

North east trips - Jan-May 2006

Trip to Nagaon, Tezpur and Rangiya

This long Magh Bihu Sankranti weekend, I did what I haven't done in a long time. Take a totally pointless train to some new part of the country in the raw (as R calls it, i.e. not AC). This was a sort of mini Brahmaputra parikrama. I've forgotten whether you're supposed to do these clockwise or anti, but the train connections decided it for me, it had to be anti. Started out on a chilly Friday morning from the campus house, bang opposite my home, minibus which soon became chock full of enthusiastic undergraduate students celebrating the long weekend with a Kaziranga trip. The bus temperature was warm and cheery with the chatter of carefree UGs.

I had already located the local Woodlands hotel for a sit down breakfast and filter coffee, which I duly took in with idlis, along with kesari bhaat, the morning sweet. I thought I would be well in time for the 10.00 a.m. Kapili passenger, or Kopili, if you want to be phonetic about it, to Haibargaon. So Haibargaon is a twin or a suburb of the district HQ Nagaon, so everyone (except me) bought tickets for Nagaon (or Nogaon or Nowgong, the British variant). A single counter for unreserved tickets and the long queue of people intending to buy tickets was getting anxiously and anxiously. Needless tension caused by Railways not anticipating and catering to this basic peak demand for their services. No wonder so many unreserved guys are tempted to travel ticketless. I would have to do it too, had I not reached well in time.

Despite the Magh Bihu crowds, the Kapili passenger had plenty of room, and I picked an aisle window facing the loco. The logic I used was that it was single line, so right side had no particular advantage (in double lines, right side is crucial, to see the track alongside and opposite direction trains). The train started 10 mins late, which was one reason perhaps that the guy was in no hurry to issue tickets. Twin single till New Guwahati yard and the east of the city is not half as grimy as the stretch to the west of the station. We picked up speed and whizzed past Narangi station, in between two freighters. We were generally at a good clip for a passenger and did not stop at too many unscheduled places, except Digaru. At the next station Teteliya, we were passed by the Brahmaputra (the mail train, not the river), which was an auspicious sign.

I saw several interesting sights through my train window. Many houses have their own small ponds where they seem to breed fish. I saw at least one fellow land a big one, which caused a lot of commotion as people came to see what he had caught. A friend told me that the Assamese rural ideal is for a man to catch his own fish and basically hang out. And the women weave and sing and hang out. He said that the thing typifying

their lifestyle was that the fellow hauls in his catch, and is looking for his two fish for the day. If he happens to get three, he tosses one back. Makes a lot of sense, and when I saw that most of them appear to have their own ponds, it made a whole lot of sense.

I also saw large scale fishing, on a couple of locations, where suddenly in the middle of nowhere, there would be a water body with about a couple of hundred folk, both men and women with bamboo baskets, actually conical things, beating at the water. I'm guessing this is some fishing strategy. Like Kuttanad in Kerala, I think these rice fields may also double as fish breeding locations. Bamboo as a building material is plentiful and used in a variety of ways. I think it is also convenient as temporary dwellings, which is useful close to the Brahmaputra, because like the joke of the Wodehouse character about the place where the river is at the bottom of the garden, and sometimes the garden is at the bottom of the river!

Returning to my rail journey, Jagi Road station has a huge tank farm, Indian Oil and maybe the other oil majors as well. The south bank of the BP was great in the winter sunshine, and if it had been at a south facing window (which was my strategic error), I could have basked even more. But I was happy just to see the sun come out after almost a week. At Chaparmukh junction, after a surprisingly short halt, we headed off on the branch line to Haibargaon. There was a 20 min hold up for some track maintenance, but no crossing delays, because this is the only train doing a back and forth on this part of the line. Once as the Kapili fast passenger and the evening trip as the Kolon Par passenger.

Haibargaon is nothing spectacular - just a dusty end of the line, but in the winter sun, any place would have looked good. I wanted to walk the couple of km to the bus stand in Nagaon, that being my chance to see the town. Commercial town, with a few old buildings and bustling with Bihu festive looks of all. Most of Assam has army men, police men, border guards and so on, with guns, so it is a bit odd, but you get used to them.

At Nagaon, I found a small (25 or so seater) comfy looking bus that was going to Tezpur and got on and stripped outer layers to be in shirtsleeves for the first time in a week almost. The ride was great. Good roads, not much traffic, green surroundings, fast but not too fast driver, window seat, winter sunshine. Not much more to ask for. This is the main highway that goes on to Jorhat and Dibrugarh on the south bank of the BP and at one point we took a northward turn to the great Kalia Bhomora bridge over the BP, connecting Tezpur with the south bank. This is a two lane road only bridge (unlike the Saraighat at Guwahati which is a road cum rail bridge) and because of the meandering course of the Brahmaputra from flood to flood, there is a huge (almost 2 km) lead up to

the bridge past sandy banks (the water is low at this time of the year) before the bridge itself. Awe inspiring sight, even to imagine the river covering all this while in flood.

Soon after we reached the north bank, we turned left to get into the military cantonment town of Tezpur, also the HQ of Sonitpur district. Neat place, which vies with Sivasgar in its claim to be the cultural capital of the state (like Aurangabad and Mysore and Vadodara in their respective states). Most of it is noticeably cleaner and neater than most small towns in India. But there is a commercial part as grimy as any, but the point is that there is another part, which most towns don't have at all.

I tramped to the sad looking railway station, which is a meter gauge end of the line station, now quite decrepit and hosting just two services (basically the Rangiya fast passenger, and the connecting service that brings the rake from Rangapara North junction). Used to be a time when there was a Tezpur Samastipur express, to far off Bihar, over 500 km or so, now the meter gauge goes west only up to Rangiya, a little more than 100 km away, and Murkongselek on the other side. I wanted to check that there were services running, and they were. Looking at the state of the lines, I thought there would be no shunting of the engine at this station and that it would just push the train back. But the train was too long for that and to my surprise, they did do the shunting the next morning.

I walked up past the circuit house and a scenic looking lake with a small wooded island in the middle. Tezpur is a little like a hill station in that sense. The Assam tourism guest house was full, so the man said, and there was no way I could verify if that was the case or whether the man wanted to continue to hang out with his pals over the garden bonfire, which certainly looked more inviting than dealing with me and showing me a room and all that. Anyway, I asked him where the nearest hotel was and he pointed vaguely in some direction and I thanked him. This turned out to be a basic, but adequate place, where there were single rooms with passable, attached baths and bare bones furniture. But I got a sheet, blanket, bottle of water, promise of a mosquito coil in case I needed it and that was quite enough.

I went for a walk in the town before it got dark. Actually it was not as cold as I thought it would get, but I was keen on picking up a muffler, so I set out to get one, have a tea and also buy a notebook to record my impressions. The first place I spotted a muffler, I asked him the price and he said 45. I set out to explore some more, but an hour later, I could not find anything better so I sheepishly returned to the guy, just as he was packing up for the night and gave him a 50 Rupee note for the muffler and he returned a tenner, giving me considerable pride in my wordless bargaining skills. In the interim I had a tea and explored Tezpur. The ethnic areas are very clearly marked, there's Marwari Patty

and Christian Patty and so on. There's also a Jenkins Road and a Kabarkhana Road and a wholesale meat market, where the poultry shops were all called Protein Point and Protein First and so on, no doubt catering to the Atkins diet plan. No impact of bird flu fears here and people were happily choosing the fowl of their choice and business was booming in pre-festival Assam.

