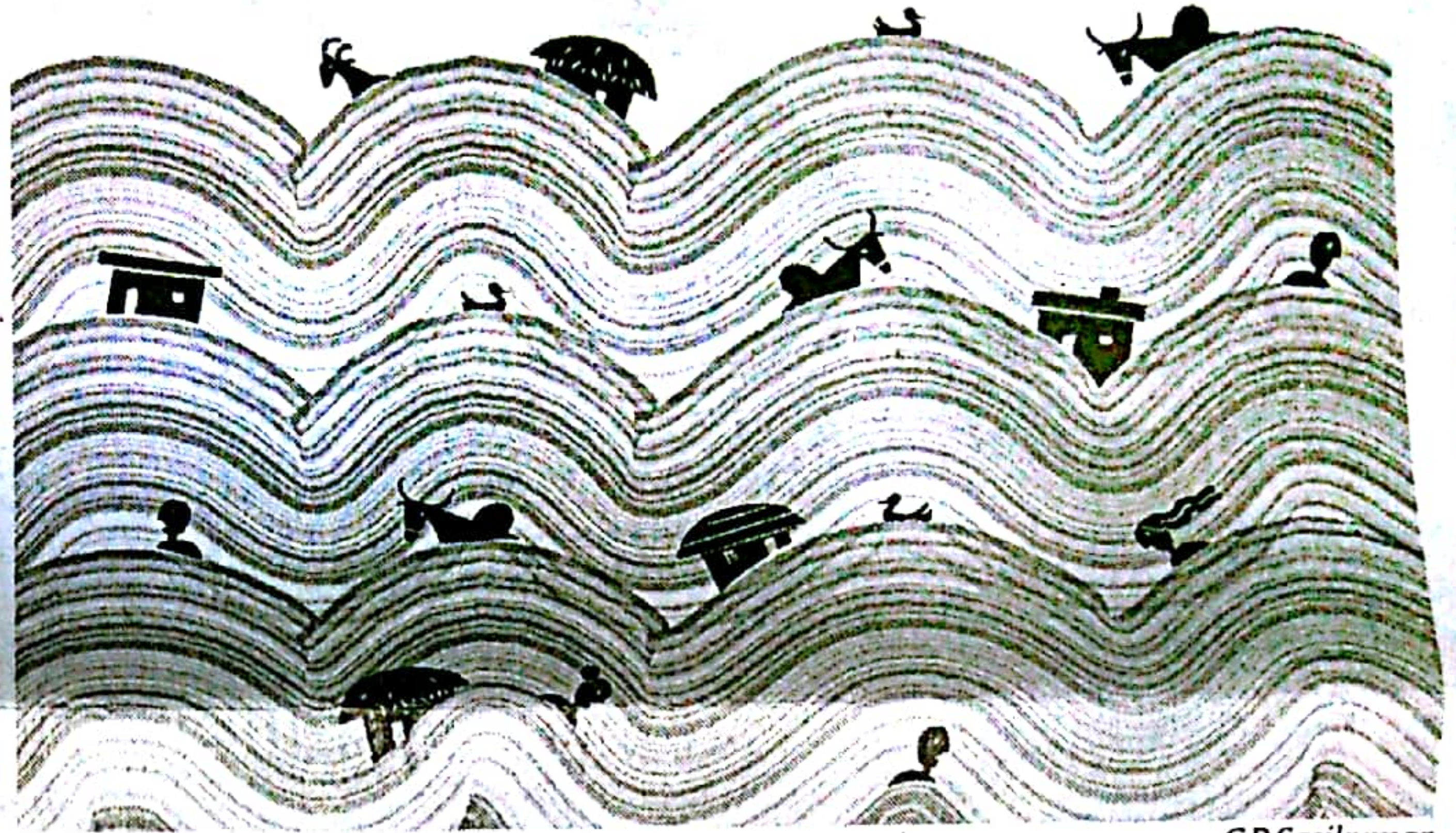


# River, a strong brown god

## GAINED IN TRANSLATION



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A DEAFENING sound at midnight suddenly woke up the village. The Solengi had torn through an embankment somewhere; its waters flowed swiftly through Balitika, Rajabari, Bilotiya, Murhanigaon and other villages. Hearing the roar of the gushing waters, panic-stricken people rushed to the safer portion of the embankment. While the women picked up whatever few household items they could hurriedly collect, the men watched the flow of the water at the breached portion. The gushing waters soon inundated fields, homes, and the village road. In no time, the entire village was under water.

