

International Journal of Scientific Research and Reviews

An Account of the Process of Urbanization and Urban Development in North Bengal before Independence

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ABSTRACT:

North Bengal comprise at present the eight districts of West Bengal viz. Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Koch Bihar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Maldah respectively. The urbanization process witnessed in North Bengal has been very scattered and a discontinuous one before independence. This resulted in a very low level of urbanization this region recorded at the time of independence and this legacy continued upto 2011. In this paper an attempt has been made to understand the political ups and downs this region experienced before independence and how this process affected the growth and flourishing of urban centres during those periods.

KEY WORDS: North Bengal, History of Urbanization, Growth of Urban Centres.

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INTRODUCTION

With the primacy of Kolkata and other South Bengal cities and towns, urbanization in North Bengal appears lackluster. But a quick look at the history will show that urban centres and that too quite flourishing ones were present in North Bengal. The history of North Bengal reveals very early encounters with the people of Bhutan and Tibet, widespread rule of valiant kings and chieftains from central and western India. Thus the history of North Bengal, although not adequately documented, shows successive shifts in power and consequent shifts in the territorial location of the seat of power. The history of urban development in North Bengal before independence can be divided into two distinct phases: i. Pre-British Period, and ii. British Period.

During the Pre-British period, the urban development was associated with the rise of political power. Therefore, it was very fragmented and easily declined with the fall of political power. Urbanization during British period has got many features characteristic to 'merchant-capitalism' and 'colonialism'. Thus, the important towns that developed during this period served the interests of the Britishers in some way or other.

OBJECTIVE

The major objective of this paper is to give an account of the history of urbanization and growth of urban centres North Bengal witnessed before independence.

DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY

Since this is an attempt to reconstruct the fragmented history of urbanization and associated growth of urban centres in North Bengal before independence so the details have been collected from various historical account which deals with the history of this region, especially district gazetteers, published reports, articles, etc. For a systematic accounting of the urbanization process this region witnessed the pre-British period and British period has been dealt separately.

POLITICAL BACKDROP CONTROLLING THE URBANIZATION PROCESS IN NORTH BENGAL

A retrospective look into the urban situation in North Bengal will be done in this section. During the early urban development of the region, the natural physical division of North Bengal probably contributed to the formation of three separate historical backdrops, against which the urban centres flourished. According to Das, S.¹ the plains, involving the districts of Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Maldah have a common history of belonging to the ancient kingdom of Pundravardhana for about 1800 years from 1500 B.C to 320 A.D. Sengupta, J.C.² said since then and before the coming of the British this area was ruled by a succession of Hindu and Muslim rulers of

whom King Shashanka and Hussain Shah, the Afghan Governor was very well known. The East India Company took over in 1765 A.D when they obtained the Diwani of Bengal.

The district of Jalpaiguri and Koch Bihar formed part of Kamrup in the early historic period. Several dynasties of Ahom Kings ruled there upto 15th century A.D., when the last dynasty fell before the invasion of the Afghans. Gruning, J.F.³ pointed out that Hussain Shah ruled this territory including the present district of Jalpaiguri and Koch Bihar from about 1497 to 1521 A.D. The Muslim onslaught towards eastern Assam was deterred by the Ahom King at about this time and a disturbed condition continued when several Koch chiefs became powerful. One of them was Hajo, whose descendents were the Koch Kings. The Koch territory gradually broke up into smaller parts under various descendants of the family. Finally, with the interference of the East India Company in 1772, the Koch Bihar Kingdom broke up into three smaller parts: i. The Cooch Behar State, ii. The Chaklajat Estates, zamindars belonging to the Maharaja of Cooch Behar, and iii. The Baikunthpur Estates, belonging to the Raikats, a collateral branch of the Cooch Behar family. According to Gruning, J.F.⁴ these two estates “between them covered nearly the whole of the permanently settled portion of the Jalpaiguri District”. The western Dooars was annexed by the British from the Bhotias in 1865 and the district of Jalpaiguri came into existence in 1869.

The hill districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong which previously belonged to the Raja of Sikkim, has a history linked with that of Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan. Different parts of these districts have often changed hands, finally to come under the British power. The area of Kalimpong district was wrested from the Sikkim Kingdom by the Bhotias in 1706. The Gorkhas, in 1780 conquered this area. Again, the whole of this area was surrendered by them to the British according to the ‘Treaty of Titaliys’ in 1817. Although the East India Company returned the area to the Raja of Sikkim after a pact, they continued to wield power over the area. The suitability of the Old Gorkha Station of Darjeeling as a sanatorium was brought to the notice of the Governor General Bentinck. Finally, in 1835, the British could get hold of most of the hilly territory of the districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong through a deed of grant executed by the Raja of Sikkim. The Tarai part was annexed in 1850. Dash, A.J.⁵ mentioned the western Dooars was handed to the British by the Bhutanese in 1865 and in 1866 the Kalimpong sub-division was transferred to the earlier district of Darjeeling.

