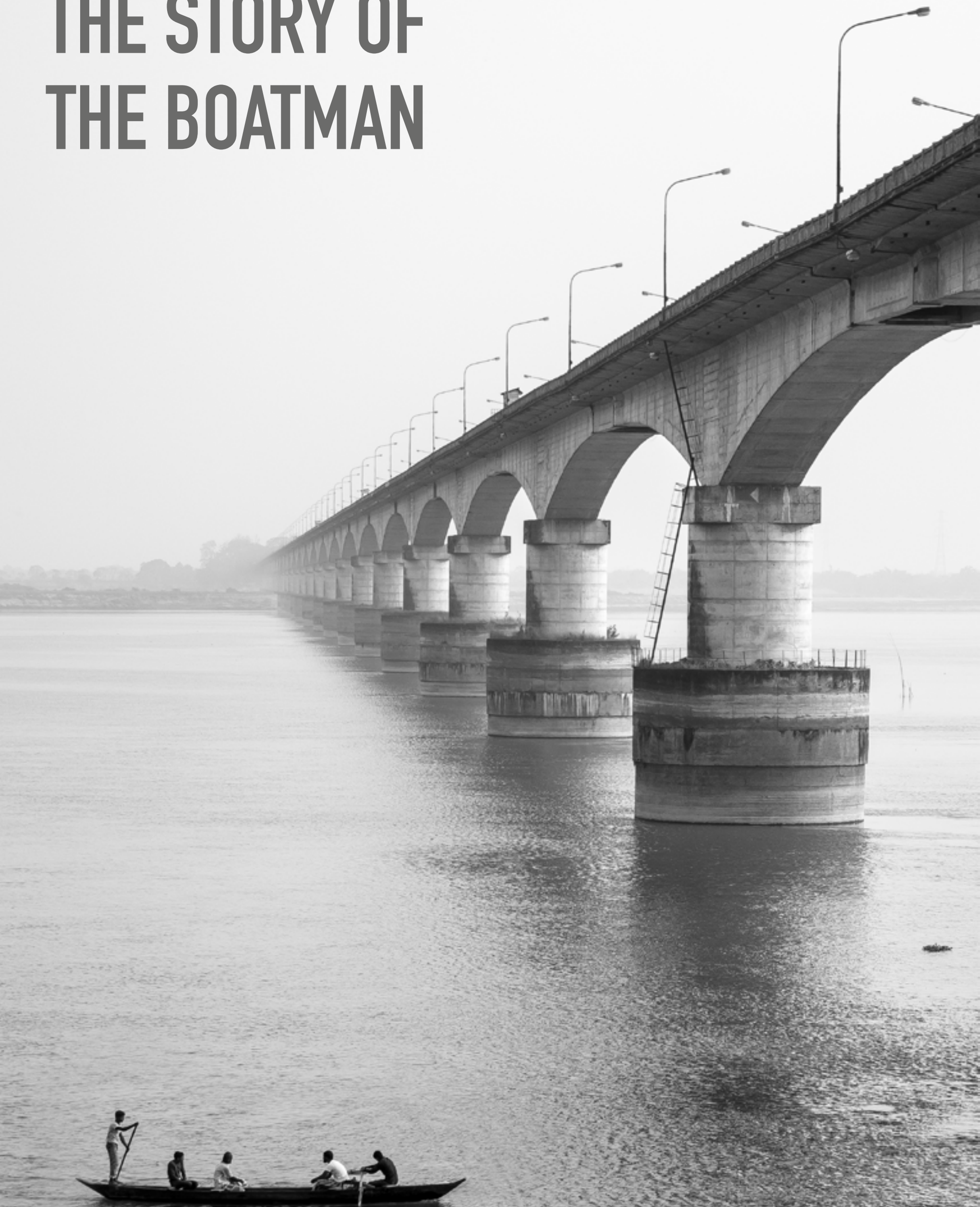


THE STORY OF THE BOATMAN



BACKGROUND

In mythological times, Amogha; wife of Sage Shantanu had a child by Brahma the creator of the Universe. The child took the form of water. Shantanu placed the child right in the middle of the four great mountains — Kailash, Gandhamadana, Jarudhi, and Sambwartakka. He grew into a great lake, the Brahmakunda.

