

Examining Urbanization in the Early 20th Century India

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Abstract: *The study of urban spaces throughout history is highly concentrated on the development of architectural marvels, town planning, civic amenities and other state organised activities. These evaluations stand valid for most parts. However, the process of urbanization in the late 19th and the early 20th centuries, especially in India, needs to be evaluated beyond the rubrics of such built fabrics and statist processes and organizations. Creation of a conscious urban public sphere, conscious of socio-economic, political and cultural narratives, is intrinsic to the process of urbanization. This paper will delve to argue the same by case studying the town of Jorhat in Assam. It will narrate upon the various agents beyond the colonial state that contributed to the development of an urban public sphere, which in turn also becomes a significant force to challenge the evils of the colonial rule.*

Keywords: Colonial Urbanization, Assamese Tea Planters, American Baptist Missionaries

Introduction

The development of modern urban spaces in India and the process of urbanization correspond to the colonial period. This generally leads to studies of these urban centres from a statist point of view, focusing on the colonial state as the principal agent of urbanization and consequently concentrating on town planning, military cantonment arrangements, the coming of the railways, the construction of water supply system and drainage systems, public health etc. This present study attempts to assess urbanization as a process that transcends the above notion. It gauges the entire process as an outcome of multiple agents. The role of the state is indispensable to the process and its understanding. However, limiting and restricting its scholarship to the activities of the state capsizes the venture. An important aspect of urbanization during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, especially in colonized territories like India, was the development of an urban public sphere. It was not exclusively instrumental in developing the notion of a nation and nationalism in India and leading the

struggle for independence but was also crucial in aggressively leading the advancements in urban spheres and in effect to the process of urbanization. It also attempts to understand other intricacies of the process by revisiting the study of urbanization. This study transcends the previous attempts to comprehend the process through the built fabrics. Leading this idea of understanding urbanization beyond the statist perspective and to test its validity, the study explores the process of urbanization of Jorhat during the late 19th and early 20th centuries by concentrating on the activities of the non-statist actors such as the Assamese Tea Planters and the American Baptist Missionaries.

Urbanization in Jorhat

In the northeast Indian state of Assam, and the erstwhile Province of Assam of British India, on the southern bank of the mighty Brahmaputra, or as the British initially named it, the “Brahmapooter”ⁱ, lies a district town named Jorhat, renowned as the cultural and tea capital of Assam. The town derives its name from a pair (*Jor*) of two markets (*haats*) - *Machorhaat* and *Chowkihaat*.ⁱⁱ The town of Jorhat became significant to the history of the region as the capital of the Ahom kingdom was shifted here in 1794 by Swargadeo Gaurinath Singha under anarchic circumstances created by the Maomoria Revolt.ⁱⁱⁱ With the turn of the century, Jorhat, along with other towns and places of Upper Assam, was torn apart by repeated Burmese depredations and it is in this condition that the British found it. The British eventually signed the Treaty of Yandaboo with the Ahom King and Assam became a protectorate of British India and later by 1838, Assam was completely made a part of colonial British India.

The Treaty of Yandaboo, of 26th February 1826 did not just terminate the political anarchy and economic sluggishness, brought on by the repeated Burmese incursions, it also planted the seeds of urbanization, patchy development and stability in the economic, socio-cultural and political spheres by the end of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. The process of urbanization, with tea plantation as the main trigger led to development in many spheres. The economic, political, social and cultural activities of the colonial state, native tea planters and the American Baptist Missionaries did not create systematic development or systematic impoverishment; their efforts created, rather, a patchwork quilt, pockets, sections and patches of development and progress and at the same time, of underdevelopment.

