theFocus
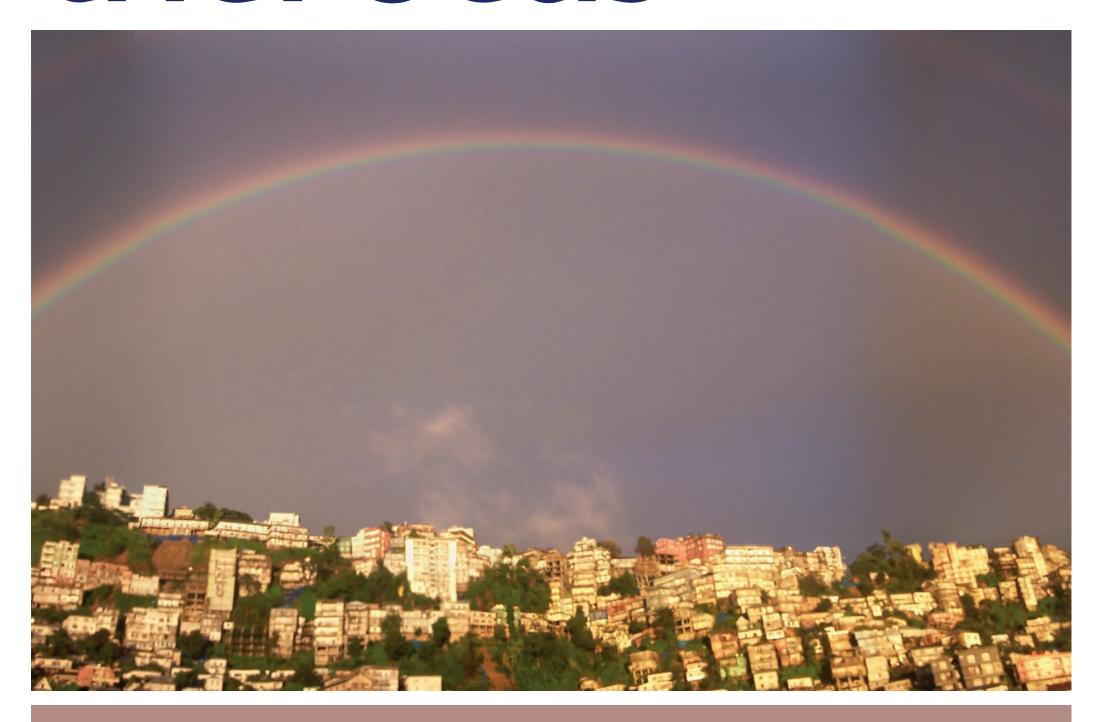

Learning to love the city in Northeast India

The rapid urbanization of India's Northeast frontier[1] is one of the most crucial transformations the area has witnessed, yet it remains relatively understudied. In just a few decades a large number of the inhabitants have become urban dwellers in one of the frontier cities, or migrants in cities in the rest of India and abroad. Urban areas in the frontier have diverse histories and some common experiences. Colonisation, resource extraction, stations for supply, and militarisation are some of the shared features. These processes have persisted in postcolonial India along with the growth in administrative quarters and buildings (and cars) for the bureaucrats of newly created political units (new federal states and autonomous districts), new military installations and housing, and population growth from migration for those seeking work, refuge, and education. Despite this history, urban environments are rarely part of imaginations of the frontier, especially in the production and circulation of images and the stereotypes of plantations, jungle insurgency, spectacular topography, and colourfully dressed ethnic minority communities. In this *Focus* section we explore the urban environments in the Northeast frontier – India's 'unruly borderland'[2] – as crucial sites in their own right, and as sites in which to experiment with different ways of researching the region.

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Mizoram. Image reproduced under a creative commons license courtesy of Joe Fanai on Flickr.