The hotel boy offered me a modest meal on my return, and although I was planning to make do with bananas and biscuits, to eat light while travelling, the guy's marketing was timely. Hot food was a good thought. He said he could provide roti, sabji and dal. I asked him what sabji. He said vaguely 'mix rahega'. I asked him what mixed meant and what he would put in. He thought for a while and said 'Alu'. Big surprise. I asked him what else. After more thought, he said Cauliflower. I told him to go ahead, and he did the best he could, with an onion, salt and a couple of green chillies to add to the dressing of the meal. Pretty good, although it was too salty and the peas (not cauliflower) were a little undercooked. But I was in an indulgent mood. I washed it down with tea, also provided by the hotel and settled down for the night. This meal of two rotis and subji and tea cost the grand sum of Rs 15 (pondra rupya as the guy informed me early next morning).

The room was airtight, the blanket thick, the muffler new and the meal warm, and I had been up at 6 and moved about quite a bit. Good winter sleep.

Tezpur is a good staging point for people who want to travel in Arunachal, starting from Tawang and other more exotic places, past Bhalukpong and Bomdila. Tawang is beyond the pass and has an old monastery, past icy roads and the Sela pass. These are really remote points on the map. For example the nearest rail head is Bhalukpong which is on a small branch line from Balipara on the meter gauge, which in turn is a few km from Rangapara North Jn. Now Rangapara North is not the most accessible place, but it is close (meaning an hour by road) to Tezpur, which has an airport. When the Arunachal website says that Itanagar, the capital, is well connected to the rest of the country, what they mean is that there are a few Pawan Hans helicopter flights a week to Guwahati, if the weather is good. If I do go to Arunachal, more about all this.

The upshot is that there are a good number of people up and about in Tezpur at 4.30 a.m. The sun rises early in these parts (not at 4.30 but early) and if you want to get anywhere in the north east, you have to make an early start. My train was at 6.15 and it was a brisk walk through the mist from the hotel to the station. The view of the lake and the coniferous trees bordering it in the mist made it all look like those Chinese miniature landscapes. Soul Mountain like views.

The station was more or less deserted except for the muffled up station master busily filling in a complicated form noting the arrival of the passenger from Rangapara North (RPAN), which would then start as my train. More or less my train, as I was king of my compartment. The person who sold me the ticket charged me Mail express fare, so that least I could do was look for a seat in the cushioned sleeper coach in the train. No competition. A sad looking military bloke came in later, who had to go to join his battalion or whatever at New Misamari, another cantonment about 50 minutes down the line.

The railway line runs parallel to the highway out of Tezpur for a long while and after the town limits, the scenery moved to those spectacular tea garden slopes which look idyllic, but are probably back breaking work for the people who work there. There was quite a bit in the newspapers about the Congress trying to retain the tea garden worker vote by this or that means. From my train window though, in the early morning light, it all looked quite nice and surreal.

Rangapara North Jn is big in these parts of the world, when competing with Bhalukpong and New Misamari. Curious reversal of our train at RPAN, leading me to speculate on which part of the line was built first. A family of four joined at Rangarapa North. The girl - a 40% reduction photocopy of the mother and the kid dressed in what seemed like a space suit, but with a woolen cap instead of a helmet. He was at the gurgling stage or whatchamacallit where he is discovering that he can blow bubbles. The girl was quite amused by it and so were me and the soldier. The kid went off to sleep on the father's shoulder and we continued the slow shunting of the engine. Something for the folks out there to do. I had a tea and biscuit at the platform, distinguished only by the refusal of the vendor to accept the crisp two rupee note I gave him. I think they have become too rare to be treated as common currency.

The train had a scheduled 45 min halt at RPAN, used all of it and more and left. A Siliguri shed YDM class loco for those interested, though Siliguri is now cut off from the meter gauge network because of conversion. That's why these lines are so sad now, they are just some lingering offshoots of the main activity. But if this part gets converted to the broad gauge, this line may actually revive.

The scenery on the north bank was not as lush as on the south bank, barring the tea garden views, which continued for some distance from Rangapara. The landscape is quite Kerala-ish, with banana plants, and lots of small water bodies and no big urban settlements. Rice eating, fish eating, coconut eating folks.

This train stopped at almost all stations, although the timetable says it doesn't. Makes sense with the sparse train schedule in these parts. At the (unscheduled) halt at Dhekiajuli Road, a family unloaded almost two hundred bundles of small wood sticks. Firewood or what, I don't know, but they seemed to be the sort of material that you make crates from. They unloaded all this, equally hastily at Tangla. We crossed several south flowing rivers, including the Tangla, all headed for the BP and thence to the Bay of Bengal through Bangladesh.

We had a rail fracture that held us up for an hour. No one seemed in a hurry and the line actually got repaired by fellows who appeared from god knows where. But it was in pleasant morning sunshine, so no one minded.

Rangiya Junction where we again join the mainstream. I had a choice of modes to get back, but was tempted to continue training, on seeing a GHY bound train on the platform. I was calculating what I might be able to connect to, at Rangiya, thinking that if my train is on time, and so and so is 20 mins late, I'll just make it. As it turned out, we were an hour and half late and I made the connection with the Lohit, running about 18 hours late! So much for fine tuned calculation. In a pleasing coincidence, we again crossed the Brahmaputra (the mail train from Dibrugarh, not the river), after crossing the previous day's version at Teteliya. Like water, the train does not remain the same even though it may appear so to the untrained eye.

We had a good run up to Changsari, except for a curious slow down and loop passage at Behata, and the train slowed down to a tantalizing pace at Agthori station, from where you can see the IIT quarters, a 20 min walk away, if you manage to hop off. But I didn't and so completed the Brahmaputra parikrama via the Saraighat bridge, an annoying halt at Kamakhya station for the Shefung passenger and a wrong side movement on the twin single for unfathomable reasons and the usual crawl through the mess between Maligaon and Guwahati. As a result, missed the institute bus, and had to take the ferry (beautiful sunset views of the river, so nothing to complain of) but then had to trudge home as there were no rickshaws, with all the folks celebrating bihu in their homes in front of bonfires (urukas ?), of which I saw quite a few of them, being built.

Briskish 40 min walk home from the ferry ghat, followed by a hot bath.

A trip along the chicken neck and through rural West Bengal

The strange geography because of partition has led to the district of West Dinajpur in India without there being an East Dinajpur, or a town called Dinajpur in India. Just like a curious kid may ask where East Bengal is (after which the football club is named), this

question about Dinajpur was answered only after seeing a map of Bangladesh where the town now is. Now, the district of West Dinajpur is split into North and South Dinajpur districts (but with Dinajpur still being in B-desh!). Even now, you can suddenly see Jessore Road somewhere and wonder where this place is and then you realize it is across a 60 year old border and that history outlives some of these divisions.

There is a fairly big cultural divide between north and south Bengal (far more than between the Dinajpurs I suspect) and even a train ride down the length of Bengal is enough to give one a feel of it. I did this two weekends ago in the course of my Phileas Fogg like journey to rendezvous with my family.

This was the weekend of the airport strike, so half my mental energy was concentrated on trying to find out whether the folks from Bombay had indeed taken off and managed to reach Calcutta and points further. I was armed with a timetable, ready to return from Malda or any other town and come back to home base if there was a change in their plans. As it turned out, their journey was eventful but more or less as per schedule, and by mid day they were in Raichak and it was up to me to make it there to meet them.

