CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF THE REGION

Prior to the British Rule (upto 1842 A.D.)

The ancient traditions or history of Assam do not seem to have made any mention about the place now known as Dibrugarh. None of the important centres in the region "Dibrugarh and its environs" has any historical linkage. Although this region is at present one of the most developed areas not only in the district of Lakhimpur but also in whole of Assam yet few hundred years ago it was a 'negative' area while the rest of Lakhimpur district was well inhabited. It is believed that in ancient times this region was a part of the Chutiya Kingdom with capital in Sadiya which was completely destroyed by an earthquake that rocked this area in 1950. According to some sources this region was annexed in 1233 A.D. to the Ahom Kingdom after a memorable battle fought during the Ahom-Chutiya war in or about the place now known as Dibrugarh which seems to have derived its name from the stream known as 'Dibru' and the 'Garh' (fort) built on its bank. But according to the Ancient Chronicles of Assam (Assamese), edited by Pandit Hemchandra Goswami, the said battle was fought between the Ahoms and the Chutiya king Dhizrarayan near Dihingmukh from where the Chutiyas were driven up to Dibrumukh. The Ahom king ordered the Thaumunchung to build a fort at Dibrumukh. This incidence according to

1. In Memorium, a pamphlet published and distributed by the Municipality of Dibrugarh on the 11th March, 1968.
DIBRUGARH & ITS ENVIRONS

HISTORICAL MAP

MAP NO. 3.
Gait was in 1513 A.D. The place where the garh was built was at the mouth of the Dibru River, known as Dibrumukh. This place at the confluence of the Dibru with Brahmaputra, was later named as Dibrugarh when the Ahoms and later the Mataks built forts (Garhs) for defence and offence respectively. Further reference to this region has been given in Topography of Assam. According to this, the Moamarias or Mataks occupied this region which was then bounded on the north by the Brahmaputra, on the south by the Burhi Dihing, on the west by a line drawn from the mouth of the river Dibru to the Buri Dihing and on the east by a line drawn south from the mouth of the Kunilinullah to the Buri Dihing (Fig.3).

A greater part of the Matak country was a desert waste, and only the banks of the river Dibru were inhabited. The three important settlements in this area at that time were Rangagora, Bengmara and Dibrugarh (in order of importance), the

5. The terms Matak, Moamaria and Moran are often used discriminately, but they are in reality quite distinct. Moran is the name of a tribe, and Moamaria that of a sect, while Matak refers to the country ruled by the Bar Senapati (chief commander) who was a Chutiya by tribe. The capital of the Morans was in Bengamara whereas the main stream of the Moamarias had their capital at Rangagora (After E. Gait, op.cit., pp.195, 204-205 and 343).

* It is important to note that Dibrugarh which is now undisputedly the regional centre of the easternmost region of India had hardly any significance in recent past whereas the two settlements Rangagora and Bengmara lying to the east of it had considerable political significance because of their being administrative headquarters. But to-day these two settlements have almost lost their identity except for the Rangagora Tea Estate which itself is under the continuous fury of the Brahmaputra river after it swallowed a part of the famous Dibru river of this region in recent past.
former being situated almost in the centre of the region on the Dibru River was the capital of the Moamarias. The people were Hindus but acted so little in accordance with Hindu tenets that, enlightened Brahmins scarcely acknowledged them. In about the year 1793 A.D. the Moamarias rose in arms against the then Ahom King, Gourinath Singh, and after many serious engagements with the troops of the Ahom king they (the Moamarias) succeeded in driving out Gourinath Singh from his throne. They appointed a successor of their own choice. The political territories which bound the Matak country and the people with whom the Moamarias had frequent struggles were:

(i) The Territory of the Khamtis to the north;
(ii) The Territory of the Ahoms to the south and west; and
(iii) The Territory of the Singphos to the south-east.

During the later decade of eighteenth century, the Moamarias committed the most dreadful ravages upon the country in and around this region as a result of which a majority of its original inhabitants deserted this area, and even till early twentieth century, this region had no sign of prosperity although the British Government in the 19th century had succeeded in putting a stop to their lawless plunders. This region was frequently affected by feuds and small warfares as a result of which there was hardly any tendency of establishing settlements by new settlers. Prior to 19th century, there was no sign of urban tendency. Few settlements were scattered over here and there but there was hardly any settlement with population more than 2000 heads in the entire region before 1837.

