

## An Interview with Professor Dhirendra Nath Burhagohain, Founder Director of IIT Guwahati

by Gonit Sora - Friday, December 11, 2015

<http://gonitsora.com/an-interview-with-professor-dhirendra-nath-burhagohain-founder-director-of-iit-guwahati/>

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Translated into English by [Ms. Manoshi Goswami](#)

([This interview](#) was published in the Assamese Daily, *Niyomiya Barta*, on 29th Oct and 2nd November, 2015 in two parts. We offer our heartfelt gratitude to the interviewer as well as to **Mr. Phanindra Kumar Dev Choudhury**, Chief Editor, *Niyomiya Barta* for allowing us to publish this interview in *Gonit Sora*.)

No one can deny the immense contribution of **Prof. Dhirendra Nath Buragohain** to the education system of Assam. He played the key role in establishing the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Guwahati at Amingaon. Dr. Burhagohain, after completing his higher education at IIT, Bombay (IITB), started working as a faculty in IITB and has contributed a lot to that premier institute. Very few people have had the opportunity to write about this person of immense personality and a firm believer in working silently for the society. This interview is a humble attempt to highlight his educational and working life and most importantly, his dedicated contribution to establish IIT, Guwahati (IITG).

**Q: What has made it possible for you, to continue your educational journey from Golaghat Amolapatti primary school to IITB, as a student, as a scientist or as the founder director of IITG? What was the source of motivation?**

**Prof. Burhagohain:** After matriculation, I took admission in Cotton College in Intermediate Science (I.Sc.). I was in the third mess of Cotton College. After completing I.Sc., I went to IITB, for graduation in Engineering. IIT Kharagpur was established in 1951, while IITB in 1958. Initially, it was in Worli, Mumbai, but later was shifted to Powai in 1959. I took admission in IITB in 1959.

At that time, I didn't know about the different branches of Engineering. As a matter of fact, there was no electricity in Golaghat till I completed my matriculation. The only engineering department that I was accustomed to since my childhood was the PWD. So, for me, engineering meant only civil engineering.

One of my senior in Cotton College, Prabhat Dutta was studying in IITB at that time and he was the first Assamese student in IITB. We were hostel mates in Cotton College. So, he sent an application form for IITB to my address and accordingly I took admission.

Immediately after completing B.Tech, I took admission in M.Tech in IITB itself. Although, I got a job in Assam Engineering College at the same time, I preferred to go ahead with my studies and hence registered myself in M.Tech (Structures) Course. After M.Tech, without wasting any time, I started my

PhD research. I was the first PhD student in Civil Engineering Department. My guide was Prof. C.K. Ramesh, father of Congress Leader and Economist Mr. Jayram Ramesh. Then I got appointed as an assistant professor in IITB, in 1968, before completing my PhD.

Actually, after completing my research, I applied for a job at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR). The job was for the Electronics Corporation of India Ltd., where the responsibility was to set up the radio telescope antennas. I was selected even; however I wanted to work as an assistant professor and hence stayed back in IITB as a teacher.

**Q: You have a significant contribution in IITB, both in academics and in administration. What were the decisions made by you after you took over the charge of Dean of Planning in the institution and what were the tasks that you have accomplished there?**

**Prof. Burhagohain:** I was the Dean of Planning in IITB from 1984 to 1987. Initially, there was no concrete boundary in the IITB campus. Just after taking the charge as Dean of planning, I initiated the work of demarcating the boundary and constructed the boundary wall. But, I am not sure, whether that was a good step or not; because, once the wall got constructed, slums developed on the other side of the boundary walls. But, for me, as IITB was on one side of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park and the Powai Lake, a strong boundary wall was must for the safety of the people inside the institution. Further, I also believe that it's wrong to have an academic institution without a boundary wall.

