CHAPTER THREE
As already indicated, street food is intimately linked with progressive urban and industrial growth. It calls for an expanding market economy, a growing heterogenous population and presence of people who otherwise lack provisions of cooking and eating where they reside.

The state of Assam (area: 78,438 sq. Km.) in the north eastern part of India (Fig. 1) has a population of 22,414,322 persons according to the 1991 census. The state has always been characterized by a high degree of immigration from other parts of the country going back to practically the inception of British colonial rule in 1826. During the colonial period, encouraged by the British administrators and the need of the economy, a large number of people having distinct language, culture and ethnic backgrounds came to the region (Bhagabati 1992:18).
From 1830s till about the 1950s, a large number of migrants flooded the state particularly from the neighbouring states of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. In 1831, when Bengali became the language of Assam, a large number of Bengali-speaking Hindu people from the neighbouring province of Bengal came and occupied petty jobs in administration and as teachers in vernacular and anglo-vernacular schools of Assam. In 1881, with the coming of the railways into Assam and its subsequent expansion, Bengali people were largely absorbed into this sector. Another stream of migrants, the rural peasants from erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), who were predominantly Muslims came in large numbers and occupied the uninhabited char (riverine tracts) of the fertile Brahmaputra valley (ibid.).

In the middle of the nineteenth century, tribal people from southern Bihar, Bengal, eastern Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and even from far away Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu came to work as labourers in the tea gardens now numbering about 800 and contributing 15 per cent of the world’s production of tea. These migrant labourers along with their locally born descendants constitute an important section of the present population of Assam.

During the same period, the Nepali people came from Nepal as part of the colonial army and as graziers. Today, they control the milk trade in the state. This period also saw immigration of the Marwari people (from Rajasthan) who came and settled in different parts of the state, playing a key role in trading and commercial activities. In fact, they act as money changers and control the wholesale trade in food, textile, hardware, etc.
All these migrant groups of people (otherwise unknown in this area) having diverse linguistic, cultural and social background have contributed to the ethnic diversity of the state. Apart from a small section of people working as clerks, officers, teachers, etc., the majority were rural cultivators and plantation workers. Though they brought with them the diversity of culture and of food habits, these migrants were not capable of supporting or patronizing street food. This is largely because home was their place of work as well as stay.

The end of colonial rule in 1947 and the progressive industrialization since about the 1950s, led to an increase in the growth of urban population in Assam from 3,45,000 in 1951 to 24,88,000 in 1991, including 93 towns and the city of Guwahati. The rural-urban distribution of the people, according to 1991 census reveals that only 11.1 per cent of the people resides in urban areas as compared to 26 per cent in India as a whole. This makes Assam one of the least urbanized state in India with Guwahati as the only city in the entire region.

GUWAHATI - THE SETTING

Guwahati, the capital of Assam and the headquarter of Kamrup district, is located on a crescent shaped foot hill plain skirting the river Brahmaputra (Fig. 1). The city extends from east to west for about 35 kms., from Chandrapur to Dharapur. Its north - south extension from the riverbank to Khanapara is about 15 kms. in the middle and about 6 kms. in its western margin. The city is restricted in the south by the Meghalaya...
foothills. In fact, a large number of hills and hillocks are scattered within the Guwahati Municipal Corporation itself. Of these, Ramcha hills, Chatrachal and Karnachal commonly known as Chandmari hills complex, Sarania hills, Narakasur, Kalapahar, Nilachal, Fatasil hillock and Tetelia Boragaon hillocks are the major ones. These hills, hillocks and the swamps lying at their feet often restrict the growth of settlement and roads within the city. There are a few hill streams of which Bharalu is the main. It has a small tributary called Bonda that joins it from the east near the Assam State Zoo.

History of the development of the city

The modern city of Guwahati (ancient Pragjyotishpur) has a rich historical background which is reflected in the past and present urbanization of the city. Ancient Guwahati was the flourishing capital of many dynasties from known period of history till the downfall of the Pala dynasty in the 12th century A.D. During the Ahom period (1228 A.D. - 1839 A.D.) Guwahati became the sub-capital (the capital was Gargaon in the present Sibsagar district), and remained so throughout the long period of its administration.

