

CHAPTER V

COMMERCIALIZING THE URBAN COMMONS

This chapter discusses the implication of a neoliberal model of urban planning and governance on the creation of the discourse of “development for the public”. The chapter focuses on urban commons (here, *beels*, that is, wetlands) in Guwahati city, which have been converted from community spaces to “public spaces” for the purposes of development. The process of conversion of urban commons to public spaces has led to exclusivist urban spaces leaning towards development for a specific class of citizens who can cater towards revenue generation and profitability. The dichotomy between urban commons and public space 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. This 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”.

5.1. Introduction

With urbanization advancing at a rapid pace, it is becoming the predominant process in the spatial organization of the world’s population. However, with the recent acceleration of urban development in the Global South, the rapid pace of this process of transition more often than not leads to emulation of a standard development model espoused in the Global North. As discussed in Chapter II, the Global North/ Global South binary underlies a system of hierarchy that segregates patterns of growth and development based on geographical situatedness, with the South always catching up to meet the standardized ideas and discourses produced by the North (Levander and Mignolo, 2011). This is reflected in the process of urban development in Northeast India which is a relatively new trend, but one that is advancing at a fast rate. The development process implemented in the region by a neoliberal state is reflective of the developmentalist agenda of the Indian state which is divested from the concerns on the ground. Not taking into consideration regional or local specificities creates a discourse of emancipation for

the *other* whereby the nuances of localized contingencies, be it the political, social or ecological landscape, takes a back seat (Caison and Vormann, 2014). As such the development initiatives of the state often leave serious adverse consequences on the social as well as physical landscape of a region, which gets obfuscated by the rhetoric of economic progress.

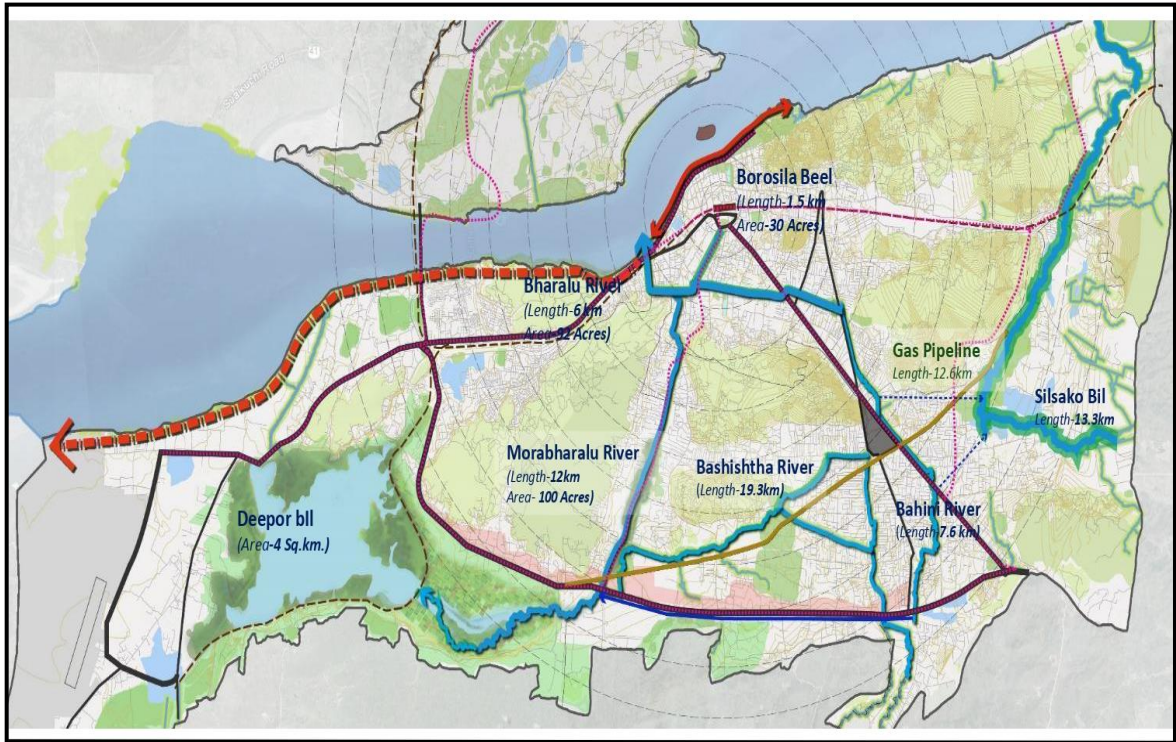
As in the case of Guwahati, by virtue of being the gateway to the entire Northeast Indian region, the city has experienced tremendous development in the last few decades, but has also been accompanied by a severe onslaught on its ecology, which has serious implications on the overall welfare of the city. One of the most pressing concerns of the process of Guwahati's urbanization is the disappearing urban commons (here, wetlands) to meet the burgeoning requirement of urban space, which has not only led to depletion of groundwater resource, but can also bring the city to a standstill owing to grave flash floods.

The sight of Guwahati inundated during the monsoon season due to flash floods in the city is an annual recurrence. This issue has always been treated as a major cause of concern by the state authorities, so much so that there is a "Mission Flood Free Guwahati" to mitigate the problem of urban flood and to devise a mechanism to tackle the problem. Four departments are mainly responsible for mitigation of urban flash flood in Guwahati city: Guwahati Municipal Corporation, Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority, Water Resources Department and Public Works Department. Though multiple projects and schemes are already underway to mitigate the problem of flash floods, not much relief can be seen from this. Often a heavy downpour of just 30 minutes causes many parts of the city to come to a standstill because of such flash floods.

The main reason behind these floods is the reduced water retention capacity due to the disappearing wetlands and shrinking forest cover and open spaces within the city. Due to increased housing and construction activities owing to rapid urbanization, the spread of impervious hard surfaces replacing land cover has led to excess pressure on the drainage channels which get clogged up. The city has five broad drainage basins – Bharalu basin, Silsako Beel basin, Deepor Beel basin, Kalmoni basin and Foreshore basin – which are ultimately drained into the river Brahmaputra, either directly or through various drainage

channels and reservoirs. These include the Bharalu-Bahini river system, Mora Bharalu river, Basistha river, Lakhimijan channel, Bondajan channel and Khanajan river. However, the rapid urbanization witnessed in the last 20 years has caused serious disruption to the drainage channels and encroachment in the wetlands which has compounded the problem of urban flooding (Das, 2021a).