The genesis of modern urbanization in Jorhat emerged in 1869, with it being constituted as a separate sub-division of the district of Sibsagar with Jorhat town as its sub-divisional headquarters on 18th December 1869.^{iv} The development of Jorhat and its process of modern urbanization thus began henceforth, passing through various stages helped along by the efforts of not just the state but with the active involvement of the indigenous people of the town; along with the American Baptist missionaries. It is therefore important to trace the urbanization of Jorhat as an organic process, a phenomenon not just sponsored by the state, but equally an endeavour of its public sphere, transforming it from nature's untamed tropical forest in to an industrial terrain of lush green estates of tea.

Assamese Planters and Public Sphere

The natives of Jorhat and its vicinity realized the economic viability of this fast growing industry. Coupled with their urgent and desperate need to shed the tag of a 'savage' and 'uncivilized' people, derived from the absence of Assamese in trade, business and industrial activities, they slowly ventured into the business of tea. The rapid influx of the Bengalis into various government and plantation jobs in the tea sector and the Marwari presence in trade and business, aroused a sub-nationalist feeling among the Assamese, and Jorhat was the epicenter of this growing feeling. The replacement of Assamese with Bengali as the official language and the medium of instruction in schools and courts in 1836^v along with English, accentuated this xenophobia among the natives and created the feeling of an Assamese oneness born out of a shared sense of resentment. The idea of being Assamese and regaining what belonged to them triggered the need to engage in 'civilized' means of livelihood like trade and business especially tea plantation centered entrepreneurship, which rapidly became the catalyst and medium for further modern urbanization.

One of the most prominent Assamese tea planters who was aggressively engaged in the process of creating an urban public sphere was Jagannath Barooh who established the Jorhat Sarbojanki Sabha.^{vi} This organization was crucial in creating a conscious modern urban public sphere. This political institution was the first of its kind in the north-east and worked towards nurturing and developing socio-political, economic and cultural consciousness and through it a public opinion among the people of not merely Jorhat but in the entire north eastern region of British India '...representing the wishes and aspirations of the people to the Government, explaining to the people the objects and policy of the Government, and generally ameliorating the condition of the people.'^{vii} It paved the way for

the establishment of the Assam Association in the early years of the 20th century. This institution through petitions; memorandums and public meetings tried to achieve a two-fold agenda: it lobbied the government on matters related to public concern through the first two means and with the help of the latter, raise awareness among the people regarding various government schemes and policies.

Under Barooah's presidentship, the Jorhat Sarbojanik Sabha engaged in philanthropic activity to create public opinion and socio-political consciousness amidst the people. In 1886, the government passed the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation which was vehemently opposed by the Jorhat Sarbojanik Sabha in its meeting of June, 3rd, 1886. The Sabha roused the public against the pernicious Assam Land and Revenue Regulation, 1886 and on this occasion a mammoth gathering was held at Jorhat on 2nd June 1886 under the presidentship of Raja Naranarayan Simha and several speakers opposed the Regulation vigorously.^{viii} The minutes of the meeting on the matter argued that "...the passing of a measure like the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation 1886, so vitally important to the rich and poor throughout the province, in the form of an ordinance by the Executive Government of India, have deprived the people of the opportunity of a thorough public discussion, which its passage through different stages of the Legislative Council would have otherwise ensured."^{ix}

The Sabha introduced the Assamese to a range of crucial ideas to think upon and argue about for the betterment of the province. While these endeavours of Barooah and other members of the Sabha were aimed at the betterment of Assamese in general, they contributed directly and indirectly contributed to the urbanization Jorhat. Seeing them solely through the lens of philanthropy, therefore, would be misleading.

The Sabha's efforts were not completely divorced from the self-interest of the tea planters who led it. Its leaders pushed the people of Jorhat towards modern urbanization through their activities by creating an urban public sphere, while simultaneously seeking to develop their tea estates. Their negotiations with the government on the matters of the Assam Land and Revenue Regulation 1886 brought the government to the point of recommending a railway line between Jorhat and Steamerghat.^x This railway line became the artery that transported tea leaves to the Steamerghat on the banks of the Brahmaputra, from where they were taken to Calcutta.

