

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

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CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

This study focuses on the urbanisation process of Itanagar, the capital of Arunachal Pradesh which is a predominantly indigenous tribal state in the Indian north-eastern frontier. The state's territory transitioned from being an 'excluded areas' during colonial period to a centrally-administered area in the early post-Independence era and eventually became a full federal state of India in 1987. These changes in formal governance of Arunachal Pradesh have to be understood in the context of its geographical location and the security developments in the region post-1962 Indo-China war. The area still remains disputed with parts of the state's territory still being claimed by China. This study, in the context of the region being a post-colonial security frontier, examines the process of urbanisation of Itanagar led by the administrative growth after it became the capital for this frontier state. It explains the urbanisation process of Itanagar by analysing the changing urban land governance and the emerging informalities within it.

Prior to being the capital, Itanagar was not a prominent place. It was a place off the map that fell within the larger traditional territory of the Nyishis, the largest Scheduled Tribe in Arunachal Pradesh. The founding of the capital meant establishing the paraphernalia of an administrative set-up, demographic change, and eventual rapid urbanisation. The study is concerned with the changes that are set off by the abrupt penetration of a new system of formal governance into the existing traditional indigenous social and economic relations of the Nyishis. It thus, also seeks to draw attention to the effects of rapid urbanisation on a rapidly transitioning indigenous society in a frontier region. The study further emphasises how the urban governance in turn is contoured to meet the local specificities, underlining the fact that no change is unidirectional, but is dialectical. It highlights the various negotiations by the people which add distinctive characteristics and shape everyday governance in the region. To elaborate all of the above-mentioned effects and changes, the study focuses on the concept of land and land rights within the changing urban land governance.

Thus, the theoretical background of the research is informed by multi-disciplinary readings. Borrowing from relevant literature, the thesis uses the framework of frontier

governance to understand the urbanisation process in Itanagar. It seeks to understand how frontier governance interacts with different aspects of urbanisation, like informality, state bureaucracy, land governance, urban planning, and housing and in turn shapes the urbanisation process.

6.1. Summary of Chapters

The thesis has six chapters, including this conclusion.

Chapter 1 (Introduction)

This chapter introduces the problem of the thesis and its significance. It also presents the conceptual framework of the study, review of relevant literature, objectives and the research question. It then explicates the methodology adopted for the present study. Finally, the chapter gives a summary account of the various chapters of the thesis.

Chapter 2 (Arunachal Pradesh: State-making, Development and Frontier Discourses)

It presents a detailed account of the socio-political history of Arunachal Pradesh to contextualise the study. It historicises the process of making of the Northeastern frontier and how the state formation and development initiatives in the State have been informed by this frontier perspective. The chapter explicates how a frontier model of governance was conceived for the state and which was then developed and sustained through various ruling regimes in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial phases.

The chapter discusses how after the British annexation of Assam of 1826, the colonial regime gradually brought different parts of the northeastern region under its control and turned the region into a security buffer or frontier for the British Indian sub-continent against Burma, Tibet and China. The territory under the present day Arunachal Pradesh was at the centre of this colonial policy. However, as the physical occupation of the entire area, inhabited by indigenous was neither possible nor economically viable for the British, they turned these areas into their zone of influence by declaring them as ‘excluded areas’.

The chapter shows that although evidently this policy aimed at protecting the land and culture of the indigenous tribes from the outsiders, it made the tribes more dependent on the British for various purposes, allowing the latter to wield control over the area. It

critically engages with the colonial modality of knowledge production and rule that helped in shaping such frontier policies of governance. The chapter shows how anthropological knowledge production went hand in hand with the colonial expansion in Arunachal Pradesh.

The chapter discusses the international, national and regional developments in the last phase of British India which shaped the Nehruvian policy on the tribes in general and Arunachal Pradesh in particular in the early post-independence period. It substantiates how the colonial protective mechanism was continued by the postcolonial Nehruvian Indian State which gave rise to a special policy of law and governance in the state. However, as the 1962 Indo-China War exposed the vulnerability of the region, there was a marked shift in Indian policy towards the state as a security frontier. It led to a rapid transition of the region from being a centrally administered area to an Union Territory and eventually a full federal state of India.

