5. PEOPLE

One river, many cultures

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THE YARLUNG Tsangpo-Siang-Brahmaputra-Jamuna River is one river system that acquires various names along its journey, transcending three countries and three major faiths, and assimilating many local customs and practices along its flow. The banks of this majestic river have been dotted with settlements since time immemorial and many an ancient civilisation has flourished in its basin. The river has impacted and shaped the lives of people living on its banks, carrying with it numerous untold and re-told myths, stories that have shaped and continue to shape various customs and traditions as well as progress and development. As Sanjoy Hazarika says, this river system encompasses "Asia in Miniature". While the geography and fractured frontiers of the basins and sub-basins of the river system are fascinating in themselves, it is the population that holds even more interest: the cultural diversity and shared history. Straddling the ages and the mountains, the people of this winding trail form an anthropological bridge between South and Southeast Asia.

YARLUNG TSANGPO BASIN

Tibetan Nomadic Pastoralists

Marc Foggin

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Straddling the ages and the mountains, the people of this winding trail form an anthropological bridge between South and Southeast Asia

THE TIBETAN PLATEAU constitutes the world's largest and highest mountain region, covering nearly a quarter of China's land area. At over 2.5 million square kilometers and averaging around 4,500 meters above sea level, it is mostly inhospitable for crop cultivation. Over vast areas of the plateau, therefore, only nomadic pastoralism can be practiced, a livelihood that is contingent on substantial flexibility and adaptability by herders to respond to harsh, often changing, and generally unpredictable climatic conditions. The environmental situation also has traditionally necessitated seasonal mobility to ensure survival of domestic livestock and their herders with the very limited productivity of the grasslands during the short annual productive growing periods.

From recent archaeological research, it appears that hunter-gatherers lived permanently in the cold-harsh environment of the Tibetan plateau from at least 8,500 to 7,400 years ago, and possibly as early as 12,700 years ago[1]. Some ecological studies suggest an anthropogenic creation of pastoral landscapes by early livestock holders, by removing trees to create or promote pasture lands, may have begun as early as 8,800 before present (BP), during the mid-Holocene climatic optimum[2]. Others, however, suggest that such human-modified environments appeared only later, c. 5,900 BP[3]. Genetic data on early domestication of yak also provide estimates ranging from c. 10,000 BP[4] to c. 5,000 BP[5].

Whatever the exact timeframe of the arrival of the first hunter-gatherers and pastoralists in the highlands, as d'Alpoim Guedes and Aldenderfer[6] point out, it is clear that when farmers first arrived from surrounding lowlands to the margins of the plateau, possibly as early as 10,000 BP, even as they brought new crops and new agricultural technologies, "they did not move into a void but rather a land that was full of other people." Beyond livestock and their many milk products, the most common staple food that is eaten by both farmers and pastoralists is barley, which was most likely introduced into southern Tibet between 4,500 and 3,500 BP[7]. Roasted barley flour or *tsampa* has always been a convenience food – versatile, long-lasting, portable – and thus a predominant part of people's fundamental diet. As such, *tsampa* may even be recognized as a core element in Tibetan identities[8].

Livestock on the Tibetan plateau include sheep, goats, yak, and horses. But amongst these, the yak epitomizes best Tibetan pastoralism, as life on the plateau would

Marc Foggin

simply not be possible without it. In many ways, the yak is to Tibetan pastoralists what fields of barley and other crops are to Tibetan farmers – or, as Robert Ekvall[9] aptly wrote in regard to livestock kept by Tibetan *drokpa*, or "high-pasture people":

> *Many dwellers of the Tibetan plateau… develop and tend other fields, not of the soil, but better adapted to the harsh ecology of that bleak land… livestock, which are the ample base of a vastly different economy… Within the production cycle of a subsistence economy, "fields on the hoof" occupy the place in nomadic pastoralism that soil fields occupy in sedentary agriculture… It is the care of these livestock which makes nearly half of the Tibetan people "pastoralists"; and because what they own, tend, and harvest is on the hoof [i.e., livestock] in wide pastures that require much movement, they are also "nomadic."*

Horses also play a very important role in Tibetan pastoral areas, even though smaller in economic impact, with horsemanship being a highly regarded skill and much praised especially through horse races and other contests at annual festivals, testing both horsemen and horses' performances to the maximum[10].

Globally, rangelands occupy about 40 percent of the earth's total land surface. For its part, the high Tibetan steppe extends around 3,000 kilometers from east to west and 1,500 kilometers from south to north. With a strong continental climate and very high elevations, this ecoregion also comprises the headwaters of many major Asia rivers, including the mighty Yarlung Tsangpo, better known downstream as the Brahmaputra River[11]. In the highlands, the Yarlung Tsangpo flows through both agro-pastoral and crop-based livestock production systems, with the former most prominent in the higher altitudes of the western region, also recognized as the cool semi-dry agropastoral ecological zone[12].

Traditionally, at least until a few decades ago, there were three main groups of people present in the Tibetan rangelands: hunters, nomadic pastoralists, and crop farmers. The latter two groups have always maintained particularly close ties, to mutual benefit, exchanging meat and other livestock products for barley in autumn, in order to sustain themselves through the long winters. Tibetan hunters, on the other hand, always have depended on wildlife, often migratory, and therefore had to move seasonally according to natural patterns[13]. Large populations of wildlife were decimated, though, especially from the 1950s through to the end of the 1970s, and now wildlife populations persist only in substantially lower numbers. Fortunately, with improved legislation as well as greater public awareness about conservation and the development of a regional network of protected areas, much Tibetan wildlife is now recovering, hunting as a livelihood is now gone, with most former hunters now practicing pastoralism, raising livestock in combination with a range of other socio-economic activities.

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Overall, Tibetan pastoralists today are less 'nomadic' than they once were, due largely to recent government policies that have encouraged varying levels of sedentarisation along with relocation and urbanization of herders and intensification of production systems, sometimes leading to fairly challenging scenarios of *nomads without pastures*[14]. Such rapid changes also have given rise to some concerns over people's sense of identity[15], which has been demonstrated, for example, amongst many First Nations in Canada to be highly and consistently correlated with people's sense of wellbeing and hope for the future[16]. At the same time, encouraging developments also are arising in China, such as with large-scale conservation endeavours including the creation of a new national park system[17] in which more participatory and inclusive approaches are now being trialled and progressively adopted, particularly through a model of community co-management in China's newest protected areas[18].

Today, for those who identify with being *drokpa* – i.e., Tibetan nomadic pastoralists,

the high-pasture people – whether or not they still engage exclusively in livestock herding, or engage in herding at all, is beside the point. In either case, their sense of identity broadly remains closely tied to the grassland where they grew up, to their yak and other livestock, to their long and rich cultural heritage as well as the surrounding natural heritage – a land in which the wildlife is and always has been, in their words, the "jewels of the land".

Building and strengthening partnerships that include traditional knowledge of the long-standing custodians of the land, will support the collective interest of all stakeholders

With new and rapidly changing circumstances largely brought about through increased connectivity, or globalisation, with a virtual shrinking of the world, two responses are needed: first, a major re-thinking about whether or not food systems and people's livelihoods should even be subject to the criterion of specialisation-for-efficiency[19], considering the many non-monetary values of yak, grasslands, and pastoralist livelihoods; and secondly, in the interim, novel approaches must also be found whereby sustainable development may be promoted, with equity, across economic sectors and all the varied segments of the population. Toward this end, different models of rural development are being explored, ranging from the development of community cooperatives, associations, and social enterprises to value-add projects centred on wool processing and handicrafts, to individuals' pursuit of higher education for achieving personal dreams for business, art, research, civil service, etc. Through the latter, it should be possible in the future for more local perspectives, for the voices of the high-pasture people, to be more resonantly heard, adequately considered, and integrated into planning and action for a more sustainable future for all.

As outlined by UN Food & Agriculture Organization already many years ago, but still very relevant today[20], there are many profound changes taking place in the Tibetan plateau region, with both negative and positive impacts on the fate of the grazing lands and on everyone who depends on them. These changes include major infrastructure developments and market reorientations within pastoral systems, policies to settle pastoralists and reduce their traditional mobility, significant expansion of protected areas, promotion of crop production where previously good pastoral land was used by herders, and, not least, climate change with alterations in precipitation and temperature and increasingly frequent natural disasters (such as snowstorms and drought). Building and strengthening the right partnerships to address these issues, inclusive of local and traditional knowledge and of the long-standing custodians of the land, will support the collective interest of all stakeholders affected by the state of the environment on the Tibetan plateau – from the local pastoral communities, living in the remote, high-altitude Yarlung Tsangpo headwaters, to the herders, farmers, forest dwellers and town dwellers living far downstream.

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Linguistic Diversity on the Tibetan Plateau

Yulha Lhawa

ASIA IS the most linguistically diverse continent in the world and is home to almost a third of global language hotspots, clusters of endangered languages in small geographic regions. Thus, the region carries a significant weight of global linguistic diversity. A common misconception, in both popular and academic representations, is that Tibet is a monolingual region. However, a growing body of research attests that Tibet is linguistically diverse[21]. This aligns with both global and national patterns of linguistic diversity in low latitudes and rugged terrains with high biodiversity like the Tibetan Plateau, especially in the eastern part.

