

Markets & the City: Planning Interventions & Markets in Guwahati City, India

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Abstract

Older cities pre-existing the founding of modern Guwahati city were important trade centers in the Indian eastern region. From the nineteenth century, the colonial regime began reorganizing the spaces in Indian urban centers through town planning schemes. The article investigates how town planning schemes and modern urban planning in Guwahati city changed the forms and locations of the public markets with the city's outwards expansion. An exploratory approach was taken to review the archival and documentary material available on Guwahati's public markets, including the publicly available historical maps and master plans to understand the public rationale for the changes. Although ideas of change and development were inducted into the city land-use plans, the article yields an answer to the problem of why successive master plans have failed to get the natural development of the city public markets to follow the urban planning goals for the city.

Keywords: *Town Planning, Public Markets, Colonialism in Assam, Urban Space, Municipalities in Assam, India*

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Introduction

Urban planning and its implementation in cities in modern India have created diverse urbanization paths due to India's immense size and diversity. Divergent urban planning policies for different states in India and shortcomings of personnel, methods, and funding led to unique problems and opportunities for urban planners. Population expansion in the cities, especially in the new cities that developed in the post-independence period, did not always follow limitations defined by city master plans. City market centers were affected by the implementation of the master plans. Large unplanned, congested settlements emerged on land around market centers, creating concerns about hygiene and traffic around the market areas. In some newly developed cities in post-independence India, retail markets were planned. However, the absence of planning for the natural growth of city areas for wholesale warehousing and truck terminals around the municipal public markets caused the older public markets in cities to emerge as problem city areas for planners (Jagannathan, 1987).

Urban public markets in India, including markets recognized by city administrators or municipal public markets, have been affected by significant political and economic challenges. The sociologist N. Jayaram, for example, writes how changes in the international economic and political order since the 1990s impacted the local and milieu dimensions of cities. After the Indian economy began to liberalize in the 1990s and the country's economy developed rapidly, planning and re-planning the cities has been transformational (Jayaram, 2010).

Public markets in Guwahati city in the northeastern state of Assam have been subject to both of these mega changes. The forms and locations of some of the public markets have survived from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The transition of the city spaces from their location in the erstwhile towns and colonial stations of Guwahati in the nineteenth century to the modern and enlarging megacity of Guwahati in the eastern region stressed the market's outer forms. The land-use arrangements in fast-growing megacities across the Asian region from Mumbai to Jakarta have shown that the economic relations of the society, the differences in modes of income of the rich and the poor, and their growing inequality affect the ways urban lands gets used for different public purposes (Alwi, 2016). The cities' public spaces develop in response to the reconfiguring of the economic relations. Urban planning has been crucial in this. This article studies the irregular and disordered spill out of public markets in Guwahati in ways the city master plans had not designed and observes some of the reasons for this phenomenon.

Public Markets and the Imprint of the Colonial in the Post-Colonial Town Planning Practices

The British colonial government in India, from its earliest days after its arrival on the subcontinent, treated the indigenous markets, the '*bazaar*' areas, with contempt (Beattie, 2003). The *bazaars* were often the centres of the habitations of the indigenous population. In Kolkata, where the British first marked their foothold and which later became the political centre of British India, the colonizers were careful to establish the European settlement away from "Barabazaar," the main *bazaar* of Kolkata. The local public market areas were places of squalor, diseases, and

a source of concern for public health (Beattie, 2003). Other academics of colonial public architecture and urban planning, such as Sen (2010) and Omolo-Okalebo et al. (2010), agree that the international political economy in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and the internal political equations in the colonies determined the physical patterns of the European settlements in the colonies. As Beattie (2003:18) writes, "the ideals of health and hygiene are intimately connected to a dominant "Western" narrative of modernity."

Town planning in colonial stations across India, Africa, and Southeast Asia benefitted from modern town planning and urban development ideas in Europe. The urban planning theories generated resources and the processes for reorienting the urban areas to serve the needs of economic production, trade, and colonial administration (Home, 2013). The arrival of these ideas prompted, for example, in Singapore, major urban reforms designed to correct its "scandalous" "insanitary" conditions (Chang, 2013:37). In far-off Kampala in Africa, the local marketplaces were also separated from the European station for awarding the white population a hygienic and comfortable living condition (Omolo-Okalebo et al., 2010).

