



The Siliguri Corridor: A Historical Analysis of Geo-Political Vulnerability in Eastern India

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Abstract

The Siliguri Corridor, a mostly geo-strategic term often associated with the security architecture of eastern India, is an important geo-political space that has received special attention from experts on security, strategy and foreign policy ever since India's independence. It has been touted as one of the most vulnerable areas of India from a security perspective, as well as the gateway to the country's north-east and by extension, towards Southeast Asia. The current structure and geography of this corridor is a result of gradual additions as well as losses of territory in its history. This includes various policies implemented under the British colonial rule in India, followed by subsequent treaties after independence. This paper studies the genesis of the Siliguri Corridor and in the process makes an attempt to understand the historical background of settlement, migration and development of the areas which compose this corridor. It also analyzes the impact of colonialism and its contributions towards the continuing security dynamics in the region. To achieve this, a detailed study of the addition of these areas into the Indian subcontinent throughout various stages of its history has been focused upon. The paper also contributes towards addressing the dearth of literature in understanding the exact area and geographical extent of the corridor with the objective of highlighting its structural composition to add to the discourse on its security which so far has been limited to the widely discussed idea that at its narrowest, the corridor is only about 20 to 22 kilometers wide.

Keywords: *Siliguri Corridor; Policy-Strategy; Security; History; Geo-politics; Migration; Colonialism*

Introduction

The Siliguri Corridor, also known as the "Chicken's Neck" in strategic circles, is a geo-strategically important area that has attracted special and undivided attention of the military as well as security and foreign policy observers not only from India but also from its neighbouring states ever since India's independence. Its narrow geographical size of 22 km, along with its geo-strategic location

between Nepal and Bhutan towards the north and Bangladesh towards the south, lends it immense credibility as one of India's most vulnerable areas to external aggression, at least from a realist perspective of threat perception. In geographical terms, the peculiar shape of the corridor is a result of several additions as well as losses of territory in its history. The additions have been with regard to the areas of Darjeeling, the Dooars and Cooch Behar as well as some areas below Nepal's Terai region, Jalpaiguri as well as Sikkim. The loss of territory on the other hand is with regard to the carving out of states such as Assam, Bihar and Orissa from the Bengal Presidency under the colonial rule followed by the partition of the country which gave birth to East Bengal thereby shaping the geography of the present 'Chicken's Neck' of India. Figure 1 shows the location of the corridor within India's political map (marked by a circle). This paper examines the genesis of the Siliguri corridor and in the process, analyzes the historical developments contributing to the shaping of the areas that give it its peculiar shape. Aside from the threat perception in military and strategic circles, the relevance of the corridor also stems from its housing of the strategic feeder National Highway 31 which leads to Guwahati (Assam) and 31A which leads to Gangtok (Sikkim). It also contains the heavy traffic broad gauge Northern Frontier railways connecting New Jalpaiguri to Guwahati in north-eastern India, apart from providing vital access to civil and defense airports in the region.

This paper analyses the historical factors leading to the geographical formation of this strategically relevant corridor in eastern India. It also makes an assessment of the geo-political prospects of this corridor in terms of regional development and connectivity with the north-eastern region.

Methodology

In analyzing the historical and strategic aspects of the Siliguri Corridor, this paper has been based on a qualitative assessment of archival data on population and migration as well as government policies and treaties. These findings have been supplemented by in-person field visits to the areas concerned and through interactions with the local residents as well as government and military personnel in the region.

Aims and Objectives

This paper primarily aims to address the dearth in literature on the historical and geo-political discourse concerning the strategically vulnerable Siliguri Corridor in eastern India. It aims to address the gap in knowledge by assessing the historical forces leading to the formation of this corridor and the areas that give it its shape and size, with the hypothesis that the vulnerability associated with the corridor largely stems from these two factors.

The following are the objectives of this paper:

- i. To assess the strategic importance of the Siliguri Corridor to India's security.
- ii. To analyze the historical development of the areas which constitute this corridor.
- iii. To highlight the political legacies of transmigration in the region.
- iv. To explore the future relevance of this corridor in terms of security and development of the region.