So, here goes. Beginning was tame, institute bus to the Gauripur point on NH-31, which heads northwards out of Guwahati and splits at Baihata, with one branch heading to Tezpur on the north bank of the river and the other branch going to Rangiya and the rest of India. I flagged down a local bus after watching several buses fly past. I was just making enquiries whether buses to Rangiya stop on their own at this bus stop or whether one has to wave. Since I could not read the destinations fast enough, I wanted some help, and as I was having this conversation, the shopkeeper pointed to a small bus and said that this one would go and I ran for it and waved furiously and got it to a cheery small bus which was bound for Rangiya. The bus had quite a few standees and like these rural type buses, there are all sorts of handles and things for passengers. Even more ergonomic and scary are the attachments on their tempo-like vehicles, called truckers in these parts, where there is a bar all around the vehicle where people very cheerfully hang on as the jeep like vehicle rattles along, sometimes at fairly high speed. No more dangerous than footboard travel on local trains, says D, putting it all in perspective.

There was a broken down truck on the highway past the transport hub of Changsari and there was a kilometer long queue of buses and other vehicles. Traffic jams fascinate me, basically in seeing how a group of humans find enough order to extricate themselves from gridlock. You have vehicles racing the wrong way, making the most of the overtaking opportunities of a static queue to their left and if you have too many of such opportunists, you have gridlock when vehicles start rolling the other way. The

beauty of it is how this all gets resolved. After 45 minutes, the jam untangled itself and we were on our way. I had plenty of time to get to Rangiya, so I could afford to be detached and analytical about traffic jams. Also, two ladies had got impatient at getting caught in the jam just short of their destination, and so had hopped off, so I had a nice window seat to observe a system climbing back to an ordered entropy state, grimy vehicles and all.

The bus dropped people off at the outskirts of town and when I asked for directions to the railway station, I was given a nice option, that of walking along-side the tracks and hit the station as a train would. So off I went, with the Broad gauge tracks on my left, the disused meter-gauge tracks keeping me company on my right. Soon the functional meter gauge from Rangapara north, which I had traveled on a fortnight earlier, came into sight, as did the large transshipment yard at Rangiya. A goods yard is exciting, and feeling a bit like Jack of the Secret Seven, I tramped on in the early dusk into the station premises. A goods train started off with the cling-clangs reverberating through the length of the train as the couplings adjusted themselves to the motive power of the loco and I waited to see it through.

I still had plenty of time at Rangiya and I walked outside to explore the town and try to call Mumbai to get an early report on the airport strike. Called a couple of times, and finally settled down to a snack and tea at a place called Kamala Cabin. Sounds railway like, but I've seen such in the heart of the market in Guwahati, so it is just a term used in these parts. On the platform, I had some idli vadas, courtesy the smart stall of S.Balakrishnan, Prop., South Indian Snack Stall, RNY, N.F.Railway. It was served rather tastefully on a leaf on a plate. Unfortunately, he had run out of coffee, as it was almost end of day's play on platform 1 at Rangiya station, with just a passenger train to see off after my train, so he had exhausted what he had made, he told me. I was to see similar stalls at other places (T.Sadasivan at Malda to name one) and was amazed at the enterprise of these guys so far from home making a living in fairly uncertain environments. Somehow can't easily imagine a Hazarika setting up shop in Alappuzha selling Assamese food.

The train rolled in 20 mins late (and later I found that it had left Guwahati a good 45 mins late) and in a customer friendly manner, there was absolutely no marking on our side of the platform to indicate the coach. By asking people, I managed to find S-6 and to my relief I found that the train was a third empty and my seat was intact and in fact, it looked as though I had the aisle berth to myself. I settled down to the best possible seat on the railways, sleeper class aisle seat on the right side, head facing the engine, not too close to the door, but not too far away in case I wanted to go to the door for a glimpse of an opposite side crossing. Chill weather but not unmanageable, clear night,

some food inside, prospect of a few hours of clickety-clack and only a quietish family in the adjoining compartment. Happiness.

The Guwahati Puri express has so much slack that despite a late start, we were early everywhere, at Bongaigaon, at Jalpaiguri and a good 90 mins early at Malda. Absurd. Overkill in terms of trying to maintain punctuality.

Sleepily checked out announcements in the middle of the night at New Bongaigaon and New Jalpaiguri and dozed off to a chilly sleep. 5.30 in the morning saw us speeding gently through the chicken neck of India, the narrow strip of 50 odd km which separates Bangladesh from Nepal and which connects the north-east with the rest of the country. I was just passing Eklahi Junction, but was on the wrong side to see the new line to Gazole and Balurghat. Soon passed Old Malda and the Mahananda river to hit Malda Town. Made famous by Ghani Khan Choudhury, the railway minister who probably got a new division made there, which has awkward contours, just north of Malda Town is Katihar division and just south of it on the river side is Howrah division, so it is only a small strip heading west towards Bhagalpur, on the Sahibganj loop, which is Malda division. The station is quite grimy like most mid stations, but there was an attempt at carriage cleanliness against all the odds, something that I had read about. There is an outfit on the platform which tries to go the extra mile and is equipped to do some cleaning over and above the mobile toilet cleaning and disinfecting units that they have nowadays. But what I still can't get over is leaky plumbing all over the place. In washbasins, in the watering lines, taps at station platforms, hand-pumps that don't work, even fixtures at IIT Guwahati, everywhere. Difficult to imagine us being an economic superpower when we can't get the taps right.

A couple of stations after Malda Town was the sight I wanted to see. The Farakka Barrage. The waters of the Ganga being reservoirised and controlled just before they enter Bangladesh and cause of some heartburn in the 70s and 80s. Massive structure of the rail bridge, road bridge and on the western side, the big screws and gates that can be pulled down or up. The image was marginally blackened later in the week by my colleague here telling me that every time he has traveled past the barrage, he has seen a dead body floating in the river.

After New Farakka junction, the railway geometry is a little complicated, which I will not get into. Suffice it to say that it is like an H, with two arms coming from the north, from Malda and Bhagalpur and two arms going south into the delta of Bengal and all connections possible between the four arms. So there is Barharwa Junction and Bonidanga Link cabin and Bindubasini halt on the stem of the H.

Negotiating this, we made our way into the fertile plains of Birbhum district and passed the exciting Nalhati junction, where there is a catty connection to Ahmadpur on the other spur of the H and the town of Rampurhat. After the inspiringly named Gadadharpur, we passed the Mayuraskhi river and Sainthia junction, where without stopping, we went off the main line to the line to Andal. This line is being used for passenger trains only recently and was a particular thrill for me. One train that has been using this line is the Mayurakshi fast passenger from Howrah, mainly to touch the district town of Siuri (HQ of Birbhum district which also has Bolpur and Santiniketan in it).

Although my ticket was to Durgapur, which by my reckoning was the point closest to Kolkata on this train, I decided to get off at Siuri, trying to save an hour by a cross country bus ride. This turned out not to help too much because of the rather sparse road network in that part. One reason is actually the fairly dense rail network and of course, the laid back attitude of people who are not in a particular hurry.

I tramped to the center of Siuri town and was accompanied in a leisurely manner by a cycle rickshaw man carrying a live advertisement via loudspeaker. It was for the Hindi dubbing of King Kong and the catch-line was something like the Mighty Keeng of Hollywood, Keeng Kong bhoyonkar, etc., etc., Keeng Kong 3 shows a day, at Chaitali cinema, Siuri. Sounded like a good deal to me. Not exactly the type of promotion the bros Warner or whoever would have imagined, but at noontime on a winter's day at Siuri, in Birbhum district, after buying bananas, it was actually an entertainment in itself.

