CHAPTER - THREE
VENUE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Geographic Features

Geography has lent a hand in investing West Bengal with characteristics, strategic and otherwise, that are unique in many ways. It has common boundaries with Nepal, Bangladesh and the two states, Sikkim and Bhutan that have special treaty relations with the country. The special strategic importance of this state also arises from the fact that the narrow neck which connects its northern most region with the main body of West Bengal provides the only land corridor between the North-east Zone comprising Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh on the one hand and the rest of the country, on the other.

West Bengal with an area of 87,675.91 square kilometers (34,214 square miles) forms 3% of India's land area, but supports according to 1991 census figures, a total population of over 67 million which is 8.05% of the national total.

The land area within the boundaries of the State of West Bengal may be classified into three broad physiographic divisions. The first represented by extensions of the Chhotanagpur plateau in the western bulge of the State comprises the district of Purulia and the contiguous parts of Midnapore, Burdwan and Birbhum districts. The second consists of the mountainous northern zone comprising parts of the Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts and the third consists of the rest of the State lying in the Gangetic plains with rich alluvial soils.

The first division is a formation made up of peneplain old rocks, most of which are below the 500 feet contour. These rocky plains gradually descend eastward to merge with the higher slopes of alluvial lands. The soils are thin and have little or no profile development.

The second division, the Himalayan zone, rises abruptly from the plains of North Bengal to attain great heights within a short distance of the foot hills. High terrains, steep gradients, heavy rains (averaging from 80 to 160 inches) and torrential streams make this region extremely susceptible to soil erosion and landslides.

The remaining physiographic region of this State comprises the flat alluvial plains and delta of the Gangetic system. The southern part consists of Gangetic plains and the moribund delta characterised by old distributary streams choked with silt, natural levees, flood plains, poorly drained swampy areas and increased salinity.

Rainfall in the State as a whole is fairly high. The average is about 70 inches of which over 50 inches falls in the monsoon months from June to September. The heavy seasonal concentration of rainfall results in both droughts and floods.

There are four main types of soils in the State, namely, the brown podzolic soils of the hill region, chiefly in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts; the red acidic lateric soils of the western parts of the State, comprising the districts of Purulia, Bankura and Birbhum and parts of the districts of Midnapore and Burdwan; the deltaic and saline soils of the mangrove areas of the southernmost parts of 24 Parganas district and the alluvial soils in the rest of the State including the Gangetic delta islands in the south and the Gangetic plain in the North.

Forests cover 4535 square miles or nearly 13% of the total area of the State. There are three main forest areas:

i) The hills of the northern part of the State (in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts). Both coniferous and deciduous varieties are found. This is the richest forest area of the State but development is hampered because of inaccessibility, inadequate roads and steep
gradients.

ii) The forest tract of the western districts especially in the Chotanagpur hills of deciduous varieties. The stands are not so valuable as those of the north; they consist largely of secondary growth timber.

iii) The mangrove forests of the extreme south which are of poor quality and of little commercial value.

West Bengal has a limited range of mineral resources. Coal is by far the most important. Other resources include fire-clay, china-clay, limestone, ochre, wolfram, copper, iron ore, dolomite, manganese, silica, moulding sand and sandstones. Of this list, only fire-clay, china-clay, limestone, ochre and coal are being commercially exploited.

The net cultivated area covers approximately 60% of the total area of the State, a rather high percentage of agricultural land use. In some districts, Darjeeling in the hills and Purulia in the south-west, the area sown is between only 30 and 35 per cent of the respective total district areas. This low percentage is obviously due to hilly and undulating terrain and poor soil. On the other hand, in districts like Nadia, Murshidabad, Malda and Dinajpur, the percentage varies between 70 and 75. Generally, in the south-western districts the percentage is low, except in Birbhum and Midnapore. In the south-eastern districts, where industrial employment is high, cultivable land is also good. In most parts of this area the net area cultivated is well above the State average. It is as high as 73% in the Hooghly and 64% in the Howrah district. Then again, in almost all these districts, uncultivable lands, excluding areas under forests and current fallows, vary from 3 to 7 per cent, not a high percentage by any standard. It is therefore, obvious that there is hardly any large scope in these districts for extensive cultivation. In most districts the area under cultivation has been increasing through the last three decades, it has almost reached the ceiling of the total cultivable land.

