

Remaking Dibrugarh in contemporary Assam

Dibrugarh, an important city for trade, commerce and education in eastern Assam has had a fascinating history of destruction and renewal since the 1950s. It was one of the highest revenue collecting cities in post-colonial India at the time of the transfer of power in 1947. Following the large-scale destruction caused by the 1950 earthquake, the city became vulnerable to floods and lost much of its trading importance to neighbouring Tinsukia. Moreover, following the Assam Agitation (1979-1985), the city became a staging post for political mobilisation by insurgents of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA). This resulted in counter-insurgency operations by the Indian army, which had an impact on social life that continues to be felt to this day. In this article, I argue that Dibrugarh showcases an urban transformation that has followed a counter-intuitive path, influenced by the socially disruptive capacities of capital, calamities and counter-insurgency.

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Capital

Most towns and cities in the Brahmaputra valley of upper Assam have fairly delineated spaces for commercial areas, especially if larger municipalities administer them. Dibrugarh town is (almost) neatly divided into localities that denote ethnic identity and occupation, especially when trade and commerce are involved. Assamese Muslim families own and run most of the garages that fix old cars on the western extremes of the city. The Assam Trunk (AT) Road winds its way through other localities that reflect the ethnic-occupational world of the city, where Bihari labourers load and unload trucks, and middle-class Assamese professors teach at Dibrugarh University and the Assam Medical College. Bengali Hindus, who live around the vicinity of Kalibari, share space with Muslims who live on both sides of the railway line. The traditional commercial area – circumscribed by the railway line, AT Road and Mancotta Road – is a hub from where the city's hinterland acquires consumer goods, food supplies and other materials needed to keep both industry and agriculture going.

As part of the 1985 Assam Accord, signed by leaders of the Assam Movement and the Indian Government, the city acquired a gas cracker plant in 2007 (as requested by the leaders of the Assam Movement). It is called the Brahmaputra Cracker and Polymer Limited and is situated along the Sessa River on land that used to be covered by tea plantations. Today, environmentally concerned citizens of Dibrugarh claim that effluence from the plant has caused fish to die and has destroyed the livelihoods of fisherpersons. There is neither data nor a report that they can use to buttress their assertions. However, the claims demonstrate a turn away from promises of development forged through the Accord.

For most visitors to the city, which is situated at the heart of Assam's tea growing area, the presence of tea plantations within Dibrugarh's municipal limits is a quaint sight. The story of tea is intrinsic to the city's modern history and has made it a rich city, attracting traders and speculators in equal measure. As historian Jayeeta Sharma has argued, "... imperial capital and enterprise transformed Assam into a plantation economy characterised as much by rapid demographic change as by the visible emergence of ordered tea gardens and rice fields in place of forested, riverine and common land".¹ Along with tea, Dibrugarh's proximity to the oil drilling areas of upper Assam – Digboi and Duliajan – means that the city hosts local offices and individuals whose lives are intrinsically linked to the two extractive industries; industries central to the economy of colonial Assam and other parts of the Empire.² The tea industry needs pesticides and chemicals, which come from factories outside the district and are distributed and stocked by Marwari traders with offices along Hanuman Singhania Road in the New Market area. The trucks that supply rationed and subsidised grain to the plantations offload their goods at the Assam Trunk Road that runs parallel to the embankment and the Brahmaputra River. This condensed space, replete with plantations, railway lines and commercial areas is reminded of its precarious position every year during the monsoon months when floods trap goods, people, and transportation.

Calamity

The 1950 earthquake changed Dibrugarh's fortunes in several ways. The riverbed shifted, altering the river's course throughout western Assam. Areas that used to be tea plantations were subjected to intense pressure from

the flow of water, which resulted in erosion and inundation of land. The geological changes produced by the earthquake accentuate the ubiquitous presence of water around the city; though not a coastal city, Dibrugarh is in this way not unlike the "soaking ecologies" identified by historian Debjani Bhattacharyya.³ Much of the municipal work around the city involves efforts to manage the flows and stagnation of water in various localities.

The Deputy Commissioner's (DC) Office and the District Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) office (the repository of procedural and logistical matters arising out of flood and earthquake related work), coordinate with the Dibrugarh Town Municipality in order to address problems that result from unregulated construction, much of which adds to the waterlogging problems during the monsoon. The DDMA recruits most of its members from various walks of civic life, including the Civil Defence, a body of volunteers that emerged during the 1930s and was given a new mandate following the Indo-China war of 1962. The DDMA outsources much of the construction work, including dredging of drains, to contractors, which reflects, in turn, the complex politics and layers of authority operating in the city.

