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INTER-UNIVERSITY CENTRE: NOTES

Thoughts on a River

Every river need not necessarily be central to the consciousness of the people who live near it. Very often, a river just exists silently as a part of the topography. But, when a river defies all geological speculations and baffles the human mind with its sheer vastness and majesty, then it becomes a powerful, mysterious being whose image is etched deeply in the consciousness of the people. For me, the Brahmaputra is 'a strong, brown god' who exists within us as well as outside us. In recording my impression about it, there is always the danger of sliding into an 'O altitudo!' vein. It is necessary, therefore, to begin with a few geographical 'facts' about the river

The source of the Brahmaputra is in the Sema-Yungdung glacier, south of the Kailas and about 75 kilometres from the Mansarovar. Three streams—Kubi Tsangpo, Semayudung and Mayun Su join together near its source to become the great Tsangpo ('The River') of Tibet. It flows eastward, parallel to the Himalaya for about 1600 kilometres before taking a sharp turn southward and cutting through the eastern Himalaya between the peaks of Gyalaperi and Namchabarwa in Tibet, it emerges into Arunachal Pradesh as the Siang or the Dihang. The Dihang runs for about 200 kilometres through the hills of Arunachal Pradesh before reaching the Assam plains below Pasighat. There it is joined by two other rivers, the Lohit and the Dibang which are the head-streams of the Brahmaputra, and then this ocean-like mass of water flows down 650 kilometres through Assam as the Brahmaputra. As the river enters Bangladesh, its name changes to Jamuna and after it joins the Ganga it becomes the Padma and the Meghna. While in Tibet, the river is about 3 kilometres wide and is navigable for a considerable stretch. At its entry point into Arunachal, it narrows down to only 30 to 50 metres. In Assam, the river again spreads out to a width 8 to 12 kilometres in some areas. Where the river enters India it passes through the deep Tsangpo gorges which had eluded all explorers till as late as 1912. It is because of this inaccessible stretch of water that the actual identity of the Brahmaputra remained a mystery for a long time. Since the Tsangpo flows at a height of 12,000 feet above sea level in Tibet and then suddenly climbs down to a height of only 500 feet at Pasighat in Arunachal, it was always believed that there must be a mighty water-fall somewhere in the Tsangpo gorges

which could be even higher than the Victoria falls. However, it was subsequently discovered that there is no such huge water-fall there but a series of medium size falls, one of which has particularly caught the fancy of poets and explorers—the 'Rainbow Falls'. F. Kingdon-Ward, a professional 'plant-hunter' gave the following account of his first sight of the 'Rainbow Falls' in 1924-5:

> We scrambled over the boulders, crossed a belt of trees and a torrent, and made for the foot of the cliff in order to see what became of the river; but even before we got there our ears were filled with a loud roaring noise. As we turned the corner...we caught sight of a great cloud of spray which hung over the rocks within half a mile of where we stood. 'The falls at last', I thought! But it wasn't—not *the* falls. A fall, certainly, perhaps 40 feet high, and a fine sight with rainbows coming and going in the spray cloud.... ('The Riddle of the Tsangpo Gorges, 1924-25' in *Himalayan Enchantment*, London, 1990)

As the river flows through the plains of Assam, it constantly erodes its soft banks, causing havoc during the rainy season. Every year, large areas on both banks are swallowed up by the river which keeps changing its channels every now and then. The different channels of the river are separated by large sandbanks, giving it a plaited appearance. The constant change of course by the river, often moving 10 to 15 kilometres north or south, has led to great topographical changes, some of which are of very recent origin. For example, the river in 1892-93 was a good 8 to 10 kilometres to the north of the Dibrugarh town. But, gradually the river kept moving southward and after the great Assam earthquake of 1950, the river swallowed up more then half the town. In 1988, it threatened to break the protective dykes of the town and then suddenly decided to leave the town and move about 5 kilometres northward! Similarly, the town of Sadiya disappeared into the river in recent times and the greatest river island, Manjuli, is threatened every year with heavy erosion.

Such is the unpredictable nature of this river, and yet the people refer to it with affection and respect as 'Baba Brahmaputra' or 'Burha Luit' (Old Man Lohit). It is a river of sorrow as well as of hope and life. Standing on its bank, watching its swelling currents, one is reminded of the long story of human quest of which the river is so intrinsically a part.

In the ancient times, the river served as the water-route to the west. Merchant boats sailed down it to Samatata, Tamralipti, Karnasuvarna,

Kajlanga and other cities on the banks of the Ganga. There was the legendary Chand Sadagar, who lost all his ships in the river because he would not worship the vengeful snake-goddess Manasa. Ultimately, it was through the superhuman efforts of his beautiful daughter-in-law Behula that Chand got back his dead sons and his riches. This story is sung even today by Assamese minstrels. The same river-route brought travellers, pilgrims and invaders from the west. The famous battle of Saraighat (AD 1670) was fought on the banks of the Brahmaputra and the Mughal army under Ram Singh was defeated by the Ahom army commanded by Lachit Barphukan. The last of the great Ahoms, Chandrakanta Singha took the same river-route to Bengal when he was pursued by the marauding Burmese army which unleashed a reign of terror in Assam in the early part of the nineteenth century. Then came the British—obviously to 'liberate' Assam from Burmese rule. But, once they came up the river and saw the fertile land on either side, they decided to stay. And then began the long story of colonial exploitation which has not yet ended. Tea and oil were discovered in Assam and it became necessary to transport all this wealth out of the province, leaving the land dry and impoverished. For, this wealth was not meant for the local people. While railway tracks were laid through difficult terrain to transport the oil and the tea, the river route was used to bring in another commodity—human labour. Thousands of poor peasants from Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and the Central Provinces were transported in shiploads to the tea-gardens of Assam. 'Coolie-Depots' were set up on the banks of the Brahmaputra in east Bengal. The harrowing condition of the people in those virtual concentration camps and the manner in which these dehumanised people were transported up the river—these shameful stories of colonialism have been vividly represented in modern Assamese literature.