Figure 5.1: Network of Water Bodies of Guwahati



Source: Guwahati Smart City Proposal

Even though Guwahati's Master Plan (perspective 2025) as well as the Guwahati Smart City Project discuss about the importance of the urban commons of the city and the need to rejuvenate and conserve them, the ground reality presents a different picture. The upcoming plans and schemes of development with regard to the conservation of the urban commons in Guwahati is reflective of an exclusionary form of governance, leaning towards development of urban spaces for a specific class of citizens who can cater towards revenue generation and profitability. 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.

This chapter draws on the experience of the wetlands within the city, with special focus on Sola beel, and discusses the impact of urban planning on it and other existing wetlands to bring forth the debilitating condition of the city's urban commons. Urban commons are crucial, not only for their ecological impact, but also as argued by Gidwani and Baviskar (2011),

...critical to economic production in cities, to cultural vibrancy and the cement of community, to “learning” how to do democracy through practices of creating, governing and defending collective resources, to regenerating the sense of place that forms communities and, ultimately, to the reproduction of urban populations and ecosystems. (ibid, 43)

This chapter problematizes 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. 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”.

5.2. Defining Urban Commons

A commons can be defined as a “...construct constituted of three main parts: (a) *common* resources, (b) institutions (i.e. *commoning* practices) and (c) the communities (called *commoners*) who are involved in the production and reproduction of commons” (Kip et al., 2015, 13). As such, 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”.

When it comes to the governance of commons, we have witnessed the dominance of two polarized approaches, one being state intervention for conservation of the commons, while the other being privatization of those resources for increased efficiency of the commons. Both these approaches are based on the premise of Hardin's (1968) work

whereby he argues, through the metaphor of herding, that the finite nature of resources in the world to support its population would suffer from the “tragedy of commons” because of overpopulation and overuse. As such, Hardin (ibid, 314) argues that there are two models that present a solution to the commons dilemma, namely “a private enterprise system”, on the one hand, or “socialism”, on the other.

Ostrom (1990), however, states that these two dichotomous models justify the intervention of an external coercive force based on the premise of the “free-rider” problem that individuals face when attempting to achieve collective benefits. Ostrom seeks to move beyond the dichotomy of state and market by presenting examples of successful CPR institutions which are rich mixtures of public and private instrumentalities. The challenge is to move beyond the assumption of the inefficacy of community management and arrive at an understanding of variables, both internal and external, that can either enhance or impede collective efforts in the management of commons. Ostrom arrives at the “eight design principles” for the management of common-pool resources by challenging the “universal institutional panaceas” imposed by external authorities in favor of “...an adequately specified theory of collective action whereby a group of principals can organize themselves voluntarily to retain the residuals of their own efforts” (ibid, 25).

Though much of the contemporary scholarship on commons is derived from the Hardin-Ostrom debate, their assumption of commons as a common-pool resource appears to be problematic when applied uncritically to the urban context. Both Hardin and Ostrom, in defining the commons as a common-pool resource, apply an objectified notion of traditional commons that diminishes in value with its usage or appropriation. But in the context of urban commons, the act of consumption increases its value as “...the resources that constitute the commons of the city are contingent on urban actors’ ability to use them: whether a wall is an obstacle or central element for a *Parcours* tournament depends on who is standing in front of it” (Kornberger and Borch, 2015, 8). As such urban commons is fundamentally different from CPRs which diminishes in value due to subtractability; the purpose of CPRs is a given whereas urban commons are the result of consumption and appropriation.

This understanding of urban commons is a derivation of the difference between value creation and appropriation propounded by Ebenezer Howard who argued that “...the value of the land and buildings is a function of the activity of people: only through their interactions the city becomes a city” (Kornberger and Borch, 2015, 7). The intrinsic value of land or resources in the city, thereby, is not derived from what it comprises of, rather how it features within the network of activities in the city. Therefore, urban commons are not simply commons located in a physical space in the city; it is a continually evolving process with a contested character of “strategic enclosure” and “ontological openness” which is characterized by ongoing negotiations and fluctuating boundaries owing to the rapidly changing nature of cities (Kip, 2015).

5.3. Governance of Urban Commons

With urbanization advancing at a rapid pace, cities have to undergo major transformations to accommodate the ever-growing urban population. 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. One of the most substantive features of a neoliberal state is to generate revenue through redistribution of resources for consumption, which Harvey (2005) refers to as the process of “accumulation by dispossession”, which includes

...the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations...; conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights...; suppression of rights to the commons; ...colonial, neocolonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources)... (ibid, 159)

The impact of this is distinctly visible on urban commons, because unlike CPRs, they are not communally owned spaces; rather, urban commons are under the jurisdiction of the state administration. It is thereby the state’s prerogative on how urban spaces and commons 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. To generate more revenue is to expand the

city limits and make room for the growing population in order to increase consumption. As a result, this has led to a situation “...in which cities are more and more subjected to the logic of exploitation without consideration of the quality of life of the majority of their residents” (Kratzwald, 2015, 27).

This can be witnessed in the case of Sola beel. Divided into Borsola and Sorusola, Sola beel serves as urban commons for the people of its surrounding locality as well as the larger population of the city by virtue of being a storm water reservoir. Sola beel is one of the most important wetlands situated within Guwahati and serves as a key indicator of the environmental condition within the city. The wetland is located near Paltan Bazaar, one of the busiest commercial areas of the city, and seems to have been the one of the most impacted wetlands in the city because of its location.

Figure 5.2: Sola beel



It was found during interviews¹ with members of the *Sola Beel Unnayan Samiti* (Sola Beel Development Committee), henceforth SBUS, that it was the Revenue Department of Government of Assam that issued land documents (*patta*) to encourage people to settle on the banks of the wetland. But due to increased encroachment and land allotments, on 18 July, 1995, a High-level Committee advocated a Resolution on

¹ Interviews conducted in April, 2017.

Wetland Conservation which was to set the precedence for safeguarding Sola beel by curtailing further encroachment and land allotments.

Initially, following this directive, the Revenue Department cancelled 30 *bighas*² of land allotment of the wetland area; but over the years this picture has undergone change in the name of development, resulting in shrinkage of the Sola beel. As a matter of growing concern, in 2000, the SBUS filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) against the Revenue Department in the Gauhati High Court for conservation of the wetland. This intervention seemed to be successful as the High Court ordered the State Government to take responsibility for the preservation of the wetlands in the city.

