

## ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of urbanization has captured sociological attention owing to its constantly changing and evolving nature, which transforms the very structure of the society and gives rise to newer forms of social organization. The world is moving at an accelerated pace towards urbanization in the race for development. With an implosion of population into urban areas, the cities must undergo expansion and development in order to accommodate the influx. In this regard, the concept of urban space is crucial to understanding the process of urbanization, as the city is not merely a physical entity restricted within a limited boundary. Urban space is inextricably intertwined with the physical as well as the social landscape of any given city, and the utilization of space and the meanings connoted to them are reflections of the underlying structures of the society.

The present study explores the changing dynamics of urban space and governance in the process of urbanization of Guwahati city of Assam in the Northeastern region of India. It attempts to contextualize the study within the contours of the Global North/ Global South debate. Underlying the uneven urban development between the Global North and the Global South is a system of hierarchy that segregates patterns of growth and development based on geographical situatedness. Though the categories of Global North/ Global South emerged as a geo-political concept, the epistemic divide between them has relegated the Global South to a marginalized state requiring to be ‘emancipated’ by the 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.

In this context, the thesis argues that the development process implemented in the Northeast region of India by a neoliberal state is reflective of this Global North-South binary. Northeast India has always been treated as *the other* in relation to *mainland India*. Despite the specificities of the region – political, social, cultural or environmental – the region’s development process appears to be a result of developmentalist agenda of the Indian state, following the same linear and standardized model geared towards revenue generation and resource exploitation. 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 the 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.

Historicizing the making of Guwahati into a capital city, the thesis highlights the marginalization of the indigenous communities living therein, and argues that the urbanization of Guwahati is reflective of a process that is geared towards creating an image befitting that of a capital city. This is also reflected in its Master Plans (1986 with perspective 2001, and, 2009 with perspective 2025) with the aspiration of creating a city that will function as a hub of all important activities in the region. Through content analysis of these two Master Plans, the thesis highlights the discrepancies between them.

The thesis argues that the plethora of problems in contemporary Guwahati seem to have stemmed from the gradual marginalization of the representative Urban Local Body (Guwahati Municipal Corporation, GMC) and privileging the bureaucratic body of Metropolitan Development Authority (Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority, GMDA) in matters of urban governance. This is the result of neoliberal policy which has led to the withdrawal of the state from delivery of basic civic services, governance and urban planning, thereby paving way for the private sector. In the process, the role of GMC seems to be reduced to that of an advisory body, while GMDA has taken over the reins of urban governance in collaboration with the private sector.

The thesis further argues that the diminishing role of GMC has led to an exclusionary form of urban governance, which operates at two levels: at the level of public representation, and, at the level of public participation. At the level of representation, the thesis finds that with overlapping area of jurisdiction, GMDA has the authority to override GMC, the representative body, in matters of urban governance and management. At the level of participation, the study finds that public participation in important matters of public interest has gotten reduced from inviting suggestions and feedbacks to being notified as and when changes take place.

Drawing from this, the thesis attempts to problematize the approach of 'development for public' through the dichotomy between urban commons and public space. The thesis

elaborates on the process of conversion of urban commons into public spaces in Guwahati, and analyzes the exclusionary form of governance that emanates from the rubric of urban development for the ‘public’.

Guwahati has experienced rapid surge in its process of urbanization which has created immense pressure on the resources of the city. As the horizontal expansion of the city is restricted because it is bounded on three sides by hills and on one side by the Brahmaputra River, the city landscape has transformed from within, leading to transformation of the physical landscape and thereby re-shaping the social landscape as well. In a world dictated by neoliberalism, this translates into large-scale commodification of urban space with the expectation of potential profitable investments in the city. Based on the study of the urban commons (wetlands) in Guwahati, the thesis finds that under the jurisdiction of the state, the urban commons have assumed a private nature. Through the process of dispossession, the users’ rights of citizens are transferred to private developers for the ‘development’ of the wetland areas.

The thesis further finds that when urban commons are converted into public spaces, it restricts the access of the people to these spaces for purposes other than those decided by the state. Though the idea of a ‘public space’ may seem to be more inclusive and open to all, in the neoliberal paradigm of development such spaces become commodified and regulated, which overrules the very essence of what makes urban commons. Similarly, the thesis sheds light on a progressive privatization and commercialization of public spaces (in the case of markets and parks) and public goods (for instance, the water supply facility) in Guwahati. Under this new system of governance, only those citizens who can pay for these services (the consumers) have access to them.

Such an exclusivist understanding of public then justifies the introduction of selective schemes and policies of consumerist nature. The thesis argues that such an approach leads to the process of *privatization of the public*, where the concept of ‘public’ is a selectively crafted one which can be projected to market the city for further investments. This process, as such, is not limited to the commodification of urban space and public goods, but it is the ‘urban public’ itself that is commodified. The thesis argues that the Guwahati Smart City Project, which is now underway, is a logical extension of this paradigm of development.

The study thus explicates how the emerging urban governance in Guwahati, geared towards revenue generation under a neoliberal state, has emphasized the privatization of basic service delivery, conversion of urban commons into commercial public spaces, and recently the creation of a Smart City. The thesis argues that these developments, premised on the aesthetic sensibilities of a ‘world-class’ city, will inevitably lead to gentrification of urban spaces and creation of an exclusive public, thereby resulting in marginalization of people’s ‘right to the city’.