from rural areas and neighbouring regions poses significant challenges (Berry, 1976). Presently, Siliguri stands as a major cosmopolitan city in India, embodying a microcosm of the nation's diverse ethnicities, cultures, and languages. Given its pivotal role as a trade and commerce hub in the region, the city offers significant prospects for consumer goods industries such as bakery and confectionery, sports goods, mineral water, and more. This burgeoning market presents a ripe opportunity for small entrepreneurs to thrive. Additionally, there is a robust demand for steel utensils, leather shoes, ready-made garments, and other household essentials, as well as a bustling wholesale market for fruits, vegetables, and fish. Consequently, the rural surroundings are transforming due to urban influences emanating from the city centre. The economic development of Siliguri is primarily driven by industries like tea, tourism, transport, and timber, further solidifying its status as a dynamic economic powerhouse in the region (Ghosh, 1406 Bangabdo).

Siliguri accommodates a significant business machinery market and readymade consumer goods markets, comprising retailers, wholesalers, dealers, distributors, and small-scale entrepreneurs. This phenomenon has resulted in a concentration of population due to economic opportunities, further emphasizing Siliguri's role as a bustling commercial center (Basu Ray & Saha, 2011). Besides meeting the daily commuting needs of consumers and others, the development of transportation and communication infrastructure has linked Siliguri with neighbouring regions. Presently, Siliguri boasts an airport situated in Bagdogra, approximately 16 kilometres from the main city. It also features an IOC terminal, a tea auction centre, and various recreational facilities including indoor and outdoor stadiums, shopping malls, and modern healthcare facilities, enhancing its appeal as a comprehensive urban centre with diverse amenities. The attraction of this plain region cityscape has drawn migrants from rural regions, motivated by factors such as poor living standards characterized

by low incomes and scant employment opportunities. Simultaneously, the pull factors of improved urban living standards, higher wages, enhanced job opportunities, and better social services have propelled rural-to-urban migration. Employment and wage prospects emerge as primary drivers of this migration phenomenon. Typically, individuals seek more lucrative and appealing work opportunities beyond their birthplaces. Migration motives vary considerably, influenced by diverse factors.

Migration entails significant costs, which generally act as deterrents, particularly for long-distance moves. Limited knowledge about distant opportunities, coupled with higher relocation expenses, often hinders migration. Moreover, social, cultural, and religious disparities between rural and urban settings can further impede migration. These factors collectively shape migration patterns, with individuals weighing the potential benefits against the associated costs and challenges (Bharadwaj, 1974). Thus, while economic incentives play a crucial role in driving rural-to-urban migration, various social, cultural, and logistical considerations also influence individuals' decisions to relocate. Migration often exhibits cumulative causation, wherein the underlying forces gradually diminish the costs associated with relocating from one place to another. This pattern is commonly observed in rural-to-urban migration worldwide. Previous migrants not only share valuable information about employment and wage prospects in their new locations with those left behind but also extend informal social security benefits to newcomers, offering assistance with food, clothing, accommodation, and social integration. They create a supportive linguistic, cultural, and religious environment that fosters a sense of belonging for new migrants. Consequently, prior migrants effectively lower the barriers to current migration, prompting subsequent migrants to follow the paths established by their relatives and friends. This typically leads to a migration pattern from rural origins to nearby urban centres, such as Siliguri, where prior connections and established social networks facilitate smoother transitions for newcomers.

In conclusion, the historical evolution of the Terai region, particularly the Darjeeling Terai, reflects a complex interplay of colonial policies, socio-economic changes, and demographic shifts. From its initial state as a sparsely populated area inhabited by indigenous tribes to becoming a focal point of British economic interests, the region has undergone significant transformations over time. The influx of outsiders and the introduction of British policies in agriculture, land revenue, and trade profoundly altered the socio-economic landscape, leading to both opportunities and challenges for the local population. The process of land devolution, marked by the sale of land to tea garden owners and other outsiders, has had far-reaching implications for the demographic patterns and livelihoods of the region. While it contributed to overpopulation and economic shifts, it also brought about new opportunities and challenges for the predominantly agrarian communities, particularly agricultural laborers. Understanding these historical dynamics is crucial for comprehending the contemporary land-related challenges faced by the Terai region, especially the Siliguri sub-division in the Darjeeling district.

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