The chapter discussed the administrative changes introduced during this phase and the resultant changes witnessed in the state. It discussed how various tribal communities are dealing with the sudden administrative penetration and control, what are the emerging socio-political tensions and new social order and how the protective regime is changing. Following this, the chapter discussed how under the neo-liberal Indian State, Arunachal Pradesh is changing drastically with the new push for big infrastructure development and increased cultural assimilation. The protective regime too is undergoing drastic change as manifested in the emerging nature of law and governance in the state.

The objective of the chapter is to present a picture of Arunachal Pradesh and its communities beyond the essentialist notions of 'authentic/exotic cultures, as sensitive spaces, as remote peripheries to be developed, as realms of cultural deviance that need assimilation' (Wouters and Heneise, 2023, p. 2) but as fluid frontiers where the state and the society is rapidly changing. The chapter shows how in the process, the protective land regime conceived during the colonial period, though continues to exist, has been incorporating various informal arrangements to adjust with the changing value system of the state and society.

Chapter 3 (Making of a Capital: Urban Planning and Development in Itanagar)

The chapter presents a decolonial history of Itanagar by questioning the way its history has been wilfully misrepresented and highlights the inherent epistemic bias in the documented formal history of the capital. Such a history does not give due recognition to the various levels and degrees of injustices committed by the British colonisers and the post-colonial Indian State against the indigenous community, the Nyishi tribe in this case. Even though the logic of both the sides were different, the extent of epistemic bias and misrepresentation mirrored each other. The chapter then introduces alternate narratives whereby local sources and Nyishi voices were given space, thereby providing a scope for a decolonial discourse on Itanagar.

The chapter then discusses the transition of Itanagar and its rapid urbanisation. It underlines the capital's different transitory phases from its early selection process to the administrative set up, marking the beginning of urbanisation, rapid growth thereafter and contemporary changes. The chapter contextualises these transformations within the changing political economy of Arunachal Pradesh and larger forces and processes of national and transnational transition.

In doing so, the chapter highlights the different imperatives which led to the founding of a new town instead of establishing the capital in an existing urban centre of Arunachal Pradesh through the life story of Nabam Runghi, the founder of Itanagar. The chapter substantiates how the initial planning and development of Itanagar was executed before the official land acquisition, whereby the state resorted to informality. Later, when the state did acquire land, it resorted to a colonial conservation law, whereby no local people were compensated for their displacement and dispossession. In the process, one witnesses how land in Itanagar which belonged to the local Nyishi clans turned into a contested and scarce resource amongst the government, new migrants, and the Nyishis, including both the local and nearby clans. The chapter critiques the initial planning and development process for being top-down in its approach as neither took into account the geographical specificity of a hill town nor the socio-cultural specificities associated with a tribal majority state.

The chapter argues that the urban development of Itanagar from 2000 onwards has been more drastic, driven by the state authorities and private finance involving big capital and infrastructural push. It has increasingly adopted an exclusionary form of governance that uses a standardised top-down techno-managerial bureaucratic structure. Based on the neo-liberal policies that focus on revenue generation from the public and benefits the private investors, such an urban growth pushes the tribals to the margins while a section of the tribal elites benefit from the process of accumulation through continuous dispossession and marginalisation of their tribal brethren. Finally, the practices of land informality that began with the state took newer forms as Itanagar rapidly urbanised. It provides scope for informality to thrive as emerging urban land policies and rules offer ambiguity which is used by both the rich and powerful and the poor and marginalised as they make the capital their home.

Chapter 4 (Violating Indigenous Rights: Narratives of Dispossession and Marginalisation)

This chapter focuses on the regimes of land governance in Itanagar and discusses how the shift from the traditional to the formal administration dispossesses and marginalises the indigenous communities of Itanagar. It employs the concept of *Kaghazi Raj* or government by paper (Moir, 1993) and engages with the burgeoning literature from South Asia on state bureaucracy and documents (Mathur 2015) to explain the process of dispossession. The chapter explains how the materiality of paper manifests itself in Itanagar when it interacts with the colonial and post-colonial frontier governance and contemporary developmentalism of Arunachal Pradesh.

