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# Boragaon: Amid Guwahati's Waste Is a Neglected Ecosystem of People and Animals

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ADITYA RANJAN PATHAK AND SHRUTI RAGAVAN

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*People, animals, birds, machines, waste – the Boragaon dumpsite in Guwahati, February 2021. Photo: Shruti Ragavan*

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- *Waste is often considered a great nuisance – but it can also be a source of livelihoods and sustenance in its own right.*
  - *A big thorn in Guwahati's side is its municipal waste, and the public dialogue over its Boragaon landfill is currently caught between urban development and ecological and public health.*
  - *Yet there exists a third group with its own interests that both civil society and policymakers need to acknowledge and plan for.*
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We first visited the Boragaon dump site in Guwahati in February 2021. As our vehicle made its way, there was a swarm of activity both on the ground and over our heads. Amid some trucks unloading and others piling up mounds off the path, hundreds of cattle, greater adjutant storks, people, some dogs and kites looked on.

A truck arrived to unload waste, and everyone moved towards the latest pile to segregate, collect and forage. Thus began the everyday lives and routines of people, animals and birds living with and around the waste in Guwahati.

Here, waste has been of particular concern in the last decade due to the location of the Boragaon dump and its impact on the neighbouring wetland. Located along the city's southwest periphery, Boragaon is next to Deepor *beel*, a wetland recognised under the Ramsar Convention and as an important habitat for migratory and aquatic birds.

As a result, the discourse on waste in the city, led primarily by environmentalists, conservationists and activists, has largely focused on the site's impact on the wetland and on the Brahmaputra river – or has used managerial/functional arguments about garbage in what aspires to be a 'smart city'.

Some articles *have* addressed the lives of the people living and working with waste, but few have tried to engage with the notion of the waste as an entangled space – consisting of multiple bodies, activities, livelihoods and living itself.



Greater adjutant storks sitting atop the garbage at Boragaon. Photo: Aditya R. Pathak

### **Living with waste, living around waste**

The neighbourhood surrounding the dump in Paschim Boragaon is populated mostly by the Miyah community. They have been migrating to Guwahati from their homes on temporary sandbars on the Brahmaputra, fleeing recurring floods and erosion.

Most families hail from the Barpeta, Dhubri and Nagaon regions, and migrated to the city and to Boragaon in particular after hearing about it from relatives, friends and other people. Haider Ali, who said this, is a dairy farmer with three cows in Boragaon.



He moved to Guwahati from Howly town in Barpeta district 12 years ago, when his farmland was washed away in a flood.

Before moving, Ali visited Boragaon to check the land and built a pucca house on a *bigha*

of land that he had bought. He also said that semi-pucca houses in Paschim Boragaon belong mostly to waste workers.

The families living here typically earn a living as daily-wage workers, in waste work or through animal-rearing.



The settlement in Paschim Boragaon comprises 100-200 families whose members are informal waste workers, cattle rearers and waste segregators. Photo: Aditya R.Pathak

On our first visit, we met Iqbal Hussain, who was collecting vegetable waste at the dump – which he does twice daily to feed his cattle. Originally from Barpeta, Hussain also migrated to Guwahati 10-15 years ago when the Beki river took away his family’s land. He first worked as a handyman in construction before shifting to rearing cattle a few years ago. His family rears 19 animals in all.

His cows are fed *sapor* (wheat bran) and *dana* (grains) mixed with water twice a day, apart from the vegetable waste he collects. In contrast, the male cattle are not fed and graze instead on nearby fields and on waste from the dump. This is why, we were told, we found many cattle near Boragaon. Hussain didn't explicitly say that his cattle consume garbage, but he did say that he could recognise his cattle in the commotion at the dump and that they would respond to his call.

Foraging is one of the primary reasons for cattle to be at the dumpsite, but they also rest, ruminate, sleep and even groom themselves here. We also saw a pack of four-five dogs running around, sniffing, playing with each other and some children, while kites circled overhead. Some greater adjutant storks watched from atop the hills of waste, while others were rummaging through along with the people and the cattle.