This incident illustrates the patch-work quilt argument made earlier: the efforts of these otherwise acclaimed social reformers and activists, were alloyed by their drive for

commerce and profit. However, dismissing their contribution and participation as the outcome of their self-interest alone would be a mistake. It remains true that even as they sought to derive profit from negotiations with the government, the Sabha's leaders were more broadly inspired by the ideology of Assamese sub-nationalism. Their public-spiritedness and need to give back to their community led them to work directly and indirectly, towards the urbanization of Jorhat.

The Sabha worked towards creating an urban socio-political consciousness. It accelerated the process of urbanization in Jorhat by bringing into the arena of discussion the Indian Forest Acts framed by the Assam Government, which placed a serious check upon the necessary supply of fuel and building materials in the whole of Assam and materially interfered with the expansion of its towns and cities.^{xi}

The Sabha's minutes make it clear that it was committed to making its audience aware of the nationalist activities in other parts of India. They recorded, for example, that the Sabha fully sympathized with the objects of the National Conferences held at Calcutta and Bombay. The Sabha formally supported the Indian National Congress' position on matters such as the introduction of representative element in the Legislative Councils; the repeal of the Arms Act, the retrenchment of expenditure by the larger employment of Indians; the Civil Service question and Lord Kimberley's dispatch thereon; the separation of judicial from the executive authority in the administration of justice, and the reorganization of the police.^{xii}

In the same vein, Jagannath Barooah as the President of the Jorhat Sabojanik Sabha wrote a memorandum to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam where he brought to notice the deplorable condition of the people living on the fringes of the town of Jorhat, between the township and the Steamerghat. This, he argued, was due to rampant flooding caused by the breaches made by the Brahmaputra in the new bund and the Railway embankment. The fact that the distressed area was greater than the area affected by the previous year's flooding, and led to the destruction of crops in previously unaffected areas like Hezari and Baligaon mouzah was formally recorded in the Sabha's minutes. Barooah also reported that the flood not only damaged the rice cultivation it also caused the loss of cattle because of the consequent shortage of fodder besides causing disease and general distress.^{xiii} The memorandum ended with a few suggestions that could be taken under consideration by the government, the most important of them being the remission on land revenue in proportion to the losses of farmers in that particular year.

Following the same tangent of Jagannath Barooah, the activities of Siva Prasad Barooah, another important tea planter also needs to be discussed. Central to the development of a modern urban public sphere through the public-spirited activities of the Barooahs was the establishment of the newspaper *Dainik Batori*. Initially a weekly called *Sadiniya Batori*, it evolved into a daily newspaper that became the mouthpiece of Assamese sub-nationalism. Thanks to the Partition of Bengal, which saw Assam being clubbed with East Bengal, the early 20th century saw the resurgence of Assamese sub-nationalism. The idea of '*Brihattar Bangla*' or Greater Bengal, meaning Assam as an extension of Bengal, gained currency and was endorsed by the government. In reaction, a few Assamese like Ambikagiri Ray Choudhury, Jnananath Borah, Nilmoni Phukan and Siva Prasad Barooah, made Jorhat their base and *Batori* their chief mouthpiece in their campaign against Bengali hegemony.

This newspaper along with Asamiya Samrakshini Sabha and another newspaper, *Deka Asom*, raised the slogan of 'Assam for the Assamese'. With Barooah as the chief editor and Nilmoni Phukan as its working editor, it spoke for Assam and the Assamese in the charged moment. The *Batori*'s editorial of November 7th, 1935 read:

"The need of the moment is to establish economic swaraj for the Assamese race. All our trade and commerce are in the hands of foreigners. There are two ways of achieving this: Competition (with outsiders) and Boycott (of outside goods and shops)."^{xiv}

Throughout the 1930s the *Batori* tried to focus its attention on issues of relevance to the Assamese people and endeavored to rouse their sense of solidarity with its editorial column entitled "Our Duty Now" which read:

"This is the basic guiding principle for the Assamese race today. Here the Asamiya Samrakshini Sabha's definition of Assamese is being accepted. In this definition we do not have considerations of religion, caste or creed. Whoever accepts Assamese as his mother tongue, whoever resides permanently in Assam and even if he has another house elsewhere, does not consider himself temporary guest of Assam, whoever has his economic interests primarily in Assam, we will accept him as Assamese. With this definition in our mind, it is our national duty to translate into reality the dream of a bigger Assam"^{xv}

Setting aside the larger debate of nationalism versus sub-nationalism, the reason for quoting this definition of an Assamese, is to bring to notice the wide spectrum of ideas being

discussed and circulated not only among the people of Jorhat but of Assam more largely. Propagandist it may have been, the point here is to show how it contributed to the formation of public opinion and a public sphere. The newspaper actively generated a sense of socio-political consciousness among the people by encourage debate and critical thinking, thus contributing to the process of urbanization.

A major turn in the history of Jorhat and its process of urbanization came in the year 1930, with the establishment of the Upper Assam College which later came to be known as the Jorhat College. This college was renamed Jagannath Barooah College by its governing body in a meeting held on June 25, 1938.^{xvi} It was started as a private venture with the donation of a fifteen bigha plot of land and the Barpatra Kutir, the residence of Jagannath Barooah, which became the administrative office of the college. The donation was made by Murulidhar Barooah^{xvii}, Jagannath's grandson. Maulavi Tafazal Hussain Hazarika, who lent a house for the hostel complex joined him in establishing the first college in upper Assam.^{xviii}

With thirteen students and nine professors teaching subjects like English, Assamese, Sanskrit, Logic, Mathematics, History, Civics, Commercial Geography and French up to Intermediate of Arts (I.A) standard and with Prof. Krishna Kanta Handiqui, the renowned Sanskrit scholar, at the helm of the institution as the principal, the college made a modest start. Some teachers volunteered to work without pay for the first session.^{xix}

The foundation of the college also attracted critics, who claimed that it would inculcate a parochial outlook in its students. However, with time the college proved the criticisms to be invalid. It became a pioneer of higher education not only in Jorhat but all of Upper Assam, competing with Cotton College of Guwhati. For locals who could not afford to send their wards to Guwahati or Calcutta for higher studies, Jagannath Barooah College was a godsend. It became the college of the commoner, taking into its fold teachers and students from all sections of society and every region. It made education accessible to the non-affluent, thus creating an environment conducive to the development of an inclusive and culturally conscious urban public sphere.

The college's structure with its colonial Assamese architecture contributed to the built fabric of Jorhat. Simultaneously it also becomes the intellectual nursery that educated Jorhat's elite. As a center of education, it catered to the intellectual needs of Jorhat's population. It encouraged its students to think critically and liberally, to process ideas that

went beyond their ascriptive identities, that is to say, to engage in disinterested public debates.

American Missionaries and Public Sphere

The American Baptist Missionaries arrived in India and proceeded to Burma by the early decades of the nineteenth century. With the occupation of Assam by the British after the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, the British through the English Baptists sent a letter of invitation to the American Baptist Missionaries in Burma to preach Christianity in Assam. As these missionaries, whose primary objective was to proselytize, started their work among the Shans, Khamtis, Singhpos and the Assamese, they encountered an important problem: the inability of the natives to read and write. These missionaries saw their principal task as disseminating the gospels and the illiteracy of the locals made the dissemination of the Bible or anything related to Christian literature near impossible.