Minority languages on the Tibetan Plateau are languages that are linguistically distinctive from Tibetic or Sinitic (Chinese) languages. These minority languages are often unrecognized by the state and within Tibetan communities, under the assumption of a one-to-one relationship between language and ethnicity. The persistent emphasis on learning written Tibetan is also another major reason why there is little room for Tibetan minoritized languages within Tibetan communities and Tibetan literature even.

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Approximately 230,000 of the 6.2 million Tibetans in China speak one of these minority languages other than the three acknowledged tongues: Amdo, Kham and U'tsang. In 2018, Roche and Suzuki[22] identified up to sixty minority languages spoken both by Tibetans and other ethnic groups. In 2019, Suzuki and Tashi Nyima[23] identified four additional languages, so the latest estimate is sixty-four languages in total. There is a common saying across Tibet that every valley has its own tongue, which hardly seems like an exaggeration.

These minority languages are spoken by small populations and are only transmitted to the next generations orally. Many are endangered based on the UNESCO 9-factor framework for language vitality, mostly due to pressures coming from both increasing integration into the modern Chinese state and standardization of Tibetan language and culture. People are traditionally farmers and nomads, and these minority languages are only spoken in these villages with no media or school usage.

Standard Tibetan is the prestige language in Tibetan society. Social attitudes regarding Tibet's minority languages also typically undermine their vitality. Tibetans are known to use pejorative terms to refer to the minority languages of Tibet. These include the Tibetan terms *'dre skad* 'ghost language' and *log skad* 'backwards language', and the Chinese term *niaoyu* 'bird language'. These languages are identified with ethnicity; and in general, speakers of minority languages tend to have a negative attitude towards their own languages. In recent years, there has been a wave of interest in learning written Tibetan among many minority language speaking communities.

The number of identified minority languages might expand as more and more research is being carried out in less-investigated geographical areas. Regardless of how many languages are spoken in Tibet, it is certain that there will be fewer languages in 50 years' time if we do not actively preserve them. Recognizing and describing the region's minority languages is an essential step towards preservation of individual languages and providing data for further research and revitalization work. If this is done well, we might be able to avoid a fate which seems to await most of Asia, the world's most linguistically diverse continent.

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Yak: the treasure of the highland[24]

Xiawei Liao

THE YAK is a unique cattle species that lives in the high mountain grasslands of the Himalayas and the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau, at altitudes between 3,000 to 5,000 meters. These mammals live at the highest altitudes in the world and can withstand severe cold temperatures of minus 30 degrees to minus 40 degrees centigrade.

The wild yak is a protected animal in China. There are more than 14 million yaks in the world, 90 percent of which are distributed in the high and cold regions of China's Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau at an altitude higher than 3,000 meters. Among them, 3.9 million yaks are found in Tibet, accounting for 30 percent of the total and ranking second only after the Qinghai province of China, which is home to 4.9 million yaks.

Yaks can adapt to the ecological environment of high altitudes, low atmospheric pressure and low oxygen content. The length and thickness of their fur vary with the seasons. In the cold season, yaks have thick hair under their chest to protect the chest, internal abdominal organs, external reproductive organs, breasts and joints from freezing. They also have small skin surface areas and extremely underdeveloped sweat glands to prevent from losing heat. Yaks have wide mouth and flexible lips so that they can eat the short grasses. On average, one yak can eat 26 to 30 kilograms of fresh grass per day.

Three types of yaks are found in Tibet: alpine yaks, Pali yaks and Sibu yaks. Tibetan alpine yaks are of two types: mountain yaks and grassland yaks. Alpine yaks are mostly black and are similar to wild yaks. The famous Jiali yaks are a type of alpine yak that live in the Jiali County in the Nagqu Prefecture. Pali yaks live in the alpine meadow grassland, subalpine (inter-forest) grassland, swamp meadow grassland and mountain shrub grassland in the Pali Town of the Shigatse prefecture. Pali yaks are mainly black, and a few are pure white.

Yaks can adapt to the ecological environment of high altitudes, low atmospheric pressure and low oxygen content

They usually have a wide head, flat forehead, and a slightly concave face, with round eyes, thin noses and large ears. The distance between the two horns of Pali yaks is large, which is one of the main characteristics of Pali yaks. Sibu Yaks are located in the Lhasa River Basin, close to the Shannan prefecture in the south in a transition zone from agriculture to animal husbandry. Sibu yaks graze all year around in the Sibu Valley, at an altitude of 3,789 to 4,200 meters.

Livestock on the Tibetan plateau include sheep, goats, yak, and horses. But amongst these, the yak epitomizes Tibetan pastoralism, as life on the plateau would simply not be possible without it. Yaks are one of the most important domestic animals in most of the pastoral area on the Tibetan plateau. Nomads place so much value on the yak that many refer to them as 'nor', which also means 'precious gem' or, more generally, 'wealth'. The yak, in many ways, defines nomadic pastoralism across most of the plateau. Yaks provide milk and milk products, meat, hair, wool and hides. They are also used as draught animals and for riding. Yak dung is an important source of fuel in an area where firewood is not available. The yak makes life possible for people in one of the world's harshest environments. There is little doubt that the presence of wild yaks, and their later domestication, was the single most important factor in the adaptation of civilization on the Tibetan plateau.[25]

BRAHMAPUTRA BASIN

Asia in Miniature

Sanjoy Hazarika

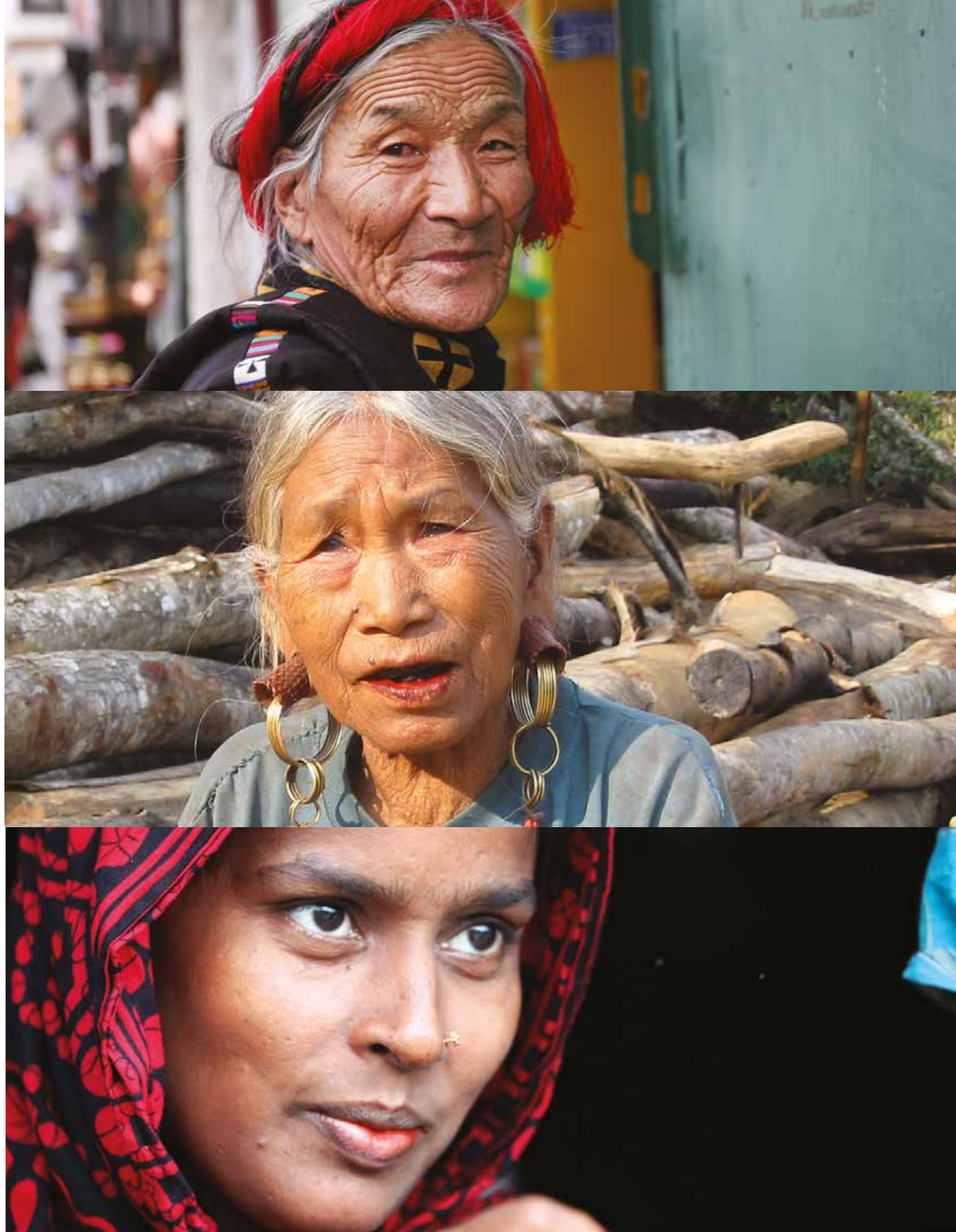
THE STRETCH of the Far Eastern Himalaya from Sikkim, India, eastward is significantly different from the rest of the mountain range. The reach of the Ganga plains, of Hindu ethos and historical Moslem influence, is much more muted here. If anything, many of the animistic hill tribes have gone the other way by embracing Christianity. Unlike the cultures of the faraway flatlands, these eastern communities are more directly linked to the Tibetans of the north, or the Indo-Chinese of the south and east.

