Assam

अनुपम • अतुपम

AN ASSAM TOURISM PUBLICATION

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MESSAGE

It gives me immense pleasure to know that the Directorate of Tourism, Government of Assam has come up with a coffee-table book covering various facets such as nature, culture, tradition, wildlife, beliefs, history among others, of this magnificent land.

Assam has immense potential for growth in the field of tourism hitherto not tapped to its full potential owing majorly to lack of knowledge with regards to destinations in the state among potential tourists. Growth in the tourism sector, apart from helping the state earn precious revenue would also provide immense employment opportunities to our youths.

I am confident this book, which also has a section on the region's contribution, such as the sacrifices of Krishak Swahids of Patharughat, towards the nation's freedom struggle, will make a delightful reading and provide an immersive experience to those who pick it up in a bid to know more about this land of Maa Kamakhya.

I congratulate the Directorate of Tourism, Government of Assam for this commendable initiative and extend my best wishes to it for all of its future endeavours.

Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma
Chief Minister of Assam

MESSAGE

Assam is an ancient land which occupies an indispensable place in the history and civilization of our country. This is the land of Maa Kamakhya, the Goddess who symbolizes eternal Shakti.

This is the land of the Brahmaputra and the Barak, the rivers that are the sources of life giving prosperities of our people living in the two beautiful valleys. This is the land which has so generously embraced people from all over and blessed them to become a member of the greater Assamese society.

Assam is a land of several beautiful tribes who have enriched our culture with their unique music, dance and of course their way of life. This is the land upon which Nature has bestowed some of its best and rarest gifts, including the Great One-Horned Rhinoceros, White Winged Wood Duck, Hollong and Foxtail Orchid amongst others.

In this beautiful Assam, tourism presents its potentials in its own pristine way. Assam is one place which offers multiple opportunities and destinations to all those who seek to spend quality time away from home in close proximity of nature. Cultural heritage, wildlife, adventure, nature, music, festivals, village life, hills, river islands, golden fabric, mouth-watering delicacies and above all everything else the beautiful and friendly people - all have made Assam one of the most preferred destinations in the country.

The coffee table book being brought out giving the vignettes of the tourism attractions of the state in the back drop of Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav takes its readers on a pleasure trip amid the soul touching golden voice of our very own Dr. Bhupen Hazarika.

Best wishes for the publication of the coffee table book. May the endeavor succeed in attaining its objectives.

Jayanta Mallabaruah
Minister of Tourism, Public Health Engineering,
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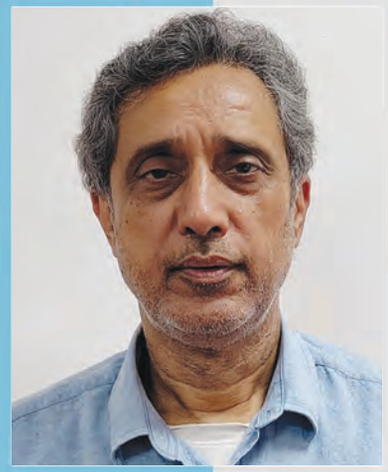
MESSAGE



Ever since I was posted in Assam, I was enchanted by its picturesque landscapes and environmental heterogeneity. I was always told and had also read about the rich heritage and ethnic cultural diversity of the various tribes and came to Assam more than three decades ago. Most of all, the way I was accepted by the people of the land right away from day one, I was enamoured with the famed Assamese hospitality that I had always heard about.

All through my service in this state, I have always been enthralled and captivated by the various songs and dance forms that speak about the landscape, its rivers, the way the colours of the land change with every season, as well as its rich cultural legacy. I truly believe that I have been privileged to have been able to experience all that Assam has to offer, and yet I feel that there's much more to be discovered.

With all that one can experience in Assam, I am certain that compiling this exceptional book by the Directorate of Tourism was no easy task. Chronicling the Ahom kings' political unification of Assam, the cultural integration of its people that was initiated by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankaradeva, the way legendary Ahom general Lachit Barphukan routed the mighty Mughals with just a handful of soldiers, to Assam's significant contribution to the Freedom struggle, this book is all encompassing. Undeniably, this book will offer an in-depth peek into the myriad traditions, belief systems, cultural practices and languages that constitute this magnificent land called Assam.

My heartiest congratulations to the Director of Tourism and the entire team of the Directorate for having successfully compiled this book so painstakingly, leaving no aspects of Assam uncovered.

Maninder Singh, IAS
Additional Chief Secretary to the Government of Assam,
Department of Tourism

MESSAGE

Assam is a familiar name across the globe, for which one should thank tea – the most rejuvenating of all beverages, the best varieties of which is produced here. Likewise, the one-horned rhinoceros, whose number has increased from just about 20 or so to more than 3000 in about a hundred years, has also constantly kept Assam in people's mind the world over. But then, Assam is much more than just tea and the rhinoceros. The Kamakhya Temple dedicated to the Mother Goddess, the mighty river Brahmaputra and the historic relics dotting its banks, the half-a-dozen or so National Parks, the golden muga silk, the world's largest inhabited river island, the earthen pyramids, the colourful people representing almost all races of the human species, the springtime Bihu festival – all make Assam one of the most compact destinations in the world with such a large number of attractions.

This book is a humble attempt of the Department of Tourism to introduce, in a nutshell, some of the amazing tourist destinations of Assam, so that one can pick and choose the places according to one's interest and liking. Assam being also a less-explored paradise for the anthropologists and nature-lovers, this book guides them to some of the places which contain immense potential for long-term study and research.

We hope, every person reading this book will only be inspired to come back again to the land of the Mother Goddess and the mighty Brahmaputra. As it is said that if one crosses the Brahmaputra once, one should cross it six more times to make one's life complete. That itself is one reason why Assam beckons the visitor again and again.

Madhumita Bhagwati, ACS
Director, Tourism,
Government of Assam

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Azadi Ka
Amrit Mahotsav

Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav

Tribute to our freedom fighters

Gomdhar Konwar

First Resistance, First Martyr

Assam had played a very significant role in the country's anti-colonial movement and freedom struggle. While Assam was annexed to British India in February 1826, it was within a little over a year that the first move to oust the foreigners was launched. Gomdhar Konwar, a prince from one of the Ahom royal clans drew up a strategy at Deberapar (near Jorhat) in October 1828, with a number of noblemen of the erstwhile Ahom kingdom extending support. Next month Gomdhar began marching to Rangpur (now Sivasagar), then upper Assam headquarters of the British, but was intercepted and arrested. He, along with three of his close associates Dhanjoy Gohain, Daha Phukan and Khamti Gohain were 'tried' and initially awarded death sentences. Soon this was reduced to life imprisonment and Gomdhar was sent to a prison at Rangpur in Bengal (now in Bangladesh), where he died in captivity to become Assam's first martyr too. A statue of Gomdhar Konwar stands aloft at Taratoli village near Mariani, about 25 km from Jorhat.

Piyoli Phukan & Jiuram Dulia Barua

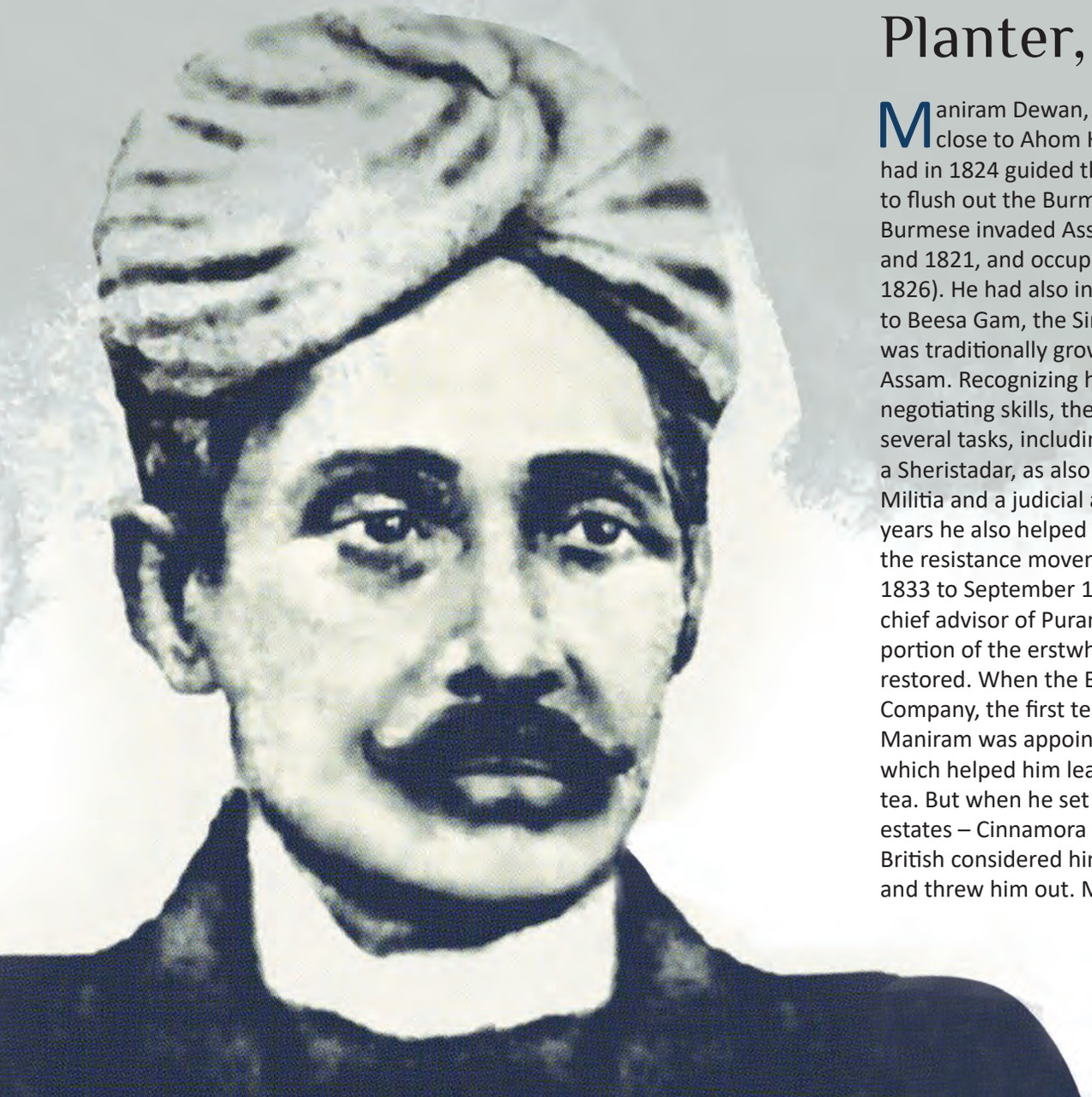
First to the gallows

In the north-east corner of the Bar-pukhuri in the heart of Sivasagar is a spot so sacred for this country. It was at this spot on September 24, 1830 that the British colonial rulers had, within a little over four years of occupying Assam, hanged to death two great sons - Piyoli Phukan and Jiuram Dulia Barua. The reason: the duo had drawn up a plan and mounted an attack on the British station at Rangpur (now Sivasagar) on March 25, 1830. The two had in fact led a force of about 400 men that night and managed to set on fire the heavily guarded armoury and magazine of the British. The better equipped British troops however managed to overpower them and arrested six of them including Piyoli Phukan and Jiuram Dulia Barua. Put through a mockery of a trial, the two were sentenced to death by hanging, while the other four – Rupchand Konwar, Deoram Dihingya Deka, Bom Singpho and Haranath Phukan – were sent to Dhaka Jail for 14 years. While nothing is known about the other three, Bom Singpho died in the prison due to illness.

Ranuwa Gohain

The Tai-Khamti Tiger

Chow Pha Plung Lu Gohain – popularly remembered as Ranuwa Gohain – a young Tai Khamti chief of the Sadiya region was a great patriot, who had led an army of 500 men and launched a massive attack on the British station at Sadiya in the wee hours of January 29, 1839 after negotiations to stop occupation of the Khamti and Singpho countries by the foreigners had failed. At least 80 men were killed in that attack, among whom was Colonel Adam White, a British officer who was vested with the task of expanding the colonialists' territory to the east of the Brahmaputra Valley. Though initially captured, Ranuwa Gohain managed to escape, only to be tracked down a few days later on the banks of the Kundil river and killed, along with his brother-in-law by British troops. The school which he had started in 1828 stands testimony to Ranuwa Gohain's patriotism and love for the country and the people.



Maniram Dewan

Planter, Patriot, Martyr

Maniram Dewan, son of a nobleman close to Ahom King Purandar Simha, had in 1824 guided the British troops to flush out the Burmese invaders. (The Burmese invaded Assam in 1817, 1819 and 1821, and occupied the country till 1826). He had also introduced the British to Beesa Gam, the Singpho chief who was traditionally growing tea in eastern Assam. Recognizing his knowledge and negotiating skills, the British gave him several tasks, including that of a Tehsildar, a Sheristadar, as also Captain of the Assam Militia and a judicial assistant. In the initial years he also helped the British suppress the resistance movements. From March 1833 to September 1838 he was also the chief advisor of Purandar Simha when a portion of the erstwhile Ahom kingdom was restored. When the British set up Assam Company, the first tea company in 1839, Maniram was appointed its Dewan, a job which helped him learn the art of growing tea. But when he set up his own two tea estates – Cinnamora and Senglung – the British considered him as a potential threat and threw him out. Maniram then openly declared his opposition to the British and drew up a plan to oust them. He also joined hands with leaders of the 1857 uprising in Bengal, and after having set up network among Indian soldiers working for the British and a sizable number of patriotic persons, even fixed a date – Durga puja Mahashtami of 1857 – to launch a simultaneous attack on the new rulers. The strategy however got leaked when a crucial letter Maniram wrote fell into the hands of the police. Maniram was arrested in Kolkata, and several of his close associates in Jorhat and Golaghat. A mockery of a trial was held in Jorhat and Maniram and his closest associate Piyali Barua were hanged to death on February 26, 1858. The place where Maniram Dewan's mortal remains were cremated – in Cinnamora tea estate in Jorhat – is today a place of pilgrimage for those who love their country. One should also visit the spot on the bank of the Tocklai in Jorhat where he was hanged, apart from carrying home some tea produced from the tea estate which the great martyr and first Indian tea planter had established.

Malegarh

Forgotten fighters of 1857

At Malegarh in Karimganj district in southern Assam have been lying in eternal sleep at least 26 brave men of the the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Companies of the 34th Native Infantry (in which Mangal Pandey too was employed), who had attained martyrdom on December 18, 1857 fighting British troops after deserting their headquarters at Chittagong. They were among about 250 sepoys who had, on hearing about Mangal Pandey's heroic story, given up their allegiance to the British, looted the treasury of Rs 2.78 lakh, set fire to the barracks, released all prisoners from the jail and fled, carrying with them all the weapons available at the Chittagong armoury. This happened on November 18, 1857. While the sepoys entered Assam, the British launched a massive operation, resulting in a series of battles between the two sides. Spilt into several groups, the brave men fought valiantly, and killed a number of British troops including at least one officer in the next four or five weeks. The worst battle took place at Malegarh tilla – a hillock near Latu in present-day Karimganj district of Assam – on December 18, 1857. Despite being equipped with swords and spears and only a few guns, they fought bravely for several hours, until 26 of them attained martyrdom, but not before one of them accurately hit Major Byng, a British officer, and four soldiers who died on the spot. Bodies of the dead bravehearts and the four Indian men of the British side were buried in the Malegarh hillock, which is today a popular destination for tourists.

1861

Phulaguri Dhewa, first peasants' uprising

Exactly 110 km east of Guwahati, on NH 715 is Phulaguri, a village where took place India's first peasants' uprising against the British in 1861. Immediately after 1857, the British increased land tax, and imposed duties and tolls. Rumours spread that tax would be imposed even on houses, homesteads, betel-leaf and betel-nut trees and *pukhuris* (tanks for rearing fish). The British also banned opium cultivation by local people and made cultivation and sale of opium a government monopoly in 1861.

While there was a general resentment among peasants all over, the protest became louder in the western part of Assam's Nagaon district, where the Tiwa or Lalung tribal Chiefs were already angry because their semi-independent territories had been taken over by the British. The Tiwa Raja of Topakuchi took the lead and organised a few *mels* (meetings) in September 1861 with the Rajas of Gobha, Nellie, Khola and Sahari – all small Tiwa principalities. On September 17, several hundred peasants – tribals, non-tribals and *kaivartas* (nowadays a Scheduled Caste) – marched to Nagaon, 14 km away and peacefully protested in front of the Deputy Commissioner's office. Deputy Commissioner Lt Herbert Sconce however, humiliated the protestors, imposed a fine on them, and detained many of them till late in the evening.

Refusing to give up, another delegation went to Nagaon on October 9. Failing to elicit any positive response, the peasants decided not to pay any tax. A *raij mel* – people's assembly – was held at Phulaguri for five consecutive days from October 15, which was attended by over 1,000 peasants from Raha, Jagi, Kampur, Khaighar, Jamunamukh, Barapujia, Chapari, etc, apart from 12 Chiefs and deposed Chiefs of the Tiwas. Alarmed at this, Deputy Commissioner Sconce on October 16 rushed a posse of policemen to Phulaguri. The people however refused to disperse. On October 17, though some of the leaders were arrested, the people easily freed them by overpowering the policemen. On October 18, Lt G B Singer, a Junior Assistant Commissioner, was sent to handle the situation. Seeing a huge crowd of over 3,000 people, many armed with sticks, the officer asked them to lay down their sticks and disperse. The people refused, leading to a scuffle. Lt Singer was beaten to death and his body thrown into the Kalang flowing by. More policemen arrived on October 19 morning, and as they opened indiscriminate fire, several

peasants were killed. In the next few days, over 40 persons including a few Tiwa Chiefs were arrested from Phulaguri, Nellie, Kachuahat, Raha and other adjoining areas. Eleven of them, mostly tribal, were imprisoned or transported for life to the Andamans.

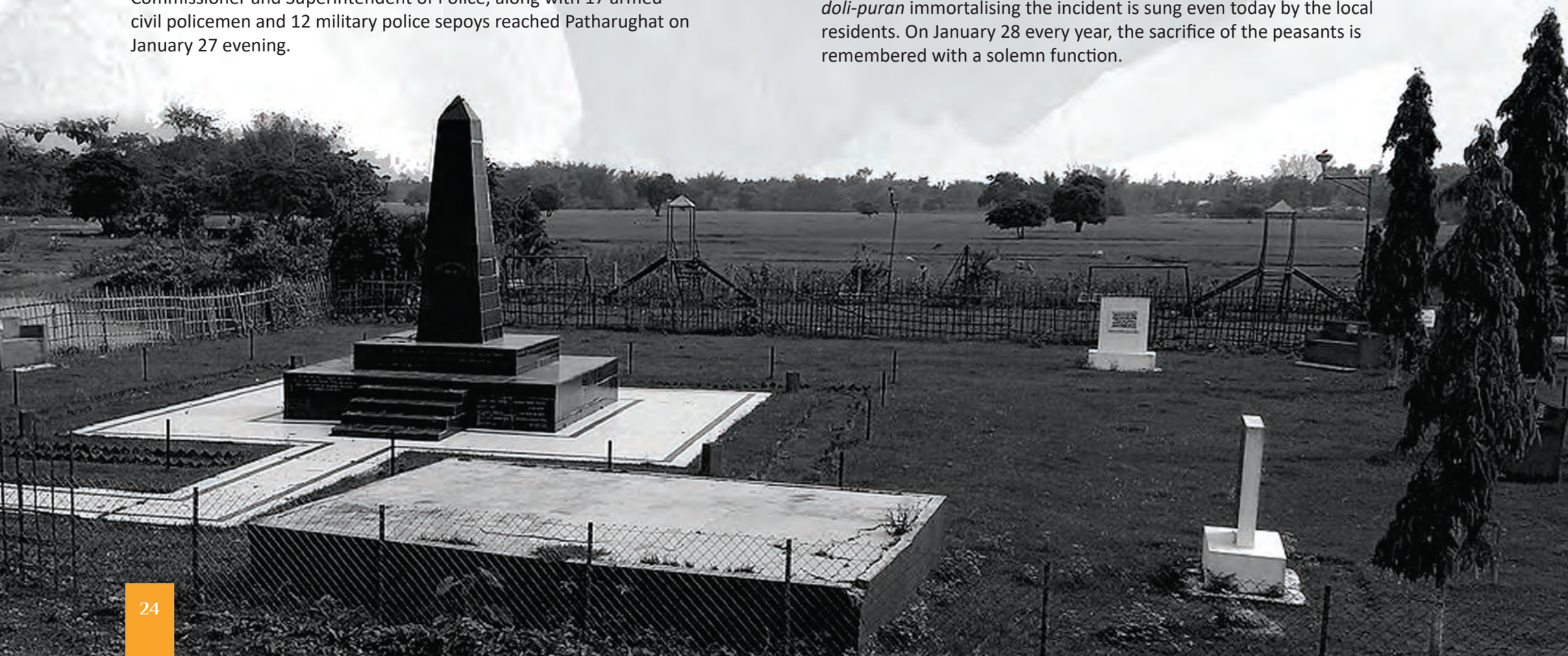
The incident, the first peasants' uprising against the British in the entire country, is remembered as Phulaguri dhewa – 'dhewa' meaning a war or battle in Tiwa language. Though some official records pertaining to the incident are missing, local history claim that at least 39 peasants were killed in the firing, while three were hanged to death, six sent to the Andamans and 60 others put in different jails across Assam. A visit to Phulaguri will help imagine how 'ordinary' peasants had fought against the British more than 160 years ago.

1894

Massacre at Patharughat

About 70 km northeast of Guwahati is Patharughat – in Darrang district – where the brutality of the British rulers had reached its peak way back in January 28, 1894. Fuming over increase of land and agricultural tax, peasants in Darrang district organised a series of *mels* (meetings) since Bhogali Bihu (January 14-15) in the Sipajhar, Mangaldai and Kalaigaon tehsils. They not only protested the new tax rates, but also decided to stop those willing to pay. The British Deputy Commissioner and Superintendent of Police, along with 17 armed civil policemen and 12 military police sepoys reached Patharughat on January 27 evening.

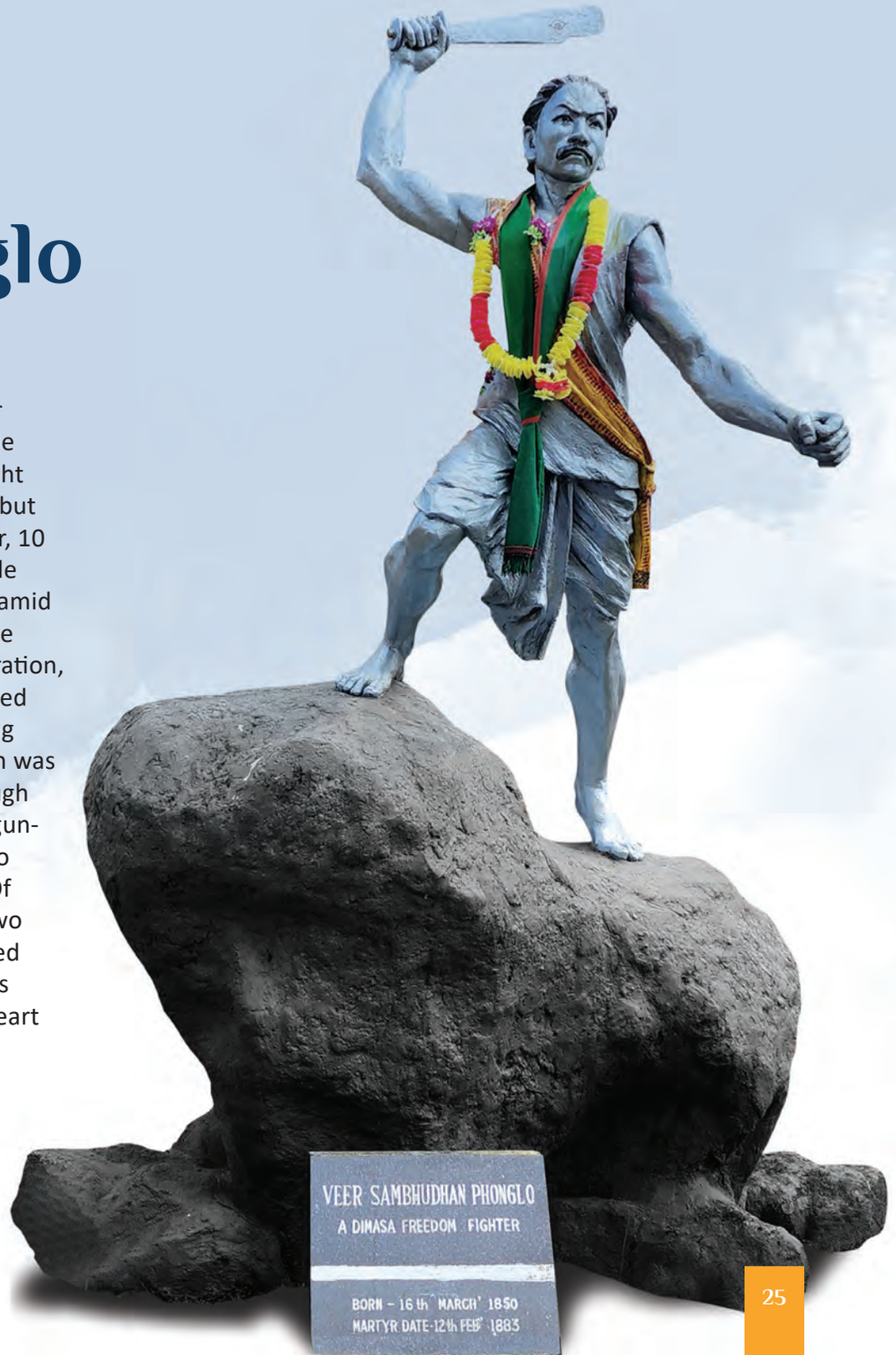
Next morning, a huge crowd assembled outside the dak bungalow where the DC and SP were put up. Though the crowd swelled, the ryots were unarmed and showed no signs of hostility. When the Deputy Commissioner went out to persuade them to disperse peacefully, the people refused to leave unless their demands were met. The SP then stepped in and ordered his men to apply force. The sight of policemen with fixed bayonets excited the crowd. A few moments later the police began to open fire. The unarmed villagers, who tried to hit back with *doli* – lumps of dry mud – simply fell to the rain of bullets. At least 140 persons, all male, is said to have died in the police firing. The Patharughat massacre is locally remembered as *doli-rann* – battle fought with mud lumps – and a ballad called *doli-puran* immortalising the incident is sung even today by the local residents. On January 28 every year, the sacrifice of the peasants is remembered with a solemn function.



Sambhudhan Phonglo

Hero of Dima Hasao

When the British established a station at Gunjung by annexing the hills portion (till recently called North Cachar) after Tularam Senapati, a Kachari chief, died in 1854, it was Sambhudhan Phonglo, a Kachari youth from Maibang, who in 1881 declared a war against the invaders and asked them to leave the Cachar Hills. Originally a spiritual leader, Sambhudhan had great motivational skills and expanded his political influence by asking the hill people not to pay any tax to the British. An operation was launched to capture him in January 1882, but Sambhudhan's small army easily overpowered the small police detachment posted at Gunjung on January 15, and burnt down the government establishment there. Next day, Sambhudhan's group came face to face with a larger contingent at Maibang. A battle ensued, in which his men fought bravely with *daos* and spears, but faced with superior gun-power, 10 to 12 men lost their lives. While Sambhudhan escaped unhurt amid a volley of fire, Major Boyd, the British officer leading the operation, who was grievously injured, died on January 30, 1882 after being shifted to Silchar. Sambhudhan was finally tracked down, and though he fought well despite heavy gun-fire, he was injured and bled to death on February 12, 1883. Of three of his close associates two died in jail, and one transported for life. Sambhudhan Phonglo's statue stands proudly in the heart of Haflong.