Despite the inadequacies of the modernistic colonial town planning approaches, postcolonial planning practices sustained its faith in the objective function of town planning of putting into order the chaotic urban space of the colonial natives (Sharan, 2014; Omolo-Okalebo et al., 2010). For understanding the application of the postcolonial planning theories in our local context, the transfer of ideas from the colonial to the postcolonial becomes necessary. In post-independence India, Sharan (2014) writes that town planners and land use economists assumed greater powers than even the sanitarians and public health engineers in the colonial period. The elected representatives reserved some democratic say in the master plans the town planners prepared, but they let the planners deal with the greater part of preparing and implementing the plans (Kalia, 2006). The master plans were raised to a new centre stage. The urban space of public markets was squeezed from two ends: master plans intending to improve the living and hygiene conditions of the nation's citizens; and creating zones for separation of residential, commercial, and public markets and other specific urban spaces. Thus, while public markets were seen only as areas of disease and unhygienic conditions in the colonial frame, the chaos and disorder of the existing public markets in cities became part of the common discourse of citizen-centric town planning focusing on local convenience and accessibility.

Methodology

There are very scant direct documentary resources on the old public markets of Guwahati. For the purposes of this article, the documentary evidence available at the Assam State Archives was reviewed. An exploratory approach was taken to review the other archival material and literature available on Guwahati's public markets, including the publicly available historical maps and master plans. A systematic rereading of this collected resource allowed for the development of this history of the growth and unsystematic spill out of the public markets from the nature of growth intended in the master plans.

Fort Towns to Colonial Station: History of Public Markets in Guwahati

History of Planning for Public Markets

The historical emergence of physical and spatial forms of urban markets across India has convergence with the general history of the emergence of public markets across the world. In the busy river and seaports, the arrival and dispatch of commodities on merchant ships from abroad and on inland vessels for exports facilitated local trade at the city, and the shaping up of markets for this trade led port cities to become thriving economic centers. The city of New Orleans, for example, began as an outpost of the French regime in North America in 1718, but the growth of public markets along the river later led New Orleans to become an important economic hub for trade with Cuba, Haiti, and Mexico (Sauder, 1981). However, in interior cities as well, such as in Quito, from the time of the city's foundation in the fifteenth century, expansion and increase of urban markets have accompanied the expansion and growth of the city (Bromley, 1974).

In Guwahati city, there are historical references to the existence of forms of markets in the ancient cities and medieval fort towns that preceded the foundation of modern Guwahati by the British in the early nineteenth century. The introduction of modern engineering, architectural practices, and colonial public works distorted the everyday existences of the precolonial public markets. The gradual formalization of public spaces of the markets and its reconstruction according to colonial methods displaced the markets from their original spaces in the old city for various public purposes such as to make the traditionally existing public markets or autonomous markets conform to approved hygiene conditions and implementation of town public work schemes.

The planning of the public markets in Guwahati in the colonial period ushered in the markets as space for public service provisioning rather than as autonomous economic spaces. Town planning in the medieval and ancient historical periods designed the Assam towns as garrisons and forts (Baruah, 2007; Konwar, 2014). Although the Ahom rulers in Assam encouraged the development of markets, public markets in the floodplain terrains and social relations of Assam were events rather than spaces. This was so because markets were autonomously organized on specific weekdays in temporary locations that shifted whenever annual floods occurred (Saikia, 2019). In contrast, the colonial period marked a departure in the ways the locations of market establishments were decided and the markets were administered.

Town planning in postcolonial India treaded a trajectory away from the colonial to adopt modern ideals of change and development while retaining a sense of national and even local identity in the town plans (Shaw, 2009). Urban land-uses, their tenures, and the laws and taxations governing them were amended gradually to reflect independent India's welfare and modernist ideals. Town planning laws across the states empowered municipalities to prepare master plans for planned growth and development. Municipalities were also empowered to purchase lands, levy property and betterment taxes, and draw up schemes and implement them to operationalize the master plans. It allowed the municipalities to secure proper

sanitary conditions, amenities, and convenience for urban areas. The urban markets were reconstructed, new markets were constructed, and lands were reserved for this purpose in municipality areas.

In Guwahati, land-use planning for expanding urban economic spaces for retail and wholesale goods markets merged with urban space planning for public markets. The Municipal administration regulated, ordered, and reordered the public market spaces to conform them to overall town development schemes. After independence, the existing town municipal authority was replaced with a municipal corporation to give it appropriate legal powers for the effective administration of a growing city. A parallel city planning authority was also set up for systematic and orderly growth of the urban areas. The two city authorities were instituted to ensure land-use modifications adapted to "changing circumstances." The planning authority was to prepare master plans to enable "the future development of the city and its suburbs in a planned way for coming years."¹ After this time, the planning systems for ordering and reordering municipal public markets in the city's space have become governed by the city master plans.

