

## Social exclusion in urban Guwahati

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### Abstract

Contemporary research on urban studies explicates a systemic link of “Social exclusion” with modern urbanism. Several celebrated studies of last few decades, explains, how under modern urbanism city cosmos get structurally designed to feature the “geography of centrality and marginality, of affluence and of poverty” (Giddens). Such studies also upheld that contemporary urban spaces across the world have become highly unequal spaces, by corroborating the logic of spatial inclusion and spatial exclusion dichotomy. Thus, under modern urbanism, where spaces get continuously structured and restructured, social exclusion of some or other group are structurally reinforced, where city subalterns usually face the extreme form of exclusion in the process. In Guwahati, the emerging metropolis of Northeast India the process of social exclusion is not a rarity. As the city grows; it seems to exclude a section of people (subalterns) structurally within the city’s boundaries, while gradually incorporating the needs of “the Others”. It is under this context, that it becomes extremely important to interrogate and understand the phenomenon of social exclusion in urban spaces sociologically. This paper, hence proposes to discuss theoretically, the nature of social exclusion in Guwahati city, it will try to analyze, how certain groups and individual face deprivation of resources or of social linkages to wider community and also how certain restrictive boundaries are being constructed for them within the larger city spaces. The paper shall delve deeper to locate the structuring forces which play a major role in institutionalizing the process of social exclusion in Guwahati city.

**Keywords:** urban, social exclusion, Guwahati

### Introduction

Exclusion is the persistent feature of human society. Throughout history, in the race of attaining power and to continue indomitable dominance in society, the powerful groups use the constructed markers of inequality and exclude the other less powerful or powerless groups. It is they who construct boundaries of blockades for the others in society. If in some time primordial ties (like blood/religion/language, ethnicity etc) were being extensively used as markers to exclude the others, in other time, it was those different symbols of power’s (class position, markers of status and party) (Weber); which were being used to segregate the others. Egalitarian society with no exclusion; thus is nothing more than a utopia.

### City spaces and exclusion

Exclusion in city spaces is not a rarity. Plato some 2500 years back has observed “Any city however small, is in fact divided into two: a city of the poor and a city of the riches.” Such rigid and somehow subtle demarcation of a city continues to exist even today. Contemporary discourses on city spaces across the world reveal that, the global cities are the terrain, where the geography of centrality and marginality got structurally emphasized. Alongside resplendent affluence, there always persists a situation of acute poverty across the cities. Spatial realities of the cities are in fact the realities of juxtaposition. Such a situation hence clearly reveals the fact that within cities geography of centrality and peripherality, the culture of exclusion features vigorously.

### Exclusion in practice and the city

Exclusionary practises are concretely visible in the cities

across the world. The intensity of such practises may vary but exclusion is vigorously rampant both subjectively and objectively within the city spaces. The diversification and ghettoization exists almost in every spheres be it the case of culture, the built-up environments, land distribution, shared worldviews and shared spatiality and so on.

Several noted studies on urban landscapes have clearly pointed that in urban spaces, it was through the dynamics like the construction of land use planning, commercialization of land, implementation of infrastructure, privatization of urban services and criminalization of poor and even through the structures of urban governance, exclusion boundaries got drafted and re drafted.

Further by installing constant surveillance and state and civic policing also, the state as well as the social cosmos fixes rigid spatial as well as abstract boundaries to restrict the movement and participation of a section of people from the emerging mainstream culture of the cities.

### Contextualizing exclusion in Guwahati city

Guwahati is the major economic hub in the entire North East region serves as gateway to the Northeast India. By being the capital hub and the primate city of both the state and the region, Guwahati promises to be a city of posterity. The establishment of Guwahati refinery in 1961 marked the beginning of industrialization of the city. The development of the city was further propelled by constructing of the bridge over the Brahmaputra at Saraighat and significantly acquired a massive pace of transformation with the shifting of the state capital from Shillong to Guwahati in 1972. Since then and basically after the beginning of post liberalization era the city acquired a further pace and is growing at a phenomenal rate.

But what is significant to note here is that in the process of spatial organization of Guwahati city, there have been several instances, where some or other people particularly the city subalterns and the people residing at the periphery of the structural configuration of the city faces exclusion like never before. As the city was expanding, Commercialized planning with little interest to sustain the needs of city subalterns, exclude them all. Such commercialized planning which get materialized through the configuration of land uses being practised through the inequitable land distribution and increased commercialization of land, creates a stringent boundaries of blockades for city's impoverished groups. Further also through processes like Privatization of urban welfare services, and practices of rigid bureaucratized urban governance, which allows only the influential and organized groups to have a voice in city planning, thus brackets and excludes the entire gamut of city subalterns.

Moreover the withdrawal of state actors from the delivery of maximum urban services and the emergence of and also with the growing power of non state actors to render such services makes the process of exclusion further more viable and distinct.

### **Lets consider some of the cases of exclusion within the city Exclusion from Land**

Factually the process of spatial exclusion in Guwahati can be said to have its beginning back in 1950's itself. It was then when in late 1950, land was annexed for the construction of Guwahati refinery in Noonmati. Similar situations of displacement induced exclusion has occurred when land was annexed by the state for the construction of Borjhar Airport, Dispur Capital Complex, Assam Zoo and Botanical park and so on. In this context I want to quote the work of some prominent scholar on this issue.