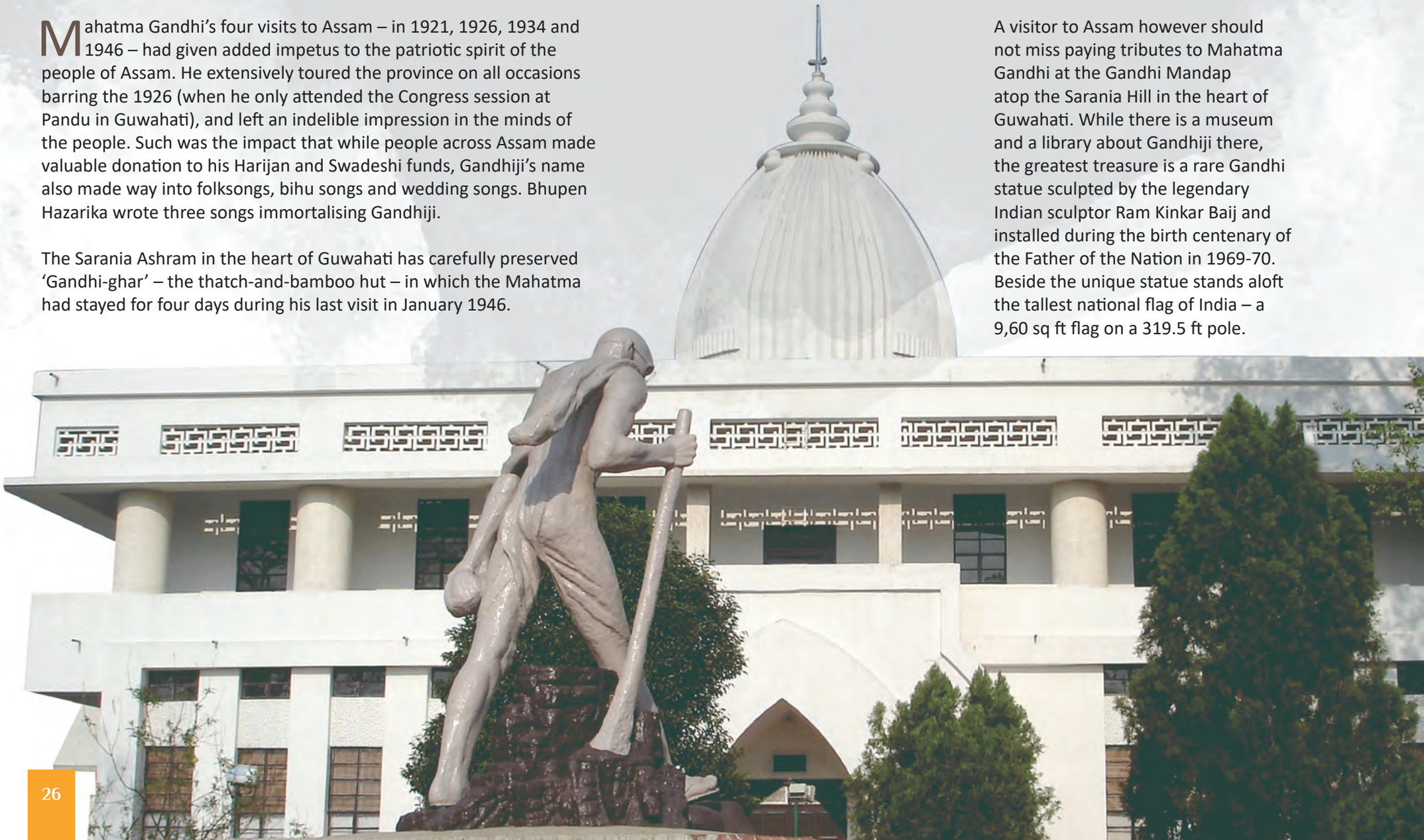


Gandhji's visits to Assam

Mahatma Gandhi's four visits to Assam – in 1921, 1926, 1934 and 1946 – had given added impetus to the patriotic spirit of the people of Assam. He extensively toured the province on all occasions barring the 1926 (when he only attended the Congress session at Pandu in Guwahati), and left an indelible impression in the minds of the people. Such was the impact that while people across Assam made valuable donation to his Harijan and Swadeshi funds, Gandhiji's name also made way into folksongs, bihu songs and wedding songs. Bhupen Hazarika wrote three songs immortalising Gandhiji.

The Sarania Ashram in the heart of Guwahati has carefully preserved 'Gandhi-ghar' – the thatch-and-bamboo hut – in which the Mahatma had stayed for four days during his last visit in January 1946.

A visitor to Assam however should not miss paying tributes to Mahatma Gandhi at the Gandhi Mandap atop the Sarania Hill in the heart of Guwahati. While there is a museum and a library about Gandhiji there, the greatest treasure is a rare Gandhi statue sculpted by the legendary Indian sculptor Ram Kinkar Baij and installed during the birth centenary of the Father of the Nation in 1969-70. Beside the unique statue stands aloft the tallest national flag of India – a 9,60 sq ft flag on a 319.5 ft pole.



The power of Assamese women

In the original home of the Mother Goddess, women played a crucial role in the freedom movement. While Kanaklata Barua (14), attained martyrdom on September 20, 1942 at Gohpur, Rupohi Aideu and Lumboi Aideu were the first women of Assam to face penal action for their active role in the movement organised by Maniram Dewan in 1857. Assam's first women's organisation – Dibrugarh Mahila Samiti – was formed in 1915 at the initiative of Hemoprabha Das and others. Next came Nagaon Mahila Samiti (1917) and Tezpur Mahila Samiti (1919). The Asam Mahila Samiti, covering the entire province was formed in 1925 by the firebrand Chandraprabha Saikiani. She and other leaders of the Asam Mahila Samiti soon set up district and local units, which inspired thousands of women to jump into the national movement. Hundreds of women courted arrest in various phases of the movement, the first among them being Guneswari Devi and Muktabala Devi of Nagaon. Guneswari Devi also became Assam's first woman to be sent to prison, and she was imprisoned as many as four times between 1930 and 1932. While Moongri Orang @ Malati Orang of Lalmati tea estate in present-day Sonitpur on the other was the first woman to attain martyrdom in 1921, 57-year old Bhogeswari Phukanani was killed in police firing a Barhampur (Nagaon) on September 18, 1942. The Dhekiajuli firing of September 20, 1942, however is the most significant, where a 12-year old girl called Tileswari Barua – India's youngest martyr – lost her life, alongside at least eight other courageous women.

Kushal Konwar

Inside Church Field in the heart of Guwahati stands the statue of Kushal Konwar, a great patriot who took full responsibility for an act of derailment of a military train at Sarupathar on October 10, 1942 and went to the gallows chanting a stanza of the Assamese *bar-geet* "Paar kara hey dinanath sansar sagar" on June 15, 1943. The 38-year old worshipper of non-violence who hailed from Sarupathar (Golaghat) was hanged in Jorhat Jail, where his *samadhi* is today a place of pilgrimage for all those who love the country.

Heritage Police Stations

While police stations were chosen for hoisting of the tricolor during the Quit India phase of the freedom movement across Assam in September 1942, three such police stations where major incidents had taken place have been recently declared as Heritage Police Stations by the Government of Assam. These are Dhekiajuli, Sootea and Gohpur. While at least 20 persons had attained martyrdom in the Dhekiajuli police station and two in Gohpur Police station, it was in the Sootea that the tricolor was hoisted successfully without any bloodshed, all on September 20, 1942. The flag was also hoisted atop the Dergaon police station in Golaghat district.

1911
A.D
CENTRAL JAIL JORHA

Jorhat Jail

Established in 1911, the Central Jail at Jorhat is in itself a heritage site. Declared a Central Jail for the Assam Valley, Naga Hills and the then Khasi and Jainta Hills in 1913, it was in this jail that most of the high-profile leaders of the freedom movement in Assam were lodged upon being arrested and awarded a prison term. Those who were imprisoned here include Pitambardeva Goswami, Gopinath Bardoloi, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Omeo Kumar Das, Bijay Chandra Bhagawati, Bimala Prasad Chaliha, Debeswar Sarma, Puspalata Das, Hem Barua, Sarbeswar Bordoloi, to name a few. It was also in the Jorhat Jail that Kushal Konwar had attained martyrdom on being hanged to death on June 15, 1943, while Kamala Miri had also attained martyrdom here after having breathed his last in the wee hours of April 22, 1943. Earlier, another freedom fighter Biju Bauri was also declared a martyr when he had died in the Jorhat Jail on June 14, 1932 after refusing to sign a declaration of allegiance due to his ill health.

Adjoining the Central Jail of Jorhat is the Jorhat Open Jail, where people can freely visit and pay tributes at the *samadhi* of Kushal Konwar and Kamala Miri. The Government of Assam has declared the Jorhat Jail as a heritage site as a mark of tribute to the freedom fighters during the celebration of the 75th year of India's Independence.

A peep into the past

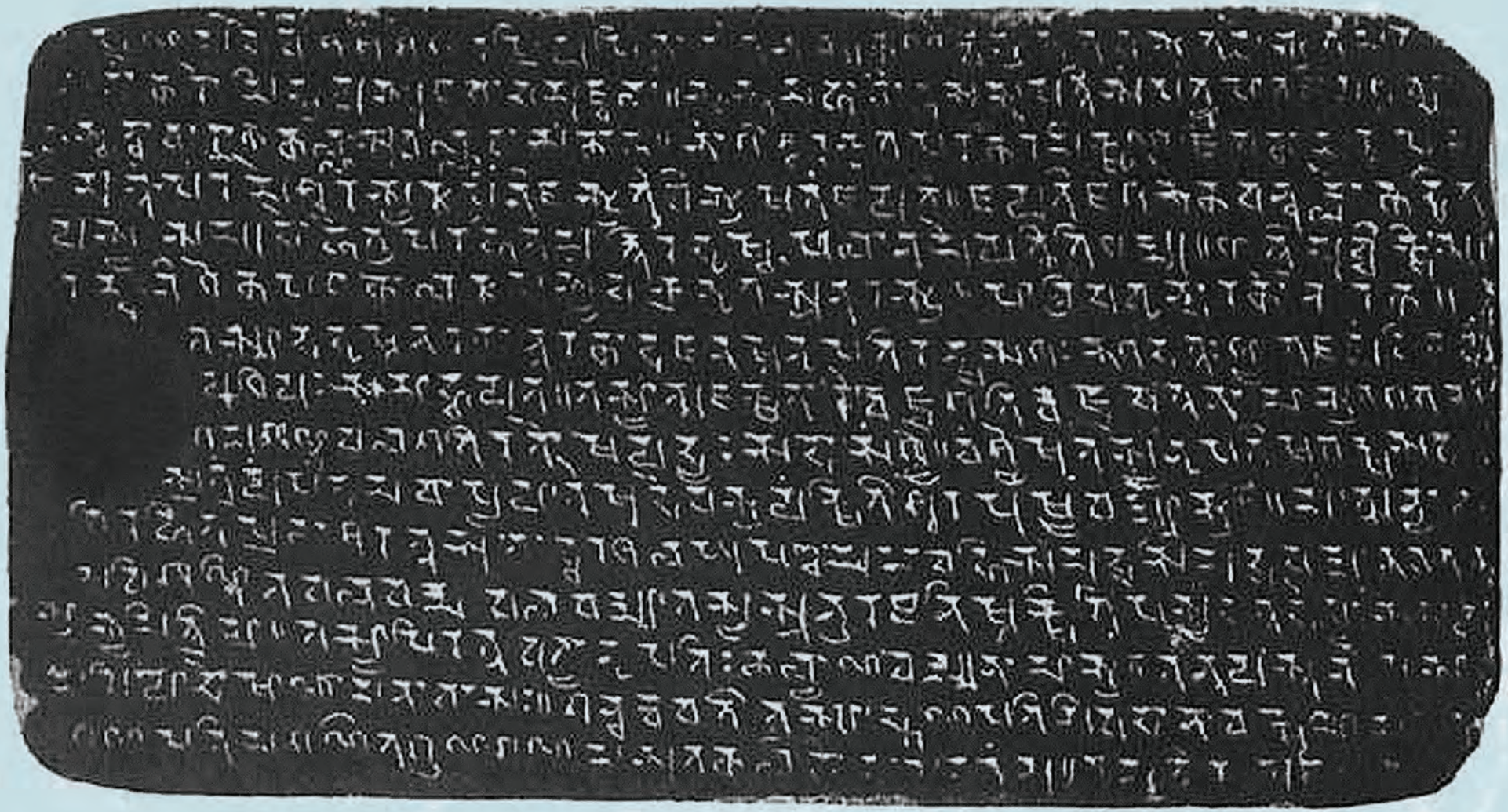
Pragjyotishpur

Let there be light

Assam was known by several names in the ancient times. In Ramayana and Mahabharata, the two great Indian epics, it has been mentioned as Pragjyotisha – meaning the Eastern Light, or Land of the Eastern Light. The Navagraha Temple atop the Chitrachal Hill in the heart of Guwahati, dedicated to the nine planets, bears testimony to this. There is also this claim that Pragjyotishpura means 'Land of Oriental Astrology'. Kamarupa on the other hand is the name of the place where Kama, the Hindu love-god, is believed to have been reborn after being burnt to ashes by an enraged Shiva.

Human footprints in Assam have been traced back to the Early Stone Age or Palaeolithic Age (40,000-35,000 years ago). Assam is intertwined with Bharatavarsha through numerous myths and legends since time immemorial. While Pragjyotisha king Bhagadatta figures in the Mahabharata, his father Naraka – son of Varaha-Vishnu – who had first built the Kamakhya Temple, was killed by Krishna after he had invited wrath of the gods of heaven. Bhagadatta, who fought on the Kauravas' side in the Battle of Kurukshetra, was a friend of Indra, the king of gods!

The first century 'Periplus of the Erythraean' Sea and the second century 'Geography' written by Ptolemy appear to call it Kirrhadia after its well-known Kirata population. Kautilya's Arthashashtra contains several names, including Para-Lauhitya, meaning Land on the banks of the Red River Lohit. In the fourth century Allahabad pillar inscription, it is mentioned as Kamarupa, and so also in the several *puranas*. The present name Assam, the English form of Asam, has two theories – (i) *A-sama* in Sanskrit meaning 'incomparable' or 'peerless, and (ii) *A-cham* in the Tai language meaning 'unconquered' or 'undefeated.'



Nidhanpur Inscription of Kumar Bhaskaravarman

Kamarupa Kings

Mahiranga to Kumar Bhaskaravarman

The earliest ruler of Kamarupa was a 'demon' named Mahiranga. A few generations down his line, another 'demon' king Naraka or Narakasura is said to have named his capital Pragjyotishpura. Narakasura's powerful son Bhagadatta made it to the pages of the epic Mahabharata. Assam's recorded history, though, began with Pusya Varman, who founded the Varman dynasty in 4 AD. The most illustrious king of the Varman dynasty was Kumar Bhaskaravarman (594-640 AD), the bachelor-king who transformed Kamarupa into a major political power by forging an alliance with Harshavardhan, and his empire extended from Burma to Bhutan and the Bay of Bengal. A seal of Bhaskaravarman discovered at Nalanda in 1917-18 has reconfirmed the Kamarupa king's close association with Harsha.

During Bhaskaravarman's reign –a great scholar and writer himself – a great Chinese scholar and pilgrim Hiuen Tsang visited Assam. In his account Si-yu-ki, Hiuen Tsang said the Varman kingdom was 1,700 miles in circumference and its capital Pragjyotishpura was some six square miles. Since Kumar Bhaskara Varman did not have an heir, a kin ushered in the Salastambha dynasty that ruled for 350 years and moved the capital to Harupeswara (now in Tezpur town). Tyagasimha, the last Salastambha king died childless. His successor Brahma Pala started the Pala dynasty.

The fall of the Pala dynasty divided the Brahmaputra valley into several principalities. The Chutiyas established themselves in the areas east of Subansiri and Disang rivers, while the Kacharis, believed to have descended from Pandava prince Bheem, took control of the southern bank of the Brahmaputra. A dozen feudal lords known as Baro-Bhuyans controlled small kingdoms west of the Chutiya and Kachari territories. By the 13th century, two political centers emerged, one at Garhgaon- Rangpur covering the Ahom kingdom in upper Assam the other at Cooch Behar of the Koch Kingdom comprising the old Goalpara region and swathes of present-day West Bengal and Bangladesh.

Hiuen Tsang

When rocks speak

The oldest archaeological objects found in Assam so far date back to the 2nd century BC. A terracotta plaque found in the Ambari excavation site in the heart of Guwahati has been ascertained to be of the Sunga-Kushana period (2nd-1st century BC to the 3rd century AD). While the Ambari site itself is worth visiting, the sculptures and other objects have been preserved in the Assam State Museum and the Ambari Site Museum. The most important discovery of the Ambari Archaeological Site is a flight of brick steps leading to a tank. Moreover, the excavation has also revealed two floors and two hearths resting on the natural soil significantly.

Ambari excavation site

There is also evidence of a ceramic industry at the Ambari site, which has numerous objects of Kaolin ware, Red ware, Buff ware and few Grey wares. Ambari has many unanswered questions as three types of foreign ceramics – Arretine and Roulleted ware (1st – 2nd century AD), Chinese celadon ware (10th –12th century AD), and Green glazed ware (16th – 17th century AD), have been also found here. These numerous archaeological and sculptural finds at the Ambari archaeological site are said to be of two distinct cultural periods, 7th to 12th century AD, and 13th to 17th century AD respectively.

Dah-Parvatiya door frame in Tezpur

Chronologically speaking, the 2nd century terracotta plaque of Ambari is followed by the one-line stone slab inscription of Dubarani (in Golaghat) belonging to the 4th-5th century AD. Dubarani, a recent discovery which is believed to be the capital city of an ancient kingdom that existed in the Doiyang-Dhansiri Valley in upper Assam. There are evidences of dykes and ramparts, ditches indicating water-forts, and remnants of brick walls at Dubarani.

The beautiful architectural and sculptural remains of Dah-Parvatiya (in Tezpur) are of the later Gupta period (6th century AD). Visitors are amazed to see remnants of what is believed to be originally a temple, upon which was built a brick Shiva temple in the Ahom period. The pride of Dah-Parvatiya is a door-frame of stone, carved in the typical style of Gupta art.

Dah-Parvatiya

Mun-dung Shun Khaam

Land of Gold

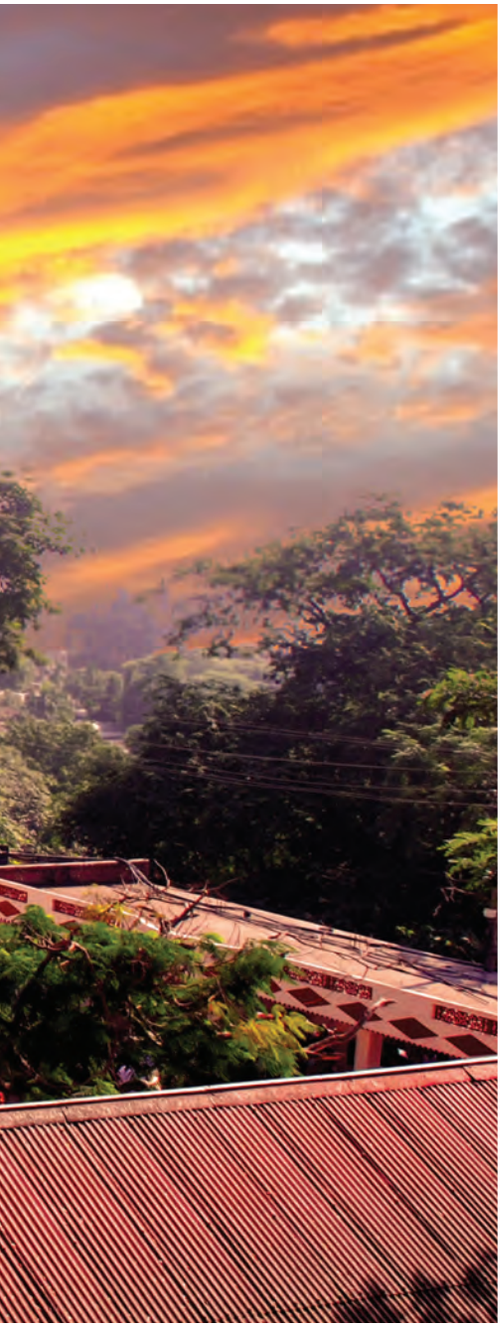
Swami Vivekananda, the great 19th century Indian philosopher had said that Assam is the most beautiful place in India after Kashmir. Pragjyotisha of yore had included parts of North and East Bengal (at present Bangladesh), and the hill tracts up to the border of China. Siukapha, founder of the great Ahom dynasty had, on having the first glimpse of the Brahmaputra Valley on arrival here from Mong-Ri Mong-Ra through Mong-Mao in 1228 AD exclaimed – "Mun-dung Shun Khaam!" meaning – 'This is the land of gold!'

The boundaries of Assam however have undergone changes at various periods of history. While most of present-day Bangladesh was once part of Assam, so were the present-day states of Meghalaya, Nagaland, Mizoram, and parts of Arunachal Pradesh. Bounded by these states, West Bengal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, its topographical asymmetry is underscored by the Barail hill range sandwiched between two valleys – Brahmaputra and Barak – named after the dominant rivers. The Brahmaputra, the Barak and their 120 tributaries ensure a fertile land dotted with more than 3,500 wetlands, 800 expansive tea estates and 25 major wildlife sanctuaries that are home to numerous rare species of flora and fauna.

Occupying 2.39% of India's landmass, Assam is home to over 32 million souls, and people here speak several languages. Assamese is the most important and widely spoken language, followed by Bodo, Karbi, Dimasa, Mising, Rabha and several other ethnic languages, apart from Bengali and Hindi. English is also widely used and understood.

Assam's population is an amazing intermixture of different racial stocks. These include Mongoloid, Indo-Burmese, Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan and Aryan. Each of the communities has its distinct cultural trait and way of life. The Bodo, Karbi, Rabha, Tiwa, Dimasa, Deuri, Sonowal Kachari, Thengal Kachari tribes have their own respective autonomous councils. A section of people have roots in erstwhile East Bengal (now Bangladesh), while the ancestors of another section had come from the Chotanagpur plateau in central India to work in the tea plantations. The greater Assamese society thus is an exotic tapestry of all these wonderful races which has evolved through a long assimilative process.

Faith matters



Mother Goddess Kamakhya

As has been already said, ancient Kamarupa is the original home of the Mother Goddess, also called the goddess of *shakti*. Legend has it that Kamakhya temple was originally built by Naraka, and *Mekhela-ujuwa path* – the stone-paved causeway that he had constructed – still stands intact for the adventurous to approach the temple from the foothills. The present temple was built by Koch king Naranarayana in 1565 AD after it was destroyed by a Muslim invader called Kalapahar.

It is said that one makes it to Kamakhya only when one gets a call from the Devi. Sometimes, one gets a call several times. Chanting of the Kamakhya strotam – "*Kamakhya varade devi, nila-parvata basini, twam devi jagata-mata, yoni-madhye namahastute"*, is in itself a great prayer that connects the devotee to the Mother Goddess. There is no idol in the sanctum sanctorum; instead it is the divine *yoni* that is worshipped inside the *garbha-griha*, which in itself is a cave. (A cave is called *guha*; and the name Guwahati is also believed to have been derived from it – *hati* or village with several caves around.)

A visit the Nilachal Hills is not complete with just offering prayers to Devi Kamakhya. There are nine other temples of the Devi around, together called Dasamahavidya, these being Bagala, Kali, Tara, Chhinnamasta, Bhairavi, Dhoomawati, Matangi, Kamala, and Bhubaneswari. There are also five Shiva shrines in Nilachal, these being Kameswar, Siddheswar, Kotilinga, Amra Tokreswar and Kedareswar.

One must also touch at least one of the several kundas or ponds in Nilachal Parbat, these being – Saubhagya kunda, Rrin-Mochan kunda, Amrit kunda, Durga kunda, Gaya kunda and Kaso Pukhuri. There are people who make a round of all the temples in Nilachal Parbat on foot, an arduous task which would take a couple of days, to attain complete salvation. There are several spots in the Nilachal Parbat from where one gets a beautiful view of the mighty Brahmaputra flowing by, as also of Guwahati, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities of India.

Ambubachi Mela

Any day of the week is good for visiting Kamakhya and offering prayers. It is however during Ambubachi Mela in the Indian calendar month of Ashadh (June) when Nilachal Parbat witnesses the highest footfall. It is said that the Goddess passes through her annual periods during these four days. And, while the temple (and all other temples here) remain shut for those four days, lakhs of devotees assemble and wait for offering prayers when the temple doors reopen thereafter.

Other important events in Kamakhya includes the three-day Deodhani or Devadhwani Mela held on Sravana Sankranti (mid-July) in the Natmandir of Kamakhya Temple. The highlight of this festival is the Deodhani Nritya, a dance form coinciding with Manasa Puja and performed by persons believed to represent the spiritual power of a god or goddess.

Durga Puja is also celebrated with due fervour in Kamakhya, the festival being slightly different from other places. Here, Durga Puja is observed for a fortnight beginning with Krishna Navami and ending with Sukla Navami of Aswina.

Kumari Puja is also an integral festival of Kamakhya. In this puja, a pre-puberty girl (Kumari) is worshipped as a manifestation of the Goddess Kamakhya after being beautifully decorated with a new red sari, garlands, sindur, jewellery, perfumes etc. The philosophy behind Kumari puja is to establish the value of women, with the maiden – being an early symbol of womanhood or Nature – symbolizing the seed of the powers that regulate creation, stability and destruction.

Guwahati in itself is a city of temples, and though it might take a few days to touch all the temples here, it is definitely worthwhile to visit four or five of them as part of a trip to City of Eastern Light.

Basisthashram

Basisthashram in the south-eastern part of the city dates back to the Vedic age. It was here that sage Vasistha had regained his physical form after removal of a curse through rigorous penance. A Shiva temple stands at the juncture of three mythical rivulets – Sandhya, Lalita and Kanta – which flow down to the Brahmaputra as Bharalu and Bahini.

Navagraha

Atop the Chitrachal Hill is Navagraha – temple of the nine planets, only one of two such temples on earth. It is an ancient seat of study of astronomy and astrology, and the sanctum sanctorum has a stone imprint of the solar system as depicted in ancient Indian astronomy. Down below to the south of the temple is Silpukhuri, a pond with nine corners or sides, where devotees in olden times used to take a dip before visiting the Navagraha temple.

Ugratara

Situated beside Jorpukhuri – twin tanks – is Ugratara *devalaya*, a temple which is believed to be the spot where the naval portion of the Devi fell. While the temple was built by Ahom king Shiva Simha, the *pukhuri* was dug under supervision of queen Phuleswari around 1738 AD.

Sukreswar

On the Hastiparbat hillock beside the Brahmaputra, Sukreswar temple stands at a site where Sukracharya, the guru of demons, is believed to have placed a massive Shiva-linga. The temple and the adjoining Barphukanar Tila were part of the erstwhile Itakhuli Fort which was the scene of a major battle between the Assamese and the Mughals in July 1682 AD.

Umananda

In the heart of the Brahmaputra, near Kachari-ghat, is a rock island referred to as Bhasmachal, Bhasmakoot and Bhasmasaila in the Yogini-tantra. It was here that Mahadeva or Shiva had burnt to ashes Kamadeva, the god of love, with flames flashing from His third eye. It is said that the temple and the island are also called Umananda because Mahadeva is always present here to provide pleasure to Uma, another form of the Devi. The island also looks like a peacock, and hence the British rulers had referred to it as Peacock Island. The Umananda temple has an Anadi Shivalinga and a Dashabhuja image of the Goddess riding a bull. According to tradition, Umananda is the *baibhav* – dispeller of all fears – for Kamakhya Devi, and hence pilgrims are supposed to pay their obeisance at the Umananda temple first before climbing up the Nilachal Hills to offer prayers at the Kamakhya temple there.

Urvashi-kunda

Sailing to Umananda one can see a tiny island in the middle of the Brahmaputra. This is Urvashi-kunda where one can see the *dasavatara* forms of Vishnu as also images of Surya carved on the rocks. There are also traces of an ancient inscription written in the Brahmi script. The base of Urvashi-kunda becomes completely visible only after a cycle of four or five years when the water-level of the Brahmaputra recedes the most. There is also a concrete pole on it as an indicator for boats to prevent hitting the submerged rocks.

Bhimashankar Jyotirlinga

Situated on the Dakini-pahar, a hill near Pamohi in the southern edge of Guwahati city is the Bhimashankar Jyotirlinga, one of the twelve Jyotirlingas spread across India. Though it is referred to as the Dwadash Jyotirlinga, there is also the Bhimashankar Jyotirlinga in Pune by the same identification. Atop the Dakini-pahar hill, a Shiva-linga is enclosed by a hill stream with a hot-water spring nearby which continuously flows over the *linga*. Halfway up the rock foot-track to it is a Ganesh temple too.

OTHER TEMPLES IN GUWAHATI

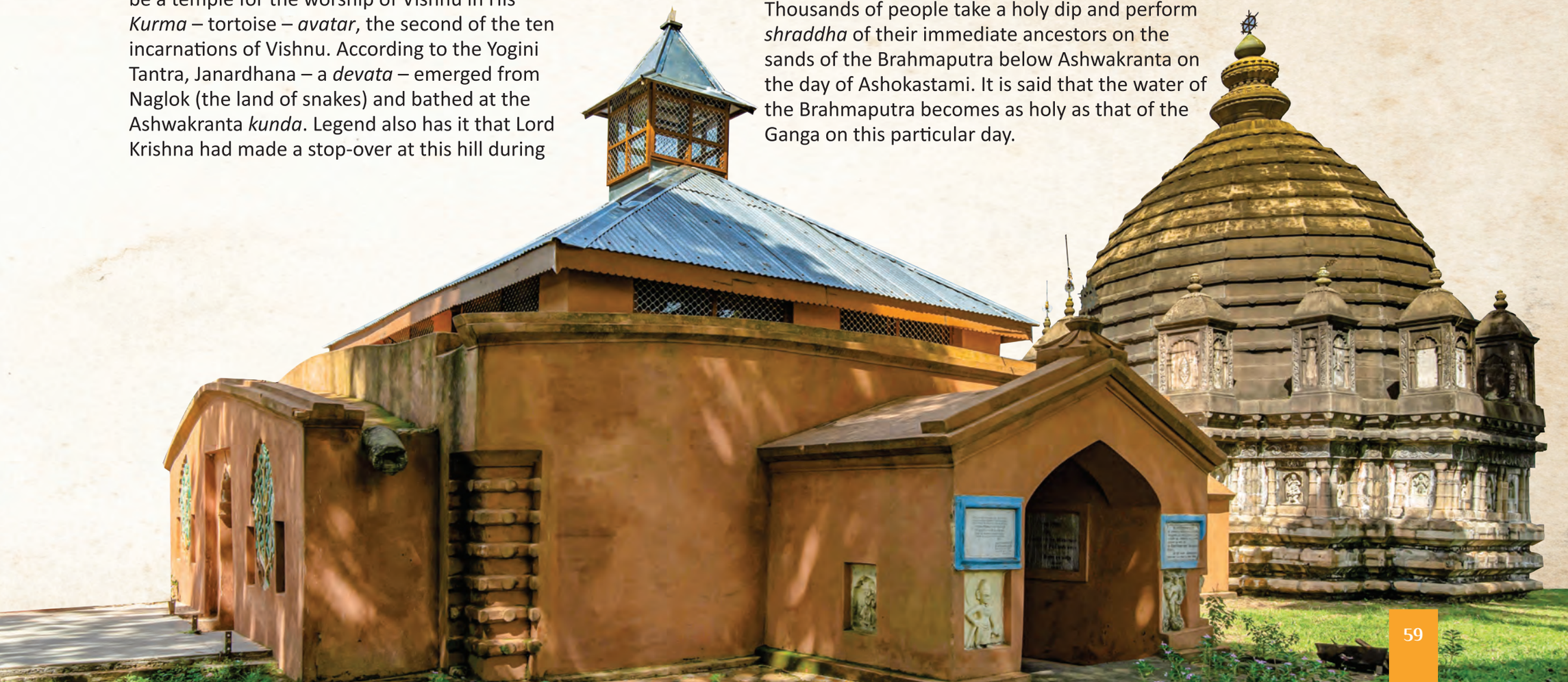
There are several other ancient temples in and around Guwahati. These include the Pandunath Devalaya on western foothills of Nilachal Hills, the Chatrakar Devalaya in Uzanbazar, Janardan Devalaya and Baneswar-linga in Panbazar, and Ganesh-mandir in Dispur, to name a few. Additionally, there are also a few shrines of other faiths and denominations. These include the Barpeta Satra branch at Kamarpatti, Tangara Satra at Beltola, Tokoubari Satra at Tokobari, Burha Masjid at Ambari, Sikh Temple at Fancybazar, Christ Church at Panbazar, Pir Hazrat Zahir Auliya Khwajagan dargah at Ulubari, and Bauddha Vihar at Pandu.