The region is also unique in its geography. Although part of the same Himalayan range, these southern latitudes nurture a lush tropical landscape drenched by one of the highest precipitation rates in the world—strikingly different from the high desert of Ladakh or the dry terraces of west Nepal. The High Himalaya itself is lower at these extremities; with the peaks descending eastward from Mount Everest (8,848 meters) in the Khumbu, to Kanchenjunga (8,598 meters) at the Nepal-Sikkim border, to Namcha Barwa (7,756 meters), standing guard as the great bend of the Tsangpo. About here, the Himalaya breaks southward into Burma and dwindles away eastward into hills of the Hengduan mountains of Sichuan-Yunnan.

While the geography and fractured frontiers of this region are fascinating in themselves, it is the population that holds even more interest: the cultural diversity and shared history

The western part of the Himalayan range is neatly packaged into a progression of states from Pakistan to Nepal to Bhutan. But here in the east the range becomes a geopolitical jigsaw, crossing national frontiers with impunity. The rectangle of the Far Eastern Himalaya is broken up among five nation states, little Bhutan, the Northeast of India, the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, the Arakan region of northern Burma, the southeastern tip of Tibet and the hills of Yunnan. While the geography and fractured frontiers of this region are fascinating in themselves, it is the population that holds even more interest: the cultural diversity and shared history.

The babel of languages heard along this Himalayan flow includes the guttural Tibetan and its offspring Dzongkha, the sweeter Assamese in the Brahmaputra valley, and the lilt of Tibeto-Burman tongues in the hills of Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. This region is Asia in miniature, a place where the brown and yellow races meet. Taking a south-north transect, for example, you encounter the Bengali migrants in Assam, Tibeto-Burmans in the Himalayan mid-hills, and the Khampa of the high plateau. Going west to east, the spectrum is even more diverse from the people of Tibetan stock, the Bhutia and Lepcha of Sikkim and the Ngalong Dzongkha-speaking people next door in Bhutan, the population takes on Tibeto-Burman hues with the Sarchop



of eastern Bhutan. Eastward, the communities become progressively less ´Tibetan´ and more ´Burman´. The variety is outstanding.

Straddling the ages and the mountains, the people of this winding trail form an anthropological bridge to Southeast Asia, where the roots of many still lie. The Khasi of Meghalaya are believed to have come from Kampuchea and still speak a form of Mon-Khmer, although because of British missionary influence they use the English alphabet. The Thai Ahom migrated from Thailand to Assam 600 years ago and settled in a land they reported was as valuable as gold.

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Archaeology and prehistory

Manjil Hazarika

WHO WERE the first inhabitants of the Brahmaputra basin? When did they start living in the basin? From where did they arrive in the valley? How did they start cultivating rice in the valley? Who built the brick and stone temples, stupas, sculptures, ramparts seen in the valley? How did the cultural development and assimilation take place? These are some questions that boggle our mind when we think of the history of the people residing in the extensive fluvial landscape of the Brahmaputra basin with so much of ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversities. To seek the answers, one may look into the archaeological remains spread across the river basin and its tributaries and the associated historical events.

Manjil Hazarika

Rock cut votive stupas at Sri Surya Pahar Archaeological Site in Goalpara

India is often considered as a major crossroad of movements of prehistoric ancestors from Africa, the cradle of humankind, to the Far East. While discussing the dispersal routes of these early humans through South Asia, the Brahmaputra basin and its surrounding hill tracks is considered as a narrow strategic corridor between the gigantic high Himalaya in the north and Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean in the south. However, it may be noted that the sub-recent alluvial deposits

Manjil Hazarika

A fine rock-cut sculpture of Bhogasanamurti of Vishnu on the bank of the river Brahmaputra in Manikarneswar in North Guwahati

of the Brahmaputra valley may not give fruitful results for such an antiquity of around 2 million years before present. Vigorous sedimentation might have covered earlier deposits bearing artefacts and fossils or been washed away, if there ever were any. The fluvial activities of over-flooding and changes in the course of the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries have also affected many of the ancient and early medieval archaeological sites in the region. Moreover, frequent earthquakes have brought down majority of the structures and temple complexes built during the ancient and medieval period.

For understanding the earliest remains of human habitation in the Brahmaputra valley, one needs to look at the surrounding hilly areas which has produced some important prehistoric sites. Many Stone Age sites dating back to the Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer period have been recorded from the uplands of Garo-Khasi-Jaintia Hills, Naga Hills, Manipur and Tripura. Many of these stone artifacts have been equated with the Hoabinhian or similar industries of Southeast Asia that fall within the Late Pleistocene/Early Holocene geological period. Hoabinhian is a technological tradition of prehistoric hunter-gatherers-fishers that existed approximately during the last 43,000 to 7,000 years before present in a broad region from southern China, northern Vietnam, Malaya, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Sumatra, Taiwan and northeast India.

The next important phase is the Neolithic period starting at around 4,500 years before present. During this phase the inhabitants of the Brahmaputra basin and the surrounding hilly tracts started making polished and chipped stone axes, adzes and other utilitarian tools, handmade pottery of either plain or cord-impressed varieties. They settled in the foothills and uplands, exploited the aquatic natural resources and forest products and cultivated food crops like rice in the uplands as well as in the nearby marshy areas. This coincides with the advent of the various

Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burman language speaking groups from neighbouring Southeast, East and South Asian regions. These assumptions are based on available archaeological, historical, linguistic and human genetic data. Slowly they expanded in population size and intensified the agricultural activities in certain fringe areas of the valley. They used large stones to erect burials in memory of the deceased and for commemorating certain events and demarcating boundaries. This tradition known as megalithic has persisted until today among various ethnic communities. Iron was a precious metal smelted by the late Neolithic communities.

Chieftain groups based on ethno-linguistic and cultural background emerged, slowly leading to the formation of petite kingdoms occupying the hills. Exchange of ideas, development of trade and commerce among them and arrival of newer groups of people from the Gangetic valley in the last part of the first millennium BC led to the rise of smaller principalities in the Brahmaputra basin and its tributaries.

Intermittent trade between India and China through the valley and surrounding areas provided a base for these earliest state formations. The Brahmaputra river system acted as a thoroughfare for the hinterland trade networks. The lower reaches of the Brahmaputra which joins the Padma (Ganga) in Bangladesh, is another important cultural zone of ancient Bengal where Buddhism flourished in the early centuries of the Common Era.

Areas like Goalpara in the confluence of Krishnai-Dudhnoi-Brahmaputra Rivers, the regions in and around Guwahati popularly known as ancient Pragjyotishapur, Dhansiri-Doiyang valley were some of the key areas of historical development since the beginning of the early centuries of first millennium AD. Mention may be made of the site of Sri Surya Pahar in Goalpara having evidence of three Indian religious sects of Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism, which is often equated with Ellora of Maharashtra. Excavation at the site of Ambari in the heart of Guwahati city yielded evidence of cultural materials dating back to the Sunga-Kushana period. The Varmans of ancient Pragjyotishpura-Kamarupa had close ties with the Guptas ruling in a large part of north, central and east India. With a more organised way of administration, trade, cultural exchange reflected in the inscriptions, coins, pottery, stone sculptures, brick and stone structures, most areas of the lower and middle Brahmaputra valley were brought under a more homogenised cultural and political structure during the nineth to twelfth centuries AD under the Pala dynasty.

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The Tai-Ahoms entered the upper Brahmaputra valley in the beginning of the thirteenth century from the kingdom of Pong in the upper Irrawaddy basin, a polity that straddled a part of upper Burma and the adjacent portion of the Chinese province of Yunnan. It gave rise to the Ahom kingdom, assimilating many of the petite kingdoms in the area. The six hundred years of their long rule witnessed a well-organised political and administrative structure supported by systematic agricultural practices, construction of roads, ramparts, forts, besides secular and religious monuments, and giant burial mounds known as the *Moidams*, mostly in the upper and middle Brahmaputra valley. The *chowkis* (military check posts) along the courses of the rivers and the battles of Saraighat near Guwahati fought by the Ahoms against the invading forces are testimonies of their naval warfare. Similarly, the Koch kingdom flourished in the lower part of the valley and shaped the cultural sphere of western Assam. Another notable feature of the medieval period is the rise of the Vaishnavite sect propounded by Saint Srimanta Sankardeva and his disciples. The *Satras* (monasteries), *Naamghars* and *Kirtanghars* (prayer halls) spread through the entire length and breadth of the valley, including the famous island of Majuli in the middle of the Brahmaputra are some important contributions of the Vaishnavite movement.

