



Urbanization in Assam in Early Post-Independent India (1947–1979)

Name of the Author: DIPAK KALITA

Designation: Assistant Professor,

Department of Social Science,

West Guwahati College of Education, Pandu, Guwahati Assam

Abstract:

This paper examines the process and patterns of urbanization in Assam during the initial decades of post-independence India, from 1947 to 1979. The urban development of Assam during this period was deeply influenced by the colonial legacy, which left behind a weak industrial base and limited infrastructural growth. With independence, the Indian government introduced planned development initiatives through Five-Year Plans, aiming to promote modernization and economic growth. This study analyzes the demographic changes that accompanied urban expansion, focusing on the population shift from rural to urban areas, and the emergence of administrative towns as urban centers. The paper also highlights the limited presence of industrial towns, underscoring the continued dominance of administration-driven urban growth rather than economically generative urbanization.

Using census data, government records, and field observations, the research explores the occupational distribution within urban centers, emphasizing the scarcity of employment in industrial sectors and the predominance of government and service-sector jobs. The study also assesses the social implications of urbanization, particularly its impact on traditional rural lifestyles, migration trends, and the evolving urban-rural relationship. While Assam's rate of urban growth lagged behind the national average, significant changes were evident in towns like Guwahati and Dibrugarh, which became focal points of urban and economic activity. Overall, this paper aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of how urbanization unfolded in Assam in the post-independence era, shaped by historical, economic, and policy-related factors.

Keywords: Urbanization, Assam, Post-Independence India, Demographic Change, Urban Economy, Colonial Legacy, Industrial Development, Social Impact.

Introduction:

India gained independence on the night of August 15, 1947. Under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the new government pursued a vision of a modern nation-state. This vision was reflected in economic initiatives, particularly the introduction of Five-Year Plans starting from 1952, aimed at industrial and agricultural development. Although these efforts led to certain improvements in urban areas, the impact of colonial underdevelopment persisted for years.

After independence, urbanization in Assam began to gain momentum. With the local Congress government assuming power, administrative reorganization was carried out across the state. New districts, subdivisions, circles, and blocks were formed. Educational institutions, including universities, colleges, and technical institutes, were established. Infrastructure like radio stations and medical colleges were set up. These developments opened up numerous employment opportunities, particularly for the educated youth, and attracted people to newly emerging urban centres. Urban expansion extended even to remote regions like the Khasi and Mikir Hills, increasing the urban population share.

Urbanization in Assam can be divided into two major phases: the colonial (pre-independence) period and the post-independence era. This study focuses on the post-1947 developments. In 1901, only 2.33% of Assam's population lived in urban areas, equating to 86,695 individuals. By 1941, this figure had increased to just 3.32%, indicating very slow urban growth under British rule. However, after independence, there was noticeable progress: in 1951, urban population reached 4.64%, and by 1971, it had risen to 8.66%.

Despite this improvement, Assam's urbanization rate remained significantly below the national average. For instance, Kamrup district, home to Guwahati, recorded the highest urbanization level at 10.64% after 1972. The Mikir Hills recorded the lowest, at 2.35%. Lakhimpur, including Dibrugarh town, showed a relatively higher rate of 9.68%.

Table 1: Number of Towns and Town Groups by Class in Assam (1901–1961)

Class of town	1961	1951	1941	1931	1921	1911	1901
I	2	X	X	X	X	X	X
II	1	1	X	X	X	X	X
III	11	6	3	2	X	X	X
IV	8	7	6	5	5	4	2
V	23	5	6	7	6	8	7
VI	11	7	10	9	12	3	4

Source: Census report, 1961

The data reveals a substantial increase in the number of towns over six decades. Most towns in Assam belonged to Class IV, indicating a population below 20,000. Until 1941, Assam had no Class I or Class II towns. Shillong became a Class II town after independence, and by 1961, both Guwahati and Shillong reached Class I status for the first time. The government's establishment of various institutions and offices significantly boosted the population in these urban centres.