Learning to love the city in Northeast India *continued*

Urban frontiers and frontier urbanism

"Urban areas in the Northeast are so small!" sceptics cry; "How can they be worthy of attention?" To begin with, the threshold for being considered 'urban' in India is quite low. The census uses two criteria to define urban areas: (a) All statutory places with a municipality, corporation, cantonment board or notified town area committee and (b) A place satisfying the following three criteria simultaneously: (i) a minimum population of 5,000; (ii) at least 75 percent of the male working population engaged in non-agricultural pursuits; and (iii) a population density of at least 400 per square kilometre. This criteria allows for smaller sites beyond state capitals and large commercial hubs, like Kakching (Manipur), Lunglei (Mizoram) and Pasighat (Arunachal Pradesh), to be considered as emerging urban forms; sites that dissolve the urban-rural distinction.

Two dynamics can be considered, in addition to just the size of a settlement: urban population growth and municipal expansion. The 2011 census recorded extensive growth in urban populations. The percentage of the overall population living in urban areas in each of the Northeast states in 2011 was as follows (with the increase since 2001 in brackets): Mizoram 52% (+3%), Manipur 31% (+6%), Nagaland 29% (+12%), Tripura 26% (+9%), Sikkim 25% (+14%), Arunachal Pradesh 23% (+2%), Meghalaya 20% (+1%) and Assam 14% (+2%), compared to a national average of 31% (3%).

However, the urban population growth data refers only to areas actually *classified* as urban. Across India, urbanization outside former municipal boundaries is responsible for almost a third of urban growth for the period 2001 and 2011,[3] yet, as Denis et al. argue, there are incentives for maintaining a *rural* classification in India (mostly eligibility for certain forms of government assistance) and so many densely populated 'built up' areas that adjoin cities continue to be classified as rural areas.[4] In much of the Northeast this classification carries additional significance given that land laws, which protect indigenous and tribal communities, are often non-applicable to designated municipal areas. Historically, city-level governance, compared to state and district level, has always been weak in India; an issue further complicated in the Northeast by overlapping layers of authority (including traditional decision making bodies), and until recently there has been little incentive to expand the territory under municipal authority.

This, however, is changing. There are now new incentives to enlarge and/or create municipal areas in the frontier. The Ministry of Urban Development has a number of flagship schemes. From 2015 the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation has provided infrastructure funding to 500 cities in India: four in Assam, two in Nagaland, and one each in the other Northeast states (all are state capitals). The Smart Cities Mission (also from 2015) aims to "promote cities that provide core infrastructure and give a decent quality of life to its citizens, a clean and sustainable environment and application of 'Smart Solutions'."[5] There are five Smart Cities in the Northeast: Agartala, Guwahati, Imphal, Kohima, and Namchi. Furthermore, the Ministry of Urban Development dedicates 10% of its annual budget to the Northeast (as do other ministries) and explains: "[g]iven the difficult access to and remoteness of (the Northeast), the urban areas in the North Eastern States perform a much higher order function than those of similar size in India."[6] Finally, all Northeast states have Municipal Acts, most created in the previous two decades with recent amendments. While the Acts vary, they have provoked controversy and contention around issues such as property tax (both the need to pay it and who has the right to levy it), elections (there are reservations based on indigeneity and gender), and constitutional protections for tribal and indigenous communities (and whether or not land under municipal authority is subject to existing protection laws). While state governments amend their municipal acts in the hope of accessing more funds for infrastructure and enabling infamous sub-contracting practices, private capital – much of which originates in other parts of India – continues to shape the urban environment through commercial and residential developments, consumer spaces, and the supply of consumer goods (from plasma televisions to house paint).

Emerging urban forms

Research on small cities in developing contexts is dwarfed by an obsession with mega-cities and global cities, what Bunnell and Maringanti refer to as 'metrocentricity'. They argue that not enough attention is paid to emerging urban forms and call for more engaged ethnographic work, work that cannot be done from afar.[7] This echoes the agenda put forth by Bell and Jayne to take small cities more seriously, a crucial task in developing countries generally where "two-thirds of urban residents live in places of less than 1 million people".[8] They argue that "a number of 'imaginative leaps' must be taken by theorists currently hung up on the notion that globalization of the city means globalization of the metropolis'.[9] This recalls Mathews' explorations of what he calls 'low-end globalization', defined as "the transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, sometimes quasi-legal or illegal transactions, commonly associated within the developing world".[10] These secondary flows are evident throughout the frontier, whether Karen refugees from Myanmar-via Thailand attending theological college in Nagaland, or the network of Tibetan traders moving 'counterfeit' clothing and footwear from Southeast Asia via China to the markets of the region.

