CHAPTER - VI

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

The socio demographic characteristics of population of West Bengal reflect a high degree of unity in diversity the periodic immigration of different ethnic groups and later their movements within the state have led to a high degree of intermingling of various cultures which in turn has given rise to the present day's ethnic, cultural and socio-economic diversities in West Bengal.

The caste system which inspite of its extremely negative role continues to exert tremendous influence on social life of the people. The religious composition of the population constitutes an important web in the social fabric of the state. In West Bengal no doubt majority of people are hindus but other religious communities are so interwoven with each other, that they show no diversity in their socio-economic conditions. Literacy is one of the important demographic elements which is a good measure of human progress. Economic composition of any region predicts the level of development of economy of the society. So, in this chapter an attempt has been made to examine the spatial variation of these aspects and the factors leading to such diversity and the impact of such diversity on the economic level of development of the region.
RELIGION:

Indian Sub-continent contains diverse religious groups which have also acted as the powerful divisive force encouraging partition. Hinduism is the dominant religion of India in general and in West Bengal in particular. Hinduism is the religion of more than 76.96% of its people in 1981. Islam has claimed to be 21.52 per cent of the population in 1981. There are also few Christians (0.58%), Jains (0.07%), Buddhist (0.29%) and Sikhs (0.09%) in the State.

The current spatial pattern of religion in West Bengal is an outcome of following factors:

i) The rise and growth of native religion

ii) Out migration of muslim population and immigration of Hindus after partition of Bengal.

iii) In-migration of the displaced persons from Tibet following Sino-Tibetan Conflict.

iv) Immigration of Britiishers and their policy of conversion through missionary works.

The Diversification Index ranges from 656 to 690 with the State average of 675.18. Puruliya with the maximum of 689.84, indicates that there is a concentration of one religion and minimum of 656.01 in Murshidabad confirms the diverse type of religion in the district (Map 6.1a). Accordingly, the districts of West Bengal may be grouped as follows:-

The major six religions of the state are established in all the districts of the state, of which Hinduism and Islam are in majority and the remaining are smaller in terms of proportion to total population.

The largest and oldest religion, Hinduism is spread unevenly. Very high percentage (above 90% of Hindus live in Puruliya whereas in Murshidabad is percentage share of Hindus are as low as 41.15%.

The next important religion, Islam, is widely distributed throughout the state, but its strongest concentration is along the eastern borders of the state, Murshidabad, is the district in West Bengal where the followers of Islam forms the single largest religious community (58.66%). In Maldah and West Dinajpur districts the proportion of Muslims are as high as 45% and 36% respectively (Fig. 6.1b).

Some concentration of Christians are found in Darjiling (4.60%), Jalpaiguri (2.87%) and Calcutta (1.36%) districts as the Britishers built their fort at Calcutta and made Darjiling town as their Summer capital. Besides in all the other districts share of Christian is below 1.96.
Jains are minor community and are evenly distributed so as the Sikhs. But maximum number of Buddhists live in Darjiling district, accounting for about 11.80% of the total population, elsewhere the percentage is low.

**LITERACY**

According to 1991 census a literate has been defined to include persons who can both read and write with understanding in any language and should be above the age of six.

The percentage of literates to total population in West Bengal is 59.32% in 1991, the state stands 15th among all states and Union Territories taken together. Not only the literacy rate of the state is low, but also there is a great disparity in the rural-urban and male female literacy rates.

It may be noted that male, female, rural and urban literacy rates are 67.79%, 49.52, 52.41 and 75.73% respectively. Equally striking are the differences in its literacy rates of various districts.

**GROWTH OF LITERACY**

The growth rate of literacy has not been steady during 1901-21, but afterwards it has been constantly increasing. Natural calamities e.g. famine, drought, floods and epidemics has been responsible to some extent for the slow rate upto 1921. The First World War had also an adverse effect on the growth and spread of education.
In the decades of 1921-31, the literacy rate was retarded in most of the districts of West Bengal, because of natural calamities and political unrest in the country. However, with the dawn of independence, the government took fresh drives to eradicate illiteracy which has now been increasing rapidly.

The percentage of literates to total population has gone up in West Bengal from 33.20% in 1971 to 48.64% in 1981, it rose to 59.32% in 1991 from 48.64% in 1981.

In respect of literacy, Darjiling, Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar, Hugli and Barddhaman have grown faster than state average during 1981-91 though the percentage of total literacy have been increasing in West Bengal, the high growth rate of literacy is associated with the regions of high literacy whereas low literacy regions are associated with low growth rate of literacy.

