

A Transit Town in North Bengal: Siliguri in the Time of Globalisation¹

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1. Siliguri has always been regarded as a migrants' town. However, the nature and profile of migration have changed considerably over the years. While it was only a large village at the beginning of the twentieth century with a few thousand people as its inhabitants, it was with the influx of the migrants from across the neighbouring countries after India was partitioned in 1947 that Siliguri turned into a city – the second largest in West Bengal after Kolkata.
2. Much of the rapid increase in population of North Bengal, as a Planning Commission document notes, is 'not the result of natural growth alone but because of significant migration'. Dasgupta points out how the phenomenal increase has also pushed up density of population. Siliguri is the most 'urbanised city in North Bengal' having hosted the bulk of the immigrants. The Outline Plan of Siliguri also notes with concern that it has around it 'many undeclared urban pockets experiencing fast urbanization'. The city is witnessing a rapid expansion of its population particularly in recent years. According to the 2001 census, the number of residents was 1,220,275 while another estimate made in 2008, puts the figure at staggering 1,559,275.
3. The volume of migration from adjoining rural areas and neighbouring towns like Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar is disproportionately less than that from outside West Bengal primarily for two reasons: (a) these towns were already well established - if not well developed - long before Siliguri was established.

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Cooch Behar, for instance, was the more prosperous town during the princely rule. By contrast, lacking in industrial fundamentals, Siliguri never attracted migrants from the so-called rural hinterland as it was unable to absorb the surplus depeasantized labour force. The local Rajbanshis used to own large landed estates while the migrants attracted to tea plantation came mainly from outside West Bengal and settled not in Siliguri but in the far-off tea garden areas. Thus it is not surprising that the Naxalite movement of the late 1960s and the early 1970s – although directed against the *jotdars* and owners of large landed estates – could not make much headway amongst the numerically dominant Rajbanshis of North Bengal.

Migration: Old and New

4. Refugees and migrants coming from across the borders and adjoining states of India came here to stay with their clearly traceable line of migration connecting the two points of departure and destination. By many accounts, there used to be and still is living connection between these two points in the sense that excepting many of the Partition refugees, most of the late settlers remained here maintaining their living connection with their expanded families and neighbours back home.
5. As the population grows and the city expands, it gobbles up the tea gardens and neighbouring areas evicting in a large way the tea labour and the marginalized and further hounding them into the adjoining rural areas.
6. The new rich of Siliguri who live their settled life within the plush housing complexes live without having to depend on the urban amenities of life usually provided by the state and its agencies. These are, as Benedict Anderson calls, 'sacred spaces' which have effectively severed their connection with the town at large. As a result, the living conditions in Siliguri, as Roy and Saha point out in their paper published in 2011, are 'dismal'. A recently conducted doctoral study reveals that while the people in transit create pressure on municipal facilities (like provision of public toilets,

access to safe drinking water etc), Siliguri as a city suffers from poor living conditions precisely because people “living” here do not have a sense of belonging to it and the “lack of genuine belongingness may grind Siliguri down”.

7. The city has no space for the evicted. They live mostly in slums and shanties, in the banks at Champasari and temporary sandbars that emerge during dry season on the Mahananda and the Balason rivers cutting across an otherwise vertically spread out city and become homeless almost as a ritual when the rivers and their tributaries are in spate during the monsoon. Many others are simply pushed out of the city. While the Uttaraayan complex and sprawling shopping mall in Matigara beam with light, the colonies of illegally raised makeshift huts across the road on the lowland remain in the dark without any electricity and safe drinking water. Their life is marked by what Ayona Datta albeit in a different context calls 'continual living in a sense of transience'. They live a parallel (at times shadowy) life besides the regulated, legal, and cultured life of the urban citizens – perennially waiting for being rehabilitated without ever being rehabilitated. Their wait is endless.
8. The new migrants settle in the town – occupy the highrises – raising phenomenally the land price and prices of essentials. The city has its new population who do not develop any stake in the life of the city. They become *absentee* settlers.

Town in Transit

9. Today it is the space that moves - not the migrant who used to move along a fixed space linking the two points of departure and destination. Migration in the age of globalization is more in the nature of churning of population where the space has become 'flat' and 'smooth'. The city resembles the doorway to a fast moving traveltor - which moves so fast that (a) one leaps into it being lured by the dream of rapid social mobility and (b) one does not know how to disembark from it.