Small urban areas – and the vernacular urbanism they produce – are a hard sell in the Northeast where research remains focused on cultural change (narrowly defined as tradition versus modernity), conflict and ethnic politics, and of course the borders, fences, and roads that connect and obstruct. Despite this lack of interest, urban areas in the frontier are crucial sites in which to analyze state-led development, liberalization and securitization, agrarian change and land issues, territorial claims and counter-claims, and connectivity (both state-led and state-evading). Urban areas in the frontier are sites where the past is manifest in material objects, the built environment, demography, and the spatial order. They have witnessed the region throughout the centuries, yet they are more than just arenas where broader economic, social, and political dynamics play out; they are also sites where these dynamics are created, channeled, and challenged.

Fig. 1: Churches for different tribal communities and future meat point. Sovima, Dimapur. December 2016 (Photo by Duncan McDuie-Ra).

Fig. 2: Newspaper clippings celebrating the community service of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) for public display. Thangal Bazar, Imphal. December 2012 (Photo by Duncan McDuie-Ra).

Learning to love the city...on foot

Urban environments in the Northeast encourage different entry points for inquiry and exploration and here I want to focus on mobility through urban space. Purposeful mobility from designated points – government office to NGO rally (often in a vehicle) – are common routes, yet emerging urban forms can best be captured on foot, and in many instances, by accident. Walking ethnography is an ideal entry point into the urban environment of the frontier. It brings researchers into contact with people, places, and objects that were otherwise unknown, unnoticed, or seen only at a blurred distance through a vehicle window. As Cheng argues, "[w]alking not only guides us through encounters with other human beings, but also embeds us in a dense network of materials, ranging from skyscraping buildings to the most mundane of everyday objects such as lampposts or sidewalks'.[11] And in a region where research can often take a predictable trajectory, any opportunity to encounter something new, unexpected, and (hopefully) significant should be welcomed. Here I identify three ways of considering urban areas, gleaned from my walking ethnography in urban areas of the Northeast over the last 15 years; all three resonate with the approaches taken in the essays in this *Focus* section and serve as examples of possible ways to research urban areas of the Northeast (certainly not the only ways).

1. Spatial violence

For a region that has experienced horrific levels of organised violence by state, non-state and quasi-state actors – in the public sphere and the private sphere – little consideration has been given to how violence has created particular spatial orders in urban environments. Herscher and Siddiqi ask us to consider the spatial histories of political violence, with their own sequences, continuities, and ruptures. Spatial violence calls for us to hone our understanding of the deeper and slower structural forms of violence that contour political historical categories such as 'development', 'reconstruction', 'modernity', 'peace', 'progress', and so on, which they argue is "a constitutive dimension of architecture, urbanism, and their epistemologies".[12] In the frontier, neighbourhoods, public buildings, commercial areas, houses, slums, parks, ceasefire camps, barracks and memorials all tell stories of past and present relationships of power and violence. In Imphal (Manipur) a paramilitary base dwarfs the adjacent Kabui neighbourhood in Ragailong. Entering the locality from the south necessitates walking past watchtowers and gun posts, a common routine in a city scattered with checkpoints, barracks, and surveillance. It is not just fissures between the civilian and military space that are striking; multistorey houses of the elite and well-connected (to both state and non-state power) with high fences and a fleet of cars parked on the lawn, rise adjacent to bamboo thatch and mud shacks. Settlements started by families seeking refuge from violence have grown into neighbourhoods and communities. Some become legible parts of the city, others remain distant from state authority, while in others settlers face struggles against threats of eviction.

Juxtapositions help to illustrate these relationships. King describes juxtapositions as attention to the positioning "of the dissimilar and even the incompatible", drawing attention to the ways space is appropriated, officially and unofficially, temporarily and more permanently, all of which drive change,

reflecting past and present configurations of power and their accompanying imaginations.[13] The urban Northeast is full of captivating juxtapositions: such as the line of *ui sa* (dog meat) shops across the roads from an Assam Rifles memorial and *mandir* (Hindu temple) in central Aizawl, or Karbi women from across the inter-state border between Assam and Nagaland selling silkworms from cardboard boxes on the pavement outside KFC in Dimapur.

