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The Importance of Being Siliguri, or the Lack Thereof

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Atig Ghosh

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Atig Ghosh *

Debashis Chakraborty visited Siliguri for the first time in 1952. After the final examinations of Class IV, this was his first trip to Siliguri to visit the part of his family that had relocated to this town from Dinajpur following the Partition of 1947. The family had set off one morning from Dinajpur town and after changing trains thrice, they reached Siliguri the next day. From the train, the child had for the first time seen the blue line of mountains. The Siliguri Junction station, where they got off, struck him as shiny new. They took a rickshaw from the station which ferried them across the wooden deck-bridge over River Mahananda along a winding pitch road. Beside the bridge ran the railway tracks for the toy train. While passing the Road Station (now Hasmi Chowk), he noticed the small wagons of the goods-trains standing idly. And what captivated him further— remained anchored in his memories lifelong— were the houses: mostly made of wood, some stood on stilts. Their house was no different. It was a bungalow, Chakraborty tells us. The yellow paint of the wooden planks contrasted sharply with the bright green of the doors and windows. The bright red tin roof shone in the morning sun. In front of the house, was a *cutcha* lane, along the two sides of which open drains had been freshly dug. There was a wide open space in front of the house, between the un-metalled road and the door. Dewdrops glistened like pearls on the blades of grass in the patch. A huge mango tree stood guard on the other side of the road. All around were open fields dotted infrequently by distant houses made of wood. From the house one could see the huge semicircular go-down to the south, covered by the same red tin roof as the houses. From the courtyard one could see the blue hills and behind them the silver crown of Kangchenjunga and other mysterious peaks of the mighty Himalayas. Such was their locality. The “town” did not impress him much: he found it to be more in the nature of a half-village, quaint and out-of-the-way. “So, this is Siliguri! This is Hindustan!” the child had wondered, “Our Pakistan is so much better.” In 1954, however, Chakraborty had to leave behind the bustling urbanity of Dinajpur town and shift permanently to Siliguri, to the same locality that he had two years ago found a little dreary— Subhaspally. He would spend his life there.¹

My brushes with Siliguri till 2015 had been purely— and literally— transitory. *En route* to the mountains, mostly Darjeeling, which, in the great tradition of a true-blue Bengali, I am in the habit of visiting at least thrice every year, and on board a bus, a shared jeep, or a private rented car, I would zip past the city, restless till my conveyance hit the forest-flanked, lichen-whiskered landscape of the foothills. On my way back, I may pause for a stop-gap snifter at a watering-hole on the Hill Cart Road or to buy tea at Rai & Company at Sevoke More. Though some of my friends would use the

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waiting time (trains for the South are usually later in the evening) to visit the famous Hong Kong Market, I never got around to doing the same. So when I got off the train at New Jalpaiguri (NJP) Railway Station last year and stepped out to find myself mobbed, as usual, by expectant drivers offering rides to Darjeeling at competitive rates, it was a strange new experience to decline their offers. I had come to stay. In Siliguri. My friend from Siliguri, Udai Kumar Shaw, had come to receive me at NJP. He told me that he was to do the talking— by which he meant the haggling— with the *auto-wallabs*, lest my Southern accent gave away my “foreignness”. That I couldn’t say “shite” to mean “sixty” was a dead giveaway of my lack of North Bengali, and I guess Irish, ancestry. On our way, for the first time I attended to the cityscape with any degree of perspicacity. As the fly-over disgorged us onto Venus More,² I found the two sides of the Hill Cart Road crammed with overbuilt houses. Almost no house had a façade, let alone the “acre of green grass” of Chakraborty’s description. Frontages were crammed with shops, bars and banks of every description. The sidewalks had been taken over by hawkers in various stages of permanence. The traffic snarl could give Central Calcutta at office hours a run for its money and the jostling jaywalkers had established pedestrian privilege as their constitutional right. Our auto-rickshaw handled the mid-morning mêlée as if it were NFS sim-racing and, Tobey Marshall-like, performed impossible stunts at an impossible speed to transport us to Airview More, our destination. I was putting up at the Airview Hotel, from which the junction got its name. From where we got off, a massive bridge spanned the River Mahananda, which was not much more than its parched bed and an occasional sickly flow, relieved mostly of its boulders by the infamous “boulder mafia”. In fact, one could see the boulder trucks dotting the dry parts of the channel in the distance. I looked wistfully up at the blue line of the mountains across Mahananda and found my view interrupted by high-rises in the distance. “So, this is Siliguri!” the frightened child in me wondered, “I had imagined it to be so much better.” But, the city grows on you. It grew on me. Eventually.

The six decades that separate Chakraborty’s first experience of Siliguri and mine have witnessed a quaint half-town transform itself into an enormous metropolis-in-the-making. The pace of this transformation has been particularly remarkable from the 1990s. Even Debashis Chakraborty, a life-long resident of Siliguri, struggles to make sense of this transformation in his memoirs, *Bibarta Siliguri*. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was the Jalpaiguri town — which is Siliguri’s poor cousin today— that enjoyed urban prominence in the area. Back in those days, no observer would have guessed that the foothill hamlet of Saktigarh (Old Siliguri) with a population of less than five thousand even in the 1940s would one day become the bustling urban agglomerate that Siliguri is today.³ This study therefore must start with a prefatory disclaimer— an *apologia*, if you will. The essay at no point endeavours to become a comprehensive commentary on the logic of Siliguri’s urban transformation. It modestly attempts to draw attention to a few aspects of this transformation, specifically under the sign of neoliberal accumulation from the 1990s. In so doing, it does not— because it cannot— look at Siliguri in isolation, as a monolithic self-completing urban phenomenon at a remove from the regional forces of economy and polity in which it is inevitably embedded and implicated and which it relentlessly shapes. Even so, the narrative has sometimes tended to divagate in seemingly unrelated directions. The author hopes that these digressive pulls have creatively enriched our understanding of this phenomenon within the otherwise carefully circumscribed remit.

Defence

Let us begin by cutting a long story short and quickly moving on to the 1990s. 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 British India (1947). The formation of East Bengal⁴ created a geographical barrier in the north-eastern part of India. The narrow Siliguri Corridor— commonly known as the “Chicken’s Neck”, which at one point is less than 14 miles (22.53 km) wide— remained as a national-territorial isthmus between the north-eastern 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 NH31 and NH34.⁵ Between Sikkim and Bhutan lies the Chumbi Valley, a dagger-shaped protrusion 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 China-India Border War of 1962.⁶

Siliguri Corridor & the Chumbi Valley



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 oldest paramilitary force of India), the Border Security Force (BSF) and the West Bengal Police. The North Bengal Frontier BSF is headquartered at Kadamtala, while one of the five Frontier Headquarters of the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) is located in Siliguri. These are two of the five Central Armed Police Forces of India, while the largest of the five, the Central Reserved Police Force

(CRPF), too, has considerable presence in the area. 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 very 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.”⁷ 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 a 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 General 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 north-eastern states to the rest of the country.⁸ Now, you see, 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. 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 lesser 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, the BSF, the SSB, the CRPF and the Assam Rifles around the city. However, there is much more to it than this.

Pathways

Dubbed the gateway to Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and North-East India, Siliguri stands in a very unique geographical niche; Nepal lies in the west of the city 10 km from Bagdogra, Bhutan to the north-east about 40 km, China to the north about 180 km at Nathu La 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. The so-called four “T”s – tea, timber, tourism and transport – have for long been claimed to be the main businesses of Siliguri. While timber is languishing and tea has entered a complex career, a fifth “T” has ominously reared its head in the area: trafficking. Tea and trafficking merit separate attention; they will be discussed at some length later in the essay. Let us for now turn to transport.