“The Gospel alone can restore them. But the Gospel must be communicated. Almost of necessity the written page needs to follow the preached Word. Such has been God’s plan in all history. Hence the absolute necessity of education among savages as a chief handmaid to religion. Little call would there be, by a people who cannot read, for Scriptures and Christian Literature”.^{xx}

The missionaries on realizing this, started from the basics by establishing schools in all their mission stations. The British Indian government approved this effort of the mission to take up the responsibility of education and subsidized their functioning with a small grant. Arriving on 23rd March 1836 at Sadiya, the Browns and Cutters within a period of two months established a primary school to teach a class of students some thirty or forty strong to read in English, Assamese and Tai. Arithmetic and Geography were also taught mostly from memory due to the unavailability of books. Students had to repeat from memory their daily lessons from the parables of Christ in Assamese and to read the Gospel of Matthew in English.

The demand for schools and mission work could be seen as early as 1842: “Around Jorhath in particular, we were beset in almost every street, and at every corner, by twenty voices at a time, “We want a school – will you establish among us a school?”^{xxi} This was not an exaggeration. The beginning of missionary work with its attendant impact on urbanisation and the urban public sphere, began in Jorhat with the arrival of Rev. S.A.D Boggs in 1905.^{xxii}

The first activity of the missionaries was the establishment of a church and a primary boarding school in April 1906 and 1909 respectively. The construction of both institutions contributed directly to the development of Jorhat's built heritage. The boarding school played a significant role in the development of a conscious urban public sphere among the natives. The school evolved into a high school affiliated to Calcutta University^{xxiii}, and brought to most people of the town and its vicinity, as far as Nagaland, access to modern urban English education, which until then was available either at Calcutta or Guwahati. Apart from being a valued institution that handed out degrees of matriculation, this school became an agent of modern urban consciousness and mentalities, giving to its students a plethora of ideas to learn and discourse on, as well as new and alien physical activities and games like football.

Collectively known as the Jorhat Christian Schools^{xxiv}, of which the Jorhat Christian Industrial School was a part, along with the Jorhat Christian High School and the Jorhat Christian Bible School, the first of the three was the only industrial establishment of the American missionaries. Two years after the arrival of Reverend and Mrs. Boggs at Jorhat, in May 1908, the industrial department was started at Jorhat with the avowed purpose of furnishing employment to young men who were willing to work to support themselves while in school.^{xxv} Although until 1910 carpentry was the only trade taught in the initial phase, by 1911 it was reported that apart from the furniture, doors and windows which were regularly supplied to government officials, tea planters, missionaries and local gentlemen and to other parts of Assam such as Shillong, Nowgong, Gauhati and Tura, looms were also made and supplied.^{xxvi}

The department of weaving gained great prominence with time. This led to the production of some piece cloth, sheets, towels and other articles in diamond point, twill and double twill along with silk work which were carried out on demand to specific orders. Hand-sewing was also taught and two seniors and one junior took the Lady Earl Needlework examination. Girls were given lessons in cutting garments as well as sewing them.^{xxvii} By the 1930s, the school incorporated a wide range of courses that trained students from the Bible school, the high school and the Normal schools (the school to impart teacher's training) in agriculture, carpentry, gardening, cane work, black-smithy and tailoring.

The third constituent school of the Jorhat Christian Schools was the Jorhat Bible School, predominantly for women, this catered to the missionary training of natives along with other vocational training already mentioned above. This school opened to the locals an

arena of learning which though religious in nature concurrently also gave them completely new sets of ideas to discuss and comprehend.

The Jorhat Christian Schools became a very significant conduit in the process of the urbanization of Jorhat town. The establishment of these finely constructed buildings added to the substance and streetscape of the town and contributed its architectural evolution. However, more significant were the ideas that came out of these urban establishments. The training that the residents of Jorhat and of other towns, who came to pursue various courses, underwent helped integrate them into the modern urban public sphere.