However, discussion with members of the SBUS revealed that despite the court order, in 2006 the Revenue Department allotted land along the Sorusola beel for expansion of an existing college and construction of an eye hospital, and a portion of land along the Borsola was given for development and construction of tourist lodge to the Tourism Department. This also gave leeway to people already residing along its fringes to encroach into the wetland area. The SBUS filed yet another PIL in the High Court that same year against the actions of the administration as an act of contempt of the court. In response, the High Court issued a stay order on the ongoing building projects and future allotments; by then, the Borsola extending over an area of 85-90 bighas had lost out on 20 bighas, and Sorusola, out of its total area of 45 bighas, had lost 25 bighas.

Though the conservation of wetlands in and around the city has found major focus in the Master Plan (perspective 2025) as well as the Guwahati Smart City Project by virtue of being ecologically sensitive zones, their conservation is contingent upon the development schemes purported by the state. The plight of Deepor beel, located in the outskirts south-west of Guwahati, bears testimony to this fact.

Deepor beel is a crucial urban common in maintaining the biodiversity of the city and was enlisted as a Ramsar site in 2002 as a site of importance for “conservation and sustainable use”. However, encroachment of the wetland area is a major concern here and some form of it seems to be facilitated by the state. One most notable impingement on the wetland area is the railway track constructed along the southern boundary of

² One bigha is equal to 0.6198347106 acre / 0.2508382079 hectare.

Deepor beel by the Northeast Frontier Railway in 2001. As claimed in the *Report on Visit to Deepor Beel in Assam* (2008), the wetland area has suffered considerable shrinkage due to the laying of this railway track and reclamation of areas outside the track. It is stated in the report that the state has granted *patta* to some of these reclaimed areas and hence they are no longer treated as encroachments. Despite being a Ramsar site, now there will be work on the electrification of the railway tracks, as the centre has given permission to undertake development work of the railway track, without seeking permission from the Forest or Wildlife departments³.

The wetland area presently also houses two educational institutions, a sprawling hotel and various other business establishments, the land for which has been allotted by the state. The eviction drives conducted by the state seem counterintuitive when at the same time land in the wetland area is sanctioned for activities deemed fit under the state's prerogative. Deepor beel, which stretched over an area of 40.14 sq.km according to earlier reports, has now suffered from shrinkage and currently the total wetland area stands at about 13 to 15 sq.km⁴.

Similar is the plight of Silsako beel located in the south-eastern part of the city which has also been appropriated in the name of expansion and development. Silsako plays an important role as an urban common by virtue of being a reservoir basin for the storm water runoff during the monsoon from the nearby hills and Meghalaya. The wetland area which was spread across 120 hectares has reduced to half of its original size as it witnesses the rise of new apartment buildings along with the construction of a multiplex, tennis court, a hotel owned by the Tata Group, a hotel management institute, and a research institute, to name a few (Desai et al., 2014).

Under the jurisdiction of the state, 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. Though it is considered that the state is the representation of the "public", one witnesses how it assumes a private nature in the development of the wetland areas. Highlighting this nature of the state, Kratzwald (2015) argues,

³ Retrieved on 25 May, 2022 from <https://www.guwahatiplus.com/guwahati/guwahati-locals-protest-as-nf-railway-starts-electrification-work-through-deepor-beel>

⁴ Retrieved on 25 August, 2021 from <https://frontline.thehindu.com/environment/deepor-beel-the-riverine-wetland-in-lower-brahmaputra-valley-on-the-brink/article34108353.ece>

(T)he state creates the political, social, and legal conditions for the functioning of the capitalist market. It ensures that people internalize the logic and the demands of the market system in their socialization to such an extent that it is even difficult to imagine, let alone implement, alternatives that do not follow the logic of the market. States have never been protectors of the commons. (ibid, 32)

Such was the case of two wetlands in Guwahati, Hahsora and Damol wetlands, which have disappeared completely owing to state approved land filling for construction activities⁵. 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.

5.4. State-regulated Public Spaces

Drawing from the above, it has been witnessed that in the case of the management of urban commons of Guwahati, the state adheres to a neoliberal mandate to fit into the larger paradigm of urban development. The increasing bureaucratization in the process of urban planning (as discussed in Chapter IV) and the “development” of urban commons resonates with the pattern of resource exploitation and revenue generation under the auspices of the neoliberal policies. This 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. He points at this being crucial “...because it helps distinguish between public goods construed as productive state expenditures and a common which is established or used in a completely different way and for a completely different purpose...” (ibid, 73-74). However, the urban planning process of Guwahati does not reflect any such distinction in its conceptualization, and as a result, this has contributed significantly to the degrading condition of the wetland areas being treated as a public space or good.

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. Treating urban commons as public spaces gives the state the authority in determining its

⁵ As stated by Kishore Kalita, Brihattar Guwahati Mati Patta Dabi Samiti.

accessibility and utilization and also opens up new domains for “...capital accumulation in domains hitherto regarded off-limits to the calculus of profitability” (Harvey, 2005, 160). This can be seen manifested in the various schemes and projects geared towards the conservation of wetlands in the city.

One such example in the case of Sola beel came to light in a discussion with one of the GMC Ward Councillors⁶ of that area. Despite the directive to conserve the wetland, it was during the 33rd National Games of India organized in Guwahati city in 2007 that Borsola beel was sanctioned by the state to be utilized for the purpose of rowing competitions. She stated,

This project was approved with the hope of receiving funds for developing an area which is an ecologically sensitive zone... The project proposed was an effort to rejuvenate the wetland by properly clearing it and then demarcating the area. So the Borsola was cleaned and demarcated, and pavements were constructed alongside for better accessibility. But during the construction of these pavements and the fenced boundary, officials overseeing the project were bribed to push back the boundary of the wetland so that it did not impinge upon the privately owned properties which have come up around the wetland. Ultimately, this led to the shrinking of the beel which then failed to meet the standard measurement requirements for the competition... finally the wetland was not even used for the National Games!

Thereby, the outcome of this project was sanctioned encroachment once the fence was drawn up for the demarcation of the wetland area. With this, the newly encroached area did not overlap with the state sanctioned wetland area and as such it would not be treated as encroachment.

⁶ Ashima Bordoloi interviewed on 25 April, 2017.