Background of the Study

Traditionally, a geographical corridor has been understood to be a narrow stretch of land that connects two or more larger areas. In this sense, the Siliguri Corridor represents a wide array of geopolitical corridors in the world, while remaining more or less unique in the sense that it connects the entire north-eastern region (comprising eight Indian states) with the rest of India. Examples of other similar corridors in this regard, are the Jerusalem corridor between Jerusalem and the Shephelah in Israel

and the Tin Bigha corridor on the border between West Bengal and Bangladesh. Aarten (2013) argues that India seems to be located at the ‘corridors of peril’, comprising of the Sino-Pakistani border through which opium and Islamist extremists could enter Xinjiang, the Tibetan plain which connects Tibet with the Tibetan refugees in India, Nepal and Bhutan along with the maritime corridor. The focus of this paper is on the Siliguri Corridor, located in eastern India and composed of some districts of north Bengal and eastern Bihar. Three factors become important when studying such a corridor under the lens of geopolitics. These are:

- I. Its geographical extent (size)
- II. The nature of the areas it connects
- III. Its location

The geographical extent and location of any area determines how vulnerable it may be in case of a conflict between the areas/regions it connects. In International Relations (IR) discourse, one often finds mention of the ‘small country syndrome’, which essentially relates the level of geo-political vulnerability to geographical size and location of a state. This leads to the second point pertaining to the nature of the areas it connects. If the nearby areas are mostly hostile, the area (acting as a corridor) may face threats to its own security on a long-term basis. However, if the areas connected by the corridor show signs of development and cooperation, the corridor-area/state itself may also experience the shared benefits. Nepal’s recent development indicators as it slowly moves away from its traditional ‘yam between two boulders’ tag in South Asia, may be looked at from this perspective given the benefits it may obtain as a result of economic competition between its two neighbours: China in the north and India towards the south. Lastly, the location of such a corridor is important in determining whether it will mostly see peace or violence, development or systematic destruction.



Figure 1: Political Map of India (The Siliguri Corridor is indicated by a circle)

Source: Survey of India. Available at <https://surveyofindia.gov.in/pages/political-map-of-india>

Historically, migration has been one of the most important factors that have shaped inter-state relations and this relevance may be particularly witnessed in South Asia. This argument may also be extended to regional relations such as those between South and Southeast Asia. Although the movement of people, across cultural, linguistic, and ethnic regions is as old as human civilization itself, in case of South Asian history the various partitions over the years leading to the construction of official borders and ‘outsider’ identification, have caused the forcible eviction of certain groups of people, who were deprived their pre-emptive rights over the land where they had lived for a substantial length of time. Murayama (2006) states that the partition of the Indian subcontinent was instrumental in transforming the issue of

‘migrants’ into a national one, not only in respect of the territorial coverage of the issue concerned, but also by adding the label of ‘foreigners’ to ‘outsiders’.

Historical Background and Placement of the Siliguri Corridor

The present geography and demography of the areas in the Siliguri Corridor have been shaped by various events in the history of the Indian subcontinent, both preceding and following India’s independence, most notably the Anglo-Gorkha war, the Duar war, the treaties of Sugauli and Punakha, the colonial policy of industrialization, introduction of railways, the free movement of people and goods between India and Nepal as per the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed by the two countries in 1950 and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 followed by one of the largest mass migrations in the history of the world. This has been supplemented by the advent of globalization in India towards the end of the 20th century. The process of globalization has compounded the migration of people from lesser developed to more developed areas in search of a better and in today’s time, more modern standards of living. The town of Siliguri, although comparatively small in size, plays the crucial role of a transit point for road, air and rail traffic to the north-eastern states of India as well as to Nepal, Bhutan and also to Bangladesh. This has automatically turned it into an attractive destination for immigrants from nearby countries as well as for drug peddling and human trafficking and has served as a rather easy avenue for international movement and migration of elements inimical to India’s national security.