The Brahmaputra originates in Tibet and flows into India through Arunachal Pradesh and Assam before emptying out in the Bay of Bengal via Bangladesh. The glacier fed Himalayan waters are rich in fresh water fish and the river for generations has been a migratory route, a source of livelihood and menace to the people in Assam. An extraordinary and unique geographical phenomenon characterizes the river in its course through Assam: a vast network of islands, home to the most vulnerable. More than 2.5 million people live on some 2,500 of these islands in Assam- *chars or saporis* as they are locally called.

Over the centuries the Brahmaputra or Luit or Siang as it is known in different parts of the North East has been instrumental in forging cultural identities, and livelihoods. It has repeatedly wandered from its course fraying into river braids that recombine decades later only to fragment off again. And this holds true even more so in this century given annual flooding, building of dams and soil erosion. This river is a lifeline for the people in Assam and over centuries has been a source of inspiration for tradition, songs, stories and folklore. These stories are steeped in Hindu mythology as well as Tribal lore. ***'Morisika (Mirage) : The Story of the Boatman'*** is an attempt to explore these stories of people living by this mighty river.

The "boatman" is a metaphor for connecting threads much as the boatmen themselves in Assam connect people and livelihoods.

**“Mohabahu Brahmaputra, mohamilonor tirtho
koto jug dhorì ahise probaxi homonnoyor ortho
Xudur kanyokunjore pora baro-bhuyan ahisile
hei bonxote Shankardev iyate jonmile.”**

**Mighty Brahmaputra union of greats,
has been flowing for ages, great soul.
Twelve Bhuyans came from far Kanyokunj to dwell,
who gave us Sankardev.**

- Bhupen Hazarika



NOTE ABOUT THE MAIN COLLABORATORS

Vandana Menon & Debashish Nandi joined Srishti Films at Srishti Institute of Art, Design & Technology in the summer of 2017. Over the course of their four years in Srishti Films, they worked together on over twenty five films all over India both rural and urban, bringing individual strengths that complimented each other. The web series and photobook is a proposed collaboration between them.

Vandana Menon is based in Bangalore, India and has had previous experience in direction, dramaturgy and pre-production. Debashish Nandi is an Assamese who lives between Lakhimpur, Assam & Bangalore. He is a cinematographer and a photographer. Both share the skills of researching and editing films. Both of them consider themselves story-tellers first and foremost and are interested in stories told through the voices of the uncommon, unconventional yet traditional.

They share a love of traveling to lesser known places and meeting different people who question their own world views, politics and sense of belonging. They are both passionate about asking questions and understand that it is more important to seek and be uncertain than to provide answers with a certainty.

In 2019, as the idea of setting out to make a film of their own took form, over coffee, over lunch and dinner and late into the night there were long discussions on ideas and beliefs that they felt strongly about and questions that gave birth to more questions. During the course of these long conversations, it also became clear that they both wanted to continue their professional relationship outside of Srishti Films and to pool in their resources to make films that they felt were time sensitive and necessary.

As story-tellers it has always been important for them to find the lens to tell the story, and represent stories through characters. For them, the medium has been most often than not inter disciplinary be it photography, theatre and their first and last loves cinema. Over the course of the past year they decided to embark on a journey down this mythical, dangerous and moody river to discover the innumerable and maybe untold stories that are deeply intertwined with the rivers' many personalities. And so it begins...

OF PEOPLE AND PLACES

Each and every place has its own identity and these unique identities are made up of the environment and the people inhabiting those places.

