

## A WATERY VISIT TO INDIA: ASSAM, GOA, THE GANGES, AND THE SUNDARBANS

### PART 2: THE BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER, ASSAM

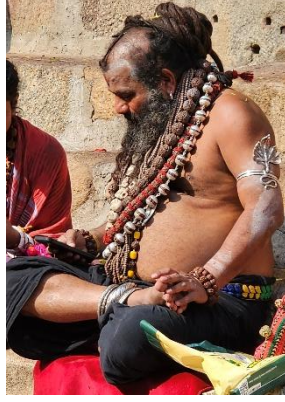
Saturday night December 21 spent at the Taj New Town was the official beginning of my MV Mahabaahu week-long cruise. I was expecting to meet a whole tour group there but, in fact, we were meeting up in Guwahati, a 1 ½ hour flight north from Kolkata. One part of the group was already on board and the five of us who gathered from various directions were taken on a visit to Kamakhya Temple high on Nilachil Hill above Guwahati. The temple is dedicated to Kamakhya, goddess of desire and a wife of Shiva, giver of salvation (and sometimes the destroyer). There was a sizable crowd of worshippers, and I didn't notice any other non-Indian visitors. The sanctuary visit requires a whole day as the wait time is



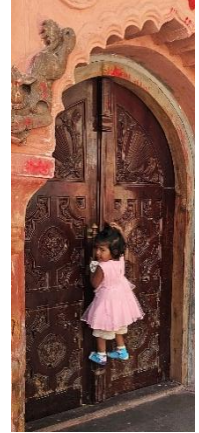
about four hours, but there was plenty to see starting from Ganesh (God of beginnings, remover of obstacles and bringer of good luck), followed by many sculptures and altars for offerings of flowers and fruit.

Daily animal sacrifices are also made. The temple was first built in the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries and has been renovated many times.





The predominant colors are yellow and red. It was time to remove our shoes, remember where we left them (we have three members of the ship's staff with us to be sure of that) and to not worry that they would be stolen because they never are! We were given



disposable blue shoe covers for our feet, the first clue of the attention to hygiene and comfort we were to receive for the next week. Every time we returned on board we removed our shoes and donned slippers (provided) while our shoes were cleaned and replaced in front of our cabin doors. We were also given a hot towel and glass of fresh juice.

As we returned to town, I was impressed by the paintings on the highway pillars and adjacent walls.



Just before reaching the harbor we passed a sculpture of Lachit Borphukan, leader of the Ahom army that defeated the invading Mughals in the Battle of Saraighat in 1671.



Now is our first glimpse of the mighty Brahmaputra which sources in Tibet, flows 1625 km eastward through China then turns south into Arunachal Pradesh in India before turning west and flowing as the spine of Assam for 700 km. It then turns again southeast towards Kolkata and enters Bangladesh where it flows another 360 km before merging with the Ganges and entering the Bay of Bengal. It has a different name in each country and changes elevation up to 20 feet during the Himalayan snow melt and monsoon flood

season from April to October. Guwahati is its narrowest width at 1 km, 8 km is very typical and during flood stage up to 30 km.



Our ship (boat? vessel?), commissioned in 2007, built in Guwahati and launched in 2011, was special purpose designed for this river and partly supported by the government of Assam to bring tourism to the state. At 55 meters in length, it fits the definition of ship (>100' long) but doesn't feel as massive as what I think of as ships!

It has a draft requirement of 1.67 meters but the pilot boat that is ahead of us each day is mapping and marking the channel of at least 7 meters of depth. We also have two pilots on board, one from the local river section and one from the overall river management authority. On river boats the captain is called the master and there are several sub-masters. We are required to anchor before sunset which is about



4:30 pm and can start up again at first light, about 5:30 am, which we do each morning. We are motoring upstream in total about 300 km over the seven days.



On several mornings we are completely fogged in when we start out.



The boat staff totals 35, many of whom we never see because they are below, maintaining the engines, water and wastewater systems. There are a chef, sous-chef, pastry chef and numerous kitchen staff. Everything is



prepared on board from local fresh ingredients including homemade ice cream as part of dessert every night! We are given dinner veg and non-veg main course options daily plus always a soup, appetizer, cheese and Indian bread. Since we will be visiting several weaving villages there is a tailor on board as well as an esthetician for all typical

services. In addition to a small pool which we were warned could be emptied to reduce our draft, there are two jacuzzies in the fitness center.

Our group is only twelve out of a capacity of 46. Three generations of an Indian/Australian family plus two Germans, a French lady and two Americans. With so many staff to support all our needs and visits we are truly pampered. Daily talks prepare us for our outings.

