



Neoliberal Urbanisation & Its Impact on the Tribal Population in Guwahati City: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The term 'neoliberalisation' refers to a dominant political and economic ideology that advocates free trade, deregulation, globalisation and a reduction in government spending, which has existed globally over the last four to five decades and is widely prevalent in academic and political debates. The policy emphasises the laissez-faire school of economics, which prescribes minimal government intervention in economic matters and emphasises the role of privatisation to the greatest extent. The policy began gradually in Assam after the Government of India adopted the New Economic Reform Policy (NEP) in the post-1990s period. Over recent decades, Guwahati has transitioned from a predominantly tribal settlement to a rapidly urbanising regional hub, driven by market-oriented policies, infrastructural development and private-sector involvement, which highlights the rapid implementation of neoliberalisation in the city. Such ongoing transformations of the 21st century have led to significant socio-economic and cultural shifts. This study critically examines the effects of neoliberal urbanisation on the tribal communities in Guwahati, Assam. The study also looks into the impact of neoliberal urbanisation on the tribal groups by focusing the ratio of displacement, land alienation, cultural erosion and livelihood disruptions. It reflects the interplay of state and market forces driving these ongoing changes and combines theoretical frameworks with empirical data to understand how urbanisation intensifies social inequalities and endangers indigenous communities of the city.

Keywords: Neoliberalisation, Tribal Population, Guwahati, Indigenous

1. Introduction

The term 'tribal' originates from the Latin Word 'Tribus', typically indicating the 'one third' or 'a group'. Broadly, it refers to a social collective sharing common ancestry, language, culture and territory. Indigenous tribal communities have long been characterized by a sense of shared identity, customs, traditions and belief systems as well as a unique social connection. Also known as "Adivasis" which means the land's original inhabitants, tribal groups are found worldwide. Globally around 476 million tribal individuals reside in 90 countries which accounts for 6.2% of the population (World Bank Report 2025). In India, the 2011 census and Ministry of Tribal Affairs report indicates scheduled tribe population of approximately 104 million which is roughly 8.6% of the total population from which 705 are recognized as ethnic groups. Assam's tribal population as per the 2011 census stands at around 3,88,4371 making up 12.4% of the state's population.

Under Article 342, the President of India, after consulting the Governor, has officially notified indigenous groups as scheduled tribes based on accepted criteria such as primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact and socio-economic backwardness. These groups are still vulnerable to significant challenges in education, technology and economic development. Many areas are still suffering with low literacy rates, limited access to quality education and a lack of technological infrastructure. The financial activities of these people are often subsistence-based, with minimal capital formation and restricted access to banking services. Additionally, these communities tend to maintain traditional lifestyles, leading to limited interaction with the broader world and slower development.

Neoliberalism emerged globally in the late 1970s and early 1980s era, primarily promoted by thinkers like Friedrich Hayek and economists such as Milton Friedman and institutionalised under leaders like Margaret Thatcher from the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US, who introduced policies of deregulation, privatisation and reduced state

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intervention in response to economic policies. In India, the balance-of-payments crisis and other serious threats led Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao to introduce the revolutionary LPG reforms (liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation) that transitioned the economy from state control toward greater market orientation under pressure from institutions such as the IMF and World Bank. The widespread effect of neoliberalisation of the 21st century is rigorously affecting the lives of millions of tribal people, leading to marginalisation of the indigenous communities, displacement, cultural erosion, land alienation and livelihood disruptions, etc. Due to development-oriented projects since 1951 to till now, more than 21 million tribal people were displaced, which is a significant portion of the 55% population and only 25% population got resettled. Although neoliberalisation has integrated the gross domestic product (GDP), surging in foreign investment and technology transfer, strengthening financial infrastructure and rising income levels of the country as well as the economy of Assam, on the contrary, it has the most negative effects on the way of living conditions and overall socio-economic structure of tribal peoples. This paper thus studies the impact of neoliberalisation on the tribal population, the displacement and uprisings among tribals and the actions needed to uplift the tribal population in Assam, Guwahati, to the best extent possible

2. Objectives

1. To assess the socio-economic impact of neoliberal reforms on Assam's tribal communities, focusing on shifts in livelihoods, access to education, technology and capital.
2. To explore displacement, land alienation and cultural erosion among tribal groups, tracing and highlighting ongoing struggles and movements.
3. To analyse the role of neoliberal-driven development projects in Guwahati's urban context, focusing on how tribal residents into the city are affected with regard of socio-economic status, living standards and policy interventions.