Presently, Marwaris, Punjabis, Biharis, Nepalis and Bengalis are the most prominent communities in the town of Siliguri with Hindi, Marwari, Bengali and Nepali being the most commonly spoken languages. The first instances of encouraged migration to the region date back to the early 19th century. This was mainly concentrated in and for activities related to plantation and road-building. A major portion of the plantation activities required physical labour, which as De (1990) argues, ‘was encouraged to migrate briefly in the 1830s from the Santal Parganas and then after the remarkable mortality of the tribal people in building the Pankhabari Road, from the indigent region of eastern Nepal (Limbuwan including Ilam) and further west and north’. The creation of the Bengal presidency by the British led to the initial drawing of Bangladesh’s border with India. The division of the country on the basis of Muslim and non-Muslim majority after independence further solidified the border. This border is 4,096 kilometers long out of which 2,217 kilometers is shared by Bangladesh and West Bengal. The Indo-Bangladesh border at Phulbari in Jalpaiguri district is located near Siliguri and is patrolled by the Indian Border Security Force on the Indian side and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), formerly known as Bangladesh Rifles or BDR on the Bangladeshi side. Unlike many border areas of the world which are characterized by low to zero inhabitation, the border area here is densely populated which highlights the impact of border economy in the region, particularly augmented by the establishment of border-haats (markets). On the other hand, due to increasing reports of violence between illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and the Indian border patrol personnel, a shoot on sight policy for infiltrators was once adopted by the Indian border patrols in the border area, particularly with Bangladesh. Interestingly, the border between India and Bangladesh is heavily guarded, which is in stark contrast to India’s borders with Nepal.

The Genesis of the Siliguri Corridor

The present security scenario in the Siliguri Corridor has much to do with the political decisions taken in pre-independence India. In other words, the history of the Siliguri corridor is essentially a history of the states and districts that give it shape. Present day West Bengal has gone through two partitions in the past: once in 1905 and again in 1947. Under the British administration, Bengal which included Bihar and Orissa since 1765 was considered to be too large for a single province and thus difficult to govern, because of which many areas of the province had been neglected and isolated. Calcutta (now Kolkata) and its nearby areas were developed whereas areas in eastern Bengal were poorly governed. It has also often been argued that this led to the emergence of organized piracy in the rivers and creeks that ran

through these areas. Under the provinces of East Bengal and Assam which were created following the partition of Bengal in 1905, the district of Dinajpur had an area of 3946 square miles (or 10,220 sq. km.) with its greatest length from north to south being 105 miles (or 169 km.) and its greatest breadth near its southern end between the Karatoya and the Mahananda rivers being 76 miles (or 122 km.). As per the Dinajpur District Gazetteer, its population at the census of 1911 was 1, 687,863.

In earlier times, the area was known for malarial fever which led to the out-migration of most of its inhabitants. Additionally, the southern ‘thanas’ were characterized by wastelands which were sparsely populated and full of jungles. One manager of a government estate believed that such lands could be reclaimed if Santals could be brought and made to settle there. The experiment was successful and their influx continued for several decades after that. The Santals were therefore one of the earlier groups to settle in the southern ‘thanas’ of Dinajpur. In this context, a ‘thana’ is one of the divisions for the purposes of local governance in present day Bangladesh, the other divisions being Upazila and Union Council. After the Santals, the area witnessed the influx of the Mundas and Oraons from Ranchi and due to their hardy nature the zamindars welcomed them. The Barind Tract, also called ‘Varendra Bhumi’ in Bengali is a physiographic unit in Bangladesh and the Bengal basin covering most of Rajshahi, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Pabna and some other areas under Rajshahi Division of Bangladesh. Outside this Barind Tract, the influx of the Santals was comparatively lower, while in some areas of Dinajpur the outbreak of malarial fever put a check on immigration. It has been widely believed that the original inhabitants of the district of Dinajpur were the Rajbansis. This is important in understanding why many also believe that the original inhabitants of the town of Siliguri were Rajbansis.

At the time, manual and seasonal labor seems to be the most important cause for movement of people from one place to another. The Rajbansis also had a sizeable population in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar as evidenced by the findings in the ‘Final Report on the Survey and Settlement of the Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri: 1889-95’, published by the Bengal Secretariat Press in 1895. Originally Dinajpur could be divided into four chief parts, namely Paharpur, Dinajpur proper, Raiganj and Kanchanghat. After India’s independence, in accordance with the Radcliffe Award and the resultant border line between India and East Pakistan, Dinajpur was divided into West Dinajpur under India and Dinajpur under East Pakistan. The States Reorganization Act of 1956 reformed the boundaries of India’s states and organized them mostly along linguistic lines as a result of which certain Bengali-speaking areas from Bihar were added to West Dinajpur. In April 1992 West Dinajpur was further divided into the districts of Uttar Dinajpur (north) and Dakshin Dinajpur (south). The northern part of the district of Uttar Dinajpur is very much a part of the narrow Siliguri corridor.