The industrial school trained its students in professional vocational courses and also gave them the means to earn new sorts of livelihoods. With the emergence of Gandhi in the forefront of Indian struggle for independence and his concepts of Swaraj and Satyagraha which included constructive work for the youth such as spinning and vocational education, the activities of missionaries, although never directly linked to the freedom struggle, played a crucial role in refining professional skills in Assam. The missionaries may not have intended to contribute to the national struggle and the incorporation of vocational training in their curriculum was been coincidental. But these vocational training courses did equip Assamese students with alternative means to earn livelihoods outside of agriculture at a time when the Congress had made the idea of constructive work became central to the nationalist agenda.

Similarly, the industrial school and the Bible school also played a very vital role in the social regeneration of the town by initiating programmees that brought women out of their households and provided them a platform that allowed them to take up courses which prepared them for urban life and fostered in them a modern urban consciousness. The notion of women as the ideal wife, homemaker and most importantly the quintessence of tradition and domesticity was slowly altered, not by design but in effect. The Bible school at Jorhat trained women in essential skills such as needlework, knitting, weaving and tailoring. The association of the school with the Teachers' Training Schools at Nowgong allowed many of their students to visit the latter and undergo the teachers' training programme.

Conclusion

Urbanization which has usually been treated as an inorganic process- something which is sponsored and engineered by the state or for that matter any other alternative agent becomes invalid. In the present study, urbanization as a process was noticed to have developed not always through an intended plan but also as a by-product. The activities of the Assamese tea planters were not directly focused on urbanizing Jorhat. It was rather a by-product. Their contributions were not devoid of self-interest but dismissing these unintended consequences completely leads to a partial picture of the past. Moreover, the above study feels safe to conclude that on contextualizing the process of urbanization to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it became evident that the process cannot only be restricted to the growth of the built infrastructure of a place. The development of an urban public sphere, especially in colonial India, is an essence of the process. Thus, it can be summarised that the work carried out, both, by the Assamese tea planters and the American Baptist Missionaries are extremely important to understand the process of urbanization that Jorhat in particular and other places in India in general went through.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Baruah, *Jorhat*, 27.

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^v Jatindranath Goswami, "B.A Jagannath", *Golden Jubilee Souvenir*, (Jorhat: Publication Sub-Committee, Jagannath Barooah College, 1982), 26.

^{vi} Khagendra N. Dutta, *Swadesh Hitohi, Jagannath Barooah*, (Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1991), 34.

^{vii} Dutta, *Swadesh*, 34.

^{viii} Jatindranath Goswami, "B.A Jagannath", *Golden Jubilee Souvenir*, (Jorhat: Publication Sub-Committee, Jagannath Barooah College, 1982), 28.

^{ix} *Minutes of the meeting of Jorhat Sarbojanik Sabha held on June 3rd, 1886*, reprinted in Dutta, *Swadesh*, 81.

^x Goswami, *Jagannath*, 28.

^{xi} Goswami, *Jagannath*, 82.

^{xii} Goswami, *Jagannath*, 82.

^{xiii} *Memorandum to the Secy to the Chief Commissioner, Assam*, reprinted in Dutta, *Swadesh*, 90-93.

^{xiv} *Batori, November 7th, 1935 editorial column*.

^{xv} "Our Duty Now", *editorial column of Batori, October, 2nd 1935*.

^{xvi} *Minute of the Governing body held on June 25, 1938*, reprinted in the *Golden Jubilee Souvenir*, (Jorhat: Publication Sub-Committee, Jagannath Barooah College, 1982), 22.

^{xvii} *Proceedings of the meeting held on August 19, 1930*

^{xviii} *Minute of the Governing body held on September 4, 1930*, reprinted in the *Golden Jubilee Souvenir*, (Jorhat: Publication Sub-Committee, Jagannath Barooah College, 1982), 22.

^{xix} *Proceedings of the meeting held on August 19, 1930*.

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^{xxiv} *Report of the 15th Assam Baptist Missionary Conference, American Baptist Foreign Mission Society*, January 15-22, 1917, Sibsagor

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^{xxvii} Anna E. Long, *Report from Jorhat Field, Missionary Conference, Jorhat*, December 7-10, 1926.