Shrines in North Guwahati

Ashwakranta Temple

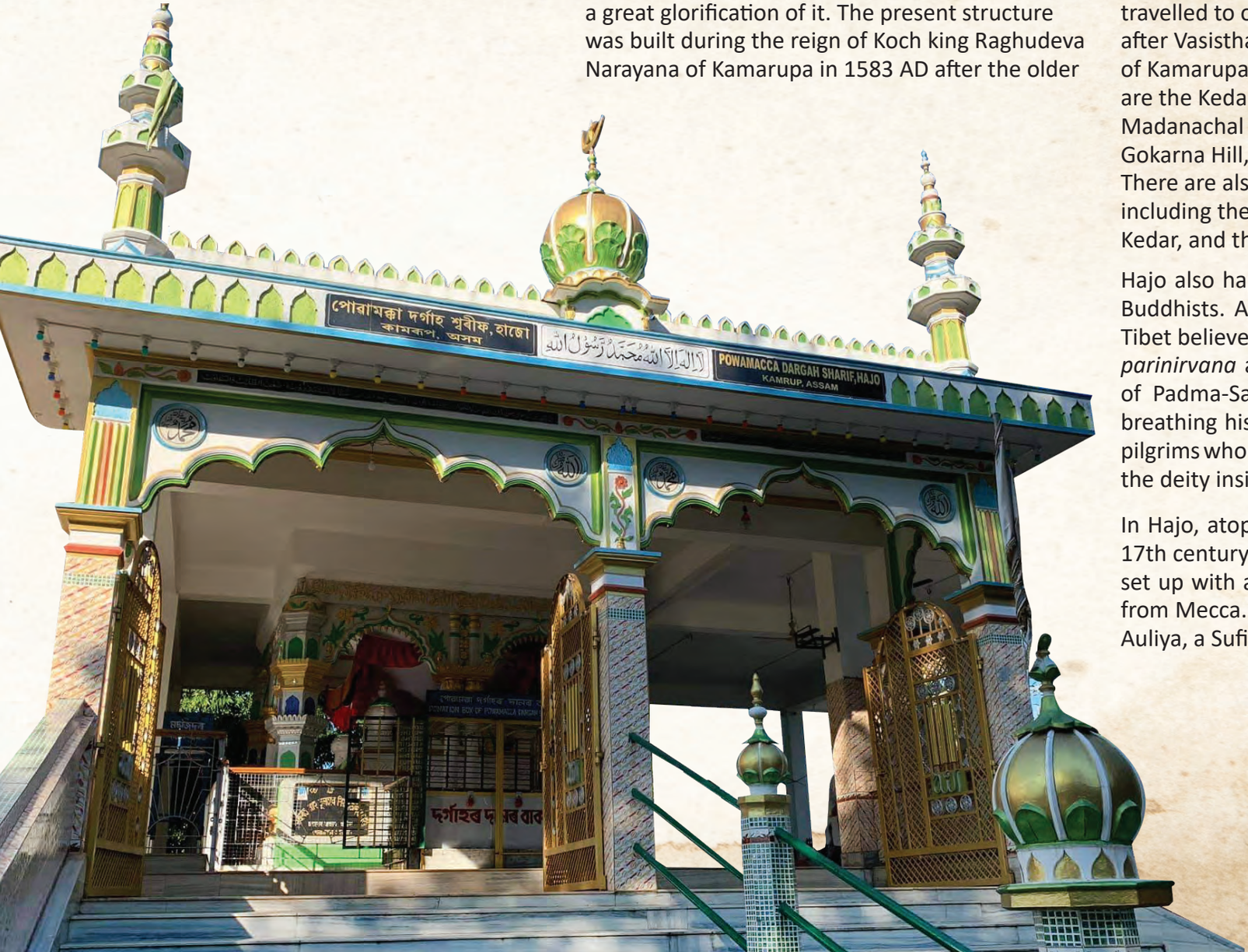
The Ashwakranta Temple in North Guwahati is the only known temple in Assam which has a statue of Vishnu in his *ananta-shayana* position. Located atop a hill beside the Brahmaputra, a part of the temple complex in fact touches the mighty river. It is also said to be a temple for the worship of Vishnu in His *Kurma* – tortoise – *avatar*, the second of the ten incarnations of Vishnu. According to the Yogini Tantra, Janardhana – a *devata* – emerged from Naglok (the land of snakes) and bathed at the Ashwakranta *kunda*. Legend also has it that Lord Krishna had made a stop-over at this hill during one of his several trips to Assam, when his tired horse satiated its thirst at the *kunda* here. The *kunda* however has merged with the Brahmaputra long ago. The Maha-Vishnu Yajna of Ashwakranta Temple, held in February-March every year, is one of the biggest events there.

Thousands of people take a holy dip and perform *shraddha* of their immediate ancestors on the sands of the Brahmaputra below Ashwakranta on the day of Ashokastami. It is said that the water of the Brahmaputra becomes as holy as that of the Ganga on this particular day.



Hajo

Confluence of faiths



About 20 km west of Guwahati is Hajo, a rural centre of five religious shrines; four are Hindu temples, one a Sufi shrine. One of the Hindu temples is also an important place for Buddhist pilgrims. The Hayagriva-Madhava temple atop the Manikut hill is a Vishnu shrine built in the 10th century, with the Kalika Purana providing a great glorification of it. The present structure was built during the reign of Koch king Raghudeva Narayana of Kamarupa in 1583 AD after the older temple was destroyed by Kalapahar, a Muslim invader from Bengal in 1564 AD. The relief works in the architectural ruins of Hayagriva-Madhava temple has a number of dancing female figures. These suggest that the Devadasi dance form had once thrived in the Hajo temples. Originally believed to be of Tibet, the Devadasi tradition had travelled to other temples of India from Assam after Vasistha *muni* had brought it to the temples of Kamarupa. The other Hindu temples in Hajo are the Kedar and Kamaleswar temples atop the Madanachal hill, and the Kameswar temple atop Gokarna Hill, the deity in all three being Shiva. There are also a few smaller shrines around – including the Ganeswar temple on the way to Kedar, and the Apunarbhava *kunda.*

Hajo also happens to be a centre of attraction for Buddhists. A section of the Lamas of Bhutan and Tibet believe that Lord Buddha had attained *maha-parinirvana* at Hajo. But the stronger likelihood is of Padma-Sambhava, great founder of Lamaism, breathing his last atop the Manikoot hill. Buddhist pilgrims who visit Hajo in January-February, consider the deity inside Hayagriva-Madhava as Mahamuni.

In Hajo, atop the Garudachal hills is Poa-Mecca, a 17th century Muslim shrine, believed to have been set up with a poa - one-fourth of a seer - of earth from Mecca. It also has the tomb of Pir Giashuddin Auliya, a Sufi Saint.

Doulgovinda

Across the Brahmaputra in Guwahati is North Guwahati, a large locality which not only has its own distinct historical identity, but is also a place of pilgrimage with a number of Hindu shrines. Among them is the Doulgovinda Temple, a relatively new shrine dedicated to the worship of Krishna which attracts hundreds of devotees every day. Doul or Holi is celebrated with massive fervour here.

Manikarneswar

It is a unique star-shaped Shiva temple on a hillock at Rajaduar in North Guwahati, built way back in the 11th century by the Pala dynasty. Rebuilt in 1755 by Ahom king Rajeswar Simha, there is a 100-step stairway leading to the temple set amid a pleasant ambience.

Dirgheswari

Situated at Rangmahal in North Guwahati, Dirgheswari is an ancient Durga temple perched on a rocky hill. First mentioned in the Yoginitantra, the hillock is also called Sita-parbat, and is believed to have the sanctity of Vrindavan in it. The present temple was rebuilt in 1755 by Ahom king Rajeswar Simha.

Rudreswar

Situated near Silsako in North Guwahati, it is a Shiva temple built in the 18th century by Ahom king Pramatta Simha in memory of his father Rudra Simha, a great Ahom king who had suddenly died amid drawing a strategy to forge an alliance of Hindu kings of eastern India to launch an attack on the Mughals in Delhi.

Bardowa

Birthplace of Sankaradeva

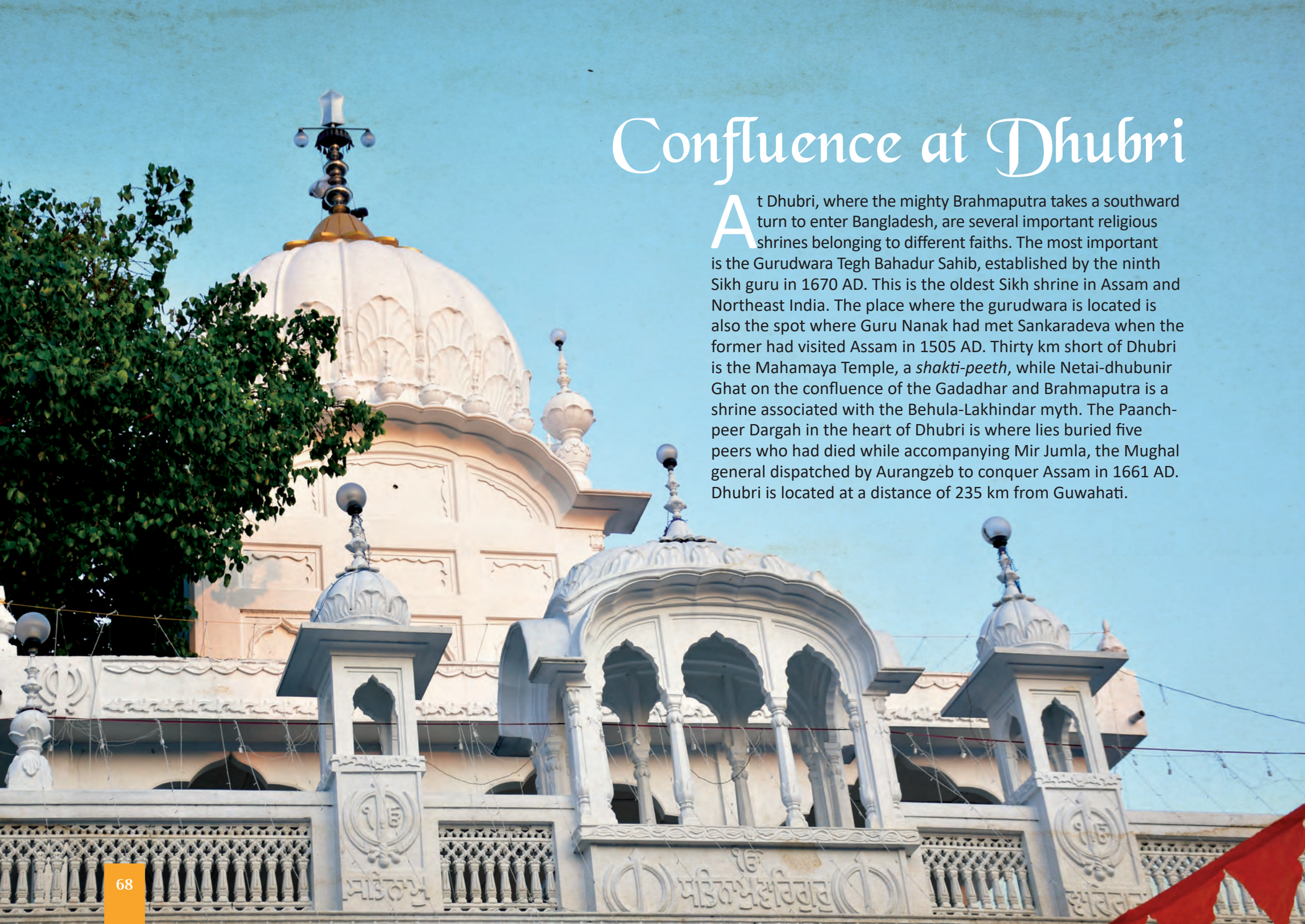
In Central Assam, about 18 km from Nagaon is Bardowa Thaan, which is not just the birthplace of Srimanta Sankaradeva, but also one of the most important centres of Vaishnavite Assamese faith, art and culture. It was here that that the saint-reformer was born in 1449 AD, and it was from here that Sankaradeva had launched his Vaishnavite movement after having completed a 12-year pilgrimage across the subcontinent. He had set up his first *naam-ghar* here, which today is the epicentre of Vaishnava faith, and had also staged his first play Chinha-yatra in 1468 AD, a unique massive multimedia dramatic production of that era. While the birth anniversaries of Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva and Janmashtami are three major annual events here, traditional *bhaona* (plays) are also staged on all these occasions.

The government of Assam has recently unveiled an ambitious Rs 155-crore plan to develop Bardowa Thaan by enhancing the grandeur and magnificence of the complex and making it one of the biggest epicentres of religious tourism in the region.

The plan includes development and beautification of the Monikut, Kirtan-ghar and Naat-ghar within the Thaan premises, and a total revamp of the several *boha* - traditional hostels of the in-house devotees as well the visiting pilgrims.

There will also be a new Damodar Ata Tourist Guest House, apart from a beautification plan for the legendary Akashiganga water-body in the vicinity of the Thaan.

The Assam government is also developing a Religious Tourist Circuit covering all the places where the great saint-reformer had lived and worked, starting from Bardowa and ending at Coochbehar in West Bengal.

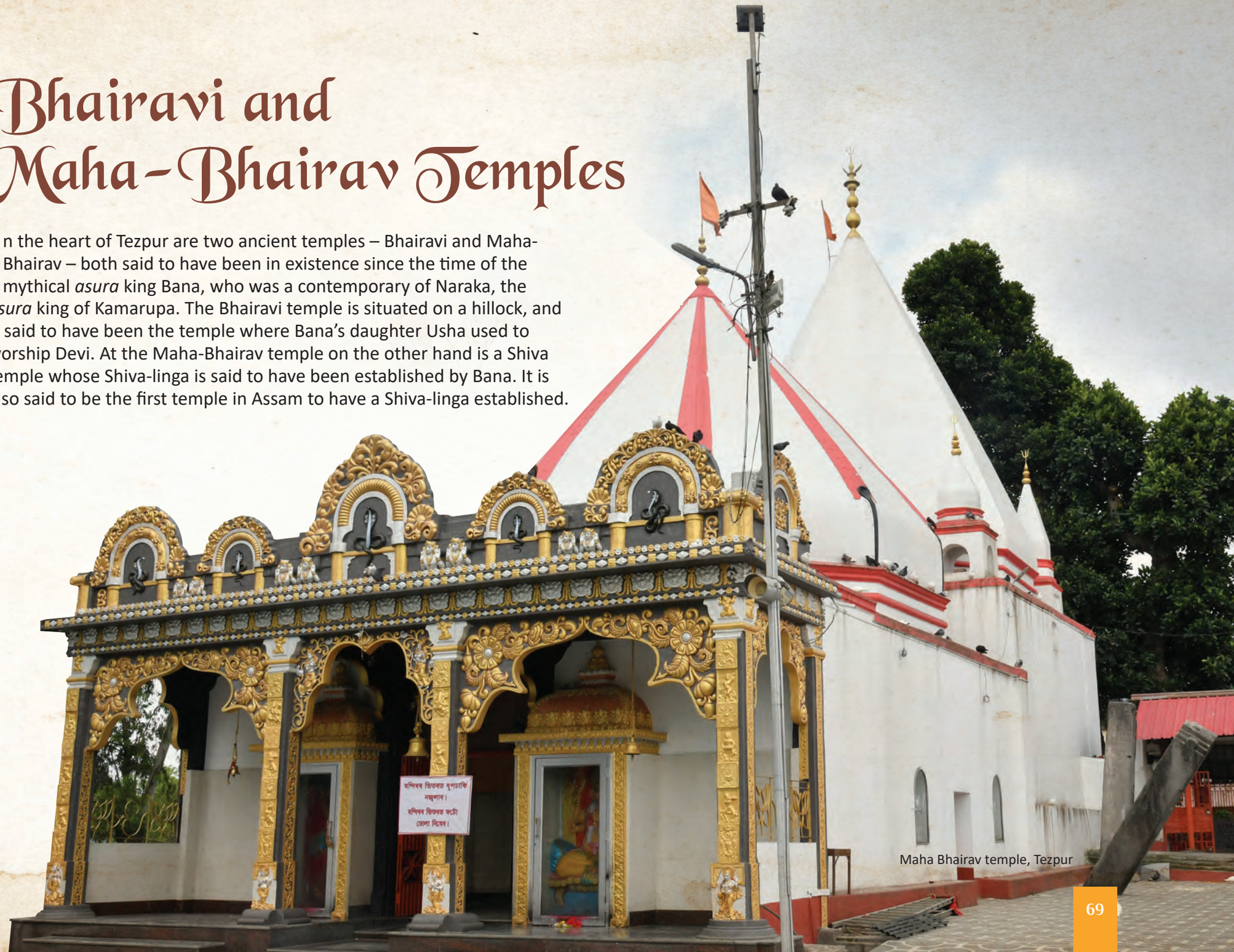


Confluence at Dhubri

At Dhubri, where the mighty Brahmaputra takes a southward turn to enter Bangladesh, are several important religious shrines belonging to different faiths. The most important is the Gurudwara Tegh Bahadur Sahib, established by the ninth Sikh guru in 1670 AD. This is the oldest Sikh shrine in Assam and Northeast India. The place where the gurudwara is located is also the spot where Guru Nanak had met Sankaradeva when the former had visited Assam in 1505 AD. Thirty km short of Dhubri is the Mahamaya Temple, a *shakti-peeth*, while Netai-dhubunir Ghat on the confluence of the Gadadhar and Brahmaputra is a shrine associated with the Behula-Lakhindar myth. The Paanch-peer Dargah in the heart of Dhubri is where lies buried five peers who had died while accompanying Mir Jumla, the Mughal general dispatched by Aurangzeb to conquer Assam in 1661 AD. Dhubri is located at a distance of 235 km from Guwahati.

Bhairavi and Maha-Bhairav Temples

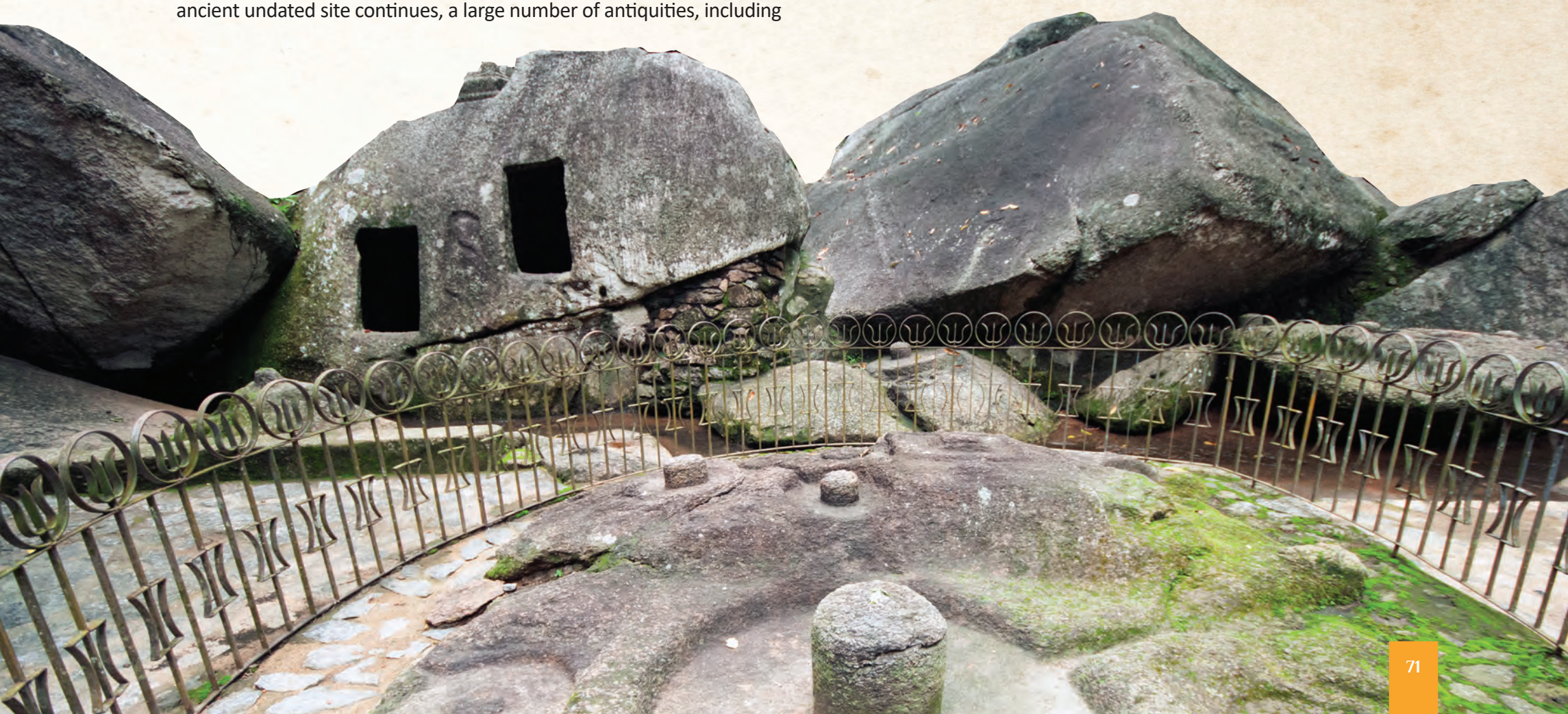
In the heart of Tezpur are two ancient temples – Bhairavi and Maha-Bhairav – both said to have been in existence since the time of the mythical *asura* king Bana, who was a contemporary of Naraka, the *asura* king of Kamarupa. The Bhairavi temple is situated on a hillock, and is said to have been the temple where Bana's daughter Usha used to worship Devi. At the Maha-Bhairav temple on the other hand is a Shiva temple whose Shiva-linga is said to have been established by Bana. It is also said to be the first temple in Assam to have a Shiva-linga established.



Maha Bhairav temple, Tezpur

Suryapahar

About 140 km west of Guwahati is the wonderful site of Suryapahar, a hilly terrain where several rock-cut Shivalingas, votive stupas and the deities of the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain pantheon are scattered in an area of about one sq km. It is said to have been a centre of Buddhism, Jainism and Brahmanical Hinduism from the early Christian era to the 12th century AD. While excavation of the ancient undated site continues, a large number of antiquities, including fragments of terracotta plaques depicting various decorative designs, different type of Kirtimukhas and a stone head of a deity probably of Vishnu have been found, all datable to the early medieval period. There is also a Dwadash Aditya temple – a temple of 12 suns – nearby, apart from a colossal stupa, a Ganesh-kunda, rock shelters with images of Jain Trithankaras, and a Panchayatana temple complex within a small area.



Barpeta

Vaishnavite Centre

About 140 km west of Guwahati is Barpeta, a very important centre of Vaishanva faith and culture. While the 16th century saint-reformer Srimanta Sankaradeva spent several crucial years of his life here, his disciples had founded several Satras or monasteries here. The most important is the Barpeta Satra or Kirtan-ghar, originally founded by Madhavadva in 1583 AD. There are three *guru-asanas* in the huge *kirtan-ghar*, named after Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and Badula Ata. Doul or *fakuwa*, the Assamese form of Holi, is the biggest festival here. Mathuradas Ata, an early head of the Satra had introduced election of the Satradhikar or Burha-Satriya of Barpeta Satra through a democratic election, the oldest voting exercise in the region.

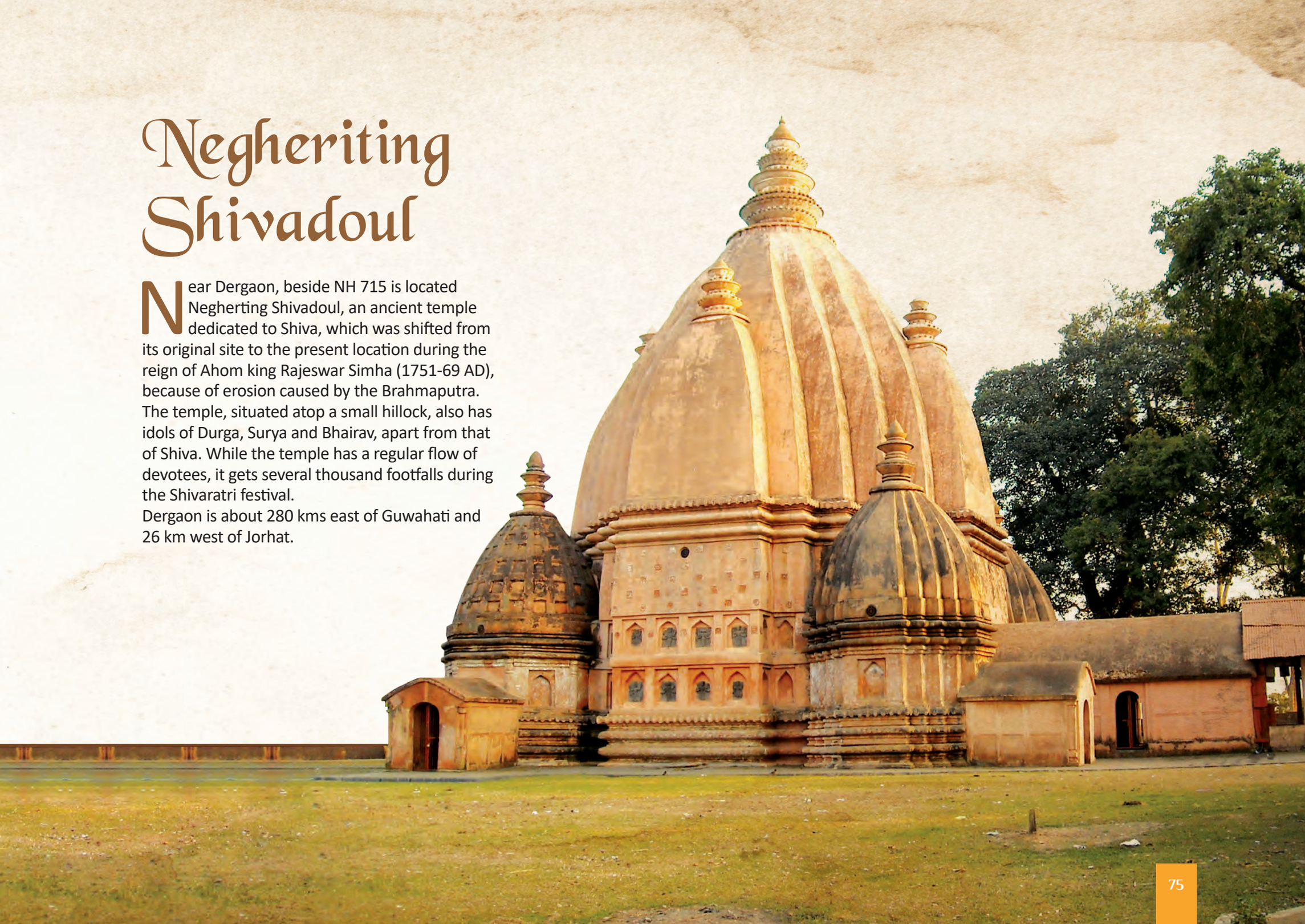
There are two more Satras close to the Barpeta Satra, both founded by Madhavadeva. About a km away is Ganak-kuchi Satra, while another two km away is Sundaridiya Satra, both important centres of Vaishnava faith, culture and music.

At Patbausi is located two Satra, one founded by Sankaradeva, the other by Damodaradeva. Yet another important Satra is Na-Satra or Basudeva-Thaan.

Negheriting Shivadoul

Near Dergaon, beside NH 715 is located Negherting Shivadoul, an ancient temple dedicated to Shiva, which was shifted from its original site to the present location during the reign of Ahom king Rajeswar Simha (1751-69 AD), because of erosion caused by the Brahmaputra. The temple, situated atop a small hillock, also has idols of Durga, Surya and Bhairav, apart from that of Shiva. While the temple has a regular flow of devotees, it gets several thousand footfalls during the Shivaratri festival.

Dergaon is about 280 kms east of Guwahati and 26 km west of Jorhat.



Dhekiakhowa Bar-namghar

About four km east of Jorhat, on NH 715 is Dhekiakhowa Bar-naamghar, a Vaishnavite shrine, which was established by Madhavadeva, the principal disciple of Srimanta Sankaradeva in 1461 AD.