The islands on either side of the river have varying elevations above the current water level and many are completely submerged during the flood including the local village we visit on our first full day. Forty percent of Assam is in the flood plain and because there is no polluting industry the river supports excellent agriculture and fishing.



When we arrive at the village in our “tender” our staff solves the challenge of the steep



embankment by creating a staircase complete with banister! During six months of the year this village has a wide variety of flourishing crops as well as a school for children from age five to grade eight. They learn English from grade 3 and another language from grade 5. The government provides incentives for students to continue onwards to grade ten and complete high school. During the flood they relocate!



I watched this woman carry a baby goat to nurse from its mother which seemed quite reluctant but ultimately acquiesced. I was quite puzzled, however, because on the return she was carrying two kids!



As we walked along, we saw an informal Hindu altar, a banana tree with its flower, cannabis and a wide variety of vegetables, some of which I didn't recognize. And, as



elsewhere, the women were colorfully dressed.

The housing is somewhat temporary in nature and this wall at the school shows the level of the river at flood time.





I learned in our evening talk about three different types of silk coming from Assam, three different moths, eating three different plants, and producing distinctly different silks, Eri, Pat and Muga. This is



non-violent silk production because the moth has already left the cocoon.

While cruising the next day we passed more islands, and a live-aboard boat.



That night we docked at Tezbur instead of Silghat because there was a tiger on the loose in town that had already injured at least one human and an in-town walk was on our schedule. This was a first such event according to the staff in their eight years of this cruise. I opted not to take a walk in Tezbur but to catch up on internet and prepare to get up at 2 am for our elephant safari. It is Christmas Eve and we had a visit from Santa.



Wake-up call was at 2 am, I had a banana and cup of tea before starting the 1 ½ hour drive to Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve. One of our four vehicles got stuck in the sand so we merged into three. Just before entering the park we stopped at Borgas Resort for a bathroom break and returned later for breakfast. We were on our

elephants at 5:15 am, it is just daylight but very foggy. There are a total of ten elephants, each holding two adults facing forward, so not only our group, for about a 45-minute walk. My elephant is 30 years old so obviously my mahut is not the only one she has had in her life! But a mahut stays with his elephant his whole life. He was talking softly to her as





we walked and at one point had a cell phone to his ear. The uneven terrain with periodic water holes is mostly elephant grass about one meter tall, which she is munching.



I think I see a wild boar in the grass, then hog deer, and then a whole herd of them. Next a buffalo in

the fog followed by a pair with a whole herd just visible

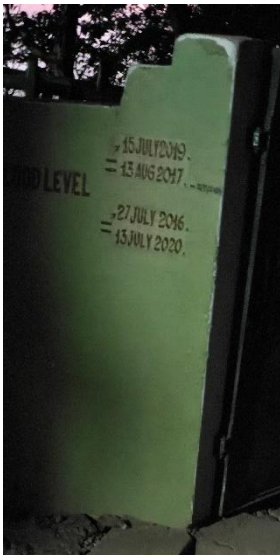


beyond them.

Then we encounter rhinos. This is the only habitat of the one-horned



rhino and it is a constant battle against poachers. The park is under water during the flood period and the animals cross the access road and move to higher uninhabited ground.



We encountered two rhinos passing each other in opposite directions. Then one turned to follow the other one which then turned to face it. I thought confrontation? But no, they checked each other out, then went on their way.





As we were returning to disembark a stork was just visible in the fog and then a lone elephant. I only saw lone elephants (no family units) on this trip. They are the young bachelors ejected from the herd to start their new life. Fortunately, I had seen lots of families in Botswana last

year! Of course, those are African elephants and these are Asian, smaller, elephants. Here is “my” elephant.



At the park entrance there is a sculpture created from the ash of burning 2479 rhino horns collected from poachers to prove they had no medicinal value. We returned to Borgas Resort about 7 am for a quick buffet



breakfast and then drove to the western part of the park for our jeep

safari. This 1030 km<sup>2</sup> area was first protected in 1908 as a

forest reserve and became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985.



In addition to large water bodies, 50% of the terrain in this part of the park is grasslands which grow to 10' in height and are no longer edible. They burn it in April so with the monsoon new grass will grow. They also do elephant safaris here with four adults per (larger) elephant seated sideways. Many of the elephants are decorated.



In 1975 there were 600 rhinos, now there are 2813 of a global population of 4014. Only 3 were poached last year and guards can shoot poachers on sight. The wild water buffalo is the most dangerous and of the 3400 in the world, 3100 are in India. There are about 1200 elephants in this park and 125 tigers which have a lifespan of 14-16 years. A tiger can kill a rhino.