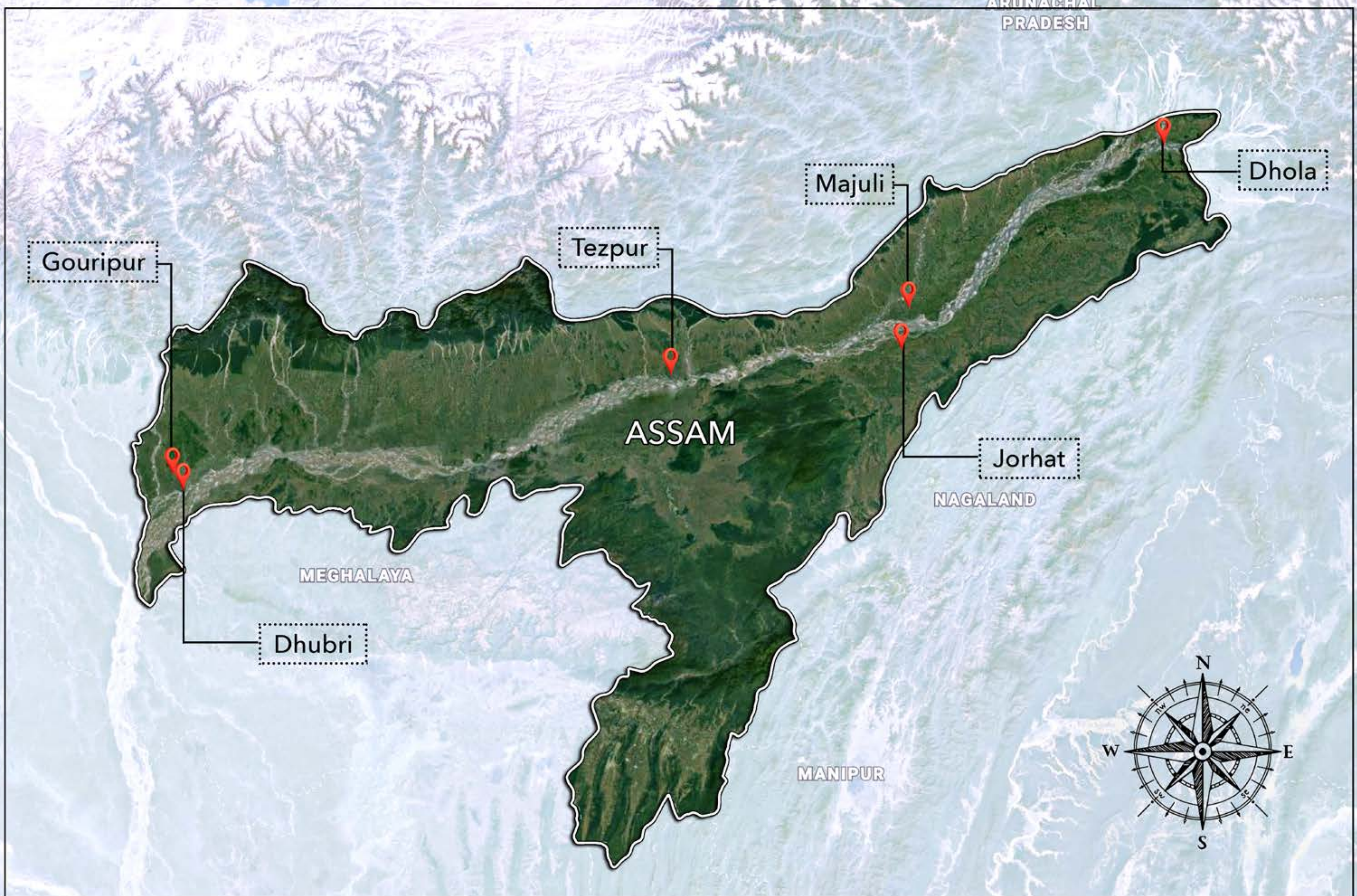
'Morisika (Mirage) : The Story of the Boatman' began as a photo series that Debashish worked on, over a period of three years & for him, being an Assamese, there exists the same sense of belonging and respect for the cultural diversity and traditions as any artist in Assam. Having travelled to other parts of the country for over a year and a half he also feels that change is on the way within Assam itself. He feels that in the current scenario of development and climate change, lifestyles too are changing. With the environment changing he realises that things will change and with it so will a lot of the traditional practises and customs.

He feels that there is distinct difference between more widely known folk forms and that of the Brahmaputra Valley as it is still fairly inaccessible and isolated. And that too will change and evolve in time. Being an insider, he feels an urgency to document and preserve some of the stories that he has grown up with.

For Vandana, she has seen and felt the flip side of urbanisation and the loss of identity, roots, culture and the sense of belonging that comes with it. Having always seen herself as an outsider because of this very fact, she feels the need to go back and discover stories and roots. Having travelled both in her own country and abroad, she's also seen a diluted version of commodified folk forms that have no bearing on history or context and help the outsider understand very little about the deep complexities of life on the inside. Which according to her, creates a bubble of detachment.

Folk, for her, is simply put, a means of communication that originated as such and now can be used as a tool helping her and other people understand a little bit more about each other. She also feels that it is a way to understand our relationship with nature; not glorified and not romanticised but in its truest form. Cultural traditions and customs have a way of embracing both the good and bad and celebrate nature as itself instead of trying to contain or change it. And for her philosophically, it is an alternative perspective that's worth exploring.

