

## **Urbanisation on a Subsistence Economic Base: History of Urban Growth in the Eastern Himalayas**

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It is said that God created the villages and, if not Satan, man created the cities in their own image. Normally, the cities were established on the banks of the rivers, sea-coasts and fertile agricultural flat lands in the past. There are various theories for the origin of the cities. The kings established cities as their capitals on the strategically important locations. There were cities as ports, trading marts, industrial centres, places of pilgrimage, holy shrines, transport focal points and so on. Certainly, the cities mean concentration of human beings at a point on a particular location. The Himalayas are the abode of gods far away from the maddening crowd, where ancient sages were supposed to be engaged in meditation. The Himalayas in general and the Eastern Himalayas in particular are known for their solitude, ethereal beauty, natural vegetation, wild life, lofty peaks, snowy summits, caves and occasional religious shrines. Even the concept of a 'village' has been borrowed by the hunters and graziers in the hills from the settled farmers from the plains. So one wonders what type of urbanisation will be found in the Eastern Himalayan region in the absence

of industries, thriving, trading centres, and significant places of pilgrimage?

The Eastern Himalayan region from Sikkim to Arunachal Pradesh falling within the Brahmaputra encatchment area provides one of the most sparsely human settlements of the world. It contains two Indian 'states' of Sikkim and Arunachal, a district of a province (Darjeeling), and the only Lamaist kingdom in the world, Bhutan, within its fold. All these political units had a strong pastoral, subsistence agricultural and hunting and collecting type of economy in the past. All of them had a strong tradition of the Lamaist cultural complex within their dzongs, monastic estates and sacred rulers over a tribal base. One must hasten to add that better part of Arunachal Pradesh has been unique domain of the small communities at a very primitive technological level. There had been practice of serfdom/slavery in the region, though it is not known as an extensive agricultural land. Its unique flora and fauna have added support to the population, which was exposed to a series of ailments in the past.

There had been a limited economic activities in the region in which denizens of the neighbouring lands would have been interested. There has been no appreciable industries; no crafts for commercial transactions; and locally available unskilled labour was not even adequate for exploiting its own resources. Thus, there was little surplus produced in the region, which could attract human migration from across the mountains. To add further to the above, it was a wild region with dense jungles, ferocious animals, and non-navigable rivers. Its northern parts are snow desert and rest of the area was parcelled to the tribal chiefs. Further more, a type of theocratic feudalism prevailed from Sikkim to Kameng district of Arunachal, which were organised around institutions of monastic establishments (dzongs) away from human settlements. These institutions, the dzongs, were, in fact, monasteries, seminaries, administrative centres, regional banks, royal treasuries, pay offices, departmental stores, defensive forts, etceteras—all together. The eastern extension of the region, Arunachal, the Un-administered and Excluded

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District of the British colonial regime, was the domain of the tribal bands engaged in hunting and collecting form of economic activities. Thus, the map of medieval India shows the Eastern Himalayan region without an urban settlement and only three dots denoting the towns were recorded even in the Brahmaputra valley (Raja Bala:1986). Even in the first fifty years of the 19th century, there was no recognisable urban centre in the region with the possible exception of Darjeeling as an emerging hill station.

### **Tradition of the Royal Mobile Courts**

There was little surplus for commercial transaction to be based in an organised urban centre. The theocrats used to maintain a mobile kind of headquarters. Whenever they were on move, the ritual umbrella symbolising their authority, presence and insignia, would move mounted on a horse. Wherever the horse could stop, the subjects would understand that their sovereign with the courtiers in attendance could be approached. This practice continued in Bhutan upto 1960's, when a permanent state capital was established at Thimphu in 1963. Even king Mahendra of Nepal used to hold mobile courts in the adjoining eastern Nepal in 1960's. There were not many civil (state) functionaries and service castes of occupationalists to serve the royalties in those days (Sinha, A.C.: 1987).

### **Sikkim**

The early Namgyal rulers had two residential establishments: one, at Phari in Chumbi Valley (Tibet) and another, in Sikkim. The first king, Phuntso Namgyal, was consecrated at Yaksam in 1642 and ruled his fief from there. His son moved to Rabdantse near border of Nepal in 1670. The Namgyal authority was shifted from Rabdantse to Tumlong after Nepalese incursion in late 18th century. John W. Edgar visited Tumlong in 1873, almost a hundred years after the Nepalese intrusion in Sikkim and recorded (Edgar, J.W.: 1969).