The Oldest Public Markets of Guwahati

The geography of Guwahati –its location at a small bend of the river Brahmaputra and the topography of hills on both sides of it sheltering its ecologically unsteady narrow floodplains; has supported the sustenance of trade and commerce through courses of history (Saikia, 2019). The ancient Hindu epic, the Ramayana, and other texts such as the Kalika Purana, described the geography around Guwahati as water-logged and low-lying areas (Baruah, 1933). The old towns of Guwahati, which were called Pragjyotishpur in the ancient age, Kamrupnagara in the early medieval age and came to be known by its present name of Guwahati; or Gauhati as the British called it, was situated across river islands formed out of the river, its channels and its hill tributaries. The channels on the south bank gradually dried up to form a contiguous landmass as the several narrow rivulets on the south bank and small and large lakes, locally called *Beels*, became separated from the main channel. The successive medieval fort towns and present-day Guwahati city have expanded across the narrow strip of the Brahmaputra floodplain (Hemani and Das, 2016).

According to one interpretation of the name Guwahati, it was derived from "guva-hatta," which meant the market for areca-nuts (Raichoudhary, 2017). An important economic center developed in Guwahati when the earliest of Guwahati's cities was established. Trade took place in its markets for grains, betel leaves, areca nuts and coconuts, pepper, cardamom, and black aloe trees. An east-to-west arterial road was constructed in the fifth century CE that connected the market center with the temples at the hillocks of the town. Riverside markets were located at the east and the west ends of the town. These served as the principal trade markets for the surplus rural agricultural production. These east and west end public markets, located respectively at Kachari-ghat and Pandu-ghat, also became the prominent ports for the arrival and dispatch of the riverine trade of the city and the kingdoms in Assam (Hemani and Das, 2016).

In the late medieval age, the four most important public markets were located in four directions of the fort of Guwahati by the side of dug-out canals, a small tributary of the Brahmaputra called the Bharalu, and by the river itself. This description of these markets in old Guwahati has been provided by a literary source left behind by an aristocrat of the Ahom monarchy, the last independent rulers of Assam before the arrival of the British. The eastern market was close to the old port market at Kachari and was called first the Chowk Bazaar and later became known as Uzan Bazaar. The location of the Kachari market possibly shifted sometime in the medieval period due to the Brahmaputra riverbank's erosion and deposition.

The western market of the town was called the Dolong Bazaar (bridge market, in Assamese) and was located by a timber bridge near the mouth of the Bharalu (Raichoudhary, 2017). This point was located about six kilometers east of the erstwhile river port of Pandu. The reason the market at Pandu ghat became separated from the markets of Guwahati in the late medieval age was that the Mughals were expanding eastwards from Bengal from the end of the 16th century, and by the year 1615CE, the strategic port of Pandu came under Mughal control. The two other markets within Guwahati were Paltan Bazaar towards the south and Faasi Bazaar (now known as Fancy Bazaar) by the river in the town center. The public market at Faasi Bazaar became the commercial center of the town, where 200-300 people came every day to trade (Raichoudhary, 2017).

The second order of public markets in Guwahati was outside the fort boundaries and was therefore not directly governed by Ahom administrators. The establishment of the Ahom state in the Brahmaputra valley fostered a trade relationship between the hill population and the plains settlers. There were eighteen small principalities in the foothills along the Brahmaputra river valley and one such principality was Beltola, the territories of which began right from the southern edge of the Ahom held territories in Guwahati. Trade exchange between the tribal inhabitants in Guwahati's neighboring hills and the city's plains inhabitants took place at a principal public market at Beltola, located about fifteen kilometers south of the town center (Choudhury, 2017).

The third order of markets in the neighborhoods of Guwahati was the autonomous markets that came up wherever there was a societal need for the establishment of regular commerce between traders and local peasants. These markets called *haat* were set up every week and were a hallmark of the floodplain terrain of the Brahmaputra. Since the sandbars and the islands where the peasants grew their produce were shifting all the time, the location of these public markets was never permanent (Saikia, 2019). Some of these "internal markets" in Assam that became stationary over time were formalized and, at some places, were subjected to toll taxation by the Ahom administration, but only a small proportion of the revenue was got from market taxes (Barpujari, 2007a).

The Public Markets of Guwahati in the Colonial Era

The British annexation of Assam in the nineteenth century led to the arrival of its officials in Guwahati. The British recognized the strategic importance of the

former Ahom station at Guwahati, and after taking control of it, established their center of government of Assam here. The change of political control of Guwahati to the British started a new period in the spatial reorganization of Guwahati (Hemani and Das, 2016). It remained the center of the colonial power in Assam province until 1873 when the office of the Chief Commissioner of Assam was shifted to the newly established station at Shillong in the hills located to the south of Guwahati. However, Guwahati continued to be headquarters for the Commissioner and Judge of the British territories in the Brahmaputra valley and an important military station for the region (Barpujari, 2007a). Its location by the river and the active commerce at the Guwahati markets between merchants and the ordinary populations at the *haats* in the neighborhoods grew the town's commercial importance. The colonial government extended the telegraph line to Guwahati and improved other means of communications with Bengal.