Legend has it that Madhavadeva once happened to stay overnight in the house of an elderly couple. The couple, who used to live on alms collected from door to door, gave him whatever little rice they had collected that day, along with a curry of *dhekia* ferns. Madhavadeva was so impressed with the couple's hospitality despite their poverty that he lit an earthen lamp in their thatch hut with a prayer for their well-being. As people from nearby villages made a beeline to their hut to offer prayers before that lamp, it was gradually converted into a *naam-ghar*. Over the decades it has become a huge *naam-ghar* and came to be known as Dhekiakhowa Bar-naamghar. While hundreds of devotees visit the *naamghar* every day, the annual *paal-naam* (in August-September) and the birth anniversary of Srimanta Sankaradeva (September-October) are its biggest events.

॥ জয় গুৰু শঙ্কৰ ॥
মহাপুৰুষ শ্ৰীশ্ৰীমাধৱদেৱ স্থাপিত ঢেকীয়াখোৱা ৰৱনামঘৰ।

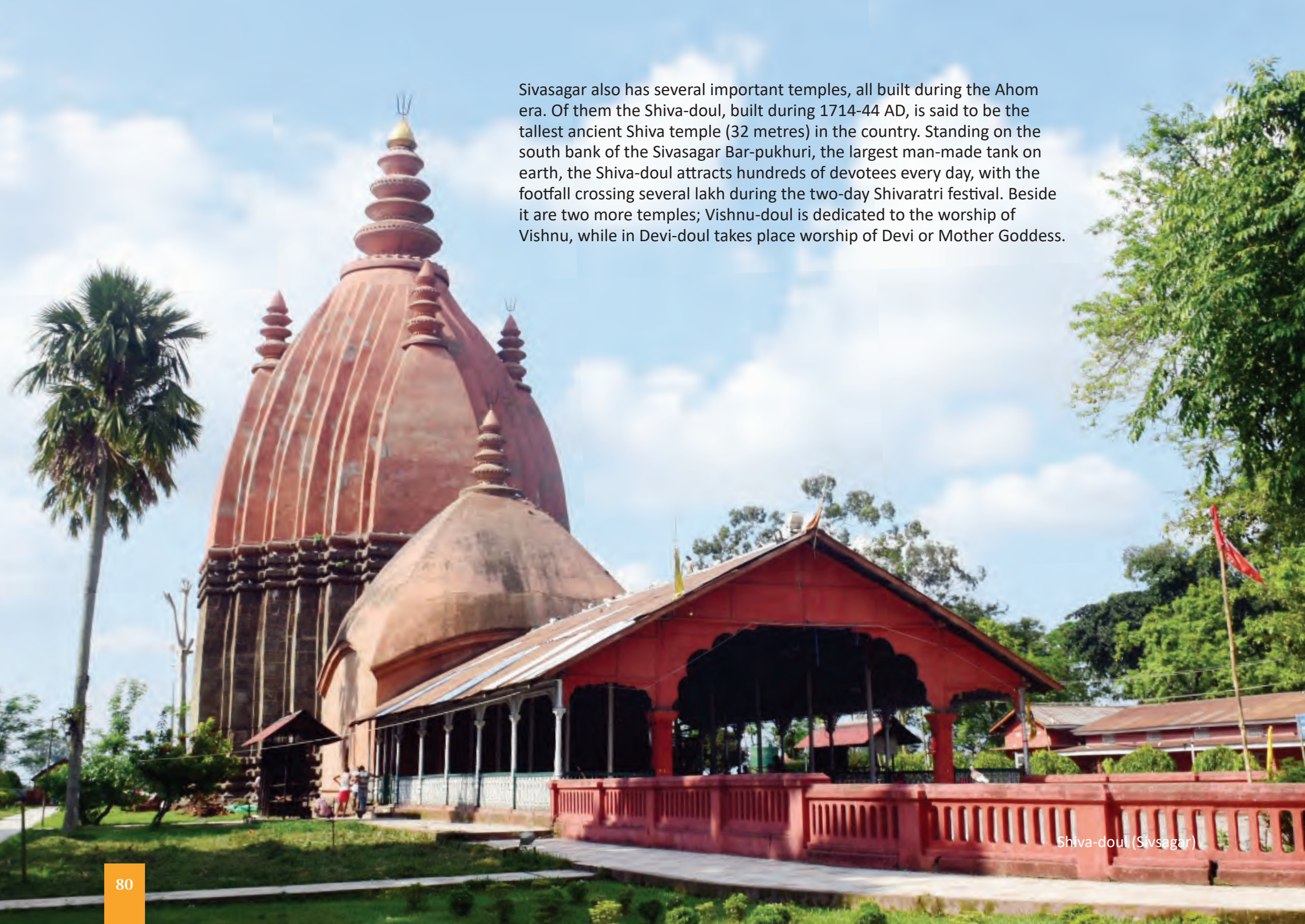
Rang ghar (Sivsagar)

Sivasagar
Of History & Faith

Exactly 360 km from Guwahati is the historic town of Sivasagar, which is dotted with several relics and archaeological sites, making it one of the top four tourist destinations of Assam besides Kaziranga, Kamakhya and Majuli. It was to Rangpur, now a part of Sivasagar, where the capital of the Ahom kingdom was shifted from Garhgaon in 1699 AD. Talatal-ghar, the royal palace – the largest among all Ahom monuments – originally had seven storeys, three below the ground level, with a secret tunnel to the Dikhow river nearby.

Lovers of history would enjoy visiting the magnificent Rang-ghar, an 18th century relic which is said to be the first amphitheatre in Asia, it also exemplifies the best of Ahom architecture. Originally built of timber during Rudra Simha's reign (1696-1714 AD) for watching various games including bull fight, wrestling etc, the present double-storied royal pavilion with unique architectural features was built by Ahom king Pramatta Simha (1744-1750 AD).

Sivasagar also has several important temples, all built during the Ahom era. Of them the Shiva-doul, built during 1714-44 AD, is said to be the tallest ancient Shiva temple (32 metres) in the country. Standing on the south bank of the Sivasagar Bar-pukhuri, the largest man-made tank on earth, the Shiva-doul attracts hundreds of devotees every day, with the footfall crossing several lakh during the two-day Shivaratri festival. Beside it are two more temples; Vishnu-doul is dedicated to the worship of Vishnu, while in Devi-doul takes place worship of Devi or Mother Goddess.



Shiva-doul (Sivsagar)

The Barpukhuri, situated in the heart of Sivasagar itself is worth seeing. Covering an area of 257 acre, it is at an elevation higher than the rest of the town. While it attracts thousands of migratory birds during winter, visitors also enjoy the sunrise and sunset on the Barpukhuri.

Borpukhuri (Sivsagar)

On the outskirts of Sivasagar, at Joysagar is located another set of Shiva-doul, Devi-doul and Vishnu-doul, on the banks of the massive Joysagar pukhuri. A third set of Shiva-doul, Devi-doul and Vishnu-doul, with the Gaurisagar *pukhuri* is located at Gaurisagar, about 12 km away.

Joydoul (Vishnu Doul)

About 13 km east of Sivasagar is the Kareng-ghar, the royal Ahom palace at Garhgaon, which used to be the capital of the Ahom kingdom for more than four centuries. Originally built of timber, the present four-storeyed edifice was built in 1752 AD.

Kareng-ghar, Sivasagar

Colourful people, Colourful festivals

Assam is home to a number of ethnic communities belonging to different racial stocks including Mongoloid, Indo-Burmese, Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan and Aryan. Each of these communities has its distinct way of life, cultural trait and festivals.

The Assamese people in general have a number of festivals round the year. Among them Rongali Bihu happens to be the most colourful. Observed to mark the beginning of the Assamese New Year in mid-April, it is a festival of feasting, merry-making, singing and dancing. Hussori – group singing during Bihu – is performed from house to house, in which young men and women sing bihu songs and dance to the rhythm of traditional musical instruments like dhol, taal, toka, penpa, gogona and sutuli etc. It is also the time when various orchids bloom across the state. The first day however is dedicated to the welfare of cattle, and the household animals are specially bathed and taken special care of.

Bhogali Bihu, the harvest festival, which falls in mid-January, coincides with the Maghi-purnima elsewhere across India. On the eve of Bhogali Bihu, which is the last day of Puh or Pausha month, young people organise a community feast in a bhela-ghar, a temporary thatch house or pandal built in the vacant paddy field.

While the bhela-ghar is set afire along with the meji – a tower of firewood specially raised for the occasion. Delicacies during both bihus include various kinds of pitha – sweetmeats – made of ground rice of different varieties, as also chira, sandoh, pithaguri, akhoi, hurum and other items made from rice.

Both bihus are also special festivals for the Bodo, Rabha, Tiwa, Dimasa, Deuri, Sonowal Kachari, Thengal Kachari and other tribal communities of Assam. Among the Bodos, the New Year festival is known as Baisagu, while the harvest festival is called Domashi. In Baisagu, young people take part in dancing and singing to the rhythm of the kham (drum), jotha, khawbang, siphung and other traditional musical instruments.

Kherai is another community festival of the Bodo people observed in October-November, during which they propitiate 'Bathou' or 'Sibrai' – their principal deity, along with 'Mainao' (the goddess of harvest). Bagrumba on the other hand is a special dance performed by young Bodo women, which is traditionally performed after completing the plantation work. Young women dance gracefully in natural surroundings wearing the traditional dokhona and aronai.

The Mising community, another tribal community of Assam celebrate Ali-Ai-Ligang their colourful festival in March. It also marks the ceremonial sowing of seeds, with young people dancing and singing to the music of the dum-dum, pempa, siphung and gunggang. Young girls wear the best of their traditional attire called ribigaseng and ribiyege to sing the oinitom songs.

The Deuri people mark their New Year (mid-April) by celebrating Bohag Bihu or Bohagiyo Bisu, while their harvest festival (mid-January) is called Magiyo Bisu. Singing of hussori from house to house by young men and women, and enjoying various traditional delicacies are integral part of the two festivals.

For people of the Rabha tribal community, Baikho is the most important festival, which is celebrated in the local Jeth month (late May). While young men wearing traditional costumes take part in the Khukchi dance performed barefoot on burning cinder to the rhythm of kham, badungduppa and karhanol, young women dance wearing the colourful rufan and khambung.

Bihu Dance

A Karbi dance troup

Bodo youth in festive mood

A Tiwa dancer

People of the Tiwa tribe too celebrate the two Bihu festivals in a grand manner. Young people take part in songs and dances to the music of the khrambar, kiringa-dhol, penpa and gamona, during the Bihu or Bisu festival, accompanied by the beautiful 'Lali Hilali' and 'Lo-ho La-Hai' songs.

In the hill districts, the Karbi people have a number of festivals, two of them being Rongker and Hacha-Kekan. Among them, Rongker is performed at the beginning of the New Year by propitiating different deities for the well-being of the community. Deities are worshipped by the elderly male people to seek blessings to keep the people free from diseases and natural calamities, and for a good harvest. Hacha-kekan on the other hand is a harvest festival which is marked with community feasting, songs and dances.

Mising dancers

Karbi Community

The Dimasas who live in the hill district of Dima Hasao on the other hand observe Busu (harvest festival) in a colourful manner, dancing and singing to the rhythm of traditional musical instruments. Young women wear the best of their colourful Rigu skirt and the Rijmphai and Rikhaosa scarves. Two other important festivals are Rajini Gabra and Harni Gabra, celebrated just before starting the new sowing season. While the Rajini Gabra is celebrated in the daytime, Harni Gabra follows immediately after sunset the same day.

Weaving Dreams on Looms

When Mahatma Gandhi visited on January 9, 1946, he was so amazed by the expertise of the women working on the traditional looms that he could not resist saying – Women of Assam weave dreams on their looms. In Sualkuchi, 25 km west of Guwahati, several thousand men and women work round-the-clock on their looms to produce *muga* – the exclusive golden silk yarn available only in Assam – and *paat* silks. While sericulture is said to have flourished here as early as in the 4th century BC, the place was then called Swarnakuchi or golden zone.

Sualkuchi's artisans work on three Assam silks – golden-hued *muga* (derived from the worm *Antheraea assama*), silvery-creamy *paat* (derived from *Bombyx mori*), and the warm-as-wool *eri* or *endi* (from *Attacusricini*). A handful of them also work on *mejangkori*, a very rare Assam silk variety derived from *Litsea citrate*.

While the *mekhela-chadar* is the normal two-piece attire of Assamese women, on special occasions like marriage ceremonies they also add a *riha* to it. Bodo women take pride in displaying their brilliant *dokhona* and *aronai* in flashing yellow, they also weave colourful *gamsa, fashra* and *hichima* in their traditional looms.

The traditional Mising attire on the other hand include the colourful *ege* and *sumpa*, both worn around the waist extending down to the knee, with a *gero* holding it tightly around the waist. On the upper body is the narrow strip called *galuk*, while a small piece of cloth called *hura* constitutes the female headdress. While these are dress worn in daily life, on festive occasions Mising women wear *rigi-gaseng* and special *ege* mekhelas, while the men sport *miboo-galuk, gonroo* and *tangali*.

The traditional Karbi women's dress comprise of *pinicamflak*, a piece of colourful cloth wrapped around the waist like a mekhela. The upper part of the body is covered with a *jar-ek*, while the *wanpo* is a highly artistic waist-band used by Karbi women. In winter, the *khanjari* is a special warm scarf made of *endi*, while young women wear another *endi* scarf called *dokherso* during the Chomangkan death ceremony.

For young Rabha women, special attire to sport during festivals comprise the *rufan* wrapped around the waist, and the *kambung* covering the upper part of the body. Among Dimasa women, the endi-silk skirt is called rigu, while an intricately designed scarf called rijamphai is worn on the upper part of the body. The rikhaosa on the other hand is a special scarf young women wear while dancing in festive occasions.

Four Great Souls

An artist's impression of Sankaradeva

Srimanta Sankaradeva

The versatile saint-reformer

Assamese literature, culture, music, language and social life is simply unimaginable without the mention of Srimanta Sankaradeva (1449 – 1569 AD). One of the greatest saint-reformers and sages of the country, Srimanta Sankaradeva was a multifaceted personality, with scholars referring to him as "the glorious sun under whose warmth of mind Assam blossomed like a lotus of a thousand petals." Poet, writer, translator, traveller, lyricist, singer, musician, playwright, actor, painter, architect – it is difficult to imagine how deep and widespread was the influence of Srimanta Sankaradeva on the cultural renaissance that had burst forth in medieval Assam. A great master of music, drama and musical instruments, it was the wonderful genius in him who created musical performances called Ankiya Naat. There are poets and composers, saints and religious preachers, singers and musicians, but Srimanta Sankaradeva was a rare and versatile genius in whom all these and several other qualities were rolled into one. A social reformer, institution-builder and multi-faceted leader, Srimanta Sankaradeva gave Assam a new simplified faith – Ekasarana Naam-dharma – which believed in one god, while in the Vaishnava congegrations all members of the society are equal. Prayer services and reading of the sacred texts – which he prepared in the local vernacular providing easy access to all – could be conducted by any person irrespective of his or her social standing in the old scale. He built the *naam-ghar* – the community prayer hall which also served as the village court, theatre and club, and laid the foundations of the Satra institution – Vaishnava monastery – which are today epicentres of Assamese art, culture, literature and music, apart from administration of social order. Above all, it was through Srimanta Sankaradeva and his works that Assam discovered herself as an integral part of the holy land of Bharatavarsha, and gloried in that discovery.

An artist's impression of Madhavadeva

Madhavadeva

While Srimanta Sankaradeva had laid a strong foundation of Assamese literature, culture, music, language and social life, it was Madhavadeva, his chief apostle and successor in the Vaishnava order, who established a number of institutions in the post-Sankara era, carried the movement forward and spread it all over. Born in 1489 AD near present-day Narayanpur (in Lakhimpur), his meeting with Sankaradeva at Dhuwahat (in Majuli) through a long debate over Vaishnavism and Shaktism, not only culminated in Madhava accepting the saint as his guru and becoming his most trusted disciple. A poet and mystic, Madhavadeva's greatest literary contribution is Naam-ghosha, comprising of 1000 devotional verses. Founder of several satra institutions – including Barpeta Satra, Sundaridiya Satra and Ganakkuchi Satra – Madhavadeva also systematised the daily prayer services conducted in the Satras. It was he who also intensified the Vaishnava movement by appointing 12 dharmacharyyas and dispatching them to different places to spread the gospel. Like Sankaradeva, he too passed away in Coochbehar, in 1596 AD.

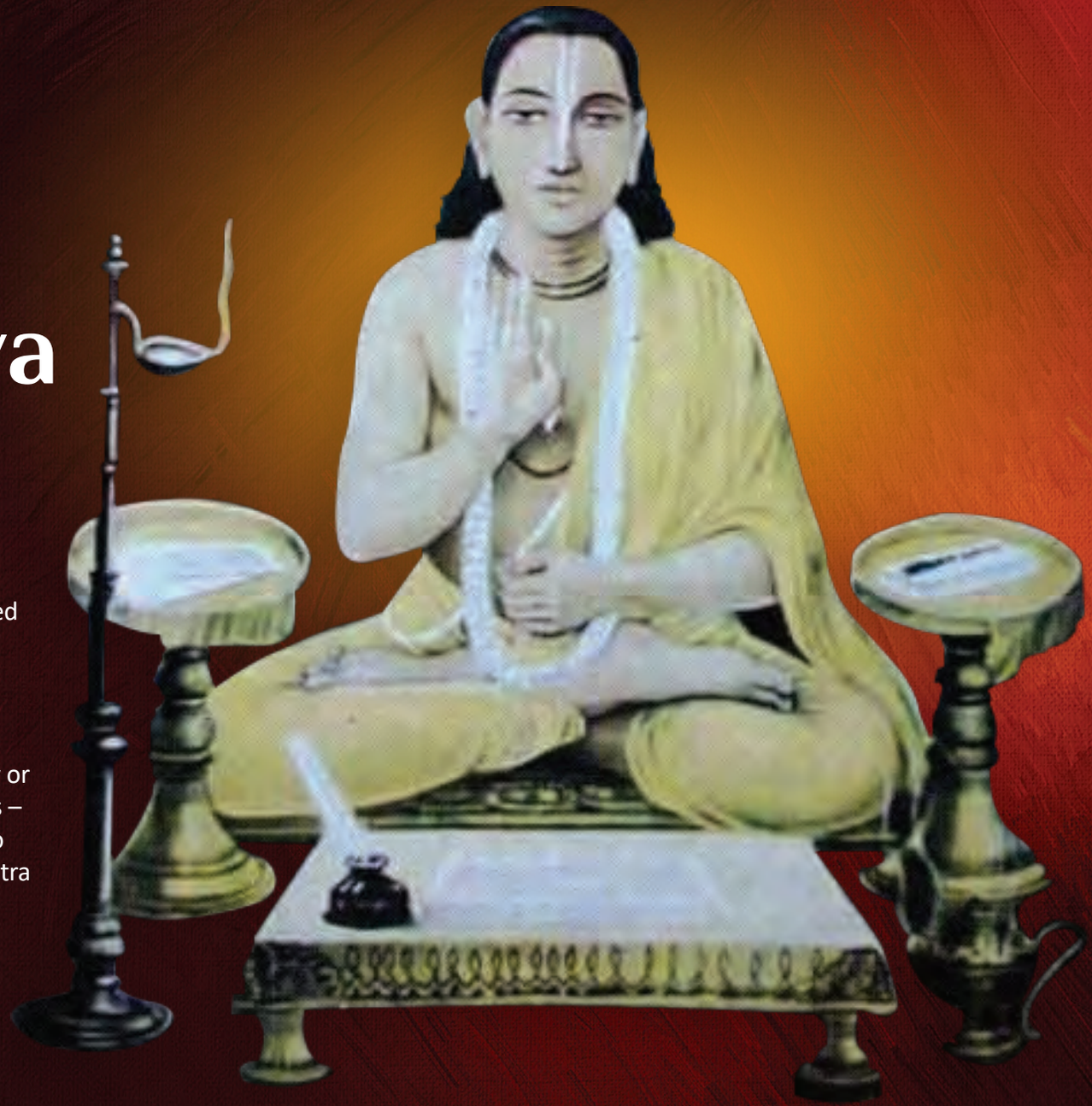
An artist's impression of Harideva

Harideva

Born at Narayanpur, Harideva (1493-1568 AD) was an erudite Sanskrit scholar who had spent four years studying the scriptures in Banaras, earning the title 'Vedacharyya.' He lived the next five years interpreting the Bhagavata to scholars and pilgrims in Puri, and was conferred the title 'Bhagavatacharyya' before returning home to set up a satra at Bahari and another at Maneri nearby. He was not part of the Sankaradeva movement, but the latter, accompanied by Madhavadeva and Damodaradeva, visited him and exchanged mutual respect amongst them. Two other satras which Hairdeva established are at Narayanpur and Haripur (this one in Coochbehar). Harideva was also the first Vaishnava saint to have appointed a woman – his daughter Bhuvaneswari – as head of a satra, thus setting a different tradition in sharp contrast to not permitting women to even enter Barpeta Satra.

Damodaradeva

Damodaradeva (1488 - 1598 AD) too was a close associate of Sankaradeva, who, being a Brahmin, is said to have been entrusted with the task of initiating Brahmins into the Vaishnava order. Founder of a satra at Patbausi (Barpeta), Damodaradeva however left Sankaradeva's order and established his own sub-sect called Brahma samhati, not just because of the predominance of Brahmins in it, but also because he modified the religious practices of the parent cult and made a compromise between the path of devotion and Brahminical practices. Known more for his organising capabilities than his literary or cultural contributions , Damodardeva sent out his disciples – Paramananda, Bhattadeva, Vamsigopala and Vanamali – to set up a number of satras across the region, Dakshinpat Satra (Majuli) being the most important of them all.



An artist's impression of Damodaradeva

Kings and Warriors

Nidhanpur inscription of Bhaskaravarman

Kumar Bhaskaravarman

Thirteenth and the last king of the Varman dynasty which claims its descent from Naraka, Bhaskaravarman was the most illustrious king of ancient Kamarupa and ruled from 600 AD to 650 AD. A scholar of the highest order, he patronised learning, which made Pragjyotisha (Guwahati) a major seat of knowledge in eastern India. Also called Kumara Raja as he was a bachelor, Bhaskaravarman was a close friend and ally of Harshavardhana, the emperor of northern India who ruled from Kanauj. It was during that time that the great Chinese scholar Hiuen Tsang came to India. He also visited Kamarupa at Bhaskaravarman's invitation and stayed here for two months. Bhaskaravarman, who played a significant role in northern India politics, had attended two major congregations in 643 AD, one at Kanauj and the other at Prayag, where he shared equal status with Harsha on the dais.

Prithu

The first defender

An artist's impression of Prithu

After Qutb Uddin Aibak, the military general of Mohammad Ghori took over the reins of Delhi, he dispatched Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji to occupy central and eastern India. Khalji, among other things, had also destroyed Nalanda University. Easily occupying up to Bengal, Khalji headed for Kamarupa.

In 1206 Bakhtiyar Khalji arrived on the borders of Kamarupa in order the conquer the country and march towards Tibet. Viswasundaradeva – popularly remembered as Maharaja Prithudeva, or just Prithu, fourth king of the Deva dynasty founded in 1130 AD – first drew up a treaty with him of not attacking each other. Prithu however also warned him against proceeding towards Tibet. But Khalji refused to heed and went ahead. As Prithu allowed the invaders to march through Kamarupa, he also drew up a strategy to strike them at the opportune moment. After a 15-day march Khalji's army reached the mountains and began to plunder. The mountain people however retaliated in a massive way. Losing several hundred men on a single day, Khalji retreated. Prithu got all bridges dismantled and placed maximum obstacles along the retreating route. As the exhausted and demoralised soldiers also faced starvation, Prithu's men went on a killing spree. Many also drowned in the river. A confused Khalji finally took shelter in a temple on a hillock north of present-day Guwahati. Prithu however refrained from attacking him inside the temple campus and instead asked his soldiers to lay siege on the temple with a palisade of bamboo spikes. A few days later, as Khalji's men broke through the palisade, Prithu's soldiers gave a hot pursuit. More of Khalji's men were drowned while desperately trying to cross the Barnadi. Though he managed to cross the river and reached Bengal, Khalji finally died a painful death at Devkot a few days later, out of exhaustion, defeat and insult.

Prithu's victory over the first-ever Muslim invader of Assam has been clearly recorded in the Kanai-barasi-bowa rock inscription in North Guwahati. The Sanskrit text is – "*sake 1127 turaga-yugmese madhumase-trayodase kamarupa samagatya turuskah ksayamayayuh*", meaning "In the Saka era 1127 (1205 AD), the Turks coming into Kamarupa were totally annihilated."

The Turks however returned in 1226-27, this time under Ghiyasuddin-Iwaz Khalji. Though Ghiyasuddin initially marched right into the middle of the Brahmaputra Valley and destroyed a number of Hindu temples, Prithu managed to defeat him somewhere in present-day Nagaon district. In 1228 AD, however, Nasiruddin Mahmud, the eldest son of Sultan Iltutmish of Delhi, ousted Ghiyasuddin-Iwaz Khalji, took over Bengal and invaded Kamarupa. Prithu once again put up his best, but was finally defeated and killed.

Though they finally defeated and killed Prithu, the invaders however did not annex Kamarupa to the Delhi Sultanate or Bengal. One reason could be that they had suffered massive casualties; about 1.20 lakh of them is said to have perished in Kamarupa. Prithu must be remembered not just for checking two successive Muslim invasions, but also for effectively checking the expansion of Islamic supremacy in Southeast Asia.

Siukapha

A prince of the great Tai race, Siukapha had arrived in the Brahmaputra Valley on December 2,1228 AD after a long march from Mong-Ri Mong-Ra through Mong-Mao (in Yunnan) to not just establish the Ahom dynasty, but also lay the foundation of the Assamese identity. Having crossed the Patkai mountains an noticing the beautiful valley, he had exclaimed – "Mun-dung Shun Khaam!" meaning – 'This is the land of gold!' While he first settled at Tipam, Siukapha however soon began shifting, from Abhaypur to Habung to Santak and Tun Nyeu (Simaluguri), to finally built his capital at Che Tam-Doi, now known as Charaideo. Throughout his journey of exactly four decades, Siukapha won over several earlier settlers, and caused a merger of various local ethnic communities, thus giving shape to a common language, identity and culture. This great founder of Assam – the word Assam itself often said to have been derived from Ahom – whose dynasty ruled for close to 600 years, passed away at Charaideo in 1268 AD.

Naranarayan

While Visva Simha had in 1515 AD given shape to the dynasty founded by his father Hariya Mandal, it was his eldest son Malla Dev, who as Naranarayan took the Koch kingdom of western Assam to its greatest height. With his younger brother Sukladhwaj or Chilarai as his Diwan, Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief, Naranarayan launched an expansion campaign of the kingdom, subdued almost every king including the Ahoms for a brief period, and rose to be the strongest ruler in north-eastern India. He also extended his prowess to Manipur, the Jaintias and Khasis, and marched southwards to vanquish the Tripura and Sylhet kings, but was finally defeated by Sulaiman Karrani, a powerful Afghan governor of Bengal. A connoisseur of the arts, Naranarayan also patronised a number of learned men, including Srimanta Sankaradeva, Madhavadeva and Ananta Kandali.

Chilarai
The greatest conqueror

While one Haria Mandal is said to be the progenitor of the Koch kingdom in western Assam, one of his sons called Viswasimha (1515-40) is credited with actually established the Koch political power in the right context. Viswa Simha was the first to have sought to remove the vestiges of Muslim rule in old Kamarupa by repairing the damaged temples. His kingdom extended from the Karatoya river in the west (in present-day North Bengal) to the Barnadi in the east near Guwahati. It were however his two Varanasi-educated sons Naranarayan and Chilarai who took the western Assamese kingdom to its glorious height in the latter half of the 16th century. Naranarayan @ Malla Deva was a brilliant person with exceptional administrative acumen and academic interests, while his younger brother Chilarai @ Sukladhwaja – 'swift as a kite' – known for his dashing military skills, assisted him as Diwan, Prime Minister as well as Commander-in-Chief of the Koch army. While Naranarayan, the king, took up various administrative measures, concentrated on relations with the neighbours, and patronized art, culture and literature (he had patronized Sankaradeva too), the duo together also pursued a career of aggression by subduing those who had remained unvanquished before, and rose to be the strongest ever ruler in the whole of eastern India including present-day Bangladesh. Chilarai in fact led one of the greatest military expeditions in eastern India, defeated the powerful Ahoms in several engagements, with King Naranarayan remaining in the rear. Having briefly occupied the Ahom capital of Garhgaon, Chilarai proceeded west and then south, in the process conquering the Kachari kingdom, exacting a tribute from the Manipur Raja, subduing the Jaintia and Khasi chiefs, defeating the kings of Tippera (Tripura) and Sylhet, and finally invaded Gaur or Bengal in 1563 AD. The Afghan Sultan of Gaur however proved tough, prompting Naranarayan to retreat to his capital. Chilarai however refused to give up, and surrounded in a forest where he had taken shelter, he was taken captive, but not before single-handedly killing about 700 Muslim soldiers. Chilarai however was soon released because the Bengal ruler probably needed a strong Koch ally to face the Mughals on one side and the Ahoms on the other. Chilarai later launched a second attack on Bengal, during which he was afflicted by small pox and passed away on the banks of the Ganga in 1577 AD.