URBAN CENTRES OF PRE-BRITISH PERIOD

The urban centres of North Bengal rose and fell against this historical backdrop. As mentioned earlier, the political instability kept the urbanization at a very low level in this region till the coming of the British. The oldest urban centre in this region is Bangarh. The ruins of Bangarh came to light during the excavations carried out by a team from Calcutta University in 1937 - 41. It is situated in Gangarampur P.S of Dakshin Dinajpur district on the bank of river Punarbhava. It was

also known as Kotivarsha in the Gupta period. Kotivarsha has been mentioned in the copper-plate inscriptions of Kumar Gupta I and Budha Gupta found in Damodarpur (Bangladesh). Goswami, K.G.⁶ ascribed the earliest stratum, excavated from Bangarh, to the Maurya or early Sunga period. The excavation revealed the signs of prosperous condition of the town. Evidence of a well planned town with good architecture and craftsmanship, spinning, use of bullock cart and horse, written language, coins, gold, copper, iron and terracotta are found. The Buddhist monastery there attained fame during the reign of the Pala Kings. During the early part of the Muslim period, Bangarh was known as Devkot and was the capital of the Khilji's till about 1220 A.D. It was connected to Lakhner (in Birbhum district) by an unusually wide and high embanked grand trunk road with ferry services on the big rivers.

Like Bangarh, the ancient city of Gour was also known differently at different time. The first mention of it was found in the 5th century B.C. as Gaudapura. During the reign of the Pala kings the city of Gauda attend great splendor. This position of Gauda was mentioned during the reign of the Senas, when it came to be known as Lakshmanavati. After the conquest of Bengal by Md. Bakhtyar Khilji, Devkot was made the capital, but Ghiyasuddin Iwaz Khilji again shifted the capital to Gauda or Gour-Lakshmanavati in 1220 A.D. Mosques and other architectural monuments, built during its days of glory are now in ruins, situated partly in the district of Maldah and partly in the district of Rajshahi (Bangladesh). It was also known as Jinnatabad or heavenly city, for a short time when it was the head quarter during Humayun's rule. The city was reoccupied during the governorship of Munim Khan, but that occupation ended in a disaster, as a severe epidemic broke out which took a toll on population by hundreds. The impact was so horrendous that the survivors fled the city in sheer terror. Gauda ceased to be a capital from that time. A vivid description of the city was given by Sengupta, J.C.⁷ where he stated "Both under the Hindu and Muslims, Gour enjoyed the status of a metropolitan city..... In the 15th and 16th centuries it covered an area of approximately 20 sq. miles and was fortified with a rampart and a moat 150 feet wide. It was an important centre of trade and used to be visited by the Arabs, Abyssinians, Afghans, Portuguese and Chinese."

Next came to prominence is the town of Pandua in Maldah district. It is located 18 km. from English Bazar on the road to Balurghat. During the reign of Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah, Pandua was the capital of Bengal. Adina mosque is the only remnant of the town of Pandua.

The three towns of the Barind division, described above have declined. The only town of pre-British period in this area that still lives on, is Malda, now known as Old Maldah to distinguish it from English Bazar, which is also known as Maldah now. It had an admirable position for river traffic, and probably rose to prosperity as the port of the Muhammedan capital of Pandus. In the 18th century it was the seat of thriving cotton and silk manufacturing and both the French and the Dutch

had factories there. In 1680, the British too established factory there. After the battle of Plassey, the supreme power of Bengal passed into the hands of the British, but the district of Maldah came under their direct administration only in 1765. Prior to the coming of the British in 1680, Old Maldah was the most important town in the district. In December 1680, a new factory at a nearby place, which later came to be known as English Bazar, was started by the British. With the establishment of the town of English Bazar, the importance of Old Maldah began to decline, and by the time the district of Maldah came into existence, the decline was almost complete. The new town of English Bazar has not only deprived the old town of Maldah of its importance but has also usurped its name. To distinguish the old town of Maldah from English Bazar, it is now referred to as Old Maldah.