"Besides the Raja's dwelling and the monasteries (three in numbers), there are scattered over Toomlong hill a number of substantial looking houses belonging to various officials. Each

house was surrounded by some culturable land, in which are generally a few clumps of bamboo or fruit trees. Many of these houses were unoccupied during my visit ...I saw two officers who were styled Dewans, and who had been left at Toomlong in charge of the state affairs (in the absence of the king)". A.W. Paul was sent to Tumlong in 1880 to persuade the rival Lepcha and Bhutia factions in royal court to come to an agreement among themselves (White, J.C.: 1971).

Edgar did not mention existence of a market centre or a commercial sector or a court complex in Sikkim. Such was the lack of economic specialisation that as soon as the 'capital' was shifted from one place to another, the site was lost in the woods. In fact, all the places of royal seat mentioned above before the seat of authority in Sikkim was finally moved to Gangtok in 1888, did not change into urban centres. Edgar further mentions in his report on Sikkim "the heaps of building materials left on Gangtok ridge for constructing another residence for the king". In the words of J.C. White: "On reaching Gangtok, (the capital in November, 1887), we pitched our tent on the ridge, close to the Maharaja's palace, then covered with jungle, now the site of a flourishing bazaar, with post and telegraph offices, dak bungalow or rest house, charitable hospital and dispensary, and many large and flourishing shops, including that of the State bankers". Further, he describes how could he select site for building the Residency house, identification of the non-existent building materials, work force, furnishings and the personnel as the house hold staff. In this way, it was left to John C. White, the first Political Officer in Sikkim, to build a permanent capital at Gangtok, which continues to be the premier city of the State since then.

### **Darjeeling**

Darjeeling, closer to the Sikkim terai, was identified as an excellent location for a sanatorium way back in 1828 by Captain Lloyd, while he was affecting a settlement among the Namgyal courtiers and subsequently, it was secured as a gift to the British from the king in 1835. As a consequence of alleged

maltreatment of Dr. Joseph D. Hooker and Campbell, the territory between Terai to Darjeeling, was seized by the British in 1849. The treaty between Sikkim and the British in 1861 confirmed this territorial seizure by the British and Darjeeling was turned into a hill resort for the convulsing Europeans. Very soon, it attracted migrants from Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan and it turned out into a considerable urban centre in region. Once Kalimpong subdivision was secured in 1865 after the Anglo-Bhutan war and tea and cinchona plantations were introduced, Darjeeling was labelled as a district town and Kalimpong and Kurseong were added as subdivisional towns. This was the time, tea and cinchona plantations were introduced as an exclusive managerial reserve of the European settlers. This was certainly a most organised economic activity, which was incapable of initiating an urban-industrial settlement by nature. For almost next hundred years, Kalimpong remained as a premier frontier-trading mart for the Indo-Tibetan trade, when it was finally closed in 1962 after the border conflict with the Peoples Republic of China.

### **Bhutan**

George Bogle in 1773, and subsequently Griffith, K.K. Bose, and R.B. Pemberton do not mention any urban centre in Bhutan during their visits in 18th and early 19th centuries. Even the significant seats of theocratic authority such as Paro, Thimphu, Punakha and Wangdi jongpens (the regional chiefs) were mentioned for their forts and monasteries mainly and nowhere a maddening crowd is suggested. Because of its proximity to trading centres of Darjeeling, Sikkim and Chumbi Valley, south-western corner of Bhutan got more populated and developed by the middle of the 19th century. But even there, Ashley Eden, the British envoy to the Bhutanese court in 1863, found: "...only two grass huts and three or four cattle sheds, some few men and a few women and thus constituted the whole garrison town of Sipchoo" (Eden, A.: 1972). At Sangbe, he found, "some four or five houses, neatly cultivated rice fields were fenced with loose stone walls and land was tilled with plough". Eden's colleague, Surgeon Renee, noted "twenty

houses and a monastery" at Samchi, the most important settlement in this part of.

### **Duar**

For the next hundred years or so Bhutan remained free from urban settlements. It was only in 1960's, when the third Drukgyalpo decided to bid good-bye to the policy of a political isolation. The kingdom also decided to go for a regular administration and planned economic development. With these innovations the erstwhile isolated Himalayan exotic kingdom opened up its doors southwards to India leading to paving of the metalled roads, opening modern schools, hospitals and dispensaries and introduction of the wheeled transport. All these resulted in an unprecedented demographic change in the country. With opening of the surface transport across the Duars to India, a series of market settlements such as Samchi, Penden, Phuntsholing, Geylegphu, Samdruk-jongkhar sprung up. A conscious decision was taken to establish a permanent state capital at Thimphu and for that town planners from Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, India were invited and meanwhile a provisional capital started functioning from Paro dzong.