As a gesture of international cooperation 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. The Silk Route of India, i.e. the trade route between India and Tibet (China), is accessible through Nathu La and Jelep La only after crossing Siliguri.⁹ And then, there are also the business routes to Bhutan across the Jaigaon-Phuentsholing border. Debashis Chakraborty has already introduced us to the Siliguri Junction and Siliguri Town stations. My introductory account has acquainted us with NJP. These are the three important railway stations within the Siliguri urban agglomerate. The Town station is the oldest; started on August 23, 1880, by the colonial government, this station for long served as the terminus for the trains coming from

Calcutta and as the starting point of the internationally acclaimed DHR. This too we have noted before. The Siliguri Junction station, where Chakraborty had alighted for the first time, was opened after independence in 1949 and it used to be the point of departure of all trains to the north-eastern states. It is the only station in India with tracks of all the three gauges used in India. To this station was added the NJP station in 1964. Located initially in Jalpaiguri district at a distance of 2.5 km from the Town station, this was a wholly greenfield project. It is now the centre of rail-communication for the entire region as well as Siliguri and, probably for this reason, has been incorporated into the Siliguri Municipal Corporation recently as one of its wards, which incidentally has 17 of its 47 wards in the Jalpaiguri district. This is the largest railway station of the entire North-east and, as we shall see in a bit, the nodal distribution centre for the trafficking flows from the region. The broad-gauge railway track has now been extended to the Siliguri Junction station, so that people can now travel directly to the heart of the city without having to alight at NJP. This new broad-gauge track extends to the old Dooars metre-gauge track up to Alipurduar and beyond.¹⁰ The Bagdogra and Naxalbari stations may not be integrally a part of this network, but the former, located roughly 10 km from the city, connects the airport located there to Siliguri, while the latter, situated to the west of the Greater Siliguri City, is of immense strategic importance as it facilitates not only the people of Naxalbari and Panitanki to connect with other parts of the country but also facilitates the people of Nepal from places like Kakarvitta, Dhulabari and Bittamore across the Mechi River to utilise the railway station as the means of communication with the rest of India. The new broad-gauge track that passes from Siliguri Junction to Aluabari Road (Islampur, Uttar Dinajpur) through Bagdogra, Naxalbari, and Thakurganj (Bihar) provides an impetus to travel, trade and trafficking through this part of the country.

The roads of Siliguri are of no less logistical importance and, in fact, in recent times, have assumed global logistical heft with the coming of the Asian Highways. We have already spoken of the NH31 and NH34 of the old numbering. The NH31 starts at Barhi in Jharkhand and passes through Siliguri to ultimately end at Guwahati, the capital of Assam. It has two tributaries so to speak: the NH31A stretches from Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, to Sevoke on NH31 and the NH31C connects Galgalia in West Bengal to Bijni in Assam, skirting Siliguri at the Naxalbari-Bagdogra stretch. The importance of the NH31A can hardly be overstated, for it is Sikkim's only substantial supply-link from India and cutting it off, as Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) strikes have often shown us in the Darjeeling hills, can cause severe distress to the northern state.¹¹ The NH34 which meets the NH31 at Dalkhola in Uttar Dinajpur district, begins at Dum Dum in Kolkata, thereby connecting Siliguri to the state's capital. Add to this the West Bengal State Highways 12 (Galgalia-Alipurduar) and 12A (Siliguri-Alipurduar) and we begin to develop a picture of the nodal location of Siliguri in this logistical roadmap which ties together not only the North-east and the rest of India but also Sikkim, and Nepal, Bhutan, and China.

Map of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar



This dragnet has only tightened with the commencement of the major infrastructure project in the region—the Asian Highway (AH) project. This, as we know, is a cooperative project among countries in Asia and Europe and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), to improve the highway systems in Asia. It is one of the three pillars of the Asian Land Transport Infrastructure Development (ALTID) project, endorsed by the ESCAP commission at its 48th session in 1992, comprising Asian Highway, Trans-Asian Railway (TAR) and facilitation of land transport projects. Everywhere in and around Siliguri, one notices the tracks that have been created for the multi-lane Asian Highways. Blinding dust billows from dug-out tracks as massive machines and countless labourers work tirelessly in the scorching midday sun. One hears rumours about the arbitrary acquisition of tea-garden lands for the project and how jobless plantation workers have fed into the workforce for a pittance; nor has the project been free of “border anxieties”, with at least one recorded instance of work stopping for two days after the Border Guard of Bangladesh (BGB) objected to workers digging soil within 150 yards of the borderline.¹² But once they are completed, the AH2 will connect Panitanki near Siliguri on India-Nepal border with Phulbari in the same district on India-Bangladesh border and the AH48 will connect Changrabandha on India-Bangladesh border in Cooch Behar district with Jaigaon on Jalpaiguri-Bhutan border.¹³ These are to become, along with the network of rail and road already in operation, the lifelines of India’s “Look East” policy. Subir Bhaumik has made a strong case for the integration of Bangladesh in this vision of “Look East” recently and has in fact proposed:

To make it [the “Look East” policy] successful and achieve its purpose of situating the country’s under-developed and conflict-laden north-eastern states at the heart of its robust engagement with South-East Asia and possibly China, India needs to first look east from its mainland to Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is crucial to India for connecting its mainland to its Northeast, linked by land through a tenuous 21-km wide Siliguri corridor, often derided as a “Chicken’s Neck”.

The demagogues on national television may rant about cross-border infiltration and the “minority menace” in border states; but, here we have a proposal that is music to our sore ears. And, in fact, the process has actually started as Bhaumik himself mentions. The first summit of the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) was convened on July 31, 2004, and the leaders of the group agreed on technological and economical cooperation among South Asian and South-East Asian countries along the coast of the Bay of Bengal. Commerce, investment, technology, tourism, human resource development, agriculture, fisheries, transport and communication, textiles, leather, etc. have been included in it. Not insignificantly, the BIMSTEC is headquartered in Dhaka since September 2014. Further, on December 18, 2013, Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar drew up a long discussed plan, emphasising the need to quickly improve physical connectivity in the region, over two days of talks in the south-western Chinese city of Kunming— the provincial capital of Yunnan, which borders Myanmar. This marked the formal endorsement on the BCIM (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Forum for Regional Cooperation) Economic Corridor by the four nations, whereby it was agreed that the corridor will run from Kunming to Kolkata, linking Mandalay in Myanmar as well as Dhaka and Chittagong in Bangladesh.

However, while we wait for this programme to flesh out properly, which might put Siliguri in the shade, at least relatively, in terms of logistical importance,¹⁴ the pathways of capital seem to extend and ramify through the organising heart of Siliguri to forge its anfractuous route to— no, probably not the North-east— but beyond, to the South-East Asian countries and China. The time has not come to feel excessively pessimistic about these developments. But, a caveat may not be out of place: neoliberal development has the nature of mobilising capital from point to point without even touching upon the lives of the downtrodden it traverses *en route*. To use Ranabir Samaddar’s evocative imagery, a literal, visual representation of this is a metropolitan fly-over— say, the one in Siliguri— which leaps over bazaar economy, urban squalor and under-bridge homelessness in smug disarticulation with the economy of need. One wonders if Look East would also mean the same for Siliguri and the north-eastern states, where “development” will come as a facilitation of capital movement from the Indian “mainland” to Southeast Asia, leaving the people of these regions in much the same historical predicament as the under-bridge slums. Added to this is the quite real anxiety of being bypassed through Bangladesh, as we have already seen. It is, therefore, not irrelevant to think in terms of the city’s possibly imminent fading into geo-economic “unimportance”— that the city itself may prove incidental to the purpose of neoliberal development, all this organisation, infrastructure and activity centred on it notwithstanding : the grim suspicion of a developmental anticlimax may not be that misplaced and the becoming-metropolitan dream of forward and backward linkages and phenomenal growth might come to grief.

