

# **URBANIZATION OF GUWAHATI CITY: CHANGING DYNAMICS OF URBAN SPACE AND GOVERNANCE**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for award of the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**NATASHA HAZARIKA**

**Registration No: TZ167101**



**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY  
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES  
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY  
NAPAAM – 784028 SONITPUR, ASSAM**

**July, 2022**

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explores the changing dynamics of urban space in the process of urbanization of Guwahati city. It examines the process of urbanization of the city and its governance by taking into account the changes in the physical landscape and the socio-cultural milieu of the people. The thesis elaborates on how a bureaucratic structure of planning, geared towards revenue generation under a neoliberal state, has led to privatization of basic service delivery, conversion of urban commons into state-regulated public spaces or private commercial/ residential enclaves, and is in the process of creation of a Smart City which adheres to the globally accepted aesthetic parameters of a developed city. It highlights the increased role of bureaucratization in the governance structure which has led to progressive marginalization of people's participation, commoditization of public goods and public spaces. This has resulted in an exclusionary form of urban governance and gentrification of urban spaces for exclusivist consumption.

The thesis is divided into six (6) chapters which include the introduction and the conclusion. This concluding chapter presents a summary of all the chapters highlighting the major findings of the study.

**Chapter I** (INTRODUCTION) conceptualizes the study within the understanding of urban space as critical to examining the process of urbanization in a neoliberal world order. With the world moving at an accelerated pace towards urbanization in the race for development, there is an implosion of population into urban areas. In order to accommodate the influx, cities have to undergo expansion and development; in this regard, the concept of urban space is crucial to understanding the process of urbanization. The conceptual understanding of this study is situated within the framework of urban space and right to city as propounded by Lefebvre, and thereafter by Harvey.

Lefebvre (1991) proposes a "conceptual triad" to elaborate on the process of production and consumption of space, whereby he argues that how the city is perceived and conceived determines the spatial ordering of the city. Under the influence of capitalism,

this translates into hegemony of urban space through systemic domination of one class over others. Harvey (2012) also argues along the same line where he analyzes the process of urbanization in a neoliberal world embedded in class struggle, where the control over resources lies in the hands of a few. This control is established by extracting surplus through exploitation and accumulation by dispossession of rights to the city, which results in privatization of public spaces and goods and polarization of the urban social fabric.

Both Lefebvre and Harvey argue towards claiming the right to the city as integral to defining the politics of urban space for an equitable process of urbanization. Through this conceptual understanding of space, this study situates and analyzes the process of urbanization of Guwahati and its governance within the global neoliberal order. This chapter also provides a review of literature relevant to the study. The review of literature covers the conceptualization and growth of the city, the understanding of a neoliberal state in the global urban order, and the implications of an exclusionary process of urbanization. Thereafter, as an introductory chapter, it outlines the objectives, research questions, methods of data collection, universe, and limitations of the study.

**Chapter II** (CONTEXTUALIZING THE STUDY) situates this study within the contours of the Global North/ Global South debate to understand the relevance of the global order in analyzing the present context of urbanization. The chapter traces the origin of cities and attempts to understand its nature as a way of life. The Chicago School of Sociology, considered the pioneer of disciplinary urban sociology, introduced the study of the city through the lens of human ecology based on a series of urban sociological studies conducted between 1915 and 1940. Such an understanding moved beyond looking at cities as merely a physical entity through the analysis of the growth of city as a process, which is a product of human nature. Though such an understanding brought forth the interplay between the physical and social landscape in determining the growth of city, these models attempted to study the growth of cities as isolated units bound by the territory of a nation-state, which underwent drastic change owing to globalization.

The chapter discusses subsequent critiques to this approach of examining the city, whereby it is argued that the uneven urban development has to be studied both in a

broader geopolitical context and in relation to worldwide capitalist production. Gunder Frank (1991) argues that the uneven urban development results in a relation of dependency because it is considered that economic development is attained in stages, with the developed metropolises on the rise and the underdeveloped satellites still struggling at the early stage. Thereafter, Castells and Harvey revolutionized the study of urbanization by linking cities directly to the world economy. The new global economy, according to Castells (2000), ushered in the Information Age which manifests itself in a new spatial form, *the space of flows*, that shapes the rising network society; this has led to the emergence of a new urban form of mega-cities which are globally connected, but locally disconnected, based on flows of capital and information. Harvey (2005) argues that the process of urbanization in a neoliberal world is marked by uneven development resulting from the hegemony of the UK and the US in which global diffusion played a crucial role in exerting the ideological influence of neoliberalism in the new monetarist economy.