I had a good meal, a veg thali with 2 veg, dal, papad and the works and what was a nice touch, very crisp, finely shredded and fried potato pieces, as an additional crunchum. Some enquiries told me that getting to Barddhaman was not straightforward at that time of day, and that my best bet was to go to Panagadh on the Durgapur highway and then make my way to Barddhaman. This sounded good, so I got into the WB Road transport bus and with only about 5 others in the bus, roared off on state highways at a fairly high speed. Passed Dubrajpur, which has a station, Illam Bazar, which doesn't, and then Darjeeling Mode at Panagadh on the Grand Trunk Road.

Could have walked it, but took a cycle-rickshaw to the bus stand at Panagadh and waited for a bus to Barddhaman which came along pretty soon. This goes mostly on the GT road, which is for the most part a 6 lane divided highway, so at a pretty high speed, except in true West Bengal style, something will suddenly show up in the opposite direction, trying to cut across. They have made some underpasses and service roads and all that, but still the ways of an earlier lifestyle remain, where you slowly proceed to your destination by whatever strikes you at that time and pay no attention to anything else around you. Just like buses which halt bang in the middle of a road because some

lady waves her bangles at you and wants to get on. So screeching of brakes and mild rear end collisions are quite common and in fact, buses seem even equipped for it with fenders all around.

We detoured from the highway to touch the town of Bud Bud and just went off on to the service road at Galsi and soon were at Barddhaman, where the hitherto sane driver went berserk, driving at a high speed with his thumb on the electric horn and driving everyone loony. Well, not everyone, because no one other than me was looking around nervously wondering how to choke the driver. Because of this, we were at the station in no time, and I hopped off.

My impression of Barddhaman was that it was like Kalyan or a similar satellite town of Bombay, with frequent local trains. There are trains, but sometimes not for an hour and a half, like the time I reached. In fact, a good section of the population at Barddhaman seems to hang out on the foot over-bridge, wondering what to do. I was doing that too, but one thing I did was to check out the narrow gauge part of the station. In fact, a small 4 coacher was getting ready to leave for Katwa, and were it not for my rendezvous, I was tempted to get on it. The announcer said that the Poorva would soon come by (some 45 mins late), and with some hustling, I upgraded my ticket to a superfast, mail express, but unreserved ticket, to Howrah. The unreserved (called General) compartment was only pleasantly well occupied and I found a comfortable seat and caught my breath.

It was my first time on this major trunk line of the railways, the so-called Barddhaman chord, and I saw the flyover from Bandel (the original main line) and the unusual rail over rail X crossing at Kamarkundu to Tarakeswar, the reason for which I have formed a purely map-based historical opinion (courtesy Samit Roy Choudhary's monumental Great Indian Rail Atlas). Passed under the Sealdah line at Dankuni and met up again with the main line at Bally and then on to Liluah and the huge complex of lines entering Howrah station.

Howrah station is a marvel of location and engineering and the facade, facing the river, with the bridge looming large on the left and the lights of Kolkata across the water is just something phenomenal. Not to mention the rush of people and the sheer volume of trains and in the midst of all this, you have these oddities where cars can drive right up to the train on the central two platforms and where you can buy a platform ticket right at the parking lot.

I took the 4 rupee ferry across to Babughat, with a cheerful, large Saraswati puja crowd of men, women and children. More than 200 people were out and others on the ferry in

a matter of minutes and we were off. At Babughat on the other side, a helpful policeman on the deserted Strand Road (late evening on a holiday and it's somewhat like Ballard Pier) directed me to Dharmatala bus stand. Made my way past Fairlie Place and Esplanade to the cheery crowds of the edge of the maidan and Chowringhee. After some asking around and moving onto what seem like disused tram lines, till a sad looking one suddenly looms up in front of you, I located my bus, no 210 to Raichak where the first a is long and the second is so thick that the BSNL cell locator actually calls it Raichowk.

The bus advertised a fare of Rs 20.50 (he took only Rs 20) for a 50 km ride through the darkness. After Alipore and Burdwan Road and Khirdirpur, you get onto the Diamond Harbour road and stay on it for ages. Through Behala, the home of the prince of Calcutta, Saurav Ganguly, through Thakurpukur, where an entire area is named after a bus that terminates there (3A bus stand), and Joka where the IIM is and then into increasingly bad roads and semi rural areas of South 24 Parganas.

Long journey through Amtala and Bishnupur and Sarisha to the riverfront at Raichak, in between Diamond Harbour to the south and Falta to the north. The river takes a bend and is actually east west here, before splitting up into the Sundarbans and the main arm joining the sea at Gangasagar. Met up with D and parents. Hot bath, etc. etc.

Return journey was tame by comparison. Flight to Guwahati. Bad airline food. But with D with me ready for a stay in a new house in GHY.

Bengal part 1

This last week, D and I went separate ways for a couple of days and joined up for a couple more and returned to Guwahati. The Saraighat left on time and I left D ensconced between a family and a couple of northeast youngsters, in her window seat.

I left the next morning, myself. Our gardener has been absent for two weeks, during which time he lost his mother, so D and I have been watering the cabbage patch as best as we could. Not too bad, and the gardener, who returned this morning, gave us one nice cabbage to mark his return.

My flight to Bangalore was a 3-hopper, with halts in Cal and Hyderabad. Despite the best efforts of the cheery Jet staff, I could not really take the three landings, three takeoffs, three safety demos, three airline meals and all that, followed by the killer evening traffic in South East Bangalore (the worst part of the city for traffic), and just managed to totter into the guest house at IIM and dozed off, done for the day.

My official work was mild and the only noteworthy thing was that my friend said that his group was quite 'underwhelmed' by a presentation they heard - not mine. Sounded like a good phrase to use. Am toying with the idea of using 'whelmed' also, since OK is a really overused word. I also had a meeting with General Motors. That evening, I did a smart thing and hired one of those radio taxis to take me around aunt-hopping. This was a sombre task, because I had learnt earlier in the day that my aunt had been hospitalized, in a fairly serious condition, in a nursing home in Jayanagar.

Left early the next morning, hoping to stock up on some foodings from the airport road Nilgiris, only to find that they did not open early enough. By the way, 'fooding' is a noun used liberally in Guwahati, as my father noticed, with many restaurants proclaiming 'Fooding only'. My return flight was direct to Calcutta, and also, breakfast food on flights is miles ahead of the paneer and cutlet stuff they dish out later in the day (and I said so in the feedback form), so I made it to Cal in good shape.

I had plenty of time to catch the Malda Intercity from Howrah, so I took it easy. It ended up with me sprinting to get into my coach, but that comes later. I took a pre-paid taxi to Sealdah, sort of on the way, to revise my knowledge of Sealdah Main, Sealdah north and Sealdah south, just to check out all the folks of north and south 24 paraganas coming to and from the great metropolis. There is a place called Habra (pronounced haabra), which is different from Howrah (pronounced how-da) and lots of other good places which probably only interest me.

I sat in an empty city bus to go to Howrah station and started out along M.G.Road, in the heart of Cal. Leisurely ride, or so I thought. Well, it was leisurely alright. After about three stops, near College road or somewhere, it changed from leisurely to stationary. The traffic management of Cal cops is something. Even if there was some calamity up ahead, the way they were managing different traffic streams was just unbelievable. People could have walked to their destinations and the smart ones did. I had a bag and it was really too far, so I just stuck around for more than 45 mins. These Cal buses are quite uncomfortable for sitting in, and are designed for a maximum number of standees.