Lachit

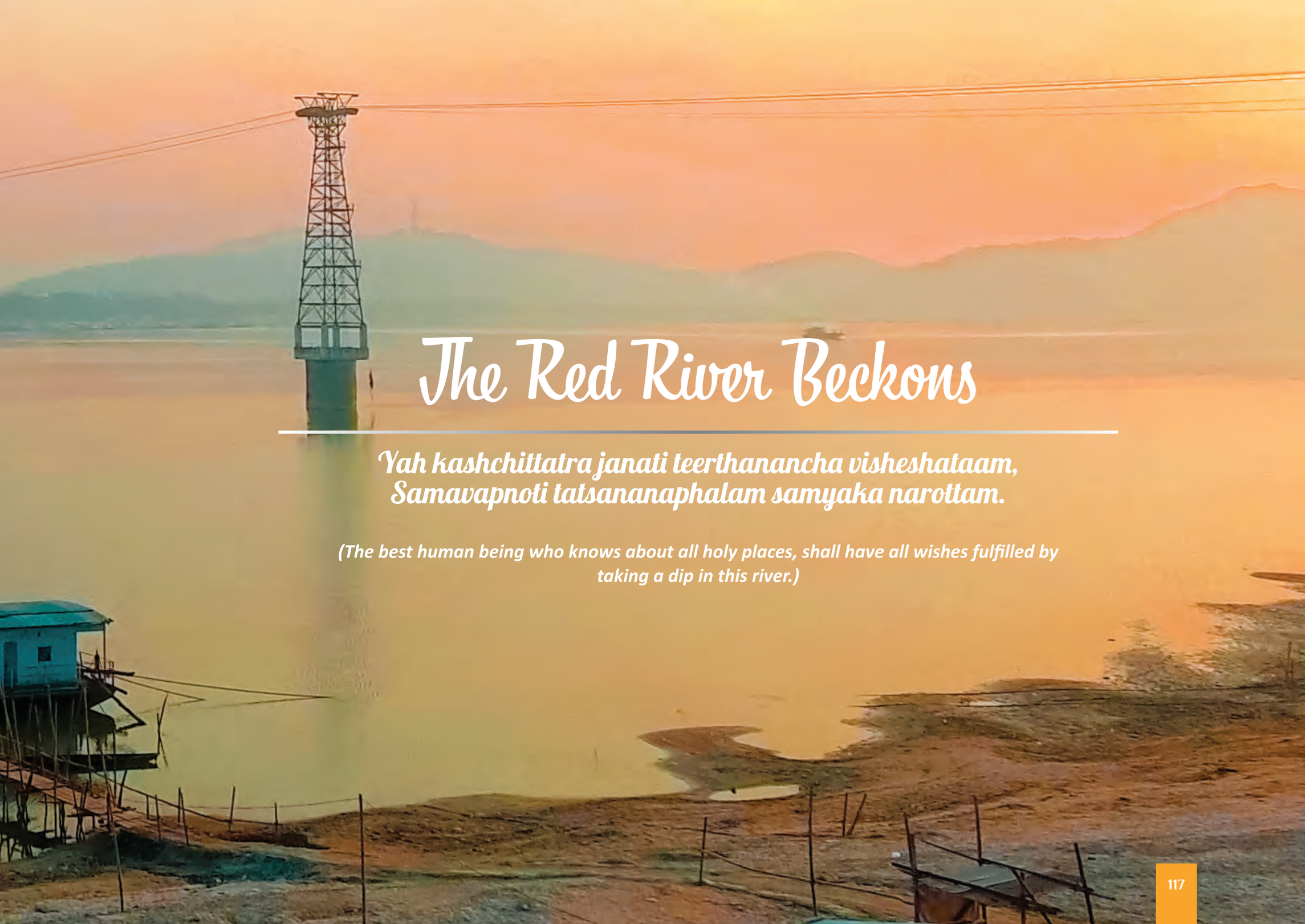
The Greatest Hero

On the Brahmaputra in Guwahati, stands a 35-feet high statue of Lachit Borphukan, the greatest hero of Assam. A great military General, he had, among other things, inflicted the most crushing defeat on the mighty Mughals.

It happened in March 1671, and the Battle of Saraighat was fought on the mighty river just below Kamakhya temple. Earlier, the Mughals had defeated the Assamese and even occupied Garhgaon, the capital, in 1662. The newly-appointed General Lachit Barphukan however recovered Guwahati in November 1667. The Mughals came back again, with Emperor Aurangzeb asking his new commander Ram Singh to capture Guwahati. On August 5, 1669, the Assamese met a major disaster when over 10,000 soldiers were killed in the Battle of Alaboi near Guwahati across the Brahmaputra. Barphukan drew up a fresh strategy and began to negotiate. But, while Ram Singh began to reciprocate, Aurangzeb reminded him that he (Ram Singh) was sent to fight and not to make friends with the Assamese. This shook Ram Singh, who then began sailing up the Brahmaputra to mount the final assault on Guwahati. On the day Ram Singh's boats had approached Guwahati, the Barphukan was running high fever. But then he was one not to step back, and boarded a boat with six other war vessels following him to lead from the front a combined attack with his army and navy.

The Mughals could not simply withstand the fierce and well-conducted attack which took place adjacent to Saraighat. The Mughal fleet was thrown out of gear. It retreated with such panic that the Mughal commander could not call it back to order. Over 4,000 Mughal soldiers perished, and Aurangzeb had to serve a recall order on Ram Singh, which was soon followed by a demotion too. Lachit Barphukan's victory put to rest all further attempts by the Mughals to expand their territory into Assam and beyond.

Historians have described the Battle of Saraighat as Assam's Trafalgar. But perhaps the best tribute to Lachit Barphukan and his men came from none other than Ram Singh himself. The Mughal commander remarked: "Every Assamese soldier is expert in rowing boats, shooting arrows, in digging trenches and in wielding guns and canons. I have not seen such specimens of versatility in any other part of India." And about Barphukan, he wrote, "Glory to the King. Glory to the Commander. Glory to the country. One single individual leads all the forces. Even I, Ram Singh, being personally on the spot, have not been able to find any loophole and an opportunity." Former Governor of Assam and Jammu & Kashmir General SK Sinha on his part described the Battle of Saraighat as "the greatest naval battle fought on a river." No wonder a Barphukan's statue also stands majestically at the entrance of the National Defence Academy at Khadakvasala too!



The Red River Beckons

Yah kashchittatra janati teerthanancha visheshataam,
Samavapnoti tatsananaphalam samyaka narottam.

(The best human being who knows about all holy places, shall have all wishes fulfilled by taking a dip in this river.)

Among the largest rivers on earth in terms of discharge and sediment, Brahmaputra is intrinsic to the socio-cultural life in Assam. Brahmaputra means Son of Brahma, the Hindu god of creation, and mythology makes it one of the very few masculine rivers on earth. Originating in the glacial womb of the Kailash Range of the Himalayas, south of Rake Kanggyen Tso lake in south-west Tibet, at an elevation of 5300 metres, the 2880-km river travels 1625 km in China, 918 km in India and 337 km in Bangladesh.

In ancient Sanskrit literature, it is called Lauhitya, meaning Red River. The name Brahmaputra is also believed to have been derived from the Bodo term bhullum-buthur – meaning 'making a gurgling sound'.

The nomenclature of Brahmaputra, fed by over 100 tributaries, however begins near Sadiya town in eastern Assam where three rivers – Siang, Dibang and Lohit – meet after flowing down the hills of adjoining Arunachal Pradesh, and ends at Dhubri in western Assam as it enters Bangladesh.

Brahmaputra has been a waterway since time immemorial. While the British introduced steamers on its way back in 1841 and first connected Guwahati and later Dibrugarh with Kolkata through then East Bengal. This continued even after Partition, until it things came to a halt after the India-Pakistan war of 1965. Declared National Waterway No 2 in 1988, there is now not much restriction on sailing down the Brahmaputra through Bangladesh.

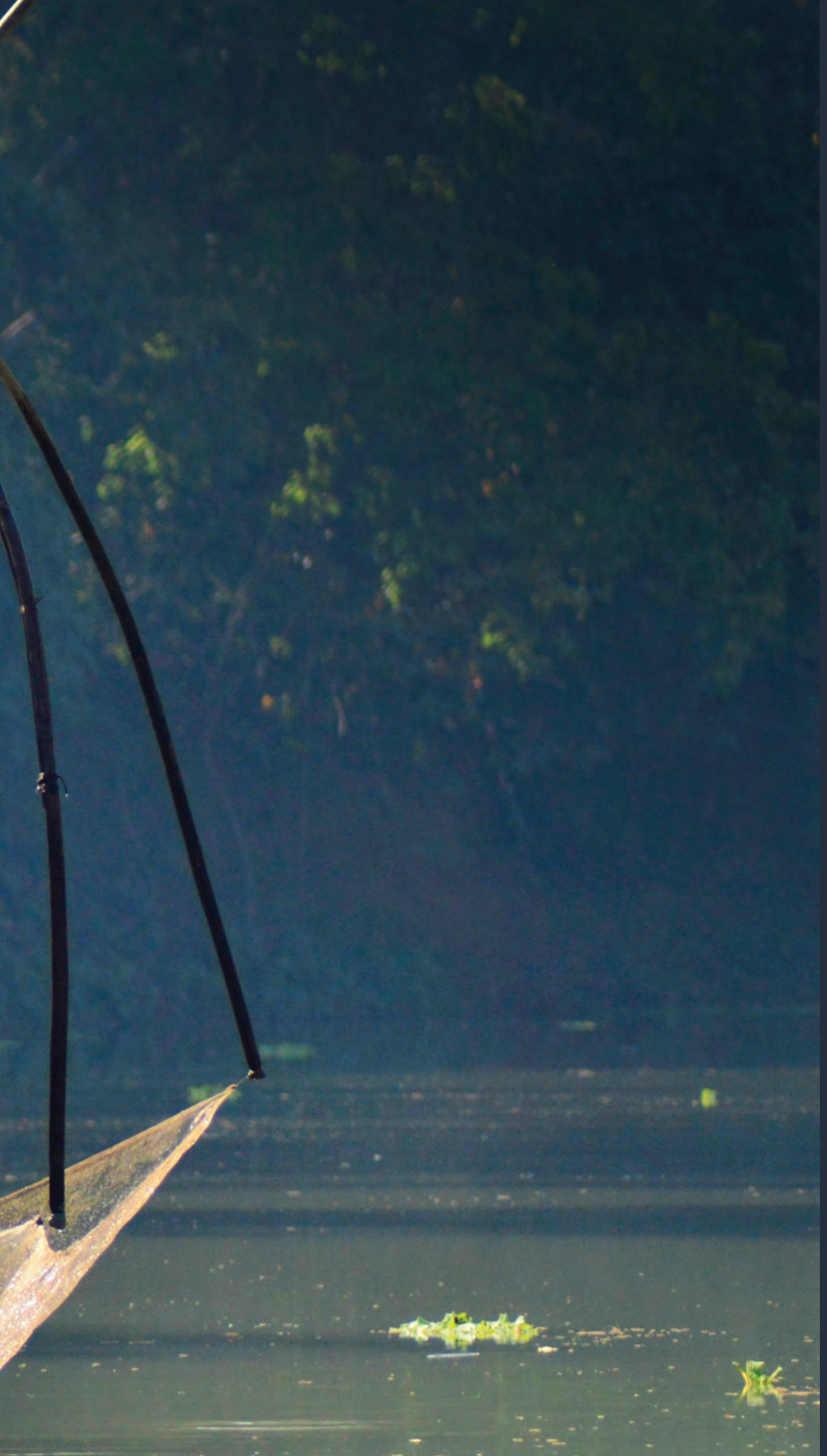
India and Bangladesh have a Bilateral Protocol on Inland Water Transit and Trade (PIWTT) for operation of inland vessels on the river protocol routes between different river ports of both countries. This protocol allows movement of vessels between the river ports of Haldia and Kolkata (West Bengal), Dhubri, Pandu (Guwahati), Silghat, Dibrugarh, and Karimganj (Assam) and Bangladesh's Narayanganj, Khulna, Mongla, Sirajganj and Ashuganj.

Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) has developed a ship repair facility at Pandu (Guwahati), and launched a Ro-Ro ferry service at two places. In February 2022, Indian cargo vessel MV Lal Bahadur Shastri sailed from Patna to Guwahati carrying 200 tonnes of food grain on a 2,350 km journey along the waterways from Ganga to Brahmaputra, via Bangladesh. This is important marker of physical connectivity not just between the two countries, but also conjured up a vision of broader regional linkages.

The Brahmaputra has also been at the core of Assam's folklore, inspiring literature, art and music often for leaving behind a wave of destruction during the monsoon months. The most celebrated odes to the river are by balladeer Bhupen Hazarika.

Hindus consider the Brahmaputra holy. They believe an Ashokastami (March-April) dip in it cleanses their bodies and souls of sins. But for ecologists worldwide, Brahmaputra is more than divine for being the sensitive border between two key biodiversity hotspots – Himalayan Hotspot and Indo-Burma Hotspot.

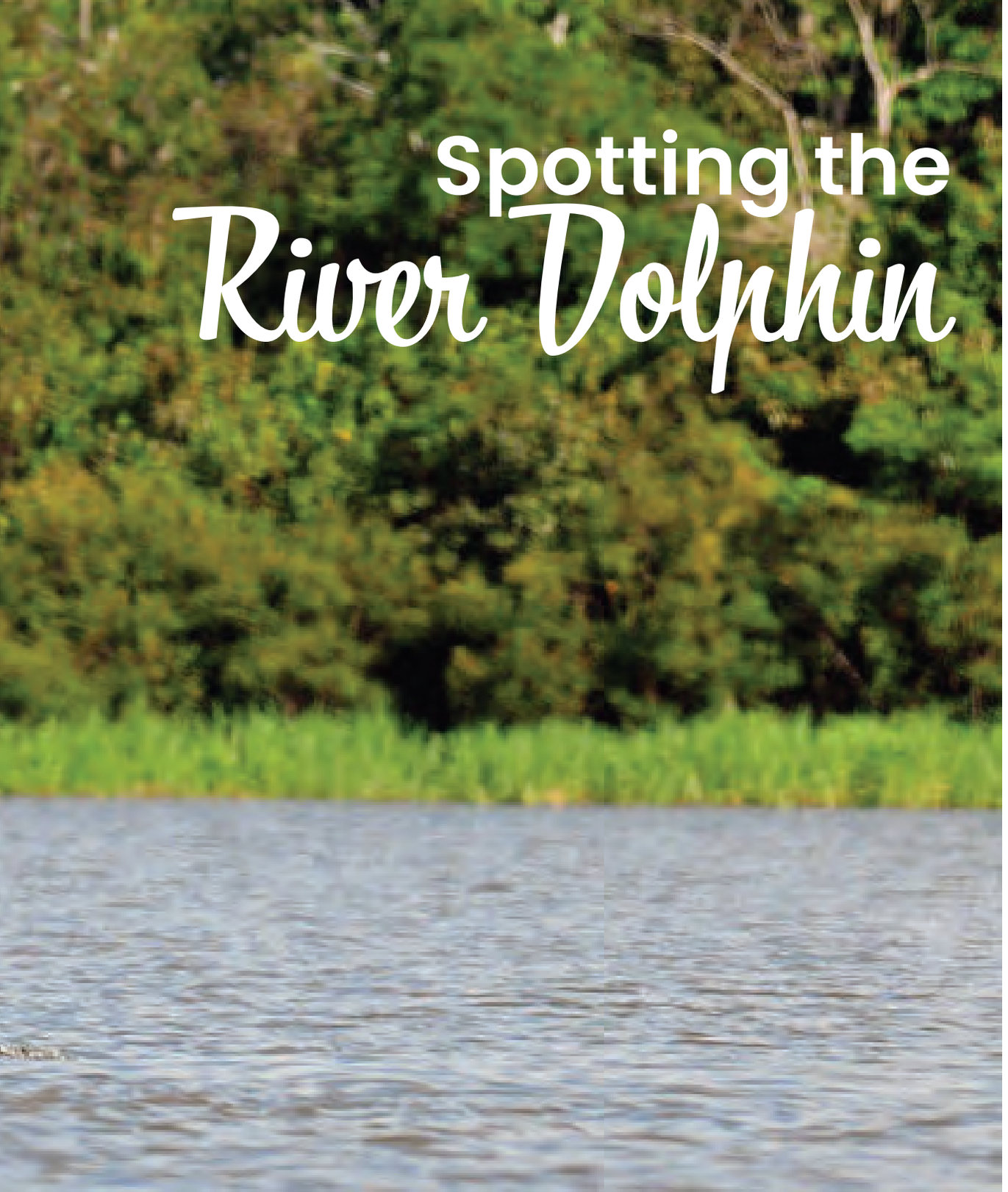
The Brahmaputra is also a photographer's delight. While sunrise and sunset on the Red River offers millions of frames even to the lay photographer using a mobile phone camera, a shot of the river from a ferry-boat, luxury cruise or from the viewpoint near Bhubaneswari Temple atop the Nilachal Hill in Guwahati has always remained special.



One river, many names

No river on earth probably has so many names as the Brahmaputra has. Known as MutsungTsangpo close to its source in Tibet, it is later called MoghungTsangpo, YarlungTsangpo and often just Tsangpo before it enters India. Old British travelers heard the Tibetans also call it Narichu-Sangpu, Tanjoo-Khampa, Erechoomboo and Tamyak-Kombo. A Japanese traveler records it as Martsan-Gi-Chu and Kobeichu, while a Swedish explorer found Tibetans also calling it Sangchen, Tsangpo-Chimbo and Yere-Tsanpo. Once it enters India, it is called Siang and Dihang in Arunahal Pradesh. People in the hills once also called it Shyama, Sema, Senglai and S'Yem.

In Assam, it is known as Lohit, Luit, Bar-Luit, Burha-Luit, SiriLuit and Bor-Noi. The Tai and Bodo people once called it Lao-Tu or Ti-Lao, and the Singpho and Mishimi people Taluk. The Ahoms had named it Nam-dao-phi, while ancient Indian scriptures had many names like Lauhitya, Hiranyo, Mandakini, Hridini, Khatai, Brahmi, Karkaya and Diyame. One British report of 1853 used several spellings to refer to it – Bhramapootra, Berhampooter, Bramapootra, Brahmooter, Brahampootra and Brahmapootra!



Spotting the River Dolphin

The Brahmaputra, along with 104 tributaries, constitutes a major bio-diversity network of the world. Among numerous aquatic species found in the Brahmaputra and a couple of its tributaries is the Ganges River Dolphin – Platanista gangetica – a highly endangered freshwater dolphin which figures in the red list of IUCN. The Brahmaputra in fact is considered as very important habitat for these endangered dolphins by IUCN. Distributed in the Ganga-Brahmaputra river system of India and Bangladesh, this river dolphin is among the three last surviving river dolphin species in the world, and was declared as the State Aquatic Animal of Assam in 2009. Assam alone had 987 river dolphins in the last count (2018), of which 677 were in the Brahmaputra and the remainder in Kulsi and Subansiri. Also listed in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, the best place to spot a river dolphin in Assam is river Kulsi at Kukurmara, about 40 km west of Guwahati. River dolphins are also commonly noticed by tourists taking long cruises on the Brahmaputra, especially upstream from Guwahati. Primarily a piscivorous species which strictly inhabits the freshwater ecosystems, they generally swim to different parts of the river in the monsoon, but congregate at meander bends in the river course where an eddy counter-current is prevalent during the winter months.

Apart from the river dolphin, the Brahmaputra is home to more than 300 other species of migratory and exotic fish species and other mega-fauna. Of the 126 fish species in the Red River, at least 41 are of commercial importance. Among the migratory fish species, the *ilish* (hilsa) is found in abundance in the western districts, while several sports fish including the golden mahseer are also present here. The *gharial*, which is distinct from its cousins like crocodiles or alligators with its elongated and slender mouth, and once believed to have been wiped out, also makes its appearance in the Brahmaputra, very rarely though.

Majuli:
The heritage island

With an area of 525 sq km in the heart of the mighty Brahmaputra, Majuli is said to be the largest inhabited river island in the world. It is also where Assam's spiritual centre-pieces – Vaishnavite monasteries or *satras* – are situated. About 350 km from Guwahati, Majuli is reached by large boats that ply on the Brahmaputra from Nimatighat near Jorhat. The Vaishnavite monasteries here are not just religious centres, but are also hubs of art, culture, dance, music, drama, theatre and literature, apart from philosophical discourses.

While 16th century saint-reformer Srimanta Sankaradeva began his journey from his native place Batadrava (in Nagaon), it was in Majuli that he met Madhavadeva, who soon became his principal disciple, and the duo embarked upon a massive socio-cultural renaissance from this island and then took them to different parts of the Brahmaputra Valley and beyond.

Devouts in a Satra in Majuli

A typical mask of Majuli

The *satras* in Majuli – Dakhinpaat, Auni-ati, Garamur, Kamalabari, Bengena-ati, Samaguri, to name a few – are treasure-houses of art and culture. Sattriya music developed by the saint-reformer is today recognized as one of the several forms of Indian Classical Music, and so also the Sattriya dances. A visitor to any of the *satras* can not only witness various dance performances and *bhaona* plays, but also listen to music that sing the glory of Krishna. While one must not miss the traditional *mati-akhara* acrobatic performance of young monks in Uttar Kamalabari Satra, a visit Natun Samaguri Satra provides a close look at the traditional mask-making art of Majuli.

Raas-Leela, held in November, is by far the largest festival in Majuli, while different *satras* also organize other festivals of dance, music and *bhaona*. Young monks – *bhakats*, as they are called – learn various crafts including making musical instruments and dance and *bhaona* costumes, while mask-making of Samaguri Satra is globally famous. With rich collection of manuscripts, artefacts and other items from the past, each *satra* is also a kind of museum.

Majuli is also home to the colourful Mising community – an important Scheduled Tribe – whose villages comprising of typical elevated bamboo-platform houses complete with granaries and weaving looms reverberate with the traditional Oinitom songs sung to the *pempa*, *dhol* and *gunggang*. Ali-ai-Lrigang is the most important festival of the Mising community, celebrated in February-March.

Purple Swamp hen

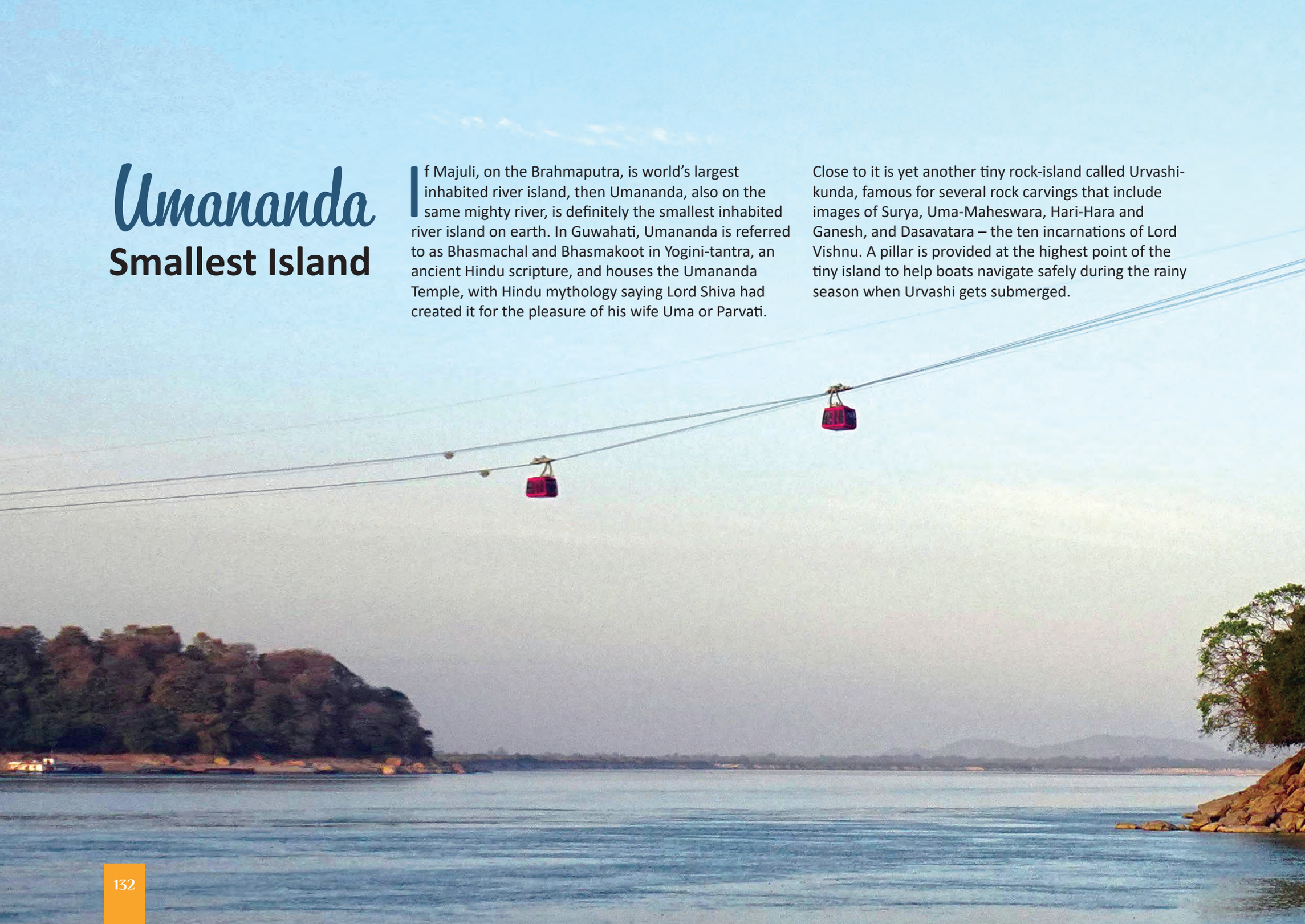
While more than 250 species of birds have been recorded in Majuli, the island is home to over 95 resident bird species, the rest being of migratory nature. Villagers here very passionately protect several stork colonies, apart from ensuring that nobody scares away or kills any migratory or resident bird.

Lesser Adjutant Stork

Umananda
Smallest Island

If Majuli, on the Brahmaputra, is world's largest inhabited river island, then Umananda, also on the same mighty river, is definitely the smallest inhabited river island on earth. In Guwahati, Umananda is referred to as Bhasmachal and Bhasmakoot in Yogini-tantra, an ancient Hindu scripture, and houses the Umananda Temple, with Hindu mythology saying Lord Shiva had created it for the pleasure of his wife Uma or Parvati.

Close to it is yet another tiny rock-island called Urvashi-kunda, famous for several rock carvings that include images of Surya, Uma-Maheswara, Hari-Hara and Ganesh, and Dasavatara – the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. A pillar is provided at the highest point of the tiny island to help boats navigate safely during the rainy season when Urvashi gets submerged.



For adventure-lovers

Brahmaputra is fast emerging as a favourite destination for adventure-lovers. While swimming across the Red River has been an old sport, sailing down the Brahmaputra from Sadiya to Dhubri – a distance of 890 km – is the new challenge that is attracting a lot of adventure-lovers. Some of its tributaries, like the Manas and Kopili dare adventurers with their swift current and fiery rapids. Rafting is an annual event on the Jia-Bhoroli near Tezpur.

M.V Mahabahu

Several luxury cruise ships ply on the Brahmaputra for both long and short distances, offering a totally new kind of adventure to the tourists. These vessels have excellent cabins and in-house restaurants and dining rooms, bars, bakeries, open sundecks, gyms, and small spas onboard, apart from live music. The cruises also offer visits and attractions such as wildlife viewing, village walks, visits to tea estates, exploring country towns in cycle rickshaws, barbecues on deserted river islands, live traditional music, dance performances, and visits to craft workshops.

A Traditional boat race on the Brahmaputra

Assam being a land of rivers, boat-racing is an age-old tradition here. Boat-races are held on different occasions in different places on the Brahmaputra and its numerous tributaries. While the boat races at Sualkuchi and Palashbari near Guwahati are the most colourful, one also should not miss the boat-racing competitions at Hajo, Chhayagaon, Ulabori, Bajali, Dharapur, Goalpara and Barpeta.
While special boats are but for racing purposes in the Satriya style, participants sing various traditional songs maintaining rhythm with the rowing.

Crossing the River

Crossing the mighty Brahmaputra, whether by large ferry-vessels or by bridges, is in itself a memorable experience. There are six bridges on the Brahmaputra – two at Saraighat (Guwahati-Amingaon), Kaliabhomora (Tezpur-Kaliabor), Naranarayan Setu (Goalpara-Jogighopa), Bhupen Hazarika Setu (Dhola-Sadiya) and Bogibeel (Dibrugarh-Lakhimpur). Of them, the old Saraighat bridge, Naranarayan Setu and Bogibeel bridge are all road-cum-railway bridges. A second bridge at Kaliabhomora meanwhile is nearing completion.

Among all the bridges on the Brahmaputra, the old Saraighat bridge is the shortest, with a length of just about 1.4 km in length, while the Bhupen Hazarika Setu is 9.5 km, the longest bridge in India.

Despite the six bridges, a large number of ferry-vessel services connect towns on the two banks, in order to meet the travel needs of the people. There are more than 70 such ferry services across Assam, transporting several lakh people every day, apart from carrying goods.

TOTAL LENGTH: **2880 KMS.** | CHINA: **1625 KMS.** | INDIA: **918 KMS.** / ARUNACHAL PRADESH: **240 KMS.** / ASSAM: **337 KMS.** / BANGLADESH: **337 KMS.**

WORLD'S 4TH LARGEST RIVER IN TERMS OF AVERAGE FLOW DISCHARGE AT MOUTH (19830 CUM PER SEC).

MOST BRAIDED RIVER IN THE WORLD.

CATCHMENT AREA: 1.95 LAKH SQ KM

TOTAL NUMBER OF TRIBUTARIES IN INDIA: 103.

WIDTH: MAXIMUM 18 KM (AT PALASHBARI-MUKALMUWA), MINIMUM 1.2 KM (AT PANDU, GUWAHATI)

AREA COVERED BY BRAHMAPUTRA IN ASSAM: 6,080 SQ KM IN 2006.