Dibrugarh, which gained some importance earlier in 1513 A.D. with change of its old name Dibrumgh after a garh
(fort) was built by the Ahoms during the Ahom-Chutiya war, came to real limelight during the confusion on the break up of the Ahom Kingdom by frequent attacks by the Moamarias. This was mainly due to its geopolitical and strategic importance which influenced the then head of the Moamaria sect to establish a quasi-independent small kingdom with his capital at Dibrugarh. Prior to 1842, Dibrugarh saw almost no light of what we now know as modern civilization necessary for development of urbanism and urban landscape. It was in 1842 that the incorporation of Sadiya and Matak country in British territory was announced by a proclamation and both these tracts were added to the district of Lakhimpur (then occupying an area only north of the river Brahmaputra) and that the headquarter of the said district was transferred to Dibrugarh in the Matak country. From this time the duties of the Political Agent came to be performed by the officer-in-charge of the Lakhimpur district with Dibrugarh as the major administrative centre not only for this district but also for the whole of the tracts lying to the north, northeast, south and southeast of this region. It is from this time onwards that the first phase of urban transformation came not only to Dibrugarh but also to the region as a whole.

It is worthwhile to make some comments, in the background of the historical geography of old settlements of the present region 'Dibrugarh and its environs' of which a major part, but not the whole, was occupied by the Moamarias in the past prior to the British rule. To the south and southeast there was a vast forested tract and people, prior to the Ahoms and Singphos, occupied some suitable areas giving...

rise to few scattered but compact settlements since they used to live in groups owing to an agricultural economy on one hand and for protection from ferocious animals and Moamaria bandits on the other. During the period of march of the first Ahom king, Sukapha (1228-1268), there is mention of at least three important settlements of this region, Namrup and Joypur (of the Ahom Territory), and Tipam (of the Singphos). These three settlements (Fig.3) were in the valley of the Burhi-Dihing and were on the land route which probably linked Burma and other regions of the south-east Asia with the Assam Valley and consequently with the rest of India. It is most likely that the land route from Pragjyotishpur7 (present Gauhati) ran parallel to the Brahmaputra river upto the Sibsagar District where it turned to the south-east through the valleys of the Disang and Burhi-Dihing mainly because of the fact that the area in these valleys was less liable to flood than the area to the east. Further, the low but hard relief of the foot-hills of the hill ranges in the south-east were better suited for land routes than the precariously flooded regions in east with frequent changes in the courses of streams. Very little had been said in old historical accounts of the three settlements - Joypur, Namrup and Tipam prior to 1800 A.D. with, of course, some exception to connecting Tipam as a low-rated administrative centre ruled by the Tipamia rajas (kings).

Thus it may, without any reservation, be said that the region "Dibrugarh and its environs" (as defined earlier) has hardly any worth-noting cultural landscape prior to the nineteenth century. It is hardly in the last 100 years that

7. Based on discussions between the author and the archaeologists doing excavation work at Ambari (Gauhati; Assam) in April, 1969; and a report under the caption "Ambari was transit point for Rome-China trade", published in The Statesman, April 14, 1969 where there is mention of the land route via Pragjyotishpur.
the cultural landscape of the area has greatly changed and
today this region shows such a speedy urban transformation
that the accepted theory\(^8\) of rapid urban transformation as
put forward by Breese and Whiteman would need some altera­
tions, for the major settlements in the present region
"Dibrugarh and its environs" have undergone overwhelming
urban transformation, as will be seen later, unlike the
settlements in any other oriental urban area which usually
took a thousand years for such urban development.

The period of Early British Rule:

With the advent of the British rule, this region
gained momentum for change of its cultural landscape. In
early 19th century there was hardly any thing known about
the economic potentiality of the region. During the early
British rule, it had been stated, this region was the most
sparsely populated part of Assam. Dibrugarh by this time had
come to significance not only because of its being the civil
station of the Lakhimpur district but also due to its advanta­
tageous geographical environment as the terminal point of
the river streamers. Further impetus for the growth of Dibru­
garh Town came from the introduction of tea plantation and
discovery of coal in the southeast of this region since
Dibrugarh controlled the administrative set up of the exploi­
tation of these two resources of the region.

The primary and principal items of natural resour­
ces of this area which gave a booster to economic prosperity
and development of the region were tea, coal and petroleum.