As we started our jeep safari we passed a field of macaque monkeys and swamp deer and our guide said their respective sentries warn them all of danger. The various species seemed content around each other. I assume the tiger is the exception to this! We saw the mandatory



wart hog and an unexpected elephant almost totally concealed by the grass.



With all the water there are lots of water birds. This one drying its wings is called a snake bird because when it is in the water only its neck and head protrude so it looks like a snake.



In a lovely woody area there were lesser adjutant stork nests in the trees and several orchid varieties. However, they bloom in April when the park is flooded.



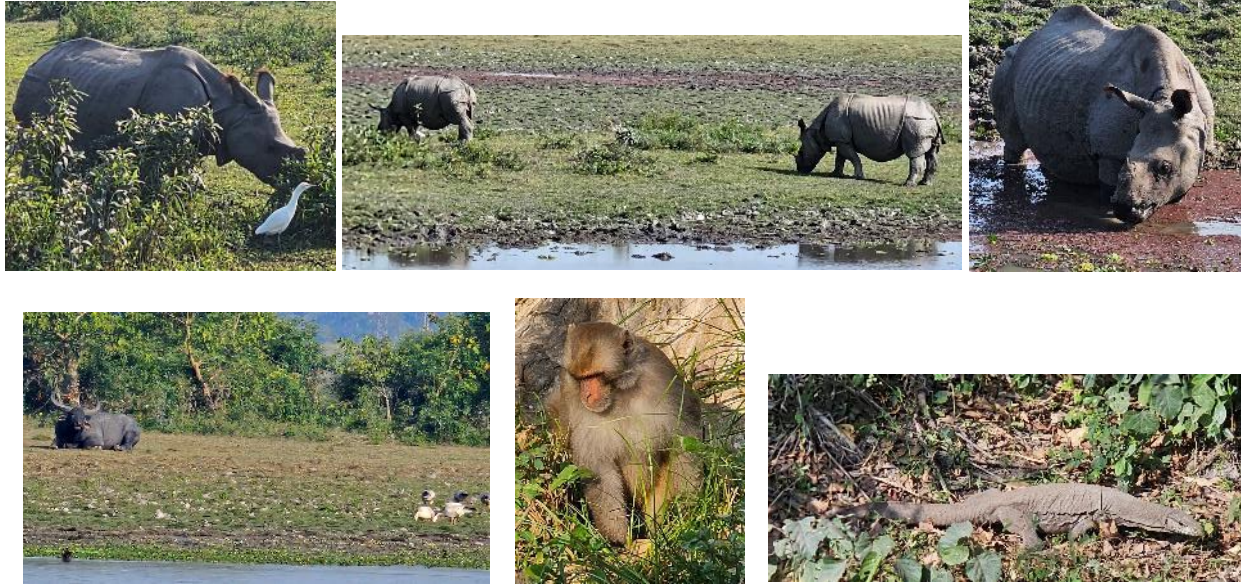
This tree shows the claw marks of a tiger marking its territory. Apparently it produces a sap that is soothing to their claws.



These two rhinos arrived and then laid down to nap.



Virtually every rhino had a lesser egret companion, because the rhino is turning up good food. This one is with an offspring of about two years, and they are clearly equally happy in the water and on land.



After the safaris we visited a jute mill that produces 25,000 bags per day with 600 employees operating 24/7. Jute is a cash crop for villagers in this part of India and must be



soaked for a month before the outer casing can be removed. The entry factory wage is 40 US\$ per month which for a person whose land and house are owned is adequate. Some of the specialized tasks bring a higher wage. There are two factories on the site with the



identical process but I noticed that only the newer one employed women. Although masks are required (due to the rather dangerous dust) many employees were ignoring the rule.

There was a nice cocktail and floating oil lamp ceremony on an uninhabited island before



Christmas dinner but I was too tired to make the effort to go out so the staff brought me a plate of the stuffed eggplant and chicken leg that were being served as aperitif!

I forgot to mention that each evening



the barman created a unique complimentary cocktail with our aperitif, non-alcoholic for those so inclined. Here is a typical dinner menu and main course. Each day the cuisine was from a different region of India.

The next day we visited Bishwanath Ghat, an island town of 18,000 population. We are



greeted by a statue of Shiva and a beautiful rocky harbor, a welcome change from all the sand! The village lies just above the flood level. There are some ancient temples inside a temporary structure built each year because they are underwater during the flood season.



We were treated to a dance performance called Bihu in this region. Everyone learns the dance, but these are trained performers. The story is of the women bringing meals in tiffin to the men while they are harvesting. The harvest festival will be celebrated about the middle of January.