Bhupen Hazarika

the golden voice

Assam's most familiar name spanning across the 20th and 21st centuries is Bhupen Hazarika (1926-2011). The man with a golden voice is often described as the last of the living balladeers of the world. He wrote poems, composed lyrics and sang several hundred songs in different languages , wrote and directed over a dozen films, scored music for a large number of films, acted in them, worked as a journalist and edited magazines, and above all, made known to the world beautiful music of the people of this part of the country. His works – poetry, lyrics, films, essays, editorials, travelogues – all are marked by the message of humanity and universal brotherhood. His songs are literally a chronological reflection of the march of the human race in the 20th and 21st century, and he used his music as an instrument of social change. An eternal 'jajabor' – a roving minstrel who called the entire world his home – he wandered around the globe singing songs of hopes and dreams, sufferings and joy of the common people. He had also been a cultural ambassador, a peace worker who resolved violent conflicts with his golden voice, and sent out strong political messages whenever the need arose. While his final resting place - Bhupen Hazarika Samadhi-kshetra – at Jalukbari in Guwahati – is today a place of pilgrimage, there is also an exclusive museum showcasing various objects associated with the life and work of the great legend at the Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra in Guwahati.

The Mentors

One should also pay tributes to the two gurus – **Jyotiprasad Agarwala** and **Bishnuprasad Rabha** - who had contributed immensely towards shaping the young Bhupen Hazarika to ultimately become a legend in his lifetime. Both hailed from Tezpur, and thus one should not particularly miss 'Poki' – Jyotiprasad's ancestral house of 1874, which is today the Jyoti Bharati museum. Poki had, during the freedom movement, also hosted a number of leaders including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Lala Lajpat Rai. About 100 km away is the tea factory at Bholaguri, which Jyotiprasad used as a makeshift film studio in 1934 to make the first Assamese film Joymati. One can also pay tributes to the Bhupen Hazarika mentors while visiting Jyoti Chitraban Film Studio in Guwahati. Those interested in music should listen to their wonderful songs and understand what impact those had on Bhupen Hazarika.

Photo courtesy : Emon NC

GUWAHATI gateway

Northbrook Gate

In olden days it was known as Pragjyotishpur, with Bhupen Hazarika eulogizing it in one of his songs as "an Alakapuri, which had spread light to the world at the beginning of creation".

Guwahati is not just the capital city of Assam. Having grown up on Prgjyotishpur of ancient times, it is also the most important communication and commercial hub of the entire North-eastern Region, and key to India's Act East Policy. Lore has it that long ago, it was a *haat* or marketplace for buying and selling of betelnuts; yes, *guwa* in Assamese means betelnuts, and *haat* a market. Some others say it is a cluster of hatis – a hati is a village in old Assamese language – that grew a lot of betel palms. Yet some others refer to the villages that had many *guhas* – (*guha* is cave) – in the surrounding hills, the most sacred being the Kamakhya temple whose sanctum sanctorum is itself a cave one has to walk down in darkness to have a glimpse of the *yoni* symbol of the Mother Goddess.

Guwahati is also arguably the second oldest continuously inhabited city in India, having withstood numerous invasions and natural calamities like earthquakes and floods. Guwahati was the scene of several crucial battles; Battle of Alaboi (1667), Battle of Saraighat (1671) and Battle of Itakhuli (1672). In the first battle, over 10,000 Assamese soldiers were slaughtered by the invading Mughals on a single day. The Battle of Saraighat is the biggest naval battle fought on a river, in which the Assamese had inflicted the most crushing defeat on the Moghuls in March 1671. After the Battle of Itakhuli, the Mughals never looked at Assam again.

Among one of India's fastest-growing cities, and an investment destination for major global brands, Guwahati provides a window to a mart of over 60 million people comprising eight states of North-east India, in addition to adjoining countries like Bhutan, Bangladesh and Myanmar. The city's strategic location makes it the focal point of India's Act East Policy that envisages the Northeast as a bridge between Southeast Asia and the rest of India. It is also an emerging healthcare and educational destination, apart from being the take-off point for tourists at various nooks and corners of Northeastern India.

Guwahati has the majestic Brahmaputra flowing through it. Tourists and visitors enjoy luxury cruises, listening to the poetry of the Red River, and watches the setting sun melt into it after painting the sky red every evening, as if celebrating the glory of this historic city blessed by Mother Goddess Kamakhya atop Nilachal, the Blue Hill.

The Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport in Guwahati is the region's biggest air hub. While the city is well-connected with all major cities of the country by railway trains. Luxury buses ply from Guwahati to capital cities of all other Northeastern states, while one can also sail up the river to Tezpur, Kaziranga, Jorhat, Majuli and Dibrugarh.

Christ Church, Guwahati

Guwahati is also a temple city, and the various temples here have been already described in another chapter. Apart from the ancient temples, the city also has a number of new shrines, which includes the Eastern Tirupati Temple.

Guwahati also has one of the oldest churches of the region, the Christ Church. Standing at the centre of the Church Field, it was founded in 1844 and consecrated in 1850. Totally destroyed in the great earthquake of 1897, and was rebuilt in 1901. The present structure, which looks the same as it was in 1901, was rebuilt in 2017.
At Kamarpatty, about a km away, is the Guwahati Baptist Church, established in 1845. The structure of the churches is a reflection of early 20th century colonial architecture, but also draws inspiration from local design.

At Ambari is the Burha Masjid or Burra Masjid, the oldest mosque in the Assam capital, said to have been built between 1663 and 1667, when the city was briefly under Mughal occupation for a brief period. While the original structure was destroyed more than once due to earthquakes, the present structure came up in the early 1980s.

Burha Jame Masjid, Ambari (Guwahati)

Assam State Zoo: A paradise on earth

Established in 1957 by carving out of a portion of Hengerabari Reserve Forest and acquiring some land from villagers of Japorigog in the heart of Guwahati, the Assam State Zoo cum Botanical Garden is spread over an area of 175 hectare. Of this, 110 hectare is natural forest. The undulating campus whose highest point is 200 metres above sea level, also includes an 82-hectare botanical garden, thus making it more a city forest than a typical zoo.

The largest zoo in the entire North-eastern region, the Assam State Zoo is a natural vista with landscaped gardens, large enclosures and perennial water bodies. It has about 30 species of mammals, 41 species of reptiles, 173 bird species, 227 species of butterflies and moths, over 150 species of insects, and 610 species of plants and orchids. A good number of them are rare and endangered species, while there are several indigenous species endemic to Northeast India.

Some of the animal species belonging to the North-east which are found in the Assam State Zoo are – hoolock gibbon, one-horned rhinoceros, golden langur,

stump-tailed macaque, pig-tailed macaque, slow loris, sangai, clouded leopard, golden cat, binturong, mithun, serow, brush-tailed porcupine and crestless porcupine, to name a few. Some of the exotic species here are giraffe, hippopotamus, ion (hybrid) and African white rhino.

Likewise, the bird exhibits include cassowary, silver pheasant, parakeet, cinereous vulture, Steppe eagle, hill myna, adjutant stork, painted stork, purple moorhen, bar-headed geese, white ibis, painted stork, sarus crane, macaw and rosy pelican. The list of reptile exhibits on the other hand include monocellate cobra, rat snake, copper-headed trinket, common sand boa, red sand boa, python, tokay gecko and common monitor.

Many of the zoo inmates - like the rare serow (wild goat), red jungle fowl and the Chinese pangolin – also often roam the forest beyond the zoo area. Primates on their part go out on an occasional inspection of the adjoining residential areas too.

Visitors to the Assam State Zoo also find a lot of interesting things in the Museum. It has a rare collection of stuffed specimens of various species endemic to the region, a comprehensive agglomeration of minor forest produce, bamboo and cane artefacts and handicrafts, fossilized wood specimens, one of the largest mounted specimens of gharial, and exquisite hand paintings of birds on ficus leaves.

The Herbarium of the Assam State Zoo on the other hand is an invaluable repository of taxonomic information, and possesses about 2000 immaculately mounted and carefully preserved sheets, covering 550 species belonging to 106 families, mostly indigenous. The Herbarium however is open only to serious students and interested amateurs for study. The Botanist, a publication of Assam State Zoo on the other hand provides guidance and technical information to interested visitors.

A floral treasure, the Assam State Zoo is home to 345 native species and 280 exotic species of flora, apart from 40 orchid species, 12 palm species and ten bamboo species.

Other attractions of the Zoo include facilities for animal adoption, jumbo rides, and a joggers' trail. On an average, about 55 lakh people visit the zoo every year. A nodal centre of ex-situ conservation and a host of awareness and outreach activities, the Assam State cum Botanical Garden is also considered as a vital "Green lung"" for the ever-growing city of Guwahati.

Kalakshetra: Centre for Arts

While Guwahati has been a centre of art and culture since time immemorial, the Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra, established in 1999, is a sprawling centre which has become a meeting place for artists, poets, authors, musicians, actors and singers. The Kalakshetra has three auditoriums, an art gallery, a craft museum, another museum exclusively on Bhupen Hazarika, a library and newspaper archive, an open-air theatre, and so on. Visitors to Kalakshetra can witness a play or a dance live, and see artisans, sculptors and painters busy in pursuing their respective creative interests.

At Kahilipara stands Jyoti Chitraban, the country's first state-owned film studio, which was inaugurated in 1968. Visitors often get an opportunity to watch a film shoot, and the lucky ones can also take a selfie or an autograph with their favourite actors. Adjoining the Kalakshetra on the other hand is the first film archive of the Northeast, established in the premises of the Assam Film (Finance & Development) Corporation. It currently has over 130 films.

Deepor Beel, Guwahati

Urban Jungle

Guwahati is a new definition for the term urban jungle, in that the city and its surroundings s said to have the highest number of wildlife species – 334 of them – in a single urban setting anywhere in the world. It has so far recorded 26 species of amphibians, 56 reptile species, 36 mammals and 216 bird species including the Gangetic dolphin which lives in the Brahmaputra flowing through the city.

The city also has a wildlife sanctuary – the 78.64 sq km Amchang WLS – on its eastern edge, while in the west is Deepar Beel, a Bird Sanctuary which is also Ramsar Site. Deepar Beel is believed to have derived its name from dipa – a Sanskrit term for elephants – and herds of elephants from the adjoining Rani RF often come down to the Beel for a bath. Ornithologists have recorded about 22 bird species in Deepar Beel.

There are also at least nine Reserve Forests within and adjoining the city, with citizens in certain localities occasionally finding a wild elephant marching through the busy roads, or a leopard peeping through the kitchen window.

ASSAM STATE MUSEUM

State Museum: History retold

The Assam State Museum, which stands on the southern side of Dighalipukhuri, was established in 1940. Among India's bigger multipurpose museums, it is one place where a visitor can learn a lot of things about the history of Assam within three or four hours.

The museum's collections include royal garments, weapons, paintings, sculptures, stone and copper inscriptions, woodwork and more. Some memorabilia from World War II is also on display. Divided into various sections like sculptures, natural history, folk art, crafts and epigraphy, some interesting exhibits in these include bamboo items, coins, musical instruments, ivory paintings etc. The museum also has a library with a rich collection of journals, periodicals and books relating to mythology, biography, art and culture, and other subjects.

A pond for Bhanumati

Bhanumati was the beautiful daughter of Bhagadatta, a great king of Kamarupa who had fought on the side of the Kauravas in the battle of Kurukshetra. It was just before the *swayamvara* and wedding of Bhanumati that her father had dug a series of seven ponds, which were later merged into one to make a long pond; thus the name Dighalipukhuri – '*dighal*' meaning long. Some other accounts say it was a canal which, during the Ahom rule was used an inland port for warships to protect Guwahati and Assam from invasions from the west. Today, Dighalipukhuri has a War Memorial Park in the north, boating facilities, and walking paths and restaurants too.

Guwahati once had 40 to 50 beautiful ponds, dug by different kings during different occasions. Silpukhuri – originally called Nakonia-pukhuri – is a nine-cornered pond dug by an Ahom general Tarun Duwara Barphukan in 1753, in olden times pilgrims had to take a holy dip here before proceeding to the Navagraha Temple.

The Nagkata-pukhuri or Nagpota-pukhuri in Panbazar was dug by Ahom king Pramatta Simha (1744-1751 AD), and the Jorpukhuri (jor meaning pair) in Uzanbazar by Siva Simha's wife Phuleswari Kunwari in 1720 AD.

Heritage Tila

On the Barphukanor Tila, a hillock beside the Brahmaputra in Panbazar, is the Mahabahu Brahmaputra River Heritage Centre, with the old Kamrup Deputy Commissioner's being converted into museum of sorts. The hillock itself is interesting. Sukreswar parbat, in Kamrupar Buranji is referred to as Mantrachal, while there are also references to it as Hastiparbat and Hastachal. Since the reign of Ahom king Pratap Simha or Susengpha (1603-1641 AD) it used to house the residence of the Barphukan, the military governor who was also responsible for protecting Assam from the Mughals. Lachit Barphukan, the great General who had crushed the Mughals in the Battle of Saraighat (1671) in Guwahati was its most illustrious occupant. It was in fact from this hillock that the Barphukan had joined the battle.

On annexing Assam in 1826, the British created the post of Deputy Commissioner for Kamrup in 1839. The tila was chosen as the site for the DC's residence in the 1850s and the Scottish-type wooden bungalow with three spacious bedrooms, a large living room, a dining hall and a small library, with two spacious verandahs in the front and back was built there. It remained the DCs bungalow till 2011, until the Government took up the Brahmaputra Riverfront Development plan and converted the bungalow into a museum complex. It has on display the heritage of Assam's boats and vessels, a rich collection of fishing implements of different communities, rare photographs and artefacts related to Guwahati, an exhibition space, an amphitheatre and a cafeteria, apart from a curio shop having souvenirs, books and memorabilia for sale.

The museum compound has a landscaped mound called Art Garden which depicts the interdependence of the river and the people, a statue of Lachit Barphukan, and a heritage mosaic, while sunset on the Brahmaputra is what visitors enjoy the most.

ISBT, Guwahati

Bus terminus

The Rupnath Bahma Inter-State Bus Terminus (ISBT) is the epicentre of bus services for travelling to all important destinations in the seven North-eastern states. Buses also ply from here to cities like Coochbehar and Siliguri in North Bengal, as also to towns on the Assam-Bhutan international border.

Railway hub

The Guwahati railway station, which was completed in 1897, but had to be rebuilt because a devastating earthquake had entirely demolished it, is also the hub of railway connectivity between the North-east the rest of India. There are direct trains from here to almost every important city in India, as also to the capitals of Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh. Kamakhya is the city's second important railway station from where several trains originate, while there are a few more stations in Guwahati which cater to commuters to nearby districts.

Busiest airport

The Lokapriya Gopinath Bardoloi International Airport in Guwahati is not just the primary gateway to the North-eastern states, but also connects them with all major cities of India. It also has a couple of international flights, making access to Bhutan and the South-east Asian countries easier. One of the busiest airports in the country because of its strategic location, LGBI Airport handles up to 90 flights a day, besides catering to helicopter services to Itanagar and Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh. An ever-expanding airport because of the growing demand, the LGBI Airport also serves as an important base for the Indian Air Force (IAF) in the North-eastern region. Flights, while landing, offer a beautiful view of the Meghalaya hills; and while taking off, it is the view of the majestic Brahmaputra down below.

Guwahati Railway Station

LGBI Airport, Guwahati

Wonderful stay

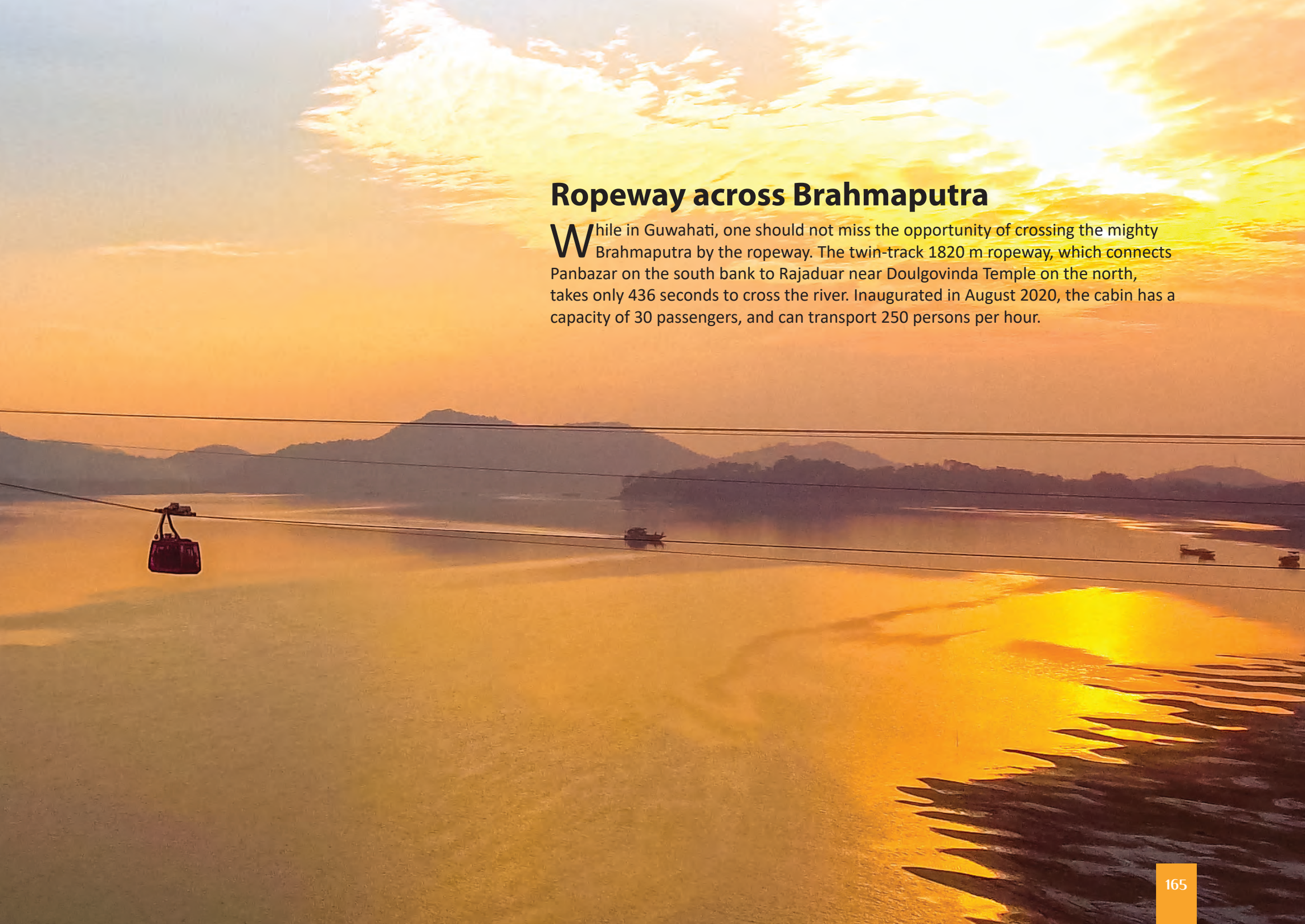
Guwahati has close to 600 hotels, from the 5-star to the budget category. While most budget hotels are located at Paltanbazar and Panbazar, close to the railway stations, the 3-star to 5-star category hotels are spread across the city, including at Kamakhya, as also near the airport and bus terminus. There is a government tourist lodge near the railway station with limited capacity though. A large government guest house complex is nearing completion on the Brahmaputra riverfront near the Gauhati High Court.

At Sonapur in the south-eastern outskirts of the city is located a large number of resorts which offer wonderful stay in natural settings close to the Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary. Several of them also offer elephant-rides, rock-climbing, boating and other adventure activities.

The Red River

While the Red River flows through Guwahati, the main riverfront is located on the south bank and part of the central area of Guwahati. There is a six-km long riverfront which stretches between the Raj Bhawan (Kharghuli Hill) in the east to the famous Nilachal Hill in the west where Kamakhya Devi, the Mother Goddess resides. A walk along any of the several stretches of the riverfront can lead to many wonderful things. The beautiful scenery, the whistling breeze, a walk down the steps at the ghats, street-food, the Uzanbazar-ghat markets where one can buy various kinds of local fish and ethnic fruits, vegetables and leafy medicinal plants – it is a different experience altogether.

There are also a number of luxury cruises and floating restaurants at the Uzanbazar-ghat and Lachit-ghat (Fancybazar), which offer hour-long cruises during lunch and dinner on the Brahmaputra apart from a ride to watch the setting sun melt into the Red River. While a large number of daily commuters between Guwahati and North Guwahati take the ferry services, pilgrims are taken to Umananda temple in the Peacock Island in special ferry services available at the Uzanbazar-ghat.



Ropeway across Brahmaputra

While in Guwahati, one should not miss the opportunity of crossing the mighty Brahmaputra by the ropeway. The twin-track 1820 m ropeway, which connects Panbazar on the south bank to Rajaduar near Doulgovinda Temple on the north, takes only 436 seconds to cross the river. Inaugurated in August 2020, the cabin has a capacity of 30 passengers, and can transport 250 persons per hour.

Thought for food

Guwahati has a number of restaurants which specialises in local ethnic food, be it from Assam or from the other North-eastern states. Traditional Assamese food – both veg and non-veg – have always remained favourite for visitors from outside, while various kinds of fish and other non-veg recipes are also available, the Brahmaputra and its tributaries being home to a large number of fish species. Tourists can also carry home packed dry traditional Assamese snacks and sweetmeats like various kinds of pitha and laroo made of rice powder, sesame, coconut powder and jaggery, apart from organically produced *bora-chaul* (sticky rice), *komal-chaul* (soft rice) and black rice, and of course *kaji-nemu* – the famous indigenous Assam lemon – which is grown and found only in Assam. Panbazar on the other hand offers a lot of street food.

Best Gifts of Nature

Assam has been bestowed with some of the best gifts of Nature, and the National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries are some of them. While a significant geographical aspect of Assam is that it contains three of six physiographic divisions of India – The Northern Himalayas (Eastern Hills), The Northern Plains (Brahmaputra plain), and Deccan Plateau (Karbi Anglong). Assam, with more than 70% of the world's population of one-horned rhinos, is the herbivore's ultimate address. The bulk of these rhinos – 2,329 as per the 2013 census – are in Kaziranga National Park, the epicentre of two biodiversity hotspots straddling Northeast India.

The other wildlife preserves in the Northeast cater to a set of rare animals, birds, reptiles and amphibians besides harbouring 50% of India's butterfly species. Together, they occupy 36.67% of Assam's landmass. The major parks accessible to tourists from October to April are listed here.

Assam, at present has seven National Parks, of which two have been declared only in 2021. Likewise, there are 20 Wildlife Sanctuaries, of which two are in the proposal stage. The seven National Parks are: Kaziranga, Manas, Dibru-Saikhowa, Orang, Nameri, Dihing-Patkai and Raimona.

Kaziranga National Park

Originally established as a Reserved Forest in 1905 Kaziranga was declared a National Park in 1985. Presently covering an area of 858.98 sq km, Kaziranga is the most popular address of the one-horned rhinoceros – the latest figure being 2600-plus – and has the highest concentration of the world's Royal Bengal tigers, 121 in 2021. It is also home to a number of primate species, the purest breed of Asiatic water buffalo and one of the largest herds of Asian elephants. About 190 km from Guwahati, the Kaziranga National Park is a unique mix of grasslands, wetlands and forestlands, and has the mighty Brahmaputra flowing through it. Also UNESCO World Heritage Site and a Tiger Reserve, it is a birdwatcher's paradise too, offering a range of quality accommodation and add-on activities such as hill trekking.

Manas National Park

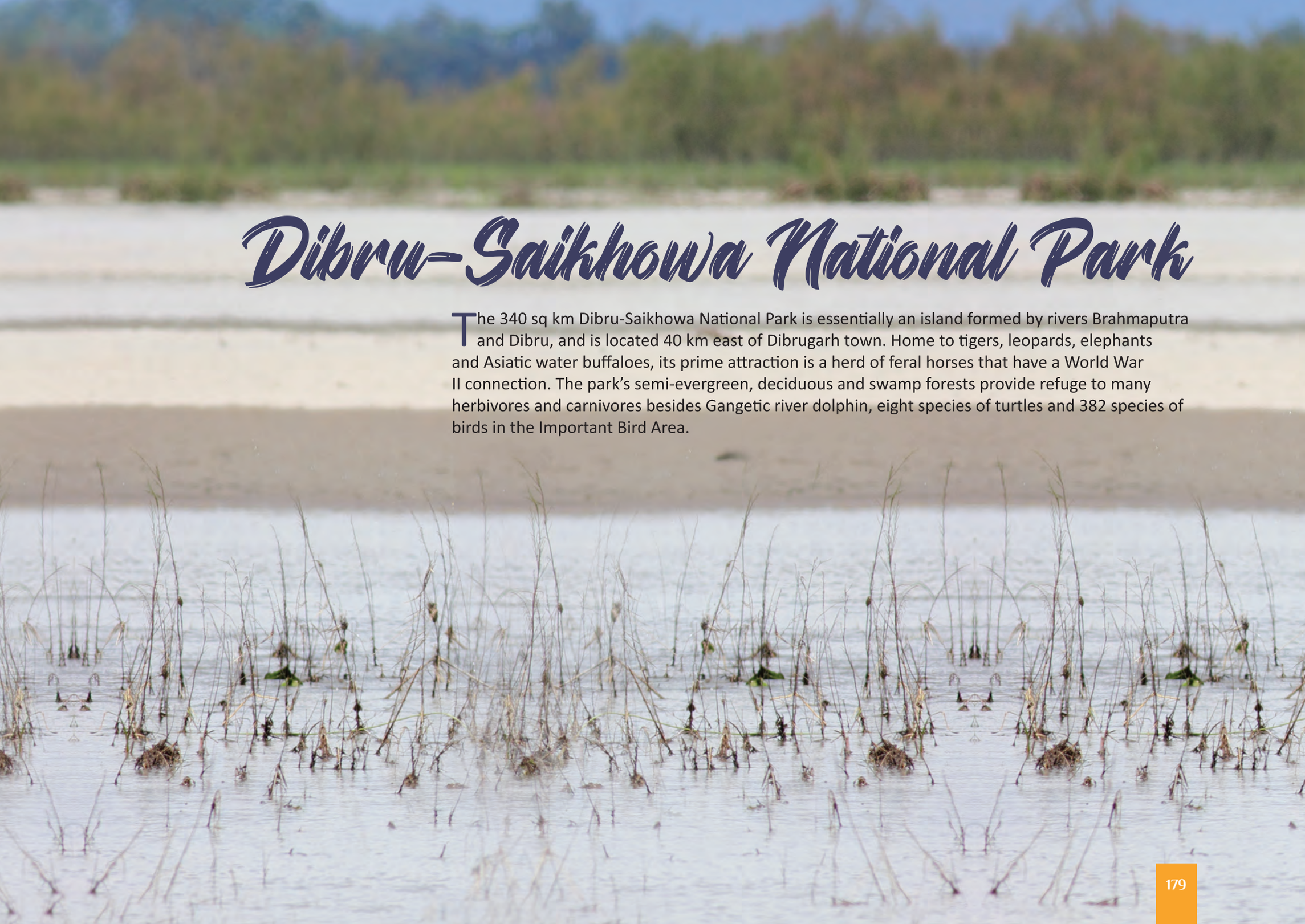
The 500 sq km Manas has many identities – World Heritage Site, Tiger Reserve, Elephant Reserve and Biosphere Reserve – and is contiguous to 1057-sq km Royal Manas National Park of Bhutan. About 150 km northwest of Guwahati, it derives its name from river Manas flowing through it. Vegetation varying from river-nurtured grasslands and swamps to sub-Himalayan mountain forests makes it home to the Royal Bengal tiger (latest count shows 48), leopard and clouded leopard, wild water buffalo, elephant, rhino, red panda and the highly endangered roofed turtle, hispid hare and pygmy hog.

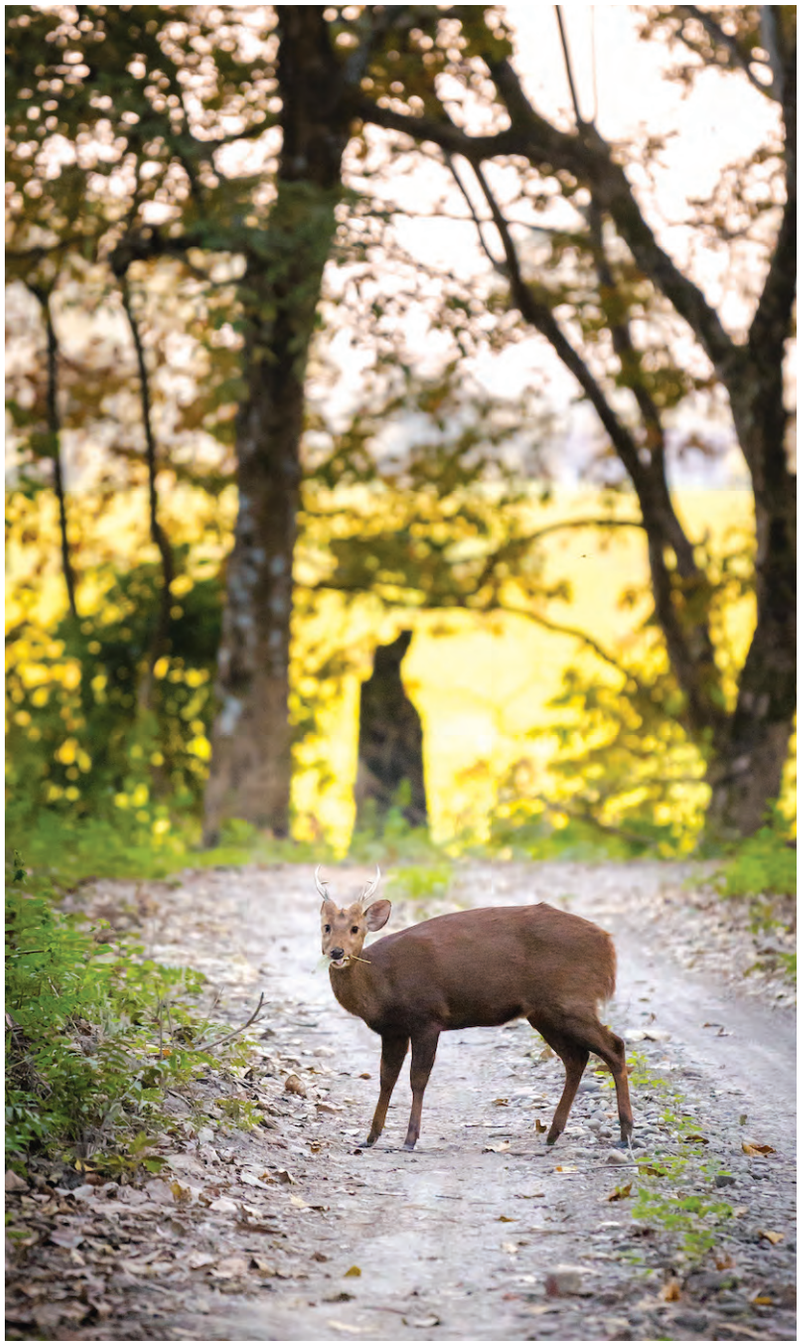
Nameri National Park

About 220 km from Guwahati, Nameri is a sub-Himalayan expanse of semi-evergreen and moist deciduous forests which is home to Royal Bengal tigers, Asian elephants, Himalayan black bears, Asiatic wild dogs, sloth bears, sambars and Indian gant squirrels among others. Close to the Pakke Tiger Reserve in Arunachal Pradesh, and not far away from Sonai-Rupai Wildlife Sanctuary in Assam, it is an important elephant corridor. Rafting and angling are popular on the swift-flowing Kameng that becomes Jia-Bhoroli in the Assam plains.