### **Contemporary Urban Scenario**

Some three decades earlier, C.J. Morris, the Assistant Recruitment Officer, Gurkha Regimental Centre, Shillong on a visit to southern Bhutan in 1932 (Morris, C.J.: 1932 ), did not find a urban centre and refers Sarbhang, Hathisar, Dagana, Chirang, and Samchi as groups of settlements and haats (markets). In our visit to the newly established capital of Bhutan in 1969, we were informed that the population of Thimphu, the capital, was about three-and-half thousands inclusive of the Palace Guards (Sinha, A.C.: 2001). Five decades after Morris' survey, the present author found most of the population statistics of the southern Bhutanese towns in particular ending with three zeros, which suggest that perhaps no survey on the spot was conducted and the population figures were estimates (Sinha, A.C.: 1987A). The same situation

I find myself even today in 2002 with the population. We must hasten to add that since 1970's Bhutan has a separate department of town planning at the national level, which plans for locations of administrative complex, markets, communication structures etc. Of late, the Royal Government of Bhutan has recognised Thimphu and Phuntsholing as municipal corporation towns. As entire demographic statistics of Bhutan is under a cloud, it is difficult to pinpoint the specific urban nuances. However, some general conclusions may be drawn on the Bhutanese urban scenario.

First of all, most of the urban centres are located on the southern borders of the country in the Duars, which links the kingdom with India through roadways. Secondly, this is also the most densely populated region of the country, which produces a number of cash crops such as orange, ginger, rice, cardamom, and vegetables. Thirdly, most of the industrial estates, hydro-electricity generating and mineral extracting locations are in this region. Fourthly, these five southern districts in the Duars are settled predominantly by the Lhotshampas, who are in turmoil for over a decade. So much so that better than a hundred thousand of them are languishing in refugee camps in Nepal. Even those of them, who are left behind in Bhutan, are socially, economically and even politically unsettled. To add further to the confusion, the Indian insurgent belonging to United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) and of late even Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) have been operating dozens of rebel camps, where state agencies responsible for maintenance of law and order have no presence. Consequently, the normal fabric of social life in rural as well as urban centres in the central (Sarbhong and Chirang) and the eastern region (Tashigang-Samdruk-jongkhar-Deothang-Bhanthar Corridor) of Bhutan has terribly been disturbed. Fifthly, towns in interior of Bhutan are mostly district administrative centres without much of urban infrastructure and amenities. Sixthly, Bhutan has an ambitious plan for hydroelectric generation for exporting the same to India and developing mining industries such as cement, coal etc. which



may be precursor to a new set of urbanisation. Lastly, Bhutan has an ambitious urban plan to link its gate way town, Phuntoshiling, with Paro, Thimphu, Punakha and Wangdi towns with an express highway and develop the corridor as a national show-piece. This project has potential for a planned urban development of the western region of the country.

### Arunachal Pradesh

Predominantly tribal state of Arunachal Pradesh too did not have urban experience prior to 1970 like its western neighbour, Bhutan. Census of India, 1971 for the first time identified three district head quarters (Bomdila, Along and Tezu) and a sub divisional settlement (Pasighat) as census towns, providing a urban population of 3.7 per cent out of the total. At that time, one of the criteria of urbanisation was a minimum population of 2,500 persons. After a decade in 1981, these figures changed to six towns with addition of Old and New Itanagars as part of the new capital complex of the State and 6.56 per cent of the total was recorded as the urban population.. In the year 1991, four more towns (Ziro in Lower Subansiri, Roing in Dibang Valley, Namsai in Lohit and Khonsa in Tirap district) were added to the urban centres taking urban percentage to 12.21 in the State. By the turn of the century in 2001, Arunachal registered 20.47 per cent of its population as urban dwellers and the number of the towns (Changlang and Jairampur in district of Changlang, Diomali in Tirap, Tawang in Tawang, Basar in Siang West, Seppa in East Kameng and Doparijo in Upper Subansiri district) rose from 10 to 17 .