This led to the emergence of the “world city hypothesis” by Friedman (2013) and the “global city” model by Sassen (2005) which argue that globalization has given rise to a new hierarchy of the organizational structure of cities globally. Wallerstein (2004) also propounded the “world-systems theory” to analyze this global hierarchy of cities whereby he argues that this unequal relation is the result of unequal exchange between the core and the periphery. This has resulted in the formation of the hierarchical binary of Global North/ Global South which relegates the underdeveloped Global South to a marginalized state in need to be supposedly emancipated by the developed Global North. However, the emulation of the standard development model of the Global North, to meet the urgency of the unprecedented urbanization in the Global South in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has produced stark inequalities and a plethora of other urban issues which are discussed in detail in the chapter.

As such, instead of focusing on the process of catching up by the Global South to the benchmark cities in the West, Ong (2011) urges to shift the attention to the alternative visions emerging from the cities of Global South, as major cities in the developing world have posed a challenge to the hegemony of the global binary and have managed to stake their claim to global significance. In the recent years, the urban scholarship on Asia and Africa brings forth the implications of an imposed model and marks the emergence of

new trends stemming from within. The chapter recounts these developments and locates India within the larger discourse of urban studies in the Global South, and from therein contextualizes Northeast India, and more specifically Guwahati for the purpose of this study.

**Chapter III (GUWAHATI: MAKING OF A CAPITAL CITY)** introduces the field site of my study, Guwahati city. This chapter traces the history of the city through state planning documents in juxtaposition to the lived reality. It discusses the evolution of the city from a historical military-administrative post to an urban centre during British rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to becoming the most important city of Northeast India, followed by the further acceleration of growth after becoming the capital city of present-day Assam in 1972. Guwahati has a particular locational significance in Northeast India being the gateway city, to not only the rest of the region, but also as a city that is being projected as India's gateway to Southeast Asia. The rationale behind choosing Guwahati for this study is that it is the most urbanized area and biggest city in the Northeast region, and the model of urban growth in Guwahati is taken as a template for other cities in the region.

Historically, Guwahati was the capital of several ancient kingdoms that ruled the region. It has always held an important position in Northeast India as the social and political hub of the entire Northeastern region of India. The chapter traces through archival data the formation of Guwahati as the capital city with Assam's capital shifting from Shillong to Guwahati (Dispur) in 1972 under the North Eastern Areas Act, 1971. The study finds that during this shift, when the city underwent major infrastructural changes, in order to meet the requirement of land for the new capital, the protected area falling under the South Kamrup Tribal Belt was de-reserved and a large swathe of agricultural land was converted to non-agricultural land. A case study conducted as part of this study of the indigenous Karbi community, located in the vicinity of the present Dispur circle which houses the Assam State Secretariat Office, is discussed to look into the issue of displacement and marginalization in the process of the creation of the capital city.

The tribal belt areas consisted of agricultural land and common property resources such as lakes and ponds, grazing grounds, and community forest. The study highlights that without a legal framework in place to deal with the CPRs, these lands were considered state property; the claim of the indigenous communities without legal tenure was

challenged as the process of de-reservation led to formalization of land holdings otherwise held commonly. The change in the land use pattern led to a major change in the demography from indigenous agriculture-based population to accommodate the newly emerging administrative and business classes. The study discusses that with changes in land use patterns and new administrative names given to the newly developed areas, the traditional association of the indigenous population with such areas has been lost. In the process of creation of the capital city, the indigenous populations, in this case the Karbis, have experienced not only economic hardship due to losses in life sustaining resources, but also social and cultural marginalization because of disruption of their social and cultural life. The thesis finds that such marginalization has occurred due to state-initiated land acquisition for various development projects, and due to alienation from the original habitat because of the pressures of urbanization.

The thesis argues that the process of creation of Guwahati as a capital city is manifestation of a process of symbolic development geared towards creating an image befitting that of a capital city. This is reflected in the content analysis of two Master Plans of Guwahati, one published in 1986 with perspective 2001 and the latest one published in 2009 with perspective 2025, with the aspiration of creating a city that will function as a hub of all important activities in the Northeast region. However, the study shows that such grand plans on paper do not reflect the reality as the underlying issues are not resolved but simply refurbished and presented in the latest Master Plan. The analysis highlights the discrepancy of these plans spanning over three decades. Even though, the latest Master Plan also promises better urban infrastructural facilities and overall growth of the city, the lived reality is far from this. Guwahati continues to suffer from a multitude of issues which have manifested as a consequence of urban development, be it in the case of displacement of tribal hamlets, degradation of urban commons, or the inefficacy in the case of basic service deliverables.