Dibru-Saikhowa National Park

The 340 sq km Dibru-Saikhowa National Park is essentially an island formed by rivers Brahmaputra and Dibru, and is located 40 km east of Dibrugarh town. Home to tigers, leopards, elephants and Asiatic water buffaloes, its prime attraction is a herd of feral horses that have a World War II connection. The park's semi-evergreen, deciduous and swamp forests provide refuge to many herbivores and carnivores besides Gangetic river dolphin, eight species of turtles and 382 species of birds in the Important Bird Area.





Orang National Park

The smallest of Assam's national parks, the 78.8 sq km Orang National Park is a microcosm of Kaziranga, across river Brahmaputra. The one-horned rhino and Royal Bengal tiger are the lead animals here, with the latest census showing 28 tigers here. It is also home to the elephant, leopard, barking deer, swamp deer, hog deer, wild boar, porcupine besides primates, reptiles and 50 species of fish. About 140 km from Guwahati, Orang is rich in vegetation and is also a birdwatcher's paradise.

Photos courtesy: Apurba Bhuyan and Gautam Deka

Raimona National Park

Inside the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), about 250 km west of Guwahati, nestled amidst the lush green landscape in the extreme north-western part of Assam and adjacent to West Bengal, Raimona National Park also shares international boundary with Bhutan. There are two contiguous forest patches across the boundary, these being Phibsoo Wildlife Sanctuary and Jigme Singye Wangchuck National Park, thus creating a trans-boundary conservation landscape of more than 2,400 sq km. With around 11 forest types and sub-types, Raimona National Park is the most biodiversity-rich forest belt in Assam. An endangered species, Golden Langur (Trachypithecus geel) – which is also the mascot of Bodoland Council – is found in sizeable numbers in Raimona. Other inmates incude Asian Elephant, Royal Bengal Tiger, Clouded Leopard, Indian Gaur, Wild Buffalo, Spotted Deer, Hornbill, several orchid species, over 150 butterfly species, 170 species of birds and 380 species of plants.

Dehing-Patkai
National Park

Assam's only rainforest, the 111 sq km Dehing-Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary was declared as a National Park in 2021. An important elephant habitat spread across Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts, it is often referred to as Amazon of the East, with a 111-sq km virgin rainforest covering it touches the river Dehing and the Patkai mountain range that stretches deep inside Arunachal Pradesh. With 4,000mm annual rainfall, Dehing-Patkai is home to the Chinese pangolin, Hoolock gibbon, Himalayan black bear, Malayan giant squirrel, Flying fox, Slow loris, Stump-tailed macaque, Assamese macaque, Rhesus macaque, Capped langur, Jungle cat, Leopard cat, Fishing cat, Marbled cat, Clouded leopard, Leopard, and a few tigers too.

While it in not possible for a tourist to visit each and every National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary in a single trip to Assam, following are three spots which are easily approachable and can provide a lot of new experience.

Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary

About 38 km from Guwahati, Pobitora has the world's highest concentration of rhinos (107 as per the 2022 census). It is a microcosm of Kaziranga, so much so that it is often referred to as national park's showroom ideal for visitors to Guwahati with little time to spare. One can choose to travel to and from Guwahati and explore the sanctuary on elephant back in less than a day or stay overnight at the forest and tourist bungalows to have a 360-degree experience.

Hollongapar Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary

This 21 sq km sanctuary, which is about 20 km from central Assam's Jorhat town, and derives its name from the tall hollong (Dipterocarpus macrocarpus) – the State Tree – and the hoolock gibbon, India's only ape. It is a semi-evergreen forest with wet evergreen patches amidst tea gardens and human settlements. Hollongapar houses the largest and most vulnerable number of hoolock gibbons besides five other primate species including the Bengal slow loris, the only nocturnal primate in Northeast India.

Chakrasila Wildlife Sanctuary

The 45 sq km Chakrasila WLS in Dhubri district, about 220 km from Guwahati, is the best known sanctuary of western Assam and is the second home of the golden langur off the Himalayan foothills. Chakrasila comprises of a hilly tract sandwiched between two wetlands – Dheer Beel and Diplai Beel – that are integral to its fragile ecosystem. Sal trees dominate the semi-evergreen and deciduous canopy of this sanctuary that offers shelter to the Indian flying fox, Asiatic jackal, Bengal fox, Chinese pangolin, short-nosed fruit bat and Indian false vampire besides 23 species of reptiles including crocodiles and turtles.

Other wildlife sanctuaries

Garampani and Nambor are two adjoining sanctuaries in Karbi Anglong district, close to Kaziranga National Park. Garampani's USP is its hot water spring. To their south is the higher-altitude Barail Wildlife Sanctuary known for the brown hill tortoise and Asian leaf turtle. Close to Kaliabor in central Assam is Burha Chapori, a sandbar sanctuary created by the Brahmaputra. The remaining sanctuaries are Laokhowa, Bornadi, Sonai-Rupai, Panidehing, Bherjan-Borajan-Padumoni, East Karbi Anglong, Marat Longri, Amchang, North Karbi Anglong (proposed) and Bordoibam-Beelmukh.

Great Mormon

Common Bluebottle

Common Tit

Tailed Jay

Common Mormon

Yellow Coster

Red-Spot Jezebel

Common Sergeant

Winged Jewels

North-East India is recognized as one of the biodiversity hot spots of the world and the state of Assam, harboring some of the world's richest biodiversity, is home to more than 500 species of butterflies. Most of the North bank wildlife reserves have a sizable diversity of butterfly fauna especially Manas biosphere reserve, Nameri and Behali.

Presence of such rare gems will open up hitherto unexplored avenues such as nature tourism that will primarily focus on butterfly watching and thus provide an alternative source of livelihood to the forest fringe villagers.

Common Yeoman

Colour Sergeant

Writeup & Photos courtesy by Niranjan Kumar Bhagobary and Prakash Kumar Kachari

State Symbols

The Indian rhinoceros (Rhinoceros unicornis) is aptly the State Animal in its best home on earth – Assam. The white-winged wood duck (Asarcornis scutulata), one of the largest species of ducks somewhat similar to the Muscovy duck, is Assam's State Bird. The State Tree is the tall *hollong*(Dipterocarpus macrocarpus) that sustains the hoolock gibbon, the only ape in South Asia, and Bengal slow loris, the only nocturnal primate in Northeast India. The State Flower is a seasonal orchid *kapou* (Rhynchostylis gigantean) or foxtail that is harbinger of the springtime Bihu, the State Festival. The river dolphin (Platantista gangetica gangetica), on the other hand, is the State Aquatic Animal.

Photo: Udayan Borthakur

Forest Etiquette

For safaris, visitors need to be accompanied by a guide authorized by the park/sanctuary management, avoid bright clothes (white, black and red in particular), drive within the speed limit of 20 km per hour, grant right of way to animals, maintain silence, stick only to specified routes, leave the park before sunset. They should not carry pets, transistors, audio systems or musical instruments and not use a horn/whistle inside the park, not use mobile phones, not disembark from the vehicle or move on foot, not smoke or light fires, and not throw litter.

Elephant safari in Kaziranga National Park

Tea & Oil

A 200-year old story

Local communities in certain pockets in upper or eastern Assam had been growing their own tea and sipping it from time immemorial. When the East India Company lost its monopoly of tea trade with China in 1833, and the British began looking for tea in India, they 'discovered' it in Assam. But, even before that, a Scottish trader called Robert Bruce had in 1823 itself met Beesa Gam, a Singpho chief near present-day Margherita, when the latter offered him 'phanap', the tea that grew in his backyard. The British set up the first tea plantation at two places, Chabua and Deenjoy (Dinjan) – both near Dibrugarh – with the former apparently getting its name from 'cha' meaning tea and 'bowa' meaning sow or grow.

Tea estates soon came up at Tingri, Keyhung, Ningrew, Naohalia, Tipam, (all in Tinsukia-Dibrugarh), and then, as Assam Company Ltd, the first tea company was established in 1839, three more tea estates – Nazira, Cherideo and Gabroo Parbut, – the first two in Sivasagar, the third near Jorhat – were started.

Thus, as the history Assam approaches celebration of its 200 years of existence, visit to any of the above-mentioned tea estates will make one's trip to Assam memorable. But then, the tea trip will remain incomplete if one does not visit Cinnamora, near Jorhat, which is the first tea estate started by an Indian way back in 1850. He was Maniram Dewan, who had, apart from being a minister of the last Ahom king, was also the Dewan – the most important officer of Assam Company Ltd. Dewan. Having learnt the art of tea, he began encouraging local people to grow tea, and later jumped into the freedom movement, was arrested and hanged on February 26, 1858. Needless to say, Maniram Dewan was hanged not just because he was a freedom fighter, but also because the tea planter and entrepreneur in him had threatened the British.

Today Assam accounts for more than 55 per cent of India's total tea production, and the strong Assam tea, grown on the rolling plains by the Brahmaputra, is famous for its smooth malty flavour. A taste attributed to the region's rich loamy soil, unique climate and liberal rainfall, Assam is also the largest contiguous tea-growing area in the world. Assam Tea has a distinctive rich, deep-amber colour and is known for its rich, full-bodied cup. It is also unique for its brisk, strong and malty character, making it a perfect tea to wake up to.

With more than 800 major plantations and 60,000 small estates spread across 3,50,000 hectares, Assam has the world's largest concentration of tea plantations and employs over 18% of the state's workforce. Assam tea also accounts for 80% of the country's tea export.

When visiting upper Assam, one can also visit the *Tocklai* Tea Research Institute, the world's first lab of its kind, established in 1911. And in Guwahati, a visit to the Guwahati Tea Auction Centre, is one of the busiest tea trading facilities in the world. In fact, it has seen the largest volume of CTC tea auction in the world.

Two out of every three persons in the world, they say, wake up to a cup of tea. And every second person in the world invariably sips tea made in Assam. No wonder Assam and Tea are synonymous to each other.

Heritage Bungalows

Assam's 800-plus tea estates are dotted with hundreds of heritage bungalows built during the British era. Though not all of them offer tourists and visitors facilities to stay, some of the best such heritage properties available for tourists include the Burra Sahib's Bungalow, Mistry Sahib's Bungalow, Banyan Grove, Thengal Manor, Chameli Memsaab Bungalow, Puroni-bheti Bungalow (all in Jorhat), the Mancotta Chang Bungalow (Dibrugarh), and the Balipara Bungalow and Wild Mahseer (both near Tezpur), to name a few. While Burra Sahib's Bungalow also has close to it the Kaziranga Golf Course, Cinnamora Tea Estate owns the Chameli Memsaab Bungalow, where the famous Assamese film Chameli Memsaab (1975) was shot.

Tea-tee

In 1829, India became the first country outside Great Britain to have a golf course. The country offers many world-class greens today, laid at Himalayan heights, in desert, military cantonments by forests and lakes and in urban areas. But Assam's 'tea-tees' – golf courses in tea estates – are in a class of their own.

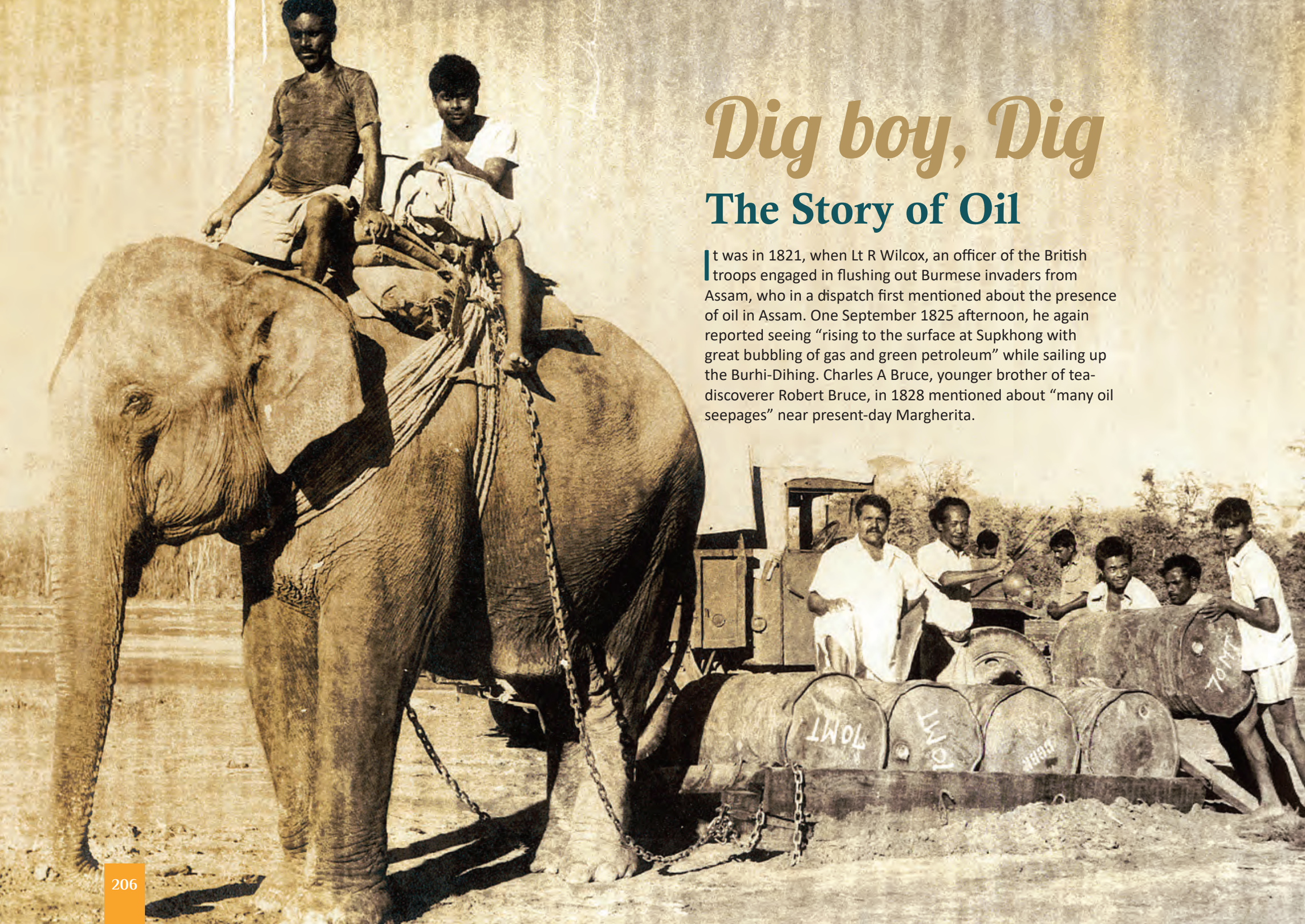
There are some 20 tea-tees, natural and almost all with nine holes. Within 200 km of each other, these golf courses prepared essentially to enhance the lifestyle of British planters transport one to the grandeur of the Raj days. Today, they are helping the estates package them as exotic holiday destinations where tee-putt is as exhilarating as the teapot.

Besides classical clubhouses for post-golf sessions, some of these estates have airstrips for tourists to arrive and take off in chartered aircraft. Professional golfers swore by the 18-hole Digboi Golf Course that Digboi Refinery lords over in eastern Assam's Digboi town until the Kaziranga Golf Resort came up in the middle of a tea estate in Jorhat. Designed by one of India's leading golf course architect, the resort has a challenging 18-hole, par-71 golf course that is the first of its kind. The club house is the heritage Burra Sahib's Bungalow. The resort also offers a golf academy with professional coaching and a well-equipped golf pro shop.

Dig boy, Dig

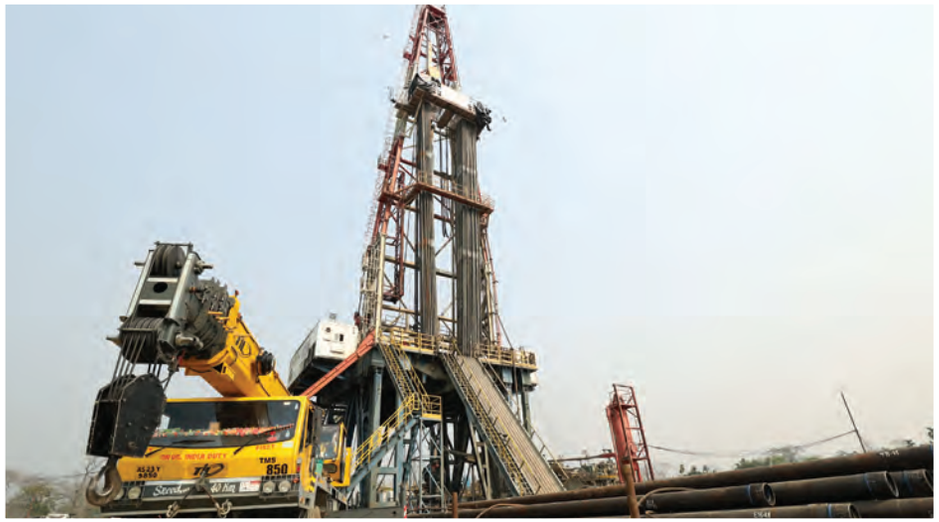
The Story of Oil

It was in 1821, when Lt R Wilcox, an officer of the British troops engaged in flushing out Burmese invaders from Assam, who in a dispatch first mentioned about the presence of oil in Assam. One September 1825 afternoon, he again reported seeing "rising to the surface at Supkhong with great bubbling of gas and green petroleum" while sailing up the Burhi-Dihing. Charles A Bruce, younger brother of tea-discoverer Robert Bruce, in 1828 mentioned about "many oil seepages" near present-day Margherita.



While search for petroleum in Assam formally began from 1854, it was on March 26, 1867, that some amount of oil was first extracted near Nahorpung, a village near Jaipur, by one Mr Goodenough.

The search for oil went on for the next few decades until, one day in 1882, an elephant deployed in laying the Dibrugarh-Makum railway track – the North-east's first railway – was found with its limbs soaked in oil. The exact is somewhere near Digboi refinery, with the place believed to have got its name from the order "dig boy, dig" given by the officers to the local workmen! Digboi refinery itself is a heritage site, being the world's second oldest refinery – and presently the world's oldest running oil refinery. One should visit the Digboi Centenery Heritage Park and Museum, and then click a picture standing in front of Discovery Well No 1 – India's first commercial oil well, where oil was first struck in October 1889, and finally abandoned in 1932. On display outside, one can also see the replica of a petrol filling station of the Burmah Oil Company era, with a four-cylinder charming Ford Perfect car dating back to the 1940s!



Digboi, the birthplace of India's oil industry, is in itself a tourists' paradise. The 120-year old oil town is in fact a unique case of co-existence of nature and industry. The Digboi forest division comprises of as many as 15 reserved forests, which are home to over 200 wild elephants, many of whom are frequent visitors to the Digboi refinery township. A visit to Digboi can actually put one in eye contact with jumbos from inside any of the numerous heritage bungalows that the town boasts of.

While visiting upper Assam's tea and oil heritage sites, one should also step into the Coal Museum at Margherita, a place where coal was discovered, also in 1828. The Museum tells many stories, including how the place came to be named after an Italian queen after three Italian engineers – the Paganini brothers – had laid Assam's first railway line in 1884.

The Hills are Calling

Assam's three hill districts – Karbi Anglong, West Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao – together comprise a different heaven on earth. While the Karbis are the most numerous people in both Karbi Anglong and the newly-created West Karbi Anglong districts, Dima Hasao is home to several tribes like Dimasa, Zeme, Hmar, Kuki, Biate, Vaiphe, Rongmei, Khelma, Hrangkhol and Khasi-Pnar or Jaintia.

NOTHENGPI, Karbi Heritage Museum

Karbi Anglong
Colourful people

Diphu, headquarter of Karbi Anglong, is a beautiful place with colourful people, and a visit to any of the several villages surrounding it provides a glimpse into the life and culture of the Karbi community. The District Museum houses many regional archaeological artefacts, apart from a collection of colourful tribal handicrafts, hunting and house tools, ornaments, textiles, and traditional instruments. The annual Karbi Youth Festival held at Taralangso – on the outskirts of Diphu – in February since the 1980s showcases the best of Karbi music, dance and cuisine.

While every traditional Karbi village has a bachelors' dormitory called Jirkedam, a typical institution where unmarried young men learn the basics of social work and community participation. Rongker and Hacha are two important festivals of the Karbis, the former held at the beginning of the New Year with prayers for a good harvest and protecting the village community from diseases and natural calamities. Hacha on the other hand is their post-harvest festival, which is marked with community feasting, singing, dancing and merry-making. Karbi women on the other hand are wizards on their looms and weave wonderful dresses like the *pinicamflak*, *jar-ek*, *wanpo* and *khanjari*.

About five km from Diphu is the Marat Longri Sanctuary, which is part of the Dhansiri-Lumding Elephant Reserve. Besides elephants, the list of animals in the Sanctuary include tiger, leopard, Barking deer, slow loris, porcupine and hoolock gibbon, to name a few. The scenic beauty is also captivating. On the way to Marat Longri Sanctuary, one should stop over at the Botanical Garden, where one can take selfies amid a number of rare trees, plats and orchids, as also many medicinal plants and herbs.

For the religious-minded, the Deopani Durga Temple – about 85 km from Diphu – is an ancient *shakti* temple beside the Deopani river. The temple has an undated Durga idol with four arms. Five km from there are two Buddha Vihars, one each at Balipathar and Silonijan, both Tai-Turung villages.

Those interested in adventure should plan well in advance for a hiking or trekking expedition to Singhason – about 1360 metres – the highest peak in the district of Karbi Anglong. From the top, one can enjoy beautiful panoramic views of the surrounding Brahmaputra valley and the distant snow-clad peaks of the Himalayas. The sunrise and sunsets, which can be seen from the top, are highly recommended when the weather is suitable.

Dima Hasao: Chorus of Silent Hymns

Dima Hasao – the other hill district – emerges from the heart of Assam like a chorus of silent hymns and rise up to the sky like crescendo of music. Haflong, the headquarter town of Dima Hasao district, is Assam's only hill station of its kind. With an elevation of 966 metres above sea level, Haflong has numerous tourist spots in and around it, while the lake in the heart of the hill station is an added attraction.

In the heart of Haflong town, one can visit Dibarai, an old Dimasa traditional village where one can visit a few tribal households to understand the Dimasa way of life. At the centre of the village is preserved a Nohdrang, a traditional bachelor's dormitory, where once upon a time all unmarried young men used to stay at night to keep a vigil over the village against enemies and wild animals. There are also a few beautiful villages of the Zeme tribe close to Haflong.

Watching the sun rise from behind the Borail mountain is a must, while those who love adventure even trek to the 1866-metre Thumjang peak and 1748-metre Hempeupet peak in the majestic mountain range. The Borail mountain and Borail Wildlife Sanctuary are home to tigers, leopards, elephants, barking deer, hoolock gibbons, black bear, wild dogs, wild buffaloes, mithuns, several tortoise and bird species, and of course several species of reptiles.

At Maibang, once capital of the Kachari kingdom, about 50 km from Haflong is the ancient monolithic stone temple by the Mahur river, while at Panimoor, about 120 km from Halong, the Kopili river turns into a thrilling waterfall. The Dimasa people take a holy dip here on Maghi Purnima in mid-January. In the extreme east of the district is Garampani, a picturesque town famous for its hot springs and captivating waterfalls. Traveling to Dima Hasao is in itself an experience particularly by train as one travels through several tunnels and lofty bridges. The winding road journey through the green and blue mountain too is always interesting, with several rivers including the Dehangi, Diyung, Jatinga, Jenam, Mahur and Langting singing songs for the passers-by.

A train through clouds

The Lumding-Badarpur Hill Section of North-east Frontier Railway, originally built in the early 19th century and converted to broad-gauge with several realignments, is not only a journey through the virgin Borail mountains, but is also considered an engineering marvel. Often described as the "most spectacular mountain line of Indian Railways", a journey on this route is like travelling through a bunch of real-life picture postcards. While names of the 20 railway stations on this route are also so musical, at certain spots the clouds simply pass through one window of the coach and flows out of the other. Several tunnels through which the railway tunnel passes, add excitement to the journey.

Jatinga: Mystery of Birds

About nine km from Haflong, on the spur of an offshoot of the main Borail range, is Jatinga, a village known the world over for its mysterious phenomenon of birds committing suicide under particular weather conditions in some months of the year. It occurs on dark moonless nights from September and November, when the breeze blows from south to north and the sky is moderately foggy and there is a slight drizzle. Birds flying over or past Jatinga come down towards any powerful light, some dying after hitting the hard ground, others trapped and killed by people. Well-known ornithologists like Salim Ali and S Sengupta did try to get to the bottom of Jatinga's bird suicide mystery. But no single hypothesis comprehensively explains why birds use a well-defined strip – 1.5 km long and 200 m wide – of the Jatinga Ridge to dash to their deaths. Awareness campaigns have brought down the number of bird casualties in Jatinga, whose oranges and pineapples are said to be the sweetest.

Panimur: Amazing waterfall

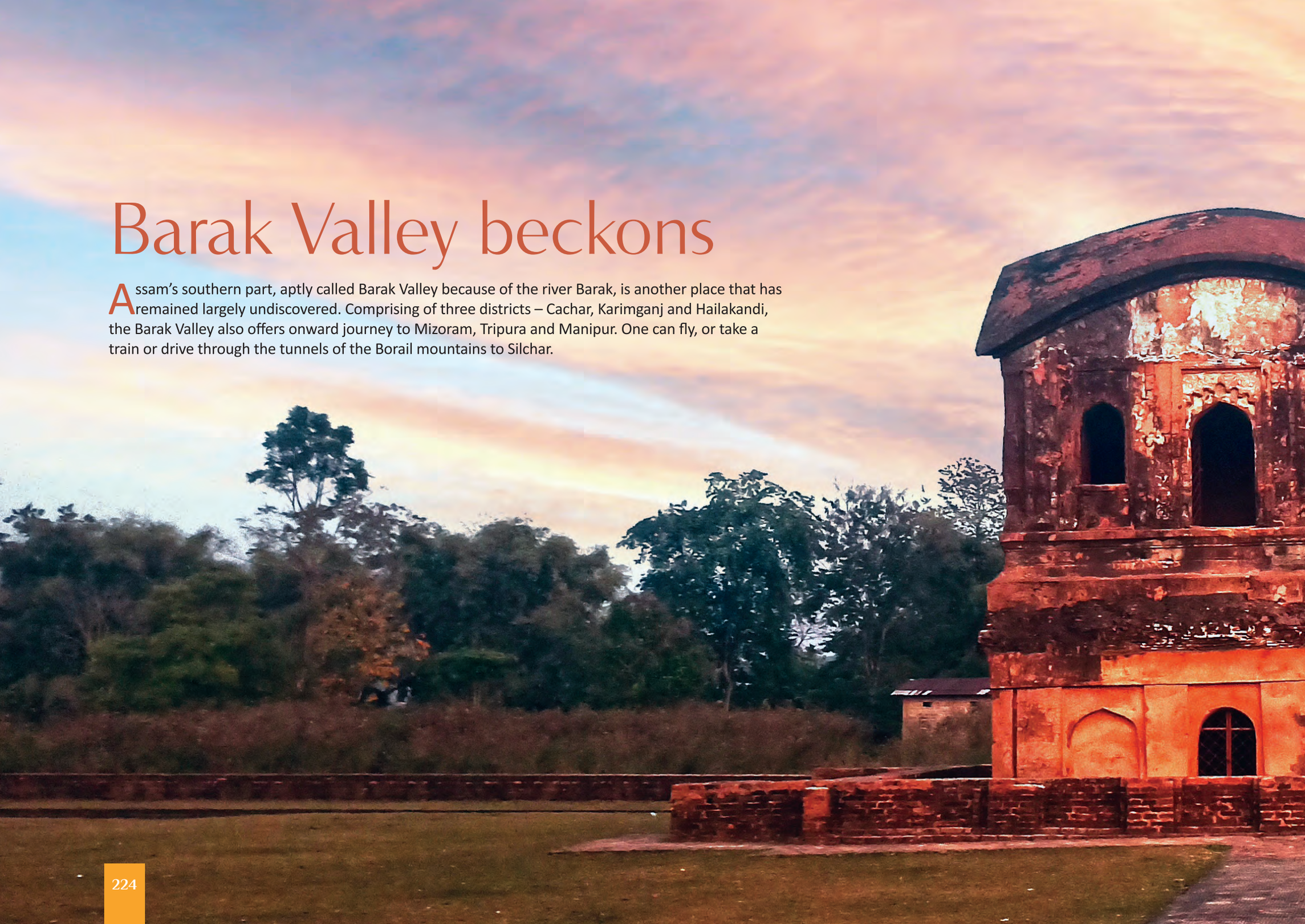
About 120 km from Haflong – and better approachable from Nagaon – is Panimur, an amazing waterfall, often called the Niagara Falls of Assam, whose resemblance cannot be overlooked. The beautiful Kopili river water hitting the rocks with great force finally gushes down creating the image of a lively and free spirited soul enjoying its youth. The picturesque location is favourite among photographers and videographers too. There's a forest nearby which adds to the beauty and thrill of the place.

