

PERCEIVED LONELINESS IN RELATION TO GENDER AND RELIGION AMONG THE ADOLESCENTS OF GUWAHATI, ASSAM

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Abstract: The present study aimed to investigate the Perceived Loneliness of adolescents of Guwahati city of Assam in relation to their gender and religion. The sample comprised of 282 high school students (from class IX & X) studying in state Government schools of Guwahati, Assam, that belonged to lower middle income families. Multi-stage sampling method was used for selection of the sample. Upadhyay-Saxena Socio-Economic Status (USSES) Scale, Perceived Loneliness Scale (L-Scale) and Personal Information Data Sheet were administered for collection of data. Mean, Standard Deviation and F-test (Two-Way ANOVA) were calculated to analyze the data. Result showed that both male and female adolescents reported very low levels of perceived loneliness and there was no gender difference in the level of loneliness experienced by the adolescents who belong to lower middle income family background. When loneliness was studied against the religious background of the adolescents in the sample it was found that no statistically significant difference was obtained in their perceived loneliness level. Both Hindu and Muslim adolescents under study reported very low level of perceived loneliness. Thus, it can be concluded that the extremely low levels of loneliness of adolescents studying in government schools of Guwahati, Assam, further vindicates that “adolescents are a highly sociable group” (Dickens & Perlman, 1981) because of their high levels of affiliation and acceptance drives.

Key words: Adolescents, Gender, Perceived Loneliness, Religion.

1. Introduction:

Assam is a state in North East India. The population of Assam can be divided into Assamese Hindus and Assamese Muslims, Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims, Tribal communities and communities of tea garden (Baruah, 1980). In Assam Muslims (30.92%) are considered as a religious minority group and the Hindus (64.9%) as the religious dominant group (Census, 2001). Assam's natural beauty and resources always attracted the attention of people from outside and encouraged them to migrate to Assam from its neighboring countries such as Myanmar, China, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, and Afghanistan as well as from other parts of India since ancient times till now. But large scale migration occurred when Hindu and Muslim migrants had come in large numbers from Bangladesh to Assam immediately after the 1947 India-Pakistan partition, 1965 India-Pakistan war and 1971 Bangladesh liberation (Hazarika, 2000). Although

these migrants are trying to assimilate with both Assamese culture and with Assamese origin people, but they are not welcomed wholeheartedly by the indigenous people of Assam as this major influx is contributing to the population outburst of the state, which is threatening the original Assamese people of becoming minority in their own land, and thus, losing their own identity. Today this influx of migration is not only a burning issue of Assam but illegal immigrants presenting themselves as citizens of India by illegally including their names into the voter list has also become a major point of altercation. Because of this migration issue terrorism has raised itself in Assam, leading to conflicts, insurgency and violence between Indigenous Assamese people and immigrants.

The 1983 Nellie massacre and 2012 Kokrajhar massacre are some of the examples of such ethnic violence which have occurred between the indigenous Assamese people and the Bangladeshi immigrants, which in turn has adversely affected both the indigenous Assamese and immigrant families especially those who belong to Hindu and Muslim religion and those who are from socio- economically disadvantaged groups (Times of India, January 4, 2018).

The members of immigrant families are also terrified by the Assam Government's decision of updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC), in order to identify the illegal immigrants and send them back to Bangladesh, or to keep them in detention camps having inhuman conditions (Khan, 2019). These groups of people also confront with harassment, labeling and stigma as "Bangladeshi Miya People" (Times of India, January 4, 2018) or "Bideshi" (foreigners) tag from the local people of Assam. This kind of labeling and negative stereotype not only adversely affects the senior members of the migrant families but also the children and adolescents of such families.

World Health Organization, Regional Office for Europe (2018) also reported that children of migrant families often confront with violence, financial crisis, exclusion from society and are also disliked by local people as well as by peers. Further, their situation becomes more intense when they have to adjust themselves with the parents who are undergoing stress due to their unstable citizenship status. As a result the children and adolescents of such families become the vulnerable groups for different mental health problems (Kirmayer et.al. 2011).