Migrant Business

Let us suspend these counterfactual niggles for the time being, and return to the here and now to look at some of the people who live and have lived in this city and some of whom we were obliquely referring to in the foregoing paragraph. As per the provisional reports of 2011 Census, the population of Siliguri in 2011 was 513,264; of which male and female were 263,702 and 249,562 respectively. Although Siliguri city has a population of 513,264, the Siliguri Metropolitan area (which

includes Binnaguri, Chakiabhita, Dabgram, Kalkut *and* Siliguri) has a population of 705,579 of which 362,523 are males and 343,056 are females. Hindus form the substantial majority of the population of Siliguri city at 91.98 per cent, followed by the Muslims at 5.37 per cent. According to the Census, Siliguri is an Urban Agglomeration coming under category of Class I UAs/Towns.¹⁵ In 1961, the population in Siliguri Municipal Area was 65,000 which increased approximately by 51 per cent every decade till it reached 227,000 in 1991.¹⁶ From 1991 to 2011, the population has more than doubled, if we take the statistic for Siliguri city alone. The city, therefore, has literally exploded. It is true that Siliguri has still a long way to go before it can vie with the other urban behemoths of India, but we have to take cognizance of its phenomenal decadal growth rate. Very few cities can run in the same league as Siliguri in this respect. Further, calculations of the number of “residents” for Siliguri invoke an impression of sedentary urbanism that is probably unsustainable. If you venture out onto the streets of Siliguri at the crack of dawn, you will see endless lines of people entering the city on bicycles. Many of them are women; many of them Rajbangshi Muslims. It would seem to be a cycle rally of a powerful political party. But these are the people who come to work in the city by day, daily. They come as construction workers, as domestic help, as vegetable vendors— thereby swelling the daytime population of the city manifold. If you try to measure the length of one such “dawn rally”, you will be surprised: when the head of the procession has reached Jalpai More, the tail is still at Phulbari (around 5 km). And you immediately begin to understand the nature of this workforce, for Phulbari is a road border crossing on the Indo-Bangladesh border. Nightly, these people presumably return to their country, thereby establishing a pattern of international circular migration and demolishing all preconceptions of sedentariness regarding Siliguri.

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.’”¹⁷ The transit nature of this migrant city— in the dual sense of being transitional and transitory— is not an effect merely of its fugacious daytime workforce. It is an affect produced by the historical fact that waves of migrants have over the decades found a home in Siliguri, be it the Marwari settlers, old and new, the plantation workers of the nineteenth century, the partition refugees of mid-twentieth century or the recent flows of “multi-collared” labour drawn by the lure of neoliberal lucre. “According to a sample survey conducted in 1990,” writes Samir Kumar Das, “amongst the immigrants, 60 per cent come from East Pakistan/Bangladesh, while 17 per cent come from Bihar and 8 per cent happen to be Marwaris mainly controlling the wholesale trade. The rest 15 per cent come from South Bengal or Assam.”¹⁸ Das has not annotated this statistical claim, which, in any case, adds up to more than hundred per cent, if you take cognizance of Das’s claim in the next page: “Masses of repatriated Burmese also made Siliguri their shelter after their influx in 1967.”¹⁹ However, from another comparative study of Baroda, Bhilwara, Sambalpur and Siliguri with reference to basic services for the urban poor conducted in 1990 and published in 1995 (or is it the same study as Das’s?), we get the figures for the migrants living in the slums of Siliguri.²⁰ We will return to the Marwari migrants momentarily. But first let us focus on the migrants in the slums. The survey takes a sample of 24 slums, consisting of 400 households. It finds that most of the slum-dwellers are migrants (74 per cent). New migrants (their length of migrancy being 1-3 years) are found in three out of 24 slums. The average length of migrancy is 8-10 years for others, though many respondents had come much earlier. Nearly eleven per cent of the migrants came for family movement, 33 per cent reported political disturbances as the cause of migration, and an overwhelming 49 per cent of the migrants had

come in search of job. Scheduled Caste people dominated in 10 out of the 24 slums, their percentage being as high as 95 in three slums and more than 50 per cent in the remaining seven slums. Since Census 1991 reports that the Scheduled Caste population was 10.2 per cent of the total city population, it can be assumed from the survey results that the majority of them lived in slums. While 38 per cent of these slum migrants came from Bangladesh, the Indian states of Bihar and Orissa together contributed 37 per cent, leaving the other districts of West Bengal with 17 per cent and Nepal and Sikkim together a distant fourth at 8 per cent. Since most of them had come in search of jobs, did they find employment? In the sample slums, only 30 per cent of the dwellers comprised the main workforce. Among them, 48 per cent was self-employed, 25.5 per cent found regular employment and another 25.5 per cent was engaged in irregular jobs. Self-employment and irregular employment basically mean menial jobs like street-corner vending, hawking, rickshaw-pulling, working in roadside repair shops, selling lottery tickets and so on. The survey found the health and water-supply conditions in these slums to be deplorably inadequate. Living conditions were abysmal.²¹ According to the survey, 21.57 per cent of the total population of Siliguri resided in all the slums of the city in 1991.²² Today, going by the Census 2011, the total number of slums in Siliguri city is a mind-boggling 26,619 in which a population of 122,958 persons resides. This is around 23.96 per cent of total population of Siliguri city.²³ Given that the population has more than doubled in the last two decades, it can be claimed that the number of people living in the slums has increased at a faster rate as well as in greater numbers. Faced with these statistics, works which *celebrate* the migrant nature of Siliguri (or any other city for that matter), the constant fluxes of its populace and the spatial tectonics of its geo-imagination, as well as give such unthinking descriptions of Siliguri as “a cosmopolitan town in letter and spirit”²⁴— elicit embarrassment.

At the other end of the migrant spectrum, probably, are the Marwaris who control the wholesale trade in Siliguri. The Darjeeling district, in which Siliguri is mainly located today, can be said to have achieved its present shape and size relatively recently in 1866 following the Treaty of Sinchula (November 11, 1865) between British India and the Kingdom of Bhutan.²⁵ Unsurprisingly, therefore, it was in the 1870s that the Marwaris first came to Siliguri,²⁶ lying at the heart of the then dreaded malarial Terai, although some settlements had already started in Kurseong in the 1850s-60s, Kalimpong in 1865, and in Darjeeling apparently with the establishment of the business firm by Jetmull Bhojraj in 1845.²⁷ From the late nineteenth century the number of Marwaris in Siliguri continued to swell, though they preferred to live within the city and not settle beyond the town area at least till the 1940s.²⁸ By the early 1970s, it was claimed that about 1,200 Marwaris of the Mahesree group and 1,800 Marwaris of the Agarwal group lived in Siliguri.²⁹ However, in an undated interview conducted by Narayan Chandra Saha with Ram Kumar Agarwal, an old Marwari living in Siliguri, we get a guesstimate that about 30,000 Marwaris, of whom 5,000 were Jains, lived in Siliguri at the start of the millennium.³⁰ Migration of the Marwaris to Siliguri did not happen following a fixed pattern historically. In fact, it happened in four phases: pre-independence, post-independence, during trouble in Assam in the 1970s, and during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. Even so, as we have noticed they never approached anything in size even in terms of becoming a considerable percentage of the population. However, the small size of the community belies the immense control they have come to wield over trade and commerce in Siliguri. For the longest period of time they have been directly or indirectly connected to all kinds of enterprises, such as money-lending, *jotedari* (holding of *jotes*), *aratdari* (big wholesale dealing), commission agency, wholesale and retail business, export and import business, ownership of hotels, restaurants, go-downs, and lately tea plantations and tea factories as well as realty. Arthur J. Dash had early noted: “Marwari and Behari control of the commodity trade of the district [Darjeeling] is practically complete and ... Marwari and Behari control

over retail supply of consumption goods is dominating.”³¹ This control has not weakened over the years. In fact, it has grown in strength and scope to encompass today nearly the entire gamut of MSMEs (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises), be it those involving building materials, wrought-iron, confectionaries or what you will. A quick look at the Souvenir of the Siliguri Merchants’ Association brought out in 1992 establishes this. According to the information provided here, the number of business firms registered under this association and engaged in Terai’s trade and commerce was 418 in 1992. Of these, the number of Marwari concerns was 177. It accounts for roughly 43 per cent of the total business firms of Siliguri.³² In the list of Presidents and General Secretaries of the Association between 1952 and 1992, we find 26 Marwari names which further confirm their dominance.