- 10.** Most of the current ethnographic works on trafficking of women in the region point out how women get themselves trafficked mostly by men whom they know and trust – in some cases allow themselves to be trafficked as part of what is often called their 'rational' decision. There does not seem to be any end point in this constant flow and circulation of human trafficking. As women are sucked into the network, there is hardly any going back. One moves circularly within the network without any end in sight.
- 11.** The 'city of migrants' has therefore become a 'town in transit' with the old and traditional industries disintegrating and without any sign of new industrial fundamentals emerging at present. Siliguri is certainly not an engine of growth – though it is a trading entrepot – the largest in North Bengal and the Northeast. It is interesting to see how Siliguri as a town gets inserted into the global political economy through the complex functioning of border economy - independently of nation-states. While much of this process of insertion like women's trafficking and flow of contraband items, drug and narcotics etc is apparently 'illegal', the process itself by all accounts creates a world where the legal and illegal overlap into each other.
- 12.** Siliguri as a microcosm of North Bengal lacks the industrial fundamentals. The urbanization of Siliguri is not matched by any corresponding industrialization.
- 13.** In other words, Siliguri seems to be a city where large scale property transfer takes place, and rent extraction in new forms (ponzy scheme has become a new method of siphoning away money from tea gardens) happens. Its role as a trading centre of tea declines relatively as its role as realty market grows. Insofar as tea gardens became increasingly non-viable, land kept hitherto under tea plantation is rapidly turned into money spinning realties and the gardens on the fringe of the city are the first to bear the brunt. Chandmoni Tea Estate is the classic example. Cities like Siliguri do not engineer growth for the general urban inhabitants, they copy the model of the Indian megalopolis, and they become the transit places of dealers and businessmen involved in wholesale and retail business in this bordering region.

- 14.** The spatial segregation has its impact on the organization of civic space in the sense that there is hardly any social interaction between the *nouveau riche* and the jetsam and flotsam urban poor – the people with homes and the new urban nomads who live in slums and shanties only to be evicted the next day. The city, to my mind, resembles what Gupta calls a ‘non-space’ – a space where people of diverse cultural backgrounds participate with the difference that unlike other ‘non-spaces’ like international airports and interstate highways, hardly there are any established rules and protocols that govern this city as a whole. Siliguri is a non-space in the sense that it is segmented into diverse sectors and within each of its economic and social sectors separate rules and protocols apply. Rules and social protocols are specific to each of these sectors and have evolved as a means of privileging certain ethnic groups and communities over others. The retail and wholesale trade, for example, are governed by strong kinship networks which make it difficult for the outsiders to make any headway. The evidently ethnic nature of tea labour is yet another example, which again makes it difficult for others to make an entry into that sector. Nor is it possible for the discarded tea labour to enter into any other sector of Siliguri’s economy. The rules and protocols seldom cut across these sectors and are not common to one and all. Gupta however prefers to define ‘non-space’ as one in which rules and protocols cut across the groups and communities inhabiting it and are common to all of them. Siliguri does not seem to have any common set of rules and protocols, but resembles a ‘non-space’ insofar as people of one sector encounters and interacts with those of another much in the same way as unknown passengers meet at the transit lounge of an international airport.
- 15.** It is important to find out the means of employment of the urban poor. Insofar as the new migrants arrive and inhabit the 'sacred space', there is also the corresponding demand for informal labour – for care, for domestic labour, for housemaids and ayahs, for low-cost entertainers and sex workers, for waste disposal, for washermen, semi-skilled electricians and plumbers, and most importantly stone crushers, illegal poachers, limestone scrapers and gatherers from the riverbed etc – a sector controlled exclusively by the rich middlemen - who serve as their recruiters, agents and suppliers.

16. The Government deploys newer technologies of governing the new urban poor and the underclass. They are regarded as unproductive population and steps are taken to render them invisible although their services are essential for this new urban landscape. More often than not, they are regarded as law-and-order problem. The walled city is in this way the norm rather than the exception. New areas are often administered by a bureaucratic authority (like the Siliguri-Jalpaiguri Development Authority, etc), while the old areas are run by democratically elected municipal corporation.

Urbanization and Violence

17. Migration of this nature has triggered off mainly two kinds of violence in the city: One, the so-called 'criminal' violence that is associated with the very nature of global political economy of migration. Two, being a transit town it becomes nobody's city rendering its inhabitants as it were 'homeless'. The anxiety of being homeless and the lure of global trade and 'cash inflow' have made the city an ideal site for contesting homeland demands that often results in violence.

18. *Uttarbanga Sambad* reports that busloads of poor women come from Islampur (a town on the Indian side bordering Bangladesh) reach Siliguri by late evening to earn their livelihood by entertaining their clients and leave for their home before sunrise to avoid identification. Siliguri is the town where both the women and the clients enjoy the anonymity. It may be kept in mind that Susan Dewey's celebrated ethnographic account on Mumbai bar dancers, for instance, shows how these women are in need of this anonymity and they are left with no way to return. Many of these women find problem with rehabilitation, for, the fear of being detected by their erstwhile clients and nearer ones hangs heavy on them. In most cases, they do not let their family know where they have been working. Borrowing Dewey's words, we may say that this city is marked by 'social invisibility'.