Throughout the history, the people living in the plains of the Brahmaputra and the surrounding hill tracts had close cultural and societal ties. This is easily observed in their customs, tradition, folklores, culture and mode of subsistence. This symbiotic




cultural milieu in a strategic geo-political setting covering a wider area of undivided Assam has shaped the cultural identity of the Brahmaputra basin. Influences of topography, environment and ecology are well reflected in the cultural traits among the people inhabiting the Brahmaputra basin in the past as well as in the present.

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Ancient fluvial trade route

Preetee Sharma

THE HISTORICAL period begins in the Brahmaputra valley from the mid-fourth century Common Era (CE) onwards. We do get a lot of references about the *Kamarupa-Pragjyotisha* or ancient Assam region in literature such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Kalika Purana and so on. These literatures mostly talk about the mythical king *Naraka*, the first king of *Pragjyotisha*, in great detail. But historically this information could not be verified with any other reliable sources such as inscriptions. The first three historical dynasties of the region of Brahmaputra Valley are the Bhauma-Varmana (mid-fourth to mid-seventh century CE), Salastambha (mid-seventh to tenth century CE) and the Palas of Kamarupa (tenth to thirteenth century CE) as reflected in the epigraphic sources.

The river played a very significant role in binding the entire length of the valley by providing ease of economic transactions and transportation which in turn led to homogenisation of culture

This period in the history of the valley from fourth till the first quarter of the thirteenth century CE is also referred to as the Pre-Ahom period, which as a term was popularised by historian Nayanjot Lahiri through her work "Pre-Ahom Assam" published in 1991. In the region of the Brahmaputra valley, the coming of the Ahoms into the valley in 1226 CE from beyond the Patkai range is considered a major break in the historical processes of the region. Historians also consider the coming of the Ahoms as the beginning of the medieval era in the region, just like in the Indian subcontinent the coming of the Sultanate rulers is the marker of medieval times. Historians also intermittently use terms such as Ancient Assam and Early Assam to refer to this period where the latter term is the most popular one.

In the historical processes of the valley the river Brahmaputra played a central role which is reflected in the way most archaeological sites of importance are located in the fluvial zone. Sites such as Ambari at Guwahati, Suryapahar at Goalpara have yielded very rich cultural metrial reflecting the larger connections within the Brahmaputra valley and also beyond. In fact, at Ambari a substantial amount of turquoise glazed potsherds, whose origin is traced to the Arab domain, have been found which shows Ambari was connected to the Indo-Arab trade network of the early medieval times. Also, at Ambari the discovery of Chinese Celadon potsherds shows the region's connection with China in the early medieval period. And most of these networks and connections seem to have been maintained through the fluvial

route of Brahmaputra as it was the most convenient and faster transportation route. A very significant historical source for studying about Early Assam are the epigraphic sources. A total of 32 inscriptions have been found in the region belonging to this period. Most of these inscriptions are records of land grants made by the kings of the three dynasties. Thus, these inscriptions provide a lot of information about places where villages were settled; information about the social groups and the hierarchies within; religious preferences; and crucial insight into the economic life of the Brahmaputra Valley in the Pre-Ahom times. In an eleventh century CE land grant we find the mention of different categories of boatmen: namely *Candenauki, Daksinapatinauki* and *Sadhavanauki*. The emphasis on segregating the boatmen plying on the *Lauhitya* or Brahmaputra on the basis of the area of operation or distance covered or goods transported by the boats within these historical records shows the crucial role played by the river Brahmaputra. The river played a very significant role in binding the entire length of the valley by providing ease of economic transactions and transportation which in turn led to homogenisation of culture and other social practices in the historical times.

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Tai-Ahoms of Assam

Ambuj Thakur

THE TAI-AHOMS of Assam are a branch of the great Dai race of Southeast Asia that came from Mung-mao, the present-day Ruili area in Southwest China's Yunnan province, in the early part of the Thirteenth Century CE. According to the *Deodhai Asam Buranji* (the Ahom Chronicles) their leader, Chao-lung Siukapha (1189

– 1268 CE) through his grit and determination, rallied his 9,000 camp followers and 300 war horses to establish a powerful kingdom on the verdant plains of the Brahmaputra valley in Upper Assam after subjugating the various local kingdoms including the Chutiyas, Barahis, and Marans. Interestingly, Chao-lung Siukapha entered this valley through the Tipam area, bound on the one side by the Patkai Hills, and the Buri Dihing River, on the other. True to their traditions of being valley people settled beside water courses, Siukapha also tested his luck along the courses of both the Brahmaputra and its major tributaries like the Buri Dihing and

the Dikhou, to establish his foothold in the 'Land of Golden Gardens' or *Mung-Dun-Chun-Kham*. The capital was finally chosen near Simaluguri, adjacent to the Naga Hills, and named Che-Rai-Doi or Charaideo, meaning the 'City of the Sacred Hill'. Ever since then, it became the royal burial ground with almost all of Siukapha's descendants interred in mounds, called the *Maidams*, akin to the Pyramids of Egypt, but rarely explored until now.

Assam, or ancient Kamarupa, has a glorious history since the days of the Bhauma-Naraka dynasty finding mention even in the epic Mahabharata. It reached its apogee during the days of Kumara Bhaskaravarman, a contemporary of Harshavardhana of Kannauj, when the Chinese traveller Hieuen-Tsang visited the capital city

Pragjyotishpura, or City of Eastern Lights, in the Seventh Century CE. But it was under the stable leadership of the nearly six-hundred year old Ahom rule that it emerged as a cohesive socio-political and cultural unit. In the period from 1228 to 1826 CE, the Brahmaputra valley witnessed an immense churning within, withstanding and adapting to numerous external stimuli, which gave shape to the greater Assamese identity. Siukapha and his successors, managed to do what few dynasties have seldom achieved in history, being conquerors, they assimilated their customs and traditions with the local populace thereby blending into a unique synthesis of ideas and emotions.

One of the major achievements of the Ahoms lay in building up a durable economy under the rubric of the *Paik* system, which was a system of corvee labour and had parallels in Southeast Asia like the *Prai* system in Thailand, amongst others. In a non-monetised economy, human labour was invaluable and this system catered well in administering the country. First reorganised during the reign of Siusengpha or Pratap Singha (1603 to 1641 CE), by the astute Momai Tamuli Barbarua, father of the famous general Lachit Barphukan, it followed the decimal system in organising the officers of state administration. Each individual was considered a *paik* and four of them formed a *got*. Land was state-owned and these *paiks* were assigned fallow land to cultivate in lieu of paying a part of the produce as tax. They also had to render services to the state and the royalty in various forms such as military service, construction works, royal household duties.

Another important innovation of the Ahoms was the introduction of wet-rice cultivation in Assam. The very reference of Mung-Dun-Chun-Kham alludes to their instant likeness for the golden paddy and oilseed fields of the Brahmaputra valley

Both Shihabuddin Talish, the Mughal chronicler (*Tarik-i-Asham*) accompanying his master Mir Jumla, and later Aurangzeb's general Ram Singh have attested to the dexterity of this system and sang paeans to the fastidiousness of the people of Assam for the love of their motherland, in their accounts in the mid-seventeenth century CE respectively. Later on, the system saw further modifications during the reign of Siurempha or Rajeswar Singha (1751 to 1769 CE), when the numbers of the *got* were reduced to three. The various officers commanding the *paiks* were the *Bora* (20 men), *Saikia* (100 men), *Hazarika* (1,000 men), and *Phukan* (6,000 men). The commanders-in-chief of Upper Assam and Lower Assam, the *Barbarua* and the *Barphukan* had 12,000 *paiks* with them. However, due to the depredations of the Moamaria rebellion and the Burmese invasions towards the end of the Ahom monarchy, this system declined.

Another important innovation of the Ahoms was the introduction of wet-rice cultivation (*Sali*) in Assam. The very reference of *Mung-Dun-Chun-Kham* alludes to their instant likeness for the golden paddy and oilseed fields of the Brahmaputra valley. Their agrarian character was suitably put to test in the regions' fertile alluvial soil and multiple varieties of paddy like *Ahom Sali*, *Khampti Sali*, *Pakhi Sali*, *Aanki Sali*, *Kar Sali* were cultivated using improved water conservation techniques. Later on, in the early nineteenth century CE, British officials like Francis Buchanan Hamilton noted that the paddy constituted about three quarters of the agrarian

produce of the kingdom. Sir Edward A. Gait also wrote in his *A History of Assam* that the local people lived in ease and comfort with every article of domestic consumption produced in their own fields, something that Shihabuddin Talish had also spoken about a hundred and fifty years earlier.

The Ahom rulers were master builders and the palaces like the *Karengghar* and *Talatalghar*, in the old capitals of Garhgaon and Rangpur, are living examples of refined architectural styles. The great reservoirs like the *Borpukhuri*, *Joysagar* and *Rudrasagar* besides the numerous temples along their banks, as well as the sports pavilion, *Rangghar*, are testimonies of their interests in leaving their mark in the region's history. These tanks were designed in such a way that the water levels have never receded to this day even during dry seasons. A special type of cementing glue, *Koraal*, made of materials such as lentils, fish, river sand, honey, and lime, was used in construction activities, which gave the walls of these buildings not only durability, but also strength. It should be noted that most of these buildings have survived till date in this highly seismic zone, including the great earthquakes of 1897 and 1950 CE.

