

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING SILIGURI

Border-Effect and the 'Untimely' Metropolis in North Bengal

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A part of my doctoral research was on the nineteenth-century colonial-making of the Jalpaiguri district space. From the archival records, it was evident that it was the Jalpaiguri town — which is Siliguri's poor cousin today— that enjoyed urban prominence in the area in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Back in those days, no observer would have guessed that the foothill hamlet of Saktigarh with a population of a few thousand people even in the 1940s would one day become the bustling urban agglomerate that Siliguri is today. The introduction of the DHR or the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway in the 1880s had imparted some importance to this burgeoning township where the Corleones of Calcutta Culture—the Dasses, the Boses, and the Tagores— would break journey to change trains for the hills. The tea trade that the DHR helped promote had led to the expansion of the land and labour market in Siliguri and the establishment of Marwari *kothis* in the area had extended the informal capital and credit market. However, what transformed the scene radically was, unsurprisingly and again, the Partition of South Asia.

The formation of East Pakistan created a geographical barrier in the northeastern part of India. The narrow Chicken's Neck— formally known as the Siliguri Corridor, which at one point is less than 14 miles (23 km) wide— remained as the bridge between the northeastern part of India and the rest of the country. Siliguri thus found itself pitchforked to the position of immense geostrategic importance. Wedged between Bangladesh to the south and west and China to the north, Siliguri has no access to the sea closer than Calcutta, on the other side of the corridor (along the National Highways 31 and 34). Between Sikkim and Bhutan lies the Chumbi Valley, a dagger-like slice of Tibetan territory. A Chinese military advance of less than 80 miles (130 km) would cut off Bhutan, part of West Bengal and all of North-East India, an area containing almost 50 million people. This is no idle speculation of an anti-China hawk. Such a situation actually did arise during the war between India and China in 1962. Consequently, there is massive

military concentration in the area. Siliguri is hemmed in by military bases on all sides. The Siliguri Corridor is heavily patrolled by the Indian Army, the Assam Rifles, the Border Security Force and the West Bengal Police. Two Air Force bases of the Eastern Air Command are located here— the Hasimara AFS and the Bagdogra AFS which is for all practical purposes located almost within Siliguri. The second largest military camp of Asia, Binnaguri, is also located not far from the town. And if one were to assume that this massive concentration has allayed defence neurosis, one cannot be more mistaken. The Army formally met the West Bengal government on November 19, 2013, and sought land to set up two military and air force stations in north Bengal “to fortify the country’s defence in the eastern sector.”¹ The army officials, during the annual civil-military liaison meeting at Nabanna in Howrah, asked the state government for 750 acres of land at Dandim in Jalpaiguri for yet another Air Force station and 1,000 acres in Kalimpong for military station. Three months later, on February 21, 2014, the foundation stone for the Berhampore Military Station (BMS) was laid by President Pranab Mukherjee in the district of Murshidabad. At the ceremony, Army chief Gen Bikram Singh informed the media that the BMS will be home to an Air Defence (AD) regiment where air defence missiles will be kept ready to protect the airspace over the Siliguri corridor that connects the northeastern states to the rest of the country.² Now you see that the strategic idea of North Bengal centred on Siliguri is expanding; its conceptual dragnet is being extended farther to draw in districts from south-central Bengal like Murshidabad. In our accounts of Siliguri we often ignore this aspect. And probably the state wants us to ignore this. The internet too has precious little to offer on this. Much of the information one gathers about the military presence is from the civilian population of the town who are somewhat in awe of this massive military concentration or from the occasional braggadocio of a sodden *jawan*.

This is obviously the less known facet of Siliguri’s history. The more discussed aspect of the town’s history is the fairytale saga of its exponential growth. The rapid development of the local economy cannot of course be understood without a reference to the contribution made by the presence of Indian army, Border Security

¹<http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/army-seeks-land-to-set-up-2-stations-in-north-bengal/1196625/>

²<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Army-starts-infrastructure-development-in-Bengal-with-air-defence-station-in-Murshidabad/articleshow/30771758.cms>