The pattern of cultivation does not show any variety. Practically in all districts, barring the hills, where cultivation of tea or fibre covers a substantial portion of the total acreage, rice and foodgrains are overwhelmingly important. For the State as a whole, 87% of the total acreage under cultivation is under food crop, out of which 76% is under rice. Market oriented agriculture, cultivation of vegetables etc. have not been widely adopted; a reason may be the selective demand for staple food items like rice.

3.2 Demographic Features

The total population of the State consists 8.05 per cent of the national total out of which 72.61% resides in the rural areas while 27.39% are urbanites. The sex ratio in 1991 was 917 females per 1000 males which was lower than the national average of 929. However, in the State the sex ratio has been registering an increase from 876 in 1961 to 911 in 1981. Thus, West Bengal ranked higher than the states in the Hindi Belt but still it could not catch up with the south Indian states. The distribution of population over the district reveals that the industrialised districts of Calcutta (23,669), Howrah (2535), 24-Parganas (1778) and Hooghly (1382) occupy the topmost rank considering the population density per sq.km. [figures in parentheses are density values]. In the second tier lies the agriculturally advanced districts of Nadia, Murshidabad and Bardhaman (population density ranging between 850 to 981 persons per sq.km.). Three North Bengal districts (Malda, Cooch Behar and West Dinajpur) and two districts in the south-western region (Birbhum and Midnapore) and 24 Parganas(S) are at the intermediate level (population density ranging from 550 to 750 persons per sq.km.).

The difficult physiographic regions in the State (Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Bankura, Purulia)
are expectedly the least populated (population density from 350 to 450 persons per sq.km.)

The trend of population growth rate in the State reflects an alarming situation. Since the decade of 1921-31 (growth rate 8.1%) the State experienced galloping increase in population (1941-51 : 22.9%, 1961-71 : 32.8%). Hopefully, in the recent decades of 1981-'91, the growth rate has been reduced compared to the gears immediately following Independence (decadal growth rate : 1961-'71 : 26.9%, 1971-'81:23.2%, 1981-'91:24.6%). The post Second World War decades experienced fast advancement in medical science and increased awareness in personal health and hygiene. As a result, death rate in the State nosedived from 36.3% (1921-'31) to 8.1% (in 1990). After the initiation of the Family Planning programme in the fifties, the birth rate also registered an impressive decline from 45.2% in 1931-'41 to 27.3% in 1988. Apart from the large share of natural increase attributed by comparatively higher birth rate and falling death rate, a continuous influx of displaced persons from the erstwhile East Pakistan after the Partition resulted into high growth rate of population in 1951-'61 (32.8%). But during the later decades of 1981-'91, the high growth rate (24.5%) was mainly attributable to the immigration factor since the birth rate was further reduced during these decades. Whereas, in the earlier decades of 1961-'71, the number of net immigrants in West Bengal was 4.85 lakhs, in 1981-'91, it shot up to a size of 15.85 lakh. Such a phenomenon has been a major cause of concern for this State which is already having the highest population density in India (766 persons per sq.km. in 1991).

This abysmal rise in the number of in-migrants cannot be attributed solely to inter-State in-migration. This is because, in the recent times, the organised industrial sector of the State has been performing poorly in absorbing the additional workforce. Hence it is clear that, this unexpected rise in the population is mainly due to the influx of migrants coming from the neighbouring countries of Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. Eight districts of West Bengal adjoining the international border line (i.e. North and South 24-Parganas, Murshidabad, Malda, West Dinajpur, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri) have to bear the brunt of this voluminous in-migration. These districts, when grouped together, recorded a growth rate of 29.7% in 1981-'91 whereas the growth rate in other areas of the State was 20.4%. A major portion of such in-migrants were drawn towards the urban area (especially the Calcutta metropolis) of the State due to the better availability of job opportunity. The National Sample Survey statistics reveal that, in the urban areas of the State number of in-migrants was 406 persons per 1000 (1987-'88) but for the rural areas this figures was 259 persons per 1000.