Another such project was the beautification and revitalization project of the Bharalu rivulet, which encompasses the Sola beel and some portions of its surrounding areas. As stated by a GMC Ward Councillor⁷ of that area,

The first step undertaken for the implementation of this project was clearance of Bharalu and Sola beel through the eviction of encroachers... But what actually happened during this eviction drive along Sorusola was that only the poor people who were residing on the peripheries of the wetland areas were selectively evicted... There are houses of a politician, big businessmen and apartment buildings along the same line which were left untouched; in fact they saw it as an opportunity to extend their residential boundaries as the areas were cleared out.

In the vicinity of the same area, there is also a college (K.C. Das Commerce College) which added a new building and further encroached into the wetland without any consequence. The people who bore the brunt of the eviction were the people who shared a relationship with the wetland; and the people who stayed back were the ones for whom the wetland area was an upcoming real estate. The role of the state seems to be implicit in such appropriation of the wetland area for consumption, as exclusive private property rights would then drive up the real estate value of that area. This is somewhat similar to the case of reclamation of floodplains by the state in Gangnam, Seoul to facilitate the growth of high-rise apartments by private developers, as discussed by Sonn and Shin (2020).

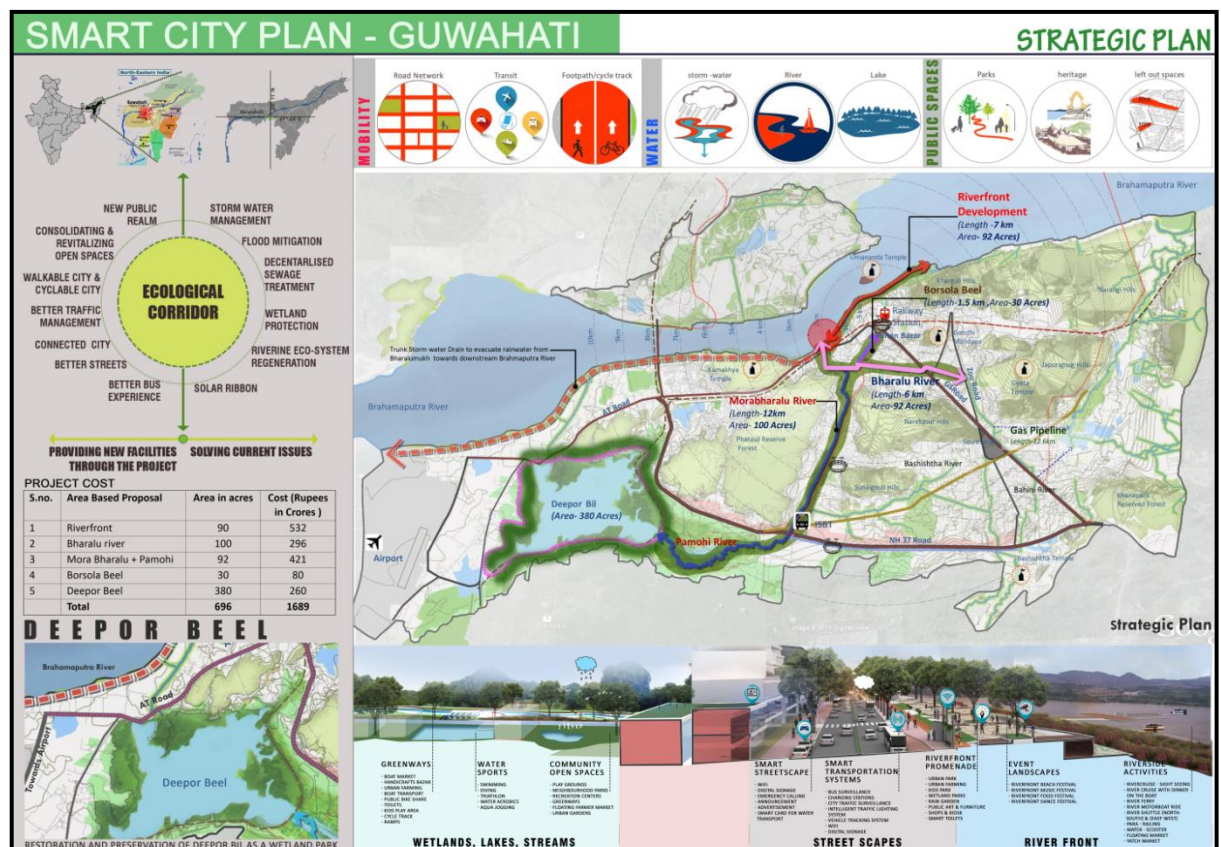
In this context, what Banerjee-Guha (2009, 96) argues with regard to the urban policies in India seems to be applicable in the case of Guwahati, that "...material manifestation of neoliberal urbanism in contemporary Indian urban policy is resting on an aggressive strategy of politico-economic restructuring of space and regulation of basic services through upscale governance that itself has become an essential component of capitalist expansion". The projects sanctioned for the development and conservation of urban commons under Guwahati Smart City Project (GSCP) bear testimony to this. As already mentioned in Chapter IV, for the purpose of the Guwahati Smart City Project, a company

⁷ Rajkumar Tewari interviewed on 26 April, 2017.

called the Guwahati Smart City Limited (GSCL) has been constituted in collaboration between GMDA and Tata Consultancy Engineers.

Going through the proposal of GSCP gives the impression of a comprehensive plan that will not only rejuvenate the urban commons but will make them the central feature of the city. The focus of the Area-based projects of the GSCP 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.

Figure 5.3: Strategic Plan of Guwahati Smart City



Source: Guwahati Smart City Proposal

However, during conversations with various officials from GSCL, it was clear that over time, the emphasis shifts and the visual and aesthetic upgradation of these commons gets

prioritized over addressing any ecological concerns. To quote the Project Manager of GSCL⁸,

We have to build these projects in a way that completely transforms how the city looks... Guwahati will look like a proper metropolitan city... People will get the feeling of living in a developed city. Once the projects are successful, it will be the public who will enjoy the benefits.

To further elaborate on this, we can take the template for restoration and preservation of *Deepor beel*, for instance, which has been designed drawing from Hongkong Wetland Park, Bishan-ang Mo Kio Park in Singapore and Houtan Park in Shanghai in order to make it an attractive tourist destination.

Figure 5.4: Proposed Plan for Deepor Beel under GSCP



Source: Guwahati Smart City Proposal

⁸ Moonmi Kalita interviewed on 3April, 2018.