The colonial administrators were unimpressed with the habitability of Guwahati, however, and they wanted to change the spatial structure of the town. The government established a modern bureaucratic municipality for the town's development and gave it the authority to raise taxes from homesteads and the markets. It empowered it to implement schemes to maintain sanitary conditions and other urban services in the town. Francis Hamilton, an employee of the East India Company, who was tasked with reporting on the topography and history of Assam, called the town "a very poor place" (Hamilton, 1940). According to some of the first colonial visitors, it was full of jungles, marshes, and tanks choked up with weeds. The colonial government altered the town by cutting down the jungles, clearing the tanks, removing the sloughs, and encouraging cultivation in the neighboring fields from funds raised through a hearth-tax imposed on its residents (Barpujari, 2007b). For maintaining sanitation and hygiene standards in the public markets, the municipal authority started schemes to improve its approaches, lighting and drainages near markets.

The medieval era public market at Kachari ghat was relocated again by the colonial municipal authority to construct the civil lines at Uzan Bazaar while Dolong Bazaar, Paltan Bazaar, and Faasi Bazaar public markets were improved. At present, there are three markets at Uzan Bazaar that can lay claim to the heritage of the medieval public market near Kachari. The establishment of the municipality for the town's governance in the colonial period introduced a new concept of the market in the universe of regional commerce. The wet markets for the commerce of vegetables, fruits, and meats came to be known by the administrative term markets; these were more precisely called the 'municipal markets' because of the municipality's regulatory role in ensuring sanitation and hygiene standards. The other markets were the more general market areas of the town where shops and establishments were collected together and later developed to become the central business localities of the town. This distinction was foreign to the indigenous ideas of markets. Such a new market, now known as the Pan Bazaar, the colonial government established north of the cantonment near the Paltan Bazaar public market for supplies to the town's European residents, but it also came to be known by the indigenous term of the bazaar (Hazarika, 2002).

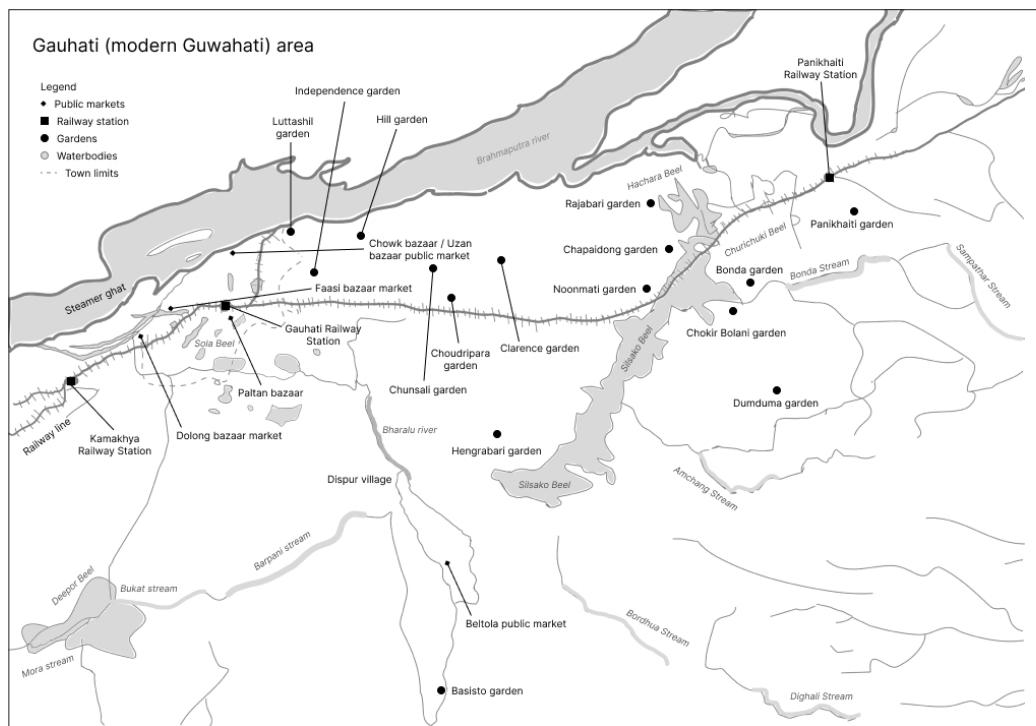


Figure 1. Guwahati Town in 1911, Assam State Archives (map prepared by Subhankar Das).

The spatial planning of the colonial government in this early period of its rule was limited to sanitation inspections of the existing native public markets while public constructions of streets, bridges, embankments and the civil lines at Uzan Bazaar for making the town habitable for the Europeans restrained natural expansions of the native public markets. The setting up of the municipality as an independent level of government for improving the town through development schemes set out Guwahati's municipal public markets from the internal markets distributed across rural surroundings of the town. This was another departure from the practice in the Ahom rule, which had a uniform administration system for rural and urban public markets. The colonial administration encouraged cultivations at the edge of the town so that the hills along the riverside at the town limits soon became covered with tea gardens (Barpujari, 2007b).