In the North Bengal plains the rise of urban centres has been still more sparse. The only towns worth mentioning are Kamtapur or Kamrupanagar and Koch Bihar. The ruins of Bhitargarh, an ancient city, indicate that it must have been a large and strong fortification in old days. Gait, E.A.⁸ mention Jalpesvara (in Jalpaiguri district) as a capital of an old Kingdom. Kamtapur was made the centre of administration in the first half of the 13th century and continued to be the main cantonment even after the capital was taken back to Kamrup. The Khan King Niladhwaaja (1440 – 1460 A.D.) rebuilt the town of Kamtapur and repaired the fort of Kamtapur. Because of the successive Muslim invasions, the fort of Kamtapur was built quite strongly. As Das, S.⁹ mentioned it was made so invincible that it could withstand the attack of the army of Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah, but ultimately in 1498 it fell.

The ruins of Kamtapur are located on the west bank of river Dharla, which formed the defence of the city on one side. The river has shifted its course further to the east, but the old course, which now occupies the eastern side of the old city, shows that formerly it was a mighty river. The city is of an oblong shape about 30 km. in perimeter of which about 8 km. is defended by the old channel of river Dharla. The rest was fortified by a huge bank of earth and by a double ditch. The place is now called Gossanimari and is situated 13 km. to the east of Dinhata on the road connecting Dinhata and Sitai. Kamtapur was also the capital of Koch Kings for sometimes.

According to Das, S.¹⁰ the first Koch King Viswasingha moved his capital from Chikangram (in Assam) to Koch Bihar, where he built a grand city Hingulavas, now known as Mahakalguri. Rup Narayan, the 10th Koch King, shifted his capital from Atharokotha to Guriahati in the early 18th century. This constitutes, more or less the present town of Cooch Behar. This is the only town in North Bengal plains that exists from the pre-British days. During the reign of the Koch Bihar Maharajas, the town has developed in a planned manner. The close connection with the British was reflected in the formation of the Town Committee of Cooch Behar in 1885 and the municipality in 1944.

The district of Darjeeling and Kalimpong which is in the Darjeeling - Sikkim division of the eastern Himalayas sub-region, was sparsely populated and was politically a very unstable area. It did not have a single urban centre till the coming of the British.

URBAN CENTRES OF BRITISH PERIOD

The first British town in the region is English Bazar, the initial development of which was centered on a factory established in 1680. The town of Darjeeling and Kurseong was next developed as summer resorts of the British administrators in India towards 1840. The town of Jalpaiguri came into existence in 1869 as the head quarter of the district of Jalpaiguri. The other towns of the British period also served the administrative or trading purpose of the colonial rulers. These towns generally had two distinct parts; the developed, well maintained European quarters and the ill kept native section. The total number of towns that came into existence during the British rule was 12. Towns of the British period are enumerated in table 1 with the year of their being considered as towns for the first time. Where ever possible, the initial primary function of the towns has also been mentioned.

Table 1: Urban Centres developed during the British Period

Urban centre	Year of establishment	District	Primary functions
English Bazar	1680	Maldah	Manufacturing, Procurement of raw materials and Administration.
Darjeeling	1839	Darjeeling	Sanatorium.
Jalpaiguri	1869	Jalpaiguri	Administration and Cantonment
Kurseong	1879	Darjeeling	Sanatorium.
Mathabhanga	1897	Koch Bihar	Administration.
Dinhata	1897	Koch Bihar	Administration, Trade and Railway station.
Haldibari	1897	Koch Bihar	Market place.
Kalimpong	1931	Kalimpong	Trade and Administration.
Siliguri	1931	Darjeeling	Administration and Communication.
Hili	1941	Dakshin Dinajpur	Railway station and Administration.
Tufanganj	1941	Koch Bihar	Administration.
Mekliganj	1931	Koch Bihar	Administration and Trade.

CONCLUSION

The history of urbanization and growth of urban centres in North Bengal is governed by a number of factors. In the early time it was the political kingdoms and their capital cities which formed the mosaic of urban structure in this region. The urban development tends to flourish in a climate of settled political dominance. However, this region has witnessed an array of political struggle for supremacy among various groups from different parts of India and neighbouring countries. This resulted in a truncated urban development during the early time with very few urban centres flourishing and developing. The most important among them are Bangarh, Kamtapur, Gauda and Pandua. The British period saw a steady progress in urbanization in this region to meet the

colonial interests. The town of Darjeeling and Kurseong was developed to meet as sanatoriums and also to give some relief to the European people from excessive heat of the summer season. Many new urban centres were also developed during this period which served as administrative and trading centres.

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