The Ahom coins were also fine specimens of currency which had a very high silver content of about 94 percent, with denominations ranging from the gold mohur to one-thirty-second of a rupee. Octagonal in shape, they had the names, regnal years and salutations to deities like Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti on the obverse and the reverse sides, besides the royal dragon symbol. While gold was sourced from the rivers of Assam, with special guilds called the *Sonowals* assigned to the task, silver was supplied from the faraway mines of Yunnan through the Southern Silk Route (*Nanfeng Sichou Zhilue*). As late as 1809 CE, British officials noted that the kingdom had a brisk annual trade amounting to a hundred thousand rupees along this route including commodities like horses, silver, cowries, lac, and silk.

The Ahoms were warriors and repulsed as many as fourteen invasions from the western side, including the Mughals. The Ahom victory in the Battle of Saraighat (1671 CE) still echoes in the hearts and minds of Assamese people. They had not only a strong infantry, but also a powerful navy consisting of different types of canoes and boats required for navigating the treacherous channels of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. Experts in constructing earthen forts and embankments, the Ahoms used natural vegetation to their advantage in defending their realm. However, towards the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries CE, religious strife and political disunity sapped the vitality of the administrative system, paving the way for the British to finally annex the kingdom in 1826 CE after signing the Treaty of Yandabo with the Burmese. However, the Tai-Ahoms still remain an influential community in Assam today and their past achievements cannot be allowed to fade away in the mists of history.

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The Brahmaputra valley is a densely populated region. Considered to be the heart of Assam. The different communities of the valley have brought colour and vibrancy to the state's landscape

Cultural landscape

Farzana Begum

THE BRAHMAPUTRA valley is a densely populated region. Considered to be the heart of Assam, the valley stretching from Sadiya in the east to Dhubri in the west is the cradle of bustling cities and towns, bucolic villages and hamlets, serene *chars* and *chapories* (sand bars), and picturesque islands inhabited by diverse communities. The valley is the meeting ground of numerous linguistic and racial groups and is a treasure house to the anthropologist. Presently, Assam is home to communities belonging to different tribes, castes, languages and religions. These communities have been living in close proximity over a long period of time, which has led to intermixing of racial and cultural elements. The different communities of the valley have brought colour and vibrancy to the state's landscape.

A unique feature of the state is the presence of a large number of tribes, comprising 12.41 percent of the state's population. Many of the tribes have common ancestry but also distinct cultural traits, which distinguish them from one another. Through

Tai Phake

A small ethnic group residing in Assam radiant with it's own culture and tradition.

Tai Phakes migrated to the north eastern part of India from the Howkong valley of Myanmar in 1775.

historical records the origin of the tribes can be traced back to 800 years ago, but studies of their migration stories, folklores, and songs indicate that the tribes have a long existence preceding the historical period. A majority of the tribes belongs to the Mongoloid group and are members of the Tibeto-Burman language family. The Bodos form the largest tribal group in terms of population, followed by the Misings. Other tribes like the Rabhas and Karbis also have sizeable populations.

The Bodos also known as Boro or Boro Kacharis are regarded as one of the earliest settlers of this region, their main concentration is now on the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra from Dhubri in the west to Dhemaji district in the east. The Misings are the second largest scheduled tribe in Assam in terms of population. The word 'Mi' means man and 'Shing' means water/river. Therefore, Mising means the tribe living by the side of the water or river. The socio-economic and cultural life of the Misings is closely linked to life on the riverbanks. They construct their houses on piles. They are expert swimmers and use boats and rafts for transport. Years of living on the riverbanks have taught them to cope with the floods that occur every year. The intimate relation of the Mising tribe with the river is an accepted truth and the saying – *Noi Suwani Miri* which means that the river is made beautiful because of the Miri (Mising)- reflects this sentiment.

The Rabhas are believed to have come to Assam from Tibet at different stages of time in waves of migration. They have close linguistic and cultural affinity with the Bodo and Garo tribes. The Garos and Karbis reside in both the hills and plains of Assam. The Garos call themselves as *Achik Mande* meaning 'Hill Man'; they follow the matrilineal family structure and trace their lineage through females. The Karbis call themselves as '*Arleng*', meaning man. Some authors opine that '*Arleng*' also refers to "slope dwellers"[26].

The Tiwas living in the plains are settled cultivators and the Tiwas living in the hills practice *jhum* (shifting) cultivation. The Tiwas living in the plains have assimilated the Assamese way of life and have been deeply influenced by Vaishnavism. The hill Tiwas have maintained their traditional culture. The unique *Jon Beel mela*, which is an annual event during the month of January, provides an opportunity to witness the ancient traditional barter system practiced among the different ethnic communities.

The Kacharis who used to collect gold or '*son*' from the bank of the Subansiri River came to be known as Sonowal Kacharis. The people of the tribe are deeply influenced by Vaisnavism, but traditional *Bathou Puja* (worship of Lord Shiva) is observed with sacrifice of animals. The Dimasa Kachari consider themselves the descendants of the Brahmaputra; the tribal meaning of the word 'Dimasa' is 'son of a big river'. '*Di*' means 'water', '*Ma*' means 'big' and 'Sa' means 'son'.

The word 'Mi' means man and 'Shing' means water/ river. Therefore, Mising means the tribe living by the side of the water or river

The Ahoms belong to the Tai ethnic group of the Mongoloid race. They came to Assam during the early part of the thirteenth century. The kingdom which Sukapha, the first Ahom king of Assam established in 1228 continued till 1826, leaving behind a rich legacy in the history of this land.

The Deoris is another riverine community of Assam. The term '*Deori*' means the 'offsprings of God and Goddess. The Deoris also known as *Jimochanya* functioned as the priests of the Chutiyas of Assam[27]. Originally from the banks of the river Kundilpani at Kundil, presently known as Sadiya, the Deories traveled along the Brahmaputra river and initially took shelter in the sand bars.

Also nestled in small pockets are found several communities including the Tribes who follow the Buddhist religion and inhabit the upper region of Assam. The Tai Khamtis are said to have migrated to Assam from Bar Khamti (Khamti Lung) in Burma during the eighteenth century. The Tai Phakes are the descendants of the Tai royal officials and had a principality of their own in Hukong valley in the Patkai range of mountains. In 1777, they arrived by boat at Kokilamukh and later settled in Naharkatiya. The Tai Aitonias and the Tai Turungs have also migrated from Burma.

The Singpho tribe believes that they migrated to this region through the Brahmaputra via the Sampo River between 800 and 700 B.C. Although these tribes have over times

developed their own individual identity, there are many traits, which they share in common. Racially they belong to the Tibeto Mongoloid races and trace their origin from Myanmar or Burma. They came to this region in series of migration from ancient times. All are followers of the teachings of Buddha. They share similarities in food, clothing, economic activities, religious rites and festivals. These small but ethnically rich Buddhist tribal groups have made the landscape of the state more brilliant and colourful with their presence. They practice agriculture; rice cultivation is the primary occupation. They are also expert horticulturists. The women in all the tribes are expert weavers.

Amidst the diversity in society and culture, there are many commonalities, which bind the people of Assam. Rice, fish, the use of *Khar*, (Alkaline) and *Tenga* (Sour) in their curry are loved by all the communities. An upper and lower wrappers are the traditional attire of a woman of Assam, and each tribe/non-tribal community has a different name for it in their language, Bihu the festival associated with the seasons and agriculture is celebrated by all people from different religions, castes and tribes. These are only a few of the attributes that unite the people of the hills and plains of Assam. These are examples of harmony and inclusiveness imbibed in the society and culture of the land of the Brahmaputra.

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The Char people

Gorky Chakraborty

Can a piece of land 'float' in water of a flowing river? If it floats, will it 'flow' with the river?

CAN A piece of land 'float' in water of a flowing river? If it floats, will it 'flow' with the river? Does such a 'flowing-float' sustain life and livelihood for the humans? If it does, how does one categorise it: as land, water, or both, or none! Well, these were the puzzles which were explained to me by my fellow traveller in a city bus in Guwahati, until an argument picked up regarding the 'quality' of the currency note provided by him as fare. The conductor reacted with a 'slur', soon followed by few other passengers, ultimately resulting in his forced de-boarding from the bus. In utter bewilderment, I too went out, as if to continue our conversation which got interrupted abruptly. The man was shivering in fear, an accumulated rage within made him angry too, unable to speak properly and sobbing intermittently, he tried telling me that he hailed from the *char* areas of the river Brahmaputra in Assam. I tried consoling him feeling bad at his hapless plight, followed by loss of words and silence, until he asked me "will you come to our place?" and went further with his invitation saying "what I had been narrating to you so far will be in front of your eyes, and you, yourself can make out what is a *char*: land, water, both, yet none! My tryst with *chars* thereby began on the roads of Guwahati, the largest and fastest growing urban agglomerate in northeast India. The search for academic literature

on these areas left me depressed as they were almost non-existent. But the incident in the bus, the slur, the land that floats and flows yet sustains life and livelihood albeit temporarily and questions about his identity agitated me until I decided to study these areas applying academic lenses.