#### **In Hussain's own words**

*Ironically.....urban expansion of Guwahati city has displaced the tribal mostly belonging to Karbis and Bodos. Urban expansion is pushing these people out of the city to the periphery. In 1973, when Assam's capital was shifted from Shillong to Guwahati once again the tribals had to sacrifice. An estimated 1,00,000 population were displaced at that time. Again educational institutions like Gauhati University and IIT, Guwahati have also displaced the original inhabitants of the outskirts of the city without proper rehabilitation*

Again Fernandes and Bharali also pointed that. (Fernandes, Bharali 2011

*The section of people that get displaced in and around Guwahati city been forced to spend money on immediate need like food, shelter leading to further deterioration in access to food, social and cultural status alienation of their livelihood disrupted their traditional lifestyle, cultural practices and social networks)*

Such studies conducted on the displaced groups of the city reveal the intensity and massivity of the exclusionary practises in the city. The above mentioned studies clearly shows that the because of such land annexation, many not only get excluded from the land but have lost their immediate livelihood too. Further all those people who get displaced includes mostly tribal's(Karbis and Bodos) and person belonging to poorest among OBS such as quarry and fish workers who dwells on community property resources never

get rehabilitated properly. (Hussain, Phanjoubham, 2007) <sup>[9]</sup> were forced to move on to slums. Compensation for them equally remains unsatisfactory and since no real rehabilitation was ensured leading to further impoverishment and marginalization of them

Ironically, if we consider the present day land market and city's development contours, Guwahati city and its development vision cum plan holds no promises to ensure the right of poor toward the city. Increase commercialization of land and state led land-allocations & redistributions to the business class and commercial firms are going to corroborate the situation of exclusion further. The emergence of land mafias makes the situation further fuzzier and exclusion boundaries are becoming even more rigid and unbreachable. The situation is further more problematic with even the large area of public land including forest lands, hills, wetlands and riverside areas are also under the grip of mafias. (City profile, 2014, Guwahati)

Ironically these are the sheer cases of state led exclusion, which has been carried on in collaboration with non-state actors (Real estate agents, Business firms, Landmafias,) has been common in and around Guwahati city, where many people especially the poorer, have to struggle even to maintain their as their rights toward the city are at stake.

Further, if sometimes some initiatives are being proposed to ensure inclusion they hardly works to act to promote the desired result in disseminating the rights to all the excluded sections and groups in the city space. Say for eg in case of Basic service to urban poor mission, which is a flagship mission under JNNURM, is being carried in the city recently, which propose to construct housing for urban poor in Fatasil, Morasoli and Amingoan.so far only the Morasoli construction get completed with no or little progress in case of the other proposed sites.

#### **Socio Cultural Exclusion**

Another form of exclusion that is clearly visible in urban space is the socio cultural exclusion in cities. A section of people living in periphery can never become a part or can participate in the mainstream culture of the city. A section of people always faces both subtly and overtly structurally imposed segregation and alienation from being an active member of the dominant urban culture. Guwahati also hosts a mass of material culture perpetuated through symbols and means. Today in Guwahati one will be able to find everything from shopping arcades to multiplexes, from global merchandise to globally recognized food hubs, but rarely do a section of people can ever have an access to such materiality of city culture.

#### **Exclusion on the basis of primordial ties**

Sections of population are again being excluded socially, culturally, economically and politically on the basic of primordial ties within and across the city. The presence of community centric neighbourhoods within the city spaces clearly indicates the dichotomous situation of exclusion within the city. The presence of such dichotomous boundaries clearly reveals that the practices of a community closures, and segregation of others on the basis of primordial ties like religion, culture, race etc have been in practise throughout the city. As reported by a many urbanities across the cities, even today, when someone goes one buying a housing unit then

builders will keep on asking you about your religion. Moreover the city the dwelling and gated neighbourhoods also reflect such a tendency. Exclusion boundaries based on primordial ties were stressed even by much urbanites, when they asked for the worldly affinities in their dwelling spaces by taking into consideration their primordial bases.

### Conclusion

Though the social landscape of Guwahati city provides space for cross cultural integration and assimilation, the built in city structure itself seems to procreate a higher degree of social inequality and exclusion. The evidences of social polarisation, social segregation and social exclusion are distinctly vivid within the structural landscape of the city. The forces of neoliberals and market driven production and consumption logistics, top bottom models of development, stringent nature of bureaucratic rationality systemically and structurally excludes the city subalterns from having equal right and access toward the city and its various avenues. A considerable section of people, who resides at the margins of city structure struggle hard to find a place for them in the city. They are the sections of people who exists at the periphery will be the first to get evicted from their lands from their traditions, from their shared worldviews and habitués Within this process of city making the city subalterns hence hardly held's any rights.

To all these, the most disturbing fact is that, in craving such a structure of the exclusion within the city, the state plays a lead role. Under the utopian dream of emancipator mercantilism, they have failed blatantly to pay any heed toward the rights of the city subalterns. And in doing so the state collaborates with the host of non state actors (the real estate agents, corporate) and continuously busy in configuring and reconfiguring the structure of exclusion for a section of people within the city.

In fact it will probably not be an exaggerate version if I say that the whole of city space at the present movement of time were being designed and redesigned to sustain and propagate the needs of riches and the other well-off classes in the city. The city spaces were materialized in such a way that it was mended to sustain the needs of business class and hence exclude the subalterns from participating in the mainstream society. In the process of making and remaking of the city, hence the needs and requirements of subalterns often got submerged to the dreams and desires of the city riches.

Thus process of exclusion was being subtly arranged within the socio-structural mapping of Guwahati city. The present state of planning and constructing of city might bring functional utility and prosperity in the many aspects of the region, but definitely not inclusion. And any space which procreates exclusion of its indigenous people and city subalterns for long cannot have a sustainable future, cannot be a sustainable base of human prosperity. Hence it can be predicts that if exclusion of the city subalterns within the city continues at the same rate it will bring chaos, violence and will enlarge urban predicaments.

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