However, Assam still lacked metropolitan cities with populations exceeding one million. This hindered the widespread adoption of urban values. The absence of large-scale industrial units was a major reason behind the slow growth of cities. The legacy of both the Ahom and colonial periods, which lacked significant industrial development, contributed to this stagnation. In 1961, while over 100 Indian cities had populations exceeding 100,000, Assam only began to see such urban development.

A key characteristic of Assam's towns is their administrative function. Many urban centres primarily served administrative purposes, with only a few involved in trade or industry. This over-reliance on administrative roles reflects economic underdevelopment. In 1961, out of 56 towns, 26 were administrative centres. Guwahati and Shillong were among them. Only eight towns, including Digboi, were categorized as industrial centres. Although tea plantations employed a significant workforce, industrial diversification was minimal. The Guwahati Refinery, established in 1961, was the only major public sector industry.

Other towns like Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, and Bongaigaon had some small-scale manufacturing units. Transportation hubs such as Pandu, Lumding, Mariani, Badarpur, and Amingaon were developed due to their status as railway junctions. Pandu served as the headquarters for the Northeast Frontier Railway and housed residential and administrative facilities. These towns played an important role in communication and trade, albeit on a limited scale.

The lack of industrial infrastructure resulted in a slow urbanization process. Colonial policies focused on exploiting resources rather than fostering development. There was limited interest among the local population in trade and commerce, further impeding city growth. British policy deliberately prevented Assam from evolving beyond a supplier of raw materials and a market for finished goods. In contrast to regions like Bombay, which had strong indigenous industrial bases, Assam remained economically dependent.

Furthermore, inadequate investment in technical education created a shortage of skilled human resources. The British intention was to keep local populations as consumers rather than producers. Consequently, towns developed primarily as administrative, residential, or educational centres. Urban areas depended heavily on rural supply chains, functioning as parasitic settlements.

Despite these constraints, some urban centres did emerge, representing a slow yet consistent process of modernization.

Definition, Rationale, and Scope of the Study

The North Eastern region of India, including Assam, remains relatively under-researched in terms of urban development. Predominantly agrarian, this region has been experiencing accelerated urban growth since the 1970s. In the context of post-colonial Assam, urban expansion is noticeable in nearly all sectors of human activity, despite the lack of a strong industrial base.

The region's urban growth can be attributed to several unique factors, most notably the Brahmaputra River, which functions as a key connector among major cities in Assam. This geographic advantage has catalyzed the expansion of trade, communication, and infrastructure.

Given this backdrop, there is significant scope for detailed, in-depth research into the urbanization process of post-colonial Assam. This study aims to analyze emerging urban trends, evaluate socio-economic transformations, and identify the challenges and opportunities in urban development in the region.

Review of Literature:

An effort has been made to review prior scholarly works relevant to the present study on urbanization, with a focus on India and the North Eastern region in particular.

Ramachandran, R. (1989), in his seminal work *Urbanization and Urban Systems in India*, presents a comprehensive macro-level analysis of the Indian urban system. He evaluates the strengths and limitations of urban development in the country, offering insightful perspectives on the interdependence among urban centres and their surrounding hinterlands.

Sovani, N.V. (1966), in *Urbanization and Urban India*, challenges prevailing notions about over-urbanization in underdeveloped countries and critiques the “push” factors commonly attributed to rural-urban migration. His collection of papers also sheds light on urban social conditions, occupational mobility, and income structures in urban India.

Gupta, Narayani, in her book *The Making of Navi Mumbai*, investigates the complexities and challenges in urban planning through a case study of Navi Mumbai. She critically assesses urban policy-making in post-colonial India, particularly issues related to land use and the distribution of civic amenities.

Sivaramakrishnan, K.C. (2007), in *Handbook of Urbanization in India*, uses census data to explore urban trends across 17 major states. His work provides a micro-level perspective on urban growth patterns, socio-economic characteristics, infrastructure availability, migration, and employment.