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Urban Planning, Princeton University Press, Princeton,
New Jersey, 1953.
But by far the most important factor in the initial growing prosperity and commercial importance has been the remarkable expansion of the tea industry. Mr. Robert Bruce, who was acting as an agent, first of the Ahom king Purandar Singh, and afterwards of his rival Chandrakant, got the idea about the growth of wild tea plant in 1823 from a Singpho chief in the upper Brahmaputra valley. The Singpho chief promised to obtain some specimens for him. But in the following year, Mr. C.A. Bruce, brother of Robert Bruce, came to Sadiya area in command of a division of gun boats during the outbreak of Burmese war and obtained the specimens from the Singpho chief and submitted to David Scott. Mr. Scott forwarded the specimens to the Superintendent of the Botanical Garden, Calcutta, for examination. They were pronounced to be of the same family, but not the same species, as the plant from which the Chinese manufacture their tea.⁹ No importance was given to tea regarding its existence in this area till 1832. Mr. C.A. Bruce and captain Jenkins pressed the matter upon the British Government claiming that tea would thrive in Assam, although the Botanists from Calcutta strongly opposed their idea. A Tea Committee consisting of seven civilians, three Calcutta merchants, two native gentlemen, and Dr. Wallich of the Botanical Gardens, was appointed to explore the possibilities of tea in commercial basis. Mr. Gordon, Secretary of the Committee went to China to procure plants, seeds and men skilled in tea manufacture. Meanwhile, it had been claimed by Lieutenant Charlton that he first discovered tea in Assam. However, it is true that he and captain Jenkins convinced the Botanists, the Tea Committee and the Government of the identity of the Assam plant with that of China.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 405.
There was some controversy as to whom the credit of discovery of tea in Assam should be given. In a report submitted in 1835 by Dr. Wallich of the Tea Committee, it is stated that "it was Mr. Bruce and his late brother Major Robert Bruce at Jorhat who originally brought the Assam tea to public notice many years ago when no one had the slightest idea of its existence". Whatever may be the truth as regards the discovery of tea in this region, it is a fact that as late as 1835 tea had nothing to do with the economic and cultural development of this region. In 1835, the first establishment of an experimental research station for tea was made at Kundilmukh near Sadiya and Mr. C.A. Bruce was appointed "Superintendent of the Government Tea Forest". Mr. Bruce was supplied with a few of the plants brought from China by Mr. Gordon along with some skilled Chinese Tea manufacturers because the superiority of the indigenous tea in respect both of quality and outturn was doubted by the authorities by that time. It was not long before the unsuitability of the poor and porous soil of the area near the confluence of the Brahmaputra and the Kundil rivers for raising tea-plants was known. Hence, the industry was removed to Jaipur which lies to the south-southeast of the region "Dibrugarh and its environs". A new garden was opened by the Government at Joypur but was soon sold to the Assam Tea Company in 1840. This company was formed in 1839 with a capital of 50 lakh sterling pounds which in the early forties of the nineteenth century established factories at Dibrugarh and at the junction of the Burhi Dihing and Tingrai rivers. This marked the first phase of urban innovation into the present area of investi-

gation "Dibrugarh and its environs", although the real initial impulse of urban development came to the region during the years 1856-59 when the foundation of the present Tea Industry was laid in the true sense of the trade. Before 1850 there were only six gardens in the area mainly lying to the south southeast and by 1853 nine more gardens were added with, of course, administration and factory at Dibrugarh. Thus as early as the middle of 19th century Dibrugarh acted as the nerve centre of trade, civil administration and private enterprises and, above all, the focus of liaison between Calcutta merchants and Tea planters of this region.

The second item of natural resources of the area which gave impetus to the region was coal. Lt. R. Wilcox, an officer of the British Government, who extensively travelled in the southeastern part of this region had given some reference regarding the occurrence of coal in this region. It was in 1847 that Major Hannay of the British Army had opened two quarries on his own initiative at Joypur on the opposite bank of the Dihing river, but he could not progress much in his exploitation work. The Assam Tea company, which was by this time the sole promoter of tea industry in this region, established another quarry near Joypur but no remarkable progress was noticed till 1865 for a commercial basis of production of coal. By this time coal was also dug out in Makum area.

Deputed by the government to the Joypur and Makum coal fields, Mr. H.B. Medlicott reported in favour of a commercial exploitation of coal in view of the quality and potentiality of this mineral wealth in this region. He also reported the presence of coal on the Namchik river not far from this area. With these informations and evidences regarding the presence

and richness of coal deposits, several grants of coal producing tracts were made rent free to coal speculators. The pioneer grantees were Mr. Goodenough of Calcutta and Mr. Jenkins of Khowang. It is during this time that the Khowang Tea gardens were in a boom and this settlement marked its initial development towards a weekly market centre which might be regarded as the initial phase in its urban transformation. It was not long before that good exposures of coal were found, besides Joypur, in the Namdang and Ledo coalfield areas upto the Tipang river in the southeast. In all these cases, the workable coal seams are exposed, even to-day, along the northern flank of the Naga Patkai ranges facing the Upper Assam Valley. Labour not being available in the region, six hundred coolies (the first stream of immigration of up-country men to this area) were brought from Raniganj, men accustomed to mining in their own country. Also sixty English navvies were brought from Birmingham with a Superintendent, and were located at Makum. This marked another initial phase in the economic development and urban impulse to the region in late 19th century.