In the early, tolerant phase of my wait, I spotted how rickshawalas (who are invariably dressed in a blue checked lungi and with a multipurpose red gamcha), manage to use hygiene products like soap and shampoo, on the fly, as it were. Here's how. Right on M.G.Road, there was an overflowing water main, and a stream gurgled off happily into some drain nearby. Now everybody feels comfortable with running water. This particular stream seemed like a regular thing, so there was a small group of fellows, in lungis, vigorously soaping their torsos and hair and splashing around in the noontime sun.

Then a quick wipe with the gamcha, then a neat change into fresh lungi (with a deft maneuver to remove the old one), and a quick wash of old lungi, wrap gamcha and wet lungi ready for a drip/sun-dry on torso, carefully retrieve soap, kept in wrapping on pavement stone, and off the fellow goes, squeaky clean and with fresh clothes as well. To pull his hand rickshaw in the old city like they have done for years.

Our bus finally made it to the bottleneck junction, and was diverted, which they should have done hours ago and I figured that he would take a parallel road, then I thought he would take the next parallel road and so on it went, till we traversed the length of Chittaranjan Avenue. The bus passengers were far more perturbed about this detour than the loss of time. Some of them may have had to walk a little, I'm not even sure. Says something, not sure what, though. I was much more concerned about the time loss, and although all roads do lead to Rome, the question is 'When?' Nobody was bothered about that.

When we finally hit the Strand Road, I could see the Vidyasagar Setu (not the Howrah Bridge we should have been on) in the near distance. That's when I decided that it was time to jump ship as it were and make a run for the ferry at Babughat. Wise move, as it turned out and the ferry took me to the station with about 10 mins for the departure. Now HWH has something like 19 platforms, so I was just praying that mine would be nearby and locatable. Thankfully it was and I dashed in with about 4 mins to spare. Found my coach and plonked myself down to get a breather.

After filling my water bottle on the platform, and putting my bag under the seat, I was set for the day time ride to Bolpur (Shantiniketan), on the main line, in the pleasant winter afternoon sun. Liluah and then Bally junction, to see the chord line and the line from Vivekananda Setu fly above us to join the chord at Dankuni and then we went on to the main line proper. This is along the west bank of the Hooghly river and although you cant see the river itself, you can get the sense of it all the way. Belur, with signs for Belur Math, which is on the river, tops of chimneys of brick kilns and old jute mills, all along the river, which used to use water transport in bygone days.

After Uttarpara comes Hind Motor, the home of the good old Amby, still serviceable in these parts, and still robust and aunt-friendly (for them to get in and out and even for some occasional packing in with one more person than you originally thought you could). Then Shrirampur, the old Serampore, which you can still see on road signs, but not now on Railway territory and Seoraphuli, the junction for the branch line to Tarakeshwar. We also passed Rishra, which I must remember to draw S's attention to, because there's another plant of the Birla group for whom he works. If he has to do

another plant stint, he could do worse than this, which is just 45 mins away (or 3 hours, going by my experience) from Park Street.

I had not been on the main line beyond Chuchura, the HQ of Hooghly district (there is a small station called Hugli after this). Bandel, some 40 km from Howrah is a big junction, with the last bridge across the Hooghly coming in and joining from Naihati and also the old line towards the north taking off here, via Nabadwip and Azimganj. We continued on the main line, past Pundooah (pronounced Paan-doo-ya) and Memari and flying over the chord line to merge with the big guys, short of Barddhaman. All this in the afternoon sun with rice fields on both sides, not too much crowd, good speed, pole position at the door, some mustard-tangy-jhaalmuri and you can see why I was one happy cat.

The intercity proceeded after a brisk halt at Barddhaman. When we left the main line again at Khana junction, this was the scene. As they say in the best shows - Picture this, if you will. 4.00 in the evening, biiig looping curve to get off the main line on to an embankment (a left exit to cross to the right, over the main line), verdant surroundings of fields and trees with spring leaves, the olive green coloured (what the rail fans call livery) Sahibganj loop passenger just past us, a coal freighter with a bright blue coloured Kanpur loco waiting patiently on the up line for the passenger to go through, the bridge over the main line with the tracks glistening below us and the blue coaches of our train clearly visible on the curve behind us, the semaphore signals at Jhapater-dhal station coming up and our train picking up speed.

The man who had the window next to me (I didn't care, because I much prefer the door, where you can peer both ways and longer than you can from a window) was carrying a jute bag which said Jalsaghar, the Unprecedented Darbar of the Badshahi Kurta, 202, Rash Behari Ave, Kol - 29. I'd agree any time that this would indeed be unprecedented.

I've always wondered how they keep these rice fields filled with water. By tilling, the surface must become the clayey sort which supports water, I suppose, rather than letting it all seep through. Also, transferring water from one field to the next is done by a boat like mechanism at the corners of these fields, when one plot is done and the next taken up. Apart from the rice, people were busy harvesting what seemed like potatoes, and filling them in large sacks, which were weighed in scales set up outdoors.

Every alternate station on this line is some Dhal or other. Meaning lake, I presume. Jhapater-dhal, Noadhar-dhal, Pichkutir-dhal. Interspersed with stations like Guskara, which D visited, which is of significance also because it has a well maintained, large water tank dating from 1920, of the East Indian Railway, right behind the station, with distinctive, red brick arches supporting the tank.

We drew into Bolpur right on time, and the report on the next part of the journey to north Bengal, to the fringes of the Dooars, with D for company, for another time.

Trip to Alipurduar and Cooch Behar

North Bengal proper consists of three districts, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling on the foothills of the eastern Himalayas and Cooch Behar adjoining Bangladesh. We got a brief taste of each of them in the second part of our Bengal trip a couple of weeks ago.

From Bolpur Shantiniketan we took the Kanchankanya to Alipurduar late one night. I missed the chance yet again to see Kishanganj, but woke up just ahead of New Jalpaiguri. We took the northern of the two lines going out of NJP, with the narrow gauge line to Siliguri and Darjeeling for company. The Darjeeling Hill Railway is a world heritage thing which we should try to experience soon. We were too early to see the full fledged train, but we caught a glimpse of a shunting operation on the small line, much to my happiness. The small line beside the big line has the image of a big guy taking his little daughter with a balloon to the park for an evening out.

Soon after Siliguri Jn, which may be for some time more the only tri-gauge station in India (world?), the small line left us to climb the hills, while we went along the plains eastward. This route is along tea gardens and some forested areas, especially in and around Chalsa. We passed the cosily named Oodlabari, then New Mal junction (but missed Mal Bazar on the branch line, which would have been nice to see), then crossed the Teesta river at Sivok. We had a view on the left of a picture postcard scene of a road along the river bank on a high cliff, heading off towards Kalimpong and the mountains.

This line has a lot of cantonment towns, Binnagudi, Hasimara (which literally means Duck Killed, I was told), and gateways to Jaldapara National Park, the Buxa Tiger reserve and an approach to Bhutan through Puntsholing (which reminded me of the groundhog Punxsutawney Phil, for some reason). We also passed through the descriptively named Rajabhatkhawa, where my friend Santanu had told me says it all, i.e. that the rice in this region was fit for the king to eat. This town now has a natural history museum, which we should check out at some point.