The organisation which plays a vital role in controlling not only trade and commerce but also industry in North Bengal in general, and of which the Siliguri Merchants’ Association is the biggest component, is the Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FOCIN) with its headquarters at Siliguri. It has 36 member associations and the number of its council members was 66 for the term 1990-92. At least 29 of the 66 council members, or roughly 45 per cent, were from the Marwari community. Similarly, FOCIN had 157 subscribing members in 1990, a majority of whom were Marwaris. A quick look at some of these members would reveal the extent of Marwari hold over business: Gajanand Goyal & Co. (hardware and electrical merchants), the Mittal Brothers (bankers and financier), the Bajla Bastralaya (textile retailer), Radheyshyam Agarwal (industrialist and transporter), the Jain Enterprise (government order supplier), the Singhal Agencies (welding material and foam dealer), the Singhania Bastralaya (cloth merchant), Jewanram Chetandass (petroleum products dealer), Harish Chandra Singhal (Income Tax pleader), Muniram Achiram (wholesale dealers of foodgrains), Lalchand Ramabatar (tea traders), Lalchand Madamlall (wholesale tea merchants), Debidutt/Phoolchand (foodgrains dealers), Lalchand Amarchand (agency business), Lalchand Kundalia (agency business), Moolchand Pariwal (broker), Pokarmall Mahabir Prasad (sawmill owner), Sohanlall Shewduttarai (edible oil, pulses, rice merchant) and so on.³³

Given Siliguri’s historical role as the coordinator of trans-border trade with Sikkim, Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh as well as with Calcutta, it is not surprising that the nature of business in Siliguri is heavily biased in favour of wholesale and retail trade. It is basically a service town, which from the 1960s has become an important centre of wholesale trade. Much of this wholesale trade, as we have noted, is controlled by Marwaris, and strong kinship bonds among them make it practically impossible for others to freshly enter into the business. It is likely that these wholesalers possess a high amount of liquid cash, much of it derived as profit from their trade, which changes hands rapidly without getting anchored in investment to any great extent. The city has also a very high concentration of retail trade with an incredible number of shops in operation. There are 3 shops per 100 people, whereas in Delhi the number is 0.21. Many of these shops operate at subsistence level generating disguised unemployment in the informal service sector. The informal sector can expand absorbing unskilled labour— migrant labour from slums, as we have seen— without any major capital expenditure. On the other hand, not uncommonly for India, at the owners’ level, 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.

At the level of industrialisation, however, North Bengal in general and Siliguri in particular, have not done impressively over the decades. Siliguri has experienced a very slow pace of industrialisation and the total number of industrial units has actually fallen from 174 to 162 between 1971 and 1985, though employment numbers have remained stable at approximately 8,300 workers.³⁴

The combination of the trans-border trade system and lack of industry has ultimately made Siliguri “a market town.” The Hong Kong market near Khudirampally is a chief hub for buying low cost Chinese goods and imported goods; then there are the nearby Seth Srilal Market, the bazaars of Sevoke Road and Hill Cart Road. The Bagdogra airport market is one of the shopping hubs in Siliguri. Another important market is the Matigara *haat*, rumoured to be the oldest in the vicinity, where people from the hills and the plains come for shopping. In recent times, the city has seen the establishment of a number of shopping malls and multiplexes to cater to the growing needs of the populace. There is the City Centre now at Matigara; there are malls like Sun Flower, City Style, Cosmos, etc on the Sevoke Road; and on Burdwan road is the Vishal Mega Mart. The organised retail sector has created jobs insofar as it has drawn unskilled informal labour into its fold thereby extending the logic of disguised unemployment. The city has also witnessed the arrival of its first set of multiplexes, CINEMAX in early December 2009 and INOX at Orbit on Christmas of the same year. Due to the cash-rich economic growth that has been seen in Siliguri, plenty of banks have started to operate from Siliguri such as HDFC, Standard Chartered, Allahabad, ICICI, State Bank of India, UCO, UTI, IDBI, Vijaya, UBKG, etc and all of them have branches in Siliguri. Some of the other prominent banks are Karnataka Bank, Sonali Bank, Andhra Bank, Canara Bank, Bank of Baroda, Maharashtra bank, etc. As a prime service city, it has developed health and education infrastructure at an impressive scale, thereby drawing people from neighbouring states and countries for treatment and education. This in turn has led to a boom in the hospitality industry. Siliguri has always been a town with a greater share of hotels than is found in any other similar town. This has been because of the small traders who come and go in incessant streams. But, of late, the rate at which hotels in Siliguri have mushroomed along any of the axial roads is simply overwhelming, belittled only perhaps by the number of shops and bars in those same roads. The Siliguri old-timers are uniform in the awe they express about the pace at which their city has transformed itself in the last two decades. Most of them are at a loss trying to comprehend the magnitude of this change. Some may come out in favour of the change, some others may not; but they do almost always record a sense of disarticulation of these massive malls and hotels, and the mass consumerism they betoken, with their lifestyle and purchasing power. However, this tumultuous change, the flow of liquid cash and the burgeoning culture of conspicuous consumerism betoken the growth of other forms of “essential” services in any city— flesh trade and trafficking that grows out of it. This, the residents are less willing to talk about or accept.

Trafficking

For most residents of Siliguri, awareness about the trafficking racket in the city and its neighbourhood ranges from the simple admission of its existence— without any deeper information or knowledge about it— to denial; and probably this is not unique, for most citizens, whether we speak of the common Mumbaikar, Calcuttan or Delhiwallah, conduct their lives without any heightened consciousness of the seamier side of their urbanity. The lack of sensitisation programmes may be blamed for such insouciance, but it is also inarguable that people by and large do not wish to be confronted with such uncomfortable realities, to say the least, in the conduct of their quotidian life. Hence, questions about trafficking put to the residents of Siliguri are generally met with disconcerted mumbles. And, at least in one case, when the author had presented a paper on the seamy story of Siliguri’s urban growth at the University of Delhi, a member of faculty, who identifies Siliguri as his hometown, in fact publicly fought back, claiming that such dystopic depictions were more products of academic anxiety, if not agenda, than an actual fact of lived experience.³⁵

The author pleads guilty to the charge only insofar as it is eminently admissible that, ostrich-like, we live our lives with our heads buried in the dunes of denial and sanitised normalcy, whereas the dreaded reality of trafficking is brought home, possibly daily, to the trafficked alone (and the academic-activists as charged)— these murky flows otherwise eddying past us in the mutually convenient disentanglement of crime and citizenship. The dreaded reality of trafficking is also a matter of anxiety and agenda to the police, by the way, and the Siliguri Police Commissionerate (or Siliguri Metropolitan Police), established relatively recently in 2012, has an exclusive page dedicated to trafficking in their official website.³⁶ Of the five commissionerates under West Bengal Police (the other four being Howrah, Bidhannagar, Barrackpore, and Asansol-Durgapur), Siliguri is the only one to have such a page the last time I checked, which in itself speaks volumes. The careful detail in which trafficking is defined in the page and categorised in the four broad sections: humans, drugs, cattle and ammunitions: testifies to the fact that, unlike the other Commissionerates at least, Siliguri is under immense pressure to deal with trafficking exigently and it is a multimodal problem. However, trafficking in person or TiP is the mode that is easier to grasp, and track, owing to the activism in the region related to this issue.