After the wall was complete, arrangements were made to widen the roads inside the campus. Earlier, some of the roads were too narrow; so there were problems in movement of the vehicles. Moreover, two buildings, one office building and one residential were also constructed during my tenure. The office building was for newly purchased mainframe computer in the institution and that had to be completed within 9 months. That building no longer exists now; a new building is there in that place. At that time, IITB didn't have mainframe computers. We had to go to TIFR for our necessary works. We used to go there two-three times a week. I too worked like that till 1984.

The building known as 'white house' in IITB was too constructed during that period. That seven storied building was also constructed within nine months.

When I was in the charge of Dean (planning) in IITB, I stressed on proper arrangements of lodging of the employees and the students. That is because without adequate arrangement of staying inside the campus, people might not prefer to work for the institution. So, we made arrangements so that everybody can stay inside the IIT campus.

**Q: It is known to all of us that you were the key person behind the IIT Guwahati. How did you get the opportunity?**

**Prof. Burhagohain:** I was in IITB till the end of 1993. At that time, there was no system of applying for the post of director. Director was appointed via nomination. MHRD used to request the Heads of all the Universities and Industrial Institutes to nominate names for the post of Director. Now also they select directors in the same way, but also advertise for the post in newspapers.

I was nominated in the same way from IITB. At that time, Prof. Biswajit Nag was the director of IITB.

IITB authority used to send my name to several places for such posts at that time, without my information. Once, I was called for an interview for the post of Director, Structural Engineering Research Centre, Madras (Chennai), about which I came to know only when I was called for. But I didn't appear for the interview and clearly informed IITB authority that they should not send my name everywhere in such a way because, I was not at all interested in those things. So, when my name was decided to send as the nominee for the post of Director, IIT Guwahati, Prof. Nag called me and informed me about the same. He also requested me not to reject it this time. There was no interview for the post; instead a discussion was there, where my presence was mandatory. So, Prof. Nag requested me to attend the discussion and also instructed me not to reject the offer, if I was offered the post of director, IIT Guwahati.

I sought one week time from Prof. Nag to ponder upon it. I was not sure about what to do. Whether I should go to Guwahati or not? I had discussed with my wife. She advised me that since I was always interested in working for my own state, Assam, I should accept such a golden opportunity to work for the betterment of my birthplace and should not let it go. I too thought over it and was sure that the way I aspired to help my society cannot be given by any other opportunity than this.

Accordingly, I went for attending the discussion on 16th of August, 1993 and went back to Mumbai once it was over. On 1st September, 1993, I got a telephone call from the then chief minister of Assam, late Hiteswar Saikia. He informed about my selection as the Director of IIT Guwahati and requested me to join. I got the official appointment letter in November of the same year.

Almost at the same time, there was a big earthquake in Latur, Maharashtra towards the end of September, that claimed the lives of approximately 10,000 people. And the responsibility of approving all the construction designs for rehabilitation of Latur was bestowed upon IITB. Maharashtra Government also had a series of meetings with us in this regard. World Bank also agreed to give loans to the Maharashtra Government; but they emphasized on only one thing and that was the designs should be approved by IITB and all the constructions should be supervised by the institution. IITB gave the responsibility on me. So, for me, it was a bit difficult to decide about accepting the offer to join in Guwahati, leaving such a huge responsibility. But, at the same time, the works also encouraged me to work for IIT Guwahati.

So, because of all these conditions, considering everything, I replied to the offer in February of the next year, which came in November, 1993 and got myself ready to go to Guwahati.

**Q: While establishing today's IIT Guwahati, certainly you had to struggle at lot. Would you like to tell us about the long journey that you have completed during the entire period from starting the construction to the establishment of today's IIT Guwahati.**

**Prof. Burhagohain:** In 1985, in Assam Accord, it was agreed that there should be an IIT in Assam. After that, Education Consultant India Limited was given the responsibility of submitting a project report on this. They have prepared an elaborated report and specially assigned Prof. C. R. Malhotra, former director, IIT Kanpur, who at that time was in IIT Delhi for the same. The complete report was submitted in 1989.