In the year 1901, the district of Jalpaiguri consisted of western Duars which was annexed in 1865 after a war with Bhutan and the thanas of Jalpaiguri, Boda, Rajganj and Patgram, separated from the Rangpur district in 1869 and 1870. When the erstwhile district of Dinajpur was bifurcated between West Bengal and the then East Pakistan by the Radcliffe Award, the newly created district of West Dinajpur which was a part of West Bengal had no direct connection with the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar as a large tract of the then East Pakistan and Bihar lied between them. A link was provided in 1956 by the Bihar and West Bengal (Transfer of Territories) Act, 1956 whereby a strip of land was transferred to West Bengal from the Purnia district of Bihar. This transferred land includes a portion of Kishanganj sub-division of Purnea district, a portion of Gopalpur in the same district, Purulia sub-division of Manbhum district excluding Chas thana, Chandil thana and Patamda police station of Barabhum thana. Originally the entire transferred land was attached to Darjeeling district by the State government in 1956 but within a gap of one day the territory consisting of 906 villages in three police stations were again transferred to West Dinajpur district.

Subsequently in 1959 parts of the transferred territories which lay north of the river Mahananda were retransferred to Darjeeling district so that the Mahananda River formed the northern boundary of west Dinajpur and now Uttar Dinajpur district. In the same year a new sub-division namely Islampur was

also created with the police stations Chopra, Islampur, Goalpokhar and Karandighi. In 1874, Assam was separated from Bengal which was followed by the separation of the province of Bihar and Orissa from Bengal in 1912. Interestingly, when Bengal was partitioned in 1905, it was followed by protests which ultimately led the government to undo Lord Curzon's policy of divide and rule leading to its reunification in 1911. However, during the partition of Bengal in 1947 the situation was not similar to the first partition. It is widely believed that the British had only linguistic factors in mind for partitioning Bengal in 1905, but the reaction it garnered showed that it could be re-enacted along religious lines if needed in future. Carrying this argument forward, Chatterji (2002) argues that the 'second and definitive partition of Bengal was preceded by an organized agitation which demanded the vivisection of the province on the basis of religion'. The Calcutta Riots, also known as the Great Calcutta Killing which saw three to four days of massive Hindu-Muslim riots in Bengal, took place in 1946. These riots have also been referred to as the Direct Action Day whereby the Muslim League Council displayed its opinion of the Congress as it believed that after India's independence, the Muslims would be at the mercy of the Hindus. Earlier at the Lahore Resolution, also known as the Pakistan Resolution, a formal political statement adopted by the All-India Muslim League called for the creation of independent states for Muslims in north-western and eastern British India, thus acting as the initial premise for the creation of East Pakistan which eventually became Bangladesh in 1971. Communal identities did exist in the pre-colonial period, however it can be argued that communalism and communal politics took shape and acquired divisive proportions during the colonial era.

Regarding the Indian society, Hasan (1982) posits that the incompleteness of the anti-feudal revolution created conditions of backwardness in which the communal ideology found a fertile soil to grow. Such events did affect the post-independence scenario of Bengal and definitely led to the present political, demographic, economic, cultural, social, linguistic and religious differences one may find in the areas which are a part of the Siliguri Corridor. Moving forward, other areas which many consider to be a part of this corridor are the Duars/Dooars. They are essentially mountain passes which lead to the Bhutanese interior and to the northeastern states of India. According to Murayama (2006), after the revolt of 1857, tension over territory culminated in the Duar War of 1865 after which the British occupied all the duars, cutting off Bhutan from all communication with the plains of Assam and Bengal. The final settlement was reached by the Treaty of Sinchula in the same year. Under this treaty, the government of British India retained possession of all eighteen duars and in return, agreed to make an annual payment to the government of Bhutan. Through this treaty, Bhutan ceded territories in the Assam Duars and Bengal Duars. This treaty stood until 1910 following which the Treaty of Punakha was signed. These facts gain relevance while dealing with the various facets of development and security scenario which are closely related in case of the Siliguri Corridor.

Strategic Implications of Borderlands

As mentioned earlier, the history of the corridor is essentially the history of the areas that compose it. The present area surrounding the Indo-Nepal border has been shaped by various treaties signed between the East India Company and the Nepali rulers of the day. India's border with Nepal is at Kachan Kawal in Panitanki area while 22 km to the south, the Radcliffe Line separates India from Bangladesh. Hence the boundaries that surround the corridor today are essentially man-made or artificial boundaries. Such boundaries, created mostly by the colonial powers disrupted the linkages that had evolved over centuries in the form of family, society, culture and economy in the region. Similar scenarios elsewhere have been widely discussed by scholars of borderland studies. However, although such a boundary successfully created a new country in the form of Bangladesh for example, it failed to put an end to pre-existing linkages amongst the people living on either side of the boundary. What this means is that a problem associated with any single community in either Nepal or Bangladesh having historical linkages with such a community in India may have a spill-over effect on the Indian side of the

border. The concerns being raised in India regarding the Madhesi-Pahari issue in Nepal is certainly an example of this.