If you want many more details on this part of the world, check out <http://irfca.org/members/trips/sbasu-20050610-dooars.html>

Our train terminated at Alipurduar Junction and we took an auto to the town proper. Like all the places in this part of the world, there are multiple stations in a short radius. This

one has plain old Alipurduar, APD Junction, APD court, and New Alipurduar. All this causes me much excitement, which is good, because there is not much else in the town proper. We stayed at the Elite, which was just about OK, and after a rice lunch (good one, not surprisingly, being so close to Rajabhatkhawa) we set out for a local exploration. We selected at random the picnic spot Rosik Beel, which is something like a combination of a zoo (it has an aviary and a gharial breeding lake), nature reserve and a sort of sanctuary for injured and captured animals, deer, leopard and so on. Spent a couple of hours there, had tea and nimki (for the grand sum of Rs 8 for the three of us, including the driver) and came back to the town, through pleasant roads.

Picked up rolls and stuff at the Monginis like place which was obviously the hotspot of APD for the young and hip and settled down to eat all of it watching Seinfeld reruns.

The next morning, we set off to Cooch Behar. The driver had planned the trip for us, which was quite convenient. First stop was the temple at Baneswar, well-maintained and with a nice temple tank. The big attraction there is the tame turtles which come to the banks and even crawl halfway out to eat the prasad which you feed them, which is balls-of-roasted-puffed-rice-mixed with jaggery and stuff, if that makes any sense. They made plenty of sense to the two big turtles that we spent some time with. The fish in the pond don't go for this stuff, and dart away after taking a sniff at it.

We did our own feeding at the neat little place across the temple gate, with steaming hot parathas and potato sabji, washed down with tea and some mishti for the road. Even the smallest place in Bengal will have a dozen varieties of sweets on offer and this one had two dozen, of which we selected three.

The big attraction in Cooch Behar is the palace turned museum, which is well kept and quite informative. There is an anthro section on the various communities who live in that part of the world (the Bhutias and the Rajbongshis and so forth). The number of implements they have to catch fish is quite mind-boggling. The museum also had the collection of the kings (all called something or other Narayan, which made me feel vaguely kin-ly towards them) and as with most of these guys who survived, they cosied up some with the British and played polo with them and what not. I believe one of these princesses of CB is something in the royal family in Rajasthan. Not something I keep a lot of track of. Not like these are railway stations or anything, after all.

We also saw a temple called Madan Mohan Mandir, which also seemed quite good. Didn't linger as the driver had spent a lot of time going round in circles in the grid of roads surrounding the palace, fooled by some one way signs.

At New Cooch Behar station, we were in for a nasty surprise. The Rajdhani was 'abnormally late', which meant that they would just not say when or whether it would come. But it also meant that they were authorized to give us a full refund, after some paperwork. We managed, with some gymnastics, to get a comfortable seat in the North East Express (the next best thing to the Rajdhani in these parts). The railway bureaucracy, as often happens when having to deal with a live person instead of a faceless crowd, responded and we got everything done in time and even picked up refreshments at the south Indian stall at New Cooch Behar station. This entire North East trip, I've picked up more paper tickets (and for that matter, card tickets) than in all my years of travel till now.

Journey back was uneventful except for some excitement for me where the track joins at Samuktala Road and we were in the company of some morose army personnel who were resuming duty after their leave in the north. We got off on the wrong side at Kamakhya and had to travel in a sardine-like environment in the IIT bus back home, but we made it in 5 pieces, including all our luggage. Good trip.

Jorhat and Sivsagar

We set off at 5 am by taxi for the Jorhat Jan Shatabdi. Splurged on an AC ticket, and enjoyed a good day-time ride through eastern Assam (called upper Assam, not because it is above the Brahmaputra but because it is upstream of the Brahmaputra, the Indian part of it, anyway). First stop Chaparmukh and then through green fields and occasional thick forest, past Hojai and Lanka on to Lumding Junction. I was thrilled to see full fledged meter gauge coming up to meet us at Lumding, which has in my mind, achieved larger than life significance by reading about the Doyang viaduct and the rest of the Lumding Badarpur hill section through Halflong Hill and Jatinga. But that will have to be some other time, it looks like.

For a visual account of the Lumding Badarpur rail section, see <http://irfca.org/gallery/Members/Mohan/LumdingBadarpur/> and also <http://irfca.org/members/trips/mbhuyan-20040110-badarpur-lumding.html> for the trip report.

The towns here are unusual. Diphu, after the river, the HQ of the tribal district of Karbi Anglong, sliced in two by Nagaon district, Furkating Jn, Mariani, Lumding, the choice of junction for the network to the south Assam Barak valley, in the days of the direct line from Dibrugarh to Chittagong. Later I learnt that Karbi Anglong is one of the three autonomously administered regions in Assam.

We touched Dimapur station in Nagaland proper, so got to see autorickshaws with Nagaland license plates (buses are plentiful in Guwahati and trucks quite common all over India for some reason). We got down at the platform to get a roll from the bakery on the platform and the enquiries were a bit too long for such a short halt and we had to run to get back in the train, with D being scooped in by an alert TTE. The rolls we picked up were not even worth it, really, but the Dimapur halt got the adrenaline going.

The train was quite empty after Dimapur, which is like a gateway to Nagaland and we left the main line at Mariani Junction to the tea town of Jorhat. Past gracious structures of the planters and quite a few Tea clubs and institutes and schools and so on and the suburb of Cinnamara and dieseled into Jorhat Town at lunchtime. We had spotted a new looking hotel just near the level crossing, so we decided to head there first. Not at all a bad choice.

The new hotel was keen to impress and they gave us a departure gift of a large wall clock saying G.B.Towers or G.B.Palace or something, matched in hideousness only by one of those gifts that mother's friends come up with as wedding gifts (but must admit, one of those hideous wall clocks has been the best performing quartz clock, as clocks go, so no doubt some of those clocks have a heart of gold underneath the forbidding exterior. But who's to know?). The hotel had a restaurant called Zero One in a rather binary and mysterious manner, as if they could not make up their mind. But it was quite adequate.

After the mandatory nap, we set out to try our luck at getting to Majuli. This riverine island, the largest such in the world, has some pockets of Vaishnavite culture, and some setups called Satras or something, apart from the Mising tribe, which is not quite missing, since it is there in Majuli and also near Tezpur somewhere. All this sounds rather exciting, although not very obviously tourist accessible, but we wanted to try anyway. But just like me, if I were asked directions on how to get to Elephanta in Bombay, no one in Jorhat seemed quite sure how to get to the place. We actually seemed to know more, that there was a ferry ghat called Nimati Ghat and so on. With some friendly but somewhat clueless discussions at the reception desk and some phone calls, we finally found a nearby travel agent who actually knew someone who knew about Majuli (who actually came from there). So she made some calls and the net result was Zip. No convenient ferries for a day trip and enough time to see anything there and return in time to catch the night train from Mariani.

So we gave up the idea and had a long walk in Jorhat town. Jorhat itself is a gracious town, probably the third or fourth most important town in Assam, after Guwahati,

Dibrugarh and Silchar. Has an airport with regular flights and some broad roads (including the ubiquitous Assam Trunk Road) in the heart of town.

So instead of Majuli, we latched on to the idea of going to the nearby town of Sivsagar, which was once the proud capital of the erstwhile kings of Ahom in the 18th century or so. We had read about this town and decided to go for it. The morning bus ride to Sivsagar after a South Indian breakfast at G.B. was pretty good. Rural Assam is a lot like Kerala, with bamboo replacing coconut and the Brahmaputra replacing the backwaters, i.e. never very far away. Everything green, neat houses, lot of semi rural areas, nothing too grotesque and cementy for the most part, nor too much grinding rural poverty and people with a fairly distinctive culture. Like Jeeves, I'm sure it's the fish that does it. River fish here, saltwater fish in Kerala.