### **Changing wastescapes, ecologies and practices**

These were the daily routines at Boragaon in early 2021. Around this time, the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC), under pressure from National Green Tribunal order and the Assam government, attempted to relocate the dump. In June, the GMC began dumping the city's waste at a defunct thermal plant in Chandrapur, around 26 km from Guwahati in the east.

Located adjacent to the Kolong and the Digaru rivers, which connect to the Brahmaputra, this site was also considered ecologically sensitive. Soon, a 'Chandrapur Dumping Site Protest Committee' was born, and organised protests involving residents, student political organisations and activists, and clashed with the police. The unrest forced the dump to shift in August 2021 to a new yet temporary site only one kilometre from Boragaon, at Raju Parking in Betkuchi.

The government, which made these decisions with the tribunal's prodding because Boaragon threatened the Deepor beel, didn't elaborate on what they meant for the human and the non-human inhabitants of Boragaon, who were largely invisibilised in the process. The result of these shifts was an altered ecology of the wastescape *as well as the lives and the livelihoods* of the people embedded in this space.

We visited Boragaon again in September 2021, and the site had evidently changed. The amount of garbage and the activity of humans, animals and birds had drastically reduced. We could only see a few women and children meandering around with their cattle.



A view of the Boragaon dumpsite in early September 2021. Photo: Shruti Ragavan

We spoke to informal waste workers and cattle rearers in the area, most of whom are Miyah. They revealed certain anxieties, first when the dump was shifted and the protests during the court hearings, and next when the state government passed the Assam Cattle Preservation Act 2021 (replacing the 1950 instrument of the same name with more stringent provisions).

This Act altered the scenery at Boragaon. Numerous families sold their cattle because they feared violence on religious grounds (the Miyah are Muslim), and shifted to waste work. On the other hand, and for other reasons, those who continued to rear cattle were worried because their cattle weren't allowed to graze at the new dump site. This made the cattle-rearers' lives harder, Asim Ali, a 14-year-old whose family rears seven cows, told us.

And even though the new dump was just a kilometre away, the waste workers' woes increased as well. Usman Ali, who has been collecting glass bottles to earn his living, told us that he has to spend an extra Rs 50 to visit the new site. Saleema and Sania Begum, sisters hailing from Pathsala, said their earnings have taken a considerable hit because less waste was being dumped at the new site than they were used to at Boragaon.

Making a living in waste work has thus become more difficult and demanding - in addition to already being hazardous.

We also learnt that the GMC "illegally" dumps waste at the old site, despite the tribunal's order, on occasion. The locals attributed this to the new site not being easy for the waste trucks to enter, especially when it rained. The new site was also spread over only 70 *bigha* (23.14 acres), versus the 108 *bigha* of Boragaon. You can tell some waste has been dumped when the activity among waste workers, dogs, cattle and storks and kites picks up.

Some families living near the new site have already begun to feel the effects of living near waste, however. Balendra Narayan and his wife have been rearing buffaloes for 70 years. They said they are discomfited by the odour, and worry about contracting diseases and the land becoming polluted.





Storks and kites indicate the presence of a waste landscape. A view in Betkuchi. Photo: Shruti Ragavan

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Waste is often considered a great nuisance. Yet, as we gather from the accounts above, it can also be a source of livelihoods and sustenance in its own right.

The Indian government included Guwahati in the first list of 20 cities it selected for the 'Smart City' mission. A big thorn in Guwahati's side, in turn, is its municipal waste. The public dialogue is currently stretched between the issues animating these two forces: urban development and ecological and public health.

Yet there exists a third group with its own interests that both civil society and policymakers need to acknowledge and plan for. We need to move beyond the common discourse and encourage the active participation of the humans and the non-humans who inhabit Guwahati's and other urban wastescapes.



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*Aditya Ranjan Pathak and Shruti Ragavan are members of the Urban Ecologies Project at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru. Pathak is a research assistant and Ragavan is a doctoral scholar exploring the natures, cultures and politics of bovines in the cities of Delhi and Guwahati.*