The district of Darjeeling came under the radar of the East India Company towards the beginning of the 19th century, before which it was a part of Sikkim which itself was an independent kingdom until 1975. The Raja of Sikkim, under tremendous pressure dealing with the Gorkha warriors of Nepal who, by the end of the 18th century had conquered Sikkim's territory as far as the Tista river along with the Terai approached the British East India Company for assistance, which led to the Anglo-Gorkha war in 1814 between the Gorkhas and the East India Company. The Treaty of Sugauli signed between the belligerents on 4th March 1816 ended the war. The intervention of the British was successful in preventing the Gorkhas from turning the whole of Sikkim and the hills west and south of the Tista into an outlying province of Nepal. Sikkim which included the present district of Darjeeling was retained as a buffer state between Nepal and Bhutan. Therefore, the Treaty of Sugauli played a major role in shaping the present geopolitics of the region. Shrestha (2008) lists five ways in which the treaty had a direct impact on the geography of Nepal, which automatically affected the geography of the Siliguri corridor:

- i. Before the treaty, the border of Nepal extended from Teesta in the east to Kangara Fort in the west. The east-west length of Nepal was 1,415 km. and the total area was 267,575 sq.km. Similarly, the distance from Teesta to Sutlej was 1,373 km. and the area was 204,917 sq. km.
- ii. The treaty reduced the average east-west length to 885 km. and the total area of Nepal was confined to 147,181 sq. km. between the Mechi and the Mahakali Rivers.
- iii. The treaty cut-off the wings on the east and west of Nepal and receded its area on the south, losing almost one-third of its total area.
- iv. Nepal was forced to give up not only its western front but also areas lying between Mechi and Teesta on the east, where there was no war. In the treaty, it was mentioned that the aforesaid territory shall be evacuated by the Gorkha troops within 40 days from this date.
- v. The British signed the Titaliya Treaty with Sikkim on February 10, 1817 (11 months after the signing of the Sugauli Treaty), and gave the land it had won from Nepal to Sikkim.

The Treaty of Titalya signed in 1817 reinstated the Raja of Sikkim, restored all the tracts of land between the Mechi and the Teesta to the Raja and guaranteed his sovereignty. In short, the result of the treaty was that Nepal lost almost one-third of its territory on the east, south and west. What this has led to is a belief amongst a section of people in Nepal that the treaty was one-sided and as it was signed with the erstwhile East India Company, it does not hold validity with regard to independent India. This has been one of the main concerns raised in the demand for Greater Nepal by the aforementioned section of Nepalese citizens.

On the question as to how the present district of Darjeeling became a part of West Bengal and especially of the area which later came to be known as the Siliguri Corridor, the Treaty of Titalya provides an insight. Ten years after the king of Sikkim had been reinstated a dispute arose between Sikkim and Nepal, which as per the treaty, was referred to the Governor General. In 1828 Captain Lloyd was deputed to settle the dispute for which he travelled to the hills and was attracted by the location of Darjeeling and developed a desire to turn it into a sanatorium for injured soldiers. Additionally, this achievement would allow the British to occupy a strategically important position with regard to the entrance to Nepal towards the West and Bhutan towards the East. Strategically, it would provide an advantage by serving as the base for defending the trade route to Tibet through Sikkim. General Lloyd was accordingly deputed to start negotiations with the Raja of Sikkim for the transfer of Darjeeling in return for an equivalent in money or land. The negotiations ended in the execution by the Raja of Sikkim of a Deed of Grant on the 1st of February 1835. The Deed, in its original form read as follows:

“The Governor General, having expressed his desire for possession of the Hill of Darjeeling on account of its cool climate, for the purpose of enabling the servants of his Government, suffering

from sickness, to avail themselves of its advantages, the Sikkim puttee Raja, out of friendship for the said Governor General, hereby present Darjeeling to the East India Co. that is, all the land South of the Great Rangeet River, East of the Balason, Kahail and Little Rangeet rivers and West of the Rungno and Mahanadi Rivers”.