To substantiate the process, the chapter presents two stories that unfolded in the present day Ganga Village, a census village within the Itanagar Capital Complex administrative division. The first is the story of the Geological Survey of India (GSI), a Central Government organisation of national importance, that opened a campus in Itanagar to mark the frontier policy imperative of state-building in the region. The story discusses how land for the GSI-State Unit Itanagar campus was allotted to GSI without formally acquiring land in Itanagar in the early days of capital establishment, and how it dispossessed the local tribals of Ganga village. The second story is of a Nyishi man of Ganga village whose family was displaced by the establishment of GSI. He has been going through a prolonged struggle to acquire land in the capital to build a house for his family. In the process of his

struggle, he had come in conflict with the law, and acquired many important government documents that shed light onto the dispossession of Ganga villagers. The chapter engages with the paper trail of his struggle vis-a-vis the government documents to explain the interface between the indigenous community and state bureaucracy.

Through analysing the paper trail of both the stories, the chapter presents an ethnography of state bureaucracy. Existing literature has shown how a complex and comprehensive system of writing and reporting has retained the British colonial state's institutional structure and wider legal and cultural practices of governance in many parts of post-colonial South Asia. They have argued how 'profound reliance on paper/documents/files has been a constitutive feature of state bureaucracy in post-colonial nations, but the particularities of space with its own socio-cultural context produced the workings of law, development and state, rather than mere reproduction or implementation of bureaucratic rules of the concerned governments (Hull 2012, Mathur 2015).

The findings of the chapter resonate with much of what Hull and Mathur has observed, but differ distinctively in terms of the extent of omnipresence of paper within the state bureaucracy. It substantiated how the traditional land management system of the local Nyishi inhabitants faced the onslaught of a new system of formal land governance where informality was an embedded feature. It seems that the real life of a newly formed bureaucratic state in a frontier region encompasses the illegible, complex and layered socio-cultural realities more than a paper state as witnessed in mainland post-colonial spaces that have inherited the documentary practices of the colonials better. Thus, in Itanagar, paper does not always underpin action or constitute legitimised evidence.

Secondly, it becomes legitimate evidence only when the state wishes it to become one. In fact, the centrality of paper has been routinely weakened to the convenience of the post-colonial Indian nation-state in its frontier territories. The socio-political history of Arunachal Pradesh with its relatively new introduction of formal administration and existence of predominantly tribal groups with various autonomous rights makes such disruptions an inherent part of the state making exercise in the region. In other words, the Indian State is yet to reproduce the colonial materiality of paper fully in its frontier region.

Thirdly, the chapter shows how the State regularly undermined its own policy of protective exclusive land regime for tribes to accommodate the requirements for land to establish a

capital and later accommodate its urban expansion. The State authorities did so, by either willfully violating its own policy of tribal protective rights blatantly or by bringing in new policy and legislations that go against the logic of a protective regime. The fact that the post-colonial Indian State used a colonial law of forest conservation to usurp indigenous community forests to establish the capital makes the situation even more ironic. It seems the relatively weak existence of a paper state and predominance of informality makes it easier for the state authorities to commit all these violations without much accountability. Thus, the centrality of paper becomes important when it serves the Indian State as it did for land acquisition for capital establishment and setup of different government organisations in Itanagar. It seems the post-colonial bureaucracy, especially in frontier regions has become a tool of neoliberal state to usurp land from the people in the same manner the colonial bureaucracy helped colonial expansion and exploitation.

Moving on from how the state authorities used the instrument of paper, the chapter shows how the local tribal communities having come from oral cultures affect and are affected by, and adapted to the everyday workings of state bureaucracy. The materiality of written government orders and notifications are a new introduction to the social organisation of tribal communities of the region. These documents largely remain inaccessible to the masses and yet are binding on the people, as they are the instruments of state enactment. If they are accessible, then being in a formal and legalised version of a non-native language, that is, English, they remain mostly illegible and confusing for the general public. The real meaning and intent of government orders are often missed by the public. The chapter shows how people resort to 'documentary claims' to make themselves visible to the state and demand their rightful share.

Chapter 5 (Negotiating Land Governance: Urban Informality in a Post-Colonial Frontier)

This chapter focuses on the practices of informality and illustrates various factors and processes through which it has become an inherent part of formal land governance in Itanagar. While the previous chapters elaborated how informality was used by the state to dispossess the indigenous Nyishis, this chapter presents the ways the latter are negotiating with the urban land governance to reclaim their rights and power.