People living by the river are familiar with floods, but this time, the situation is critical. People would generally replant saplings in the alluvium even if the original saplings were buried under it. But this time, there is no way out. The seed beds too have been submerged.

These people have been living by the river for generations. The river destroys their houses and chases them away, but once the flood waters recede, they return. This time around, it has been difficult to even find the bank. Where is it? It is now a vast expanse of water, a sea.

Scared of the darkness of the night, the little ones are crying. Someone has shifted a little girl and her mother to a safer place on a banana-trunk raft. The girl has been crying inconsolably — "I want to go home, I want to go home".

There aren't many boats in the village. Those who don't have boats depend on the rafts, cut from banana plants, when the floods come. These rafts are not only a mode of transportation; cooking, eating, sleeping, all happen on them. Children, women and the elderly — all know how to handle a raft. Where are these people going on the rafts? They are looking for higher ground. Human beings, cattle, goats, poultry birds, have all taken shelter on the same higher ground, least bothered by the presence of snakes and other reptiles. All living beings are exhausted.

Those who have taken shelter in temporary sheds on the embankment are discussing — our saplings are submerged; the

water has entered our granary; the sand deposit will kill our betel-nut and coconut palms; Shobhan's cow was caught in a whirlpool along with its calf; Seuti's husband died when his boat overturned near Borghuli; two young siblings of Majukuchi were washed away along with their house by the Satrang's flood.

But now, they are mostly talking about rescue. Will it be possible to rescue the cows, buffaloes, goats and poultry? Will it be difficult to plant saplings afresh, because the fields will all be covered in sand?

The floods have anyway created an emergency, but there is a bigger emergency in Gobinda's house. Not exactly house, but a shed on the embankment. His daughter-in-law is in labour. Where do they take her now? There is only water all around. The embankment on which they have taken shelter has breached a little distance away, causing the water level to rise further. There is now no link to the highway. People of 11 villages have taken shelter in this portion of the embankment. A few young men somehow manage to get a boat to take the woman to a hospital. But she gives birth to a girl on the way, in the middle of the water. They name her Plabita, from *plaban*, which means flood.

Not all are as fortunate as Plabita's parents. Bogadhar's grandmother, who was running a high fever for several days, breathed her last on a raft while on the way to hospital. Cremating the body had become a problem.

Hunger is a dangerous thing. It can wipe out all kinds of feeling and emotion. Whatever little food the people had managed to bring with them got exhausted in a couple of days. The children are crying for food; the parents are simply helpless. Human beings have turned inhuman because of hunger. They are snatching whatever food and clothing the relief teams have brought. Hunger has snatched away people's self-respect too.

One day, the government's rescue oper-

ation began. But even before that, a voluntary organisation had already shifted people to the highway. This year, the floods have been devastating. Villages which never got inundated in the past are submerged. The highway, schools, public buildings have all become relief camps. Women and the elderly have been compelled to shed their sense of privacy while responding to nature's call. The rivers that have played havoc in this area are Mornoi, Dubiya, Solengi, Satrang, Balijan, Brahmajan and Buroi. Mahabahu Brahmaputra has risen, displayed its clout.

*O' Shantanukulandan!* Why have you taken such a terrible form? The people of this valley have, through the ages, realised your immense power. Civilisations have thrived by your banks because of the love, trust and dependence the people feel for you. But why have you assumed such a destructive form today?

What did you say? Because the people have meted out atrocities towards nature? The rivers have filled up their beds with sediments carried down the mountains because people have destroyed the environment? Why are you causing such suffering to the innocent wild animals? What did you say? Because the people have failed to protect them?

*O' Shantanukulandan!* I know you do not willingly want to cause such a massive destruction. The environment awareness of our people is increasing, our scientists are coming up with various innovations, and I am sure one day the people of this valley will be able to secure your blessings. I pray to you with folded hands, *O' Shantanukulandan!*

*Purabi Bormudoi, 67, is an Assamese author whose novel Shantanukulandan, based on the history of civilisations on the banks of the Brahmaputra, won the Sahitya Akademi award in 2007 (Translated from Assamese by Samudra Gupta Kashyap)*