Under colonial rule, in-migration of the traditionally skilled cultivators from the populous districts of neighbouring Bengal to the wasteland of the Brahmaputra valley, was encouraged to meet the rising food grains requirement of the state and also satisfy the ever-increasing demand for raw jute from the mills in Bengal, thereby adding to the revenue generating capacity of Assam. The Census Report of 1911 mentions large scale movement of people from East Bengal to Assam, mainly to the Goalpara district. What started flowing in trickles soon transformed into waves and till the end of the colonial era, the migrant people constituted about one-tenth to one-sixth of the state's population, settled in more than 6,213,000 acres of wasteland, increasing the cropped area from 2.40 million acres to 4.79 million acres in Assam. While this heralded a sea change in the agricultural scenario in the Brahmaputra valley, increasing enormously the acreage, yield and productivity of a wide variety of crops along with revenue, it also changed the socio-cultural profile of the state.

Large scale anthropogenic settlements were established on the chars of the Brahmaputra valley. The 1992-93 survey reveals that there were 2,089 char villages in the Brahmaputra

Large scale anthropogenic settlements were established on the *chars* of the Brahmaputra valley as many of these farm-settlers from East Bengal chose to live on the *chars*. A large section of these migrants was already used to living and cultivating in fluvial plains in East Bengal and thereby could negotiate the Brahmaputra flood plains. Interestingly, as the *chars* were within the river, they were geographically exclusive, as a result, the settlers remained outside the mainstream population groups which had settled in far-off areas from the river. The *chars* were thus both the geographically 'other' and the settlers became the socio-culturally 'other' in terms of their identity.

After more than four decades into the post-colonial era, the state undertook a socio-economic survey of the *chars* of the Brahmaputra, to assess the life and livelihood patterns of its dwellers. The first survey was conducted in 1992-93 followed by another in 2003-04; till date they remain the only source of macro data concerning these areas. The 1992-93 survey reveals that there were 2,089 *char* villages in the Brahmaputra, where Barpeta district (351) in lower Assam had the highest numbers followed by Dhubri district (313), which borders Bangladesh. In the 2003-04 survey, the data shows a different trend, more villages in Dhubri than in Barpeta, indicating the change in the fluvial regime of the Brahmaputra.

These surveys revealed that the *chars* constitute 4.60 percent of the total land in the state and 4 percent of its cultivable land and are inhabited by 9.37 percent of the state's population. Evidently, there is excessive pressure on land for survival, land which is impermanent and prone to regular flooding and recurrent erosion. As a

result, the density of population in these areas is more than double (690 persons per square kilometer) compared to the state average (340 persons per square kilometer). More than 81 percent of the population in the *chars* is illiterate, perhaps one of the largest illiterate population groups in India. The findings of these surveys may be summed up by quoting the poverty estimates. The population living below the officially determined poverty line increased from 48.89 percent to 67.89 percent from the survey period 1992-93 to 2003-04.

Due to these abysmal conditions, migration remains an important 'escape' route for the *char* dwellers. These impermanent *chars* when eroded, migrate downstream. They re-appear, of course if not fully eroded, through accretion towards the tail. The *char* dwellers exhibit different patterns of migration: moving to central locations within a *char* from the eroding peripheries; migrating to a more stable *char* usually nearer to the banks; shifting to relatively stable places within the riverine flood plains; migrating to urban locations seasonally; and if possible, to urban places for good.

Despite producing a diversified crop profile and exhibiting a higher crop intensity compared to the mainland, impermanence of land, lack of legislative and revenue safeguards along with abysmal conditions of health and literacy entwined in skewed income and land occupancy, the *chars* remain the most impoverished and neglected areas in Assam. Where the *char* dwellers are caught in a bind of uncertainties: the river fosters the uncertainty of life and livelihood, land and water, and migration to the mainland ushers in the uncertainty of identity.

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Majuli Island

Sushmita Mandal

As per local literary records and folklore, Majuli has existed for more than five hundred years. There is evidence that the Ahom kings also consolidated their rule on the island

MAJULI, OR "land locked between two parallel rivers" is the world's largest inhabited river island located in the middle course of the Brahmaputra river in the state of Assam in India[28]. The island is a conglomerate of 248 cadastral villages spread over an area of roughly 487.55 square kilometers[29]. However, the true extent of the island today is unknown due to the shifting nature of the river that constantly erodes the riverbanks and reshapes it. Islets (locally known as *chaporis*), *beels* or wetlands, ox-bow lakes and streams cover 14 percent of the total geographical area of the island[30], making it an ideal habitat for birds (both resident and migratory) and aquatic diversity.

As one de-boards at Majuli's Kamalabari Ghat, the new sediment deposited from the last monsoon greets you. Further ahead there are concrete structures that lie along the banks of one of the streams. Referred to as porcupine structures in

engineering terms, they are a silent testimony to the efforts ongoing in Majuli to arrest the eroding banks from being further eaten away. But as one sees, these efforts have been futile in the face of a raging river. The shrinking of Majuli is documented from the colonial era. A map prepared by A J Mefat Mills of the British East India Company in 1853 shows Majuli's land mass at 1,246 square kilometers. The 1993 maps prepared by the Brahmaputra Board show only 880 square kilometers as the total landmass. However, after the monsoons of 2001, the recorded land area of Majuli was approximately 425 square kilometers. The river takes away earth but also creates new land masses. In these newly formed sand bars (locally called *chapori*) animals and humans live, not knowing when they will be again washed away by the devouring river. The memory of this shifting relationship between land and water is etched on the eroded banks. The loss of land in Majuli has meant a loss of both homestead and land for farming. Erosion and accretion are a distinct feature of braided river systems and while people have been juxtaposed between the two, life in Majuli progresses from day to day, negotiating such paradoxes.

Life on Majuli Island

As per local literary records and folklore, Majuli has existed for more than five hundred years. There is evidence that the Ahom kings also consolidated their rule on the island. The remnants of an erstwhile fort that was built on the island are a testimony to that. The key point of Majuli's transition into a unique cultural landscape was seeded in the setting up of *Sattra* (Vaishnavite monastery) in the fifteenth century. The Assamese Bhakti saint, Srimant Sankardeva came to the island and imparted teachings of Lord Krishna through performing arts. He used innovative methods of communicating spiritual teachings that included music, dance and theatre, most of which exist till this day. It was Sankardeva along with his successor Madhavdeva, who set up several monastic institutions called *sattras*, where monks spend their lives in reading scriptures, engaging in performing arts and devoted to the worship of Lord Krishna.

It is believed that as many as 65 *sattra*s existed in Majuli at the turn of twentieth century, but due to the floods coupled with erosion, several of these have shifted base to the mainland. Currently about 22 *Sattra*s exist in Majuli. It is a major seat of Vaishnavite culture in Assam and is much revered and worshipped by locals. The *sattriya* culture is the mainstay of local tourism in Majuli and figures prominently in the itinerary of any devout Vaishnav in Assam wishing to visit the seat from where it spread across the state.

Majuli is juxtaposed between the impermanence of a shrinking landmass and a continuing cultural-religious heritage. The cultural-religious component is intangible and the physical component in the form of the *sattras* are continually relocated and hence reconstructed. History is written in Majuli with water; it eludes the usual frameworks for measuring heritage. In 2006, Assam passed the Majuli Cultural Landscape Region (MCLR) Act, aimed at "prevention of loss of value and authenticity of the cultural landscape of Majuli" and established the Majuli Cultural Landscape Management Authority (MCLMA). This institution is entrusted with implementing an inclusive management plan, involving local stakeholders in an integrated effort to protect the unique heritage of the island.

The rhythm of life on this island is clearly guided by the seasons; summer is the season of high activity when roads and embankments are repaired/fortified for the ensuing monsoons that would again take away some life and livelihood. Soon after the flood waters recede, the wetlands are teeming with fresh stock of fish that the river brought along with it. The new sediment deposited in the fields is ready to be ploughed and planted with a variety of paddy, vegetables, and oil seeds. Winters are a time of tending the crops, harvesting ones that are ready and spending some time at leisure as well. People's reverence to the Gods is best expressed through their regular visits to the *naamghar* (village level religious institution), each morning and evening. Festivals like the *Bhaona* festival are an opportunity for the villagers to

congregate and enjoy the traditional theatre form known as *mukha bhaona*, which evolved as part of the *Sattriya* culture and uses *mukha* (masks) of mythological characters for storytelling.

Mask making as an art form is closely linked to Vaishnavism. The Chamaguri Sattra in Majuli has traditionally been known for making the masks used in the traditional theatre; it is a hereditary skill passed on from generation to generation. But over the years this art is dying as the youth have demonstrated little interest in keeping it alive. We had the privilege of meeting Kosha Kanta Deva Goswami, Sattradhikari(head) of Chamaguri Sattra, master mask maker, whose family is devoted to mask making. He and his family have been engaged in various outreach activities and have held trainings to pass on the knowledge so that the art form can survive. In 2003 Kosha Kanta Deva Goswami was recognized for his contributions by the Sangeet Natak Academy. His family besides making the big masks used in *mukha bhaona* also makes small replicas that have found ready takers among tourists who find it convenient to carry them as mementos from Majuli.