In spite of such impressive growth of urban population, it seems that the State had been outpaced in urbanisation by at least four other states of India which are either industrially advanced or upcoming. These are Maharashtra (38.73%), Gujarat (34.4%), Tamil Nadu (34.2%) and Karnataka (30.91%). [The figures in parentheses denote the proportion of urban population]. Even Punjab, the State with a pre-dominantly agrarian economy experienced rapid urbanisation during 1981-'91, the percentage of urban population being 29.7%. It seems that the economic dynamism which is a deciding factor in setting the pace of urbanisation is eluding West Bengal, although, the State is still much ahead in urbanisation than the neighbouring eastern States of Bihar, Orissa and Assam.

Within the State, the industrially advanced districts of Northern 24-Parganas, Howrah and the urban district of Calcutta are having the greatest concentration of urban population (49% to 50%). In contrast, economically the less favourable districts of Bankura, Purulia, Birbhum, Medinipore, Malda and Cooch Bihar are lagging behind with only 7% to 13% of the district population residing in urban areas. So, it is evident that the urban structure of the

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State is severely disbalanced with 82% of the total urban population (in 1991) residing in the class I cities (with population of one lakh and over) of the State. Also, a large number of urban centres in the State (129) are packed in a very congested area around Calcutta, forming a sort of urban agglomeration called the Greater Calcutta. This area comprising of the entire urban district of Calcutta and parts of the districts of North and South 24-Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly and Nadia alone accounts for 58.6% of the total urban population in West Bengal. Keen competition for space between residential land use and urban infrastructure is threatening the economic prosperity of this region. Moreover, for this strong polarisation effect, balanced regional development of the State has been continually impeded.

3.3 Socio-Economic Features

During the last decade of 1981-'91 per capita income in West Bengal has been continuously declining when compared to the national average. In 1980-'81, per capita State Domestic Product and Gross Fixed Capital Formation (at current prices) approached 99% of the national average. In 1985-'86, the figure was down to 94.2% and in 1988-'89 a further fall assigned West Bengal a pitiable seventh position (per capita income Rs. 3089 at current prices). The State is outdone by the two agriculturally advanced states of Punjab and Haryana and the industrially advanced states of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu & Karnataka. For obvious reasons the rural-urban difference in per capita income was noticeable in the State. In 1983-'84, the urban per capita income was 2.7 times of the rural per capita income (at 1980-'81 constant prices); but this figure was reduced to 2.4 times during 1988-'89. This is indicative of two significant phenomena - gradual increase of income from agricultural and allied activities in the rural area but stagnation or marginal expansion of the urban non-agricultural economy, especially, constricted growth of the organised industrial sector which is the main source of livelihood for urban population. Also, the rate of increase in per capita income was much higher during 1983-'84 to 1988-'89 in rural areas, i.e. 16.7% than that in the urban areas, i.e. 2.9%.

Regarding the domestic savings also, West Bengal is lagging behind considerably. As sources of investment available for the organised industrial sector are much short of requirement, such domestic savings from household income has been recognised as an invaluable source of finance for direct and indirect productive activities. In the states of Punjab, Haryana and Kerala, the domestic savings of rural households ranged from Rs.77,148 to Rs. 96,631 (National Sample Survey, 1981-'82). But for West Bengal the figure was a paltry Rs.20,746. The situation in the urban areas of the State was no better either with domestic savings per urban household in West Bengal being only Rs.28,304. For the urban areas of Kerala it was Rs.112,475. Followed by Haryana (Rs.60,063) and Punjab (Rs.55,235).

According to the per capita, per day intake of calories, Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan occupied the three topmost positions while West Bengal had been impeded to a poor 13th rank. The rural-urban difference in per capita calorie intake was not that pronounced in the State (rural areas 2027 and urban areas 2048 respectively in 1983) but still, compared to the national average, people in the rural areas of West Bengal consumed much less (national average 2221). Moreover, the otherwise backward states of Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and Assam were much ahead of West Bengal considering the calorific value of food intake in urban areas.