Similarly, *Bharalu River* with an area of 100 acres is planned as a new riverine parkway which would comprise of promenades, an amphitheater, children’s play area, seating area, walking and cycling trails, viewing deck, flower terrace, boating facility, eating joints and markets.

Figure 5.5: Proposed Plan for Bharalu River under GSCP



Source: Guwahati Smart City Proposal

Keeping in line with the same idea, *Borsola beel* is proposed as a themed lake attraction for the city comprising of an area of 30 acres. Along with revitalization of the wetland which is crucial to mitigate the problem of flash floods in the city, the proposal also states that there would be a sluice gate decentralized water treatment decomposer for the treatment of sewage, so that in the absence of an integrated sewerage system, the city’s sewage is not directly released into the river. Though such initiatives find mention on paper, conversations with GSCL officials reflect that the focus is to make the wetland a viable centre of attraction. As such it is proposed to be comprised of an amphitheater, viewing deck, fishing deck, provision for water sports activities, cycling and walking trails, floating market, handicrafts section and eating joints. It is also proposed that leaf

composting will be done here, but as stated by the Chief Technical Officer of GSCL⁹, this would be more of a model for display.

Figure 5.6: Proposed Plan for Borsola Beel under GSCP



Source: Guwahati Smart City Proposal

The majority of this wetland area is planned around the potential of generating revenue from the wetland area; hence, the space would be designed for public consumption practices. However, the site being shortlisted for this is an already congested area, and such construction would not only disrupt the nearby localities but would also lead to traffic congestion, displacement and create further imposition on the wetland area. Such a park would be a revenue generating source for the government but it would make no real contribution to maintaining the biodiversity of the locality or the city. A shop owner¹⁰ in this area said,

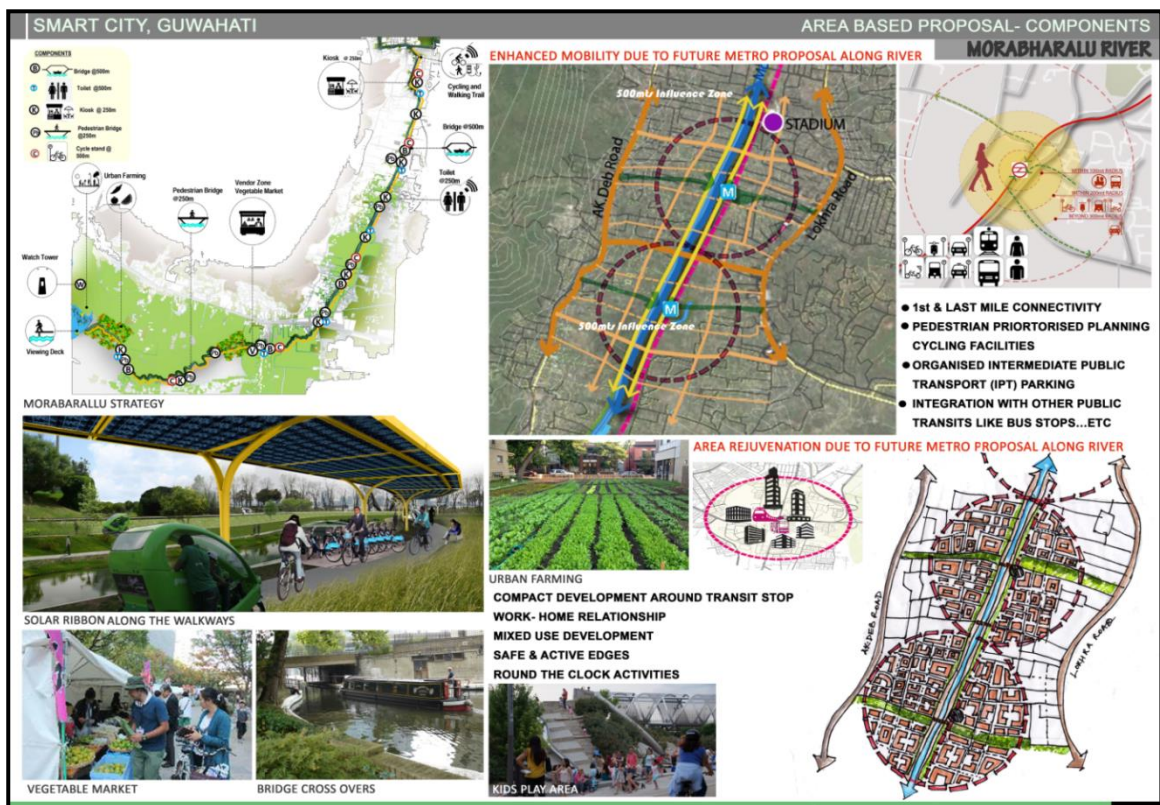
⁹ Sanjay Verma interviewed on 4 April, 2018.

¹⁰ Jeevant Kejriwal interviewed on 17 May, 2019.

This area is already congested...Where will they build a park here? They will start building and then realize that there is no space. After that the work will be stopped in between like all other projects... And in case the park is built and people come to visit it then this area then this will get more crowded... and what will happen to local shops like ours; we will have to close down because then they will open big shops near the park.

In the case of *Mora Bharalu River*, an area of 92 acres has been demarcated for the establishment of a new ecological corridor as part of urban revitalization project. Apart from walking and cycling trails, viewing deck and space for markets similar to the abovementioned projects, the focus of this project is enhanced mobility for better connectivity through integration with public transits. This project proposes rejuvenation of the surrounding riverine area as an outcome of the future metro line proposed along the river. However, this sounds reminiscent of the plight of Deepor beel as a result of the railway track running through it, which made no contribution towards the rejuvenation of the wetland; rather, it led to the problem of encroachment and adverse effect on the biodiversity.

Figure 5.7: Proposed Plan for Mora Bharalu River under GSCP



Source: Guwahati Smart City Proposal

This stretch currently comprises of easily accessible parks and open spaces, fish and vegetable markets, and accessibility to the river as well. As far as riverside activities and better connectivity through the river are concerned, such provisions already exist; though these are in need of major improvement, it does not require complete uphauling of the existing riverfront.

