

POLICY EXPERIMENTATION AND MARGINALIZATION OF SMALL TOWNS IN INDIA: DHUBRI TOWN OF ASSAM

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to study the post-independent urban policies in India and marginalization of the small and medium towns, which for all practical purposes have grown on their own and in their own way, special reference to Dhubri town of Assam. The post colonial urban policy was guided by the post colonial economic policy of India which formulated for the better accumulation of capital for the purpose of economic development. For much of the 20th century the Indian urban system was dominated by the four metropolitan cities: Mumbai (Bombay), Delhi, Chennai (Madras) and Kolkata (Calcutta). Each of the cities served as regional capital and acted as a central place for the vast rural hinterland (Shaw, A: EPW 1999) and is also the nerve centres of industry, trade and commerce. Containing the headquarters of all major industrial and financial houses, government institutions and professional services the urban areas represent a large proportion of the dynamic element in the spatial economy of the country. In 1950-51, the urban sector accounted for 27% of country's gross domestic product (GDP) and by 1980-81 its contribution had increased to 47% (Shaw. A: EPW 1996). The need for the control and management of urban areas, in order to facilitate the unfettered accumulation of capital in the modern sector, was expressed in the country's earliest Five Year Plans. However, it was only after the Third Plan that financial and legislative measures were taken to facilitate this process. Pre-occupied with the problem of reorganization of the economy after partition, India's First and Second Plan has been rather low key about the urban (ibid). In terms of concrete policy statement and financial allocation "urbanization by and large does not appear as a problem of worthy attention" (Ramachandran: 1989: 329). In the Third Five Years Plan (1961-66) the government, for the first time formulated an urban planning and land policy. The policy was shaped by its 'broad objective' which was the need to secure 'balanced development' between large, medium-sized and small industries between rural and urban areas.

Key words: Urbanization, Five Years Plan, Small and Medium Towns, Experimentation, Marginalization, Housing and Development Corporation (HUDCO), Integrated Development of Small and Towns (IDSMT).

I. Introduction

It is very surprising to note that the urban policy envisaged by the government of India seems to be very contradictory in nature. The urban legislations being passed by the government, was a kind of experiment which were altered by another set of programmes after a few years of its implementation, e.g. in order to explore the better capital accumulation new set plans were formulated for the small and medium towns in the 1960s and 1970s but surprisingly, throughout the period special attention was given to the larger cities. It is evident that the urbanization process had become concentrated in the developed regions and larger cities in recent years. This excessive centralization of urban growth and management were expressed by Government's own appointed committees (Task Force on Planning and Development: 1983). The Fourth Plan (1969-74) period saw the establishment of Housing and Development Corporation (HUDCO) to provide funds for the housing and urban development projects to metropolitan authorities, state housing boards and other urban institutions. Much of the funds were disbursed to the larger cities to house the industrial working class. The rhetoric for urban and industrial decentralization was repeated in plan after plan (Shaw. A: EPW 1996). Therefore the word 'experimentation' has been used in the title of this paper.

The Fourth Plan merely noted the desirability of decongestion or dispersal of population cities like Bombay and Calcutta and suggested that "the potentialities of developing existing small towns in the area need to be fully explored". But it made no financial provision for this. In 1974, the importance of decentralization was again stressed in a document on national urbanization policy prepared by the town and Country Planning Organization, Ministry of Works and Housing. Likewise, one of the objectives of urban development in the Fifth Plan was "to promote the development of smaller towns and new urban centres to ease the pressure of increasing urbanization". Financial commitment towards this end was, however, made only in the Sixth Plan period when a major project, the Integrated Development of Small and Towns (IDSMT) was launched by the Central Government in 1979, to regenerate smaller urban places. The IDSMT scheme saw an allocation of Rs 96 crore and such funding of urban places have continued into the Seventh and Eighth Plans (ibid).