Humans— the *Homo sapiens* — are a species which is social in nature and cannot survive or progress if they are forced to live alone. Not only humans but also the life of other social species would be disrupted if they are forced to live in isolation. The social need to be connected with others peaks during the adolescence period of the lifespan and this social need is regarded as one of the most important sources of psychological development of an adolescent.

Adolescence is the time during which an individual moves from childhood to the age of majority. During this period, dramatic hormonal changes not only affect physical growth and development but also the psychological transitions of the adolescents in perceptions, independence, motivations, reproductive behavior, etc. (Sato et. al., 2008). Adolescents also experience immense changes in their social environment.

According to Dickens and Perlman (1981), "Adolescents are a highly sociable group" because of their high levels of affiliation and acceptance drives. They fulfill these drives by connecting themselves more with their peers rather than with parents which makes their relationship with parents become distanced

and sometimes conflicting too. Adolescents are more prone to influence from peers and they are also expected to abide strictly by the rules of the peer groups. But this conformity to the accepted norms and standards may act as a barrier to the adolescents' desire to form an identity and to become independent. Thus, an adolescent is confronted with a situation of struggle where constant tug of war occurs between his various needs i.e. need for affiliation and needs to form an identity and to become independent, which in turn, may create immense tension in the adolescent.

G. Stanley Hall (1904) considered the adolescence period as the age of "Storm and Stress". The independence need profoundly motivates the adolescent to raise questions and argue regarding the authorities, societal rules, regulations and the restrictions imposed upon him/her, which can be observed within the family system and as a result the parent-adolescent relationship becomes characterized by turbulence and conflicts. This turbulent parent-adolescent relationship causes poor perceived social support, low self-esteem, maladjustment, poor psychosocial adjustment, addiction, delinquency, poor mental health etc. (Tucker et. al. 2003) and also causes disruption in fulfilling their affiliation need. As adolescents view the world through rose tinted glasses (Mozumdar & Borooah, 2019) therefore, they hold unrealistic expectations regarding family and social relationship.

Affiliation need of adolescents is not fulfilled when they find mismatch between their actual level of social relationship and the expected one both inside and outside home and then they may perceive themselves as lonely, unloved and inadequate. Their loneliness feelings become more intense when they are confronted with negative stereotype, criticism, stigma, conflict and violence not only inside home but also outside home. Research studies also have found that loneliness is highest among adolescents (Parlee, 1979).

Loneliness feelings are very subjective but painful emotional experience. Perlman & Peplau (1984) defined loneliness, "as the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relationships is significantly deficient in either quality or quantity". Loneliness causes depression (Cacioppo et.al, 2006), poor academic performance, expulsion from school, abandoning of own home and involvement in different delinquent acts (Brennan & Auslander, 1979) among adolescents. In spite of those disastrous effects of loneliness still there is hope for its eradication as earlier research has suggested that keeping positive attitude towards social isolation (French, 1981) and perceiving it as an opportunity for personal growth by engaging himself/herself in various constructive as well as creative activities is one of the most effective coping strategies for loneliness. By encouraging solitude Turkle (2012) in her TED Talk also says, "Start thinking of solitude as a good thing. Make room for it" as this positive thinking helps us to improve our relationship with others.

In addition, a healthy and well functional family environment and parental support are considered as defensive factor against various mental health problems of adolescents (WHO, Regional Office for South-East Asia, 2017) including loneliness. A healthy home environment is created by adequate parenting, togetherness among family members, inter-parental relationship, parental support and response toward their children (Zimet & Zacob, 2002). Parental support helps the adolescents to save themselves from feeling loneliness, unloved and being excluded, no matter how much adverse situation they have to confront in their life.

2. Rationale of the study:

From the above discussion about Assam's adverse situation, it can be noted that although it is influencing people of all stages of the life span as well as the people of various religious background, it is especially affecting the children and adolescents who belong to Hindu and Muslim religious groups. Therefore, assessment of the adolescents of Assam on various psychological aspects is urgently required under these adverse circumstances in Assam as adolescents are the future nation builder.