3. Methodology

This study has extensively used secondary data sources to comprehensively examine the impact of neoliberal urbanisation on tribal populations through a systematic literature search available across major academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, etc. using predefined keywords. Secondary data also includes academic literature, government census and policy documents. The primary data has been taken from participant observation, ethnographic insights, displacement metrics and government reports. The studies that lacked methodological strength and/or not aligned with the central theme of this research study had been excluded. Although have surveyed the literature from 1989 to 2022, ensuring that neither recent data nor up-to-date studies in the field get excluded, we have also included results and observations of the focussed group discussions (FGD) that had been carried out in May 2025. The study is based on the above established framework followed by the subsequent sections that delve deeper into the key findings and challenges of neoliberal urbanisation in Guwahati city and exploring how urbanisation intensifies social inequalities and endangers indigenous communities of the city.

4. Literature Review

Harvey (2018) examines the organic linkage between the growth of urban space and capitalism. Throughout his work, he highlights how urban spaces are shaped for meeting the needs of powerful capitalist societies interests. He argues that urbanisation is a process which is driven by class dynamics where the wealthy rich exert control over urban areas to further their own needs. According to him, this results in urban spaces being structured to serve the requirements of capital rather than the requirements of the broader population. Being a prominent urban theorist and geographer, Harvey's critiques of neoliberalism and its impact on urbanisation are highly influential. In his book, "A Brief History of Neoliberalism", he point outs a scathing critique of neoliberal policies, arguing that they worsen social and economic inequalities. Harvey insists that cities should belong to all of us that we collectively own the right to shape urban space rather than leaving it in the hands of profit-hungry capital. He also shows how urbanisation has long functioned as a tool to absorb excess capital and labour. For example, in Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris and Robert Moses's suburban and infrastructural expansion in New York which is not just for "beautification" but as a mechanism of capital accumulation. Under neoliberal urban development Harvey argues, the drive for profit overshadows public welfare, worsening inequality and pushing marginalized communities aside because real estate and planning become driven by investors not by people's needs. To counter this, he calls for stronger democratic control over how cities grow so everyone has a say in decisions and resources are shared more fairly. In his vision, reclaiming urban space isn't a local battle, it's a global movement to resist capital's grip and build more equitable, inclusive cities.

Sassen (1991) argues that cities play a central role in the global economy. Neoliberal policies have transformed them into “global cities” that concentrate financial and business power, widening inequality. Sassen shows how these cities like New York, Tokyo and London become hubs for high-end services and command-and-control functions while lower-paid workers and migrants fill precarious jobs, creating deep social polarization. Sassen’s work highlights the patterns of exclusion and marginalisation that arise from these processes which underscores the imperative need for critical engagement with pressing issues of urban inequality and social justice. In his work, Brenner (2004) argues that neoliberalism reshapes cities by re-scaling how the state works shifting power away from national systems to local and regional ones. He shows that under neoliberalism, urban governments act more like entrepreneurs in which they compete for investment, privatize assets and favour growth-oriented policies. This process deepens inequality, because only certain “strategic” places benefit from this growth. For Brenner, the state isn’t retreating, it is merely changing shape, reorganizing itself at different scales to support market-driven urban development. In his work, Xaxa (2005) explores how India’s tribal communities struggle to sustain their identity in a modern, rapidly changing society. He critically examines constitutional protections like those in the Fifth and Sixth Schedules and questions how effectively they are implemented. Through detailed analysis, Xaxa shows how development, assimilation and political marginalization erode tribal culture. He also highlights how identity politics among tribes is evolving: tribal people are not just passive recipients of state policy but active agents asserting their rights, language and traditions in the face of social and economic pressures.