Initially, a place was selected for IIT in Misa, Nagaon. Accordingly, first a society named "IIT Nagaon, Assam Society" was established as per the provisions. Because, it needed an amendment in the

parliamentary act to add the name of IIT Guwahati in the list of existing IITs to transform the society in to a full-fledged IIT. But, a lot of problems occurred while trying to set up the IIT at Misa. So, a new committee had selected the present land for IIT, Guwahati and formed a new society called “IIT Guwahati Assam Society”. Then, in 1992, then Prime Minister of India, P. V. Narasingha Rao declared during his visit to Assam that classes of IIT Guwahati should start from 1992 itself.

But, the vital question was how?

So, it was decided that foundation stone should be laid in the selected plot of North Guwahati. Although, initial plan was to go by helicopter to the place for the purpose, but the plan failed due to flood in the area. So, the foundation stone laying ceremony was held in Raj Bhawan, Guwahati. Till that, there was no plan for appointment of the director. The selection process started in 1993 and I joined in February, 1994 only.

[Image Source](#)

**Q: So, when did the classes start?**

**Prof. Burhagohain:** From 1995. I joined as project director in 1994. My first responsibility was to collect all the official documents related to IIT Guwahati, to study all of them in details and then to work for passing the IIT act in the parliament. After a series of meetings, discussions, decisions, finally the proposal was sent to the parliament to amend the IIT Act. The proposal was cleared in both the houses in May, 1994. This amended IIT act was notified as gazetted on 1st of September, 1994 and accordingly I took over the charge of Director, IIT, Guwahati from the same day. That is the reason, why 1st September is celebrated as the establishment day of IIT Guwahati.

But, the planning for JEE Examination began one year ahead of this. I represented IIT Guwahati in the IIT JEE Meeting held in August, 1994. Accordingly, it was decided to start Computer Sciences, Mechanical Engineering and Electronics & Communication departments by enrolling around a total of 100 student, i.e. 33 in each from July, 1995. But, we didn't have our own classrooms, hostels or office rooms.

To start an academic institute, the first thing needed was the classrooms. So, we requested the Chairman and Secretary of Institution of Engineers, Panbazar to provide us some rooms in their building. At that time, Nagen Goswami and Munin Deka were the chairman and secretary respectively. Mr. Goswami even congratulated me before I have joined as the director and promised me to extend a helping hand. Moreover, Prafulla Sharma and Himangshu Sekhar Das, who were the Commissioner of Education and Finance Secretary to the Govt. of Assam at that time, had also helped me in many ways during the process.

I was there in the Guest House of Institution of Engineers at Chandmari till August, 1994 and I didn't have any office room. Then I started sitting in the office of the then Additional Director of Technical Education, Muhi Borgohain inside the premises of Directorate of Technical Education, Kahilipara.

The old Administrative staff building in Beltola was lying vacant at that time. We planned to ask for the ground floor of the building for our classes. But, it was already allotted for Archaeology Department of

Gauhati University and hence, could not be given to us. Then we went to Dept. of Fisheries, where a new building was constructed with the expectation to get at least one floor of the building. But, that too was not possible. No government building was available for using as classroom. It was depressing for me. Moreover, Chandmari was a place, which used to get inundated very often. The place selected for IIT Guwahati was also a wetland, in real sense. So, these conditions were completely unsatisfactory for me and I decided to resign from my post.

I discussed about my decision with my wife and she told me to wait for a few days in Guwahati. She reached Guwahati from Mumbai in the next day. The provision of electricity in the Chandmari Guest House was so poor that it was impossible to work at night. But, I had one laptop with me, which I bought before coming to Guwahati from Mumbai. So, some of my works could be handled with that. My wife was able to feel what my requirements were; a comfortable office room and a comfortable place for staying.

Then Nagen Goswami told me that the office room of Institution of Engineers could be used during daytime and their office staffs were always there to help me. But, initially I could not agree as it was their office room, not IIT's or mine. Finally, we decided to rent the entire first floor of the building as our office and proceeded with our works in September, 1994.

