



ASSAM'S STATE ANTHEM,
COMPOSED BY LAKSHMINATH
BEZBAROA, WAS OFFICIALLY
ADOPTED AT A TEZPUR
CONFERENCE IN 1927

THE UNEXPLORED GUWAHATI



Guwahati offers a rare combination of modern life that still carries elements from our rich, unexplored past, writes SOMEN SENGUPTA

The significance of Guwahati is often reduced to its connection with Kamakhya Temple, which is one of the Hindu *Shakti Peethas*, or its proximity to the Kaziranga National Park, which has been given the tag of a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. But there is a lot more to Guwahati, the largest city of Assam. The rich history of Ahom kingdom and its subsequent merging with British Assam adds a colourful layer to the rich legacy of Guwahati. A combination of mythology and textbook history needs to be looked into to get a taste of the many stories that this place has to offer.

Legend has it that this land was once known as Pragjyotishpura and was ruled by a demon king named Narakasura, who was later killed by Hindu God, Krishna. King Narakasura's son Bhagadutta is believed to have sided with the Kauravas in the battle of Mahabharata. Another tale connects Guwahati with Hindu God Shiva, who is believed to have come here for meditation after the death of his wife, Sati. When Kama, the God of lust and passion, had tried to interrupt his penance, an angry Shiva had reduced Kama to ashes. Kama's wife Rati pleaded with Shiva and eventually, a new form of Kama emerged. The new form of Kama created the word 'Kamrup', the most common name by which this part of Assam is known.

Inscriptional evidence suggests that in the 4th century, Pushyavarman and his family ruled Pragjyotishpura, which was watered by the river that was then known as Lauhitya, and is today known as Brahmaputra. The last king of this dynasty was Bhaskar Varman. Modern history says that in 1228, invaders from Burma had established Ahom kingdom here. It lasted till 1826 when Assam came under the East India Company. It was at that time that Guwahati as a city bloomed and Assam as a region turned into a coveted area for growing commercial crops like tea. Guwahati became all the more significant when tea became the cash cow of the East India Company. Elements of British legacy and Hindu mythology became one here and give modern Guwahati its unique identity.

Guwahati also houses the Commonwealth War Cemetery, which has relics from World War II. It might not be as popular as the war cemeteries in Imphal or Kohima, but every year, it still manages to attract thousands of foreign tourists who come here to revisit history. This small yet beautiful war cemetery in Guwahati is an

exceptional gem. Thanks to its geographical location, Guwahati was a big wartime airbase when Allied Forces were planning to cut off Dimapur from the rest of India. At that time, several dead soldiers had been buried in ordinary graves. Later, in order to give them a dignified burial, their graves were relocated to Sylhet Military Cemetery, Amaribari Military Cemetery, Nowgong Civil Cemetery, and Mohachara Military Cemetery. After the end of the war, more graves were shifted here from Darjeeling, Dhubri, Dibrugarh, Shillong, Silchar, and Cooch Behar to make this a more important place. Today, the place has 486 graves that belong to soldiers of the British Commonwealth and 24 graves that belong to Chinese soldiers of Ching-Kai-Shek's army. It also has 25 unidentified graves. Those who rest here in eternal peace belonged to prestigious regiments like Royal Australian Airforce, Essex Regiments, Bengal Civil Pioneers, Royal Indian Airforce, Scottish Rifles, Royal Deccan Horses, King's own Yorkshire Light Infantry and Royal Artillery.

The most unique feature of this war cemetery is that it houses 11 graves of Japanese soldiers who had died in 1944 under the leadership of Lance Corporal Miyata Kotsuo. Kotsuo died on September 13, 1944. In 2012, a team of officials from Japan had come here to dig up the graves and collect the remains of their soldiers. This is perhaps the only World War II cemetery in India where along with Commonwealth soldiers, 'enemy' soldiers also rest in peace.

Another important tale about Guwahati is related to Lachit Borphukan and his role in the Battle of Saraighat. Lachit Borphukan was the commander-in-chief of Ahom king in the 17th century. With his outstanding

military skill, especially in naval warfare, he had forced the Mughals back to Delhi, leaving Assam unconquered. The Battle of Saraighat, which was fought in 1671 on the banks of the mighty Brahmaputra, saw Lachit's army defeat Aurangzeb's even though the latter was heavily supported by Portuguese gunners. An imposing statue of Lachit Borphukan, along with his warriors, now stands at the river bed of Brahmaputra. The place where the battle took place has now been decorated with the Saraighat Rail Road Bridge.