Urban areas host a concentration of development projects, most visible in infrastructure or lack thereof, reflecting deeper and slower forms of violence and exclusion shaped by powerful players within and outside state institutions. Useless showpiece development projects, such as a (now empty) outdoor aquarium in Namchi – a town with chronic water shortages – or the day/night cricket stadium at Sovima on the outskirts of Dimapur, are touted to the public as exemplars of modernity, of putting a town 'on the map'. Other infrastructure reflects long histories of extraction, like the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation facilities on the outskirts of Dibrugarh, while the comically narrow Bir Tiekndrajit Flyover in Imphal and the foul pollution of the Wah Umkhrah in Shillong are testament to the impacts of rapid urbanization and (meager) attempts by civilian authorities to grapple with these impacts. Some of these projects inspire pride, some hope, some embarrassment or disgust, and others are repurposed for entirely different uses as they age, become dilapidated and go to ruin. The search for exceptional spaces in urban areas also needs to account for normalcy, and indeed the unstable ground upon which 'normal' and 'exceptional' can be understood in the Northeast. Parks, malls, theatres, cemeteries, bus stations, are important sites where people live out their lives, sometimes even – in the case of the gardens on U-Chiyok in Kakching – in full view of acres of military infrastructure.

2. Visual culture
Visual culture in the urban Northeast is astounding. Freitag encourages the use of visual resources for understanding public culture in urban South Asia. She posits that in such rapidly changing sites paintings, photographs, posters, maps, and three dimensional objects are "witnesses to the changing 'communication context' predicated on visual literacy that transcended multiple languages and scripts", and depend "on new dissemination networks, repletion... and thickly-entwined inter-ocular references".[14] Urban areas in the Northeast are covered in images and text that reflect a lived cosmopolitanism – and it's limits – that both accompanies and challenges dominant ways of understanding the region and its component parts. Consider advertisements (government and private) on billboards, painted directly on walls, shutters, or handed out on flyers. Some advertisements are vandalised, some are defaced, some are marked with particular scripts – such as Meitei Mayek – that turn conventional advertisements for, say, telecommunications companies into statements about place and territory. Billboards for education fares, training colleges, apartment complexes (often in other cities), cars, or global restaurant chains reveal changing perceptions of the frontier as a consumer market producing and reflecting the aspirations and desires of the residents, visitors, and interlopers. Common throughout the region are billboards publicising the armed forces and paramilitary, marking sites of control, and littering the landscape with propaganda such as 'Friends of the Hill People' and enlarged newspaper clippings touting community initiatives (see fig. 2). Civilian governments, both local and national, mark space with their presence on foundation stones, inauguration plaques, and details of funding schemes utilised to build a bridge, seal a road, or upgrade a bus station.

Alternative scripts appear as graffiti made with etchings, spray paint, and stencils announcing support for a particular underground group, declaring undying love in multiple languages, and as public art; most noticeable in Aizawl and Gangtok where cement walls have been given over to local graffiti artists. Posters for election candidates, advertising tuition courses and medical care (including almost region-wide attention to piles and fistula), and announcing army recruitment, are pasted onto electricity poles and cement walls and live on in various stages of decay. Handwritten signs direct relatives and well-wishers to funerals, weddings, and prayer meetings; often wedged onto an existing signboard or affixed to a bamboo stake. Red stains from betel nut and white clumps of lime paste mark the built environment with the presence of passers-by, often haphazardly, but occasionally with purpose targeting the face of a politician or a particular storefront. Less obvious yet also instructive are the names on businesses and publicly displayed licences revealing the commercial power of particular ethnic communities, and these may change as one moves through different localities. Hand-painted locality maps, snippets of religious texts, and civic and moral instructions such as *Aia upate zah thiam Mizo Zemawi* [Respecting Elders is the Mizo character], add further layers of text and image. (see fig. 3)

