

## Louhitya—the Red River

### Harekrishna Deka



In Indian mythical imagination, the rivers are of feminine gender with one exception, and that exception is the Brahmaputra, to which an appellation, Mahabahu, has been irrevocably attached in modern times and has been popularized by legendary singer, composer and director Bhupen Hazarika. Mahabahu signifies a personified entity who has mighty arms and points to the royal, dominating majesty of the river. A myth in *Kalika Purana*, a significant source of cultural footprints of Sanskritized culture in the region, has a story on the mythical origin of the river, which appears to be a later invention compared to the rich mythology around Ganga that can be traced to the *Mahabharata* days. Interestingly, according to Indian mythology, both rivers came down to the earth under divine interventions. One mythical story centering round the Brahmaputra claims that Lord Brahma, impressed by the beauty and piety of Amogha, wife of sage Santanu, wanted to give her a son and his subsequent union with Amogha brought forth that son. This son formed into a large mass of water and became a river flowing down from the mountain to the valley. This is the mythical interpretation of the origin of the river Brahmaputra. Late Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, in his book *Kirata Jana Kriti*, however, makes a guess that Brahmaputra is a Sanskritized name of Indo-Mongoloid origin. He also referred to Late Bishnu Rabha's claim that Brahmaputra had its origin in the Bodo language and was a corruption of the words *Bhullum-Buthur* (one who makes a gurgling sound), but Dr. Chatterjee felt that *Bhullum-Buthur* could have been an intermediate name originating from a source name which was now lost. Dr Chatterjee further said that the name Louhitya, which is another name of the Brahmaputra, is older than the name Brahmaputra. Interestingly, one of the two rivers that joined the original course coming down from Tibet (Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet, renamed as Siang in Arunachal and then Dihang as it approaches Assam) has also been called Lohit or Luhit. It is difficult to say which name came first, Lohit or Louhitya or whether the main river appropriated

the name from the tributary or it was the other way round. Dr Chatterjee guessed that the name was of Indo-Mongoloid origin, later Sanskritized. A literal meaning of Lohit is 'blood-red' or copper-coloured. In rainy seasons, when the river is in spate and the water becomes muddy, the colour resembles a colour akin to sienna-red, characteristic of the colour of clay in the surrounding earth. Both the Brahmaputra and Louhitya are often used simultaneously or alternatively in the lore of the people.

We may, however, leave aside mythology and come to geography. Mythical imagination speculated that the Brahmaputra originated in Brahma Kund in which Parsuram, the slayer of *Khatriyas* as well as of his mother, exculpated his sin of matricide, and used his axe to cut a channel to facilitate the flow of the holy water. It was not known then that it was the continuation of a much longer river originating in a glacier in Tibet and hence the myth. It is the continuation of the river Yarlung Tsangpo of Tibet, holding the record of flowing through the highest altitude among the rivers of the world. Only some enterprising adventurers discovered the source during the British regime. Geography was perhaps in a position to deceive the plains of Assam, if the topography wanted. For its long 1100 km journey, Tsangpo never showed the inclination to turn south and rather took a north and northeast turn between mountainous massifs of Gyala Peri and Namjangbarwa through a series of rapids and turns. It turned south and south west after it met a deep gorge, where it seemed to have disappeared, but actually emerged as Siang and then became Louhitya alias Brahmaputra. If this fortuitous turn would not have happened, the great river would have eluded the plains of Assam and would have appeared somewhere else as a different river. But to inhabit the cultural history of Assam, it flowed through the wide valley it found in the plains in its south-westerly movement through the lower Himalayan region and became witness to the ups and downs of its history. After moving 700 kms in an westerly direction through the valley of Assam it turns south but there in the plains of Bengal (Now Bangladesh) it dramatically met its consort, the river Ganga, before emptying its water into the Bay of Bengal. The feminine Ganga and the masculine Brahmaputra join the sea in a tango. It surprises me that this very union of a male river and a female river failed to ignite the imagination of the myth-makers and poets of the ancient ages. As Padma it has, of course, captured the folk-mind of the Bengali people in the riverine areas and enriched their cultural mind with resourceful folk-songs and life-style.

In the symbolic dimension, a river stands for the irreversible passage of time (Heraclitus used the river symbol to exemplify the flux of time) and, in consequence, for a loss or oblivion. But various peoples' cultural investment in life-sustaining rivers is so deep that the river remains ever-renewing and ever-sustaining as long as it continues to flow. Through time immemorial, peoples have migrated from harsh barren lands to fertile regions washed by rivers, lakes and other sources of water. The Brahmaputra attracted various people of different racial stock, who have migrated from the East and the West towards its fertile valley. An interesting characteristic of the Brahmaputra is that all migrations have been inward to its valley while there has been no outward significant movement away from this valley. The Brahmaputra is a mesmerizer, making lives of the communities settling in its valley comfortable giving abundance of water and silt for agriculture and enkindling popular imagination with bounty of nature as well as biodiversity. The people here have faced enormous flood but never ever they called the Brahmaputra a 'river of sorrow'. The Assamese people prefers to call it Luit, a softened form of the word Louhitya and Luit has rich and abiding presence in their cultural imagination. The lyrical mind of the people

here responds so enthusiastically that their lore is full of references to Luit. Interestingly, when Bhupen Hazarika invoked the name of Brahmaputra, he called it Mahabahu, one having mightily powerful arms and there we get a very youthful image. But when he fondly calls the river Luit, he calls it Burha Luit (old river Luit), harking back to its continuous presence in the cultural life of the people. The Brahmaputra is a vigorous, powerful and youthful entity (Mahabahu), but Luit is a sage-like grandfather. Of course, Bhupen Hazarika was influenced by Lead Belly's song for Mississippi whom the latter called 'Old Man River'. When Jyotiprasad Agarwala invoked the famed name of Joymoti, who sacrificed her life to protect her husband but more than that to save the land and people from a cruel king, he asked the river Luit to assume the role of a story teller for the generations to come. Luit seems to symbolize historical memory flowing into the future. In many of Jyotiprasad Agarwala's lyrics, Luit appears many a time as a presence of inspiration. His imaginative attachment to and love for the river was enduring. He knew that Luit continues to sustain the Assamese people and has given them a very potent cultural symbol.

In Assamese cultural nationalism, Bihu perhaps carries the most vigorous symbolism. During the celebration of Bihu festival, the entire Brahmaputra Valley reverberates with distinctive Bihu songs and dances with the people's ecstatic participation. The Luit is frequently mentioned in Bihu songs and so also many of its tributaries. Ajit Barua, one of the most distinguished modern Assamese poets, had written one of the longest Assamese modern poems that contained complex and rare evocative images reminding the readers of the evolution of Tantric tradition from Tibet to Guwahati and invoking as well some significant historical events with different impacts at different times in the history of the people. The central metaphor of the poem was the Brahmaputra binding desperate events of history.

The river island Majuli, arguably the largest river island of the world, is the seat of Vaishnavite culture propagated by Shri Shri Shankardeva. Burha Luit magnanimously provides space for preserving the spiritual dimension of the Assamese people. In their identity formation, this aspect of spiritual life is very important for the Assamese. Spiritualism and lyricism are the two poles of the Assamese mind and the River Brahmaputra holds the threads of both in its running loom. The Brahmaputra it is, but it is more endearingly Siri (Shri) Luit protected by blue hills that permeates the lore of a sensitive people. The mood of the river is the index of the mood of the people, now hospitably quiet, now sensitively emotional, but at the end as alive as the Red River.

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