The Commissionerate regularly advertises its recent achievements in the “Latest Update” section of its homepage. Of the self-advertised “Good Work done in September, 2015”, there is one case that I wish to present here as an example of what the force considers a job well done and worthy of publicity. On September 19, 2015, Samandri Sahani of Matangini Hazra Colony lodged a complaint at the Siliguri Police Station (one of the six police stations under the commissionerate) claiming that her granddaughter, an 18-year-old named Aarati Kumar, had gone to a fair at about 8 pm but had not returned home. The “complainant” had apparently conducted a search herself to begin with and had approached the police only when she came to know that a man named Ganesh of the same locality as hers had kidnapped her granddaughter and taken the latter to an “unknown place”. The complainant further suspected, it was noted, that one Ranjit Paswan of the same locality was also involved in this act, though this latter miscreant was not named in the FIR. The police rightfully congratulated itself on the fact that Aarati was rescued and the accused, Ganesh, was arrested by the next day from Darbhanga district in Bihar.³⁷

If you are thinking this could be a simple case of elopement and a mean, spoilsport grandmother, you are terribly mistaken. It is surely a case of a spoilt attempt at trafficking, though, not unlike an elopement, Aarati could have been an accomplice in her own trafficking; many acts of trafficking, in fact, start as elopement at the source. The police records do not give us these details; they are more interested in publicising the successes of an otherwise much-maligned force. However, what we can confidently say is that Aarati’s story follows a pattern that has now set in north Bengal and the telecom revolution is at the heart of this darkness. First, the teenage girl receives a missed call. If she calls back, a male voice at the other end compliments the girl, say, on her voice or her wit. These “phone relationships” then develop quickly with the crafty stranger professing undying love for the girl and his need to marry her immediately. This leads to that, and the impressionable teenager soon finds herself trafficked to strange cities. Sometimes, as in the case of a 16-year-old girl from Buraganj, 32 kilometres from Siliguri, the victim meets a stranger, normally a middle-aged woman, at a wedding or a social function. The stranger strikes up a conversation with the victim and soon coaxes her phone number and even a photograph out of her. The well-dressed stranger who approached the Buraganj girl at a marriage introduced herself as Rani. Soon enough, she received *the* missed call and, when she responded, found not Rani but a man named Mahesh Mardi at the other end. The man was already proclaiming his love for the girl. He had, of course, seen her photograph on Rani’s phone. There was the usual promise of love, faithfulness, and the always-present allure of a

better life in a big, big city. The magnificence of the dream makes the urgency of the marriage believable. And elopement takes the girl to Naxalbari, a town which has emerged as a trafficking departure hub, from where Mahesh and Rani take the girl to the NJP railway station, abutting Siliguri. Here she is drugged and when she wakes up, her life in the big, big city has commenced. Only not a better life as Mahesh's wife. There is no need to assume that trafficked persons are sold into prostitution alone. In fact, after having changed hands many times many of them end up in Delhi where they ultimately land up at the so-called placement agencies for "employment", a euphemism for slave wages and working conditions, as domestic workers.³⁸ Life as domestic worker, though, is almost never without its share of physical and sexual abuse. In any case, life of a trafficked person is never unaccompanied by physical and sexual abuse. Take the example of the minor girl of Tony Soong village, Darjeeling, who was rescued from South Delhi after she alleged that she was sexually and physically assaulted by a trafficker. The 17-year-old girl was rescued by the police and the NGO Shakti Vahini after she was brought to Delhi four months before on the pretext of marriage. As usual, the girl was duped by a friend who gave her the number of one Satyanarayan from Siliguri. She left Darjeeling and went to Siliguri alone to meet Satyanarayan; from Siliguri, they came to Delhi. After a week, Satyanarayan started exploiting her physically and sexually.³⁹

The foregoing TiP narratives leave us with an impression that Siliguri, alongside the adjoining NJP Station, is the nodal organisation centre for the flows of trafficked persons which originate in the neighbourhood and beyond in the North-east and end mostly in metropolitan centres of the north and the west. This is substantially true. But the phenomenal growth of Siliguri has also meant that the city itself is often the destination for trafficked persons from the neighbourhood. In fact, over the last few years many girls rescued from brothels in Delhi, Mumbai as well as Siliguri have been found to be from Assam.⁴⁰ In October 2014, a 19-year-old girl was rescued from a brothel in the Khalpara red light area, Siliguri, by Shakti Vahini and the Additional Commissioner of Police, Siliguri Commissionerate, following information received from the MARG NGO. The girl hailed from a village in Jalpaiguri district and was trafficked by a man named Suraj Chatterjee, who first came in contact with the girl by making a phone call claiming it to be a wrong-number call. Suraj ensnared the girl typically through a promise of marriage and better life, and eventually handed her over to Jhunu Mondol who ran the brothel at Khalpara.⁴¹ The story could be more complex, if we believe Samir Kumar Das's account of the real-estate boom in Siliguri and how trafficking fits into it. He writes evocatively: "The starred apartments of internationally mobile middle class and the new rich of Siliguri that remain vacant here reportedly serve as places of conduit where trafficked women— themselves in transit— are called to entertain their affluent customers in transit and money quickly changes hands."⁴² In this account, Siliguri is both a destination and a waiting-room, so to speak, of trafficked persons. However, since 2011, when Das wrote his piece, the situation has grown murkier still with reports of what could be called "reverse trafficking" becoming common. Rishi Kant of Shakti Vahini was already talking of this in late 2014, when, speaking about the Khalpara red light area, he reported: "The Khalpara red light area has become a hub for the traffickers. Cases of reverse trafficking have also been reported recently in the Khalpara brothel. In a case Shakti Vahini along with Siliguri police rescued one girl trafficked from Delhi to Siliguri and was sold for Rs.70,000."⁴³

The flows of trafficked persons, therefore, may not be as unidirectional in terms of geographical movement as we may assume. That a place like Siliguri, awash in loose cash, would attract trafficked persons as a destination in itself makes sense and good business. On the other hand, the economic direction of TiP is unalterable: it is abjection that sources TiP. Invariably. Let us for a moment return to the Buraganj girl. She was not from an indigent family by the standards of their

village. But her case is quite a rare exception. Most trafficking flows are fed by persons from extremely poor and hopeless backgrounds. They are bombarded continuously by the consumerist ethic of the governing *zeitgeist*: by the invidious imaginium of mediatised images and mall architecture. The gap between the doomed despondency of daily drudgery and billboard materialism is bridged by the promises whispered over hushed phone calls from strangers in the dead of night. The deliciousness of these promises justifies the exigency of flight. And this is not empty conjecture. The richest recruiting ground for the traffickers in recent times in North Bengal has turned out to be the tea belt. Set squarely amidst the splurge and conspicuous expenditure that Siliguri has spawned in the region is this tea belt and its impoverished workforce. The closed tea gardens probably provide the best opportunities for the traffickers, but gardens that are still operational are no exceptions. And this is true even of the Assam tea gardens. What is heartbreaking is that in many cases prostitution or being trafficked is not the result of a person being duped into it; it is a conscious choice.

The closing of several tea estates in north Bengal— particularly those of the Duncans— has forced many young girls between 16 and 18 years of age into prostitution in order to feed their families. With no income coming from the tea estates, many of them have dropped out of school to become sex workers and earn money. They wear flashy clothes and hang around dhabas on the NH31; their customers are mostly truck drivers. A newspaper reported a girl claiming: “Some nights we even earn 500 rupees. The pimps take a portion of this but the rest is all ours. Who would have given us this money?”⁴⁴ The statement makes any appropriation of this predicament in clichéd terms of victimhood impossible and makes the underbelly of neoliberal development strategies flowing out of Siliguri apparent. We will return to this in a bit. As of now, let us listen to the voice of another “victim” carefully. She tells us: “How long can we survive on government’s mercy? We need many more things to survive than just rice. [The reference is to the state government’s provision of rice at two rupees a kilo.] Now at least my family can have food every day; we have good clothes to wear and even have some spare money.”⁴⁵ Similar are the stories of several trafficked women and not all of them are fooled into being trafficked. Take the case of a tea garden worker from Assam. Somila Tanti, 16, who was trafficked for forced labour and then rescued a year later from Delhi, admits that poverty made her blind to the threats behind the promises of her trafficker. “I was tempted,” she recalls, “into going away with him [trafficker] as he promised me a job in an office because I knew how to read and write. The idea of having a comfortable life in the big city was too tempting to resist. We are poor; so I fell into the trap.”⁴⁶ Shakti Vahini reports that in the first ten months of 2015 alone nearly 2,837 victims of trafficking [1,129 minors and 1,708 women] from West Bengal were rescued from different parts of the country. Among the areas in West Bengal which are most vulnerable is the region where the teagardens are located.⁴⁷ Debjit Datta, a prominent trade-union leader, explained, “The wages in the tea garden stand at about Rs. 122. This is also irregular in certain tea gardens. Don’t you think that under such a situation women and girls would be more vulnerable to trafficking?”⁴⁸

Datta is of course asking a rhetorical question. The suggestion is that if the wages and working conditions in the tea gardens of North Bengal— the general grim situations therein— do not improve, flesh trade cannot be curbed, nor trafficking ended. It is true that NGOs like Shakti Vahini are doing a lot to sensitise women in the tea gardens to the dangers of being trafficked as well as the strategies of the trafficker.⁴⁹ Success stories growing out of such sensitisation programmes are not uncommon too.⁵⁰ However, so long as life conditions force the “victims” to collaborate, overtly or implicitly, in these processes, it is indeed impossible to put an end to them. The search for a solution, therefore, seems to carry us into considerations of the situation in the tea gardens of North Bengal, operational and closed alike.