**Table 1**  
Decadal Urban Growth, Number of Towns, Urban Percentage in Arunachal Pradesh, 1971-2001

| Sl. No. | Towns | No. Dists | No. Towns | Dist Towns | Dist without Towns | Per cent | Decadal Growth |
|---------|-------|-----------|-----------|------------|--------------------|----------|----------------|
| 1.      | 1971  | 5         | 4         | 3          | 2                  | 3.7      | None           |
| 2.      | 1981  | 9         | 6         | 4          | 5                  | 6.56     | 139.63         |
| 3.      | 1991  | 11        | 10        | 7          | 4                  | 12.21    | 167.04         |
| 4.      | 2001  | 13        | 17        | 12         | 1                  | 20.47    | 101.29         |

There are certain generalisations to be made on the table. Districts along with administrative centres have been created with a view to administrative convenience and welfare administration. Though the oldest town in the state, Pasighat, did not fall in the line for about three decades, the district head quarters were turned into census towns. Still a number of the districts did not have an urban centre within their boundaries. Thus, there were two out of 5 districts without towns in 1971. This number went to five in 1981 out of 9 districts. In the year 1991, there were 4 districts without towns among 11 of them in the State. And there was the district of Upper Siang in 2001 without an urban presence. However, a salient feature of urbanisation in Arunachal is that most of the towns are administrative centres. Similarly, percentage of the urban population has been growing at a faster rate per decade. The decadal population growth between 1971 to 2001 has for the state of Arunachal Pradesh been simply fantastic: 139.63 (1981), 167.04 (1991), 101.29 (2001) per cents. This rapid growth is attributed to the same phenomenon of establishment and expansion of the modern administration on the interior tribal social base, as many of them do not satisfy the criteria of 75% population gainfully employed in the non-primary sector of production. Many of the towns lack infra structural amenities required for a healthy urban living.

Scholars have noted that urbanisation in Arunachal was a completely alien phenomenon to the predominantly tribal society. In this way, urban settlements were not a product of the internal dynamics of the Arunachalis (Das, G. 1995). The Town Survey Report on Tezu, undertaken by the Census of India, 1981, records: "Development and growth of Tezu started by (the) government almost from 'o' point because excluding a few local houses, site of the present township was full of jungle before the establishment of the present town. Initially, the buildings for the government offices and quarters for the employees were constructed. Organised market, co-operative shop, commercial complex, banks, schools, playgrounds, parks, community halls, hospitals, veterinary dispensary, public library, electricity etc. gradually came up with the initiative of

the government and all these buildings belong to the government" (Census of India, 1981: 12). This type of urbanisation was naturally incapable of attracting a good number of scheduled tribal population from its immediate hinterland. Not surprisingly only 24.28% of the urban residents belonged to scheduled tribes in 1991. This type of induced urbanisation does not contribute quickly to modernisation of the economy and improvement in the quality of life of the citizen.

### **Civic Participation and Urban Prospects**

In case we turn our attention to the Himalayan 'States' from Jammu & Kashmir, Himanchal, Uttaranchal, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunachal Pradesh, one point emerges vividly, and that is the rate of urbanisation is much below the all India level. And for that there are historical reasons. With a view to securing consumer goods, building materials and other requirements for a fast economic development of this region, a number of gate-way towns sprang up in course of time on the most convenient entry points to the power centres in these hill 'States'. Pasighat for the eastern and Tezpur for the western Arunachal Pradesh and before that Sadiya up to 1950, Phuntoshiling for Bhutan, and Siliguri for Darjeeling and Sikkim and even for western Bhutan serve such a purpose. Then, there have been a number of market settlements on the foothills and on the borders of these 'States', which are neither exclusively villages, nor are completely towns. Many of such settlements are, in fact, seasonal or temporary collectivities posing problems of their own. Daranga bazaar or Mela bazaar near Samdruk-Jongkhar on eastern Bhutan-Assam border may be sited as such an example. In the absence of an appropriate term, we may refer them as border towns, as they pose their own problems. As urban administration is relatively a new phenomenon in the region, these border towns are not really controlled by an appropriate authority; they conveniently turn into den of criminals, smuggler, fugitives, fortune seekers and a variety of doubtful activities. In fact, no body controls them, as they exist on the frontiers of two administrative units. Their

basic character is that of 'haat' culture, which is by nature transient in its function<sup>1</sup>. Of course, once the administration links such towns with that of an effective communication network, they turn into one of the most profitable urban-industrial centres in the region. Once more, cases of Pasighat, Phuntsholing and Siliguri as erstwhile border markets now turning into regional urban-industrial towns, may serve as the best examples to illustrate the point. Their linkages with the hill hinterland need to be studied. Geographers have conducted the studies in this fashion on Kalka-Simla, Kathgodam-Nainital. Similar studies on the role of Siliguri, Phuntsholing and Sadiya and other towns may be undertaken to examine its their linkages to Gangtok, Kalimpong and Darjeeling, Thimphu, Paro, Punakha, and interior towns in Arunachal Pradesh respectively.