Infant mortality rate, average life expectancy and the success of family planning programme are good indicators of popular awareness about health and hygiene and especially
these are useful measures for assessing the status of female population. It seems that, in spite of the prevalent relative poverty in West Bengal, the average life expectancy in the State kept on increasing through the decades (1951-’61 : 44.3 years, 1981:55.1 years). Moreover, it was marginally higher than the national average (1951-’61:41.2 years and 1981:54.4 years). The infant mortality rate in West Bengal (82 per 1000 in 1984) fell below the national average (104 per 1000) but still the State has to go a long way to catch up with the educationally advanced southern states of Kerala (infant mortality rate 29 per 1000) and Tamil Nadu (78 per 1000) and an economically better off state of Punjab (66 per 1000).

In modern social life, the socio-economic status of a person is vitally decided by vocational preparation supported by the level of educational attainment, and here, literacy plays a vital role. According to the 1991 census, 57.7% of the total State population were literate (national average 52.11%). However, inter-state comparison reveals that the economically better off states of Gujarat (60.9%), Maharashtra (63%), Tamil Nadu (63.7%) and Kerala (90.5%) were much ahead of West Bengal and Punjab (57.14%) was only marginally falling behind [figures in parentheses denote per cent literate population]. These States have fared better in female literacy also (in Maharashtra 505 per 1000 females were literate in 1991, while for West Bengal it was 472 per 1000).

In Kerala, not only the overall literacy level is higher, but the rural-urban and male-female differences in literacy level are also much low keyed. But in West Bengal, the male literacy rate was 20% higher than the female literacy rate in 1991 and the urban females were getting greater exposure to education than their rural counterpart (female literacy rate : rural area 22.06%, urban area 54.82%).

Such discrepancies will have obvious repurcussion on the job scenario. The work participation rate per 1000 males in the main and marginal worker category was 547 (1987-’88) against 177 for female main and marginal workers. In both rural and urban areas of the State, at all educational levels, the male work participation rate was much higher than that for females. In the rural areas, male work participation rate was higher (550 per 1000 in 1987-’88) than that in urban areas (539 per 1000), indicating greater competition for job in the urban labour market.

Although West Bengal has been traditionally considered as a premier industrialised State, the occupational structure indicates that agriculture and allied activities account for the largest share of working population (49.79%) in the State followed by industry (18.02%) and trade and commerce (10.49%). Unfortunately, the secondary sector, especially the organised manufacturing sector of the State could not retain the necessary dynamism over the years and hence, the growth of tertiary sector is also somewhat retarded, when compared to the major urban industrial centres in India. The going has become tough particularly for the educated entrants in the workforce. The rapid expansion of secondary and higher education in the State since the 60's has resulted in widespread unemployment and underemployment among the educated youth, especially among matriculates, graduates and post graduates. This is because, the job opportunity is too few in relation to the educated manpower turned out by the educational institutions of the State. Such an educational inflation has worsened the employment situation rather than improving it which is reflected by the rate of drop outs at different levels of formal education. Drop outs at primary level was 48.6% in 1987 and in the same year, it was 47.13% at 10 + level. The reasons given out for discontinuing studies were mainly financial problem (in 30% of cases) and disinterest in higher studies [in 26% of
cases). In 1988, the proportion of mainly unemployed persons (registered with the employment exchange) was 2.1% of the total population of the State (13.1 lakh). This does not appear to be a very large backlog to be cleared, but in the same year, the State economy had 22.43% of the main workers quoted as underemployed. Such a scale of underemployment is a matter of grave concern as it is indicative of inherent weakness in rural farm sector and urban organised sector in the economy. Shrinking employment in the organised sector has given vent to fast growth of informal sector. In the urban areas, casualisation of work force has become the rule of the day. Aspiring educated entrants are overcrowding the metropolitan economy but could not be provided with enough scope of gainful employment. Land reform movement in the agrarian sector could not reap the expected benefit due to the technical and institutional hurdles imposed on the way of agricultural development. Such a lacklusture performance does not spell much hope for healthy economic development of the State in the foreseeable future.