Counter-insurgency

The world of contractors and sub-contractors in Dibrugarh is intrinsically linked to the government's counter-insurgency policies against the ULFA that began in 1990 with the Indian army's Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino. As Sanjib Baruah has written of this period, "dissent (in Assam) was severely curtailed and human rights activists and journalists were arrested for reporting on abuses".⁴ For the rebels, Dibrugarh and its hinterland were emblematic of both the structural conditions of Assam's colonisation, as well as the possibility of an armed insurrection against the state. Most of the rank and file of young women and men who joined the armed wing of the organisation came from villages and small towns around the city. In 1990, they ambushed and killed a number of important businesspersons related to the tea industry. They also attacked police officials and demanded reparations from the tea industry, leading multi-national companies to airlift their executives out of eastern Assam.

In earlier work, I have noted that Operation Bajrang and Operation Rhino were instrumental in driving ULFA further underground and the militarisation of public life, creating a "garrison mentality" in governing Assam.⁵ Many of the mid-level leaders of ULFA, especially those who were based around Dibrugarh, were convinced to leave the organisation through pecuniary incentives that were offered by the government throughout the 1990s. These incentives included rehabilitation grants, and offers of business licences and contracts. In return for such largesse, many leaders were induced to report against and sometimes actively eliminate their former comrades. This created a volatile environment, in which a set of upwardly mobile young men were allowed to enforce their will over established trading houses and older businesspersons. They were able to do so with tacit support from the administration, but this created friction among the various groups in Dibrugarh. In April 2003, one 'Surrendered ULFA' (locally referred to as SULFA), Nayan Das (alias *Guli* [bullet]), was hacked to death by people of a predominantly Bengali-speaking locality, because they were outraged by his lack of decency and

the impunity that was offered to him by the police and administration. Such an explosive milieu necessitated a closing-in among the SULFA cadre, who corralled off parts of the city to build apartment blocks where they could live together, fearing further attacks by their former comrades, or even the local public. Nevertheless, they continued to respond to advertisements for government tenders, and also began to muscle in on much of the lucrative trade in perishable goods – like fish and poultry – that were brought to Dibrugarh from different parts of the country. By 2010, they had successfully begun to operate multiplex cinema halls, hotels and other high-end businesses, far removed from their days in ULFA. This ceasefire capitalism challenges the old order of the city's business operations, creating new tensions and new opportunities, while further segmenting the city into different sites of control and influence in uneasy relationships with one another.

Puzzles to contemplate

Dibrugarh's modern history, as a city that hosted people, institutions and the bureaucracy that sustained two of Assam's most important industries – tea and oil – is offset by a contemporary story of political violence and ecological vulnerability. The expansion of tea and the discovery of oil created the foundations of a modern city that brought in tradespersons, artisans and professionals alike. While it was able to include a diverse range of people in the early 20th century, political events of the 1980s and 1990s created a period of uncertainty for the inhabitants of the city. In pursuing a sovereign Assam, ULFA's upper Assam cadre saw Dibrugarh as the town they needed to muscle into and control. While a few rehabilitated cadres were able to corner some businesses in the city, their ascendancy in the late 1990s – enabled by the administration – coincided with a few intense years of violence against different sections of the population in Dibrugarh. The counter-insurgency operations targeted rebel sympathisers, while the rehabilitated rebels targeted businesspersons. This period has created a silence about social relations in the city. There is an uneasy everyday life in Dibrugarh, one that persists in concerns about the everyday life of its citizens.

For instance, the city is also home to India's eastern-most university, where scholars from various departments contemplate the ecological devastation to the Sessa River caused by the gas cracker plant. Their concerns are all the more urgent as the plant is situated along the banks of a river that provides people with large stocks of freshwater fish, livelihoods, and water supply. Hundreds of families living downstream have had to give up their livelihoods as fishers, as all the fish have disappeared. Protests against the gas cracker plant are little comfort, as they quickly disperse again after a few more contractual jobs are offered to some of the leaders of the protest groups. There are dilemmas here that narrate the counter intuitive urbanisation of Dibrugarh. The gas cracker plant was set up to bring development to the city following the Accord; it was part of the deal to mitigate the sense of state-neglect and give the city and the region a post-conflict future. Yet this very plant is now seen as the cause of much of the ecological devastation in the city, one already ravaged by calamity, militarisation, and the (mis)fortunes of the tea industry.

Even as the city attempts to come to terms with the effects of rapacious capitalist growth, its volatile ecology and political expediency, those learning to love it – students, teachers and activists – have had to continually improvise. In doing so, they have managed to keep the waterlogged streets cleared for another torrential downpour of water and politics. Dibrugarh's history offers fascinating insights into the manner in which urbanisation occurs under very challenging circumstances, especially at sites that have had intense ruptures from colonial and postcolonial experiments in capitalism and counterinsurgency, and persistent exposure to severe calamities.

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