It may be noticed that the territory of Darjeeling came under British occupation in three phases. Sharma (2014) makes a similar assessment. Firstly, the signing of the Deed of Grant mentioned above was a significant event leading towards this occupation. The second phase followed a war with Sikkim which resulted in the annexation of Sikkim 'Morang' or Terai at the foot hills as well as a portion of the Sikkim hills which was bounded by the Rammam river on the north, by the Great Rangit and the Tista rivers on the east, and by the frontier with Nepal on the west. The third phase was marked by the Anglo-Bhutan war which ended in the Treaty of Sinchula (1865) through which the British annexed the hill tracts east of the Tista river, west of Nechu and Dechu rivers and south of Sikkim. This serves as the historical and political basis for the formation of the northern parts of the Siliguri corridor. The district of Darjeeling also includes the city of Siliguri which plays an important role in the corridor. Before the signing of the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816, Siliguri served as the transit point between Darjeeling, Kurseong and Nepal. It started to grow as an urban center after Darjeeling was seized by the British, which was followed by the addition of the Duars and Kalimpong by the end of 1865 into British India. Some of the areas which make up the district of Darjeeling are Kurseong, Kalimpong, Mirik, Darjeeling, Siliguri and the Terai region.

In January, 1950, Cooch Behar or Koch Bihar merged with the state of West Bengal and is presently the farthest north-eastern border district of West Bengal adjacent to Assam and Bangladesh. Cooch Behar has five sub divisions namely Cooch Behar Sadar, Dinhata, Mathabhanga, Tufanganj and Mekhliganj. The district is also considered to be a part of the Siliguri Corridor due to its location, wedged between Bhutan and Bangladesh. By an agreement dated 28th August, 1949 the king of Cooch Behar ceded full and extensive authority, jurisdiction and power of the state to the Dominion Government of India. The transfer of administration of the state to the Govt. of India came into force on 12th September, 1949. Eventually, Cooch Behar was transferred and merged with the province of West Bengal on 19th January, 1950 and from that date Cooch Behar emerged as a new district in the administrative map of West Bengal.

Present Composition of the Siliguri Corridor

Geographically, the Siliguri corridor starts from the northern fringes of Uttar (North) Dinajpur district of West Bengal and Kishanganj district of Bihar and extends up to some of the areas in the district of Darjeeling close to its border with Nepal on the one hand and Bangladesh on the other. Some military and strategic analysts also include the districts of Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar in their understanding of the Siliguri corridor. As mentioned above, the exact area of the corridor has been a subject of debate among scholars. India's border with Nepal at 26°21'46.34" latitude and 88°1'5.48" longitude may be considered as the starting point of the Siliguri Corridor if one were to take a map of India and draw an imaginary line precisely from this point, going through Panjipara in West Bengal down to the Indian territories near Debiganj in Bangladesh. This however only forms the western part of the corridor. The eastern part of the corridor starts from the Indo- Bangladesh border at Phulbari (26°38'01.24"N latitude and 88°24'18.29"E longitude) in Jalpaiguri district in North Bengal up to some areas in the district of Darjeeling including Siliguri, Pankhabari and areas on Indian soil close to Nepal's Bahundangi on the other side of the border. As mentioned before, the inclusion of the districts of Alipurduar and especially Cooch Behar in an understanding of the Siliguri corridor are debated. However, if they are added to one's understanding of the corridor, its eastern end starts from Dhumpara Forest in Alipurduar and runs down to the areas of Tufanganj, Jhingapuni, Mansai and Chamta in Cooch Behar and includes area in between like Falimari, Jaldhoa, Baruipara, Purba Salbari and Dakshin Chengmari.

The district of Darjeeling (within the Siliguri Corridor) measures a total geographical area of 3149 sq. km. and accounts for 3.55 percent of the total area of West Bengal (88752 sq.km.). The total length of international border along the district comes to 185 km. which includes the Nepal border: 101.02 km, the Bhutan border: 30.18 km. and the Bangladesh border: 54.33 km. Adjacent to the district of Darjeeling lies the Jalpaiguri district, on its east lies Uttar Dinajpur district, on its south are the districts of Panchagar, Nilphamari and Lalmonirhat of Bangladesh and on its east lies Cooch Behar district. India and Bangladesh share a 4096 km. boundary of which 2217 km. is shared with West Bengal. Therefore, it can be estimated that the corridor is made up of around eighty small towns and villages lying within the areas of Kishanganj district of Bihar, Darjeeling district, northern parts of Uttar Dinajpur district as well as the districts of Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar in West Bengal.