3.4 Other Features

West Bengal has been steadily losing ground as the most favoured location of industry for the last few decades. Indeed, in the post-Independence days, the process of industrial development in the country gathered momentum and hitherto under developed areas entered into the main stream of development and the earlier growth centres like Bombay and Bengal started losing some of their pre-eminence.

In the post-Independence period, the reduction of regional disparity has been one of the major objectives of planned development and a number of measures were adopted with a view to achieve it. Besides, a degree of preference to the less developed areas in the matter of selection of the location for the central industrial projects, the equalisation of steel prices and subsidising coal prices for the areas remote from the coalfields, as well as the rapid growth of electricity generation capacity in new areas have actively helped in the process of wider dispersal of industries. Added to the above, the clogging of the port of Calcutta and the deterioration of other infrastructural services have tended to militate against a high rate of growth in West Bengal. Sharp deterioration of law and order situation and the resultant flight of capital worsened the situation. In addition to the common problems of industry in general in West Bengal, the major industries in the State suffer from some specific problems as well.

The jute textile is one of the major industries in West Bengal. It once enjoyed world monopoly. But, now on the world plane, jute textile appears to be in a moribund stage. Increasing competition from substitutes, paper and synthetics - and recourse to bulk carriage have been increasingly cutting into the market of jute bags. Faced with this challenge, the jute industry over the years growingly resorted to the manufacture of carpet backing. Now, even this market is being threatened by woven polypropeylene.

The main problem of West Bengal's paper industry is the raw material. Though modern paper-making industry was founded for the first time in West Bengal, after the Partition this truncated State has been bereft of any suitable raw material for paper making. Most of the state governments have started charging exhorbitant rates for royalty from other states as compared to those charged from paper mills in their own state. This discriminatory rate of royalty, coupled with rising transport and haulage charges have raised the cost of bamboo considerably for the mills in West Bengal.

During the 40's Calcutta was the largest centre of engineering industry in the country.
But by 1990, its rank in the country, as a centre of engineering had dropped to the fifth place. Most of the engineering companies had British owners. These started declining after Independence as their British owners lost interest in running them efficiently in the face of government's new restrictive laws on repatriation of profits and mandatory limits on equity holding by expatriates. Bengali capital was conspicuous by their absence in this industry. The non-Bengali capital from this industry had a flight during early 1960's onwards when the industrial climate of the State was ravaged by communist-led trade union movement.

During the mid-sixties the engineering industry was hit by the recession which engulfed the whole Indian industry. In West Bengal, since late 60s, conflicting political forces deteriorated the working environment further. The declining productivity could not recover from this unprecedented shock due to the typical product-mix observed in the industry. It was more heavily geared towards intermediate metal forgings, fabrications and machine parts based on older and long established technologies. The backward and forward linkage effects which tend to support continued inward flow of new investments in already established industrial centres in India were also much weaker in this industry of West Bengal. Such a diffective product-mix led to severe market shrinkage and capacity underutilisation in heavy engineering industries. The crisis was multiplied by the lack of government order due to financial crunch. The engineering sub sectors like light engineering and consumer durables were not well represented and the automotive sector was also much limited compared to the industrial base in Bombay. The spatial distribution of metal based and engineering industries in & around Calcutta suffered from extreme congestion - spread over 870 square kms. of area of the metropolitan district, extending in a narrow long strip of urban sprawl along the Hooghly river. This area had long attained saturation in industrial space and companies shy away from locating their new plants in this area. The adjacent rural area, away from the urban congestion are mostly in-equipped. The poor state of maintenance of extremely inadequate inter-city routes radiating out of Calcutta and the West Bengal government's lack of initiative in developing sites along these routes have prevented the development of industrial corridors, which is a phenomenon that has attracted massive new investments to locations near Bombay and near Delhi.

In spite of all this, industrial heritage of Calcutta helped the city to enjoy a number of locational advantages, responsible for further concentration of industries in this region. The most important of these favourable factors were:

i) easy availability of skilled labour
ii) proximity to and good communication with large hinterland and
iii) access to the large money market in the city of Calcutta.