The old part of this temple dates to 1675, these were Buddhists who converted to Hinduism. At the time, it was



colorful. There are a meditation room, the Ahom dynasty symbol of dragon and lion, and another small room to pray for lost items.

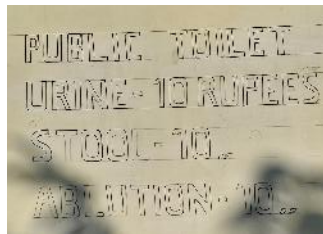


The wall paintings along the streets are relatively new as they didn't exist in a video I watched about the community which has a central area with paved streets and concrete buildings.

However, the island is primarily fishing, farming and weaving. When walking we passed a tree altar and a pay toilet. This is a



typical local house.



Among the wide variety of plantings was a small plot of teak which will bring serious money when it reaches harvest size.



We visited an extensive selection of the women's cotton and silk weaving and some shopping occurred! It turns out most of the linens and curtains on MV Mahabaahu were woven here.





Before departing we received a demonstration on how to prepare betel for chewing. The red and white scarf is the typical welcome scarf of Assam.

While cruising this afternoon we saw the leftover debris from the flood season. We also saw a wide variety of birds, and very curious floating blobs of sand!



I haven't mentioned before the local shore-based fishing nets which have appeared in several photos. I managed to snap a turtle photo.



These markers show the channel now and the island during flood season.



At the end we spotted an elephant in the woods. Fortunately he stayed along the shore and we were able to follow him!



When we turned around to head back home staff broke out glasses and wine and juice choices and we arrived before sunset.



Back on board, one of our chefs gave a cooking demonstration of samosas and egg pakoda with help from two of our group.

This is a good time to mention that not only was there a make to order omelet station every breakfast, but a cook made pancakes from a different flour each day, most of which I had never tasted!

The following day is another village visit, this time of the Mishing Tribe who originated in the Mongolian regions of Asia. They have

been living on the Brahmaputra for centuries and have adopted a lifestyle with ingenious stilt houses that among other things allow the floor level to be raised to accommodate the flood height. As with some other tribes they have a certain amount of autonomy under Indian law. At least one NGO is promoting use of their house design in the region but updating bamboo columns and mud foundations to sturdier materials and elevating the basic floor level a further three feet to accommodate the increasingly higher floods. During the flood season bamboo rafts provide transport.



This past year they lost about 50 meters of land including part of the school. There is now a temporary school. Here are the

requirements for the school meals.



MACHHA AMATGURI W.E. SCHOOL	
1. Rice	1000g
2. Lentils	100g
3. Oil	50g
4. Salt	10g
5. Tea	10g
6. Sugar	10g
7. Eggs	10g
8. Milk	10g
9. Fruit	10g
10. Vegetables	10g
11. Spices	10g
12. Fuel	10g
13. Paper	10g
14. Stationery	10g
15. Books	10g
16. Other	10g
17. Total	1000g



They have their own animistic religion, language about 350 are also weavers.

and clothes. This village has residents, and the women



We saw baby piglets, chicks, ducklings, goslings, and these adorable two-day old goat kids.

Before departing we were given a demonstration of traditional men's and women's Assamese clothing to prepare us to dress for the Assamese event on board.



That evening, once we were dressed, the staff, over half of whom are Assamese, provided local Ahomia music. Except for the Directress, all the staff are men and the Ahomia dancing was lively and athletic!

Majuli Island is one of the largest inhabited river islands in the world, formed in 1750 in a massive flood. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>C it was 1250 km<sup>2</sup> and has diminished to 352 km<sup>2</sup> today. The population is about 160,000 in twenty communities and it was a shock to see concrete multi-story buildings! There are 10 colleges, about 100 schools and Mishing, Assamese and Duri languages are spoken. The primary activities are fishing, farming, dairy, mask making and pottery.





Because a large new island has formed since this cruise itinerary was created, it was necessary to take alternative transport, in this case one of the Inland Waterways



Transportation Authority boats. When it arrived our Directress wasn't satisfied and had them move their plastic chairs to the inner warmer cabin, mop the wet deck, and install five of our chairs on the front deck. In the end I sat on the back deck in the sun with

staff and napped a bit as wake up had been at 5:45 am for this very full day.



We passed the early squatters on this new island and were told they would soon be planting crops.

We also saw a dredging operation and workers installing the water diverters known as bandaling.



There is an 8.25 km long bridge under construction from the mainland to Majulu which should be



finished in about three years but for now they are served by constant vehicle/passenger ferries.