The establishment of Guwahati as a modern municipal town made the availability of space for the emergence of newer temporary public markets limited. Whereas the floodplain terrains had supported the free emergence of shifting farmers' markets, municipal spatial planning pushed the continuation of the traditional market-event practices outside the town boundaries. The tribal subsistent farmers cultivating and inhabiting the surrounding hills would only sell their excess productions to merchants outside the town. The Beltola public market and similar barter markets for commercial exchange between communities of the Guwahati valley continued to exist along the southern foothills (Choudhury, 2017).

With an increase in trade, the merchants' market area at Faasi Bazaar expanded in space. The improvement of communications to Assam, the establishment of

the European colony in Guwahati, and the material changes colonial rule in India introduced to society generated demand for machine products. The increase of trade opportunities led to the opening of a newer and increasing number of shops and establishments around the European market at Pan Bazaar and the civil lines at Uzan bazaar.

Until the 1940s, there were only a few trades and shops at the business center, such as a newspaper agency, bakery, optical shops, book shops, clothes stores, departmental stores, and liquor stores. The trade at these shops supplied to the urban consumption demands of the European and native upper classes in other towns of Assam as well apart from Guwahati (Raichoudhary, 2017). For example, a bakery named the Shaikh Brothers, which continues to exist now by the same name was started in 1885 by a family of merchants from Bengal who began by supplying uniform accessories to British soldiers in Assam and later moved to the bakery and then expanded it to general consumer goods business. The shop served the colonial officers and European planters across Assam. It had a regular supply line to Shillong for its bakery products, and by the year 1905, it became the official supplier to the Assam Chief Commissioner's residence at Shillong (Banerjee, 2004). With population increase in Guwahati town and growth of business in Assam, the town commercial area expanded southwards and westwards from Pan Bazaar and Uzan Bazaar towards the old public markets of Paltan Bazaar in the south and Dolong Bazaar in the west.

Master-Planning the City Markets

After India's independence from British rule in 1947, Guwahati remained the center of commerce in Assam. Mass migration from Bengal and interior parts of Assam due to the partition of British India increased the town's population. It increased from just 44,000 in 1951 to more than 100,000 in 1961 (Hemani and Das, 2016). The town limits were extended to the narrow valleys west of the public markets in Dolong Bazaar and east and south of Uzan Bazaar and Pan Bazaar to include new settlements in the town. The independent provincial government in Assam adopted the colonial model for town governance and urban municipal planning but followed the emerging new vision for town planning across India that combined acceptance of the colonial burdens on town planning science with the necessity of integrating the indigenous Indian culture and tradition of public spaces use with it (Shaw, 2009). The government further improved rail and road connectivity to the town by constructing a bridge across the Brahmaputra in the 1960s. It established public sector industries and encouraged the growth of private trade and small industries.

The next stage in the evolution of municipal governance in Guwahati came when the capital was shifted here from the hill town of Shillong in 1972. The need for planned development of the enlarging city got the government to reconstitute the municipality into the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC). This step was joined by the constitution of another office, the Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA), in 1985. It was given the authority to draw up master plans for its planned development. The authority was also given powers to formulate and

execute schemes for enforcement and execution of the master plan. The GMC retained the ordinary municipal powers to tax, inspect and regulate the municipal public markets and other commercial areas and the trade carried out in its market stalls, shops, sheds, pens, and building quarters (Choudhury, 2012). The GMC had powers to lease or acquire lands to construct and maintain new infrastructures for the municipal public markets and slaughterhouses. It also had powers of supervision and licensing over public markets the municipality did not directly own or control; these markets have become known in GMC regulations as "private markets" (Choudhury, 2012).

Traders in private markets paid rents to their property owners rather than the government. These markets started as irregular clusters of vendors in newer urban settlements as the town expanded outwards from the old town center around Uzan Bazaar and Pan Bazaar areas. One such private market was recognized in 1967 in Silpukhuri, three kilometers east of Uzan Bazaar. Vendors in these markets would form associations for common dues and regulate themselves.² The recognition and indirect administration of private markets have become an established practice in the Guwahati municipality. There are currently four such markets under the GMC, and no new municipal public markets were established until the most recent decades.