Adolescence period is considered as a difficult period because during this period adolescents confront with abrupt changes in case of both physical as well as psychological aspects and they become confused with their sense of identity, which also brings intense stress among adolescents. Therefore, during this period of stress and storm adolescents need constant unconditional support, love and care from their parents, teachers, peers as well as from other members of the society, as this period is considered as the most important to lay foundation upon which adult life will be built. But when their surrounding is filled with conflict, chaos, avoidance, dislike, negative stereotype and stigma, violence, insurgency etc. it is likely to lead them to feel helpless, alienated, excluded and lonely. The adolescents' life becomes more stressful when they are a member of immigrant families and the member of religious minority groups (Hatter & Ottens, 1998).

Therefore, looking at Assam's existing situation, the present research aims to investigate the perceived loneliness among male and female adolescents of Guwahati city who belong to Hindu and Muslim religion.

3. Objectives:

- To compare perceived loneliness level between male and female adolescents.
- To compare perceived loneliness level between Hindu and Muslim adolescents.

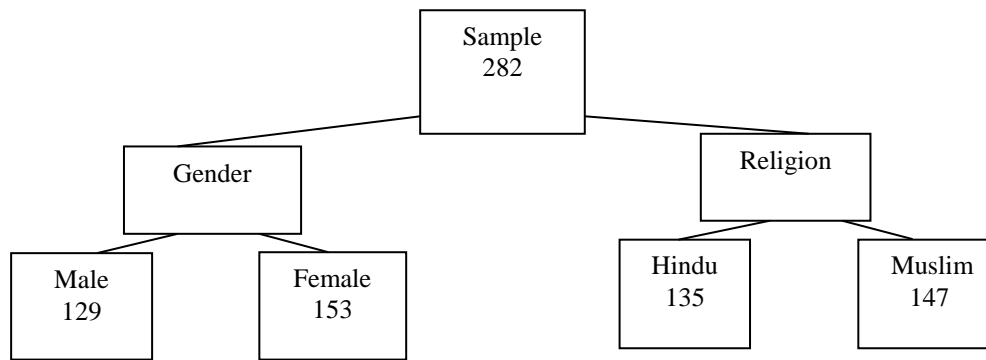
4. Hypotheses:

- There will be no significant difference in the perceived loneliness level of male and female adolescents.
- There will be no significant difference in the perceived loneliness level of Hindu and Muslim adolescents.

5. Method

5.1 Sample:

The sample was composed of 282 adolescents studying in class IX and X in various state government schools of Guwahati city, Assam. The adolescents were aged between 14 and 16 years and belonged to Lower-Middle Income family background. Guwahati city was selected for data collection as it is the Head quarter of Assam as well as Gateway of North Eastern states. The sample was distributed in the following manner:



5.2 Inclusion Criteria

- The age of the participants must be between 14 and 16 years.
- He/she must be a student of class IX or X and should study in state government schools of selected zones of Guwahati city.
- The participants should be either Hindu or Muslim.
- The participants should be mentally and physically healthy.
- Those who belong to Lower-Middle Income family background.
- Should be the residents of Guwahati city.

5.3 Exclusion Criteria

- Students of Private schools of Guwahati city, Assam.
- Any married students.
- Transgender were not included.
- Those who did not give voluntary consent for participation.

5.4 Sampling Technique

Multi-stage sampling method was used for collection of the sample. Where, in the first stage, out of total six zones of Guwahati city, four zones namely Dispur Zone, East Zone, West Zone and South Zone were selected with purposive sampling technique. In the second stage, total four numbers of state Government schools were selected randomly which were scattered within the selected four zones. Lastly, as the sample size was left open, the researcher had included all the students present in the classes except those who did not give consent for participation.

5.5 Measures

Before administering, both Upadhyay-Saxena Socio-Economic Status Scale (USSESS) and Perceived Loneliness Scale (L-Scale) were translated into Assamese language as the medium of instruction/learning was in Assamese in those selected State Government schools. The translations were reexamined by the experts of psychology, and thus, confirmed its validity. Again, before administering the Perceived

Loneliness tool, its reliability for the present sample was checked through internal consistency reliability method and Cronbach's Alpha value was found to be .848, which indicated good reliability.