The third important and most significant item of natural resources of the region is oil which has helped in transforming the original rural landscape into outstanding urban areas in this remote part of our country. The first search for mineral oil in India began in this region. Early explorers particularly British Army men from 1825 onwards reported about oil seepages in the remote forests near the head of the Brahmaputra valley, but these remained merely a geographical curiosity till 1865, only a few years after the Drake well in Pennsylvania (U.S.A.), when H.B. Medlicott, of

14. Ibid.
the Geological Survey of India, visited this area and recommended drilling near some of the oil seepages reported earlier. The first oil well was drilled at Nahorpung, about 8 miles southeast of Nahorkatiya in 1866. Encouraging signs of oil were obtained in wells at Makum near Margherita, not far from the Makum coal fields, but due to lack of transport facilities further progress in this connection could not be made. There was a significant lull for about 20 years in the exploitation of this valuable wealth of this region. The lull was naturally due to the absence of roads and railways in the area, for though tea was spreading up in the valley area of this region, Margherita then a growing town due mainly to coal and oil of the Makum fields, was accessible only by dug-out canoe up the Dihing River or along jungle tracks from the tea garden area then developing around Dibrugarh. Moreover, Dibrugarh itself could be reached only by river, and there was no way of sending the oil to the markets where it was needed. However, the transport difficulty was overcome when the Assam Railways and Trading Co. built a railway line in 1882 from Dibrugarh to the coalfields of Ledo near Margherita. So, in 1888, exploratory drilling was resumed at Makum but although oil was obtained in several wells, and one flow covered the nearby Dihing River with oil, the outcome was not up to the mark. Meanwhile, oil seepages which were noticed while building railway lines at a place, now known as Digboi, had attracted attention of the explorers and drilling began there in 1889, oil being found in 1890. For many years production of oil was on a small scale, less than 20,000 tonnes per year. Thus commercial exploitation of indigenous oil

commenced since 1890 when the foundation of the oil town of Digboi was laid down. This urban innovation of oil exploitation further got accelerated when subsequently a refinery was set up near the Digboi oil field to process the crude oil in 1899. But earlier to this time crude oil from successful wells was sent for refining to Margherita where a small refinery had been built to treat crude oil from Makum oil field, which naturally stopped after the erection of the Digboi plant.

It is worthwhile to mention here in the background of the historical geography of this region that the significant change in the cultural face of this uninhabited area resulting in a humming urban landscape greatly rests on the Assam Railway and Trading Co. which opened up the area to human habitation and urban civilization not only by constructing railway lines but also by working the coal quarries and drilling the oilwells in this remote corner of the region "Dibrugarh and its environs". The same company in collaboration with the Assam Oil Syndicate constructed the refinery at Digboi with a capacity of 17,000 to 20,000 gallons a day which was bigger than the one at Margherita. It is also important to note, in connection with urban development of this region, that introduction of the innovations of coal mining, oil well drilling, Tea plantation and manufacturing and, finally railway communication had helped in opening up of half a dozen urban centres in this region by the end of 19th century. These new settlements with distinct urban character were: Makum (near Margherita) Margherita, Ledo, Nahor Pung, Nahorkatiya and Digboi. Besides these centres, few railway focal points had come up by this time also. The first railway tract in this area was laid in 1878 known as the Dibru-Sadiya Railway which was mainly built by the rail-
way enterprise consisting of few Tea-estate proprietors to connect important tea gardens around the new urban nucleus of Doom Dooma in the east and the military headquarters of Sadiya in northeast. Besides the garden town of Doom Dooma lying on the said railway, the significant railway-heads that had come up by the end of the 19th century were Tinsukia and Makum Junction Town, the later being the station from where a railway line was laid to Ledo in Makum Coal fields near Margherita in 1882 by the same railway enterprise. Further it may be noted that besides being a railway junction the Makum Jn. Town saw change in the landscape due to the settling up of a number of Chinese families who were brought to this region to train local people in manufacturing tea in the factories established by the Tea estate proprietors.

By this time Dibrugarh had come into prominence since the East India Company made full use of the possibilities of the place and developed it as a centre of industrial, commercial and administrative activities. This was due to the fact that Dibrugarh with its scenic beauty, its situation by the Brahmaputra with a deep and wide sylvan belt around, and a mellow, moderate climate, besides having facilities for navigation, and road communication had a level plain providing immense possibilities for commercial exploitation of Tea industry in the areas around it besides its administrative control over the coal and oil fields in the south and southeast of the region. The British people who came to this area as administrators took no time for a complete control of all the economic development and exploitation of the area. They established the Dibrugarh Town with the construction of a still layer fort since they had transferred most of the important military functions of Sadiya Military headquarters to Dibrugarh by this time. To this site
of the fort area merchants came by boats for trading purposes and a market sprang up known as Purana Bazar (old market). The present New Market was established in 1907. Dibrugarh was constituted into a second class Municipality on July 16, 1873. Under the Bengal Municipal Act 1870 which was in force till 1887, the Municipal Board which continued to be dominated by the officials had no power to lavy taxes. The Bengal Municipal Act 1884 which was mostly on the basis of the famous resolution of Lord Ripon was extended in 1887 and elective system was introduced. In 1887 a Town Improvement Committee was constituted which was a non-statutory voluntary committee of the local officers to look after the health and sanitation of the town. The committee was however, permitted to appropriate the land revenue collected within the limits of the station for Municipal purposes.

