

## Re-living an “Abandoned” Space

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Amingaon, in Guwahati, is an abandoned railway township. In 1908 with the extension of the Kaunia-Dharla line from erstwhile East Bengal, now Bangladesh, Amingaon was added to the railway map of India. By the end of the 19th century, Lalmonirhat in Bangladesh had emerged as an important railway centre. Links were established with Assam, with the Golokganj-Amingaon line coming up. Prior to the partition of India, the prestigious Assam Mail used to travel from Santahar to Guwahati (Amingaon) via Lalmonirhatt. This train carried passengers from all across the world to Amingaon. There were American engineers who came to build army bases, airfields and lines of communication in North East Frontier of India in the early 20th century, there were British, American, German, etc. missionaries, British tea planters and their staff Indian and non-Indian both, besides labourers who came to work in the tea plantations, British political agents, army stationed in the frontier, east Bengalis on a pilgrimage to Kamakhya or looking for greener pastures besides the few locals who ventured out to the world. There was a single platform, half-a-kilometre in size and half of that size in breadth where they all embarked. Today this platform lies abandoned (Figure 1). Broken benches stand as mute testimony of the bygone days (Figure 2). The sound of the waves of the river Brahmaputra that flows approximately 30 yards away from it has no competitor today. When the station lived, it had to compete with the huffing and puffing locomotives, which visited the station. In fact, there was continuous puffing of the locomotives loading and unloading wagons on the timber stack supported rails. It was a dominant sound heard 24 hours a day as the

railway kept supplies rolling on this extraordinary line of control.

An account picked from the archival records of the official history of “The War against Japan” talks about a hundred yards of track running in Amingaon over a muddy beach a long way below supported on timber cribwork. Rail wagons were pushed across this tracks and loaded on barges to be ferried to Pandu on the other side of the Brahmaputra. Huge groups of labourers continuously adjusted the timber baulks deftly removing or inserting them to adjust the height and slope of the railway line according to the water level and changes in the riverbed. It was called an engineer’s nightmare but also a tribute to their skill. According to the records, this ferry transhipped up to 250 wagons per day in each direction, representing over 50 per cent of the total supply requirement for the Central and Northern fronts at that time. The capacity was later trebled. When loaded each pair of barges would be lashed either side of a steam tugboat or sailed across to the Pandu Ghats on the south bank, two miles from Guwahati. There was a snorting locomotive bringing up the rear and pushing the wagons forward in determined fashion.

Then the puffing stopped one day on June 7th 1963. A bridge, the Saraighat Bridge was constructed joining Amingaon to Pandu. The station was no longer required because the bridge was built almost a kilometre to the right of the station and it was elevated as per the norms. On June 8th when the Assam Mail arrived, there was no movement. The hawkers, the vendors, the coolies watched it stretching their neck crossing the bridge.

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**Figure 1: Platform in Ruins**



**Figure 2: A Broken Bench**

The station lay abandoned. With it the railway track, the houses of its employees, the vendors, the hawkers, the provision shops all were abandoned. Today, shanty shops on the roadside greet all who enters the place. Then you come across red-bricked square or rectangular abandoned railway houses. On the side of the road there are the typical iron rails only seen in railway crossings otherwise and if

one walks one can also stumble on a half-buried railway track.

Amingaon is a Census Town city in district of Kamrup, Assam, India. The Amingaon Census Town has population of 8,855 of which 4,561 are males while 4,294 are females as per Census of India 2011. They are primarily descendants of the employees, vendors and hawkers of the abandoned railway station. Casual chats with them on their family

background will take you to across India mainly, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Telangana, Bangladesh, Nepal, etc. The elderly talk about blonde haired *memshahebs* whom they have seen as children, of horse riding railway *shahebs* who went for a casual hunt in the nearby hills. They talk about their grandfathers who served the *shahebs* and wore boots and trousers. In the conversations, there is a sense of loss, maybe a destiny that deprived them. If the station had continued we would enjoyed the benefits of being connected to the world. That they were deserted in the past makes them feel insecure for even the future. The sense of being “abandoned” is in the spirit of the place.