By the time we reached Sivsagar, it was noon, the hottest time of day in these eastern parts. We haggled with a taxi fellow to take us round, and had a just-passable thali lunch near the bus stand, at an old place with high ceilings and yellowing posters of the Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose variety on the walls, and suddenly populated by dozens of college going youngsters out on some trip or other.

The taxi fellow had pretended that it was a tough job to go hither and thither to see all the attractions of Sivsagar, but himself sheepishly admitted that it could all be done in a couple of hours or so, and so we negotiated a drop at the railhead Simaluguri as part of the deal, so everyone was happy.

The monuments themselves were rather nice. Distinctive architecture of red masonry and brick and what later turned out to be some organic paste which those people used (we were told), and restored by the authorities and kept quite nicely. There are three places with three temples each, Siva Dol, Vishnu Dol and Devi Dol. The two main ones are an old complex on the banks of Joysagar, which is of historical value, and the main Sivsagar tank in the middle of town, from where it gets its name. The one in town is an impressive temple on the banks of a large scenic tank, at a raised level, which is rather unique. The promenade around the tank is picturesque and includes a museum, which was unfortunately closed because they were redoing the exhibits at the National Museum in Kolkata at the time.

There are also a couple of palaces, the Talatal, which has some underground labyrinths, including a secret passage, and the Rang Ghar, where the erstwhile used to graciously spectate. Elephant fights and other entertainments of those times in the company of their consorts. These days we have Charles and Camilla doing very holistic things like visiting Anandpur Sahib and checking out water harvesting schemes in Rajasthan.

Those days, kings were more kingly in their tastes, I guess. The Rang Ghar has an inverted boat shaped roof and some crocodiles sculpted on top, and the whole structure is quite something.

With a tea break at the only posh hotel in Sivsagar, we finished off the rest of the sights in town and headed for the remaining monument on the way to Simalugudi. That was a similar palace, Kareng Ghar, but on an elevation and we had a good climb to the roof, where we could see the setting sun over Upper Assam. We also had a quick glimpse of the famed weaving skills of the female population of Assam in the village outside. Every woman is supposed to know how to weave and every man to fish. These women were doing a good job on an outdoor loom and it was nice to just watch the whole thing, which did require a bit of a set up, and some co-operation of a few to get it going. At least I did not see enough to get the technical part of it, but could see that it was quite a wholesome pastime which I enjoyed watching.

As usual, we were early at Simaluguri station and the train was a bit late. We packed dinner at a restaurant outside the station, strangely and endoscopically named Bellyview, but ignoring that, we went in anyway and it turned out to be good. Neatly packed parathas and sabji, some sweets and some local kachoris.

Simaluguri on the main line is a junction for a small branch line to Sivsagar Town and Moranhat and also serves the ONGC oilfields at Nazira. The Ledo intercity, which was our train, has the distinction of being the easternmost terminal of a passenger train in India, so I had more symbolic reasons to be happy. Also being part of Tinsukia, the easternmost division of Indian Railways. Since our ticket was earlier booked from Mariani (with the Majuli plan in mind), we decided to take a chance in the unreserved general compartment from Simaluguri to Mariani for the hour's journey. Which was not at all bad. On to the AC coach at Mariani, blankets etc., sleep slightly interrupted by a large party getting in at Lumding. Guwahati by 5 a.m., home before 6 a.m., a half hour nap and enough time to prepare for my class at 9 a.m. Yet another good trip under the belt.

Manas National Park

Last weekend we went to Manas National Park with friends. It was a short trip but quite exhilarating. D had visited this place some 19 years ago and remembers it as the most beautiful place she has seen, so she was keen to go. After going there, I also agree with this assessment. In fact, a Forest Officer we met later, who has traveled in most parts of India and quite a few places abroad also said the same thing.

The park, actually straddling the two banks of the Manas river in India and Bhutan is a unique one. It is a tiger reserve, elephant reserve, national park, some biosphere something or other and also a world heritage site. The Indian part of the park, in the Bodo dominated area of Assam had quite a troubled social and political history for more than a decade, starting from the late 80's and has only now returned to stability. The park had almost no tourists during those years and the militant groups in the area preserved the large part of the wilderness at least by preventing timber felling in the area, since this is viewed as a key resource in the area. This meant that the national park did very well, actually, in terms of natural regeneration. Almost all the 20 odd lodges that the British built in the area were damaged or destroyed. The one lodge that survives is at a fantastic location, on a raised part, overlooking the broad river and the Bhutan hills on the other side and no sounds except for the rushing of the river through the day and night. The lodge is a good 40 minute drive through a bad but motorable road from the park entrance.

No electricity there, but now there is modern plumbing there and a generator if you take diesel there. You need to carry all the food to use there, although there is a cook in residence. I think there is now some wireless communication or something, but current day mobile phone connectivity ends long before even reaching the park entrance.

We reached in the evening, in the dusk and could see nothing that day. I had never been in such wilderness before, and although we were in a convoy of vehicles, you did get that feeling, rare nowadays, of an expansive earth with much more than one can grasp. You just don't feel that nowadays because of jaded travelogues, National Geographic, discovery, air travel and the rest of it. But we did get the feeling that evening that the morning was going to be spectacular, because we could hear the river right at our doorstep, and we could see far more stars in the sky than we normally do. I must admit though, that I, like the modern man, do not look up in wonder very often, in any case.

We were traveling with friends and we met their friend at the lodge, who had actually organized everything. So we had tea and then a drink and snacks and then dinner and tried to get an early night. Even before entering the park, the road is in extremely bad shape soon after we leave the civilized precincts of the railway station area at Barpeta Road. Almost for an hour, you really need a high axle vehicle, a rugged driver, no back problem and a handle to hold on to. This area is largely in Boksa or Bogsa district, now one of the four northern districts in lower Assam administered by the Bodoland Autonomous Council, which has some 40 elected members who run a state within a state. I learnt that Karbi Anglong district and the North Cachar Hills District are likewise, and perhaps similar arrangements in Meghalaya and the other North Eastern states.

Law and order is still provided by Assam and it is of interest to know how this region will find a balance between the desire for autonomy and the control of one's resources and fate, but at the same be part of the 'globalised' world outside. Mobility of humans and jobs would be a big concern, and it is no surprise that many of the agitations for better management of these areas come from student outfits, even in Assam. Same story in Manipur and Nagaland.

The landscape in the park is not the same as one goes through and later we found that there are some five distinct bio-entities in the place. We could spot a part where there is elephant grass like vegetation and a more wooded version, at least. Worth studying what all this is about.

We did manage to get up early the next morning and went for a walk along the river. Soon enough, you come to a non-descript stone which announces the border between Assam and Bhutan and an ambitious sign announcing various institutions of the govt of Bhutan. Royal Manas Park, Department of Forests, and so on. But not a soul in sight. The sight of the river from the lodge is enough to keep you glued to the spot for minutes on end and the roar of the perennial river (even at its low water level, at this point in time) and the wildness of the scene on the other bank was memorable.

After breakfast, our hosts decided to drive through to Bhutan, which was quite an exciting prospect for us. The bumpy ride, with rocks making it to the underside of the vehicle a couple of times, was along the east and south bank (the river curves quite a bit) with a cliff face on our right, throughout. We could see the river for the most part and a couple of times, the scene was so spectacular that we stopped to admire it. Sum total of human habitation we saw was as follows, in the one hour till we reached the Bhutanese village of Pangbang. A few houses on the Bhutan side across the river, with some tame elephants doing duty on the banks, a small picnic party of a Bhutanese group of women with a few kids in tow, a small construction gang working on a small causeway like thing, and that was about it.