Tinsukia which had no significance being only a small village before the construction of the Dibru-Sadiya Railway (1878-81) started gaining some importance as a Railway station by late 19th century. Prior to the coming of the Britishers to this area, the only importance of Tinsukia was that the last of the Ahom Kings, Sarbananda Singh constructed here a sort of pleasure house, the relics of which are now seen near the Sunday Market. The Government records mention it as Rajnagar. King Sarbananda Singh also excavated two tanks close to the Tinsukia village and one of these tanks which was at the junction of the present Trunk Road and the Katchujan Road, was known as "Tinkunia Pukhuri" (a triangular tank). It is presumed that the name Tinsukia follows from

this tank (Tin = three and Suk = corner). It may be recalled here that Bengmara and Rangagora lying near the Dibru River had the administrative headquarters of the Morans and the Moamarias. These two settlements which had prominence when Tinsukia was only a small village were not very far from the later. Tinsukia came into prominence only when it gained control over export of tea chests and became an important railway station owing to the centrality of its location in the tea gardens all around. Further fillip to the expansion of Tinsukia in late 19th century came from the discovery of oil in Digboi (1889) and the establishment of Digboi Refinery in 1899.

Inspite of the growing importance of Tinsukia, it attained officially the status of a town as late as 1947 when Tinsukia Municipality came into existence.

It may be noted here that by the end of 19th century the present area of investigation "Dibrugarh and its environs" although had achieved the stimulation for setting up of a changed landscape with attraction for new settlers from outside yet it remained basically an agricultural tract having very sparse population with exception, of course, of the coal, oil and tea towns - all of them having a heterogeneous population structure owing to inflow of British civil and army officers, upcountry traders and merchants, Chinese tea manufacturers, and above all, coolies from Bihar, Orissa and eastern Madhya Pradesh. Dibrugarh stood high above all of these small urban centres having the control of all administrations - civil, military, industrial and commercial on one hand, and its geographical location on the other giving it the facility of a steamer and rail-head to export the products of its hinterland.
The credit for development of roads before 1900 A.D. would go mainly to the Tea Planters of this region. They opened out roads and improved the means of travel, aided by Government appropriations, but from the following forcible illustration it may well be surmised how poor was the road communication in this region by late 19th century.

"Most people are aware that it rains in Assam, and that when it rains, it is wet. But it is impossible to understand how very wet it is, how utterly waterlogged the region becomes without personal experience of travel during the rains. My attention was first attracted to the real state of affairs riding along the high road from Sibsagar to Dibrugarh, when sundry long poles erected here and there by the road side elicited a query as to what they were for? "To enable mahouts to keep their elephants on the road during the rains", was the reply...............it was a solemn fact that during the rains, that "grand trunk road" is, or was, often submerged under x feet of water, and but for the poles, the elephants might get off the embankment of the "grand trunk road" which was itself raised in some places as much as ten feet above the surrounding country, and might have to swim for it".

Even today, during the rains, many parts in this region are unapproachable and sometimes the main roads get submerged causing great troubles for road communication.

The period of late British rule:

Besides the rapid growth in Tea, coal and oil industry a new item of the natural resources of this region, unexplored till the end of the 19th century, added a significant dimension to the urban expansion of this region; it is timber, processed from the valuable forest resources of this area. The tea traders not only of this region but of the whole of Assam had a great demand on the timber of

20. Ward, S.R. (Mrs.), op.cit., p.77
Hollock (Terminalia myriocarpa) and Hollong (Dipterocarpus macrocarpus) for manufacturing plywood which was used in making tea chests. These two species widely occur in the present area of investigation. Hence, saw mills were established in this area in late 19th century and early 20th century with a purpose to produce packing cases for tea. The first saw mill was started at Dihingmukh using the local soft wood species (mainly Hollock and Hollong) for production of tea chests. By 1889-90, there were half a dozen saw mills working in full swing in this region. But for some time the timber industry had to face severe competition from the imported tea chests favoured by the foreign Tea planters. This competition was so keen that the Naharkatiya saw mills went into liquidation in 1914. This was mainly due to the fact that these mills did not try to saw general utility timber from the mixed hardwood forests.  