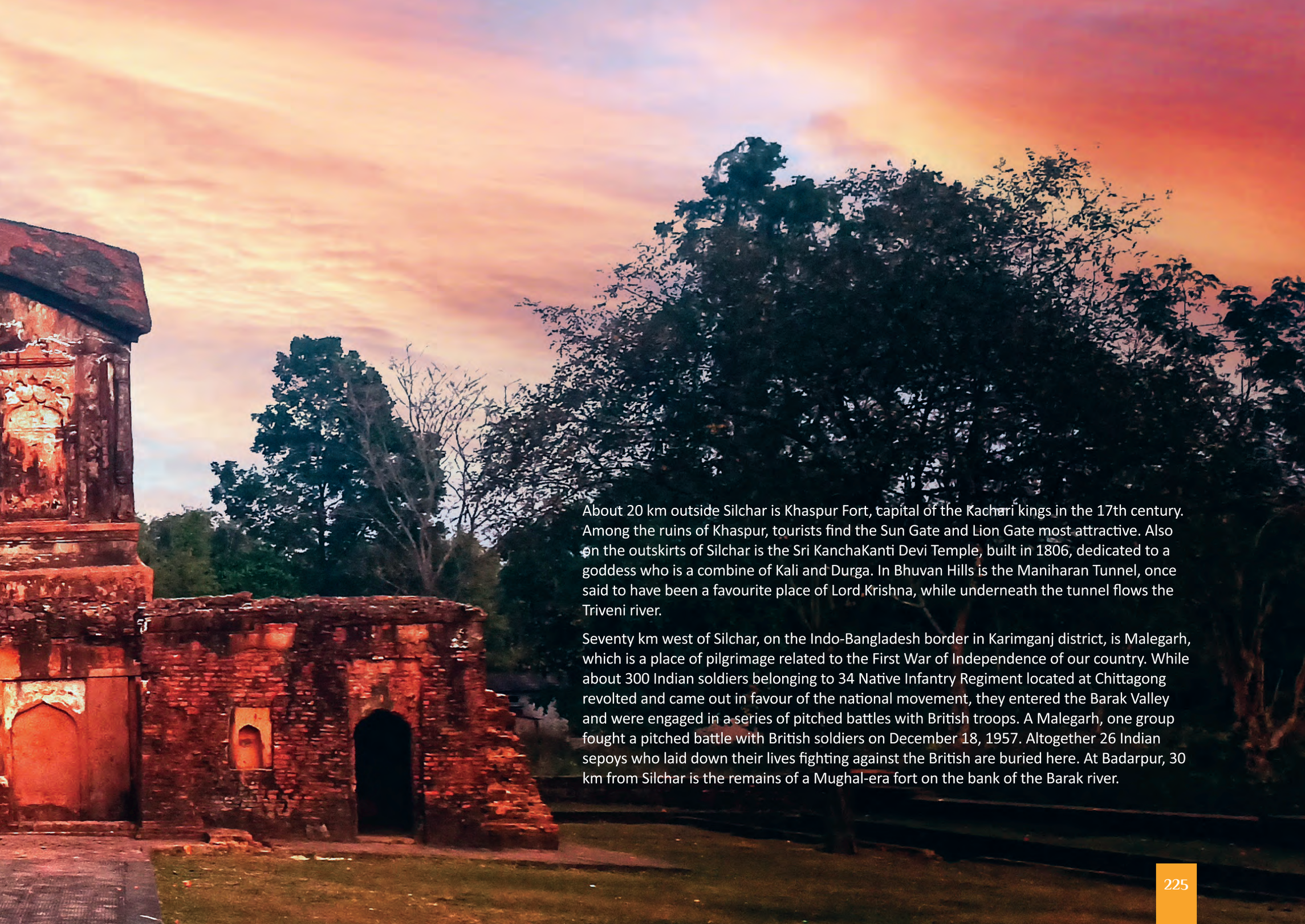
Umrangso: Quiet in the hills

About 112 km from Haflong is another hill station Umrangso, a place full of scenic beauty. While musicians and poets will immediately fall in love with the place, every visitor will enjoy the beauty of Garampani, a small river that emerges from a hot water spring and soon meets Kapili close to a dam which is part of the Kapili Hydro-Electric Project. Boating amidst the serene waters of the Garampani lake and the picturesque scene visible from the hilltop are enough to magnetize its visitors. Bhupen Hazarika had immortalised Kapili in one of his songs by calling it a young free spirited girl who is unpredictable yet with many qualities. Umrangso also has an 18-hole natural golf course, while the arrival of thousands of Amur Falcons, as they make a brief stopover as they migrate from Siberia to South Africa during October and November has led to an annual Falcon Festival.

Barak Valley beckons

Assam's southern part, aptly called Barak Valley because of the river Barak, is another place that has remained largely undiscovered. Comprising of three districts – Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi, the Barak Valley also offers onward journey to Mizoram, Tripura and Manipur. One can fly, or take a train or drive through the tunnels of the Borail mountains to Silchar.





About 20 km outside Silchar is Khaspur Fort, capital of the Kachari kings in the 17th century. Among the ruins of Khaspur, tourists find the Sun Gate and Lion Gate most attractive. Also on the outskirts of Silchar is the Sri KanchaKanti Devi Temple, built in 1806, dedicated to a goddess who is a combine of Kali and Durga. In Bhuvan Hills is the Maniharan Tunnel, once said to have been a favourite place of Lord Krishna, while underneath the tunnel flows the Triveni river.

Seventy km west of Silchar, on the Indo-Bangladesh border in Karimganj district, is Malegarh, which is a place of pilgrimage related to the First War of Independence of our country. While about 300 Indian soldiers belonging to 34 Native Infantry Regiment located at Chittagong revolted and came out in favour of the national movement, they entered the Barak Valley and were engaged in a series of pitched battles with British troops. A Malegarh, one group fought a pitched battle with British soldiers on December 18, 1957. Altogether 26 Indian sepoys who laid down their lives fighting against the British are buried here. At Badarpur, 30 km from Silchar is the remains of a Mughal-era fort on the bank of the Barak river.

Son Beel: Lake extraordinary

The beautiful and mesmerizing Son Beel – a lake which is also second largest seasonal wetland in Asia and the largest wetland in Assam. About 25 km from Karimganj, the most amazing feature about Son Beel is that while it becomes a paddy field from November to l March, once the rains start, it is filled with water and becomes a lake. Son Beel overflows during rainy season and the excess water flows to the Kushiara River through Kakra River onward into Bangladesh. The lake gives a picturesque landscape with hills on both east and west sides. Son Beel is famous for its several fish varieties

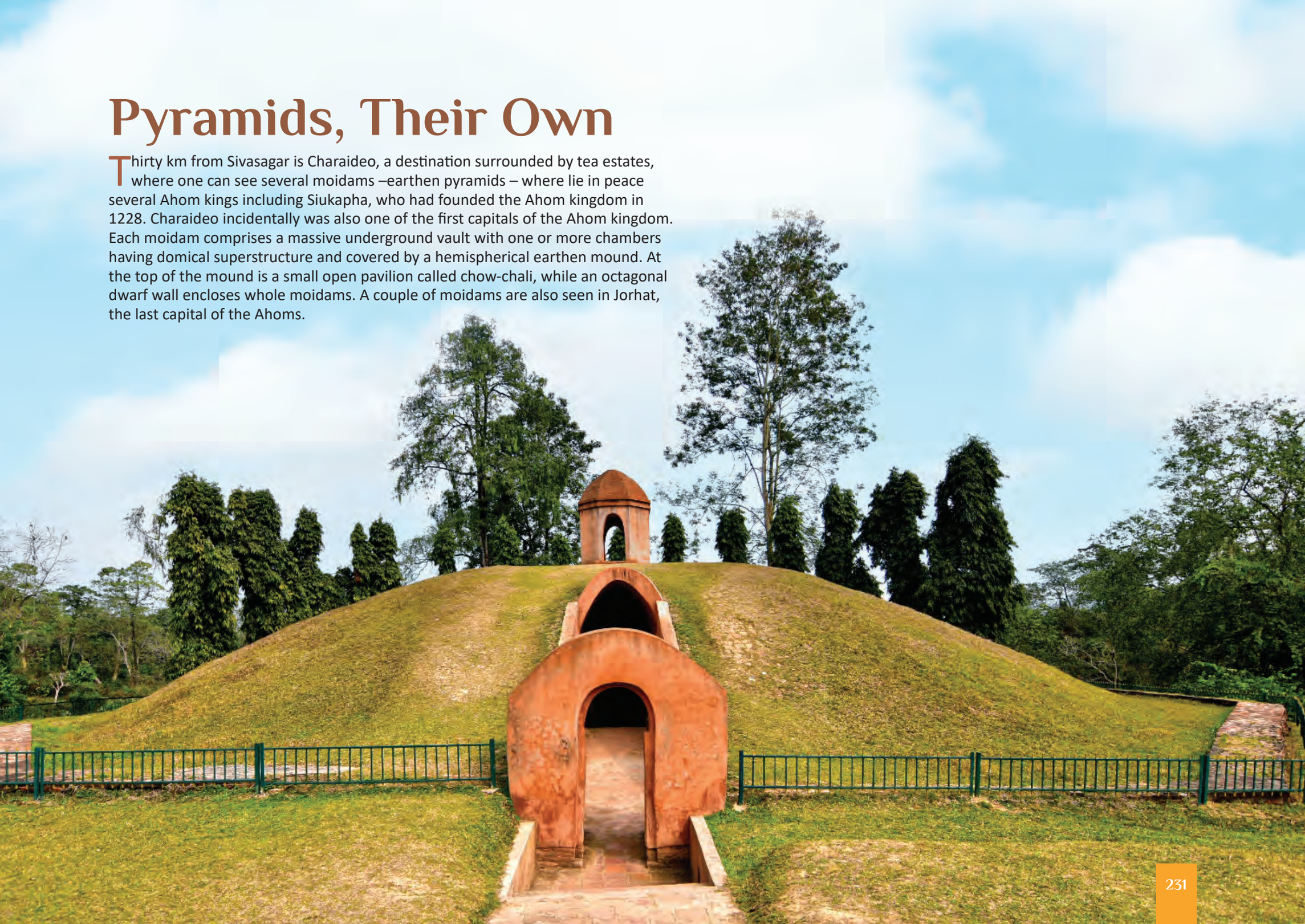
Kushiara: Durga on the river

Immersion of the Durga idols in the Kushiara river on the day of Bijoyadashami is a special event in Barak Valley which has international dimensions. Whil the Kushiara river is the international boundary between India and Bangladesh for Karimganj, a number of Durga idols from both sides are taken for immersion to a designated place, with thousands of people standing and watching the process for hours. Border Security Force sends out a few boats filled with sweetmeats to their Bangladesh counterparts and vice versa, with the sweets then distributed among the people.

And, so many other things to see...

Pyramids, Their Own

Thirty km from Sivasagar is Charaideo, a destination surrounded by tea estates, where one can see several moidams –earthen pyramids – where lie in peace several Ahom kings including Siukapha, who had founded the Ahom kingdom in 1228. Charaideo incidentally was also one of the first capitals of the Ahom kingdom. Each moidam comprises a massive underground vault with one or more chambers having domical superstructure and covered by a hemispherical earthen mound. At the top of the mound is a small open pavilion called chow-chali, while an octagonal dwarf wall encloses whole moidams. A couple of moidams are also seen in Jorhat, the last capital of the Ahoms.



About 22 km from Sivasagar, at Saraguri Chapori near Disangmukh, where the Disang meets the Brahmaputra, is situated Ajan Peer's dargah, the final resting place of Shah Milan, a Sufi poet and saint who came all the way from Baghdad to be remembered in Assam as Ajan Peer or Ajan Faqir. Ajan Peer not only mastered the Assamese language but also contributed immensely to enrich Assamese literature with zikir songs that are inseparable part of culture here.

Buddham Saranam...

Buddhism is said to have existed in Assam in olden times. Though there is no record of Buddhism being practiced in ancient Assam, Amritaprabha, a princess from Pragjyotisha who was married to Meghavahana of Kashmir, had taken with her a Tibetan Buddhist guru and had constructed a lofty vihara for the Buddhist Bhikshus in Kashmir which was called Amritabhavana. While there is strong reference to existence of Vajrayana Buddhism, a later form of Buddhism in Assam, there were also strong relations between Tantric Shaktism and Tantric Buddhism in ancient Kamarupa. While a section of Lama Buddhists from Bhutan and Tibet strongly believe that Buddha's mahaparinirvana took place at Hajo, for that reason they also consider the Madhaba deity of Hayagriva-Madhava temple in Hajo as Mahamuni.

Upper Assam on the other hand has four Tai communities – Tai-Phake, Tai-Aiton, Tai-Khamyang and Tai-Turung – which practice Buddhism. The beautiful monasteries and the culture and tradition of the Tai communities attract a number of visitors. The most important such village is Nam-phake, the largest Tai-Phake village in Assam, which has also taken up tourism as an important economic activity. On the outskirts of Naharkatiya, the monastery here was built in 1850. It also has an Ashoka Pillar, while the Burhi-dihing flowing past is an added attraction. The village has home-stay facilities apart from a tourist lodge. (Not far away from Nam-phake village are two more tourist attractions – the Jaipur Rainforest, and Sasoni-Merbeel Eco-tourism village.)

About 35 km from Sivasagar on the other hand is Chalapthar Shyamgaon, a 150-year old village with a Buddhist monastery belonging to the Tai-Khamyang community. What is most noteworthy about Chalapthar Shyamgaon is that the 120-odd households here have not only taken upon themselves the responsibility of protecting the 683-hectare Chala Reserve Forest as a community conservation initiative, but has also declared it as Chala Village Sanctuary. The Charaideo Maidams – earthen pyramids – are only about 12 km from here.

Ledo legends

Fifty-five km from Tinsukia is a quaint little town called Ledo, which offers the visitor a mix of history and culture. It is a coal town, the black diamond having been discovered here first in 1882. Ledo however shot into prominence during Second World War, with General Slim saying that in December 1943, as the War was reaching its peak, Ledo, which first seemed rather like the end of the world, suddenly was the start of the road to China. In fact, it is from Ledo that the famous 173-km Stilwell Road takes off for Kunming, passing through present-day Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar. Driving on this road is in itself exciting, especially after quickly reading some background of it in the Internet. At Jairampur in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh, about 25km from Ledo is a World War II cemetery where lie buried about 1,000 soldiers and labourers of the Allied Forces, mostly Chinese, Kachins and Indian, as also a few British and Americans.

Half an hour's drive from Ledo, and one finds Lekhapani, the last station of Indian Railways in the east, which is definitely worth visiting. Six km from Ledo is Mounglang, home to Tai Phake and Tai Khamti people, where the main attraction is the Mounglang Khamti Buddhist Monastery which also has an International Meditation Centre. On the way to the monastery is an abandoned Ledo airstrip, which was a major take-off point for war-planes during World War II. A 15-minute drive away is Margherita, which has a Coal Museum, while the Margherita railway station – named after an Italian queen and opened in 1884 – is the oldest railway station in North-east India.

Rampur: Under the Sal trees

About 125 km west of Guwahati, just short of Goalpara town is Rampur, a village which has shot into international fame for its unique theatre festival called 'Under the Sal Tree' held in December every year since 2008 inside a forest of tall Sal trees. Organised by Badungduppa, a registered society, the festival attracts artists from across the globe. A month-long residential theatre workshop is also held every year at a permanent workplace named Badungduppa Kalakendra, which has separate boys' and girls' dormitories, a training ground, two guest houses and a small auditorium. Badungduppa is a musical instrument of the Rabha tribe, symbolic of an effort to revive, preserve and promote Rabha cultural heritage in general and traditional theatre in particular. Rampur, which had won a national award for cleanest village in 2007, has also started home-stay facilities, while visitors can buy bamboo mats, traditional hand-woven fabrics and home-grown vegetables among other things.

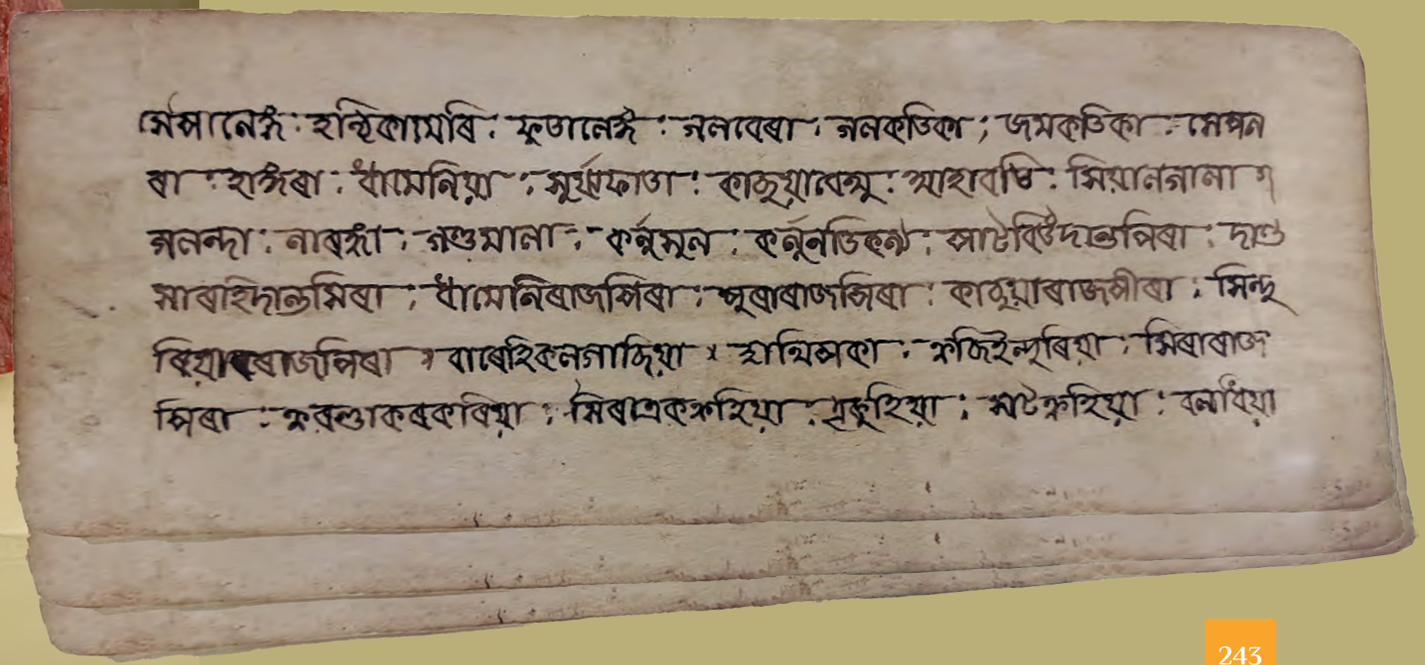
Barkola: Guru's blessings

The composite Assamese identity has contributions of so many ethnic and linguistic communities professing different faiths that the Sikhs of Punjab too have become inseparable from this intrinsically woven canvas. Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab is said to have dispatched, in 1820, a 500-strong contingent of Sikh soldiers to Assam at the request of Ahom king Chandrakanta Simha to help fight the invading Burmese. While most of them died fighting the invaders in the Battle of Hadirachoki (near Jogighopa), those who survived settled down first near Chaparmukh and then spread to Barkola, about 120 km east of Guwahati to assimilate with the local people and become a part the Assamese society.

Mayong means Magic

Less than an hour's drive from Guwahati is Mayong, a village that literally weaves magic. Blessed with a magical ambience, Mayong is an occult village where live at least 100 practicing wizards and witch-doctors – *oja* or *bej* in local parlance – who have a spell for every ailment or misfortune, and can literally beat the ghosts out of the possessed.

Remains of some old temples on the hillocks around Mayong are probably a pointer to its tantric or black magic past. Mayong, which is close to Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, has four important temples – the Kechaikhaiti shrine of BurhaMayong, the Narashinha Ashram of Hiloikhunda, the Ganesh temple of Hatimuria and the Shiva Mandir of Kachashila. It also has a community museum showcasing numerous objects relating to ancient magic literature and relics.



Madan-Kamdev:
Mini Khajuraho

About 40 km north of Guwahati is Madan Kamdev, atop the Dewangiri Hills, ruins of some 20 temples, among which the basement of one temple is still intact. The complex, declared protected by Archaeological Survey of India, is strewn with numerous carved slabs of stone, fragments of stone pillars and their capital bases, chiseled stone blocks of walls, many having floral designs on them. Archaeologists say Madan Kamdev was built between the 11th and 12th centuries. The complex has some erotic sculptures, and the sanctum sanctorum of the temple has the male and female deities in amorous embrace, making locals believe it was dedicated to Kamdev, the god of love.

Valiant Souls

Assam has two major World War II cemeteries where lie in peace as many as 686 brave soldiers who had lost their lives in different places in Assam and present-day Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh fighting the invading Japanese forces. The Guwahati War Cemetery originally had 497 graves, of which 11 belonged to Japanese soldiers. Those were however dug and flown back to home in 2012. The Guwahati War Cemetery is unique in that it is the only cemetery where heroes of both sides – the victors and the vanquished – were buried side by side within one campus, till 2012.

Of the 486 existing graves in the Guwahati War Cemetery, 316 belong to soldiers from the United Kingdom, 136 Indians, four each from Canada and Australia, and one from New Zealand. It also has 24 Chinese war graves, while 25 of the burials continue to remain unidentified, in addition to two non-war graves.

The Guwahati War Cemetery was started during the Second World War for burials from the several military hospitals posted in the area. Later, other graves were brought in by the Army Graves Service from Amari Bari Military Cemetery, Sylhet Military Cemetery, Mohachara Cemetery, Nagaon Civil Cemetery and Guwhati Civil Cemetery, where permanent maintenance could not be assured. Further graves were also brought to the cemetery for the same reason from isolated sites in present-day Mizoram, and from civil cemeteries in Badarpur, Coochbehar, Darjeeling, Dhubri, Dibrugarh, Dinjan, Lebong, Lumding, Shillong and Silchar, in 1952.

The other War Cemetery is at Digboi, which 197 Commonwealth and 3 non-Commonwealth (1 Italian, 1 American and 1 Belgian) burials of the World War II. These graves are of soldiers who had died in the field hospitals, as also from burial grounds in Panitola, Jorhat, Margherita, Tinsukia and Ledo, where permanent maintenance could not be assured. One grave is also from the US Military Cemetery at Shingvuoiyang in Burma (Myanmar).

Sarthebari:
Bell-metal hub

Less than 100 km west of Guwahati is Sarthebari, home to the traditional bell-metal and brass industry, the second largest handicraft of Assam. An alloy of copper and tin, bell-metal is used for making various kinds of utensils used for domestic and religious purposes. About 40 per cent of the Sarthebari families are engaged in this cottage industry which has survived as a craft for ages. Visitors can see the *kanhar* – as the bell-metal craftsman is called – making *kalah* (water pot), *sarai* (a platter or tray mounted on a base), *kanhi* (dish), *bati* (bowl), *lota* (long-necked pot), temple and school bells, and various kinds of cymbals and decorative items.

Mugkuchi: Welcome *Japi*

While *Japi* – the colourful version of the original traditional field hat – is an essential item while welcoming a distinguished guest in Assam, one should go to Mugkuchi, Tilana, Sutarkuchi and Balilecha, a cluster of villages in Nalbari, about 50 km from Guwahati, to see how families of artisans manufacture it with their nimble fingers in their respective home cottage units. Made of tightly woven bamboo and dry leaves of *tokou* (Assamese fan palm found in rain forests), the *Japi* has two versions – the plain field hat used by farmers working in the sun, and the decorative ones originally used by kings and noblemen. Popularised by the first Assamese film Joymati (1935) made by cultural icon Jyotiprasad Agarwala, the *Japi* is also a popular wall-hanging in Assamese drawing rooms.

Jewellerty

Ornaments, particularly of gold, is an essential element of Assamese craft and culture. Assamese women wear a wide variety of ornaments befitting different occasions. Most of these ornaments are made of raw gold called “ke-cha son” in Assamese. While traditional Assamese ornaments and jewelry are made in several places, the most important centre is a village called Rantholi near Nagaon, about 110 km east of Guwahati. Artisans use local flora, fauna and various other traditional items as motifs to design these ornaments and jewelry. The range of handmade Assamese ornaments include necklaces - like golpota, saatsori, jonbiri, dholbiri, bena, gejera, doogdoogi, and mukuta-moni; earrings -- like lokaparo, kerumoni, thuriya, jangphai, longkeru, and makori etc; and a wide variety of rings.

ভূপেন হাজৰিকা

মহাবাহু ব্ৰহ্মপুত্ৰ

মহাবাহু ব্ৰহ্মপুত্ৰ মহামিলনৰ তীর্থ
কতযুগ ধৰি আহিছে প্ৰকাশী
সমন্বয়ৰ অর্থ...
মহাবাহু ব্ৰহ্মপুত্ৰ মহামিলনৰ তীর্থ
কতযুগ ধৰি আহিছে প্ৰকাশী
সমন্বয়ৰ অর্থ...
মহাবাহু ব্ৰহ্মপুত্ৰ.
সুদূৰ কাণ্য ভোগজৰে পৰা
বাৰভূঞাঁ আহিছিলে,
সেই বংশতে শংকৰদেউ
ইয়াতে জনমিলে,
মৰুৰ দেশৰে আজান ফকিৰে
মধুৰ জিকিৰ ৰচিলে,
দিল্লীৰ দিলৰাৰে আহি
অষ্টিপুথি আঁকিলে,
পঞ্চনদীৰ টেগবাহাদুৰে
ধৰমৰ সেতু গঢ়িলে,
সমন্বয়ৰ দেখুৱালে কত
প্ৰকাশ স্বতস্ফুর্ত,
মহাবাহু ব্ৰহ্মপুত্ৰ...
দূৰৰ লাচিতে শৰাইঘাটতে
শতৰু আগচিলে,
জাতি-ধর্ম-ভাষা সবাকে
স্বদেশ প্ৰেমেৰে বান্ধিলে,
কিৰাত পুত্ৰ বিষ্ণুৰাভাই
মাটিত বৃষ্টি দিয়ালে,
সমন্বয়ৰ দেখুৱালে কত
প্ৰকাশ স্বতস্ফুর্ত,
মহাবাহু ব্ৰহ্মপুত্ৰ...
পত্তা নদীৰ...
পত্তা নদীৰ ধুমুহাত পৰি
কত শতজন আহিলে,
লুইতৰ দুয়ো পাৰে কতনা
অতিথি আদৰিলে,
কিছু ল'ব লাগে কিছু দিব লাগে
দিন যাবলে হ'লে,
মিলিব লাগে মিলাব লাগে
ৰবীন্দ্রনাথেও ক'লে,
অগ্রৱাল জ্যোতিয়ে ইয়াতে
জ্যোতিৰ প্ৰপাত বোৱালে,
অজীন পাতকী খবৰ চক্র
জ্যোতিৰে কৰি ব্যর্থ,
মহাবাহু ব্ৰহ্মপুত্ৰ মহামিলনৰ তীর্থ
কতযুগ ধৰি আহিছে প্ৰকাশী
সমন্বয়ৰ অর্থ...
মহাবাহু ব্ৰহ্মপুত্ৰ...

Mahabahu Brahmaputra

To where does the bohag come with its distinct glory?
To the banks of the Brahmaputra, isn't it?
What could be the great heritage of this Brahmaputra?
The mighty-armed Brahmaputra
Pilgrimage of great unity
Expressing through the ages
the meaning of harmony.

From far-away Kanyakubja came the Barabhuyans
Sankaradeva was born here, a descendant of that family,
Came Azan faqir from the land of deserts
To compose sweet jikirs
Came Dilowar from Delhi to paint the Hastiputhi
And Tegh Bahadur from the land of five rivers
built the bridge of faith,
Causing spontaneous expression of harmony.
Lachit took head-on the enemy at Saraighat
Uniting with the bond of patriotism
All races, faith and tongues
Bishnu Rabha, a great Kirata son
Rejuvenated the culture of the land,
Causing spontaneous expression of harmony.

Hundreds came, hit by storms beside the Padma,
The banks of the Luit embraced many a guest,
Give a little, take a little
To merge and live in amity,
As Rabindranath had said.

It was here that Agrawal, the Jyoti
Caused an avalanche of light
Thwarting conspiracies of the wicked ones
With the might of his radiance.

Bohag= the first month on the Assamese calendar, denotes Assamese New Year.
Kanyakubja= Kanauj in central India.
jikir= Typical Assamese Muslim devotional songs.
Hastiputhi= A painted Assamese treatise on elephants.
Kirata= A branch of the Mongoloids.
Luit = Another name of Brahmaputra.
Padma= River in East Bengal/Bangladesh.
Jyoti = Light; Jyotiprasad Agarwala, greatest exponent of modern Assamese art and culture.

Translation: Samudra Gupta Kashyap

Bhupen Hazarika

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