In order for this project to be underway, the first step would be to clear out these spaces so as to accommodate the amenities proposed. With the upcoming project, the first people to be affected would be the existing vendors in the Kachari Ghat and Uzan Bazaar area who would have to vacate their spot, but at the same time would have limited access or hardly any requirement for the amenities that would be imposed. During a visit to this market place for the study, the uncertainty of their source of livelihood in the near future loomed large for the vendors there. A fish vendor¹¹ in the Kachari Ghat market said,

My daily income is around 800-1000 rupees... and on Sundays it is more... that is because I sell here. This market gets lots of customers for fresh fish and vegetables as it is one of the oldest and most popular local markets. But we don't know for how long we will be allowed to sit here... we have heard that there will be some Smart city work on the riverside... they will build some park. Maybe we will be removed from here... we don't know yet.

A vegetable vendor¹² in the same market said,

We will see what happens... not like we can do anything if we are removed from here. But I don't think they will shut down the entire market; maybe they will change the market spot.

Such a change in the area would affect even the local residential communities as the landscape would undergo massive change, and may even lead to disruption of their

¹¹ Moinul Azad interviewed on 25 March, 2019.

¹² Bikash Pal interviewed on 25 March, 2019.

everyday life. A local resident¹³ of Uzan Bazaar, commenting on the pros and cons of this project, had this to say,

Apparently this riverfront project looks very good; we will have a nice place and a nice view. But what will happen then comes later. I am worried about what will happen when they start the construction work. Just to lay some water pipes, they dug up almost the entire area... and you know how much time they take to finish projects. Now this riverfront project is even bigger... the people who live here will have to face lot of *jhamela* (hassle)... and who knows for how long; it might be years!

Another resident¹⁴ had commented,

If the riverfront becomes so attractive then the whole city will come here... where will we go... can you imagine the traffic and noise and chaos!

The purported idea behind the riverfront is to make it a centre of attraction by showcasing the developed riverfront as the central feature of the city and make it a viable revenue generator. As of now, the existing riverfront has an open nature accessible to all, but with the upscale development of this stretch, this space would be open only to those who engage in and encourage consumption practices. As Smith (2002, 443) argues, the influence of global economy under neoliberalism has led to a generalized gentrification of urban spaces, which is facilitated by strategic appropriation of urban spaces by the state and "...finds its most developed expression in the language of urban regeneration".

Adhering to the neoliberal mandate, the state today exists in conjunction with the market economy, thereby providing the necessary framework to ensure the functioning and growth of the market. The aforementioned projects under GSCP bear testimony to this fact. Though each of the above 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

¹³ Apurba Bora interviewed on 8 April, 2019.

¹⁴ Sainen Bhattacharjee interviewed on 8 April, 2019.

converted to public space. Brenner (2004, 453) argues that the process of formation of “state spatiality”, through its policy frameworks, has always targeted “...specific jurisdictions, places and scales as focal points for state regulation, public investments and/or financial aid”. As such, 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.

5.5. Urban Commons vs. Public Space: A Contestation

It may be noted that the role of the state in planning the development of a city is to ensure the welfare of the public; however, there is a conceptual problem while structuring the plans for the city with everything centered around “development for the public”. What is of concern here in the case of Guwahati city is that in the process of creation of “public” spaces, urban commons are rapidly diminishing in its essence to make way for state-regulated spaces. Though the development propaganda may suggest that conversion of urban commons into public spaces is the only way for conservation, Harvey (2012, 72) argues, “(T)here is an important distinction here between public spaces and public goods, on the one hand, and the commons on the other. Public spaces and public goods in the city have always been a matter of state power and public administration, and such spaces and goods do not necessarily a commons make”. When such urban commons are converted into state-regulated public spaces, the purpose of utilization for these spaces is defined by the state which gets ingrained in its design. This defeats the appropriation of these spaces by the people for other purposes than those prescribed by the state.

Taking the example of Deepor beel, in 2005, three years after its declaration as a Ramsar site, GMC approved a 24 hectare dumping site in Boragaon which lies in the eastern corner of Deepor beel. The untreated waste (refinery waste, industrial and hospital waste as well as sewage discharge) disposed here has only compounded over the years because of the increasing population of the city, which seeps into the beel during monsoon further deteriorating its water quality. Such contamination of the wetland has caused the fall in

oxygen levels which results in the death of fishes and pollution of other aquatic resources. This has an adverse impact on the wetland ecosystem as the pollution levels have also affected the aquatic migratory birds which are an important component of the biodiversity of the wetland (Talukdar, 2021).

Such disruption to the wetland ecosystem has severely impinged upon around 1200 families of the 14 villages, comprising of the Karbis, a Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Kaibarttas, a Scheduled Caste (SC) communities around the wetland who are predominantly dependent upon the wetland ecology for their livelihood and survival. While the Karbis are mainly subsistence farmers, the Kaibarttas are fisherfolk. The 500 Kaibarttas families which are directly dependent on the wetland resources for fishing or collection of herbaceous plants maintained a symbiotic relationship with the beel. Due to the degradation of the wetland and its resources, these communities have suffered immensely. It may be mentioned that many private players have already been allotted land by the state in the wetland area (Saikia, 2019). Further, with increasing contamination and encroachment, Deepor beel has turned into a health hazard. Now under GSCP, the plan for the rejuvenation of Deepor beel does not cater to the ecological and community needs, rather it sets up the wetland as a viable tourist destination at their expense.

On paper, the efforts for conservation of urban commons seem to be of utmost importance. The Assam Hill Land and Ecological Sites (Prevention and Management) Act, 2006¹⁵ empowers the government to provide for preservation, protection, regulation, acquisition, and maintenance of hill land and other ecological sites of the state, and more specifically those that lie within the jurisdiction of the Municipal Corporation. The Guwahati Water-Bodies (Preservation and Conservation) Act, 2008¹⁶ mandates the protection and conservation of the wetlands in the city against degradation resulting from

¹⁵ Retrieved on 28 August, 2021 from https://asdma.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/The%20Assam%20Hill%20Land%20and%20Ecological%20Sites_0.pdf

¹⁶ Retrieved on 28 August, 2021 from https://legislative.assam.gov.in/sites/default/files/swf_utility_folder/departments/legislative_medhassu_in_oid_3/menu/document/The%20Guwahati%20Water%20Bodies%20%28Preservation%20and%20Conservation%29%20Act%2C%202008..pdf

pollution and encroachment¹⁷. The implementation of development schemes should be in accordance with these Acts, the violation of which is considered a punishable offense. However, the various projects and schemes for the conservation and rejuvenation of the urban commons in the city have led to their further decline and increased exploitation.