Force(BSF),Central Reserve Police Force(CRPF),SashastraSeemaBal(SSB) and theAssam Riflesaround the city. However, there is much more it than this. Described as the gateway toBhutan,NepalandBangladesh, Siliguri stands in a very unique geographical niche; Nepal lies in the west of the city 10 km from Bagdogra, Bhutan to the northeast about 40 km, China to the north about 180 km at Nathula Pass in Sikkim, Bangladesh to the south at 0 km from Phulbari. The strategic location of the city makes it a base for essential supplies to the above regions. Siliguri has gradually developed as a profitable centre for a variety of businesses. As a central hub, many national companies and organizations have set up their offices here. The so-called four “T”s – tea, timber, tourism and transport – are the main businesses of Siliguri. The latest development is the construction of malls like City Centre, Cosmos and Orbit. In 2009, the first set of multiplexes arrived in the city: Cinemax at Savin kingdom and Inox at City Centre and Orbit. Growing economic transactions has led to a boom in the banking sector too. There are more banks and bars along the two axial roads of Siliguri— Sevoke and Hill Cart— than can be found along any road even in Calcutta. As a gesture of international co-operation and friendship, the road network of Siliguri is being used by the governments of Nepal and Bangladesh to facilitate easy transportation of essential commodities, such as food grains. TheSilk Routeof India, i.e., trade route between India and Tibet (China) is accessible only after crossing Siliguri throughNathulaandJeleppla. And then there are also business routes to Bhutan.

Consequently, the population of Siliguri has exploded. The population density of the urban area is 11,000 persons/sq. km. According to the 2011 provisional census data, the number of residents in Siliguri metropolitan area 701,489though another non-governmental estimate made as early as in 2008 put the figure much higher at 1,559,275.Both these figures can vie with population sizes of all major cities of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, for instance, including those of the state capitals. However, calculations of the number of “residents”forSiliguri invoke an impression of sedentary urbanism that is probably unsustainable. A comparative study of Baroda, Bhilwara, Sambalpur and Siliguri with reference to basic services for the urban poor conducted in 1990 and published in 1995 (by ArchanaGhosh, S. Sami Ahmed and ShipraMaitra) tells us that the city has had to host waves of immigrants down the decades. Of these

immigrants, 60 per cent came from East Pakistan/ Bangladesh, 17 per cent came from Bihar and 8 per cent happen to be Marwaris mainly in control of the wholesale trade. The rest 15 per cent came from South Bengal and Assam. Masses of repatriated Burmese also made Siliguri their shelter after their influx in 1967. A separate study by Sumana Saha and Mousumi Bhattacharya on basic services for the urban poor of Siliguri published in 1993 corroborates this. Siliguri is therefore a city of migrants and as such does not lend itself easily to the fixing technologies of demographic calculations. Some commentators have gone a step further to call Siliguri a “town in transit with the implication that it is the city that moves with its moving population and loses fast its potential of becoming anyone’s home conventionally understood as the relatively stable abode where the family lives like what Hegel calls ‘an individual.’”

A sizeable chunk of the migrants live in slums. However, the municipal authorities are desperate to suppress this dystopia or at least overlay it with vision documents and dream-projects for the developmental city. “In order to develop the city in a planned manner and to make arrangement for the exploding population of the city,” one such document declaims, “new townships of Uttarayan, the Kanchanjunga Integrated Park, Vastu Vihar and Shushruta Nagar-Kawakhali township have been proposed to be built around the fringes of Siliguri.” Added to these are protected, fortified housing complexes which are the perches of the *nouveau riche*—those who can afford to own them, without having to depend on the municipal corporation for water supply and sanitation, the state electricity board for supply of electricity and any of the government agencies for any of the essential services. They have the money to buy these services and price them beyond the reach of the urban poor. These apartments of the internationally mobile middle class and the urban new-rich of Siliguri allegedly serve as places of conduit where trafficked women— themselves in transit— are called to entertain their affluent customers, also in transit, and money quickly changes hands.

This political-economic *mélange* of people in flux—of wholesalers, retailers, military and security personnel, tea planters and labourers, trafficked bodies and their consumers, gun-runners, political fugitives, asylum-seekers, railwaymen, construction workers, and stateless groups—cannot be understood without the governing sign of neoliberalization. In fact, in 2002, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh studied a