The following measures were used for data collection:

- **Personal Information data sheet:** It was prepared in Assamese language, by both the authors, which gathered information about socio-demographic details of the participants, along with information regarding usage of social media sites, hobbies, relationship with family, peers and also with opposite sex.
- **Upadhyay-Saxena Socio-Economic Status Scale (USSESS):** Sunil Kumar Upadhyay and Alka Saxena had developed this scale to assess Socio-economic status of the students of both urban and rural backgrounds. Here, total 31 items are divided into five sections namely (1) Personal Information (2) Family (3) Education (4) Income and (5) Others i.e. about cultural and material ownership. The reliability of the scale was checked by test-retest reliability method and was found to be .83. The scale can also be considered as perfectly valid because obtained score was .78, when it was correlated with Socio-Economic Status Scale developed by Shah (1986). Administration and scoring of this scale is uncomplicated and the scoring is operated manually by the scoring key which is given in the manual.
- **Perceived Loneliness Scale (L-Scale):** It was developed by Dr. Praveen Kumar Jha. This tool focuses on the one-dimensional approach to loneliness and gives a holistic view of the individual's loneliness. This five point Likert scale consists of 36 items in total of which 28 positive items are in pro loneliness direction and 8 negative items are in non loneliness direction. Each of these 36 items has five categories of responses namely totally agree, agree, can't say, disagree, and totally disagree and against each positively worded statements there are five scoring options namely 5, 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively and in contrast, 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 for each negatively worded items. The minimum score is 36 and maximum score is 180. Here, low score is indicative of lower levels of perceived loneliness, whereas high score is to be interpreted as higher perceived loneliness. It was a reliable scale for assessing loneliness, where reliability score of test-retest reliabilities was found to be .84 and .82 respectively and through Kuder- Richardson method it was found to be .65. Validity of the scale was confirmed by three validity methods namely Content validity, Predictive validity and Concurrent validity.

5.6 Statistics

Descriptive statistics namely Mean and Standard Deviation and F-test (Two-Way ANOVA) were computed to test the null hypotheses formed for this investigation.

5.7 Procedure

After taking initial permission from the concerned authorities, researcher went to all the selected schools and administered the questionnaires by distributing to all the students present in the class except those who did not give consent to participate. The participants were assured of maintaining confidentiality and were requested to give honest reply. In the midst of administration of the questionnaires five minutes rest was given. After completing the questionnaires, the participants along with the school authorities and teaching and non teaching staffs were thanked for their cooperation. It was found that 97 numbers of questionnaires were incomplete, thereby rejected after scrutiny. Then after completion of the scoring of Upadhyay-Saxena Socio-Economic Status Scale, it was found that large part of the participants i.e. 282 adolescents out of total 373 adolescents were from Lower middle Income family background. Thereby adolescents who were from Lower middle Income family background and also from Hindu and Muslim religion were selected for the sample of the present study, wherein 135 adolescents were Hindu and 147 adolescents were Muslims. After that their responses on the Loneliness Scale were scored, calculated and analyzed through SPSS.

6. Results

Table 1 presents the Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) of Perceived Loneliness of male and female adolescents, who have come from lower middle income family background and also are students of various state Government schools. The Mean and SD of the male adolescents in case of their perceived loneliness are 107.19 & 19.168 respectively. Whereas in case of females the Mean and SD for their perceived loneliness are 108.05 and 21.379 respectively. The Means obtained for both male and female adolescents are at very low levels signifying that both the groups have reported low levels of perceived loneliness.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Perceived Loneliness of male and female adolescents

Dependent Variable	Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Perceived Loneliness	Male	129	107.19	19.168
	Female	153	108.05	21.379

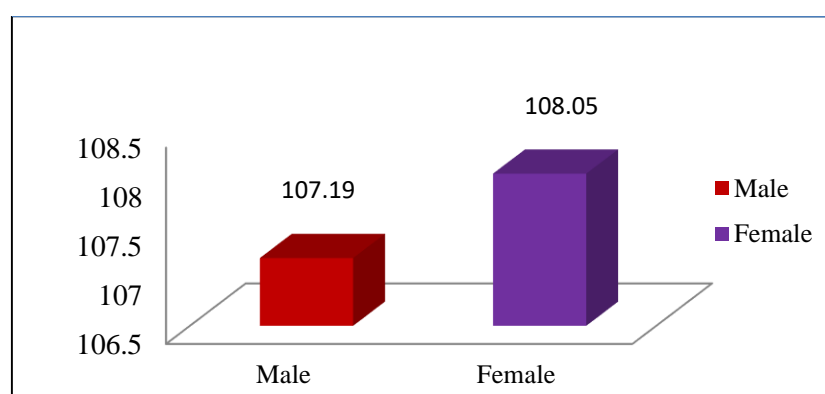


Fig 1: Graphical representation of Perceived Mean Loneliness level of male and female adolescents