But, the actual task of establishing the IIT was still left. We needed an architect to start the construction. So, we decided to hold a competition of architects in the national level. But, to prepare the architectural brief for the competition, we needed another architect. Nabajyoti Borah, who was an architect (passed out from Dept. of IDC, IITB) agreed to prepare the brief and accordingly, the competition was held. A total of 80 architects joined in the competition and 22 of them submitted their master plan. Mr. Achyut Kavinde of IIT Kanpur was the judge of this competition held in IIT Delhi. Still, we needed some instant plans for the session to begin.

When I shared my worries with Nagen Goswami and Munin Deka, they asked for 4 months of time from me to construct the second floor of the building. Accordingly, classrooms were built in the second floor of Institution of Engineers Building and we were able to start the first classes of IIT Guwahati from July-August of 1995.

After that, we needed to start was the selection of faculties. Prof. Devadas Kakati joined with us in January, 1995. He was in IIT Madras earlier and also acted as Managing Director of Amtron. He was the first teacher of IIT Guwahati. Sometimes, Prof Pradip Baruah also came from IIT Kanpur to help in the selection process. Prof. Mihir Choudhury (who was in NEHU at that time) and Prof. Pradipeswar Bhattacharyaa (IIT Kanpur) also assisted in the process. Many teachers from Cotton College and Assam Engineering College also conducted the classes as guest faculty from August, 1995. We had no problem in getting guest faculties, because the first year started with the courses on Basic Science and Humanities. Our students were taken to Assam Engineering College and later, to Jorhat Engineering College for workshop practices.

Although we could made the temporary arrangements of office room and class rooms in Institution of Engineers Building, we were still searching for a decent place for accommodating our professors, staffs and students. One day, I saw a large marriage hall in G. S. Road and came to know that it belonged to some Bofaiz Ahmed from Dergaon. When he knew about us, especially when he got to know that I am

also from his own district Golaghat, instantly he agreed to give the building on rent to IIT Guwahati as hostel. From him only, we could know that he was supposed to sign an agreement on the next day with someone for opening a nursing home in the building. So, just for a day's difference, we got this first IIT Guwahati Hostel. Now, Nemcare Hospital has been started in the same building.

We faced the same problem in the next year too. As number of students increased, we requested Institution of Engineers to give another floor for classroom. But the question was where to start another hostel?

Again we came to know that, there was a building in Lakhimi Nagar, Zoo Road, which was constructed to start a nursing home. But, as they could not start the same, it was given to us on rent for hostel.

But we were not that lucky every year. Initially, I proposed to construct some temporary buildings at the allotted plot. But, as law and order situation at that time was not so good, it was decided in the Board of Governors Meeting that we should go for permanent construction and in the mean time, somehow everything should be managed in Guwahati itself. Our plan was to shift the office, classrooms and laboratories to the campus in 1997. But, to construct permanent buildings of IIT Guwahati in two years was not feasible.

So, a contract was given to build a temporary building for the classrooms in the allotted plot during April, 1997 and the party was told to complete a transit complex of 10000 sq. feet within 8 months. As requested, they finished it within December that year. So, we shifted out classrooms, workshops and laboratories to the campus in January, 1998. But, during that 5 years duration, we had to arrange 13 hostels for the students in 13 different locations and 84 flats for the faculties. The teachers and students had to come from Guwahati to the IIT campus at 7 am everyday and had to return at 5 pm in the evening by IIT Bus service. We had to adjust like that for 3 years since 1998.

Finally, construction of the entire necessary infrastructure was completed in June-July of 2000 and then all were shifted to the campus permanently. Actually, I am always grateful for the help, good will and support that I received from everyone in Guwahati and North Guwahati during the whole process of establishing the IIT.