The real development of Saw Mills on modern lines started in 1918, when the Assam Saw Mill & Timber Company installed an up-to-date factory at Murkongselek near Sadiya, very close to the north-eastern boundary of the present area of investigation. Another modern saw mill was started by the Assam Railway and Trading Company at Margherita, and its production started in 1924. During the Second World War the foreign supply of timber and plywood being quite negligible, several saw mills came up in Upper Assam and the maximum share of these mills was in this region "Dibrugarh and its environs". The forest department also took initiative in starting saw mills. Out of eleven, for entire Assam, nine mills were located alone in this region - three at Digboi, four at Mokum Junction Town and two at Joypur. Besides, out

of the four American Saw Mills (on lease-land basis), one was located in this region at Joypur.

Plywood industry which has now added a new dimension to the economic potentiality of this region was first started here by Messrs. Bird & Co. in 1918 at Murkongselek lying close to the north-eastern boundary of this region taking the name of Assam Saw Mill & Timber Co. A few years later the Assam Railway and Trading Co. Ltd. opened another mill at Margherita. The said two factories started production between 1920-24 but faced severe competition from imported foreign plywood for tea chests in this region. However, during the 2nd World War, when import from aboard was restricted, a rapid expansion of this industry also took place. But it is interesting to note that in spite of the fact that this region has the best advantages regarding raw materials and market there was no significant progress in this industry till the end of British rule in this region. This may be due to the reluctance of the tea trader in using local timber to manufacture chests for exporting tea for reasons best known to them. However, now the position is completely changed and timber and plywood industries have gained great significance in the cultural and economic development of the region. The towns which received significant urban impetus by this innovation of timber and plywood industries were Makum Junction Town, Margherita, Doom Dooma, Joypur, Dibrugarh, Digboi and Tinsukia. This industry opened up avenue for new settlers from U.P., Bihar, Punjab and Rajasthan and road communication was extended into deep interior for the purpose of transporting suitable logs of wood for the industry by trucks. The exploitation of the valuable timber from forests of this region gave an added

22. Das, H.P., Ibid.
fillip to urbanization in the area and also to immigration of job seekers which had already begun in the later half of the nineteenth century with the establishment of tea, coal and oil industries.

The tea industry which made a significant progress by the end of 19th century and was mainly drawing its labour force from the aboriginal tribes of Chota Nagpur and the neighbourhood had to look for the plains people from the United Provinces since the supply of labourers from the Chota Nagpur area was insufficient. Thus by early 20th century the innumerable tea gardens in the region "Dibrugarh and its environs" had been occupied by a heterogeneous group of people with considerable differences in their culture, tradition and social status.

The benefits which the tea industry had conferred on this region by this time had been many and great. One of the most significant benefit is due to the fact that the land most suitable for tea was not adapted to the cultivation of rice, and the greater part of it would still be hidden in dense jungle if it had not been cleared by the tea planters. Thus the area in this region which would otherwise have been inaccessible and very sparsely populated with few settlements and infested with wild animals, became initiated with a growing urban economy and accessible to the civilized world with small but beautiful urban centres catering to the needs of the heterogeneous non-agricultural population employed in the Tea industry of the region. By 1923, the tea industry in Assam provided employment to 527,000 labourers out of which the tea gardens of the Lakhimpur district alone employed about 300,000 persons. Since most of the tea gardens of Lakhimpur district lie in the present region "Dibrugarh and its environs";

it may well be surmised how an otherwise "negative" region became an area of growing urban activities and underwent rapid transformation in its cultural landscape under the influence of an imposed demographic structure in this remote part of our country. By 1940, most of the innumerable tea gardens in this region had developed individual nuclei for primary urban amenities such as hospitals, primary schools, recreation grounds and shops. Besides, the growing urban tendency of this region had stimulated the development of central places and weekly bazars in addition to the urban growth and development of the comparatively bigger centres like Tinsukia, Doom Dooma, Chabua, Joypur and Makum. On the other hand, the centres which got the impulse of urban transformation from rural landscape during this period were Moran, Khowang, Hansra, Panitola, Bordubi, Kakopather, Rupai, Dikam, Chaulkhowa, Jamira, Bar Barua T.E., Lahoal, Nudwa, Tengakhat, Hapjan, Talap and Tanganagaon. These settlements which originally were weekly market centres, gradually attracted business community leading to the establishment of a line of permanent shops selling such items as might attract the garden population lying around them. In course of a few years, the individual nuclei of the tea gardens were connected to these growing central places by suitable road links and the whole region became vulnerable to new immigrants from different parts of the country.