After the British occupation of Assam in 1826 the pace of development of Guwahati became rapid. It became the headquarter of the British Commissioner of the Brahmaputra valley till 1847 when Assam was constituted into a province under a Chief Commissioner and its capital was established at Shillong in the Khasi hills, about 100 kms. south of
Guwahati. The district headquarter, administrative offices and military cantonment were established here. This led to the increase of town dwellers requiring public utility services to cater to the needs of the people of Guwahati. In 1865, Guwahati became a municipal town with the establishment of a Municipal Board in the same year. After independence, Guwahati began to grow due to the establishment of major institutions of higher education and of administrative offices and expansion of trade and commerce. Today, the city has become the most important administrative, commercial, economic, cultural, political and educational centre of north-eastern India (Fig. 2).

Commercially, Guwahati began to attain importance after the independence of the country in 1947. Its economic significance increased further after becoming the capital of Assam in 1972. Since then, economic and industrial activities in the city accelerated. Although the importance of Guwahati is mainly administrative, its physical location within the north-eastern region as also of the country as a whole has led to a growth in commerce and industries, thus attracting a large number of people.

Being the principal city of the region, it has rail, road and air links with the rest of the country. Before the introduction of railways and motor transport in the region Guwahati, being situated on the bank of the Brahmaputra, was an important river port. The water route through this river was used to transport both passengers and goods from Calcutta in West Bengal upto Dibrugarh in Assam via Guwahati. After construction of the Saraighat bridge - the first river bridge over Brahmaputra in 1962, linking the city to its north bank - the importance of this riverine route declined.
The coming of the railways to Guwahati\textsuperscript{1} and construction of the national highway No. 37 in the 1960s, linking Guwahati to different states of the region and the country, led to a tremendous increase of commercial activity in the city. Guwahati is the main receiving and distributing centre of goods for the entire north eastern region. Most of the goods are either carried by truck or rail transport. At present about 4000 trucks and buses enter the city daily. The railways also play a major role in the transportation of passengers and goods. With the extension of broad gauge line to Guwahati in April, 1984 both passenger and goods traffic have increased\textsuperscript{2}.

Industrially, Assam is a backward state, yet the industrial importance of Guwahati is significant. It has a number of medium and small industries and also a large industry in the public sector, namely Guwahati Refinery at Noonmati situated to the east of the city (Fig. 2). There are various types of small industries associated with fabrication, brickmaking, saw milling and carpentry, welding and rivetting, bakery and food processing, plastic goods manufacturing and other works associated with cottage industries which attract a large number of labourers (skilled and unskilled) and buyers, etc. It is such development which is responsible for creating the demand for street food in Guwahati.

Guwahati also enjoys the distinction of being an important religious, educational and cultural centre of Assam. The famous Shakta temple of

\textsuperscript{1}The railway line to Guwahati came to North Guwahati in 1952. However, after the construction of Saraighat bridge, the railway line came upto Guwahati city in 1964.

\textsuperscript{2}According to an estimate, the volume of passengers coming to Guwahati have been put at 21.2 million in 1991-92. This increased to 26.5 million in 1994-95. Also, the volume of goods unloaded in Guwahati in 1994-95 (both broad and meter gauge) is 1,200,492 tonnes. This increased to 1,855,529 tonnes in 1995-96 (Source : N.F. Railway).
Mother Goddess Kamakhya built in 1565 A.D. is located atop the Nilachal hills in Guwahati. There are numerous other shrines like Nabagraha, Sukreswar, Ugratara, Umananda, Basistha, etc., which attract a large number of pilgrims and devotees. During the great fair of ambubashi (a period when the earth is believed to be menstruating) held in the precincts of the Kamakhya temple in June-July, people throng to visit the temple from all parts of India. In addition, Shivratri fair in Umananda temple held during February-March also attracts a large number of people. The congregation of people during such fairs and festivals provides suitable locales for street food vendors. Besides the above mentioned temples, there are a large number of mosques, churches and gurudwaras scattered all over the city, where street food vendors set up stalls during the religious festivals.