Table 2 shows the Mean, and Standard Deviation (SD) of Perceived Loneliness of Hindu and Muslim adolescents, who have come from lower middle income family background and are also students of various state Government schools. In Hindu adolescents, the Mean and SD of their perceived loneliness are 106.16 & 20.257 respectively. The Mean and SD of perceived loneliness of Muslim adolescents are 109.03 & 20.438 respectively. When the Means obtained against religion are examined it is seen that in the case of the two religious groups of adolescents too the reported perceived level of loneliness is extremely low when seen against the norm table given in the manual of the scale.

Table 2: Mean, and Standard Deviation of Perceived Loneliness of Hindu and Muslim adolescents

Dependent Variable	Religion	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Perceived Loneliness	Hindu	135	106.16	20.257
	Muslim	147	109.03	20.438

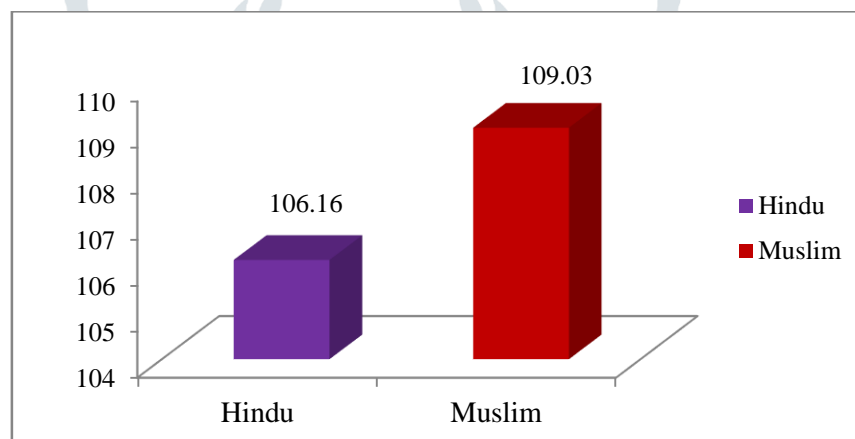


Fig 2: Graphical representation of Perceived Loneliness level of Hindu and Muslim adolescents

Table 3, below shows the result of F-test for finding out the significance of differences between the two groups of students. The F values for perceived loneliness for groups differentiated by gender and by religion were found to be statistically non-significant.

Table 3: F test for Effect of Gender and Religion on Perceived Loneliness among Adolescents

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Gender (Male & Female)	21.723	1	21.723	.052 ^{NS}	.819
Religion (Hindu & Muslim)	462.272	1	462.272	1.115 ^{NS}	.292
Gender * Religion	691.702	1	691.702	1.668 ^{NS}	.198
Error	115251.075	278	414.572		

NS= not significant

7. Discussion

The current research aimed to scrutinize whether there is any influence of gender and religion on perceived loneliness of adolescents who are students of various state government schools of Guwahati, Assam.

In the present study, although there is a marginal difference in the mean loneliness scores of male and female adolescents (Table 1), but it was not found to be statistically significant (Table 3). Further, both the reported Means demonstrate very low levels of loneliness. This indicates that there is no significant difference between male and female adolescents of Guwahati city in their perceived loneliness level, and both male and female adolescents perceived low level of loneliness.

Earlier research have found results which are contradictory as some studies have reported a difference in loneliness for gender with males reporting significantly higher level of loneliness than females (Muyan-Yilik et al, 2017; Nikhat, 2017) while a large number of research have found that females experience higher loneliness than males (Vig & Gill, 2016; Baran et al; 2015; Zarei et al, 2013; Al-Khatib, 2012; Gurses et al, 2011; Gursoy & Bicakci, 2006).