Tea

If we were to do justice to the issue of tea in north Bengal, we would have to write a separate article on the theme. Even in the narrow context of Siliguri and its urban transformation, it is not enough to establish the link between the capture of tea-garden land and the growth of prime realty around the city. There is more to the entangled story of tea trade and Siliguri than just a straightforward account of realtor-politician nexus and land grab. However, let us start with this familiar theme and touch on some of the important issues towards the end. In 2005-2006, 400 acres of land of the Chandmoni Tea Estate next to Siliguri was converted to real estate. The acquisition was ultimately successful and the Uttarayon Phase I, including the City Centre mall, stands in its place today. While a huge percentage of Siliguri's population continue to languish in insalubrious slums, the municipal authorities are desperate to suppress this dystopia or at least overlay it with vision documents and dream-projects for the developmental city. Hence, the official website declares: "City Centre, Siliguri is a high point in the evolution of a growing metropolis that is increasingly influenced by four major drivers— quality housing, quality working, quality shopping and quality entertainment." And why so? The planners answer: "Siliguri has a vivid mix of local, transit and tourist population. City Centre will keep drawing visitors from both in and out of Siliguri— from adjacent foothills, the hills, the neighbouring areas, the borders and from across the City, providing a unique experience."⁵¹ In many ways, the authorities have nailed it. They have got the character of Siliguri correct, but not before characteristically cleansing it of the grime and sweat of poverty. The multicultural *mélange* on offer here is, of course, priced beyond the reach of even the urban lower middle-class, let alone the tea-garden workers who were evicted in the process of acquiring Chandmoni. The brutal process of acquisition, under the slogan "Siliguri is Changing", has been written about in great detail. Samir Kumar Das gives us an effective and poignant account of the process.⁵² From his account we gather that the workforce was increasingly casualised, once the decision to convert to real estate was taken, so that there were only few permanent workers left who would be required to be compensated when the company was ultimately liquidated. The General Manager of the Chandmoni Tea Estate presented the workers with a letter by which the latter were given an ultimatum "to vacate your present labour house, dismantle the same, vacate the premises and make it free from all encumbrances within October 31, 2005." Incidentally, the letter was dated January 5, 2006, which made it a *post facto* imposition of what Manas Dasgupta has called *forced voluntary retirement* on the tea workers; they were not left any space to negotiate their terms, let alone reject the proposal. The letter haughtily continued: "You will be paid voluntary retirement compensation as per the said scheme with other terminal and statutory dues payable to you as per the terms and conditions of employment applicable to you."⁵³ Here we have, clearly, a case of primitive accumulation in the age of neoliberal development: where tea labour is "expropriated, evicted, pauperised, cut down from below the level of subsistence and thus pushed into hunger, penury and death through rampant use of violence and corruption."⁵⁴ Manas Dasgupta calls this "Chandmoni capitalism", but this is the common picture and book of "development" all over north Bengal, the North-east and, indeed, the country at large. The tea workers did not go gently into the dark night of casualisation, deracination and death; they fought— a losing battle— and as early as 2002 two garden workers had been killed in police firing. This is on official record. The continuing misery of workers was not always played out in mortal combat with the grabbers: many of them were relocated to a distant tea garden in Subalbhitia and were ripped out of their social fabric; many more were casualised and never rehabilitated, and many simply disappeared never to resurface.

This in itself is a dismal narrative. What makes it even more unpalatable is that the conversion of Chandmoni into real estate was based on false claims. Dipankar Chatterjee, Managing Director of the Luxmi Tea Company, that bought the “ailing” garden, makes this false claim: “The Chandmoni Tea Estate was a loss-making company with huge liabilities. We could not turn the company into a profit-making one and have decided to convert 400 acres of tea garden into real estate.”⁵⁵ Chatterjee could be speaking for a whole range of tea garden owners who use the same pretext to sell gardens, convert them to some other use or, more commonly, keep the minimum wages of workers depressed. The first thing that we have to realise is that the tea industry is not ailing. This can be demonstrated: if we look at the market for tea in India— if we look at the supply of tea in the market and the prices it fetched over the last few years— we would see as supply has increased so has price. For instance, in 2012, 514.99 million kilos of tea was produced and the average price in the market was Rs. 121.81; next year the production (or supply) increased to 532.4 million kilos, but instead of decreasing, price increased to Rs. 128.46. Similarly, the auction price statistics of the Tea Board show that in 2006 and 2007 too, in spite of increase in supply of tea to the market because of increase in production, prices have increased. This means that the market for tea is inelastic and for that reason tea does not remain unsold even as prices increase. There is nothing strange about this, for the demand for tea in our country is far greater than its supply. According to the calculation of the United Nations Food & Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the rate of increase in domestic demand for tea was 3.7 per cent between 2003 and 2010, and to meet this demand of the domestic market they had calculated that 919.13 million kilos of tea will have to be produced.⁵⁶ Going by available statistics, India produced 966.40 million kilos, of which it exported 222.2 million kilos. Therefore, after export, only 744.2 million kilos remained for domestic consumption. So there is a supply deficit of 175.1 million kilos of tea. In this situation, it is unlikely that prices will fall and they have not. In fact, not only in the domestic market, but also in the international market the price of Indian tea has increased consistently. In 2007, tea sold for an average of 1.62 dollars per kg, whereas in 2010 the average export price of tea was 2.29 dollars per kg and in 2011 2.23 dollars per kg.⁵⁷ It also needs to be mentioned that the tea industry in India at present is not dependent on export and only a small percentage of the produce is exported every year. From 65 per cent of the total produce that used to be exported in the 1950s, it has climbed down to 19-20 per cent after 2010.⁵⁸ This is because tea sellers have found the domestic market to be more attractively priced than the international market. Clearly then, the planters’ ploy of keeping the minimum wages depressed on account of the imminent fall in price of tea because of its increasing supply and the destruction of the tea industry because of the imminent fall in export is disingenuous, to say the least. In their Report for 1888 the Indian Tea Association had stressed the necessity of reducing expenditure on labour “by a more economic use of the labour available and by getting better work from the coolies.”⁵⁹ Since tea was a labour-intensive industry, the colonial government clearly believed that production costs had to be reduced by giving low wages to the workers; also that lesser number of workers should be employed at the low wages and they should be squeezed to produce more. Sixty-five odd years of independence have not changed the planters’ attitude much.

