

Book Review 1**Rivers, Society, and Culture: Environmental Perspectives on the Rivers of Assam and Bengal.****Moniruna Debnath**

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Email Id – monirunadona85@gmail.com**Rup Kumar Barman: Rivers, Society, and Culture: Environmental Perspectives on the Rivers of Assam and Bengal. (New Delhi, Primus Books, 2023), 98 pp., Soft Bound, Price: INR 375**

The birth of Environmental History especially Fernand Braudel's revolutionary new paradigm for the study of history that adopted a multidisciplinary approach and 'longue durèe' as its main theme, opened a new sphere in the world of social science. The book under review '*River, Society, and Culture: Environmental Perspectives on the Rivers of Assam and Bengal*' by Rup Kumar Barman is the first of its kind in India where three rivers have been discussed extensively keeping in tandem with the concept of lounge durèe.

In the first chapter titled '*Fishermen and Crisis Migration: An Environmental Study of A River Called Titash*' Prof. Barman portrayed the hapless condition of 'Malo fishermen' through the lens of Adwaita Malla Barman's novel '*A River Called Titash*'. Adwaita Malla Barman was Malo himself born in 1914 in Gokarnaghat village of Brahmabaria, Tipperah (Comilla) district. Hence, his novel '*A River Called Titash*' exhibits some of his bitter experiences as a person belonging to a minority community. The Malos were accustomed to the different moods of the Titash River and migrated accordingly. However, the Malo lives turned topsy-turvy when Mohan's net got caught in the silt bed and with this ecological disaster they were forced to migrate to new places as fishing could no longer be their livelihood. As fishing was disrupted the Malos had to find odd jobs and live with a fractured identity, Malo women had to face the worst who did not have male members at home. Adwaita in the 1940's talked about 'Environment-induced Displaced Persons' much before the UN Guiding Principles, but do civilians, States, or Nations recognize them?

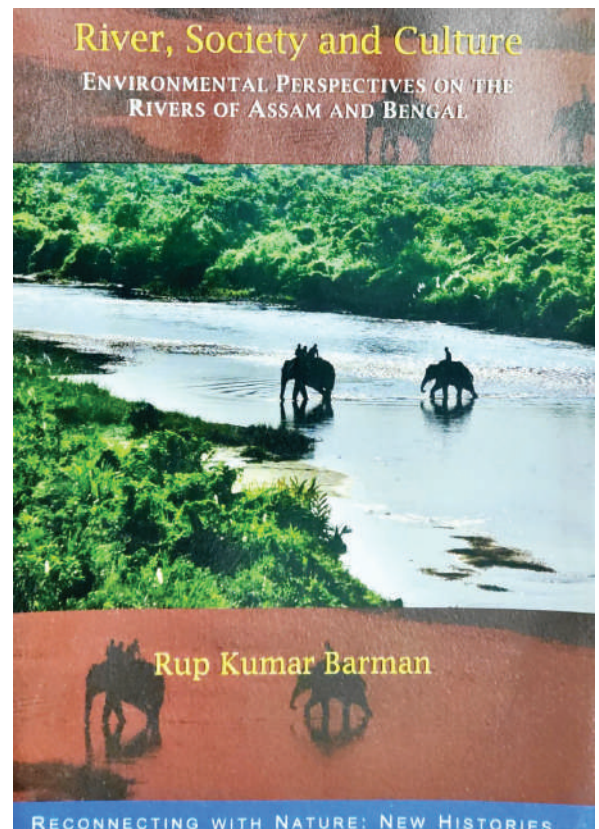
In the second chapter titled '*Struggle in the Assam-Bengal River Basin: Fictional Illustrations in Historical Perspective*,' Prof. Barman highlighted the political struggles of local people living by Tista River through the lens of Debesh Ray's novel '*Tista Parer Brittanta*' (1988) and Kalahi River through the lens of Jitendra Das' '*Kalahi Nadi: Ikul Hikul*' (1989). The River Tista is well connected with the transnational history of West Bengal and Bangladesh, as it has been at the core of the dispute over water-sharing between the two countries. The problem began years after partition as West Bengal was a border state and faced great population pressure from the Indian provinces as well as the newly established Pakistan pushing the pre-settled Rajbanshis out of their homeland. At the heart of the conflict was the 'land reforms program' in West Bengal under the United Front