Simultaneously, the oil and coal industry in this region added further impetus to the urban development of the area. In late 19th century and early 20th century, the Assam Oil Company undertook a limited amount of exploratory work near Digboi but after maintaining a precarious existence for 21 years they found themselves in financial difficulty. Hence, in 1921 the Burma Oil Company assumed technical control of
development and exploration, and provided A.O.C. with the capital needed for new drilling and producing equipment and for a better and new refinery at Digboi at the site of the old one. Systematic exploration of the Digboi field led to the discovery of rich oil reserves and by 1934, the production reached 2½ million tonnes. A unified programme of geological mapping and test-well drilling was undertaken after B.O.C. assumed technical control of A.O.C. and as far back and 1925 gravity surveys had been initiated but interpretation techniques were still far too rudimentary for useful information to be obtained. In the new investigation started in 1937, gravity and seismic surveys were undertaken, but little more than reconnaissance work had been completed when a moratorium imposed during the war made it necessary to suspend work. After the war, the Assam Oil Company's exploration of the Digboi structure revealed important eastward extension of the productive area. However, nothing more significant could be done in this connection till the coming of independence.

The last but equally significant item of resource exploitation which made further advancement and consequently added great fillip to urbanization in this region was coal. By the later part of 19th century it was found out through scientific investigation that the Makum coal fields near Margherita were in a more advantageous position for economic exploitation as the coal was not only of good quality but also the mines were easily accessible. Hence, much attention was paid to coal in this area in early 20th century for profitable exploitation since there was a great local demand on coal from the Railways and Tea Gardens of the region. Consequently, four small mining towns developed in the Makum fields:

1) Ledo-Tikak Mining centre;  
2) Bargolai Mining centre;  
3) Tipong Mining centre; and  
4) Namdang Mining centre.

Besides the progress made in the Makum area, attention was also drawn to the Joypur fields in the south during 1920-30 A.D. All these coal-mine centres drew huge number of immigrants from different parts not only for the coal industry but also for retail trading, public utility services, associated small scale industries to which coal became a stimulant and, above all, for opening up new colonies in this area since land was plenty and cheap.

It is worth mentioning here that with the opening up of all these centres associated with coal, oil, tea and timber and plywood industries in this region there was a quick transformation of this uninhabited area to a new settled one and the subsequent settled area to an industrial landscape with small but growing urban centres linked by suitable communication lines and accommodating a heterogeneous group of people drawn from different parts.

An added fillip to all these was given by the Second World War when the condition of the roads were improved for military purpose and shops and agencies catering to the needs of people engaged in war were opened up in this region. Dibrugarh during this time held the string of all these developments and the entire region "Dibrugarh and its environs" and the neighbouring tracts were areas of strong military activities owing to the strategic geographical location of this region. After the end of the Second World War many of the army men who retired from their services found this region quite suitable for permanently settling in as a
result of which this region got an added heterogeneous demographic structure consisting of such retired army service men as Nepalis, Biharis, Punjabis and Bengalis besides a few Anglo-Indians also. It is needless to mention that such a heterogeneous group of people were apt to non-agricultural occupation with high urban tendencies on one hand and good purchasing power and enterprising ability on the other. Thus by the middle of the twentieth century there had been a significant diffusion of urban innovation in the present area of investigation which started at Dibrugarh as nucleus as early as 1842 with the advent of the British administrative to this region.

**After Independence**

Prior to the independence of our country, there had been significant changes towards urbanization in this region. Besides the development in major industrial items in the area, there had been localization of a number of small-scale industries such as rice and flour mills, steel mills, carpentry works, mechanical workshops, handicraft centres, and grain mills particularly in the better developed urban centres like Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Digboi, Doom Dooma and Margherita. To these were added such urban innovations as cinemas, banks, automobiles, electricity, tailoring machines and photography and many others - most of them being introduced after the Second World War to common people although earlier these were introduced to a selective section of town people of the area. All these had created a significant urban mentality in the population of the region and there was already a step towards rural depopulation and encroachment on agricultural lands by urban culture with the progress in laying
roads and railways, establishing tea factories, building houses to locate urban establishments, acquiring lands around established industrial concerns for future expansion, establishing hospitals and schools in prominent central places, procuring of land by new settlers particularly with a clear-cut non-agricultural occupation and urban mentality for residential and business purpose in the neighbourhood of existing as well as potential urban centres and so on. This had also resulted in a rise of price in land for which a new tendency had come up to look for cheap land in the neighbouring rural tracts.

After independence (1947) not only all these took a new turn when the social structure got changed owing to our democratic set up but also some significant booster came from further exploitation of economic potentiality of this region through Government intervention.

This resulted in such significant industrialization and urbanization that recently the Lakhimpur district alone accounted for nearly 40 percent of the factory labour and 45 percent of the total industrial output of Assam and more than 60 of every thousand persons in this district worked in factory compared to only 7 out of every one thousand persons in the state as a whole.25 Since the present region "Dibrugarh and its environs" accommodates almost all the industrial establishments of the district, the importance of this area may very well be surmised where more than 10 percent of its population work in factories in comparison to less than 1% in Assam.