**Chapter IV** (CHANGING NATURE OF URBAN GOVERNANCE) traces the emergence of urban governance in India and elaborates on the administrative structure of the process of urban planning and governance of Guwahati city. The role of the primary agencies responsible for the urban management and governance of Guwahati city, which include Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC), Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA) and Guwahati Development Department (GDD), are discussed here.

This chapter highlights the implication of neoliberal policies on urban governance, a predominant characteristic of which has been an increased bureaucratization, which has led to privatization and commercialization of public amenities, resulting in an exclusionary form of urban governance and progressive marginalization of people's participation.

The chapter situates the importance of governance of cities because of their potential to contribute significantly to a nation's economic growth. As such, the process of development adopted at the national level is geared towards mega projects and model cities which would lead to global significance. The thesis argues that the projects and models adopted to achieve this seem to have been directly borrowed from the Global North without factoring in the local issues, concerns and complexities. Despite the development at a macro level, the quality of life of a common resident in cities, especially in the Global South, is far from satisfactory. It is to be noted that the local urban governance is the prerogative of the state government and the ULBs by virtue of being the elected representatives of a particular locality or region.

The chapter states that in the case of India, the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 is considered a landmark with regard to devolution of urban management and governance, as it formally recognizes ULBs as the third tier of government. Though the 74<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act is of much significance as it granted municipalities constitutional recognition and sought to empower them politically, the Act has not succeeded in devolution of power and authority to the ULBs as can be witnessed from their present plight across various states in India. The thesis argues that this is the result of the lack of financial capacity of the ULBs which stifles their functional capacity, especially in a neoliberal state where the power and authority for urban planning is vested in the hands of executive bodies such as the Metropolitan Development Authorities (MDAs).

When India's economy was opened up in 1991, it sought to move from a state-controlled to a neoliberal economy, with a new emphasis on the partnership between public and private sectors and a reduced role of the state. However, the thesis shows that this has led to a considerable transformation in the nature of governance through increased bureaucratization, as the role of the public through elected representatives is rapidly diminishing with the authority of the ULBs being transferred to bureaucratic bodies like

the MDAs, which work in close partnership with the private sector. This partnership visibly favours the “consumer-citizen” which has led to a form of exclusionary governance (Harriss, 2007).

The thesis finds that the diminishing capacity of the ULB is clearly visible in the context of Guwahati city, whereby the role of the ULB (GMC) is progressively being reduced to playing an advisory role. GMC’s authority in the matters of the governance of the city is being gradually replaced by GMDA, which is a bureaucratic organization comprising of officials who are appointed employees within the administrative structure of the state. This study finds that in the process of urban planning, be it the case of the formulation and implementation of the Master Plan or the Smart City Project, GMDA has the upper hand, and it works through collaboration with private consulting firms, thereby sidelining the role of GMC.

This results in the withdrawal of the state from governance and increased privatization of basic service delivery, which is discussed in the chapter through a survey of the present condition of water supply in the city. This survey brings forth the fact that the incapacity of GMC to provide a basic and crucial amenity is the result of GMDA overriding its jurisdiction through the implementation of four major water supply projects, which have been tendered out to private parties. These projects are funded by loans, whereby the cost and interest of the delay will be levied as tax on the people. In the meantime, the latest option provided under Smart City Project of installing water ATMs is commoditization of water, which will result in institutionalized disparity in the access to basic public amenities.

The thesis further argues that such a form of urban governance under the neoliberal order has assumed an exclusionary nature which operates at two levels: at the level of public representation, and, at the level of public participation. At the level of public representation, the study finds that GMDA bringing in external consultants and funding agencies has drastically reduced the role of GMC in the provision of basic service deliverables. Multi-scalar projects are planned, created and managed by non-elected team of officials and consultants, who cater to over-ambitious plans on paper without taking into consideration the ground reality. This has severely limited the capacity of GMC as these projects are under the jurisdiction of GMDA, which has the authority to



override GMC's jurisdiction as found during the study. It argues that under neoliberalism, it is beneficial for a city to be governed by chief executive officers (in this case, GMDA) who give importance to mega projects and material expressions of development in a bid to attract investment capital rather than ministers, mayors or commissioners (in this case, GMC) who are required to be accountable to the public and can pose roadblocks.

