



Urbanisation in Assam: A Case of Guwahati City

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to study the process of urbanisation in Assam with special reference to the gateway of northeast, Guwahati City. The rapid urbanization of Guwahati, the largest city in the state of Assam, India, has been a subject of growing concern in recent years. This paper tries to bring out the pattern of urbanisation and growing trends in Guwahati during the 20th century to the contemporary times. The findings here are based on secondary data and literature survey respectively.

Keywords: Urban Process, Growing Trends, Periphery, Guwahati.

Introduction:

Guwahati was the capital of the Kamarupa kingdom earlier known as Pragjyotishpura. The oldest part of the city- Fancy Bazar, Panbazar and Uzanbazar- form the core around which Guwahati has expanded on the southern bank of river Brahmaputra. The most important corridor southward from the city centre is the Guwahati Shillong road stretching 11km to Khanapara. Dispur, the capital complex since 1972, is situated on this stretch. The westward of the city includes the Kamakhya temple, headquarters of Northeast Frontier Railway (Maligaon), Gauhati University (Jalukbari), Deepor Beel (wetland) and Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport. Towards the north side of the city leads to the Saraighat Bridge on the river Brahmaputra and Indian Institute of Technology. The east side extends for 12 km to Guwahati Refinery (Noonmati) via Chandmari and an army cantonment at Narangi. The newest corridor and fastest developing is on the southern part of the city along National Highway 37, from Khanapara to Jalukbari. The inter-state bus terminus, Balaji temple and a modern sports complex (Sarusajai) are within this southern part. These corridors fall within the 328 sq.km area of the Guwahati city (Kashyap & Karmakar, 2014). Guwahati meaning “areca nut marketplace” in Assamese was known by the name of ‘Gauhati’ prior to the 1980s during the British period. In contemporary times the city has turned to becoming of a business hub and largest city of Assam and North-East India (Desai et al, 2014). Urbanisation process in Guwahati encompasses population concentration, geographical expansion and a shift in land use patterns. It reflects a transition from predominantly rural to urban lifestyles, marked by increased density and the expansion of built environments.

Growth of Urban Population:

The country's Independence in 1947 added a new dimension to the process of urbanization in this part of the country also, and Guwahati witnessed a remarkable change in its urban expansion and development. The process of growth was further compounded when the capital of Assam was shifted from Shillong to Guwahati in 1972. The shifting of the capital to Dispur in the south-eastern part of Guwahati along with a large number of other government offices, has contributed substantially to form another nucleus around the capital within the city area. Since then the city has grown enormously in terms of population and development of commercial activities (Borah and Bhagabati, 2015).

So, Guwahati experienced a massive rise in population in the 1971-81 and 1981-91 respectively. Population grew with migrants pouring into the city. The migration process was social and economic in nature. For instance, the people in rural areas facing extreme poverty and challenges came to Guwahati for their survival. Some of these people were those who had lost their homeland due to floods and soil erosion on the banks of the river Brahmaputra. There was migration of lower middle class people to Guwahati for employment opportunities and to improve their living conditions. Along with this students came in large numbers from rural areas, other towns and some from North-Eastern States for education purpose (Desai et al, 2014). So, Guwahati experiences significant demographic shifts driven by both natural population increase and rural to urban migration. However, increased population density have also resulted strains in existing resources. Moreover, infrastructure development also shapes urban form; for instance, the construction of major roads can drive population and employment growth in cities.

According to the 2011 census data, Guwahati municipal area and Guwahati Metropolitan Area (GMA) had a population of 963,429 and 968,549, respectively. The population in Guwahati was 8,394 in 1891, which crossed the one lakh limit in 1961. According to the 2001 census, the population of Guwahati Municipal Corporation Area (GMCA) is 8, 09,895. The population of Guwahati Metropolitan Area has grown almost 6.5 times between 1971 and 2001. During the same period the municipal limit of the city increased from 43.82 sq.km in 1971 to 216.79 sq.km in 1991 (Borah and Bhagabati, 2015, p.28)

Occupational Distribution of the population:

As per the census 2011, Municipal Corporation and outgrowth of total population, 169,336 were engaged in work activities. 86.8% of workers describe their work as main work (employment or earning more than 6 months) while 13.2% were involved in marginal activity providing livelihood for less than 6 months. Of 169,336 workers engaged in main work, 736 were cultivators and while 910 were agricultural labourer.

Occupation	Total	Male	Female
Main Workers	146,944	119,790	27,154
Cultivators	736	521	215
Agricultural Labourer	910	714	196
Household Industries	2,457	1,713	744
Other Workers	142,841	116,842	25,999

Marginal Workers	22,392	12,052	10,340
Non Working	264,435	92,582	171,853

(Source- [https://www.censusindia.co.inGuwahati\(Part\)Poulation,CasteDataKamrupMetropolitanAssam](https://www.censusindia.co.inGuwahati(Part)Poulation,CasteDataKamrupMetropolitanAssam))

Urban Governance:

The Municipal Act of 1956 was a significant development towards administration of urban local bodies in Assam (Kalita, 2015). The major government departments involved in urban governance in Guwahati are Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC), Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA) and Guwahati Development Department (GDD). GMC was formed in 1971. With the extension of the municipal limits, municipal area increased from 43.82 sq.km in 1971 to 216.79 sq.km in 1991. GMC is the elected local body and each of the 31 municipal wards is represented by elected ward councillors who elect the Mayor of the city. Moreover, GMDA was formed in 1992 (replacing the erstwhile Guwahati Development Authority) and is responsible for the preparation of the Master Plan for the Guwahati metropolitan area (GMA) which covers 262 sq.km (Desai et al, 2014, p. 28). However, currently Guwahati Metropolitan Area covers an area of 328 sq.km, after an extension of 66 sq.km as per the proposed master plan of 2025 (GMDA).

Guwahati Smart City:

The Guwahati Smart City proposal focuses on two developmental strategies: area-based planning for redevelopment and greenfield development; and pan-city projects. The area based development plans, aim to reinvigorate the city's riverine system anchored by the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries, lakes and wetlands which has been gradually degraded by unplanned urban growth over the years and to formalise the city centre into planned spaces that are flood resilient. The pan-city plans to focus on improvement of urban infrastructures such as the installation of smart streetlights, bus stops, toilets, parking spaces, CCTV surveillance and smart flood monitoring. Along with these plans, the smart city proposal aims to strengthen eco-tourism prospects of the city by incorporating social, cultural and heritage aspects into economic models of developments (Zahan, 2022).

Conclusion:

The rapid urban growth in Guwahati presents both opportunities for economic advancement and significant challenges related to environmental sustainability, social equity and infrastructure provision. Urbanisation process in Guwahati reflects a broader narrative of growth coupled with significant developmental challenges common to many rapidly expanding cities in the Global South. While many urban centres in India face similar challenges, Guwahati presents a unique case due to its geographic location, cultural diversity and socio-political context.

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