However, Rani & Kumar (2016) in their study of loneliness in adolescents, as related to gender and place of residence, found that there is no significant difference between male and female adolescents and both gender groups had average level of perceived loneliness. Shaheen et al (2014) in their study with adolescents on loneliness and well-being revealed that their sample showed no significant difference in loneliness by gender. These two previous researches support the present finding of no gender difference in loneliness among adolescents.

This present finding is also an indication of the positive attitude of Assamese society where gender differences are less prevalent and both the gender are given equal importance, cared for and loved, both outside and inside the home.

Adolescents of this present investigation were also from lower middle income families. It was observed that most of the adolescents' parental education is up to high school, which is pretty low. It has been iterated that the more the parental educational level increases, the more their knowledge about child development and how to deal with adolescents will increase (Gursoy & Bicakci, 2003), and accordingly gender discrimination will not be seen in the family. Prior research study also reported, "Households with higher paternal literacy, regular occupation, and dominant caste were less likely to have gender disparity" (Selvaraj et. al. 2017), indicating that cases of gender disparity may be more among parents with lower educational level and in lower socio-economic status. Many research studies had also found that socio-economic status plays an important role on adolescent loneliness (Gursoy & Bicakci, 2003; Baran et al 2015). Previous researches also show that lower level of loneliness is associated with higher income and higher education (Anderson, 1998; Savikko et al 2005). Taken against the background of gender bias associated with low socio-economic status, and lower level of loneliness associated with high socio-economic class, it is indeed a positive reflection of lower income families of Guwahati that their children do not report high loneliness and there is no gender difference in the level of loneliness experienced by the adolescents from such low socio-economic background.

It must further be noted that the sample under study in Guwahati was not only from low socio-economic background but they also belonged to an urban environment. Two research studies investigating differences in loneliness against place of residence have found that rural adolescents reported higher level of loneliness as compared to their urban counter-part (Shukla & Kang, 2017; Rani & Kumar, 2017). As such, it is quite probable that the urban adolescent sample from Guwahati would experience low perceived loneliness when considered against the findings of the quoted research studies.

When loneliness is studied against the religious background of the adolescents in the sample, although a marginal difference in mean scores of perceived loneliness of Hindu and Muslim adolescents (Table 1) was found, but this difference is not statistically significant (Table 3). It indicates that there is no significant difference between Hindu and Muslim adolescents of Guwahati city and both Hindu and Muslim adolescents reported low level of loneliness, which is a positive sign about adolescents of Guwahati city who belongs to Hindu and Muslim families. It also indicates that no matter how adverse the situation may be outside home, both Hindu and Muslim adolescents of Guwahati city probably have a positive family environment and caring, supportive parents which could be the reason that they do not feel higher level of loneliness, although further in-depth investigation is required to give a clear picture in this regard.

The present finding also indicates that in spite of being members of religious minority the Muslim adolescents of Guwahati city do not feel isolated and instead they may feel accepted, loved and engaged socially as the members of other religious groups, which in turn reflects the positive nature of Assamese society.

However, the present finding is inconsistent with the study by Bhogle (1991), where the Hindu participants were found to be lonelier than the Christians and Muslims. Dahanga (2016) also reported that while 25% of their sample of (N = 35) Hindus reported frequent loneliness, only 10% of the Muslim sample (N = 16) reported frequent loneliness. Although sample size is small yet the indication of loneliness level for religion is in favor of Muslims. This again illustrates the equitable nature of Assamese society where both Hindu and Muslim adolescents appear to be equally sociable and have low level of perceived loneliness.

The results obtained in the present study also show that there is no gender and religion interaction effect illustrating that not only do gender and religion not affect loneliness independently but when the two variables interact even then there is no effect on perceived loneliness of adolescents in Guwahati.

The results have revealed that the adolescents studying in government schools of Guwahati, Assam, experience low levels of loneliness as demonstrated by the sample studied in this research. This further vindicates that “Adolescents are a highly sociable group” (Dickens & Perlman, 1981) because of their high levels of affiliation and acceptance drives.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion it may be stated that results obtained from the present research on levels of loneliness among adolescents studying in various Government schools of Guwahati, Assam, show that gender and religion do not have any effect on perceived loneliness. Further, the group of adolescents studied, have

reported extremely low levels of loneliness. Moreover, these findings signify the equatability which exists in the urban society of Guwahati in Assam.

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