3. Sensory experiences
Finally, in the built environment and astounding visual culture of the urban Northeast, sense plays an important role in the articulation and demarcation of space. As Low argues, "[e]veryday experiences of the senses take on an emotional character, where heightened feelings become apparent in the encounter between sensory selves and sensory others".[15] In urban areas attempts to articulate and enforce acceptable sensory behaviour characterises relationships between ethnic communities, often drawing a line between indigenous and migrant, or dominant and marginal, with the latter the subject of grievances for the physical, sonic, visual, and olfactory affect on local space; such as the smell from the food different communities cook and eat, or the noise from particular religious worship and festivals. Senses also affect relationships among communities along class lines; for instance, poorer areas are perceived as 'smelly' by some urban residents because of the rubbish, the industry (metal works, incineration, animal slaughter), and noise owing to overcrowded dwellings and raucous behaviour often linked to rural sensibilities and alcohol consumption, while wealthier areas are imagined as quiet, odour free, clean, and 'decent'. And between residents and the authorities, for instance, sensory disturbances are taken as indicators of ineffective urban governance and thus the smell of burning garbage and polluted watercourses, the noise and pollution of heavy vehicle traffic, and the aesthetic breaches of the built environment contribute to the perceptions of civilian authorities as corrupt, inept, or incapable and that development remains elusive and mismanaged.

In this *Focus* section six authors approach six different urban environments in Northeast India from diverse disciplinary perspectives. The collection is exploratory rather than exhaustive. Bengt Karlsson discusses the nostalgia hanging over Shillong: a former colonial hill station and now the capital of Meghalaya. Within overlapping forms of governance and all the associated problems of rapid urbanisation on a limited amount of land, Karlsson considers the best way to think about contemporary Shillong, settling for analysing it as a 'tribal city'; one unable to come to terms with the present in favour of memories of the past. Lallianpuii uses an account of print media in Mizoram and surrounding Mizo speaking areas to situate Aizawl city, the state capital, as the centre of the transnational Mizo world. Bucking the trend of a global downturn in print circulation, demand for daily print media emanating from Aizawl can barely keep up with supply, revealing the need for news produced close to the corridors of political power – from the Mizo metropolis.

Sanjay Barbora analyses three dynamics that have shaped the history of Dibrugarh in upper-Assam: capital, calamity, and counter-insurgency. These dynamics produce what he refers to as a 'counterintuitive urban transformation' evident in the tea gardens in the city centre, the oil installations and gas cracker plants on the outskirts, and the 'silent social relations' of the city's multi-ethnic population. Mona Chettri considers the infrastructure-driven growth of Chungthang in north Sikkim alongside the enduring presence of the armed forces deployed to monitor the border with China. At the centre of the town, between an enormous hydropower dam and various army barracks, is a Sikh Gurdwara (temple) built by the armed forces and currently at the heart of contentions over cultural history, space, and 'belonging' in Sikkim.

Fig. 3: *Aia upate zah thiam Mizo Zemawi* [Respecting Elders is the Mizo character], transl. Lallianpuii; billboard facing basketball court. Zarkawt, Aizawl. February 2014 (Photo by Duncan McDuie-Ra).

R.K Debarmma begins his account of Agartala, the capital of Tripura, with protests for an indigenous state and the demonization of the protestors by the state. This sets up an account of Tripura as a settler colonial state during the British period and especially after Partition of South Asia in 1947. Agartala is the main arena where spatial contests between settlers and indigenous communities play out, making it a settler colonial town. Dolly Kikon discusses the controversy over the sale of dog meat in Dimapur, Nagaland. Opposition to dog meat sales from a government determined to make Dimapur more 'city-like' and activists concerned with animal welfare exist alongside the persistence of impunity for the armed forces in their treatment of humans in Dimapur and beyond. If sales are to be banned what will become of the traders, mostly women, who peddle the meat in Dimapur's markets?

In presenting this collection we advocate for and encourage research that explores urban areas in the Northeast of varying sizes and official classifications. Such research offers new insights into the Northeast and new possibilities for comparative research on urbanism in frontiers elsewhere in Asia.

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