Today, in the 16 big tea gardens owned by the largest corporate house in the Bengal tea sector, Duncans Industries Limited of the Goenkas, permanent hunger stalks the lives of the 29,000 permanent workers and their dependents. These gardens have neither been abandoned nor declared closed by GP Goenka, but left completely non-functioning, with the result that the workers cannot claim the Rs.1, 500 per month government aid under the Financial Assistance to the Workers of Locked out Industries (FAWLOI) scheme. Meanwhile the Goenkas have been siphoning off the entire capital and considerable profit from tea to the company’s sugar and fertiliser industries in Uttar

Pradesh. This they have done by depriving the workers of their wages, bonus, subsidised ration, fuel, medical facilities; further, they have allegedly defalcated approximately Rs.18 crore from the workers' provident fund and gratuity dues. The same management has also cheated several frontline banks by borrowing huge amounts of money in the name of reviving "ailing" gardens. A similar situation obtains in other big gardens as well, which are lying abandoned or locked-out by the speculator-owners.⁶⁰ Binayak Sen, in a survey conducted in early 2015 in the Raipur Tea Estate near Jalpaiguri, found that of the 1,272 workers surveyed, 539 (i.e. 42 per cent) had BMI value of less than 18.5. This is well above the 40 per cent critical value of a particular population, which is the baseline to bring a community within the category of famine-affected, to be labelled as "a starving community". Similar BMI-based surveys done earlier had yielded comparable results.⁶¹ While, Sen and Mazumdar report a permanent famine in the big tea gardens, both closed and operational, the planters' have erected the bogeyman of chronic ailment to keep the wages low and, when necessary, to sell the gardens off, so that new owners can step in with a bagful of promises, run the garden till they get the loan from the Tea Board and banks to resuscitate the "sick" garden, and then disappear with the money one fine day. It does in fact seem that there is a booming market for *closed* tea gardens in north Bengal! The politician-realtor nexus that is grabbing land in the vicinity of Siliguri is but an extension of this iniquitous process. Over the last many years, numberless tea garden workers have committed suicide or died of malnutrition and starvation. These are organised institutional murders. Those who are selling themselves into prostitution and trafficking, too, are doing so because there is no discernible evitability of this structural violence and exploitation.⁶² Siliguri, with its Tea Auction Centre since 1976 and also as the nodal centre which organises the trade in tea, can hardly dodge responsibility for the ongoing exploitation, casualisation, expropriation and death that stalks the lives of tea workers.⁶³ It literally cannot, for many of the casualised workers make a beeline for Siliguri to find jobs as day labourers, riverbed boulder-breakers, and construction workers probably in the very lands from which they or their brethren had been evicted.

Coda

In some of the foregoing sections, the idea of labour that has been developed— projected through narrative instantiations— probably requires a few sentences by way of abstracted explanation. Clearly, the argument has not been in favour of a radical exteriority of postcolonial labour outside the processes of neoliberal development. It is, in fact, common sense that labouring subjectivities are never encountered as *purely* resistant selves. At the same time, it does not, *pace* Sugata Marjit, enframe labour as an inescapable involution within neoliberal development— the co-constitutive double of logistical worlds, if you will. It is, in fact, common sense as well that labouring subjectivities are never encountered as *purely* docile bodies. Following Ranabir Samaddar, it tries to understand the dialectic between interiority and exteriority of labour in a worlded logistical framework, the already-always inside-outside spectrality of labour when viewed from the perspective of logistics. This allows for a more historicised, if not dynamic, understanding of labouring subjectivities in the context of Siliguri's metropolitan transformation. Such has been the attempt in the foregoing sections of this essay.

Moving on, the political-economic *mélange* of people in flux— of wholesalers, retailers, traders, 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 outside the governing sign of neoliberalisation. 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 securitisation 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 North-east in general. This allows us to controversially state that Siliguri, and by extension north Bengal, is perhaps more integrally a part of the north-east 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 a flood with commodities brought in from the neighbouring countries, by licit means and illicit. 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 sanitised self-image of Siliguri as the hub of neoliberal development and reveal 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. These are intractable flows 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, 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 coevalness of the two in South Asia for some time now.⁶⁴ 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 apparently 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 organising 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 conceptualisations. 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 north-east, 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 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 realisable 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 it fits 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. Simple succession affects the presents which pass, but each present coexists with a past and a future without which it would not itself pass on.”⁶⁵

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Notes

¹ Debashis Chakraborty, *Bibarta Siliguri* [Siliguri in Transformation], Kolkata: Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd., 2008, *passim*.

² More: A junction or crossing of roads.

³ In 1951, Siliguri was declared an urban area with a population of just over six thousand. Archana Ghosh, S. Sami Ahmad, and Shipra Maitra, *Basic Services for Urban Poor: A Study of Baroda, Bhubaneswar, Sambalpur and Siliguri* (Urban Studies Series No. 3), Institute of Social Sciences & Concept Publishing Company: New Delhi, 1995, p. 190.

⁴ In 1955, a year after Debashis Chakraborty with the rest of his family had relocated to Siliguri, East Bengal was renamed East Pakistan. This system lasted until 1971, when Bangladesh was formed.

⁵ NH: National Highway.

⁶ James Barnard Calvin, “The China-India Border War (1962)”, Marine Corps Command and Staff College: 1984; <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1984/CJB.htm> [last accessed March 20, 2016].

⁷ “The Army seeks Land to set up Two Stations in North Bengal”, *The Indian Express*, November 19, 2013; <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/army-seeks-land-to-set-up-2-stations-in-north-bengal/1196625/> [Accessed on February 15, 2016].

⁸ “Army starts Infrastructure Development in Bengal with Air Defence Station in Murshidabad,” *The Times of India*, February 21, 2014; <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Army-starts-infrastructure-development-in-Bengal-with-air-defence-station-in-Murshidabad/articleshow/30771758.cms> [Accessed on February 15, 2016].

⁹ “Siliguri”, World Public Library; <http://www.worldlibrary.org/articles/siliguri> [last accessed February 20, 2016].

¹⁰ For a detailed history of how railway communication developed in the city in particular, see: Sibaprasad Chattopadhyay, *Siliguri: Purnanga Itibas* [Siliguri: A Complete History], Himalaya Publishers: Siliguri, 2008 (third Edition), pp. 40-47.

¹¹ “National Highway 31A blocked by GJM, Sikkim cut off”, *India Today*, February 7, 2009; <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/National+Highway+31A+blocked+by+GJM,+Sikkim+cut+off/1/27551.html> [last accessed February 21, 2016]; also, the GJM has been considerate to the neighbouring state at times: “NH 31A open for Sikkim Traffic: GJM”, *Hindustan Times*, February 14, 2011; <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/nh-31a-open-for-sikkim-traffic-gjm/story-EX4eiPX5CDZLyG855xTz3I.html> [last accessed February 21, 2016].

¹² “BGB Grumble halts Asian Highway Work,” *The Statesman*, October 28, 2015; <http://www.thestatesman.com/news/bengal/bgb-grumble-halts-asian-highway-work/99746.html> [last accessed February 20, 2016].

¹³ “Bengal proposes Road connecting State with Three Countries,” *The Hindu*, June 4, 2014; <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/bengal-proposes-road-connecting-state-with-three-countries/article6081600.ece> [last accessed February 20, 2016].

¹⁴ Bhaumik thinks there would be a *quid pro quo* to this reorientation towards Bangladesh: Bangladesh could use Indian territory to link up to the Himalayan nations like Nepal and Bhutan, especially for power, in lieu of allowing India to connect to its Northeast through Bangladesh. In fact, in Bhaumik’s view, the process has already started with the two countries attempting to turn the ‘Chicken’s Neck’ into an asset rather than a liability by the recent opening of the Banglabandha-Phulbari check post that will help Bangladesh access the Siliguri Corridor to link up with Nepal, Bhutan and Upper Northeast India. This line of argument, however, does not defeat my point.

¹⁵ Siliguri City Census 2011 Data, Census 2011; <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/city/192-siliguri.html> [last accessed February 21, 2016]; also, Siliguri Urban Region 2011, Census 2011; <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/metropolitan/186-siliguri.html> [last accessed February 21, 2016].

¹⁶ Archana Ghosh, S. Sami Ahmad, and Shipra Maitra, *Basic Services for Urban Poor*, p. 191.

¹⁷ Samir Kumar Das, “Homeless in Homelands”, Theme Articles, *Eastern Quarterly*, Vol. 7, Issues III & IV, Autumn & Winter 2011, p. 80.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 81.

²⁰ Archana Ghosh, S. Sami Ahmad, and Shipra Maitra, *Basic Services for Urban Poor*, pp. 210-215; all the figures that follow in this paragraph are taken from these pages, unless indicated otherwise.