MALE-FEMALE DIFFERENTIAL IN LITERACY-1991

Though the average literacy for the state is 59.32% there is much variation in the percentage of male-female literacy. The average male literacy in the State is 67.79% while female literacy is 49.52%. The male-female differential in literacy is below state average in the districts of Calcutta (9.85%), Nadia (15.63%), North Twentyfour parganas (16.72%), Murshidabad (16.85%) and Haora (18.28%) whereas highest male-female differential is recorded in the district of Puruliya (38.93%). High female literacy is positively associated with high degree of urbanisation.
The inequality in literacy by sex is the outcome of traditional prejudices against female education and employment. They are also not permitted much mobility and may not be sent to a school even in an adjoining village. These conditions are, of course, changing and the sexwise disparity in the literacy rates has been narrowing although it continues to be wide in itself.

**URBAN-RURAL DIFFERENTIAL IN LITERACY-1991**

There exists a wide disparity in the literacy of Urban and rural areas (75.73% - 52.41%). The urban rural differential is above State's average in eight districts. whereas rest of the districts record literacy well below the state average (Fig. 6.2b).

This disparity is attributed to following factors:

1) Urban centres are better equipped with educational facilities.
2) Urban population is socially more aware and economically more capable of imparting education to their children.
3) Many educated ruralites migrate to urban places in search of employment.
4) The Urban character of the erstwhile British administration was also partly responsible for creating a wide gap between the urban and rural literacy rates under it.
5) The extreme poverty and old methods of agriculture in rural areas, burden of dependents and meager educational facilities are the causes of low literacy in rural areas.
There are 152 police stations, which are entirely rural. Urban-rural differentials of literacy is very high i.e. more than 30% in 24.49% of the remaining police stations. Medium urban-rural differential of literacy (15-30%) is found in 40.82% of the police stations. Low urban-rural differentials of literacy i.e. below 15% is found in 34.69% of the police stations.

SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION OF LITERACY 1991

Within the State there are marked regional variations in literacy and in its various components-Urban, Rural, Female and Male. These regional variations are the natural outcome of variations in the level of Socio-economic development. Generally high measures of agricultural productivity, high level of urbanisation and high degree of industrialisation are responsible for the higher level of literacy. The economic prosperity of a region thus attracts a large number of literate immigrants from other neighbouring areas. Majority of the towns and cities function as centres of administrative, educational, trade and commerce, which attribute to high literacy. In West Bengal pattern of urbanisation has a great impact on the literacy. On the basis of the general characteristic of literacy, districts of West Bengal can be divided into three literacy groups (Fig. 6.3).

1) HIGH LITERACY REGION - Calcutta, Barddhaman, Medinipur, Haora, Hugli and North Twentyfour parganas are the districts where the literacy rate is more than 60%. Calcutta recorded the highest literacy rate of 77.61%, male-female differential in literacy is also narrowest in this district. The high literacy in Calcutta is mainly because of the district has the benefit of early start of education under British rule. Politically this district has long been very active in the functioning of the government.
Large number of educational institutes, research centres and other government agencies attract many literates and educated persons from the neighbouring regions.

Relatively high literacy rates in these districts are mainly the result of high degree of Urban-industrial development, dense network of transport system and diversified economic base.

MODERATE LITERACY - Districts with moderate literacy rates (50-60%) are South Twentyfour Parganas, Bankura, Darjiling and Nadia Areas with moderate literacy are generally peripheral to those with relatively high literacy rates. Industrial development and urbanisation are the causes for the moderate literacy in South Twentyfour Parganas and prosperous agriculture and historical factors in case of Nadia and Bankura and tea plantations in case of Darjiling.

LOW LITERACY- Low literacy less than 50% is recorded in the districts of Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar, Birbhum, Puruliya, Maldah, Murshidabad and West Dinajpur.

Factors behind the low level of literacy are slow urbanisation, high dependency on agricultural land, pressure of rapidly growing population, higher proportion of Scheduled Tribes and Muslim Population and lack of industrialisation.

The high male-female and rural-urban differentials in the State indicate the fact that modernisation and development are only superficial in this
State. Thus to cope up with this problem there is a need to eradicate poverty and illiteracy by allocating more funds for the same. The spatial variation of literacy in West Bengal is mainly due to variations in social awareness, Scheduled Tribes population, Muslim population, agricultural development and poverty level. Thus, to lift the standard of education in this state, formulation of sound socio-economic planning is essential.

Hence, to promote the level of literacy in general it is necessary to give more attention to the low literacy region, with a special emphasis on rural and female literacy.