Majuli reveals itself as a vast mosaic of paddy and mustard fields crisscrossed with wetlands and streams, with concrete bridges in some places and rickety river bridges at others

Locally available materials like bamboo, cane, clay, cow dung and vegetable dyes are used in making these masks. The framework is made by weaving spliced strips of bamboo or cane into a loose structure, over which cloth (now paper is also used) is pasted using a light mixture of clay and water. This is sun dried, after which the features are carved out using a mixture of three parts clay to one-part cow dung. After these dry, the mask is painted using vegetable dyes. Accessories such as hair are stuck using locally available materials like jute. A mask takes anything between 12 and 15 days to complete. The masks portray characters from Indian mythology, including gods and goddesses, demons, birds and animals.

Majuli reveals itself as a vast mosaic of paddy and mustard fields crisscrossed with wetlands and streams, with concrete bridges in some places and rickety river bridges at others. The idyll that it symbolizes is far from reality for its residents. Limited connectivity to the mainland is one of the main concerns. Aspirations, especially of the youth coalesces around the idea of a bridge that would connect the island to the mainland. Given that infrastructure like embankments have provided little relief, the bridge promises much more, such as connectivity, and access to emergency medical facilities, and markets. But the tricky terrain is a cruel pin sticking into such bubbles of hope. The alluvial flood plain of Brahmaputra is unstable and will only support vast quantities of water passing over it, but not permanent concrete structures.

Impermanence is the only way of life in Majuli. People anchor themselves into their cultural way of life and build their hopes around a stable and yet elusive future. Uncertainty looms large, floods and erosion have become more pronounced in recent years due to changes in the climate[31]. Plans are afoot to conserve this largest inhabited river island in the world, declaring it a no-plastic zone, exploring traditional methods of arresting erosion, developing an integrated conservation

plan for the island with extensive consultations[32]. People are moving towards an unknown future, where things operate beyond their powers and make them helpless. From climate change to embankment politics, to floods and lives washed away by the Brahmaputra, Majuli could have been a sad and poetic tale of loss. But it is not. Because in their transient world, people of Majuli have devised ways of living with water. It is this spirit of the people and their way of life that deserves to be protected. It is the "Majuli way of life" that merits a heritage label.

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Tea tribes

Pooja Kotoky and Paresh Borah

ASSAM THE "land of Red River and Blue Hills" is known around the world for its tea[33] and has been a major industry contributing to the economy. The backbone of the tea industry is the labour provided by tribal communities who were brought to Assam nearly 200 years ago to work in tea plantations. The tribals who settled in the tea plantations over the years were identified as Tea Tribe (collectively) or *Cha Jana Jati*. Today this community represents 20 percent (6.5 million) of Assam's total population[34] and is composed of Santhal, Munda, Khond, Kharia, Ho, Gond, Bhumij, Kurukh and 112 other tribes.

In the face of acute shortage of manpower to clear forests and expand plantations, The Assam Tea Company began to bring in labour from outside the state. The labourers were brought to Assam from Bihar & Jharkhand (Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Chaibasa and Dumka); Bengal (Santhal Parganas, Bankura, Birbhum and Midnapur); Orissa (Sambalpur, Balasore, Cuttack and Koraput); Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh (Raipur, Balghat, Bhandara, Bundelkhand, Ghazipur and Gorakhpur). And a small number were brought in from South India and Maharashtra.

In late nineteenth century several natural calamities like earthquake, drought, flood, famines, epidemics and poverty gripped millions of lives in north-west provinces, Orissa, north Bengal and central India. Poor peasants and landless labourers who were victims of exploitation and indebtedness to *zamindars* or landlords, fell into the traps of contractors' false assurances of better and easier work opportunities, higher wages and land for cultivation in Assam.

In order to recruit labourers two main systems of recruitment were followed; Contractor System (1859 to 1915) and Sardari System (1870 to 1959).[35] Contractors were the licensed people whose ultimate objectives were to collect as many people as possible to work. Without any restrictions, contractors adopted all kinds of fraudulent methods and transported labourers to Calcutta depot on foot, trucks and goods trains, then to Assam in most inhumane and inhospitable conditions. It will not be wrong to say that they were literally uprooted from their existence, heritage and culture to an unknown new world on false hope and deception to work as 'indenture labours'. The transportation journey became complicated during the rainy season because of the strong velocity and current of the Brahmaputra. It took 135 to 140 days to reach Sadiya from Calcutta.

Letters of communication between the Company and Government have revealed that streamer boats were introduced in the eighteen sixties exclusively to transport labourers from Calcutta depot to Assam

Letters of communication between the Company and Government have revealed that streamer boats were introduced in the eighteen sixties exclusively to transport labourers from Calcutta depot to Assam[36]. Because of the inhospitable journey, many lost their lives due to sickness and unavailability of treatment before reaching the different tea estates in Assam, where living conditions were overcrowded and hazardous. They were not permitted leave from duty during sickness and did not have guarantee of personal freedom and liberty. The labourers were imposed with draconian rules to live and work; any violation of rules resulted in flogging, beating, and at times were brutally killed. Female labourers were pressurized to increase the birth rate and abortion was strictly prohibited to create 'future' generation of labourers.

Post Indian Independence, with the implementation of the Plantation Labour Act of 1951 the basic standards of living for plantation workers improved. About 3 to 4 million labourers belonging to the tea tribes work in the tea industry. Today the tea tribes comprising of 96 ethnic groups, have no connections with their original homes. Since the colonial period, tea tribes have remained cut-off from the other indigenous groups of the state and have formed a unique identity bearing the historical impression of colonial plantation life. Having no connections with their places of origin and intermingling with various cultures in the plantation setting of Brahmaputra valley, the tea tribes have developed a composite community culture in which the elements of the tribal culture of the Jharkhand region are predominant.

The present generation in the tea plantations is looking beyond life in the tea gardens. They are aspiring to create a separate identity from their parents; some are now first-generation graduates, and some are taking up skill development programs provided by the Government and private organizations and getting recruited as teachers, nurses, and mechanics.

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Boat clinics: ships of hope

Pooja Kotoky

THE BRAHMAPUTRA valley has a network of 2,500 river islands known as *chars or saporis* which are home to 2.5 million people. Most of the islands lack basic infrastructure and services like health care, schools, roads, electricity and drinking water and sanitation. During monsoon there is no accessibility and communication between the mainland and the river islands. Most men from these marginalized communities migrate to the mainland for work, leaving behind vulnerable women and children.

In June 2004, the Centre for North-Eastern Studies and Policy Research (C-NES), under the leadership of Sanjoy Hazarika, launched a unique initiative to bring mobile relief and health care facilities by boat to these marginalized communities. In the same year (2004), C-NES won the World Bank's India Marketplace competition for the innovative concept of "A Ship of Hope in a Valley of Floods", and the prize money of USD 20,000 (about ₹1.37 million now) led to the construction of the first boat clinic. Named *Akha*, which means hope in Assamese, the first boat clinic was built with local raw material with the help of boat-builder Kamal Gurung. Made of wood, the boat is 65 feet in length and equipped with an out-patient department, a laboratory, cabins, toilets, water supply and a power generator. Fourteen more have been added since. The mobile health services were first started in partnership with the district administration in Dibrugarh. Later the services were expanded to Dhemaji and Tinsukia districts.

In August 2008, as the waters raged around Lamba *Sapori,* an island home to the Mishing community in Dhemaji, a couple, Punyadhar and Oiphuli Morang, watched helplessly as their two-year-old daughter, Moina, suffered an acute asthmatic attack. Having seen the boat clinic pass by the *sapori* several times, they had some idea of its schedule. So Punyadhar stood atop his house and waved vigorously to the *SB Shahnaz*, which was plying these waters. The team spotted the couple and made its way to their home, where medication was administered, and the child recovered. This is just one incident out of hundreds which demonstrate the importance and value of the boat clinics.

"A Ship of Hope in a Valley of Floods". The boat clinics are at work 24/7, 365 days a year

After being proven as an effective and successful model the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), Government of Assam proposed collaboration and signed a unique private-public partnership in 2008. As of 2019 the Boat Clinics are working in 13 districts. Each boat has 2 doctors, one or two auxiliary nurses, a lab assistant and a pharmacist. These boat clinics provide curative care, reproductive and childcare, family planning services, basic laboratory services, emergency services and care during pandemics, epidemics, disasters and public health emergencies. Awareness programmes are also carried out on family planning, health and hygiene, nutrition and sanitation. The boat clinics are at work 24/7, 365 days a year.

One of the special highlights of the project is the Brahmaputra Community Radio Station (BCRS) popularly known as Radio Brahmaputra established at Dibrugarh with the aim to target tea garden labourers and most remote islands. Currently, the radio reaches 14 islands, 30 tea plantations and more than 180 villages and three districts along and across the Brahmaputra on FM 90.4.

Till March of 2019, over 2.7 million people have received basic health care services. Annually 3,40,000 cases are handled by the Boat Clinics in all the 13 districts in the Brahmaputra valley. In 2020, the Boat Clinics became the main catalyst during the spread of the novel coronavirus disease. They launched awareness campaigns in the islands about the newly emerged disease and advocated the need for social distancing and carrying out community surveillance and testing.