From the point of view of education, Guwahati has been a centre of formal learning in the region for a very long time. The first ever high school in Assam, namely Cotton Collegiate High School (presently a higher secondary school) was established by the government in the year 1834 and the first college, Cotton College was established in 1901. For a very long time this remained the only college of Assam. At present, as a single urban area, Guwahati has the highest number of educational institutions in the whole of north-east India (Bhagabati et. al. 1986:14). Today, there are about 100 educational institutions in Guwahati (Fig. 2).

Parks and open spaces are limited in Guwahati. There is one park called Nehru Park near the Deputy Commissioner's Court, which attracts a

1It is not known with certainty when this temple was originally built. Archaeologists put the date to the 8th Century. The original temple was destroyed by Kalapahar, a Bengali Hindu convert to Islam and rebuilt by the Koch king Naranarayan in the year 1566 A.D.
large number of children and adults. Other parks worth mentioning are the Mahabir Jain park, Shankardev park, Tarun Ram Phukan park, etc. Apart from these, a few play grounds like the Judges' field near Nehru park, New Field in Paltan Bazar, Dispur Parade Ground, Assam Engineering Institute field in Chandmari and Latasil field near the High Court are available for sporting activities. Besides using these fields for sports, they are often used for holding exhibitions, fairs, circus, public meetings, etc. There are two major stadia in Guwahati - The Nehru stadium (capacity : 30,000) to the east of the city is used for holding major events like football and cricket. In addition, the N.F. Railway has a smaller stadium (capacity : 10,000) to the west of the city at Maligaon. The Assam State Zoo, located in the eastern side of the city attracts many people throughout the year not only from Guwahati, but from all over the state. There are 16 cinema halls in Guwahati which provide recreation to its people. All the above mentioned centres of recreation like parks and play grounds, zoo, cinema halls, etc., are the points where street food sellers gravitate (Fig. 3). It is here that a variety of food vendors sell their relishes and snacks catering to the tastes and preferences of the people.

There are as many as 24 important daily markets situated in different localities of the city (Fig. 4). There are two weekly markets at Beltola and at Maligaon provide vegetables, fish, meat, clothing, utensils and other miscellaneous items. These weekly markets, particularly the Beltola bazar, are visited by people even from far away places. It is in such locations that
the street food vendors provide an important service by selling ready-to-eat food for the benefit of both buyers and sellers.

**Population growth**

Census figures of population as recorded in 1872 gives a total population of 11,492 for the town. It increased marginally to 11,695 persons in 1881. In 1891, the population declined to 8,283. The reason is attributed to a kalazar epidemic which broke out in Guwahati in 1888. From 1901 onwards the population steadily increased as shown in Table 1.

**TABLE 1: URBAN POPULATION GROWTH IN GUWAHATI (1901-1991).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Decadel variation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>11,661</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>12,481</td>
<td>+ 7.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>16,480</td>
<td>+ 32.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>21,797</td>
<td>+ 32.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>29,598</td>
<td>+ 35.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>84,601</td>
<td>+ 185.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>1,66,695</td>
<td>+ 97.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>2,52,305</td>
<td>+ 51.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>5,84,342</td>
<td>+ 131.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 1981 census could not be conducted in Assam, owing to the situation prevailing at that time.
Table 1 shows that in the first decade the population of Guwahati increased marginally (7.03%). In 1921, the population increased suddenly and continued till 1951 to an all time high of 185.83 per cent. This increase can be attributed to the expansion of the municipal boundary to 7.7 sq. kms., incursion of population from Bengal to Assam and general flow of migrants following the independence of the country in 1947. The decennial growth of population from 1951-1971 may be attributed to several factors such as immigration, establishment of the North East Frontier Railway headquarter at Maligaon, Oil refinery at Noonmati, several educational institutions and expansion of town area to 14.08 sq. kms. Between 1971-1991, there was a tremendous growth of population primarily because of the transfer of capital from Shillong to Guwahati, associated administrative expansion and growing commercial and industrial importance. In 1974, with the establishment of Gauhati Municipal Corporation, Guwahati became the first and only city of the region. The increase of population in 1991 census after twenty years cannot be said to be as high as that of 1951 and 1961 census. However, with the present growth rate of 131.60 per cent with a high density of population of 2,695 persons per sq. km., Guwahati has become one of the most crowded cities of Eastern India (Bhattacharyya 1990:5-9).