Guwahati is the child of River Brahmaputra. The 2,900-km-long river that covers a basin of 6,51,334 sq km comes from Tibet and covers about 728 km in its journey through Assam, breaking into several big and small river islands. Considered sacred in Hindu mythology, the river is described as the love child of Brahma and Amogha (queen of king Shantanu) in *Kalika Purana*.

This river is considered to have masculine fury which can often be destructive. No wonder, then, that it floods its banks, including areas in Guwahati city, every now and then. But Brahmaputra is also the reason why Assam is fertile and green. It forms the base for Assam's rich biodiversity. Most of the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in Assam are also dependent on Brahmaputra. To add to that is the immense beauty of the river. An evening cruise here, along with sumptuous snacks, drinks, and music — both English and Assamese — is an experience beyond words. Umananda, also known as Peacock Island and popularly known as the world's smallest human-habited river island, is often the highlight of such journeys.

Going back to the Shiva and Kama legend that gives this river the names



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Bhaskar or Bhaskarachala, one learns about the Umananda Shiva Temple. It was established in 1694 by Gadhadhar Singha of Ahom dynasty. The original temple was destroyed in the 1897 earthquake. Later, the present version of the temple was set up. Umananda Island is also home to golden langur, a rare species that was brought here by a king of Nepal for sacrifice. Fortunately, they were freed instead.

This cruise takes one through many milestones of history. On the banks of Brahmaputra, several old British bungalows, watch towers, and mosques can be seen. It also boasts of a magical sunset over the horizon when the sky looks like a fountain head of melted lava of an active volcano.

One has not seen much of that if one has not visited the ruins of Madan Kamdev Temple, the massive arena of debris with stone sculptures and a broken plinth of several temples. Often referred as the "hidden Khajuraho of Assam", the temple dates back to the 9th century, though no written history is available. In 1855, an employee of the East India Company named Captain E Taite Dalton first recorded it as a cluster of 15 temples inside a deep jungle near Guwahati and he contributed an article on this in the *Asiatic Society Magazine* in Calcutta. It created a sensation among scholars, and soon gathered more attention. However, the devastating earthquake of 1897 reduced all temples to rubble, thus making the site an endless kingdom of ornamented stone sculptures. From 1901, a local Muslim land collector named Niyamat Ali

started preserving the place, and from 1943, a scholar named Tarini Kanta Sarma started doing serious research on the debris.

In *Kalika Purana*, we get a reference of Madan Kamdev Temple. The legend says it was here that Madana, the God of passion, reunited with his wife Rati. Thus, the temple walls were decorated with figures expressing human passion. Several panels are bold and candid in expressing physical relations between man and woman. They also depict various Hindu Gods, animal motifs, and floral designs. The roofless temple is enshrined with an Uma-Maheshwar statue where we see Shiva and his wife Uma in an emotional state. Though no foundation plaque or dedicatory tablet was found in the debris, it is assumed that it was established by Vanamala Varman Deva of Satasthambha dynasty in the 9th century. Later, it was expanded and completed by Pala kings of Bengal. However, no solid evidence has been produced so far. Madan Kamdev Temple is now considered a temple of fertility. Young couples pray here to fulfill their desire of becoming parents.

In Guwahati, near Nehru Park, a small wooden church is a reminder of our colonial past. This is the Christ Church of 1844, one of the oldest buildings of the city. This is the third reincarnation of its original form as the first one was destroyed and second one badly damaged in the 1897 earthquake. The present version was completed in 1903.

Another treat is a state museum dedicated to the unexplored heritage trail of Guwahati. The collection of stone sculptures and statues is astounding. Several collections of Mahishashuramardini Durga from the 10th to 13th century are displayed here with monolithic stone pillars and iron cannon of Ahom dynasty. Set up in 1940, this museum houses one of the richest collections of artifacts.

Last but not least is the temple of Kamakhya, a pilgrimage spot of Hindus. This temple, too, has been destroyed and rebuilt several times and by several people. The present one was built in 1665 by the king of Cooch Behar of Bengal named Nabanarayan. After the 1897 earthquake, it was repaired to a great extent. Festivals like Ambubachi when the Goddess goes through her annual menstruation and Poush Biya when the Goddess gets married with Kameshwara are celebrated here and draw huge crowds.

Though Guwahati is famous for the Kamakhya Temple, the city has much more to offer. It offers a rare combination of modern life and tales from the past.