In his work, Kalita (2016) investigates the complex politics of tribal identity in Assam showing how social, cultural and political forces shape tribal belonging and conflict. He draws attention to the contrasting tensions within Assam’s tribal communities and how their identity claims intersect with local power dynamics. At the same time, he explores how migration and urbanisation are transforming Assam’s predominantly agrarian society as people move to towns and cities, tribal lifeways and political landscapes are being reshaped. Kalita’s study offers a nuanced picture of how tribal identity is negotiated in a rapidly changing Assam.

Sharma (2013) provides an analytical assessment of Guwahati’s urban situation examining the contextual factors that contribute to the marginalisation of tribal communities. As the city is growing, the city is undergoing a transformation with migration driving the shift towards an urban way of life in this predominantly agrarian economy. Baruah (2011) and Hussain (2008) emphasises that urban growth in Guwahati is often driven by the elite interests, sidelining tribal communities and marginalising indigenous inhabitants. Bhatia (2018) notes that the expansion of key sectors has led to rapid tribal land commodification forcing employment shifts and eroding traditional community bonds. These studies highlight the complex interplay between urban development, identity politics and social justice in Guwahati and Assam.

5. A Glimpse at The Tribal Population of India

As of the 21st century, Africa, the largest continent with approximately 3000 tribes, has been divided into 54 nations. Asia comes in the next position in this context. As of the 2011 Census of India, there were approximately 24.95 crore households in the country, of which around 2.15 crore households belonged to the Scheduled Tribes (STs). The total population of India was recorded at 1.21 billion (121.05 crore), with the ST population comprising 104.28 million (10.43 crore including 52.41 million males and 51.87 million females). This group represented 8.6% of the total population, marking a notable rise in both absolute numbers and proportional share since previous censuses.

The decadal growth rate of the tribal population between 2001 and 2011 was 23.7%, surpassing the national average of 17.6% during the same time period. Approximately 90% of the total tribal population are located in rural areas, reinforcing the close ties between tribal communities and traditional land-based livelihoods.

A) Geographical Distribution:

The highest concentrations of tribal populations are found in the Northeastern states and certain central and western states of India. States with the largest proportion of tribal residents include:

- Mizoram--94.4%
- Nagaland--86.5%

- Meghalaya--86.1%
- Arunachal Pradesh--68.8%
- Manipur--35.1%
- Sikkim--33.8%
- Tripura--31.8%

Outside the mainland, Lakshadweep has a tribal majority is 94.8%.

In terms of absolute numbers, the states with the largest tribal populations are:

- Madhya Pradesh accounts for 14.7% of India's tribal population.
- Maharashtra accounts for 10.1% tribal population.
- Odisha accounts for 9.2% tribal population.

These three states together account for nearly one-third of the tribal population of India. On the other hand, Daman and Diu report the lowest ST population share (0.01%). States and Union Territories like Puducherry, Chandigarh, Punjab, Delhi and Haryana report no ST population as per Census records.

B) Sex Ratio and Child Sex Ratio:

The overall sex ratio among STs in India is 990 females per 1000 males which is higher than the Indian national average of 943. This reflects a relatively more balanced gender ratio within tribal communities.

- Goa recorded the highest ST sex ratio at 1046 females per 1000 males.
- Jammu & Kashmir reported the lowest at 924.

The child sex ratio (0–6 years) among STs stood at 957 girls per 1000 boys.

- Chhattisgarh had the highest child sex ratio (9930) among tribal populations.
- Lakshadweep reported the lowest (907).

C) Literacy Rates:

The overall literacy rate among STs in 2011 was 59% significantly below the national average of 74%. The gender-wise breakdown is as follows:

- Male literacy rate stood at 68.5%
- Female literacy stood at 49.4%

This reflects a gender literacy gap of 19.1% points with a wider gap in rural areas (19.9%) compared to urban areas (12.9%).