Again the commitment of Central Government towards the development small towns began to dilute during eighties and nineties, when the rest of Asian countries like Japan and South Korea adopted a subtle change in urban policy in favour of the larger

cities. In 1991, the Central Government launched Megacities Project to upgrade the infrastructure of Mumbai, Chennai and Calcutta (Chakraborty, S: EPW 1996).

As consequences of all these experimental urban policies in India, the small and medium town grew on their own way (unplanned) under their respective Municipal Governance, sided by their very poor functioning. Much of these Municipal Authorities seems to be only a platform for gaining political power and rampant corruption. This created the urbanization process in small and medium towns very complex. The growth of population is also very faster in the small towns which further aggravated the situation and numbers of problems like lack of adequate water supply, sanitation facility, urban sprawling and many more came in to surface.

The small cities and towns are hugely deprived of access to certain civic amenities which are very essential for a good living and survival. The reason for extreme deprivations of small cities and towns in general and in particular lie in their poor economic base, lack of planning and support from state governments. Many of these small towns are still governed by rural local bodies like *Panchayat*. Thus in actual practice, both administratively and economically, they are not treated differently from villages. Demographically small cities and towns are growing as fast as big cities due to their higher natural increase. Ironically, urban development in India is a state subject and the state government have neither resources nor vision to develop small cities and towns in synergy with rural areas (Bhagat: IIPS, 2013).

The theme of this paper is to study the urbanization process in Dhubri town of Assam from 1947 to 1983, during this period the study area was the district Headquarter of Goalpara District. This region was the western most tract of Assam and served as the sole corridor to enter in to the entire North Eastern India. This part connects the entire North Eastern India to the rest of India. Therefore, the unique socio-economic and cultural fabric of this part makes the region very important and left vibrant fields to be studied.

II. Urbanization in Dhubri town of Goalpara District, Assam:

Dhubri is one of the oldest towns of North Eastern Region of India in general and Assam in particular. The town is located on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra, where the river takes its southward direction and entered to Bangladesh. The town is famous for the legendary stories of *Netai Dhubuni*, *Behula & Lakhindar* and *Goalporia* folk songs. Its cultural affinity with Bengal than the rest of Assam is the peculiarity of this town. The Colonial regime declared it as one of the civil Sub-division of the Goalpara district in 1876 and since then it had been serving as the Administrative Head Quarter of the district. In 1983, it was designated as a full-fledged district of Assam.

According to the Act of Bengal Commission, in 1883, Dhubri was constituted into a Municipality and later in 1887, was upgraded into a Second Class Municipality. It was formally declared as town in 1901 Census with a population of 3,737. In the Census of 1951, Dhubri had been recognized as Class IV town with an urban population of 22,787 and a decadal variation of +79.44% against the population of the year 1941. This growth rate further got a fillip in 1961, which showed an increase in the extension of Municipal area up to 5.18 sq. kms and up-gradation as Class III town, comprising a population of 36,503 persons with a decadal variation of +24.43% (Census of India 1961, voll III, Assam, Part I-A: 108). In 1971, Dhubri Municipal area again registered an increased area of 8.56 sq. kilometres, including Bidyapara as its Outgrowth with a population of 45,589 persons with a decadal variation of +60.7% (Census of India 1971: series-III, part X-A: 294). This phenomenal increase of population was the increasing economic activity of the town on one hand and the rural-urban migration (including Inter-country) on the other hand.

Dhubri town was the central point of socio-economic plate-form of the entire region. This town successfully catered the need of the people of the surrounding places ranging from health to entertainment. The economic importance of town lies in the fact that Dhubri was one of the biggest trade centres of Assam. Jute, mustard seeds and matches were the most important export commodities and matches, soap and plywood were the manufactured commodities of this town. The Assam Match Factory, located here, was a major factory of the State. It was established by a Swedish enterprise in 1925, comprising an area of about 9 hectares of land. During 1957 the Assam Match Factory produced 41,032 cases of matches, which was about seven percent of the total production of India (Gopalkrishnan, R.: 2000: 177). In 1985, the production increased up to 4979 thousand gross boxes (Goswami, P.C: 2003: 143). Besides this, Plywood and Soap factories were also important industries of this town where the people coming from different part of the district found placement.

