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Travels to lands on the banks of the Brahmaputra

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BACK in 2017 when a friend mentioned the much-hyped event 'Namami Brahmaputra', the alarm bells started ringing — what would happen to Bhupen Hazarika's *'Bristimo Purore'*, the popular song that rebukes the Brahma's *putra* (son) for being uninspiring and detached even after witnessing the struggles of thousands of people living on its banks? Would the organisers demand a ban on the song and the Bard of Assam be trolled for calling Brahmaputra the *'burha'* (old) Luhit?

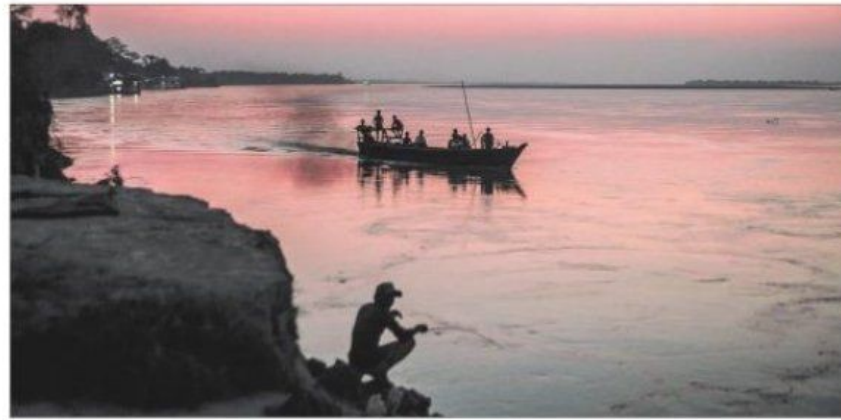
Fortunately, nothing of that sort happened. I had forgotten all about the song till I found mention of it in *'The Braided River: A Journey Along the Brahmaputra'*. It raised concern once again; this time not for Bhu-

pen Hazarika but for the author, Samrat Choudhury.

In his introductory chapter, he writes: "The Brahmaputra flows through Assam gathering yet more streams, before entering Bangladesh. Upon entering that country, it undergoes one more change in nomenclature, this time accompanied by a sex change — the 'male' Brahmaputra, for some reason, becomes the 'female' Jamuna." It takes courage to make such an observation these days, a lot less invites ire.

But courage is something Choudhury has in plenty; be it undertaking an adventurous journey or just plainspeak.

'An irreligious Hindu' by his own admission, he attacks the ritualistic practices attached to river waters. In his words, "The Ganga, polluted beyond belief, is considered pure and holy by devout Hindus; sprinkling its water on places and people is a Brahminical ritual of



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purification. The Brahmaputra, perhaps fortunately for it, has little such holiness attached to its waters, and escapes some of the tortures that the holy Ganga must daily go through..."

His courage comes from his meticulous research, his long years of experience as a journalist who knows how to sift the outstanding from the

mundane, and his ready wit.

The author calls the Brahmaputra the 'braided river', terminology used by hydrologists as it has braids of water running into one another to finally become one. The most important among all these braids are the three tributaries — Lohit, which originates in eastern Tibet, 'untidily' meets Dibang from the

southern slopes of the Himalayas at Dibru Saikhowa to become the Brahmaputra, which is later joined by Siang or Dihang, a stream from the Agnsi glacier near Mount Kailash, at the foothills of Arunachal to finally traverse through the plains of Assam.

As he travels from Dibru Saikhowa in upper Assam, the point of origin, to Bangladesh,

where it changes its identity, Choudhury discovers the history, geography and culture of the lands on the river banks with 'the fresh eyes of an outsider and something of the knowledge of an insider'.

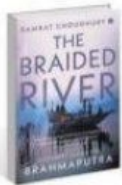
During the course of his journey, he takes a detour or two to discuss political issues like ULFA or NRC and CAA, or make some insightful observations on the illegal migrants in Assam, but there is nothing to complain as his views are unbiased and arguments solid.

One particular chapter which drew my attention was on Guru Teg Bahadur, the ninth Sikh Guru who visited Dhubri in lower Assam in 1669. The circumstances that led to the visit are quite intriguing. When Emperor Aurangzeb ordered Raja Ram Singh to invade Kamrup, the brave Rajput General developed cold feet because of its reputation as a land of black magic. Ram Singh

approached Guru Teg Bahadur to protect his army from black magic and sorcery. The Guru agreed and reached Dhubri to do the needful.

Another important takeaway from this book is contextualisation of the Battle of Saraighat. Describing the events that led to the battle, fought in 1671 on the banks of Brahmaputra, the author writes, "Today, much of this long and complicated history is forgotten, what is remembered by some chauvinists is a battle between the Ahom forces, characterised as the Hindu army, and the Mughal forces, seen as a Muslim force. This is a vast oversimplification; it was a battle between two empires, not a riot between two religious communities."

Choudhury tells us how history needs to be read and interpreted, with all its glory and doom. For the feel-good factor, we have mythology!



**THE BRAIDED RIVER:
A JOURNEY ALONG
THE BRAHMAPUTRA**

by Samrat Choudhury
HarperCollins.

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PHOTO COURTESY: HARPERCOLLINS

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SHORT TAKES

Assam launches flood reporting system

Guwahati: An online flood reporting and information management system was launched on Saturday in Assam, which faces severe deluge every year, an official said. The online system developed jointly by Assam State Disaster Management Agency and UNICEF will replace the existing manual flood control mechanism. Launching the digital system, chief secretary Jishnu Barua said managing floods is a critical administrative function as it involves multiple departments and stakeholders. The current practice of flood reporting passes through a time-consuming manual verification and quality control system, he said. The new system for flood reporting will be operational from May 15. The administration is very conversant in dealing with flood, relief and recovery efforts, which depend on situational awareness and availability of data, the chief secretary said.