- The highest literacy rate among STs was recorded in Lakshadweep (91.7%).
- The lowest was found to be reported in Andhra Pradesh (49.2%) as per 2011 records (Point to be noted: Andhra Pradesh was bifurcated in 2014; newer state-level figures differ post-bifurcation).

D) Diversity and Vulnerability:

India officially recognizes 705 Scheduled Tribes spread across 26 states and 4 Union Territories (Census 2011). Among these, 75 communities are designated as "Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups" (PVTGs), a sub-classification for tribes with declining populations, pre-agricultural lifestyles and low literacy.

- Odisha and Andhra Pradesh together account for 25 of the 75 PVTGs, making them key focus areas for tribal welfare interventions.

E) Largest ST Communities in India (by Population):

Based on 2011 Census, the most populous tribal communities include:

- Bhils – 12.7 million
- Gonds – 10.9 million
- Santhals – 5.8 million
- Minas – 3.8 million
- Naikdas – 3.3 million
- Oraons – 3.1 million
- Sugalis – 2.08 million
- Mundas – 1.9 million
- Nagas (combined groups) – 1.82 million
- Khonds – 1.39 million

These groups together constitute a significant share as the country's total population which is tribal and are primarily concentrated in central India, the northeastern states and certain southern regions.

6. Status regarding Assam's Sixth Schedule, Autonomous Councils & Ethnic Politics

Constitutional Framework:

Assam has officially three constitutionally recognized Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) under Part A of the Sixth Schedule--Bodoland Territorial Council, Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and Dima Hasao Autonomous Council that rule over large tribal-majority districts and have authority over land, forest, infra and culture, etc. In addition to this, the states also host 12 statutory councils (e.g., Rabha Hasong, Mising, Tiwa, etc.) under state laws that lack the protections and powers of ADCs.

6.1 Rabha Tribe & the Push for Constitutional Recognition:

The Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) administers approximately 779 villages in Goalpara and Kamrup that have demanded Sixth Schedule status to protect land rights and identity against rapid urban expansion. Rabha civil society alliances, such as ARSU, SSDC and ARWC, have organised large-scale protests and diplomatic appeals, including a Jantar Mantar plea in 2023 and a 7000-plus-strong mass rally in Dudhnoi. While the 2019 Union Cabinet moved to enhance the financial autonomy of ADCs, it accelerated the transfer of funds and functions from departments to councils. RHAC inclusion is still under negotiation as part of tripartite talks initiated in early 2025.

Since it lacks Sixth Schedule status, the RHAC area remains outside the protective buffer that imposes legal constraints on non-tribal land acquisition and resource exploitation. This regulatory gap enables neoliberal factors to secure tribal-majority land for projects ranging from satellite townships to industrial parks without mandatory community compensation, thus consolidating political exclusion and economic marginalization.

7. Neoliberal Urbanisation in Guwahati--Positive & Negative Impacts on Tribals

Guwahati's rapid transformation under neoliberal governance currently focuses on infrastructure investment, private real estate development and Smart City initiatives. While these processes signal growth, they also restructure tribal livelihoods and socio-spatial relations in and around the city.

7.1 Smart City, Land Acquisitions & Satellite Expansion:

7.1.1 Barduar Satellite Township:

Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA) has proposed the Barduar Satellite Township, a massive development project spanning 1,500 acres in Palasbari, a rural area near Guwahati. The idea is to create a new township as part of urban expansion to alleviate the pressure on Guwahati city. In recent years, tribal communities especially the Rabha, Garo and others have strongly opposed a proposed development project that threatens to displace more than 2,100 families. They argue that this plan violates key legal protections including the Forest Rights Act and tenancy laws dating back to the colonial era which were meant to safeguard their ancestral land. For these communities, losing their land means far more than losing a home and it would erase their culture, livelihoods and social fabric.