To illustrate local negotiations, this chapter focuses on a unique practice of encroachment witnessed rampantly in the capital region. The practice entails unauthorised renovation, extension, demolition, and re-construction of the government staff quarters by its occupants like personal property and eventual legal transfer of rights over the land or the quarter or both from the government to private. It is found that while encroachment of government land is a common phenomenon, there has been no parallel in any other states in India, let alone the north-eastern region, where encroachment of government quarters is as commonplace a practice as in the capital region. The easy transfer of legal rights of ownership of such encroachment was a unique phenomenon witnessed in Arunachal Pradesh and hence needs to be located and analysed within its unique socio-political trajectory.

To do so, the chapter explores how government quarter encroachment began in Itanagar and how encroachers transfer property rights. It asks questions on rules and regulations to prevent such violations and how they are manoeuvred by the people. In the process, the chapter sheds light on the nature of land and housing governance in Itanagar, and how it manifests itself in the capital governed within a dominant context of post-colonial security frontier. Focusing on encroachment as a form of urban informality, the chapter re-engages with the emergence of Itanagar as the capital and its subsequent rapid urbanisation and changing land governance.

The chapter argues that informality, following Roy's (2005) definition, to explain government quarter encroachment in Itanagar must be understood not as the object of state regulation but as one produced by the state itself through deregulation and unmapping. She borrows Giorgio Agamben's (1998) notion of sovereignty 'as the power to determine the state of exception' and shows how the 'planning and legal apparatus of the state has the power to determine when to enact this suspension, to determine what is informal and what is not, and to determine which forms of informality will thrive and which will disappear' (Roy, 2005, p. 149). In Itanagar, by introducing new regulation (the system of LAP vis-à-vis existing customary practices) the state creates a zone of exception (urban areas vis-à-vis the rest of AP). Secondly, as discussed in Chapter 3 and 4, Itanagar was established on land that was usurped from the community informally and its planning and development began in unmapped land.

The master plan of Itanagar too did not tend to the local requirements of a capital in a tribal State. Instead, by introducing LAP that was in contrast with the existing traditional land management system, the authorities expected people to automatically adapt from their customary practices to statutory laws. The government thus overlooked the possibility of contestations against this. And when the people digressed, the state had to adapt and bring in new laws to deal with the violation.

The chapter argues that it is the colonial state's way of administering frontiers that defined the broader context of land possession and ownership practices in the state. It made land non-alienable to non-indigenous people of the state by law. Land can only usually be sold to people belonging to the same tribe, and barely to members from other tribes. Such exclusive land rights shape an indigenous entitlement regime as it provides a sense of ownership through the colonial ethno-territorial frame (Prasad-Aleyamma 2014). Baruah (2020) terms it as 'de-facto ethnic homelands' and elaborates on how such a regime gets manifested. He maintains that tribal communities 'have near-exclusive access to public employment, business and trade licences, rights to land ownership and exchange, and the right to seek elected office' (Baruah 2020, 89-90). With such near-exclusive privileges comes a near-exclusive sense of entitlement and power, which in turn shapes the everyday practices of rule of law in the region.

The Chapter illustrates how encroachment in Itanagar is the result of the interface between rapid housing demands and political and socio-cultural factors. They are rooted in a context of legal pluralism where politics of indigeneity and the colonial ethno-territorial frame can influence everyday governance or create specific norms for governance. Thus, while encroachment as a form of urban informality is commonplace, the logic of its production and regulation varies across different geographies. It is the socio-political historical context and cultural factors that provides the logic of *production* of encroachment in Itanagar. Unlike the neo-liberal logic of deregulation and market that defines informality and urban planning and governance in a metro city, in Itanagar, what assumes precedence in its *regulation* is the logic of security and nation-building in a frontier region where formal administration and formal property rights are newly introduced.