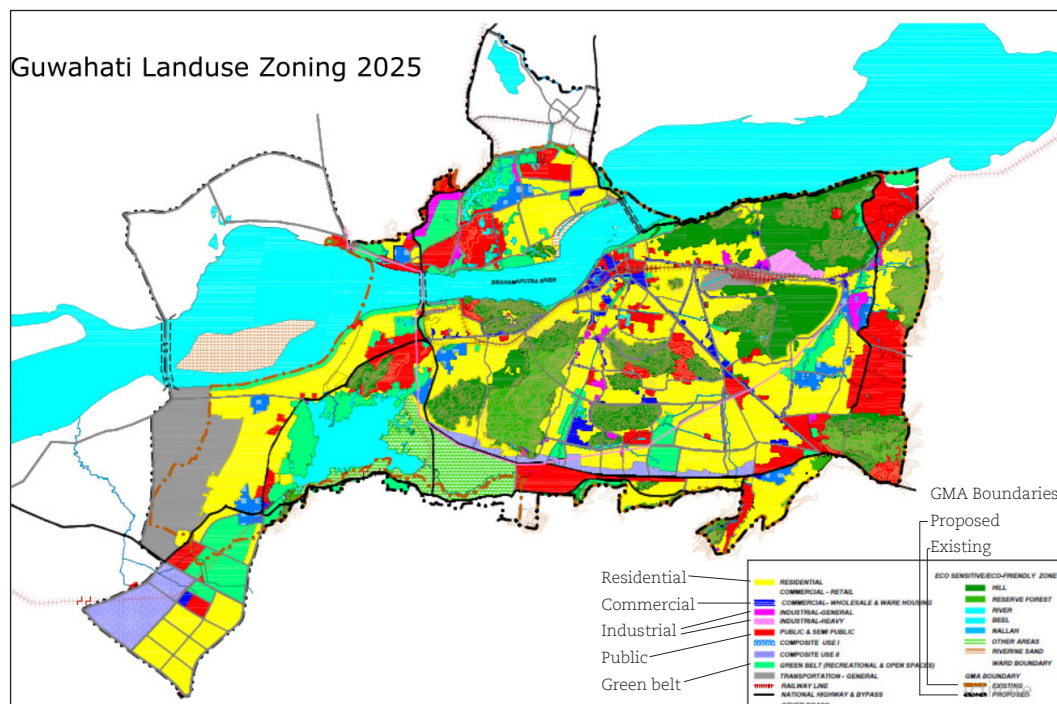


Figure 2. Guwahati Landuse Zoning 2025. Extracted from Guwahati City Land-Use Master Plan 2025.⁶

The general old commercial areas of the city have evolved to reorganize spatially into clusters of shops and establishments that trade in similar articles or the same sector, mimicking the general pattern of urbanization for many global cities (Colson, 2016). The commercial areas spreading out from Pan Bazaar and the Faasi

Bazaar public market have expanded south and west to integrate the residential and semi-residential areas of Machkhowa, Athgaon, and Lakhtokia to form the major retail and wholesale commercial areas of the city. The Athgaon area, close to the Paltan Bazaar area on the old trunk road of Assam, has become known for automobile spare parts, electrical equipment, construction materials, and hardware. The Pan Bazaar area has publishing houses, book stores, newspaper agencies, and some retention of shops and establishments from the colonial period, such as the Shaikh Brothers bakery. The Faasi Bazaar area also has establishments dating to the late 1800s that trade in grains, Assam tea, fruits and vegetables, cut flowers, aluminum, steel and iron implements, and household items. It also has the city's older clothes, silk, and cotton traders. There is a municipal wholesale public market for fresh fish on the riverbank along the Uzan Bazaar area. The Lakhtokia commercial area, situated between Pan Bazaar and Faasi Bazaar areas, has the old electronics establishments of the city and hundreds of small shops doing trade in electronic spare parts and repair services.

The distinction of the city's business areas as retail, commercial areas, and wholesale commercial areas has been a relatively new development. This distinction began to come in the 1960s when the state government adopted the first master plan for the planned development of Guwahati. The master plan regulations have had separate guidelines for building constructions in retail and wholesale commercial areas, but enforcement of regulations has always been an unending challenge for the city's municipal and development administrators (Hemani and Das, 2016). Because of this, the central commercial areas have remained mixed land-use spaces where residences, public offices, and retail and wholesale establishments now huddle together.

As one might observe by comparing older city maps with successive city master plans, spatial expansions of the city have got newer commercial areas, municipal public markets, and other municipality-recognized markets to distribute across the south bank areas. The municipality-recognized markets came up as irregular markets in newer residential zones of the city, and municipal administrators extracted only periodic lease and toll charges from their traders. The municipality did not own or directly run these markets. These markets have multiplied with time, even in the older residential areas. At present, amongst the cluster of public markets in Uzan Bazaar area, a public market at the GMC office building at Uzan Bazaar the municipality directly administers while the Uzan Bazaar fish market, the Kachari ghat market, and its hawkers are administered through leases and toll collections; the role of the municipality is limited to sanitation inspections.³ There also comes to the Uzan Bazaar GMC public market, especially on Sundays, the weekly and occasional farm producer who does not have the usual trade license and the stall allotment at the market to trade her produce regularly but pays a toll for setting up temporary shops on the pavements.

