The Brahmaputra in the minds of people

Deepak Goswami

The writer gives an scriptural account of the origin of the river Brahmaputra and Parashuram becoming free from the sin of matricide by taking bath in the river and cutting the hills for the release of its sacred water of the benefit of the common man.

The mighty river is known as Burha Luit in Assam. Luit is derived from the word Lohit meaning blood and this is how Brahmaputra is known as in Arunachal Pradesh. The Brahmaputra is very frequently referred as Lauhitya in puranic stories. One such story in Kalika Puran describes how Parashurama, one of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, got rid of his sin of murdering his own mother with an axe (or Parashu) by taking bath in this sacred river. Actually, the story goes like this: On strict order from his father Yamadagni (who had suspected his wife Renuka of adultery), Parashuram had to murder his own mother by severing her head with an axe. As a result of this nefarious act, the axe got stuck to his hand and he was unable to take it off his hand. On advice from sages, he started on a pilgrimage and ultimately reached the place, which is presently known as Parashuram Kunda (about 25 km north of Tezu in Lohit district in Arunachal Pradesh). The story says that the mighty river was then confined to a Kund (or Kunda) or a small lake surrounded by hills. Parashuram cut down the hills on one side to release the sacred water for the benefit of the common people. By this act, Parashuram’s axe came out of his hand to his great relief and he knew that he had been exonerated from his sin.

The legend says that the river washed off the blood-stained axe of Parashuram and hence its water acquired a tinge of blood; that is how its name became Lauhitya or Luit in the derived form.¹

The Brahmaputra or the Son of Brahma is the only male river in the country. It is a little surprising that out of all the rivers in India, the Brahmaputra should be considered to be the only male river. More so for a river whose catchment areas have seen a low stage of development of feudalism and hence vestiges of matriarchal societies are still visible. Therefore, it is more likely that the river had a similar-sounding name in its pre-sanskritized form, which ultimately became the Brahmaputra after Sanskritization. As Dr Banikanta Kakati had shown, a large number of so-called pure Assamese and sanskritized names (e.g. Bordoisila, Kamakhya etc) have actually originated from Bodo names.

Another point which merits some consideration is that there appears to be very few folklore materials on the Brahmaputra although the name Burha Luit is a recurring theme in many folk songs. One reason may be that the river with its enormous size and placid nature was mostly taken for granted by the people in its valley in the early times; that may also be the justification of the adjective “Burha” (i.e. old) before its name. With the present author’s limited knowledge of history, let me hazard a guess: probably there is hardly any mention of the flood problem caused by the Brahmaputra in any historical material; flood appears to be a phenomenon of more recent origin. Therefore if people
took such a large river for granted, it is not much surprising. Another reason may be the low stage of development of the State’s economy, which did not create a powerful merchant class with a major dependence on riverine transport. However there is likely to be some folklore material on the Brahmaputra amongst the fishermen community of the State, which can be unearthed with serious study and research.

¹ A more down to earth explanation of the red tinge of water especially in the upper reaches may be due to the carrying of reddish soil by the river.