The present condition of Sola beel bears testimony to this fact. At first sight, this wetland looks like a broad drain running through the city covered in garbage and siltation. However, this is the result of state's claim over the wetland by virtue of multiple development projects, most of which are abandoned midway and leave the wetland area stagnated. State intervention and conversion of the wetland into a "public space" gives state agencies claim over a particular space; this then dispossesses the local population, not only from communal ownership, but also from its usage.

Figure 5.9: Present condition of Sola beel



¹⁷ Restriction on use of land: ... no person shall i). undertake any activities including the filling up of waterbodies which may cause damage or reduce the size of the waterbodies; ii). construct or erect any structure in the waterbodies; iii). dump or throw solid waste or garbage in the waterbodies; iv). extend or reinforce of any building standing upon the waterbodies, v). carry out any kind of business except fish curing, aqua culture, conservation measure and flood control measures, that too with the specific previous permission of the Competent Authority...

The conversion of a space from urban commons to public space alienates the local people and the “public space” becomes a state appropriated resource. This area around Sola beel has a very mixed population it is in terms of community and class background. Some local residents opined that the wetland and the development around it should benefit all these various sections of the population. Most of the respondents said that such projects do not concern them as it does not benefit them in anyway, but eventually leads to more chaos in the neighborhood through intermittent construction work. To quote a local resident¹⁸,

Such construction activities disrupt our daily routes. Our lanes are occupied by tents of construction workers. And the constant dirt and sound also affect us... Nobody comes to clean the beel and its surrounding areas. These projects just give us headache, nothing else... We have heard for so many years now that the condition of the beel will improve but nothing has happened.

Another resident¹⁹ said,

Every time there is a new project, officials come and make a big spectacle that this time the beel would be cleaned and maintained... They evict people from some portions of the encroached land... they bring in all the *jugaad* (requirements) - construction workers, construction material and tools... but then after a few days of work they leave it and disappear. After that we have to deal with it; it becomes a hassle as the roads get blocked, the area gets dirty...

¹⁸ Anamika Bhattacharya interviewed on 12 May, 2019.

¹⁹ Pankaj Nath interviewed on 17 May, 2019.

Figure 5.10: Rubble from construction activities



Evidently, once the urban commons is claimed for “public” use, its symbiotic relationship with the local population is adversely affected. Now the same people who previously had easy access to such urban commons are described as encroachers. For any development project to be underway, the first step is eviction of encroachment. However, during such eviction drives it is the local poor people residing on the peripheries of the wetlands who bear the brunt. The land acquired through such action serves the purpose of revenue generation for the state, without taking into account the fact that the continued preservation of such commons is the symbiotic relationship between the environment and the local community.

According to few residents in the Sola beel area, the eviction of temporary (*kuchha*) settlements is used as an excuse by the implementing agencies to show that concrete steps are being taken to combat the ecological destruction of the wetlands. However, nothing is done about the illegal encroachment of the financially and politically influential people who have constructed concretized permanent structures on land which is part of the wetland area. Instances such as the expansion of K.C. Das Commerce College, construction of the Guwahati Lions Eye Hospital and encroachment through

expansion of concrete structures of a politician and other economically well-off residents were reiterated during interviews. A household help and a local resident²⁰ stated,

Whenever a new project is about to start, we get evicted from our *kuchha* houses... we even have GMC house no. and electricity connection. But still only we are treated as the encroachers! Rich people can bribe and extend their boundary wall and nobody says or does anything... When there is flood and the beel is full, the water overflows and destroys our houses but nothing happens to the people living in buildings... The beel needs to be cleaned and that will solve our problems. Otherwise these projects are useless.

The larger local population in this wetland area seems to feel alienated from such development schemes as it does not cater to their needs; rather it impinges upon their community space. A septuagenarian local resident²¹ lamented,

We have no place left to sit, relax and interact with our neighbours. Earlier we used to sit along the beel and have an afternoon chat session with our friends and neighbours... Now the sidewalk is broken, the water is dirty and smelly, and there is always one or the other so-called development project work going on.

²⁰ Nizora Ahmed interviewed on 28 April, 2018.

²¹ Mukul Phukan interviewed on 2 May, 2018.

Figure 5.11: Broken sidewalk and growth of water hyacinth due to lack of maintenance



A local resident and a shopkeeper²² also said,

We just know by word of mouth that some work is supposed to be going on but we hardly see any officials or engineers around. In the initial stage, they come and look around but after that they disappear... Since we never know what work is going on, the local residents have lost all interest towards the beel.

The continued encroachment through construction activities, expansion by filling up the wetland, and pollution resulting from garbage dumping has not only led to drastic reduction in the size of Sola beel, but has also severely reduced its water-retention and carrying capacity. The pollution and shrinkage have disrupted the natural channels linking the wetland with the River Brahmaputra through its tributary Bharalu. Despite Guwahati's natural network of storm water drainage, flash floods are a common occurrence owing to the debilitating condition of the wetlands, which results in prolonged rain-induced water logging and inundation in many nearby areas.

²² Rajen Talukdar interviewed on 4 May, 2018.

The plight of urban commons in Guwahati is somewhat similar to Baviskar's (2011) study on the plight of Yamuna in Delhi and its surrounding areas. Yamuna was treated as a "non-place" occupied by "non-people" who were evicted in order to reinvent the space to make the riverfront visible and desirable, inviting investment. In the early 2000s, the Yamuna waterfront had an Information Technology Park, a metro train depot as well as the Akshardham Temple complex, along with the plan for 2010 Commonwealth Games Village with high-rise luxury apartments. Apart from these, on the docket were a shopping mall, housing for Delhi metro workers and a bus depot waiting to be built. However, the high court ordered only for the eviction of squatters indicating concern for the high level of pollution of the river as justification, which did not seem to raise any such ecological concern when it came to approval of capital-intensive construction projects along the river.

Such instances highlight the exclusionary practices of the state, which in the process of development does not only design the utilization of a particular urban space but also determines its accessibility. As such it can be argued that urban commons and public spaces are not interchangeable as both have varied contribution to maintaining the fabric of the city. 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.

The urban commons are woven into the structural fabric of the city by virtue of its appropriation based on the ever-evolving and changing nature of the city. However, with development projects underway, the urban commons lose its essence when converted to "public" spaces. The process of providing land for preferred market activities is achieved by "...pushing out low valued activities" from these spaces (Kundu, 2003, 3085) for the development of cities, which, as argued by Banerjee-Guha (2009, 96), are "...undergoing drastic transformations in their form and governance to become equipped to function as incubators of neo-liberal strategies in the Global South". This has led to commodification of urban commons in the name of conversion to "public spaces" at the cost of welfare and inclusivity.