Government (1967-9) and later the Left Front Government (1977-2011). The novel ends with the construction of a barrage on the Tista River and here the focus was more on the marginalized people who were forced to migrate due to the barrage as well as frequent floods. Local agitation was put up by Uttarakhand Dal (1969) but was of no use as it got consumed in National politics.

Jitendra Das' novel '*Kalahi Nadi: Ikul Hikul*' (1989) was written in the context of Assam's linguistic struggle and conflict with Bengali migrants. The two popular movements '*Bideshi Kheda*' (expulsion of foreigners) and '*Bangal Kheda*' (expulsion of the Bengali) in 1979 are portrayed through characters like Mahimabai and Mr. Balin Thakuria (the then ACS). The characters not only hail from the same place Kalahipar (the basin of the Kalahi River), Balin was brought up by Mahima Bai but this relationship started to sore when Mahima Bai's Kinsmen was arrested during the foreigner expulsion movement. The novel further focuses on the student movement of Assam. At the national level, the Indian National Congress was ruling and Assamese people felt that they were being deprived at the national as their issues were not getting enough importance. Fractured regionalism as well as the tussle between local politics and popular politics resulted in forced migration by the poor people. Hence, the Kalai River basin stood witness to community-making and nation-building.

In the third chapter titled '*From Wang Chhu to Raidak: Reflections on the Society and Culture of River Basins*' The *Raidak* rather two *Raidaks*, *Raidak I*, and *Raidak II* are transboundary rivers, which originate in Bhutan as small streams and gather momentum on the way with the mighty *Brahmaputra* passing through India and Bangladesh. The *Raidak* is *Wang Chhu* in Bhutan and has been an eyewitness to the origin and evolution of Bhutanese civilization and culture, it is a symbol of the state's national culture, language, and identity. *Wang Chhu* and its tributaries have been part of the cultural evolution of Bhutan like the *Kagy* sect of Tibetan Buddhism and *dzongs* are important in the *Wang Chhu* basin. However, the problem arose with the introduction of the *Bhutan Citizenship Act* in 1977 and 1985 causing reversed migration, especially for the *Lhotshampas*, or the Nepali-speaking people who were an important ethnic group of Bhutan.

The *Wang Chhu* enters the Alipurduar district of West Bengal through Bhutanghat as a river called *Raidak*. After the partition of India in 1947 people from East Bengal, Tibet, Bhutan, and other Northeastern Indian states began to settle along the basin, they were the new settlers and practiced different religions. The *Raidaks* or the *Wang Chhu* though have shaped and re-shaped history, polity, society, economy, and culture for both Bhutan and India not devoid of exploitation. *Raidak* faces a persistent challenge from the tea gardens of both Alipurduar II and Kumargram CD Blocks. The two hydel projects Chuka and Tala are located in Bhutan, often



Bhutan opens the sluiceways of its reservoirs without prior information and this disrupts the life of the people settled along the Raidak forest to NH31C.

To encapsulate the book '*River, Society, and Culture: Environmental Perspectives on the Rivers of Assam and Bengal*' by Prof. Rup Kumar Barman have upheld multifaceted issues associated with rivers and the ostracization of the communities living by them as well as environmental issues. Mainstream academics have mostly focused on big rivers like the Ganges, the Brahmaputra, and the Indus this book on the other hand provides the readers with an opportunity to learn about small rivers and, at the same time their importance in the making and unmaking of states, language, society, culture, polity, economy, and nation-state relationship.