proposal to create a free trade zone in the area which would enable all four countries to connect directly with each other without restrictions. Two observations are in order. First, it is not strange that an area which is the hub of heavy military securitization occasioned by neurotic obsession about territorial integrity is also the proposed hub of international free trade. This paradoxical coupling of military jingoism and neoliberal redeployment has been a marker of the northeast in general. This allows us to controversially state that Siliguri, and by extension north Bengal, is perhaps more integrally a part of the northeast than it is a part of the rest of West Bengal. Second, the creation of a free zone in commodity trade is not awaiting an international diktat in the area. It has, as has been suggested above, already come into being and is doing splendidly. A walk through the bazaars of Siliguri testifies to this. The new shopping complexes have not even offered the meekest challenge to the booming business of the Seth Srilal Market, the Sevoke Road and Hill Cart Road bazaars or the airport market at Bagdogra. They are prominent places to buy daily use goods, and are extremely popular among people from nearby areas as well as tourists from all over the world. These markets are aflood almost exclusively with commodities smuggled in from the neighbouring countries. The city has a very high concentration of retail trade— in commodities obtained by licit means and illicit— and the rate of concentration is unmatched by any other city in West Bengal. Wholesale trade is also vibrant and, not uncommonly for India, the retailer and the wholesaler are often the same person operating from the same shop-front. Put another way, a bit of monetary inducement promptly turns the wholesaler into a retailer in Siliguri's bustling marketplaces. 20 per cent of those involved in wholesale trade are returnees from East Pakistan/ Bangladesh and as high as 70 per cent of them are Hindi-speaking people coming mostly from north India. Kinship bonds are strong among the wholesalers which make it practically impossible for others to freshly enter into the business. They are also said to be in possession of a very high quantity of liquid cash— much of which is derived as profit from their trade in Siliguri, which they do not either spend or invest in the city. This is classic "enclave economy", as Dietmar Rothermund has developed the idea. It also operates under the neoliberal mandate— a feature which is endemic again in the whole of the Northeast.

The Bidhan market near Khudirampally was originally created for partition refugees. Now it is a chief hub for buying low cost Chinese goods. Nobody would be able to give you directions to this market, however, if you referred to it by its official name. To the local people as well as to the tourists, this is the famous Hong Kong market where you buy shoes and garments, watches and sunglasses, cosmetics and computers, aphrodisiac and underwear imported from China at throw-away prices. This is also a space, like so many others in the city, which dents the sanitized self-image of Siliguri as the hub of neoliberal development and reveals the seamier, probably dominant side of a border town in the throes of economic expansion. Siliguri is the nodal urban coordinator of smuggled goods and trafficked human beings. An intelligence report quoted in the Draft Development Plan 2008-09 to 2012-13 of the Siliguri Municipal Corporation tells us: "In recent times, the area has become the focus of illegal crossings between Bangladeshi rebels and Nepali Maoist insurgents, both in search of refuge from their country. A flourishing narcotics and weapons traffic also takes place in this region." These are intractable currents of crime and commerce that co-constitute Siliguri under the sign of neoliberal capital. These are flows that leap out of the pages of government reports and newspaper reportage but are difficult to grasp and render in substantiated academic commentary. Yet, they impart an unmistakable flavour to the sensorium of this city-in-making. One day, as I stood in the Hong Kong market, amidst the peaking bustle of evening trade, haggling over a smuggled Chinese watch, which I eventually bought for a hundred rupees, the sense that the bazaar economy in Siliguri has not been subdued or subsumed by the formal capital market struck me. Historians have been arguing for the coequality of the two in South Asia for some time now. But that evening a general sense seemed to carry me beyond the meek dialogicity of the bazaar and neoliberal consumption. Here, beyond the mere co-existence of two allegedly incompatible modes of consumption, what seemed to be at work is an active gerrymandering of collective and individual urban subjectivities. It seemed that the rational actor-citizen has been entirely displaced by the migrant as the organizing human principle of political economy. Further, to borrow a jargon from cinema studies, the cityscape presented itself as retrofuturistic, as depictions of the future produced in an earlier era. Here, the neoliberal sign appeared coded in the calque of the migrant bazaar.

Through this compressed commentary—which is as a result inevitably simplistic—what I have tried to do is explore the possibility of certain conceptualizations. First, it seems that there is a need to rethink the geo-imagination of north Bengal at a time when its ideational remit is being expanded by statist defence neurosis as well as everyday practices of mobile peoples. Conjointly, is it possible to think of this re-imagined north Bengal as more integrally a part of the northeast, with its border economy and its “travelling actors”, so to speak? At another level, through its rhizomic entanglement of control, crime, communication and capital, Siliguri shows us that a border economy does not remain confined to the border and borderlands but seeps and segues into the so-called mainland to bring about powerful transformations in the economies of the mainland and cities therein. Going a step forward, it may be said that the metro-polarities of Siliguri present before us the idea of what may be paradoxically called a “futuristic archetype” of a border-city. It is archetypal in the Jungian sense of being a mental image—a dream project—that is already-always present in the collective unconscious and yet, insofar as it is a mental image, it is an abstraction that is realizable only at some indeterminate and permanently deferred point in the future. In this sense, Siliguri approximates the *untimely*; for, as Deleuze tells us and probably fittingly for Siliguri, “there is no present which is not haunted by a past and a future, by a past which is not reducible to a former present, by a future which does not consist of a present to come.”