The approach for developing planned city markets recognized a need to remove ugly, unorganized, and dirty public market spaces and replace them with modern

remodeled urban structures. After the transfer of the capital to Dispur, the adjacent Ganeshguri area, then an important intersection on the Guwahati-Shillong road, was redeveloped to make its space fit the requirements for developing the capital area. There was a public market adjacent to a government-run school called the Gopal Boro School before the Dispur areas came under municipality control. GMC market inspectors found the old Ganeshguri public market a chaotic and untidy place, and it was a source of disturbance for the school.⁴ The municipality realized a need for having a planned commercial area, including public markets in the capital area. Towards 1979, it drew up a scheme to redevelop the commercial area by constructing permanent structures for the old public market. The construction block was divided into sections for categories of vendors for the sale of vegetables, fish, and meat separately. There were to be neatly spaced corridors for walking between the sections. The plan provided adequate public toilets and a separate porters' lobby in the market. Perimeters of the market were changed to comply with the construction regulations under the city master plan.⁵

The implementation of the master plans has altered the structures of older public markets. The space around the medieval-era public market at Kacharighat, which now exists as a toll collection municipal market, was changed through a city improvement scheme started in 1989. The scheme designed the riverfront running along the main road by the market to open up tourism opportunities in the city. Its riverfront project in Uzan Bazaar and Kachari removed the market from its former more prominent location and pushed it to a corner at a turn of the road before the road approached an incline to the Assam Governor and other state residences. The succession of the scheme by other similar improvement schemes in the future, the opening of a riverfront jogger's park, establishment of retail shops in the area, and improvement of the river ghat have wholly hidden the Kachari public market from the curve of the main road. The approach to the market has narrowed to a thin stairs corridor running downwards by the ghat. From there, the market extends along the riverbank behind towering government offices that cover the market from the city's viewers located farther from the riverbank. The other end of the market is very near to the High Court of Assam and remains separated from its buildings by perimeter walls.

In some places, especially the older city areas, the city master plans have made the public markets enclaves in otherwise residential zones. In Uzan Bazaar area, the plans disfavor the future expansions of the public market located here because the area is a residential zone; the public markets have been permitted to stay as they exist, if only for the time being. The city's larger commercial areas have also been made to follow the same principle: new constructions or redevelopments in wholesale or retail commercial zones have been required to follow specified guidelines for such constructions in each zone. New constructions have not been allowed to relocate outside zone limits.⁶ In this way, despite the constraints of the city planning authorities in implementing municipal bye-laws and ensuring its compliance, the phase of administration of the city space through master plans has inaugurated an era of systematizing control on how commercial areas would expand.

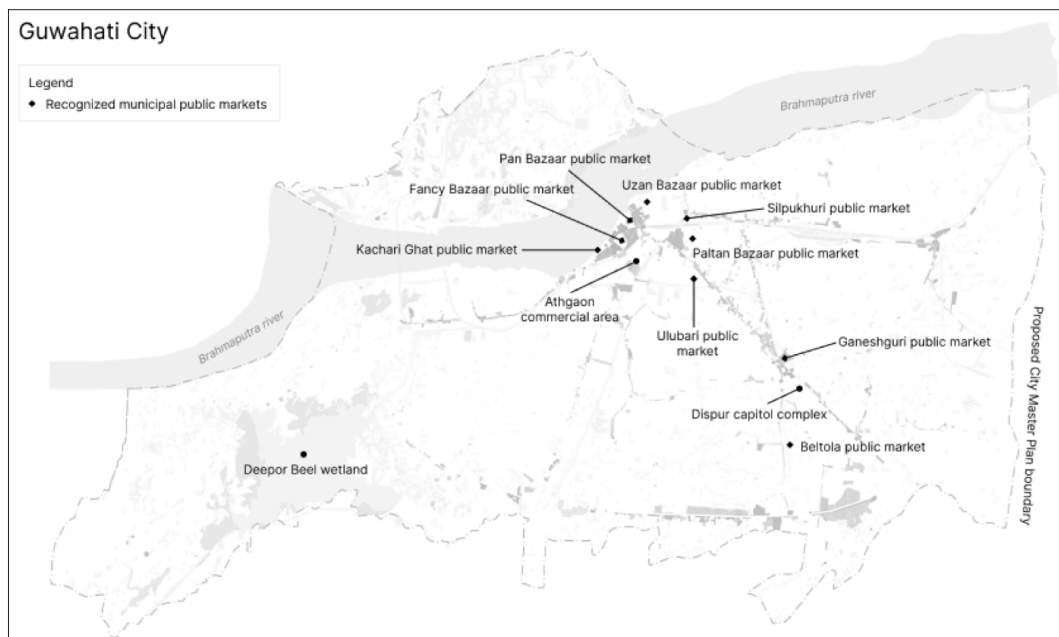


Figure 3. Extracted from Guwahati City Proposed Land-Use Master Plan 2025 (map prepared by Subhankar Das).