Due to the lack of a prior study on the exact area of this corridor, it may be argued that the first inhabited area falling under the Siliguri corridor from the western side is Jirangachh village in Thakurganj block in Bihar. The adjacent area is Amol Jhari village, also lying in Thakurganj block. Kishanganj is one of the districts that make up the corridor and the only district from Bihar in this regard. It came into existence on 14th January 1990, with an area of 1,884 sq.km. During the Mughal period, the area was a part of Nepal and was called Nepalgarh. It may be noted here that similar to Kishanganj, some of the areas in the Siliguri corridor have been added to India and some have been ceded to other countries during various eras in Indian history. In the pre-colonial era, Mohammed Reza captured the fort at Nepalgarh and the name was changed to Alamganj, which eventually became Kishanganj. The border village of Hathiduba lies here. Kharibari is a town in the Siliguri corridor that lies near the Indo-Nepal border and is about 30 km. from the town of Siliguri and about 13 km. from Bhadrapur in Nepal.

Due to its strategic location, the Siliguri corridor not only connects the mainland of India to its north-eastern region, it also makes it convenient for citizens of countries like Nepal and Bangladesh to cross over into each other's territories due to an existing treaty for free movement of goods and people between Nepal and India on the one hand and a rather porous border between India and Bangladesh on the other. The Indo-Bangladesh border is at Phulbari in Jalpaiguri district which is located near the town of Siliguri. According to the census of 2011, the population composition of the districts that form the Siliguri corridor is as follows:¹

- Uttar Dinajpur (West Bengal): 3,007,134
- Darjeeling district (West Bengal): 1,846,823
- Jalpaiguri district including the Alipurduar Metropolitan Region (presently: Alipurduar district, West Bengal): 3,872,846
- Cooch Behar (West Bengal): 2,819,086
- Kishanganj (Bihar): 1,690,400²

The total population of the Siliguri corridor according to the 2011 census thus stands at 1,32,36,289 people. This is of course keeping in mind that the population of the whole of Uttar Dinajpur has been taken into consideration here whereas only its northern part forms a part of the Siliguri corridor. Uttar Dinajpur shares an international border which is approximately 206 km. towards the east with Bangladesh. The importance of the bustling town of Siliguri is based on its role as the transit point for road, air and rail traffic to Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal along with the northeastern states of India. Its location on the foothills of the Himalayas makes it strategically important and its role as the main trading and commercial center of north Bengal adds to its economic significance. The district of Uttar Dinajpur

¹ West Bengal Population Census data, 2011. Available at: <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/west+bengal.html>

² Kishanganj District. Census 2011 data. Available at: <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/district/62-kishanganj.html> Accessed on 16.04.2023

occupies an area of 3,140 sq. km³, Darjeeling district occupies an area of 3,149 sq. km, Jalpaiguri occupies an area of 6,227 sq. km and Cooch Behar occupies an area of 3,387 sq. km⁴. The district of Kishanganj in Bihar occupies an area of 1,884 sq. km⁵. It may thus be concluded that the total area of the Siliguri corridor comes to 17, 787 sq. km.

Geo-Political Aspects

In the case of the Siliguri Corridor's geographical extent, although there has been some irregularity in the discourse regarding its exact area, there is considerable agreement among scholars on at least two general guidelines; first, that the corridor includes the whole of north Bengal including the districts of Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Cooch Behar along with eastern Bihar and second, that in its entirety the corridor is not more than 200 kilometers long and about 20 to 22 kilometers wide at its narrowest point. This needs to be understood in the context of the 5,000 kilometers external boundary that the region, including Sikkim, shares with Nepal, the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China, Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh. The corridor's importance becomes clearer when one looks at how it serves as the only physical entry point to the north-eastern region of India. In fact, many scholars argue that the reason for the comparative underdevelopment of the north-eastern region is due to its limitations of geographical location whereby it is only connected to the rest of India through this narrow corridor, which severely disrupts any serious logistical development.