R.P. Misra, in *Urbanization in India: Challenges and Opportunities*, places India’s urban growth within a global context and assesses the dynamics of its contemporary urban systems.

Dube, S.C. (1977), editor of *India Since Independence: Social Report on India 1947–72*, compiles works by scholars such as Ashish Bose and K.C. Sivaramakrishnan, offering valuable data and analysis on the evolution of metropolitan cities and small towns in India during the post-independence era.

Bhagat, R.B. (2013), in his research article *Access to Civic Amenities in Small Cities and Towns in India*, highlights the lack of basic urban amenities such as water, sanitation, electricity, and proper traffic infrastructure, particularly in smaller urban centres.

Anderson, Nels (1959), in *Urbanism and Urbanization*, defines urbanism as a dynamic and evolving way of life. He argues that urban culture influences all aspects of human existence and varies across geographical contexts.

Srinivas, M.N., in his study *The Industrialization and Urbanization of Rural Areas*, explores how urbanization disrupts traditional social norms, emphasizing the socio-economic transformations and ideological shifts it induces in rural communities.

Shastri, Paromita, in *How India’s Small Towns Live (or Die): Making Sense of Municipal Finances*, explores fiscal issues of municipalities across 30+ urban centres. She advocates for greater autonomy, transparency, and citizen participation to enhance urban governance.

Mukharji, Shekhar, in *Migration in India: Links to Urbanization, Regional Disparities and Development Policies*, examines distressed migration and urban involution. His work draws connections between migration patterns, urban poverty, and regional disparities in policy implementation.

Kundu, Amitabh, through a series of research papers, including *Trends and Patterns of Urbanization and their Economic Implications*, investigates variables such as poverty, exclusion, and migration within India’s urbanization process, offering data-driven insights into the socio-economic outcomes of urban growth.

Batra, Lalita, in *A Review of Urbanization and Urban Policy in Post-Independent India*, critiques urban policy for marginalizing poor migrants and accelerating slum evictions, noting that cities often fail to live up to the promises they offer to incoming populations.

Carter, Harold, in the second edition of *The Study of Urban Geography*, compares urbanization trends in developed and developing nations. He observes that developing countries, including India, are undergoing urban transitions similar to those experienced by Western nations during the industrial revolution.

Shaw, Annapurna (1996), in her article *Urban Policy in Post-Independent India – An Appraisal*, develops a critical framework for analyzing urban policy. She particularly points out the inadequate planning and fragmented development in smaller urban centres due to neglect by policymakers.

Barpujari, H.K. (ed.), in *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol. V*, documents the socio-cultural and economic transformations of Assam during its transition from medieval to modern times. It also highlights the changing societal behaviors due to modernization.

Ganguly, J.B. (ed., 1995), in *Urbanization and Development in North-East India: Trend and Policy Implications*, presents proceedings from a regional conference which analyzed urbanization patterns in Northeast India. The volume addresses prevailing urban challenges and future prospects in the region.

Objectives of the Study:

- 1: To study the demographic status of Assam during 1947–1979.
- 2: To analyse the pattern of urbanization during the period.
- 3: To focus on the economic importance of the towns and occupational distribution of the population in different sectors of the urban economy.
- 4: To explore the social impact of urbanization on the traditional lifestyle of the population.

Research Questions:

- 1: What demographic transformations occurred in Assam between 1947 and 1979, particularly concerning urban and rural population dynamics?
- 2: What were the major urbanization trends observed in different parts of Assam during the early post-independence years (1947–1979)?
- 3: How did economic roles of towns and the distribution of urban employment across sectors develop in Assam between 1947 and 1979?
- 4: How did the process of urbanization from 1947 to 1979 influence traditional social structures and ways of life in Assam?

Research Methodology:

This research adopts a quantitative-historical methodology, using demographic, statistical, and economic data from both primary and secondary sources. Fieldwork will be conducted through structured questionnaires and interviews with residents, officials, and relevant government departments to validate findings.