The municipality's limited land and financial resources for establishing new municipal public markets across the city and costs involved in traders using the municipal market infrastructures lead individual farm producers and small traders to vend articles at makeshift locations and some traders to sell door to door (The Sentinel, 2019). The hawkers source their articles from the wholesale markets in Guwahati or the peripheral villages producing the vegetables, fruits, chicken, or fish. The city wholesale vegetable and meat markets have expanded from its delimited public market in Faasi Bazaar. Vendors evicted from the wholesale market's peripheries due to violations of space regulations competed for allotments at an alternative wholesale market that the state government constructed for the use of wholesale vegetable traders in 2012 near the city bypass on the southern edge. The overspill of traders in municipal public markets and the consequent scattering of roadside vegetable vendors and door-to-door vendors make a contrasting image to the relative unrestricted license for traders to occupy space and conduct business in the pre-modern city.

The discipline and control inclinations of municipal public markets here replace the relative wildness and freedom in the unregulated agrarian and traditional public market spaces. For example, the traditional marketing practice at the Beltola market for exchanges between communities has changed to a bi-weekly public market during which subsistent farm producers from neighboring rural areas and small traders arranging to bring these farm products to the market meet to trade with interested city residents. The market gets organized on stretches along a main city road in the Beltola-Dispur area, two kilometers from the capitol complex, rather than in any open field or evacuated site. Since the expansion of Guwahati city to the new capitol complex at Dispur and development of the surrounding areas, especially since the 2000s, the Beltola weekly public markets have been

eyesores for many city residents who feel the Beltola market has become now known more for its wilderness and causing traffic disruptions than for traditions or culture. The regulated municipal public markets are preferred, and markets like the Beltola weekly markets are seen as aberrations defying the city's spatial order. The marketing becomes "harassment" to city commuters (Barman, 2018).

City residents also complain of the same harassment for the random temporary public markets that have come up in the newer residential areas. For residents, these smaller street markets decrease commuting time to municipal public markets, but like in the Beltola weekly markets, random clusters of meat and vegetable vendors near the streets obstruct the residential areas. When these traders have operated without licenses, the municipality's enforcement officers have evicted their stalls from residential areas of the city, especially when street markets have obstructed traffic on major city roads.

Operation of the private markets, like the disaggregated street vendors and hawkers, municipal authorities have understood to be the markets of disorder and chaos instead of organization and discipline in the functioning of municipal public markets. Vendors have been vulnerable to being forced by the property owner or the rent collector she appoints to pay arbitrary taxes in goods or terms of money. In one of the private markets near the Beltola area, I was told that if it suits the municipal rent collector, she takes away from the vendor, in place of rents, a duck, some fish, or a similar amount of vegetable. There are also no proper sanitation inspections of this category of markets. Organic wastes, including animal body parts, are dumped on the sides of the roads and streets.

Conclusion

The old public markets are now some of the more renowned areas of present-day Guwahati city. The markets lent their names to the general residential and commercial areas where these markets are now located. Its traditions and histories have created a significance of their own for the local culture and local tourism of Assam. This article helped collate the literature and documents on the public markets of Guwahati and thereby write a history of the evolution of its public markets. The role of town planning and the master plans was analysed in marking out the paths for the evolution of the physical forms of the public markets. It has brought forth some observations that may help future urban planning policies.

Although the old public markets remain rooted in their original locations or neighborhoods, the random springing up of unmanaged markets across the city may indicate preservation of the culture of mobility of public markets in the Brahmaputra valley. The city master plans designed the spatial planning for commercial areas in the expanded city areas. However, the lack of dedicated planning for the public markets, making them convenient spaces and developing access for the city's residents, continues to make the management of the public markets a troublesome urban problem for the municipal administration and the residents. Implementation of the master plans needs to ensure that the public markets have an independent spatial existence distinguished from the existence of the general commercial areas in the city.

Endnotes

- 1 Modified Final Master Plan and Zoning Regulations for Guwahati, Town & Country Planning Organization, Government of Assam, (1987).
- 2 File no. MA 19/67, Fixation of License Fee on Private Markets, Assam State Archives.
- 3 (document), Office of the Guwahati Municipal Corporation, Market Branch, Lakhtokia, Guwahati.
- 4 File no. TCP 7/79 B, Construction of Market at Ganeshguri by GMC, Assam State Archives.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority, Landuse Zoning Plan – 2025 [map], Guwahati: GMDA. http://www.gmda.co.in/master_plan.php

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