²¹ A separate study on the basic services for the urban poor of Siliguri published in 1993 corroborates this. Sumana Saha and Mousumi Bhattacharya, *Urban Basic Services: The Experiences of Siliguri* (Report of a Research Project sponsored by ILGUS and UNICEF), University of North Bengal: Darjeeling, 1993.

²² Ibid, 193

²³ Siliguri City Census 2011 Data, Census 2011; <http://www.census2011.co.in/census/city/192-siliguri.html> [last accessed February 21, 2016].

²⁴ Sibaprasad Chattopadhyay, *Known yet Unknown Darjeeling/Siliguri: Facts and Figures*, Kashi Nath Dey: Siliguri, 1997, p. 48.

²⁵ The long military engagement of the Kingdom with British India is covered by Karma Phuntsho, *The History of Bhutan*, Vintage Books/Random House India: New Delhi, 2013.

²⁶ Narayan Chandra Saha, “Darjeeling Tarai Anchaler Marwari Samaj: Ekti Samiksha” [The Marwari Community in the Darjeeling-Terai Region: A Survey], *Itibas Anusandhan*, Vol. VIII, Calcutta, 1993, p. A-345.

²⁷ *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, by Arthur Jules Dash, Calcutta Secretariat Book Depot: Calcutta, 1947, p. 174; however, Timberg could not identify the firm of Jetmull Bhojraj as a Marwari concern. See, Thomas A. Timberg, *The Marwaris: From Traders to Industrialists*, Stosius Inc./Advent Books Division: Delhi, 1979, p. 206.

²⁸ *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, p. 71.

²⁹ Yognath Mukhopadhyaya, “Ai Amar Desh” [This is My Country], *Desb*, BS Magh 23, 1379 [1973].

- ³⁰ Narayan Chandra Saha, *The Marwari Community in Eastern India: A Historical Survey Focussing on North Bengal*, Decent Books: New Delhi, 2003, p. 157.
- ³¹ *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, p. 175.
- ³² Souvenir (A Special Issue), Siliguri Merchants' Association, 51st General Meeting, 1992.
- ³³ Souvenir—FOCIN, North Bengal, published at its 10th Annual General Conference on June 3, 1990.
- ³⁴ District Census Handbook, Darjeeling, 1987.
- ³⁵ The paper was presented as part of *Panel 5: Border and Borderlands* at the two-day ICSSR-sponsored National Seminar on "Gender, Identity and Migration in India", Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, August 7-8, 2015.
- ³⁶ <http://www.siliguripolice.org/> [last accessed March 01, 2016]; also see: Pinak Priya Bhattacharya, "Mamata Banerjee inaugurates Siliguri Police Hub," *The Times of India*, August 06, 2012. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Mamata-Banerjee-inaugurates-Siliguri-police-hub/articleshow/15370009.cms?referral=PM> [last accessed March 01, 2016].
- ³⁷ Siliguri PS Case No. 862/15, Dt. 20.09.15 U/S- 365/109 IPC.
- ³⁸ Ashwaq Masoodi, "Human Trafficking: A Phone Call to the Heart of Darkness," *Live Mint*, September 05, 2014; <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/nierR4Q3L7VFwkAhcKVPpJ/Human-trafficking-A-phone-call-to-the-heart-of-darkness.html> [last accessed March 01, 2016].
- ³⁹ "Trafficked girl Rescued," *The Times of India*, June 21, 2012; accessible at: <https://traffickingnews.wordpress.com/tag/siliguri/> [last accessed March 01, 2016].
- ⁴⁰ Azera Rehman, "Assam's Tea Gardens are waging a War against Girl Trafficking: It's both Inspiring and Heartbreaking," *The Better India*, August 29, 2015; <http://www.thebetterindia.com/32118/assam-tea-gardens-girl-trafficking/> [Last accessed on March 20, 2016].
- ⁴¹ "Girl trafficked from Jalpaiguri rescued in Siliguri Brothel," Shakti Vahini News, October 26, 2014; <http://shaktivahini.org/girl-trafficked-from-jalpaiguri-rescued-in-siliguri-brothel/> [last accessed March 01, 2016].
- ⁴² Samir Kumar Das, "Homeless in Homelands", p. 86.
- ⁴³ ⁴³ "Girl trafficked from Jalpaiguri rescued in Siliguri Brothel," Shakti Vahini News, October 26, 2014.
- ⁴⁴ "In West Bengal shut tea gardens force girls to resort to prostitution," *The Times of India*, February 5, 2016; <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/In-West-Bengal-shut-tea-gardens-force-girls-to-resort-to-prostitution/articleshow/50865125.cms> [Last accessed on March 20, 2016].
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
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- ⁴⁷ "Distress brewing in Tea Gardens of North Bengal triggers Trafficking," *The Hindu*, February 7, 2016; <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/distress-brewing-in-tea-gardens-of-north-bengal-triggers-trafficking/article8204343.ece> [Last accessed on March 20, 2016].
- ⁴⁸ Ibid .
- ⁴⁹ "In a bid to reach out to the most vulnerable group of child trafficking Shakti Vahini has been organising school sensitisation programme in collaboration with the district administration in the schools of north Bengal districts. Altogether 300 such programmes have been organised in various schools of north Bengal districts." Quoted from "Child Trafficking – a Major Menace in West Bengal", Shakti Vahini Press Release, August 26, 2014; <http://shaktivahini.org/press/child-trafficking-a-major-menace-in-west-bengal/> [Last accessed on March 20, 2016].
- ⁵⁰ Amitava Banerjee, "Student busts Human Trafficking Racket in Darjeeling," *Hindustan Times*, March 22, 2012; <http://www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/student-busts-human-trafficking-racket-in-darjeeling/story-2g27t89BlmLgOfbnLxzjO.html> [Last accessed on March 20, 2016].
- ⁵¹ <http://siliguri.citycentremalls.in/> [last accessed February 21, 2016].
- ⁵² Samir Kumar Das, "Homeless in Homelands", pp. 83-85.

⁵³ Manas Dasgupta, *Uttarbange Chaa Shilpe Bartaman Shamasbha* [The Present Problems in the Tea Industry of North Bengal], Kolkata: Boiwallah, 2006, p. 147, quoted in Samir Kumar Das, “Homeless in Homelands”, p. 83.

⁵⁴ Samir Kumar Das, “Homeless in Homelands”, p. 83.

⁵⁵ “Chandmoni Tea Uprooted for Siliguri’s first Township,” *Business Standard*, January 5, 2004; http://www.business-standard.com/article/companies/chandmoni-tea-uprooted-for-siliguri-s-first-township-104010501098_1.html [last accessed February 21, 2016].

⁵⁶ Medium-term prospects for agricultural commodities: Projections to the Year, 2010, Food & Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, Rome, 2003.

⁵⁷ ITC Annual Bulletin, 2012.

⁵⁸ K.G. Karmakar, “The Tea Industry in India: A Survey”, NABARD, 2005, p. 74.

⁵⁹ Percival Griffiths, *The History of the Indian Tea Industry*, 1945.

⁶⁰ Abhijeet Mazumdar, “Hunger Valley,” *Newsmen*, November 16, 2015; <http://www.newsmen.in/news-item/opinion-hunger-valley/> [Last accessed February 21, 2016].

⁶¹ Iina & Binayak Sen, “Cup of Starvation,” *The Week*, March 17, 2015; <http://www.theweek.in/columns/Binayak-Sen/cup-of-starvation.html> [Last accessed February 21, 2016].

⁶² The author is aware of the story of the small tea gardens which sell green tea to bought-leaf factories. Here we do not have the scope of discussing them in detail. See, for instance, Sutanuka Ghosal, “Bengal Entrepreneurs look at Tea Production as a Source of Income,” *The Economic Times*, December 27, 2011; http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2011-12-27/news/30561684_1_tea-production-green-leaf-tea-growers [Last accessed February 21, 2016].

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⁶⁴ See, for instance, Christopher A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1983.

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