**ECONOMIC COMPOSITION**

The population may be dichotomised into two groups of economically active and economically inactive population. These two segments of population are of distinctive significance as their proportions, demographic characteristics and economic compositions have direct bearing on the pattern, rate and level of economic development of a country.

According to 1991 census, in West Bengal about 30.20% of population are economically active, the highest percentage of workers being recorded by Puruliya (35.40%) whereas lowest (26.04%) is recorded by South Twenty-four Parganas. In Murshidabad, Nadia, North and South Twenty-four Parganas, Haora and Barddhaman districts percentage of workers to total population is below state average, whereas all the other districts are well above the state average (r%, ).
The spatial variation is closely associated with the type of economic activities. In the districts where agriculture, forestry, household industries and similar occupations provide the bulk of employment even to the people without any formal qualifications or professional expertise, work participation rate is relatively high, whereas in the districts where the organised sectors of the economy are more localised and specialised in nature, the employment is restricted by the qualifications of skill and professional training, work participation rate is low. Besides, the introduction of automation and mechanisation in production processes of economic goods and services has considerably reduced the manpower requirements. Moreover due to better facilities of education, quite a large number of boys and girls of 15-24 years of age attend educational institutes and does not participate in economic activities. This tends to lower the percentage of workforce.

Though the variation among the districts is less but amongst the police stations is remarkable. It varies from 21.56 per cent in Amta Police Station of Haora District to 44.67 per cent in Pulbazar Police Station of Darjeeling district. The pattern of regional distribution of workforce may be projected systematically by grouping the workers into 5 grades viz. Very Low (20-25 per cent), Low (25-30 per cent), Moderate (30-35 per cent), High (35-40 per cent) and Very High (40-45 per cent). About 24.74 per cent of police stations fall in the category of Very low and 54.64 per cent in the category of Low. These two collectively cover 79.38 per cent of the police stations whereas 15.81 per cent of the police stations are included under moderate category and 4.12 per cent in the category of high and 0.68 percent in the category of very high.
According to 1991 Census there are nine industrial categories. For better comparisons among different regions, these nine industrial categories are combined into three general groups of economic activities.

1) Primary activities include cultivators, agricultural labourers, livestock, forestry, fishing, hunting, plantation and orchards and allied activities, mining and quarrying.

2) Secondary activities include manufacturing, processing, servicing and repairs and house-hold industries.

3) Tertiary activities include construction, trade and commerce, transport, storage and communications and other services.

PRIMARY ACTIVITIES:

Primary activities are dominant in majority of the police stations. In most of the less developed police stations the proportion in primary activities is more than 71.52 per cent (x). This region of very high concentration of primary activities, include 28 police stations. High concentration (x-1σ to x) of primary activities is found in 150 police stations. In most of the economically advanced police stations these percentages are low (x-2σ to x-1σ) and very low (x-3σ to x -2σ). The graded distribution of primary occupations shows that a small zone of low percentage is found in the southern part of the State. It is composed of the police stations of Shamsheganj, Nabadwip, kalyani, Moheshtola, Jadavpur, Budge Budge, Liluah, Domjur, Mogra, Kulti and Asansol. At the opposite extreme of very high percentages of primary activities cover about 28 police stations of Murshidabad Twentyfour Parganas, Haora, Hugli, Barddhaman and Medinipur.
Cultivation is the most conspicuous constituent of the primary activities. The percentage of agricultural labourer is relatively small and is different from that of the distribution of cultivators. Livestock, forestry etc. account for very small percentage of the working population. The share of mining activities is very small and is concentrated in western part of the Barddhaman district.

SECONDARY ACTIVITIES

Distributional aspect of the proportion of the labour force engaged in secondary activities is rather reverse to that for the primary sector—high proportions are identified with the economically developed police stations and low proportions with the less developed police stations. In West Bengal, secondary activities are more unevenly distributed. The graded distribution of secondary occupations shows that a small zone of very high percentage (50 and above) is found in 14 police stations covering Twentyfour Parganas, Haora, Hugli, Barddhaman districts. The high percentage of secondary occupations is concentrated in Hugli Industrial Belt. The general trend of the distribution of secondary group is marked by a gradual decrease in all directions from the zone of the high concentration of secondary occupations.

Household and manufacturing industries are the chief constituents of secondary occupations. The share of the former is low compared with the latter.
TERTIARY OCCUPATIONS

Tertiary activities represent a highly composite group of activities, as a class it is not responsible for the production of material goods but for a great variety of services. Tertiary occupation includes activities which are poles apart but they represent social, economic status and wealth. At one extreme is domestic service and petty shopkeeping, at the other is the huge insurance company, mercantile establishment and bank. In West Bengal sophisticated forms of tertiary activities are mainly concentrated in southern industrial zone.