The development of the north-eastern region is also vital for India's Act East Policy whereby it seeks to further cultivate relations with East and Southeast Asia. Ensuring the security of the corridor is important in order to ensure the security of the north-eastern states which in turn is important for India's Act East Policy. The geo-strategic location of this corridor, wedged between Nepal and Bangladesh raises serious concerns regarding the security of India, particularly as China's soft power diplomacy gains more footing in India's neighbourhood. The narrow area of the corridor also makes it conducive for cross-border illegal activities. The corridor is at its narrowest in the area lying between Phansidewa near the Indo-Bangladesh border and Panitanki in the eastern border between India and Nepal. In recent times, the eastern parts of the corridor have come under the radar of security experts owing to the proximity to the Chumbi valley, where heightened tensions along the tri-junction between Bhutan, India (Sikkim) and China (the Tibetan Autonomous Region) due to the emergence of satellite images showing Chinese infrastructure build-up in the area, have led to a new security challenge in the region.

Owing to the peculiar geography of the region as well as the logistical necessity for development of the north-eastern states, the Siliguri Corridor plays the critical role of a bridge between two distinct economies, one characterized by the dictates of a peripheral economy along with its associated institutions under the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, and the other guided by the principles of a mixed economy. Its geopolitical prospects largely hinge upon a network of developmental models in the area which range from those conceptualized by strategic experts and military generals on the one hand and institutions such as the Asian Development Bank on the other. The ongoing connectivity projects in the area attest to the prominent role that the corridor is expected to play in India's Act East Policy eventually. Furthermore, the sustained growth of the North-Eastern region of India depends on the development levels of the Siliguri Corridor. In terms of threat assessment regarding the Siliguri Corridor at the moment, the highly concerning 'pincer-move of China' theory seems implausible given the nature of Sino-Indian relations. However, flare-ups in Doklam involving India, Bhutan and China could bring about new geo-political challenges at the cost of development projects in the corridor.

³ See: "Brief Industrial Profile of Uttar Dinajpur District, West Bengal". Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, Government of India, MSME-Development Institute, Kolkata. p.3.

⁴ State Forest Report: West Bengal, 2011-12. Directorate of Forests, Government of West Bengal. p.2.

⁵ See: 'Kishanganj District: Location and Geography'. Government of Bihar. Available at: <http://kishanganj.bih.nic.in/Location%20&%20Geography.htm>

Conclusion

The location of the Siliguri Corridor lends a sense of criticality to the discourse on its security as well as for India's larger objective of playing a more proactive role in South Asia, given the backdrop of historical trans-migration and settlement in the area. The political causes for its relevance as a legacy of several British colonial policies in the past, as well as the present sense of vulnerability emerging largely following the 1962 conflict with China, cannot be downplayed in any assessment of India's national security on the one hand and its development on the other. Its location as the gateway to the north-eastern region, which in turn is regarded as the gateway to Southeast Asia, gains immense significance not only from a strategic lens but also from economic, social, cultural and logistical perspectives. The narrow corridor, which provides the advantage of free movement across borders, especially with Nepal and an almost semi-porous one with Bangladesh has led to innumerable cases of cross-border illegal activities in the past and as per recent newspaper reports, continue to be a source of concern.

The other factor for security is the continuation of peaceful relations between the various communities inhabiting the corridor, which have obvious historical and socio-economic cross-border connotations with Nepal and Bangladesh. Communal tensions flaring up and turning into political concerns as a result of, along with many other factors, the engagement of some political leaders in vote-bank and community-appeasement politics in the region is another major cause of concern. Hence one may find multiple dimensions of overlapping issues and concerns with regard to the strategic importance of the Siliguri Corridor. While on the one hand, as the transit point for trade and commercial relations between India, Bangladesh, Nepal, China and Southeast Asia, the corridor provides immense opportunities for economic development of the region, on the other hand its geographical location and size does make it one of India's most vulnerable areas. It is therefore, imperative to approach the notion of security in this region from a historical perspective. The rising influence of China's soft power diplomacy in Nepal, evidenced by the nature of investments on highways, airports, education, healthcare, etc. in the country necessitates a deeper understanding of the vulnerabilities in India's eastern parts in general and the Siliguri Corridor in particular. In case of a military conflict between the two rising powers, it is not likely that China would consider targeting this narrow stretch connecting India's heartland with its north-eastern periphery. However, it needs to be noted that military and geopolitical strategies are often centered on threat perception rather than actual aggression. This is what makes the Siliguri Corridor extremely vital to India's security in the east. Through extensive fieldwork and in-depth analysis of these issues, it has been observed that there does remain a dearth of literature on the topic. Perhaps, the role of the region's civil society gains more prominence in this regard.

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