Access to Basic Urban Amenities:

With increasing urbanization human well being should have been improved but it was not so. Urban areas in India are known for abject deprivation of civic amenities like water, sanitation and burdened with air pollution, traffic congestion and electricity failure. There is no doubt that big cities have received more attention and most of the programme with increased funds flowed to them, while small cities and towns have been relegated to the background ignoring the fact that better rural and urban linkage could be established only by developing small cities and towns. There has been a serious lack of vision for the small cities and towns (Bhagat. R.B: 2013).

Drinking water, drainage & sewerage system, electrification & street lighting system and sanitation system:

The condition of drinking water supply facility in urban areas of Goalpara district is not satisfactory because except some portion of the municipal areas of Dhubri, Goalpara, Kokrajhar and Bongaigaon where drinking water is provided by the municipalities, the

people in other urban areas of the district depend mostly on wells, tube –wells, tanks, rivers, canals etc. for their drinking water (Goalpara District Gazetteer: 1979: 482).

In Dhubri municipal area, 662 houses were connected with drinking water facility out of total 6164 households in 1981, which constitute only a percentage of 10% of the total households (Chairman, Dhubri Municipal Board). The rest of the population have to rely on precarious and suspected source e.g. river or wells.

The condition of toilet facility was also not satisfactory in Dhubri town, only 30 percent of the total households had sanitary latrine facility and while the rest of the population survived on *Kuccha* latrine system (Chairman, Dhubri Municipal Board). The Dhubri municipal area had 20 kilometres of Open Surface Drains which run along with the main road connecting the drains of the every locality. All the drainage system of this town finds its way out to river Brahmaputra.

The electrification of small towns in India is very poor compared to the big cities. While in mega-cities 75 percent of the poor household have access to electricity compared to about the 50 percent of the small towns (Bhagat, R.B: 2013). The power supply in Dhubri town was managed by National Power Supply Corporation, which had been functioning since 1954 and prior to that a private company supplied electricity to this town. In 1966, the Assam State Electricity Board took over the management of the power supply of the town. In 1971, the Dhubri municipal area had 1,348 domestic, 46 industrial and 64 commercial electric power connections, which shows a percentage of 21% households were connected with electric facility and 325 numbers of street lights (Census of India 1971: Series 3, Assam: 282). The number of connections increased up to 1900 in domestic, 67 in industrial and 818 in commercial sector in 1981 and in the year 1981, there were only 390 numbers of street lighting posts in Dhubri town (Census of India: 1981: 456).

Communication and Entertainment & Recreational Facilities:

The economic development of a country considerably depends upon the effective development of transport facilities. The transport and communication system constitute as one of the important basic factors of urbanization. The development of the communication system helps in the process of urbanization in any given country. The transportation system facilitates the movement of people from one place to another and this process is the key factor behind the growth of urban centres.

The level of urbanization in Dhubri was high compared to the other towns of Goalpara district, due to the fact that Dhubri town was well connected by road, rail and river-ways. The National Highway no. 31 confined in the north bank of the Brahmaputra in Goalpara district, run through the heart of Gauripur town, which had a distance of 8 kilometres from Dhubri town and a road connected the town with the National Highway. The Dhubri municipal area had a road length of 32 kms, which was maintained by the Municipal authority (Census of India 1981: part 3, Assam: 456). Dhubri was one of the important ports of the principal water transport route of Assam stretching from Dibrugarh to Calcutta via East Bengal (Bangladesh).