[Image Source](#)

**Q: How was your experience during the management of the new IIT?**

**Prof. Burhagohain:** There were so many *Bandhs* in Assam at that time. Still, while we were at Guwahati, our teachers went for taking classes by walking even to the hostel at the Nemcare Building of G. S. Road. No classes were cancelled during any of the *bandhs*. Similarly, if students came to the temporary classrooms at Institution of Engineers Building, teachers were also compelled to take the classes. Thus, we always tried to run our activities in a disciplined way from the beginning. And, I believe, these things compel everyone to feel a sense of purpose or a sense of belongingness. The people were habituated to go to office at 11 am and then again come out for a cup of tea, we were astonished to see their interest in working for the IIT. They even agreed to work on Saturdays and Sundays if needed. It happened because, none of us hesitated to do any work; so they too were forced to be punctual and disciplined. According to me, the environment decides the work culture of a particular office or institute.

So, we were very strict in maintaining the same. But, the most important fact was that, later on, these were the people who felt proud to work in such an environment in the IIT.

Similarly, we also adhered to the rules very strictly while appointing our faculties. Innumerable claims were made to appoint local people in the IIT. Since, the IIT is in Assam, only Assamese people should be appointed in all the posts, only local people should get the preference, etc. etc. Then I said, why were you calling it as Indian Institute of Technology? Name it as Assam Institute of Technology. If you are giving it the name of IIT, then it must follow the rules of IIT, it must have the standards of an IIT. It cannot descend from that. Gradually, everyone understood the fact that eligibility is the only criteria for selecting a teacher, not where he belongs to. However, if eligible, the posts of supporting staffs can be filled up from local candidates. So, if any eligible person applies for a post, we will definitely consider him for the post. But, without eligibility, only because a person is from Assam, we cannot appoint him or her against a vacant post.

I uttered similar things to the Central Government too. Initially, we were granted only 53 Crores of rupees to construct the 1200 sq. feet academic building and 500 sq. feet hostel building. When we had again requested for financial grant for the works as per our master plan, they said the fund given earlier should be sufficient. Then, I clearly told them that, if you are planning to establish an IIT, then establish an IIT. If you are trying to satisfy us by giving a toy car after promising a car, then the reactions will certainly be opposite. However, they could understand what we were talking about and did accordingly.

When we had started IIT, many teachers were interested to teach there. At that time itself, I requested all teachers, who didn't have a PhD, to apply for a permanent position in IIT, Guwahati only after completing PhD. Many of them completed PhD and then got appointed as teachers in IIT with their own capabilities. As per my information, they have excelled in research and other fields later.

What I believe is that if you want to do something, you must have a fixed aim. Success will definitely come, if someone works consistently to achieve the target. Then only self-confidence comes and people can be happy.

**Q: Did you follow any special rules or special systems in case of appointments other than the teaching staff. What were your experiences in such appointments?**

**Prof. Burhagohain:** There were no such special rules or systems. I have told already that, except in the posts of teachers or similar ranks, we were taking local people. At that time, many unemployed graduates were there in North Guwahati. So, when we have decided to start appointment for supporting staff, naturally they demanded that we should consider only them. Then, we explained to them, if they were appointed, they must know to use computer in the office work. Then they told that there is no facility to learn computer in the area. So, we arranged for free one week computer training twice. It helped many of them to get the jobs and they also could understand that one can get a job in IIT, only if he or she is eligible.

**Q: What is your opinion on establishing so many IITs in India recently?**

**Prof. Burhagohain:** No, I don't have to say anything in this regard. You have to see these things from various angles. Many aspects are associated with these facts. Everything has a good and a bad side. Have you read *The Fountain Head* by *Ayn Rand*? It narrates the story of an architect, who never cleared any

architectural examination, due to many reasons. But he was an original thinker who believed in excellence only. A very important point in this book was about the mentality of the mediocre people. In our society, there are more people of mediocre mentality than people who believe in higher thinking. And the mediocre class always judges and controls the class who think higher. As they can't equalize with the mentality of the latter group, they try to bring the others down to their own level. They can't go up and hence always try to pull back others. Only a few can be excellent; but if you are many of the same standards then you are mediocre. People are always comfortable being in the majority group, that means being mediocre.

