

How Assam's four ponds kept the city from sinking, till now

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The city of Guwahati stands as an entry point, a vanguard to the rest of the northeast in India. In the past 20 years, the city has witnessed tremendous growth and progress. It is one of the emerging cities in the country. A growing service class population, fuelled by rapid industrialization, is transforming its former image of a sleepy town. Small standalone shops have been replaced by large malls, roads have become bigger, apartment complexes dot the city skyline and an aerial view of the glittering lights is absolutely stunning. If nothing else, this city is a reflection of the growing success story that is India. Yet, beneath the glamour lies a menace that threatens to shake the foundations of this prosperity: urban floods. Unmitigated and thoughtless urbanization has damaged the ecological balance of this once small town. These urban floods are almost an annual phenomenon in Guwahati—in 2017, in a little over one month, five lives were lost as a result of flooding. Rapid urbanization, choking off of traditional water bodies, degradation of the hills that surround the city, and lack of proper waste management system have all contributed to ongoing vulnerabilities. It is perhaps the right time to go back in time to understand how our forefathers had always placed water planning as a priority while developing the city. During the Ahom rule of nearly 600 years (1228-1826), Guwahati occupied an important strategic location on the western frontier of the kingdom. At its zenith, the Ahom kingdom ran from Sadiya in present-day eastern Assam to the boundary of the Manas river on the western side. Guwahati served as the last big city and a naval dockyard, which stood at the periphery of the kingdom. Towards the second half of Ahom rule, in light of continuous wars with the Mughals, Guwahati began to occupy an important place in the battle for domination of Assam. The Ahoms, the astute urban planners that they were, took a special interest in water bodies and water harvesting of the city. In this context, the four great ponds of the Ahom era were established. The oldest of this, the Dighalipukhuri, however, predates the Ahom era itself. Legend has it that Bhagadutta, who led the Kauravas in the *Mahabharata*, had dug the pond during the *swayamvar* of his daughter Bhanumati. It derived its name from its length (*dighal*) and was hence called Dighalipukhuri. Once upon a time, it was connected to the Brahmaputra, and the Ahoms used it as a naval dockyard. During the battles with the Mughals in Alaboi and Itakhuli (near Sukreshwar temple in present-day Guwahati), the dockyard at Dighalipukhuri served as a naval backbone. As history would tell us, the Ahoms emerged victorious over the Mughals because they took them to the river. So comprehensively were the Mughals beaten on water that they could never challenge Ahom suzerainty again. On the banks of the Ugratara Mandir, in the heart of Guwahati, stand the twin ponds of Jorpukhuri. White swans (

rajhaah

) swim at the edges while birds of different hues dot the canopies on the bank.

The Jorpukhuri. Photo: Ibu Sanjeeb Garg

The beautiful ponds date back to the reign of Ahom king Swargadeo Siva Singha in 1720 AD, when the ponds were dug up for the benefit of the priest and pilgrims of the Ugratara Temple, which too was built by him. In earlier days, it was connected with the Brahmaputra through the Naojan canal, which has now sadly been reduced to a mere sewage canal.

The Swargadeos (Ahom kings) used this canal to visit the temple whenever they were in Guwahati. The British divided the tank into two parts by laying a road in its middle and thus the pond acquired the name Jorpukhuri (meaning "a pair" in the Assamese language).

Swargadeo Parmatta Singha built the Sukreshwar temple on the banks of the Brahmaputra between 1744 and 1751 AD. Amid much fanfare, the temple was inaugurated and on the day of the inauguration, a snake of immense size was sacrificed at the altar of the temple.

As legend has it, regular snake worship was subsequently performed at a special location marked out a few feet away from the temple. It was here that the Nagkota Pukhuri (the third of the ponds) was built, which stands in the heart of the city, the Panbazar area, today.

The Nagkota Pukhuri. Photo: Ibu Sanjeeb Garg

It was on the banks of Nagkota Pukhuri that the first silent movie was screened in Assam in the now almost dilapidated Bijulee Cinema hall in 1920. The hall, at the time, had a seating capacity of about 60. There were a few chairs, but many more benches and bamboo rails. The tickets cost four annas for chairs, two annas for benches and one anna for bamboo rails. The pond and the hall stand in desolate shape today, filled with muck and used as little more than waste disposal sites.

A rock inscription written in Sanskrit, now kept in the Assam State Museum in Guwahati, gives details of the fourth major pond that was dug during the Ahom era—the Na-koniapukhuri or nine-edged pond.

Swargadeo Rajeswar Singha got this tank dug through the then Guwahati barphukan (minister), Tarun Duwara, in 1753 AD. The tank was dug simultaneously with the construction of the Navagraha, or nine planet, temple, and hence was provided with nine angles (na-non), which gave it the name Na-koniapukhuri.

The faithful believed that the water that was used to bathe the nine planets of the Navagraha temple flowed down to this pond, making it holy. It is the only pond or tank site of the four in Guwahati where a rock cut inscription of the Ahom era has ever been found. It is called the Silpukhuri today.

The Silpukhuri. Photo: Ibu Sanjeeb Garg

Each of these ponds, along with almost 300 other big and small ponds, has served the city over the centuries. The general populace had their water needs fulfilled through them. They also acted as reservoirs during excessive rainfall and as host sites for flora and fauna.

Today, these ponds lie in ruins, covered by weed, and threatened by rapid encroachment of human habitat. The Nagkota Pukhuri has become a sewage dump while Silpukhuri has been "urban planned" beyond recognition.

Only Dighalipukhuri and, to some extent, Jorpukhuri, retain their essence. If Guwahati has to combat the urban flooding problem, it has to urgently revitalize these ponds along with hundreds of other ponds and channels which have been destroyed.

Shantanoo Bhattacharya, an executive engineer with the Public Works Department, who has worked substantially towards flood mitigation and control, says, "These ponds and wetlands are essential components of a flood plain. Without this reservoir, the entire system fails."

Needhi Kotoky, a doctoral student from IIT Guwahati, while commenting on the same, advocates a cautionary warning. "The unplanned drainage system of the city can be linked to the nearest pond. Filtration facility can be designed to reuse the pond water for healthy water management projects."

These natural aquifers have to be re-imagined into the urban planning narrative of Guwahati, in the vision of its future. The previous administrations of the Ahoms and the British understood the same and sought to nurture both natural and artificial aquifer systems in Guwahati. The present administration must do the same.