The Mishings have a large presence on Majuli and we saw their stilt villages on route to our cultural performances.

We also passed mustard fields, dairy cows and buffalo.



I saw examples of the local pottery when we passed through a town.



The neo-Vaishnav culture, founded by Srimanta Sankaradeva in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, focuses on one God, individual worship through poetry, song, and dance, is inclusive of all castes and women and has a strong presence here.

Dashavata, danced by eight women accompanied by castanets, flute and drum depicts the ten avatars of Vishnu who takes birth at different times and forms to protect man.





A masked episode from the epic Ramayana was then presented. In short,



warriors and



Sita, Ram's wife, is abducted by the devil king Ravan posing as a beggar. Eventually Ram returns with Hanuman and an army of monkey warriors and rescues his wife.



The costumes and performers were great.

I have always been partial to Hanuman so I bought his mask from the local mask maker as my souvenir of this trip.



We continued to the Kamalabari Satra, one of the monastic orders founded by Sankaradeva, this one in 1673. Today there are eighteen monks who operate a boys' boarding school for religious and secular education. When they turn 18 they decide if they want to pursue life as a monk. The Gayan Bayan dance is part of their prayer ritual, not a

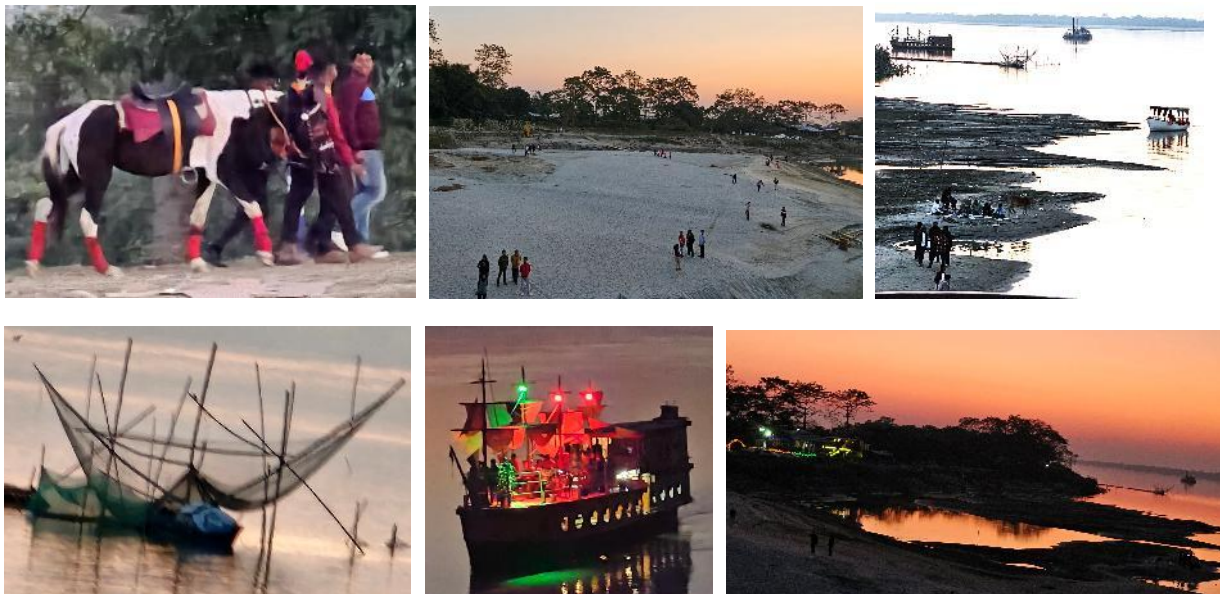


performance, so there is no applause. Our staff gave us anti-bacterial wipes to clean our feet before putting our socks and shoes back on so they would be clean for our slippers when we returned!

We made a final stop at the Rengam Industrial Women's Cooperative Society founded in 2011 which supports 312 Mishing artisans in livelihood, health, education and social improvement. They were not working on Saturday but their shop was open.



Given the new transport situation, the option to visit Sibsagar Ahom temples was no longer feasible. We are docked at Neamati Ghat for our final night. A few people took a nature walk, I stayed on board to watch the local activity which included a horse decked out for some special occasion, lots of people on the beach and some party boats out for sunset cruises.



On our departure day we took a morning trip to a tea estate but as it is the dormant period no picking was occurring. They use this time to do the severe pruning required each five years or so plus fertilizing and overall maintenance. A brief demonstration of the tea types and processing was followed by a nice final lunch before heading to the airport for our respective onward flights. I spent Saturday night at the Taj in New Town and left early Sunday morning for my two flights to Goa. This completes part two of this trip.