8. Environmental Justice & Water Commons:

8.1 Deepor Beel Wetland:

Deepor Beel is one of the most vital wetlands in Assam which is recognised as a Ramsar site (a wetland of international importance, 1974). It is home to around 1,200 indigenous households, primarily the Mishing and Khot communities who entirely depend on the wetland for their livelihoods. From last few decades, the wetland has become severely polluted by municipal solid waste, industrial runoff and encroachments. As a result of which there is a drastic decline in fish catches, which were once the primary source of income for the local indigenous communities. Due to the ongoing pollution, there has been a sharp rise in health issues among the different community members, such as skin rashes and livestock deaths. In 2006, the city's garbage dump was relocated near the wetland, worsening the pollution and impacting the livelihoods of the fishers who lived there.

8.2 Silsako Beel Encroachments:

In 2023, a large-scale eviction drive was carried out at Silsako Beel, a protected wetland on Guwahati's fringe which displaced around 250–1,000 families. Many of those affected belonged to indigenous and tribal communities, who say they were removed without proper notice or procedural fairness. This operation backed by the Guwahati Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA), was officially justified as part of a flood-management and environmental restoration plan. However, locals argue the drive prioritized real estate interests over their rights, their homes, long-standing settlements, temples and mosques were demolished. The eviction left these tribal families feeling uprooted and vulnerable, many having lived there for decades.

8.3 Amchang Wildlife-Smart City Overlap:

In order to meet one of the important criteria of 'Smart City Mission', that is 30% of Guwahati's area be covered with green spaces. The Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary's development has led to the eviction of tribal communities ignoring their rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA). These communities have been historically dependent on the forest for livelihoods and environmental groups argue that development will undermine their rights. The evictions framed as green cover preservation; risk displacing traditional communities to advance urbanisation and also raises concerns about balancing conservation goals with social justice and indigenous rights by highlighting the need for more inclusive and equitable urban planning.

8.4 Guwahati Ring Road & NH-27 Corridor:

Presently, the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) is pushing for the expansion of NH-27 and the Guwahati Ring Road, both of which are massively cutting through areas like Sonapur and Jagiroad. These areas are home to many tribal settlements that face eviction as the road projects move forward. The main problem here is that the affected communities, predominantly tribal settlers, had not been effectively consulted about the plans, which is leading to fears of permanent land loss and destruction of their traditional ways of life. The police charges during the protests indicate how tense the situation has become, as many tribal members see the evictions as an existential threat to their homes.

8.5 Aerotropolis Project near LGBI Airport:

- This plan is underway to develop a large Aerotropolis (airport-centred commercial hub) near LGBI Airport in Guwahati. As a result, over 1,100 families, including tribal households, are receiving eviction notices under the Assam Land (Requisition and Acquisition) Act, 1964, which supersedes the RFCTLARR Act, 2013, a newer law intended to protect displaced people. The tribal communities are protesting because of various reasons such as--
 - The use of an outdated law deprives them of the protections offered by modern land acquisition laws.
 - The development threatens local small industries.
 - It poses ecological risks to Deepor Beel an important wetland area to entire Assam.

8.6 Forest Reclamation Drives:

Since the beginning of 2021, the Government of Assam has cleared over 1200 sq km of "encroached" forest land to restore forests, affecting nearly 50000 residents. The state says that they are doing it for forest restoration but tribal groups argue these drives have been used to displace long-settled communities--

- Uriamghat (Rengma forests) and Nambor South are examples where tribal villages were removed for alleged encroachment without compensation.
- These drives are seen as land grabs masquerading as environmental conservation and ignoring the historical ties of communities to these lands.

9. Positive Spillovers

On the contrary, supporters of neoliberal urbanisation often highlight improved road connectivity, job creation in construction & services and municipal infrastructure as positive outcomes. However, all the evidence shows subaltern tribal households rarely reap advantages from such gains due to limited formal education, social capital and capital access. Real estate jobs often employ migrant labour; local tribals face exclusion due to caste-cultural barriers.

10. Social Impacts on Tribal Communities

1. Landlessness & Joblessness: When tribal households are evicted or lands are acquired for development projects by the government, it ultimately leads to loss of their ancestral land, the primary source of livelihood. Without proper compensation or alternative job opportunities, they face economic hardship and struggle to sustain.