Partition of India cut off this vital communication route between Assam and the rest of the country and Assam became totally land-locked. The mind-set of the people has suffered immensely from this land-locked condition. No serious attempts were made for a long time to re-establish the links and even a bridge over the Brahmaputra was constructed only as late as the sixties—to facilitate the movement of troops after the Indo-Chinese war of 1962.

Today, the river no longer interests the rulers because there are pipelines and wheels to transport commodities. But, there was a time when the east fascinated the people as much as the west and the Brahmaputra was seen as a communication link with China and Tibet. During the colonial days, the river witnessed numerous expeditions

undertaken by the British and other Europeans whose goal was to discover an alternate route to China via Assam. The strange odyssey of Kintup who was assigned the secret mission of exploring the Tsangpo from the Tibetan side by the survey of India in 1880, was one of the many such remarkable missions that combined efficiency in clandestine 'survey' techniques with a romantic spirit of adventure. There were many more expeditions from the Assam end by British and other European missionaries, military officers and adventurists. Amongst them the accounts left by Lt. Burlton, Lt. Wilcox, Capt. Bedford, Needham, Cooper, Williamson and L.W. Shakespeare form an interesting part of colonial writing on Assam. The whole imperial story of 'Dreams of Empire and Deeds of Adventure' is succinctly retold in these accounts.

Others, too, had tried to make a cultural conquest of the primeval energy of the Brahmaputra. The myths found in the *Kalika Purana* and the *Padma Purana* attempt to give Aryan parentage to the river. Some of these myths imaginatively recreate the actual region amidst the Himalaya where the river has its source. Amogha, the wife of Shantanu *muni* of Tibet was impregnated by the seeds of Brahma and she gave birth to this beautiful, radiant 'son of Brahma' in a heavenly lake surrounded by four mountains—the Kailas, the Gandhamadan, the Sambartak and the Jarudhi. There is the other story of Parasurama's quest for waters that would cleanse him of the sin of matricide. His quest ended in the Brahmakund, the source of the Brahmaputra from where he brought down the river for the service of mortals. But, then at the same point in history, the river was shorn of its sacredness by the sage Vashistha whose *asrama* was washed away by the flood waters of the river. So, the river attains its holiness only once a year — the day of Ashokastami. This story seems to signify a decision taken in the Aryan mainland to exclude the Brahmaputra and what it stands for, from the 'mainstream' culture! So, the Brahmaputra, despite its size and grandeur, does not form a part of the great Indian pantheon of holy rivers. Perhaps, that is why it was also left out of the vision of unity symbolised by the turbulent waves of Indian rivers chanting in unison the greatness of India, in our national anthem.

But, Brahmaputra is its own god and it has a music of its own— deep and solemn. It flows through three countries, assimilating the currents of numerous tributaries in Tibet, India and Bangladesh. The names by which the river is known, themselves signify the notion of cultural pluralism with which the river is associated. It is called Tsangpo in Tibet; Siang and Dihang in Arunachal Pradesh; Luit, Burha Luit, Siri Luit,

Brahmaputra and Louhitya in Assam; Jamuna, Padma and Meghna (after it joins the Ganga) in Bangladesh. These names are cross-cultural in every way. The river has always been central to the culture of all the countries/regions through which it flows. That is why the river is a living presence in the Beehu songs, marriage songs and other folk songs of the Assamese, in the plaintive notes of the Mishing's Oi-Nitam, in the songs of the boatmen in Bangladesh. Assamese poets from ancient times to the present days—from the unknown poet who wrote an invocation to Louhitya in one of the ninth-century copper-plate inscriptions of King Vanamaladev of Kamrupa, to the modern-day poets and musicians like Jyotiprasad Agarwalla, Bupen Hazarika and Ajit Barua—have recorded the saga of the river in their verse and music.

In my recent novel *Louhitya Sindhu* (written partially at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla), I have endeavoured to pay my homage to that great river saga. The river exists in my book both as a powerful, awesome entity and as a symbol of cultural diversity. Defying all narrow, parochial, sectarian claims, the river constantly inspires one with a vision of infinity, of unity through multiplicity. The deep, mysterious music of the river seems to echo the harmony produced by the intermixing of Aryan and Mongolian strains of culture, of the beliefs of the Vaishnavas, Shaktas, Shaivas, Sufis, Buddhists, Christians and the worshippers of Doyni-Polo (Sun-Moon). There may be ominous signs of attempting to drown that solemn music by the loud, discordant notes of hatred. But, my novel renews my faith in the healing power of the river, in its ability to re-establish harmony in the midst of chaos.

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Mahatma Gandhi and the U.P. Congress

On 21 October, 1997, the violent proceedings inside the U.P. Legislative Assembly caught the attention of the entire nation. The fittings of the august Council House were ripped apart and microphones were hurled by the legislators at each other. It seemed as if a street riot was being enacted inside the legislative assembly. Amongst the others involved in this sequence of events were the legislators of the Congress party. How did this incident come about? Is it symptomatic of a larger