Adding to the already existing population, Guwahati attracts a large number of people daily for administrative, business and educational purposes. Every day, thousands of people pour into the city from the neighbouring villages, towns and districts by bus, ferry and train to school,
college, office and business establishments in the city. In the evening, there is an exodus of these people. It is this transient section of people who leave their homes early in the morning and return late in the evening who have to depend upon quick and cheap ready-to-eat street food during the day. Moreover, long distance travellers who arrive in the city in the early morning or late at night, are to a large extent dependent on the street corner tea stalls or roadside pushcarts for their cup of tea or a quick meal.

Settlement pattern and ethnic composition

Territorially, Guwahati has expanded to keep pace with the increase in population. The early settlements concentrated mainly in the region between the Brahmaputra in the north and the railway line in the south. Later, in the 1950's and 1960's, settlements spread further south to Kalapahar. New settlements cropped up in Sarania, Gandhibasti, Lachit Nagar, Santipur, etc.

Around the same time a railway township came up at Maligaon followed by the Gauhati University campus to the west of the former. All these developed over the plains skirting the Brahmaputra. In the 1970s, when the pressure of population further increased, the city expanded to include Beltola plains through a corridor in the south of the city. Side by side settlements also came up at Fatasil, Noonmati, Khanapara, Dispur, Basistha, Kahilipara, etc.

Guwahati can mainly be divided into two parts - northern and southern, by the railway line which passes through the city in an east-west direction. The northern part is comparatively higher than the southern part.
In Guwahati, most of the localities except the new residential areas, have a homogenous residential pattern. The tendency is to make settlement along caste or community lines. This is true in the old areas of the city such as Uzanbazar, Chenikuthi, Bharalumukh, Shantipur and Rehabari which are primarily inhabited by the caste Hindus. Assamese Muslims are mainly concentrated in Hedayatpur, Machkhowa and Lakhtokia. The Bengali Muslims are distributed in Dhirenpara, Fatasil-Ambari, etc. The Christians are located in Christian Basti and the Sikhs are scattered over Fancy bazar, Paltanbazar, Hatigaon, Milanpur and Beltola areas. The main commercial centre of Fancy bazar, Panbazar and Paltan bazar are inhabited by Marwaris from Rajasthan (who are primarily Jains), Assamese and Bengali people respectively. There is a small pocket of Manipuri people found in the Manipuri basti near Paltan bazar. The Nepali people are found in the fringe areas of the city near Khanapara in Amerigog in the Assam-Meghalaya border.

In case of the newly developed residential areas the populations are of mixed ethnic background. It is important to mention that there are no completely residential areas in the city except a few areas like the Oil India Limited and Assam State Electricity Board Complexes at Narengi, Railway colony at Maligaon and Bamunimaidam, Gauhati University Campus at Jalukbari, a campus of Assam Agricultural University at Khanapara, Temporary Capital Complex at Dispur and a few multi-storeyed flats scattered over the city. The rest are either mixed residential, i.e., residential localities having commercial establishments and commercial areas which are predominantly market and office areas.
Besides the above mentioned settlements, the city is composed of several areas of sub-standard living conditions. These include slums and blighted areas. In the northern part of the city, at Kharghuli near Uzanbazar, there is an area of sub-standard living condition. It is inhabited by rickshaw pullers, street food vendors primarily of Bihari origin, part time housemaids and other informal sector workers. They also live in scattered locations in Maligaon, Pandu and Noonmati areas. More areas of sub-standard living can also be found in Kachari basti in Ulubari, a few pockets in Paltanbazar, B. Barooah Road and in Fatasil-Ambari. These areas are inhabited predominantly by sweepers. Some areas in the southern part of the city of Athgaon, Fatasil-Ambari, Birubari and in the central part of Paltanbazar are mostly inhabited by street food vendors, *thela*, rickshaw pullers and daily wage earners. Over and above the areas mentioned, there is a slum area on either side of the railway line from Ambari to Fancy bazar (except the Guwahati Railway Station) and below the Panbazar over bridge. The living conditions in these areas are deplorable. These are mostly inhabited by informal sector workers including street food vendors.