2. Homelessness & Relocation Distress: When tribal settlers are relocated far from their original homes, they are mostly separated from their community networks such as family, social ties, local support, etc. This leads to social disarticulation, a sense of isolation and loss of community cohesion, making it harder for them to rebuild their lives in the new location.

3. Loss of Common Property Resources: Development projects like the expansion of cities or infrastructure often encroach on wetlands, fishing zones and communal forests that tribal communities depend on for food, water and resources. This loss erodes their traditional livelihoods and access to vital resources.

4. Social Marginalisation & Identity Threats: Tribal communities like the Rabha, Keot etc. are fighting for Sixth Schedule protections which would safeguard their land and governance rights. Not safeguarding these protections may push them to the fringes which means ultimately losing control over their own resources and cultural practices hampering their very own indigenous identities.

5. Health & Morbidity Increases: Various ongoing pollution from projects around Deepor Beel etc is taking a toll on tribal fishers' health causing respiratory problems and skin issues. As a result of which is not only affecting their

well-being but also puts their traditional livelihoods at danger, making it hazardous to pursue fishing and other forest-based activities.

6. Educational Disruption: The Smart City initiatives often overlook tribal youth needs by widening the education gap and limiting opportunities in the society. Tribal communities face exclusion due to language barriers, lack of skill development and economic marginalization. A tribal-centred approach is needed which includes language support, training programs and financial inclusion to ensure they benefit from urban growth.

11. Policy Recommendations: Towards a Tribal Inclusive Urbanism

1. Embedding Free, Prior & Informed Consent (FPIC): Before any land-use plan (e.g. Barduar or Aerotropolis) is approved, tribal communities must be consulted and given consent about the project. Ensuring that their rights and interests are respected as outlined in laws like the LARR Act 2013 and the PESA Act (which empowers gram sabhas or village councils), this gives tribal communities a voice in decision-making that affects their land and livelihoods.

2. Sixth Schedule Inclusion for RHAC:The Rabha Hasong Autonomous Council (RHAC) should be granted constitutional recognition under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which would---

- Increase their fiscal autonomy by way of giving them control over their own budget.
- Secure tribal land rights and safeguarding them from forced land acquisitions.
- Providing legal safeguard measure to preserve their culture, land and resources from exploitation and ensures that their rights are respected and protected.

3. Social Impact Assessment Process: It will be good to conduct a participatory Social Impact Assessment (SIA) for urban expansion projects involving tribal representatives to evaluate effects on local communities before projects proceed for future analysis.

4. Wetland & Natural Commons Protection: Areas such as Deepor Beel and Silsako Beel should be protected from pollution and especially from industrial dumping. Granting co-management rights to traditional fishers will enable them to manage and protect these vital wetlands alongside the government.

5. Cultural Zones & Heritage Spaces: It is really essential to protect designated cultural zones such as Ojapara and Deepor Beel periphery to safeguard tribal customs, rituals and traditional markets ensuring the continuation of cultural practices and community life amidst urban development.

6. Inclusive Livelihood Programmes:The government should create specific programmes to support tribal livelihoods like--

- Micro-enterprise schemes that help Mishing fishers, Rabha bamboo artisans and Karbi handicraft makers develop their businesses.
- This would allow tribal communities to join in the city's economic growth, rather than being pushed to the margins of society.

12. Conclusion

Guwahati's neoliberal urbanization has left its tribal population vulnerable to displacement, livelihood loss and cultural disruption. Development projects prioritize corporate growth over tribal rights bypassing consultation and fair compensation. To ensure inclusive urbanization, adopting policies that includes tribal voices, protecting land rights and creating tailored livelihood opportunities is imperative. By implementing free, prior and informed consent, Sixth Schedule inclusion and inclusive programs can definitely build a sustainable urban future. This approach will help tribal communities thrive alongside Guwahati's urban growth ensuring equitable development and preserving cultural heritage. By prioritizing tribal rights, we can create a more just and sustainable urban landscape.

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