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Runa Khan

JAMUNA BASIN

FRIENDSHIP hospital ships

Runa Khan

EIGHTEEN YEARS ago, while visiting a *char* (island) on the River Jamuna, I was invited into the home of a family I had met by the riverbank. It was a humble hut made of straw and living within it was a family, along with the one cow they possessed and the entirety of their belongings. Families like theirs barely have enough to eat two meals a day, yet I saw the wife feeding their sick child the

Runa Khan

second meal of the day, just before dusk fell. It was only rice with a little onion. I asked the mother. 'Why do you not feed her a little later so that she will sleep at night, contented?' Perplexed, she looked at me with disbelief in her eyes. 'What an extravagance!' she exclaimed. 'One taka (1 cent) of kerosene to light a lantern so they could eat after dark! If the child falls asleep now, she will not know that she is hungry at night.'

Another mother came with a baby who was suffering from cerebral palsy and asked me, 'doctor (the village quack) said that there is nothing to be done for my child. Should I kill her?' A handicap, another mouth to feed, social ostracism, and a pain watching the child suffer daily.

A reverberating shock, pain, anger at the injustice broke my heart and led me to look for any solution I could find. These were areas where even the trawlers for passenger transport used to stop plying at dusk due to remoteness and insecurity. Where the nature of the land and climate eclipsed the possibility for any permanent infrastructure. These were the *chars* of the Jamuna: silted, nomadic islands formed and broken upon the river's whim. Access to any basic services be it roads, electricity,

schools, hospitals, shops, police were totally unheard of. Millions lived on such *chars* all over the country.

In the strife towards saving lives FRIENDSHIP started the first hospital ship on these shores. Now we could even deliver tertiary care to their doorsteps! The Lifebuoy Friendship Hospital was followed by the Emirates Friendship Hospital on the Jamuna, and now five new hospital ships are on the verge of being launched on the Jamuna, Padma (Ganges) and other rivers of Bangladesh.

As the Lifebuoy Friendship Hospital ship brought much needed healthcare, I realized just a ship was not enough! What would happen to the patients we were leaving behind? Those needing simple contraceptives or surgical follow ups? Thus, FRIENDSHIP developed a three-tier healthcare system, the first of its kind in the world, so no one would be left behind. 1st Tier: Ship Hospitals; 2nd Tier: Satellite Clinics, where healthcare teams set up bimonthly medical camps in communities around the hospital giving primary care and follow ups. 3rd Tier: Friendship Community Medic-Aides: community women to take healthcare to the doorstep of every family. To link the three tiers, we used mHealth, a software that would assist to diagnose, treat and refer patients. This way, we provide free and comprehensive care to 6.5 million people a year, 60 percent of whom are women.

FRIENDSHIP developed a three-tier healthcare system, the first of its kind in the world. Integrating our work with lessons learnt from nature, we have made a most robust global healthcare system

But Saving Lives, needed global healthcare and comprehensive interventions. For poverty alleviation could not be ignored if that child was to eat three meals a day. Empowerment for the communities and to reach the services, climate action was needed. Schools, trainings, access to finance and preparedness and support, even linkages through to governments were created. Every solution and step built on mobility and innovation.

The rivers change daily. Erosions, floods, tropical tornados, famines today have become unpredictable and extreme. Integrating our work with lessons learnt from nature, we have made a most robust global healthcare system. As the land and people move, so could the solutions. FRIENDSHIP's integrated approach spanning over 18 years has rendered more than 36.25 million services for these climate-impacted migrant communities.

Once upon a time, our very culture and life was ingrained and inseparable from the rivers and nature. Now, most of us reside within the secured glass bubbles of our cities and societies, so sheltered from nature's wrath and generosity. Many of us have moved far away from designing our services geared to the one thing we cannot fight: nature and the environment. Humanity's greatest challenges will come from nature in the coming years. Those who live in harmony with nature and the environment will know how to cope and survive. And it is only by respecting the environment and working alongside it, can we find the solutions in regions such as these *chars* of the *Jumna*.

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Langalbandh festival and fair

THE LANGALBANDH fair or Gur-Pukur's fair is one of the major religious festivals of the Hindu community in Bangladesh. The festival occurs on the eighth day of the lunar month which coincides with the Bengali month of *Chaitra*. During the festival also known as *Astami snan* or holy bath Hindu devotees take a bath in the Old Brahmaputra river, the channel that flows through Jamalpur, Mymensingh and Langalbandh. There are a number of *ghats* (steps leading to the river) or bathing places by the river, but Langalbandh and Panchami *ghat* on the west bank of Brahmaputra, are considered to be most sacred.

The belief of the devotees is that the holy or sacred bath will please Lord Brahma, provide salvation and mental purification. Thousands of people, both from the country and abroad, visit the place every year for the holy bath. The fair is also a major tourist attraction. The fair lasts for three days, beginning on the day before the holy bath and ending in the day following the bathing festival.

Sheikh Rokon

Bard of the Brahmaputra: Bhupen da Hazarika

Sanjoy Hazarika

TO MILLIONS he was simply 'Bhupen *da*', a legend recognized and honored in India and Bangladesh.

While India posthumously gave him the Padma Vibhushan (he had earlier been awarded the Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan civilian honors), his stature in South Asia was demonstrated when Dhaka honoured him with the *Muktijoddha Padak*, the country's highest civilian award. Indeed, he was cherished in Dhaka as much as he was in Guwahati. His song on the war of Bangladesh's freedom, *Joi Joi Nobo Joto Bangladesh* (hail the newborn Bangladesh), is a stirring marching tune, which was on every Bengali's lips during those harrowing days as that momentous struggle for liberation gathered strength and inspired the battle for freedom. And when Bangladesh was born, he was welcomed there like a hero. His songs were not limited to Assamese and Bengali, and his rich baritone was equally at ease in Hindi, Urdu and English.

The waterways of Assam were the source of inspiration for his lyrics. 'The Brahmaputra is the lifeline of Assam,' he said. One of his notable collaborations for Doordarshan was Luit Kinare (by the banks of the Luit), a mosaic of ordinary tales that was both cheerful and poignant. Perhaps the best example of the humanistic ideals that imbue his works is *Manuhe Manuhar Babe* (For mankind), composed in 1964. 'If we do not care for our fellow human beings, who will?' sings the bard. It is a song that needs to resound across Assam and the north-east at times of strife.

The waterways of Assam were the source of inspiration for his lyrics. The Brahmaputra is the lifeline of Assam, Bhupen da said

He was without doubt one of the greatest living cultural communicators of the region, swaying millions with the power and passion of his voice, and the message of universal brotherhood and humanism. He had a genius for weaving a magical tapestry out of traditional Assamese music and lyrics. In the process, he breathed new life into the language, synthesizing old and new strands of music, and instilling a sense of pride in the Brahmaputra valley. Bard of the Brahmaputra. But he was more than that: he was a passionate fighter for rights, for the poor (his early and later songs drive home the messages of equality, humanity and brotherhood especially in times of pain and tragedy) and who believed in the importance of means over ends.

It was because of his persistence as head of the Sahitya Kala Parishad that the *Satriya* dance, performed originally in the *satras* or Vaishanvite monasteries, is today recognized as one of India's 'national' dance forms. Bhupen Hazarika was at the confluence of these great streams, bringing them together in his unique way, with humanity and equality as his principles and symbols.

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Atisha Dipankar Srijnan (or Srigyan)

Bushra Nishat

"He crossed the mountain
Covered with perilous frost:
He is the Atish of Bangla
Who lit the light of learning in Tibet".....

REGARDED AS the most enlightened and outstanding Buddhist scholar and philosopher, Atisha Dipankar Srijnan was born near the Padma in Bangladesh and breathed his last on the banks of the Yarlung Tsangpo near Lhasa in Tibet. Born to a royal family as Chandragarbha, he was given the title named Dipankar Srijnan meaning the 'one who has the lamp of wisdom in his hands' after initiation into Buddhism. Invited by the king, he travelled to Tibet in 1042 where he received the name of Atisha, a Tibetan reference to peace.

Atisha had a lengthy career as an academic at the Buddhist monastry, Vikramasila (in Nalanda, Bihar, India), travelled and lived in Sumatra, Indonesia for over a decade but it was in Tibet where he found his final calling in life[37]. It took Atisha and his companions almost two years to travel on foot from India to Tibet across mountainous terrains of the Himalayas amidst climatic hazards and also attacks by dacoits. The main route was from Palpa in Nepal to Manas Sarover[38]. In Tibet, Dipankar reformed Buddhism; he refined, systematized, and compiled an innovative and thorough approach to *bodhichitta* known as "mind training" (*lojong* in Tibetan). Atisha also wrote on engineering and agriculture and devoted more than a decade of his life for the well-being of the Tibetan people. He employed his engineering skills for construction of a dam in western Tibet for protecting communities from floods and helped in setting up an irrigation system by digging canals which led to boosting of agricultural productivity[39].

Dipankar wrote, translated and edited more than two hundred books, which helped spread Buddhism in Tibet. Tibetans revere Dipankar, granting him a rank second only to Gautam Buddha and refer to him as *Jobo Chhenpo* (a great God)[40].

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