Among its recreation facilities, mention may be made of two cinema halls namely Bishnu and Basanta Cinema Hall, and 4 Community cum Auditorium Halls (Census of India 1981: part 3, Assam: 459). The famous Park namely Netai Dhubuni Ghat on the bank of the river Brahmaputra is the beauty of this town, where a big *Mela* held every year on Ashthami Day and people from different parts of Assam and Bengal very enthusiastically participate. Presently, this park is run jointly maintained by Dhubri Municipal Board & Dr. Pannalal Oswal Memorial Committee. The legendary story behind the origin of the name Dhubri can be seen in the entrance gate of the Netai Park "*Padmapurana famed Sati Behula met Netai Dhubuni, washer-woman of Lord Siva, here and got the boon for rebirth of her husband Lakhindar from which the name Dhuburi is derived*".

Health and Educational Institutions:

The towns are service point of health and education of any country within any given period. Likewise, Dhubri town has served the region with one 130 bedded Civil Hospital, one 167 bedded Nursing Home, 2 Dispensaries and 1 Chest Hospital cum T.B. Centre (Census of India: part III, Assam: 458).

The period between 1947 and 1983 there were 29 Primary, 11 Junior Secondary, 3 Higher Secondary Schools in Dhubri town. It had one Municipal High School established in 1964. The establishment of Bhola Nath College in 1946, in Bidyapara, was the beginning of imparting collegiate education of the entire Goalpara district, both Arts and Science stream was introduced. In 1983, another Arts college was established namely Dhubri Girls' College. For imparting legal education the Dhubri Law College was established in 1967. Among vocational institutions there were 2 Type Writing centres in Dhubri town. There was a Public Library with a reading room namely District Library Dhubri in Dhubri town (Census of India 1981: part 3, Assam: 458).

Urban Planning in Assam; way to urban sprawling:

The Government of India passed the Assam Town and Country Planning Act in the year 1959 for providing urban governance to the districts of Assam including laws related to the overall development of the urban areas as well as the responsibility of the urban local bodies. The Town and Country Planning Department of Assam was empowered to prepare Master Plans for the development of the urban areas. In collaboration with the Calcutta Metropolitan Planning Organization, the Town & Country Planning organization took up the Preparation of Master Plan for Water Supply, Drainage & Sewerage for Greater Guwahati in 1969 which was approved by Town & Country Planning Advisory Council in 1972.

Sprawling, congestion, slum were the consequences of the loopholes of urban planning in India. The small towns easily fell into this trap because of the lack of scientific layout of the urban areas, which was also a result of the relegation of the small town in urban development agenda of the authorities and guided by the poor functioning of the local-bodies. In the context of Assam, as stated above, the Guwahati Master Plan was the single long term plan prepared for the urban planning under the period of study. As its consequences, the small towns extended their sizes without any proper planning and sprawling became their characteristics.

Dhubri town housed 35 percent of the urban population of Goalpara district and it became the most congested town of the district, which aggravated the landscape of the town. The continuous growth of population led to the emergence of Bidyapara as an Urban Agglomeration in 1971, outside the Dhubri Municipal area, acquiring an area of 2.9 sq. kms with a population of 1488 persons. This showed that the density of population was 513 persons per square kms which was much higher than the state average of 150 persons per sq. kms in 1971.

Conclusion:

Thus, with limited working of the Municipal Board, Dhubri town had made its growth on its own way. In spite of the lack of adequate urban planning and programme from the authorities the growth of population in Dhubri was increasing in massive scale even more than the previous decades, which resulted severe congestion. Later, Dhubri became more populous because of the setting up of the several administrative offices, emergence of commercial centres and development of good communication networks. Gradually, it became the largest urbanized area of the district. Massive migration, development of educational and medical facilities and inclusion of some populous rural areas into the municipal limit of the town were the causes behind the increase of urban population and growing number of surrounding towns. Dhubri town became the leading urban centre of the district because of its functional specialization. The economy of the town offered multiple employment opportunities to the population than led to the growth of towns like Gauripur, Bilasipara, Sapatgram and Chapar.

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