Therefore, for this project, as always, they believe that they have a unique perspective and the ability to bring it together and tell a story that needs to be told.



**“Maa ami Xodialoi jamei
Maa ami Xotful khamei
Bandhim ami bandhim Maa
Kesa paatot loon.”**

**“ Mother, some day we will visit Sadiya
Mother we will eat dessert flowers in Sadiya.
We will make khar from the ashes of the banana
stem leaves.”**

- Khagen Mahanta



School children learnt of a world in their fables and poems. An imaginary land just beyond the horizon. That imaginary land was Sadiya in the eastern most point of Assam. Many children believed it to be a fictional place for centuries.

Very close to the Burma border, rich in ecological bio diversity and oil, disconnected from the rest of Assam because of the river, nomadic pastoralists and several indigenous tribes learnt to be self sufficient. The pastoralists still exist to this day on islands dotted across the river. They describe their architecture and way of life as '**Khuti**'. Their sole source of income came from the milk of tamed water buffaloes that the boatman would take every morning to the closest villages on the banks of the river.

In 2017, Sadiya was connected to the rest of the world by the longest beam bridge called the Dhol-Sadiya bridge. The place was no longer imaginary. The boatmen, fishermen, pastoralists began to lose their only sources of income from transportation of milk and goods across the river.

Today, these pastoralists' very existence is in limbo as their landscape is threatened by oil drilling companies, poachers and rising water levels.







“Majuli, the largest river island in the world was once believed to be a place where a King kept his treasure hidden beneath the Brahmaputra. It is said that the Brahmaputra flowed around and over it protecting the treasure.”

“Boluka pelai Rotnopurok putla,
nogoror duyukakhe Brahmaptra
goila odyopiu dukakhe Luhit boi,
Hikarone rotnopur Majuli bulay.”

Majuli, known as one of the largest river islands in the world is rich in biodiversity, culture and sustainable practices. Satras (religious institutions), livestock and farmlands are keys to life in Majuli. Livestock and farmlands depend on the annual floods to fertilise the soil. The very existence of Majuli is under threat due to the untimely change of course of the river. Due to the rising water levels the satras, farmers, the fishing community and boatmen are all in peril. Majuli has customs and activities outside the traditional seasonal cycle of agriculture. There are many recreational activities that give hope and motivation to help survive the annual devastation of this riverine island.

Dakhinpat Satra (a religious institution of Vaishnavite sect of Hinduism), said to be the oldest Satra in Majuli has been practicing many unique rituals to celebrate the land and its many treasures. The Satras are directly connected to the Brahmaputra; started by Mahapurush Sankardev himself who spent his early childhood playing in this mighty river. The Dakhinpat Satra in Majuli every 12 years pays homage to the river through offerings and foretellings about the changing course of the river. The Satradhikar (religious head) is the keeper of this age old tradition. A monastic institution, children are sent to the Satras to learn their ways of life and are trained in dance, music and theatre at the institution.

Theatrical folk forms dating back to the 15th century are prominent on this island.

Mahapurush Sankardev used his expertise in the medium of performing arts to convey his teachings to the most common man. He wrote plays on the life of Lord Krishna and performed plays called “*Bhaona*” in the villages that dot this island. Typically, in a “*Bhaona*” performance, masks were used by the performers to depict the characters of the play. All properties used in these performances are made of natural materials found in and around Majuli. Clay, sheath of betel nut leaves, wood, bamboo all found their way into the stories. At present, all the Satras of Majuli do not practice the art of making masks. It is kept alive at the Natun Samaguri Satra in the southern part of Majuli.

**“Luitar bolia baan,
tolo koloi nu dhapoli meliso
hir hir sowode kal roop dhoroi loi
kaak nu bare bare khediso?”**

**“ Oh, maddening floods of Luit,
where are you headed this time?
Whom are you chasing again with
the frightening sound of the waves?”**

- Sanjoy Hazarika



Jorhat means **'Two Haats'** (markets). **Macharhat and Chowkihat** existed on the two banks of river **Bhogdoi**, a tributary of the Brahmaputra in the 18th century.