As we have seen above, 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. Such commodification of urban commons, stemming from the bureaucratic structure of urban planning, has led to an increased role of privatization of 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. Here, we can also take the example of open spaces and parks in Guwahati to further elaborate this point. With rapid urbanization of the city, there has been a sharp decline of open spaces as the residential areas today cover around 60% of the total land area which has also spilled over to the open spaces and urban commons. Now most of the open spaces in the city are not entirely public in nature as they are either allotted to religious institutions or are part of schools and clubs, which automatically restrict access, unless one is part of that community or has the required permission. Apart from these allocated open spaces, even the public parks (be it Nehru Park, Judges Field, Shradhanjali Kanan or the parks along the Brahmaputra riverfront) charge an entry fee which is not feasible to everyone; it is now not simply an open space accessible to everyone, but only to those who can pay for leisure.

Similar is the plight of markets in the city; there is a distinct divide between openly accessible local markets and upcoming malls and departmental stores. Looking at the present status of local markets and shopping malls in the city of Guwahati, one can notice which “public space” is given more benefits as compared to the other. Both local markets and shopping malls are public spaces but the treatment meted out varies significantly. On one hand, shopping malls are granted prime locations by the state authorities, whereas on the other hand, the local markets are simply neglected in terms of maintenance, as highlighted by a vendor²³ in Uzan Bazaar GMC market,

There is no storage facility here... so every day we have to carry our goods back and forth... we also suffer losses on the way. We are here for

²³ Nausad Ali interviewed on 18 April, 2019.

the whole day but the bathroom is in such a bad condition that we cannot use it; and there was a drinking water tap whose pipe broke few years back and it is still in that condition.

The situation is worse for other vendors in local markets which are not under GMC's regulation. They face continual hardships in just setting up their stalls as they are often evicted by government authorities. A vendor²⁴ interviewed in the Beltola local market stated,

We do not get any notice; these officials come and just break our stalls and throw our stuff, then they tell us that we are not allowed to sell here. My stall has been removed at least 10-12 times... every time I have suffered so much loss... but they don't care!

Another vendor²⁵ interviewed in this market revealed,

As we do not have a permanent area to set up our stalls, we have to keep moving. Every time we set up our stall we have to bribe the officials and local strongmen; we call it the *gunda* (bully) tax... It is difficult for us to keep moving with our goods as we do not have any storage facility and we travel from far every day to come to the city.

The deplorable condition of such markets as well as the declining ease of access to these markets (due to eviction of vendors) pushes the crowd to avail for better facilities which is provided by the private stores, thereby creating a class divide in terms of accessibility to different markets. Though shopping malls and departmental stores may seem open to all but there is an underlying class dynamic to its accessibility, for both vendors as well as customers, which is not the case in local markets. Such a form of exclusionary governance, even though seemingly indirect, visibly favours the "consumer-citizen" (Harriss, 2007). As Zhang (2017) argues,

²⁴ Pankaj Biswas interviewed on 26 April, 2019.

²⁵ Rajni Lalung interviewed on 26 April, 2019.

(T)hese markets and parks, even though are seemingly open to all, there is a definite class dynamic to its access. A series of urban spaces, such as shopping malls, cafes and theme parks, provide opportunities to spend and make money as well as take in social activities and public events at the same time. These consumerist spaces, on one hand, need to be public to facilitate spending; but, on the other hand, these public spaces are restricted to people with the means to buy what is on sale. (ibid, 3472)

With the existing and upcoming parks (under GSCP), along with shopping malls and centres replacing local markets, there is emerging an increasingly privatized nature of public space. This visibility granted by the space to a certain section of the consumer population then constitutes the “public” whose concerns and aspirations are the only concerns that become visible. 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. As Harriss (2007, 2722) argues, “(I)t is organisation of and for the “consumer-citizen” subjects of the neoliberal state, and much of the activity that it sustains is directed at disciplining the urban poor rather than supporting their struggles over rights to housing, livelihood and protection, or their self-realisation”.

As such, the abovementioned projects under GSCP are justified on the aspirations of the “consumer-citizen”, thereby making way for increasing privatization of urban commons and public spaces to cater these needs to those who can afford to pay. This is the pattern of development observed in the Global South which is geared towards revenue generation under a neoliberal paradigm; and those who do not fit into the aesthetics of this development paradigm are rendered invisible. Aspiring to become “world-class”, the cities in the Global South emulate standardized practices of the Global North in an attempt to shed its “rural” or “local” image. However, in this process, as argued by Datta and Shaban (2017), speed has become a prerequisite in conceptualizing solutions to urban crisis and to rapidly become an economically booming city; however, the process of the fast pace of urbanization raises questions of sustainability as it surpasses the process of negotiation of democratic urban development and privileges economic return over social and environmental concerns.

In this rush to become world-class cities, focus is placed on the aesthetic development so as to invite investment in order to generate revenue. In this bid, urban commons have fallen prey to the conceptual obscurity of what constitutes “public space”. As discussed earlier, urban commons are not ecological hotspots owing simply to its nature and location but because of how it is interwoven into the continually evolving network of the city. When urban commons, such as the wetlands of Guwahati, are treated in isolation divested from the ground reality and converted into “public space”, it severs the fabric of the network of relations that constitute the urban commons.

The state argues that regulation of these urban commons as public space is crucial for their conservation, but what it does in actuality is that the state exercises control and dictates the terms of utilization of these spaces. Though on paper, the plans for these development projects seem to cater to the ecological conservation of the city, such an approach, as Baviskar (2020, 111) explains, can be termed as “bourgeois environmentalism” which is characterized by a contradiction “... between elite citizens’ claims to civic responsibility and environmental concern and the simultaneous rise of consumerism in the same social stratum...”, the brunt of which is unequally placed upon the marginalized whose mere presence is treated as pollution. Such an approach appropriates urban commons and urban spaces in the city for the development of the “public” and in turn creates state-regulated public spaces with docile subjects consumed by the commercial and aesthetic façade of urban development. There is a need to bring urban commons into the forum of discussion of urban planning in order to problematize the concept of “public” in a neoliberal world so as to raise question on the state control over the social order of urban spaces.