It appears in the first place that so many IITs will reduce the overall standard of IITs. But, if all IITs grow up to the standards of old IITs, then, the standard, which earlier was known as 'excellent' will automatically become 'average'. So, to rise up to "excellent" level, all IITs must increase their present standard, that's what I believe. But, the main problem in this case is to get sufficient number of eligible teachers for so many IITs.

**Q: Brain Drain has not yet ended in Assam even after having an IIT or so many other good academic institutions. What is your opinion in this regard?**

**Prof. Burhagohain:** It's the same, whether someone is going out of Assam or going out of India. Many people says, when a person goes outside India, I mean America, he or she doesn't comeback; but actually many have returned. I don't think that because of brain drain, Assam has got no direct or indirect benefit. It's up to you, where you are comfortable working in; but what matters most is the exchange of knowledge or resources. This will always benefit everyone. According to me, if you are always confined within a boundary, don't keep yourself up to date on what's happening in the world, refrain yourself from experiencing the outside world; you will not be able to excel as per your capability. So, I don't think brain drain to be that hazardous.

**Q: Are you satisfied with the present education system of Assam?**

**Prof. Burhagohain:** In true sense, I am not well aware of the system run by SEBA. But what I want to tell to the Engineering Institutes is that students will benefit only when they follow the important and necessary courses. In general, the management of the entire education system should be proper; because we always get to know about one or the other problem making headlines, more particularly in final examinations. This is not a good sign. It affects the students negatively.

Then, now-a-days, many engineering institutes and universities have come up in Assam too. But, acquiring a degree doesn't matter much; students must acquire the eligibility for appointments too. Moreover, majority of the students do not want to work hard. They don't want to appear in JEE, because it requires hard work. If they don't appear in examinations, how will they get a seat? When I was in IIT, about ten thousand students appear in JEE from a single centre in Patna. In comparison, how many students appear in JEE from the entire North East? However, the condition has improved considerably now.

**Q: What keeps you busy these days?**

**Prof. Burhagohain:** I was retired in 2003. After retirement, for four years or so, I was in Guwahati itself

as structural consultant and in some other works. Then I was associated with Srimanta Sankar Educational Trust till 2005 and helped them in establishing the first ever private engineering college of north east i.e. GIMT. The college was started in 2006, in Azara, near Guwahati. After that, from the end of 2005 till the mid 2007, I was supervising the Spanish Garden Complex construction in Zoo Road as a COO of Brahmaputra Consortium. In 2007, a German Company named Civil Engineering Networks opened a branch in Pune. Actually, the person who has started the branch in Pune was known to me since my IIT Bombay days i.e. from 1989. So, on his request, I have helped him as Chief Technical Officer of the company. After 2011, I was running my office works from my Mumbai home, instead of staying in Pune. Then in between, for one and half years or so, I worked as the Principal Adviser of Royal Institute of Engineering & Technology, Guwahati. While working in Pune, since 2012 July, I was acting as the Chancellor of Nagaland Central University. Then, towards the end of 2014, IIT Guwahati invited me to join there as an Emeritus Professor. Since, IIT Guwahati is my favourite place; I left the job at Pune and joined IIT Guwahati in January, 2015 as an Emeritus Professor in the Department of Civil Engineering.

Another attraction of Guwahati for me is the association called Convergence'57. This was started very informally in 2007. Actually, this is a small association of everyone who passed their matriculation examination in 1957. All of us gather together on the fourth Sunday of every month and also arrange a grand get-together on the fourth Sunday of December, every year. It feels good to meet batch mates like this. We have approximately 80 people, including ladies and gents. Apparently, these are the things that keep me busy now.

*(We wish Prof. Buragohain good health and a long life!)*

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