The thesis argues that the disempowerment of GMC by GMDA overriding its authority through overlap of domains of jurisdiction has led to a crisis of local urban governance. The study finds that the constrained capacity of GMC leads to exclusion in public participation as the public concerns do not find voice in matters of urban governance. Exclusion of public participation becomes even more pronounced when we take the case of Smart City project. Through the course of interviews conducted with Guwahati Smart City Limited officials, which is a company in collaboration between GMDA and Tata Consultancy Engineers, it was found that public participation got reduced from inviting suggestions and feedback to being notified as and when changes take place. As such, the thesis argues that this leads to a reduced role of the public, thereby leading to an exclusionary form of urban governance.

**Chapter V (COMMERCIALIZING THE URBAN COMMONS)** focuses on urban commons (wetlands) in Guwahati city, which have been converted from community spaces to “public spaces” for the purposes of development. The chapter elaborates on the process of conversion of urban commons into public spaces and analyzes the exclusionary form of governance that emanates from the rubric of urban development for the “public”. Through a case study of the Sola beel and an analysis of the Area-based projects under Guwahati Smart City Project, the thesis argues that the process of conversion of urban commons to public spaces has led to gentrification of urban spaces for exclusivist consumption.

The chapter argues that commons cannot be considered as just an object or a resource; rather Harvey (2012, 73) posits it as, “...an unstable and malleable social relation between a particular self-defined social group and those aspects of its actually existing or yet-to-be-created social and/or physical environment deemed crucial to its life and livelihood”. It defines urban commons as distinct from CPRs, as urban commons are not

a fixed resource diminishing in value due to utilization. It is argued that urban commons are woven into the structural fabric of the city by virtue of its appropriation and consumption based on the ever-evolving and changing nature of the city.

However, the study finds that with urban commons being under the jurisdiction of the state administration, it is thereby the state's prerogative on how these spaces will be designed and managed depending on the mandate of development policies, which in the present day are largely influenced by neoliberal policies of resource exploitation and revenue generation. A neoliberal state generates revenue through redistribution of resources for consumption, which Harvey (2005) refers to as the process of "accumulation by dispossession", which in the case of Guwahati has translated into large-scale commodification of urban space through commercialization of the urban commons.

Through a case study of the Sola beel and discussion on the plight of other wetlands in the city, the study finds that the state is implicit in the process of encroachment of the wetland area through sanction for activities for private land ownership or for commercial purposes as deemed fit under the state's prerogative of development. The thesis argues that under the jurisdiction of the state, though the urban commons in Guwahati have taken on the form of a public space or good that is provided for and managed by the state for the benefit of everyone, one witnesses how it assumes a private nature in the development of the wetland areas. Sonn and Shin (2019) argue that such a form of dispossession, which transfers the users' rights of citizens to private developers, is similar to privatization of public spaces. This process completely undermines what Harvey (2012) argues about collectivity and non-commodification of urban commons being at the core of the principles of the management of urban commons.

The thesis argues that when a public resource (here, urban commons) is appropriated by the state, the process of its production and distribution comes under the jurisdiction of the state. The process of conversion of urban commons from community spaces to "public spaces" for its overall development, which would also serve as a means of revenue generation, resonates with a neoliberal model of planning. The projects sanctioned for the development and conservation of urban commons under Guwahati Smart City Project bear testimony to this. The proposal for this project presents a

comprehensive plan that will not only rejuvenate the urban commons but will also make them the central feature of the city. The focus of the Area-based projects under Smart City is to make the city resilient to flood by revitalizing the water channels through the development of riverfronts and wetland areas. The proposal is to build contiguous ecological corridors along natural storm water drains connecting to the riverfront. On paper, the urban commons of the city, which includes Brahmaputra Riverfront, Bharalu and Mora Bharalu River, Deepor beel and Borsola beel, find special focus. However, the study finds that over time, the emphasis shifts, and the visual and aesthetic upgradation of these commons gets prioritized under the guise of addressing ecological concerns.