The last capital of the **Ahom** rulers, who it is said, migrated from Thailand, Jorhat became an important trade route. Merchants, artists and courtiers from several countries came to Jorhat and settled at the Kings court. Even though the glory of the Ahom kingdom faded with time, Jorhat remained an important mercantile centre due to its proximity to the river. **Nimatighat**, connected the city through a national waterway with the Brahmaputra during colonial time. The British used the waterways in Assam as a means of trade and communication. Ghats and haats on different banks across Assam were instrumental in shaping its economy for centuries. Jorhat in particular attracted the Burmese who settled there for trade. This, in turn prompted the British to intervene and establish a money based economy in the State where barter system was the main stay. The access to the river was instrumental in establishing Jorhat as a trade capital and supported the economy.

Over the last few centuries, the prominence of Jorhat has dissipated as new forms of infrastructural development replaced the old water routes.

Every year, millions of people are displaced and extensive property, crops and livestock are destroyed in annual floods in Assam. Communities live on the chars or sandbars and continue to practice traditional medicine. Health problems are acute. Many are affected by water-borne diseases. A major problem is access to medicines and sustained health care.

The Boat Clinics are floating hospitals piloted by members of the Mishing tribe (indigenous community) who navigate the boat carefully alongside the endangered Ganges River Dolphin. The doctors are all from different parts of Assam. These boat clinics travel far and wide into the Brahmaputra, into places that are inaccessible by road. The boats are caulked with resin from the Sal tree by traditional boat makers. These boat makers are now dwindling in number as mass production of ferries and boats is slowly taking over. They now look for other jobs to earn an income.

On these forgotten islands, several artisans mould the clay from the river into terracotta utensils for cooking and eating. They also now sell these to bigger markets as their traditional self sufficiency has eroded over time by environmental change and industrialisation.



Tezpur, legendarily known as Pragjyotishpur was ruled by Banasura a descendent of Prahalada the demon king. He had a beautiful daughter Usha. Not wanting her to marry someone he did not approve off, he kept her isolated in a palace by the river now known as Agnighar. She had among her friends the minister's daughter Chitrlekha who had some magical powers.

Usha once dreamt of a handsome young man and fell in love with him. Chitrlekha helped her by drawing his image from Usha's dreams. Then Usha helped her by identifying him as Krishna's son Aniruddha. Later, Chitrlekha abducted Aniruddha while he was sleeping at home. She smuggled him into Usha's Palace, they fell in love with each other and got married.

Banasura discovered this and tied up Aniruddha using snakes. Krishna heard of this and came to rescue him. Banasura was a great devotee of Lord Shiva. When a huge battle began, Shiva fought Krishna, just as many other equals fight each other. Eventually, many died and the whole city was drenched in blood. Banasura's arms were cut off and he retired to the Himalayas. Krishna returned to Dwaraka with Usha and Aniruddha.

Lord Shiva was so pleased with him that he promised to grant Banasura a boon. Banasura, in turn asked Shiva to come and guard the gates of his city (now known as Tezpur). The people of Tezpur worship Lord Shiva and believe that he protects this town even to this day.





'Tezpur' – from 'Teza' + 'Pura' or 'Blood' + 'City'

It is said that while many places in Assam face floods and natural calamities, Tezpur; a small hill top on the bank of the mighty Brahmaputra stays unaffected because it is protected by Shiva himself. It is a historical town, situated on the Northern banks of the Brahmaputra & a tourist destination. But it is also important to note that the river serves many families who live on fishing, grazing cattle and selling milk. Many different communities from nearby districts migrate to Tezpur during the winter season to support themselves through fishing.

Joy Da; a renowned sculptor from Kolibari sculpted the figures depicting the story of Usha and Aniruddha in the archaeological site of Agnighar. In his imagination he wanted to create images which would transport us back to the times of prospering Pragjyotishpur. Born and brought up on the banks of the river, Joy Da's stories are steeped in a mix of mythology and history.

During the Indo-China war in 1962, Assam was in the eye of the storm. There were people who bore witness to the war and its aftermath. One such family belonged to the **Mahaldaari** system (Business of fish) in Tezpur. A matriarch who used the river Brahmaputra to ferry people to its opposite bank the night the Chinese were at their doorstep. Her son, Jeeb Das has spent his whole life on the banks of this river. Traditionally a fisherman, he now promotes sustainable eco tourism in and around Tezpur and is a passionate conservationist.