Sources of Data:

Key data sources include:

- Census Reports from the Directorate of Census Operations, Assam.
- Statistical data from the Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Assam.
- Municipal data from the Directorate of Municipal Administration.
- Archival records from the Assam State Archives in Dispur.
- Reports from departments such as Public Health, Public Works, and Refugee Rehabilitation.

These sources will form the backbone of this empirical study on Assam's urbanization in the early post-independence period.

Findings and Discussion:

Assam's urbanization trajectory between 1947 and 1979 was shaped by a confluence of historical legacies, policy decisions, and socio-economic factors. While the post-independence period witnessed some acceleration in urban growth, the state lagged behind national trends due to several interrelated challenges.

1. Slow Urban Growth

Assam's urban population experienced modest growth in the early post-independence decades. From a mere 2.33% in 1901, it rose to 4.64% in 1951 and 8.66% by 1971. This growth, however, was significantly lower than the national average. The colonial focus on resource extraction, particularly in tea and oil sectors, led to underinvestment in urban infrastructure and industrial development. Post-independence policies did not adequately address these disparities, resulting in continued sluggish urban expansion.

2. Administrative Dominance

A defining characteristic of Assam's urban centers was their administrative nature. By 1961, out of 56 towns, 26 functioned primarily as administrative hubs. This concentration limited economic diversification and industrial growth. While cities like Guwahati and Shillong evolved into significant urban centers, their growth was predominantly driven by administrative functions rather than industrialization.

3. Infrastructural Constraints

Urban infrastructure in Assam lagged behind, with many towns lacking essential amenities like water supply, sanitation, and drainage systems. Efforts to improve these facilities were often hampered by inadequate planning and funding. For instance, Guwahati's first modern water treatment plant was established in 1960, but comprehensive water supply systems remained insufficient to meet the growing urban demand.

4. Limited Industrialization

Industrial development in Assam was sparse and localized. The Digboi refinery, established in 1901, was Asia's first, but its capacity remained limited. The Guwahati Refinery, inaugurated in 1962, marked a significant step, yet broader industrial growth was minimal. Factors such as geographical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, and policy neglect contributed to this limited industrialization.

5. Sociocultural Shifts

Urbanization brought about notable sociocultural changes. Traditional family structures began to evolve, with nuclear families becoming more common in urban settings. Occupational patterns shifted as more individuals

moved from agrarian roles to service and administrative jobs. Gender dynamics also changed, with increased participation of women in education and the workforce, particularly among urban migrants.

6. Colonial Legacy

The colonial administration's approach to Assam as a resource-rich periphery led to infrastructural and economic underdevelopment. Post-independence policies did not sufficiently rectify these imbalances. The emphasis remained on resource extraction rather than value addition, and infrastructural investments were inadequate. This legacy continued to influence Assam's urban landscape, limiting its growth and integration with broader national development trajectories.

Conclusion:

The period from 1947 to 1979 marked a phase of gradual transition in Assam's urban development. Urbanization during these years did not witness dramatic shifts but was instead shaped by lingering colonial structures, limited industrial activity, and weak infrastructure. The pattern of growth remained slow and imbalanced, largely influenced by administrative priorities rather than by comprehensive economic or industrial planning.

Although the rate of urban expansion was modest, subtle changes were taking place in the social and cultural spheres. These shifts signaled the beginning of urban transformation, suggesting that even limited urban growth had a meaningful impact on Assamese society. The foundations for future urban expansion were being laid, despite the many constraints.

The continued influence of colonial economic legacies, along with post-independence policy limitations, played a critical role in directing the path of urban development. For Assam to overcome these long-standing challenges, there is a need for targeted efforts focusing on infrastructure development, economic diversification beyond agriculture, and inclusive urban planning practices. These steps are essential to ensure balanced and sustainable urban growth in the region moving forward.

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