Though each of the abovementioned urban commons has its own ecological and social specificity, the project plans all echo the same standard model which enables the state to dictate the terms of use of these urban commons, geared toward revenue generation once converted to public space. The thesis here argues that though the term “public” in the process of planning and governance is considered representational of that which is owned, maintained and provided for the public by the state, but what a neoliberal state does in actuality is create the conditions for the functioning of the market through the paradigm of development for the public.

The chapter highlights the dichotomy between urban commons and public space which creates an interesting distinction in how urban space is conceptualized and accessed. When converted to public spaces, urban commons are disconnected from the continually changing fabric of the city, and they become spaces of consumption for revenue generation, thereby leading to debilitating condition on the ecology of the commons and the city. The thesis argues that the urban commons of Guwahati are also undergoing this transition and are turning into largely privatized or state-regulated spaces, which will have severe impact on the ecology of the city and further create a class dynamic with regard to accessibility to urban space. The upcoming plans and schemes of development for the conservation of urban commons in Guwahati are reflective of this as it leans towards development of urban spaces for a specific class of citizens who can cater towards revenue generation and profitability.

The thesis further argues that such commodification of urban commons, stemming from the bureaucratic structure of urban planning, has led to an increased role of privatization

of urban spaces which leads to an exclusionary form of governance based on a consumerist nature. Under this paradigm of governance, the “consumer” has access and right to the space. The study further elaborates on this through a discussion on the accessibility to public parks and markets which highlights the increasing commercialization of public spaces to cater these needs to those who can afford to pay. Drawing from this, the thesis contests the approach of “development for the public” as there needs to be a conceptual distinction within the ambit of urban planning between urban commons and what is considered public space so as to raise question on the state control over the social order of urban spaces.

### **Concluding the Study**

The study argues that urban space is inextricably intertwined with the physical as well as the social landscape of the city, and, the utilization of space and the meanings connoted to them are reflections of the underlying structures of the society. The process of production and consumption of urban space in this study has been conceptualized through the “conceptual triad” put forward by Lefebvre. The *spatial practice*, which represents how space is perceived, reflects the functioning of the daily life in the city, which at present in Guwahati is immersed in a plethora of urban issues and disengagement from the public in matters of urban governance. This is the result of the domination of the *representations of space*, as perceived through the bureaucratic process of urban planning of GMDA, over the *representational spaces* comprising of the lived reality, as seen in the case of the urban commons.

The thesis argues that the process of conversion of urban commons to public spaces has resulted in the creation of what Lefebvre refers to as *abstract space*. The abstract space created through the process of appropriation of urban commons and spaces in the city for the “development of the public” creates state-regulated public spaces with docile subjects consumed by the commercial and aesthetic façade of urban development. The thesis further argues that this process is embedded in accumulation of resources by dispossession of rights to the city, as posited by Harvey.

The study finds that the creation of such abstract spaces under a neoliberal paradigm is manifested through the process of urban development and regeneration. In this context, it

argues that the development process implemented in Northeast India is reflective of the Global North/ Global South binary, with Northeast always been treated as *the other* in relation to *mainland India*. Despite the specificities of the region, be it political, social, cultural or environmental, the region's development process follows the same linear and standardized model of development geared towards revenue generation and resource exploitation by a neoliberal state. This study is a testament to this process of "emancipation" and "development" as seen in the case of Guwahati, which has led to increased bureaucratization and privatization in the process of urban governance, and polarization of the urban social fabric through gentrification of urban spaces.

The thesis argues that such a pattern of "development" has led to an exclusionary form of urban governance at the cost of welfare and inclusivity. The *right to the city* is given, not claimed, to the "consumer", which then constitutes the "public" whose demands and aspirations are the only concerns that become visible; and those who do not fit into the aesthetics of this development paradigm are rendered invisible. Such a skewed representation then justifies an exclusive paradigm of development with selective schemes and policies which only this particular section of population can aspire for.

The thesis finally argues that this leads to the *privatization of the public* as the "public" is a selectively crafted one which can be projected to market the city in the global neoliberal order. This process, as such, is not limited to the commodification of urban space but it is the "urban public" itself that is being commodified. The thesis asserts that with the city's public institutionally and structurally polarized into "marginal public" and "privatized public", a coherent urban identity and urban politics become difficult to emerge and sustain. This facilitates the hegemony of the neoliberal market and poses no challenge to a neoliberal state in the claim to the city. This warrants that the concept of "development for the public" is contested to retrieve the discourse of inclusive urban governance.