Darjeeling and, to a great extent, Gangtok were established as the colonial towns with exclusive settlements for various segments of population of the time. Thimphu and Itanagar were created as the capital towns for the respective 'States' and accordingly their developments were controlled by the power to be and they were under the gaze of the public for their appearance and functioning. Rest of the urban centres in Sikkim, Bhutan and Arunachal, whether they were census towns or statutory towns, were recognised as the head quarters of the respective districts for the convenience of the administration. They were unnatural settlements in the sense that denizens of their immediate hinterland did not identify themselves with the settlements, as they lacked the required skills for white collar employment. They rarely have significant secondary sector of economic production, which could employ them. They do join these towns as unskilled labour force in the service sectors and cause a heavy demand on the limited urban amenities. We have called them else where possessing a type of urban civic culture levelled as 'haat' culture (Sinha, A.C. at al: 1993).

Ethnic policies in the Himalayan States, even before the idea of 'sons of the soil' concept was articulated, was such that non-locals were not to enter the 'Sates' to settle beyond an

imaginary line drawn from East to West some kilometer North of Gangtok in Sikkim, just on the northern slopes of the Bhutanese Duar ridges in Bhutan and all across the hills in Arunachal Pradesh (The Inner Line in existence since 1873.) The entire Bhotiya-Lepcha reaction to the 'Pahariya' (Nepalese) settlement in Sikkim during J.C. White's regime could depend on this issue. Similarly, Bhutan till other day did not permit non-Dukpas to settle in the interior areas. Socialist leader, Rammanohar Lohia's arrest in violation of crossing the 'Inner Line' without a permit 1950's is well recorded. Now one hears demands for introduction of an "Inner Line" even in Meghalaya, which had been historically free from this stipulation. When the ethnic policy of the 'States' is based on ethnic segregation, will a healthy urban ethnic growth be visualised? What type of ethnic plurality will emerge on a predominantly distinct tribal urban setting?

It is difficult to generalise on the basis of doubtful statistics from Bhutan. Still one has to make certain general statements on the urban scene of the regime under study. Gangtok, Thimphu and Phuntsholing are under the municipal Corporations. Till other day, Itanagar, the capital of Arunachal Pradesh, was governed by the Village Council (Dutta, P.S.: 1993). In between, there are towns such as Darjeeling, which have municipal boards. Some of them may have even Town Committees, which are euphemism for direct control of the nominated bureaucrats. Interestingly, most of the towns, with possible exception of the Bhutanese ones because of the 'State's ethnic policy, have a pre-dominant non-local population. Another feature of these towns is the preponderance of the single male residents without families. This phenomenon not only leads to sex imbalance in the towns, but is also suggestive of the situation in which the residents send bulk of their earnings elsewhere to support their families, which means a considerable income earned in these towns are not spent there and the urban amenities suffer from excessive use by such residents. The towns as such have very limited sources of their income and they invariably depend on the occasional allotment of funds from the administration, but their requirements are

substantial. In such a situation, the quality of urban life continues to deteriorate to an extent that these towns are reduced to shanty settlements. Most of the "States" have plans for rural development, as bulk of their population continues to reside in the rural areas. They do have schemes for development of the Capital towns. However, none of the "States" of the region have a conscious policy for future development of the 'small towns'. In such a situation, the prospect of these predominantly parasitical administrative towns do not appear to be very promising in the near future. The eastern Himalayan towns and cities do not project an image of urban, industrial and modern human settlement. Even in the traditional way, they do not present a picture of feudal cities, as it happened else where in Asia, Africa and Europe. In fact, they do not even effectively influence the overall life style of their hinterland. In this way, urbanisation in the eastern Himalayan region is spurious, to say the least.

#### NOTE

- 1 The earliest experience for commercial transaction the hill tribes had before the colonial set-up was with that of the *haat* on the foot hills or river banks, where they could barter their wild products against the (items of their) necessities...The merchants and their customers could shout prices, haggle around and ultimately bargain a favourable price through signs and *bazaar* language. The *haats* themselves were transitory congregations...The visiting tribals would meet their friend, relatives and even enemies; negotiate on settlements of disputes; contract marital alliances and even conspire against the foes. But by evening they would be once more on forest high way for a home ward journey leaving behind the *haat*. It did not belong to them; they did not belong to it; and the two were two different worlds and were just the meeting points with minimum of interaction and even that too with out much intensity. One could feel free in the *haat*; act as care free as possible; come across a variety of novelties; shout and gesticulate with purpose and even sing and dance on way home. No doubt, one had occasions to celebrate, especially after a good bargain. But in the final analysis, the *haats* were just the meeting points, which belonged to no body (Sinha, A.C. et. al.: 1993).

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