The thesis argues that while the government regulation was lax in the early phase of the presence of the post-colonial Indian State in Arunachal Pradesh, as both state entrenchment

and legitimacy were weak in the frontier state, in recent times, the government is seen taking stricter action against encroachment practices. The changing regulatory approach of the government needs to be located in the context of the increased administrative penetration and control on one hand, and on the other, as a demand by the newly emerging generation of educated and employable tribal people. Their new hopes and aspirations, expectations from the government as citizens with awareness of political, social-cultural and economic rights, present new challenges to urban governance and the government in general in this tribal dominated frontier State. It challenges the nexus of the existing tribal elite and the Indian State and thus the site of contestations expands (not necessarily replacing) from centre-periphery (frontier) to divisions within AP in terms of clan, tribe, class, religion, and gender. The chapter explains how the state of exception is used differently as the local context changes. The chapter explicates the complexity and paradoxes of state power as well as people's adaptation and innovations in manoeuvring the state machinery.

The thesis clearly shows that land constitutes the very site of production of various other forms of urban informalities and the crisis of planning and development at large in Arunachal Pradesh. This warrants a more detailed examination of the emerging land laws and governance practices and its relations with informality and urban planning within the context of the protective land regime that exists in Arunachal Pradesh as a tribal state. Such examination will help us understand how the new land laws are to be situated within the changing discourse around land rights in India and in the Global South.

6.2. Key Contributions

This thesis in its attempt to examine and document the urbanisation process of Itanagar presents a comprehensive socio-political and historical context of Arunachal Pradesh and its urbanisation from its inception to the present. It explicates the nature of urban land governance in the state in general and Itanagar, its capital in particular. The thesis engages with the challenges of planning and development of Itanagar, explores the contestations between state and society, and examines the myriad forms of negotiations present within the urban land governance system. It highlights the need to take the local specificities into consideration in all stages of planning and development of an urban centre, the neglect of

which inadvertently paralyses the formal governance system with myriad Lilliputian negotiations and conflicts.

This thesis seeks to contribute to the emerging literature on urban studies that focuses on new urban sites in the frontiers, borderlands, and such other ‘peripheral’ areas. It shows how Arunachal Pradesh remains a security frontier on one hand, and on the other, undergoes rapid infrastructural growth as it becomes part of the latest thrust of big infrastructure development led by neoliberal policies of the Indian State. The thesis argues that as the capital of Arunachal Pradesh, Itanagar’s urbanisation and its urban land governance is reflective of both frontier imperatives of the Indian State as well as its neoliberal policies. The thesis, by engaging with the concept of urban informality, seeks to offer a new perspective on urbanisation from the positionality of a frontier region and an understanding of the transformation that its indigenous tribal societies are undergoing.

The thesis also adds to the existing literature on tribal studies in India, specifically the ones that focus on tribal land issues. While tribal land alienation and dispossession has been an old story of India’s development trajectory, urban development in tribal areas have become the new ways of dispossessing tribals from their protected land. This thesis showed how the contemporary thrust of formal governance and urbanisation in Arunachal Pradesh by the neo-liberal nation-state continuously undermines the constitutional mandates of protecting tribal land against inconsiderate exploitation. It surreptitiously violates indigenous tribal people’s right to their land, distorts and wipes out their histories and cultures. While examining the violations by the state, the thesis, however, also shows how people adapt, negotiate and contest such violations and exerts pressure on the state.

As urban studies in Arunachal Pradesh is relatively under researched, there is much scope for future work in this area. Rapid urbanisation is one of the most significant processes of social change witnessed in the state in recent years making it a very interesting subject of inquiry. The strategic significance of Arunachal Pradesh in the larger geo-politics of the region, which involves two of the largest neighbouring Asian nation-states, makes it pertinent to pay a close attention to its rapid infrastructural development in general and urbanisation in particular in recent years.

Commenting on the importance of urban ethnography in northeast India, Kikon and McDuire-ra (2021) emphasise the “value in thinking of frontier urbanism or tribal urbanism

as a research agenda that can travel beyond India and connect to researchers working in other similar environments in Asia and beyond, answering the call to better situate urban ethnography in the Global South, engage comparatively, and move away from the mega city” (220-221).

Urbanisation in the tribal states of northeast India indeed presents extremely insightful lessons about the process of social and economic development, the nature of state penetration, unfolding neo-liberal economy, and the transformation in the tribal societies of the region. These insights can be useful in understanding the dynamics of the urbanisation process, if not the process of social transformation in general, in similar geographies across the globe. There lies the significance of this study.