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Chapter 1: Introduction

What is the nature of urbanisation in a territory that has been both a colonial and a post-colonial frontier with minimum formal governance? Do such frontiers experience the process of urbanisation differently? What happens when such a territory also has a protective exclusive land regime for its indigenous tribal communities? As the world is undergoing an unprecedented urban growth, it is transforming physical space in two ways. On one hand, cities are expanding to become mega-cities and large metropolitan areas that are absorbing more and more peri-urban areas; on the other hand, new areas of the globe which were largely rural are transitioning rapidly to give birth to new towns.

The emerging literatures on urban studies have increasingly focused on new urban sites in frontiers, borderlands, and such other 'peripheral' areas. These smaller, less global, and relatively more peripheral urban areas are of recent origin but are experiencing rapid growth as it becomes part of the latest shift in the thrust of neo-liberalisation (Peck, 2013). These new studies have shown how urban sites in the frontier regions develop (Hirsch, 2009), how local communities engage with the process of change brought by rapid urbanisation and how different actors like state, market, elite and poor control, contest and co-opt the process in return (Beall & Ngonyama 2009; McDuie-Ra, 2016, Kikon & McDuie-Ra, 2021). The shift in urban studies came as global cities failed to offer holistic perspective on urbanisation and urbanity (McCann, 2004) and calls were made to focus on third world cities (Roy, 2005).

The present study is based on Itanagar, a new urban site within a post-colonial frontier territory in Northeast India (NEI). Located in the Eastern Himalayan region, Itanagar is the capital of Arunachal Pradesh, a predominantly indigenous tribal State of NEI which has a long history of protective land regimes. Its territory, having a contested border with China, has also had a contested history of state power and control as formal governance has been introduced to the region only in its post-colonial period. Itanagar gained significance after it became the capital in the 1970s. It urbanised rapidly in subsequent years triggered by the sudden administrative growth. The study examines the process of urbanisation in Itanagar, with the primary focus on its changing urban land governance and emerging informalities within it. In doing so, it investigates the historical background of the emergence of Itanagar as a capital town, its changing land governance system, the specific nature that bureaucracy assumes and the ways the local population negotiates with the emerging system of governance in this frontier state.

Urban Land Governance and Informalities in a Post Colonial Frontier: A Study on Urbanisation in Itanagar Arunachal Pradesh

by Bhaswati Borgohain

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