If a single industry after independence has to be named which has helped not only in rapid urbanization of the area but also in establishment and growth of new urban centres

in the region, it is the oil industry. The most beautiful, though small, township of this region, Duliajan, was born more than a decade after independence when India’s first gas turbine power station was commissioned by Oil India, where once wild animals used to be shot not long ago. Historically, this township does not have much of background, although it is presumed that the neighbourhood was inhabited by a group of people belonging to the Dulia community whose main occupation was to carry the palanquins for the Ahom kings and nobles. The name Duliajan* might also have been derived from a streamlet that runs near the village in the neighbourhood of this town. Getting spurt from industrial colonisation the area around Duliajan completely changed the rural landscape with tiny and scattered settlements to a busy planned urban landscape within a few years. Although Oil India’s first decade of destiny dates from the establishment of the Duliajan Township, the seeds of its greatness were sown earlier in 1953 with the discovery of the Nahorkatiya fields. This was followed by the discovery of the Moran field in 1956. It was in 1956 that a revision of the Government’s Industrial Policy Resolution of 1948 was made and in keeping with the spirit of the new resolution, negotiations were started between the Government of India and the Burmah Oil Company to create an agency for the management and proper exploitation of the Nahorkatiya and Moran Oil discoveries. The result was the incorporation of Oil India Private Ltd. on February 18, 1959. The events that followed greatly accelerated the development of urban landscape in this region which led to the birth of the“Nahorkatiya-Duliajan-Namrup” industrial complex with the string of urban pull still in Dibrugarh since the later had the control of most essential urban

* The word 'Jan' in Assamese means a small stream.
The Mighty Brahmaputra shortly after floods, near a river-ghat, Dibrugarh.

The fury of the Brahmaputra threatening the south-western area of Dibrugarh, a little away from the Park and the Court Building.
amenities of the whole region besides its administrative control in both civil and private organisations and concerns. In 1960, the accelerated pace of drilling in both Naharkatiya and Moran field led to better definition of oil pool limits. Supplies of crude oil from this region to Gauhati Refinery by tank wagons started in 1961, thereby giving an added fillip to road and railway facilities in the region. From January 1962, Oil India started functioning as a separate organisation with headquarters at Duliajan and it was in this year that the 16" diameter of Oil pipeline, connecting Nahorkatiya with the Gauhati Refinery was commissioned. In 1963, the world's first crude oil conditioning plant was commissioned at Duliajan and the first two exploratory wells were dug out in the Doom Dooma area. The next year crude oil delivery through pipeline from this area to Barauni Refinery started. In 1965, this area also began supplying gas for producing electricity to the Thermal Plant erected by the Assam State Electricity Board at Namrup, and the Fertilizer Corporation of India also established a Fertilizer manufacturing unit there based on Oil India's natural gas resources. By this time a number of tea garden factories in this region were successfully persuaded to change over to natural gas firing. All these eventful developments not only changed the face of the land in this region over a considerable area but also created sudden urban spurt in the whole region whereby the region has become vulnerable to such peculiar urban transformation that an analysis of the urban landscape of the region as a whole would reveal its diverse peculiarities which is the aim of the present study.

Another important factor which has to be borne in mind in the context of historical geography of the area after independence is the regional imbalance in educational facili-
River erosion by the Brahmaputra near the Court Building, Dibrugarh. (Note the flood protection measures - wooden spurs, stone blocks and barbed-wire-meshing. Also mark the consignments waiting to be transported by mar-boats to NEFA).

A stone-spur for saving a part of Dibrugarh from the fury of the mighty Brahmaputra.
ties of the region. Establishment of colleges and more high schools which started after independence gave an added fillip to the development of the urban landscape. This reached a remarkable height with the establishment of the Dibrugarh University at Rajabheta T.E., to the south-west of Dibrugarh Town. A new educational township is in the offing at the place and more colleges are coming up in potential urban centres of the region.

With the "give-and-receive" relationship between Dibrugarh Town and its region, the primary nucleus of Dibrugarh reached the present stature through a steady process with a series of timely spurts but this progress was seriously jeopardised by the great earthquake of 1950. Again, the unprecedented flood of 1951 swallowed the most picturesque portion of Dibrugarh in the north and north-east. The town after this started expanding towards south, south-east, and south-west in such a rapidity that this has indicated how valiantly Dibrugarh withstood the unkindest wrath of nature with its new dimension of progress and development joining hands in full co-operation with its satellite towns in the region. The fury of floods has resulted in a change of its geographical co-ordinates* at least three times and fourth one might take place within few years, since from the year 1969, the town has become a serious victim of the wrath of floods and some of the key areas with picturesque urban landscape, particularly the Court and the Medical compounds, have been greatly eroded and submerged by flood waters.

* The geographical co-ordinates of Dibrugarh at different times were as given below:


(iii) After 1954 - 27°28' N. and 94°53'55" E. This indicates the shifting of the town to the south & southwest.