The share of tertiary occupations vary from 2 to 78 per cent. High percentage of workers i.e. 25 per cent engaged in tertiary occupations covers 17 per cent of the police stations. Whereas about 83 per cent of the police stations have low percentages (below 25) of workers engaged in tertiary activities and are associated with the region of high proportion of primary sector.

SCHEDULED TRIBES

Scheduled tribes, another group of depressed class, belong to different ethnic groups and of varying cultures, usually cut off from main stream of national life, are confined to the hilly and forested tracts of West Bengal. According to 1981 census percentage of scheduled tribes population was 5.63% which has gone down to 5.60% in 1991.
The santhals are the most populous tribe in West Bengal followed by Oraon, Munda, Bhumji and Kora. The Mahalis have occupied the 6th place replacing the Lodhas and pushing them down to 7th place. Others are Bhutia, Mal Pahariya and Lepcha.

District level data reveals that Jalpaiguri is the only district where percentage of scheduled tribes population is more than 20 percent (i.e. 21.12 per cent). Besides, in eight districts namely Puruliya (19.29 per cent), Darjeeling (13.41 per cent), Bankura (19.29 per cent), West Dinajpur (9.82 per cent), Medinipur (8.26 per cent), Birbhum (6.94 per cent), Maldah (6.57 per cent), Barddhaman (6.29 per cent) the percentage of scheduled tribes population to total population is above state average. The table below provides the detailed categorization of districts on the basis of scheduled tribes population (in per cent).

Table-6.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classes</th>
<th>Percentage of scheduled tribes population to total population</th>
<th>Name of the districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Low</td>
<td>&lt; 0.5</td>
<td>Calcutta, Haora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>0.5 - 5.5</td>
<td>Darjeeling, Murshidabad, Nadia, North and South Twenty-four Parganas, Hugli, Puruliya, Medinipur.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>5.5 - 15.5</td>
<td>Koch Bihar, West Dinajpur, Maldah, Birbhum, Barddhaman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>&gt; 15.5</td>
<td>Jalpaiguri, Bankura</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bankura, Medinipur and Puruliya districts form an almost compact block of land with an undulating terrain, interspread with forests, hills and hillocks, which is an extension of the tribal belt of Chhotanagpur plateau. Another noteworthy concentration is in the industrial and mining region of Barddhaman district. So far as the northern districts are concerned, the settlement of the tribals in and around the tea plantation of Darjiling and Jalpaiguri needs no elaboration.

In West Bengal, out of 342 police stations 227 have either low or very low tribal population where as there are only 14 police stations where atleast 33 per cent of the population are tribals.

It is noteworthy that districts with larger percentage of tribal population tend to have larger number of police stations with very high or high tribal concentration, but there is a significant difference in the pattern of over all dispersal.

As the tribals are concentrated in few pockets (Map 6.5a) and most of these areas are mountaneous or hilly tracts, which on one hand serve as physical barriers, demarcating areas, where politico-cultural formation of the major language-culture groups could take place and on the other hand, provide the natural setting for the tribal communities to flourish and maintain their distinct entity.

In all the districts a continuum from high to very low concentration of tribals is observed. The existing pattern of distribution of tribal communities is likely to create a gap in the communication set
up both among the tribals and non-tribals at various levels. As there is no uniformity in the perception of the tribal situation at the state level there is need for area specific planning.

**SCHEDULED CASTES**

In 1991, 23.65% of total population of West Bengal were scheduled castes, whereas it was 21.99% in 1981. Few members (10.30%) of scheduled castes live in urban areas. As a socially backward community, level of literacy is low (24.37%). Though economically backward community the percentage of scheduled caste workers is higher than that of the percentage of workers to total population but most of them are agricultural labourers.

Koch Bihar is the only district where percentage of scheduled castes population is above 50% (i.e. 52.07%), High concentration region of scheduled caste population (30-40%) covers Jalpaiguri, South Twenty-four Parganas, Bankura and Birbhum districts. Calcutta is the only district with very low percentage share of scheduled castes to total population i.e. 6.46%. Rest of the districts belong to moderate concentration zone (10%-30%) (Fig.6.5b).

The higher percentage of Scheduled Caste population is positively associated with higher percentage of Christians, Buddhists and Muslims. Besides, higher percentage of scheduled caste population is positively associated with the higher percentage of agricultural labourer and inversely correlated with the high proportion of scheduled tribe persons.