19. The underclass live in the city; but they are not citizens, because they do not have the right to the city. They experience brutal violence – burning of

houses, rape, extortion, police harassment, beating, killing, and at times expulsion. They find it impossible to establish themselves as the legal-judicial personalities who are entitled to make rightful claim to rights.

The Question of Justice

20. Both inward and outward migration in the town makes the issue of justice relevant and invisible at the same time. Relevant – because the town in transit has not only evicted those who were thriving on the city for their life and livelihood but has made the city a 'home' for those who are internationally if not globally mobile and are therefore virtually absent from the city. Siliguri has the place for the immigrant absentees – but no place for the evicted. The contemporary discourse of justice that has devolved on the issue of forced migration hinges profoundly on the asymmetry of resources and opportunities and the right of the deprived to access them through migration.

21. Invisible – because being enveloped in the global political economy it acquires an anonymity at home that not only deterritorializes it but makes it disappear from public gaze and scrutiny. On the other hand, our global discourses of justice are inadequate in appreciating its impact. Much of the dissent that bursts out seems to be sporadic, 'rootless' and momentary.

22. It is important to explain why in spite of being a city of migrants, Siliguri has not experienced any significantly sustained struggle against eviction and homelessness, urban poverty and police atrocities and lack of urban amenities.

23. On the other hand, if there is peace in Siliguri, it is perpetually fragile and is constantly haunted by the spectre of violence. The crosscutting movements for homeland revolve centrally around the question of the 'occupation' and 'ownership' of Siliguri. What is Gorkhaland or Kamatapur without Siliguri and what is West Bengal without North Bengal with Siliguri at its centre?

24. Although Siliguri does not have any history of ethnic violence, the clash that shook Siliguri on 28 September 2007 points simultaneously to the paradox of fragile peace on the surface and the fissure that runs deep into the city's social landscape. Siliguri has been a city of contesting homeland claims. On the one hand, Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha makes the claim of including some of the *mouzas* of Siliguri under the jurisdiction of the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA). On the other hand, pro-Bengali organisations like the Jana Chetna Manch and Jana Jagran Manch have been formed and are opposed to the inclusion of these *mouzas* in Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA). Hand in hand with it, Amra Bangali branches are reportedly spreading across North Bengal.

25. David Chandler argues that when the connection between citizenship and nation-state breaks down thanks to the flow of capital, skilled labour, information and so forth, individuals are let loose from their identities and hitherto territorially anchored solidarities and become 'atomised'. It becomes imperative then that our rights claims and political struggles to expand beyond the territorial confines. On the other hand, such solidarities and representative structures are absent at the global level. As he puts it, "[T]he more socially atomised we are as individuals – the more we confront the world without mediation through social and political collectivities – the more we appear to live in a 'globalised world'.

26. This is perhaps the reason why the conclave against trafficking of women recently held in London and led by Angelina Jolie (in June 2014) does not have any reverberation in the places badly affected by such trafficking like Nepal and North Bengal. In the absence of any headway, these protests become awareness-raising events and end-in-themselves. As Chandler observes:

Space is no longer relevant once deterritorialised activists can travel from the US or UK to protest for the freedom of Tibet at the opening of the Beijing Olympic Games or can demonstrate their solidarity – with Palestinian women, Indian farmers protesting against dam constructions, or the Zapatistas in the Chiapas – in their local college

or shopping centre. Time is no longer relevant once the goal of political protest becomes increasingly an end in itself in the form of raising awareness. The wearing of a pin or ribbon as an expression of solidarity makes the action itself valuable regardless of its consequences. With the decline of representational forms of politics – which involved winning people over to ideas or political platforms rather than just expressing one's own awareness – political practice becomes much more immediate and unmediated. The deterritorialisation of politics is a one-sided expression of politics without the territorial grounding, which imposes the need to engage and be accountable to others. Deterritorialised politics, without social bonds, can easily result in political action revolving around personal expressions rather than external engagement.

28. Our initial study shows that the movements against trafficking have been sporadic and fleeting and led only by a handful of NGOs without any sustained political support from the people. The deterritorialization brought in the wake of globalization has sent the victim into oblivion without damaging the honour of either her family or the community; the family benefits from the remittance victim' sends. We shed tears in international and global forums; NGOs protest – for them. The network operates as usual.