The common meaning of “abandoned” is having being deserted or left. Abandoned children might get adopted, abandoned animals might find shelter but what happens to an abandoned place? Mostly they are treated as haunted or are forgotten. Maybe soon they get plastered by the present. Again, the present may not be powerful enough to cover the whole past. The past lives provokingly. The ruins may not be appealing enough to attain the tag of heritage. They lie abandoned, like the Amingaon railway and its associated structures but they have been “re-lived” creating layers of history and meaning. They exist on the present landscape but there is a mutual incompatibility between the two. This incompatibility is not just in form but also in the spirit of the place. Specific activities performed in the abandoned area in a particular time period had created certain fixed features Cultural landscape understandings say landscape is derived from the ‘taskscape’ and can be understood as the taskspace in its embodied form (Ingold 1993:162). These activities have collapsed but maybe there is a rise of the symbolic, narrating the spirit of the place. The memory paths lead an inquisitive soul to the source of the symbolic. Human activities of all types add to it (Tilly 1994; Ingold 1993). Amingaon symbolises abandonment.

As one walks through the *bazaar*, the narrow lanes of Amingaon you come across this mixed

population speaking a *lingua franca*, which is an admixture of Hindi, Bengali, Assamese and what not. The ones from Telangana have forgotten their tongue fully or partially but they still savour the food. The visit to a house might get you on the plate-roasted *atta* balls, a cuisine of Bihar-Uttar Pradesh with sambhar dal and dry-fish chutney made the Bengali way. This mini India is a “secret agreement between past generations and the present one” (Benjamin, 1986: 254).

During these moments of historical recognition amidst the town’s decaying structures, I acquire a sense of place through the stories of the descendant population. Maybe if I could dig the wind I could recover the huffing and puffing noise of the locomotives, the hustle and bustle in the platform when the Assam Mail arrives from Lalmonirhat in present Bangladesh. After independence, Assam lost railway link with the rest of the country. From 1948 to 1950 through the Assam Rail Link project, it was reconnected with the rest of the Indian system wholly through Indian territory. For this link, the Kishanganj branch of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway was taken over, converted to MG, and connected to the Northeast Railway network at Barsoi. This change did not disturb the activities of the platform much. Only that no longer the timber baulk was required for transferring the wagons to the barge. The train terminated there and the passengers took a ferry to Pandu. Where did the skilled labourers of that engineering marvel go? The British engineers were given assigned jobs elsewhere but the gang of labourers who almost carried railway wagons on their shoulders remained.

The impressions of this era in Amingaon consists of the railway station in ruins, the post-office still in use, a unique water supply system which is still operational, quarters build for the railway officials but now abandoned and a School still functioning.

The water supply works on principle of backward supply gravity without any power for which it is unique. The supply is simple. Water from the river is fed to a tank. The water comes under gravity into the filter, pressure filtration

takes place, the filtered water is sent back to other tank on hill by gravity, and water is distributed to houses from this tank.

The post-office was built almost hundred and five years ago and it handled all the mail, money orders, telegrams send by the frontier officials of the British empire, tea garden officials and labourers, missionaries, military officials of the British Government. It is still working. It is located just beside the river. It carried letters then which had travelled across continents.

It is exactly 53 years since the last train rolled out of the Amingaon station. There is much in memory and the ruins constitute maps of remembrance. The present is strong.

The Government has built an Export Promotion Industrial Park (EPIP) Amingaon, which contains almost 40 industries. An Inland Container Depot, a Container Corporation of India ventures has also been established. It has been earmarked as an industrial belt in the present master plan of the Guwahati city. The railways are using and re-using some of its office space still. The railway health centre is still

operational. The Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati is also partially located here.

These are micro-histories, the local dream worlds. Amingaon has existed always outside the flow of histories. However, how do things and places accumulate historical worth? It seems as though some types of histories are seen as romantic and beautiful, while others are deemed unappealing and are therefore destined to be always un-remembered? From the realm of refuse when will the narrow-gauge iron tracks lying in the abandoned colonial railway station of Amingaon move to the privilege position of an artefact? (see, Figure 3).

History accumulates in Amingaon with every passing day making 1908 more remote and the Assam mail irrelevant. The descendent population seeks refuge in the present. Maybe there is a will full detachment to the ruins. Histories and memories are embedded all over the place symbolising an abandoned world. The powerful present might devour them all and shelter them in problematic confusing terminologies of 'development' 'growth' etc. that Amingaon critiques, symbolically? (see, Figure 4).



**Figure 3: Abandoned Narrow Gauge Tract**



**Figure 4: An Abandoned Railway Quarter**

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