A fisherman by profession, Mohan Da is a singer in his free time in the **Namghars** or temples of **Kolibari** fishing village. In this village, there is an unusual practice wherein prayers performed in temples mostly are odes to the river and its people. Many of the **"Bhakats"** (Priests) are either boatmen or a fishermen, by profession. These **"Bhakats"** earn their income directly from the river through fishing. They are also invited to peoples' homes for performing religious rites and rituals. Through this transference, songs about the river enter households in Tezpur. Thus, these forms of folk songs reaches a wider audience talso become a deeply rooted part of Assamese religious practices.

The fishermen in Kolibari describe how the river has changed and the alarmingly rapid rate at which the number of fish in these waters are declining. According to them, there has been an increasing number of unsustainable fishing practices and infrastructural development that is changing the river and its biodiversity.



“ I am a woman made of clay, I sing songs of the soil,
I mix with common people because I know without them the
society cannot survive, What is society? Well dressed, sweet
vocabulary, outward courtesy, I do not follow the rules. I sing
songs of the people. Those are our folk songs.”

- Pratima Barua

In Gauripur, Dhubri district, farming is the main source of livelihood. Regional folk songs have a special place in the Gauripur. They are called '**Goalparia Lokogeet**'. Goalparia songs reflect the socio-cultural life of the people in Western Assam. It expresses the struggle of common man. Hard labour in the fields is the backbone of their society. Goalparia songs paint the pain, problems, struggle, agitation, exploitation of these hard working people. The hard life of the people and their relationship with the nature is vivid can easily be felt in these songs. The various festivals of modern day Gauripur, have given a lease of life to the folk songs of Goalpara. Spiritual thoughts and ideas are also being infused into this genre of music.

The instruments are made of wood from locally found trees. These trees are slowly disappearing due to deforestation and local communities have switched to wood that are imported from other regions of Assam.



**"I am a Miya
My serial number in the NRC is 200543
I have two children
Another is coming
Next summer.
Will you hate him
As you hate me?"**

**Write
I am a Miya
I turn waste, marshy lands
To green paddy fields
To feed you.**

**I carry bricks
To build your buildings
Drive your car
For your comfort
Clean your drain
To keep you healthy.**

**I have always been
In your service
And yet
you are dissatisfied!**

**Write down
I am a Miya,
of the Brahmaputra. "**

- Hafiz Ahmed





The islands on the western most point of Dhubri district where the Brahmaputra enters Bangladesh, is separated from the rest of Assam not only by the river but also by language and religion.

Minority muslims living on these islands have been marginalised for decades and considered to be illegal aliens. Their lives are completely dependent on the river. Farming, fishing and boats are their primary sources of income. The rising water levels and depletion of fish have forced them to travel to the town of Dhubri across the river to look for daily wage labour. They have several different forms of poetry and music.

'*Lalon geeti*' is their form of music and only the elders of this community practice this art form. "*Bhatiyali*"; a form of folk music that is mostly practiced in Bangladesh and West Bengal is also prevalent here. Bhatiyali is a river song mostly sung by boatmen while going down the river. The word "*Bhatiyali*" comes from "*Bhata*" meaning downstream. "*Bhait-yali*" talks about the life in a metaphorical way and describes the lives of boatmen and fishermen. These folk forms are part of a vanishing ethnic identity that has fallen prey to hate, distrust and discrimination.

'*Miya*' is an Urdu word for gentlemen but is commonly used as a derogatory slur in Assam to denote Bengali origin Muslims. Recently, Miya poetry is reclaiming one's identity and seeks to answer questions of belonging and citizenship.

CONCLUSION

The islands of the Brahmaputra are unmapped and under threat. Of disappearing. And along with them so are the stories of the boatmen and other river people. The Assamese, the Mishings, the Ahoms, the Satoris and various other communities along the course of this river call it home. And a home has a hearth where once stories were told. Of gods, of mythical animals and birds, of the jungles unknown, of their own identities and cultures lost and found. The Brahmaputra lives in their rituals and religions, nourishes the soil and sustains them in the ever-developing Assamese mainland.

It is a journey along the course of Brahmaputra. The Brahmaputra is at times calm and silent, as if in a meditative mood, sometimes destructive like a monster. This "vanishing paradise" is tucked away in a part of the country that is often sidelined and we will travel to places along the river that seem ethereal almost given its sense of instability and explore the endless stories that dwell within its currents.