Most of the houses inhabited by the street food vendors in the above mentioned sub-standard areas are rented accommodation. They are of thatched roofs with bamboo or reed walls and earthen floor. There are no drainage, garbage disposal, sewerage or drinking water facility in these areas. The living condition of these people are very poor. They utilize the same room for dwelling and cooking purposes. During rainy season, these houses and roads are partially submerged with dirty water, making the conditions very unhygienic.
Urban infrastructure and facility

In order to understand the life of the people living in Guwahati, mention must be made of the various civic facilities and other amenities available to its people.

i) Road network and transport system: Being the only city in the region, the existing road network shows lack of any form or pattern. The majority (53%) of the roads are non-metalled as compared to black-topped roads (35%). Also, there is no uniformity in the width of the roads. Except for the G.S. Road and parts of A.T. Road, majority of the roads are narrow leading to overcrowding and congestion particularly in the busy commercial areas.

Guwahati has a good network of city bus service operating along the important roads of the city. They are run by both private operators and the government. They serve as a very important means of commuter traffic in the city. Besides the city bus, auto-rickshaws and slow moving rickshaws form a part of the urban transport system in Guwahati.

Another mode of mass transport, the ferry service, facilitates movement of people between north bank and the main city in the south bank. Though city bus service exists via the Saraighat bridge, it is not
frequent and thus inconvenient to daily commuters who are mainly dependent upon the ferry service.5.

ii) **Drainage system**: The city at present does not have any scientific drainage system. Some of the areas are served by a system of *pucca* (cemented) road-side drains. Yet the system is not effective. Most of the main roads of the city are provided with foot path cum major drains which are lacking in planning and an integrated approach. In most of the localities including the new residential areas, the drainage system is poor. There are no drains in the sub-standard living areas, and if at all, these are *kutcha* (earthen).

The natural topography of Guwahati is such that rain water is carried by river Bharalu through Khanajan river in the west and discharged into the Brahmaputtra river. However, because of over-population and rapid increase of built up area6 (by filling up uninhabitable low lying areas and cutting down hills, etc.) the existing capacities of these natural channels have been reduced, leading to frequent flooding and water logging of most of the low lying areas of the city.

iii) **Water supply and drinking water facility**: The main source of water supply for Guwahati is the Brahmaputra river. The city needs 156 million litres of water per day. But the different sources like the Guwahati Municipal Corporation, the Public Health Engineering

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5It is estimated that in 1991-92, through the three main points in North Guwahati, viz., North Guwahati, Madhyam Khanda and Rajaduar, riverine ferry has carried 891 thousand passengers to the city (Source: Statistical Handbook, Assam. 1993. Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Guwahati).
Department, Urban Water and Sewerage Board, the Guwahati Refinery and the N.F. Railway together can supply only about 90 million litres of water per day.

The city does not have any integrated water supply system to cover the entire area. The government has been able to provide drinking water through the Guwahati Municipal Corporation to only 48.5 per cent of the total population. The rest uses ring well (36.1%), tube well or deep tube well (13.5%) and natural sources (0.2%) like ponds, etc. (Bora 1997).

iv) Sewage and garbage disposal: Guwahati city has no underground sewerage system except for railway, refinery and defence areas. Majority of the households under Guwahati Municipal Corporation have individual septic tank system without any collective disposal of affluent. In many of the sub-standard and slum areas already mentioned there is no proper system of disposal of night soil. The conservancy system of service latrines is still followed in these areas.

Regarding general garbage there is again no scientific approach. All garbage and waste materials are kept on the road sides which are carried away and dumped in open space near Fatasil-Ambari, emitting foul smell and largely affecting the environment.

*The built up area in the city has been expanding in a devastating manner despite the fact that only 22.1 per cent of the Guwahati Municipal Corporation area is fit for construction activity. In 1968, the built up area in the city was 26.8 per cent and in 1990 it reached 42.2 per cent (Patowary 1997).*
In this chapter, we have attempted to give an outline of Guwahati as an ideal setting for the emergence and growth of street food vending. From the discussion made in this chapter, it is clear that Guwahati’s importance as an administrative, educational, economic and political centre has aided the growth of street food sector.

In Chapter Four, some popular varieties of street food vended in Guwahati have been discussed.