After quite a while, we came across a point where two rivers meet and there was a clearing of sorts and we saw some multicoloured vertical fluttering flags with lettering on them. Some Buddhist memorial to the dead and to the living. But nice colours in silk like fabric on bamboo poles and with neat calligraphy on them.

We reached the outpost of Pangbang, some 8-10 km inside the border and since we were legit guys, after some walkie talkie type interaction, the Bhutanese guys let us in. The village was like out of Heidi or something. Sun baked mountain plains, with vaguely

apple cheeked people going about their work, a fairly active school sports ground where we saw those kids like you see in the Parineeta song, doing archery and playing volleyball and other stuff, a few shops with wooden carved frontage and generally neat place. Got to see a couple of vehicles with Bhutan license plates.

We were wondering where to try to have a cup of tea, when we were accosted by a stout fellow dressed in a checked tablecloth. It looked as though he was interrupted in something and had rushed out in whatever he could drape himself in, till you saw that he was neatly socked and shoed and his whole manner was quite official and smiling. This is the official dress, I guess. He was the police boss in the place and he took us all to a guest house to offer us cold drinks (Fanta) which we dutifully had. The guest house looked nice but fairly primitive, which is OK in such a remote place. So we just managed a small slice of life in Bhutan (the host spoke impeccable English) and had to make do with that.

The return journey was, as always, shorter than the way in, because you remember all the bumpy parts and avoid them, I guess, or more importantly, you know where you can afford to go a little faster.

A quick lunch at the lodge and we were on our way out. We did see some deer, a hornbill or two, a peacock and a herd of wild elephants in the near distance on our way back. We did not really spend much time even trying, so these were just random sightings. We had earlier seen a wild buffalo on the other bank from the lodge, for what that was worth.

We stopped for tea at Barpeta, as we had done on our way in and met some interesting people, including aforementioned forest ranger, who earlier was managing Guwahati zoo and was telling us stories about the problems he had to face. One was about a loris, a nocturnal animal which was kept in bright light and fed at 10 a.m. with all the rest of the gang and soon started to go crazy and harm himself and others in a self destructive frenzy. Then this fellow figured out what was going on, took him out and got him into a routine closer to what he was used to and he recovered like magic.

The ride to and from Barpeta was pleasant, through Nalbari and Kamrup districts, with a stop in Rangiya on our way in, at our hosts mother's place for that rare event, an Assamese veg lunch, in our honour. Our hosts are quite remarkable, both being notable Assamese writers, of the award winning variety. In fact, Ks Katha award story in 1999 is based on his old family home, with creaky gate, pond and all. K's mother was a gracious octogenarian, who lives alone in a self contained manner and she fed and wished us well, which sentiment we could all do with.

Our host's 12 year old M. was most entertaining, being one of the few people to know at all times which side of the railway line we were on. The others being my father, Raghuram, my late friend Vasudev and maybe one or two others. It is the equivalent of the cricketing phrase 'He knows where his off-stump is'. He is one guy who if I ask him 'which is the eastern-point you've been to?', will immediately know it. M. knows far more than that and is a mine of information (especially on animals, geography and language) and surprising for his age, has a lot of interesting opinions. For example, he gave me a detailed account of flood control in the Dibrugarh area, the building of embankments, the changing course of the river and so on. At some point, I felt like seriously telling him 'Don't worry about embankments. You're just 12 years old!' But he's that sort of guy, just laps up National Geographic, and anything he sees around him and remembers it all, and what is amazing, processes it to form an opinion. I haven't seen too many people twice his age able to do that, even with an MBA degree.

Patna

The runway at Loknayak Jaiprakash Narayan airport at Patna is a short one and although safe for A-320s to land, they have to land sharply and can't take off with too much of a load. Thereby we had to refuel at Bagdogra on the way from Patna to Guwahati after offloading some fuel at Patna.

The city of Patna is pretty ancient and entirely on the southern bank of the Ganga. The northern bank is straggly, partly because of the changing course of the Ganga and also because the Gandak joins it in between Sonpur and Hajipur and causes a pretty big area prone to flooding in the rains. The main part of the city is in between the railway line and the river with the striking Gandhi Maidan as the centerpiece. The fancy part is on the way to the airport and that stretch, although full of governmentia, and a large zoo cum botanical garden, has broad roads and is impressive. Much more so than its UP counterpart, Lucknow.

The city also has hung on to its colonial names and has Bailey Road (but often spelt Beli Road, which has its own Bhojpuri ring to it), and Bowring Road and 1, Anne Marg, the CM's residence and Fraser Road. In contrast, the area just south of Patna Junction, Karbigahiya, is chaotic and within 200 m of the platforms on that side, you can get fresh cow's milk, straight from the udder! I did a clockwise parikrama of the station, starting with good views from the bridge on the East side of the station (where I saw the Magadh departing to Rajgir after depositing the major part of its load at Patna station). From the other side, in the maze of roads and lines in between the Gaya line and the main line to Mughalsarai, I observed trains from a vantage point at an old level crossing.

I saw the once important, but now bedraggled Howrah Delhi Janta Exp straggle by with just 11 coaches and a couple of freighters making their way through the big passenger terminal.

Patna now has two more full-fledged termini, Danapur, the old headquarters of the division on the western outskirts and the new Rajendra Nagar terminus, just to the east. They have also opened up the line to Digha Ghat, and with some more proposed stations and lines, Patna may have a circular railway and a near-suburban service some day. An interesting station after Rajendra Nagar and Gulzarbagh is Patna Sahib, after the big gurudwara, marking the birth-place of Guru Gobind, making it one of the big five in Sikhism.

We had an official trip to Khagaul, in between Danapur station and the Cantonment in Danapur. We continued on to a short trip to Vaishali on the northern side of the river. This was quite exciting for me, the first time in north Bihar. Contrary to expectation, the countryside was lush and clean and filled with fields of maize, wheat, sugarcane, banana, mango and sunflower. Plenty of well fed cattle, neat haystacks of round design and nice housing. Not my preconceived view of north Bihar. It may get messier in Samastipur and Muzaffarpur, but I'm not even so sure.

With some twists and turns, we first hit Mahatma Gandhi Setu, a 4 km or so bridge on the Ganga. In the evening sun, the sight was expectedly awesome. Some distance from the bridge, Hajipur town comes up and I could see Hajipur station on my left and the lines to Barauni and to Muzaffarpur take off immediately below the bridge on the right. There is a new line to Sagauli which will go on the northeastern bank of the Gandak, which will also take off at some point there, in the future. We followed the alignment of this new line and headed for the historic location of Vaishali (the district is now called Vaishali), past the town of Lalganj.

Vaishali, we found, is the birthplace of Mahavir, and also a place where the Buddha spent some significant time. One of the eight significant incidents in his life happened here, when a monkey offered him honey. There is a world peace pagoda constructed with Japanese money and an old monastery and stupa excavated from the ground, with a metallic Ashoka pillar, with some interesting architecture. Nalanda and Rajgir are supposed to be much bigger, but this one was pretty interesting, with some evidence of old arrangements for bathing (precursors to modern plumbing) and so on. We were too late to see the museum there.

The Mahavir birth-place is deserted, with just a commemorative plaque in the middle of nowhere. Surprising, given the amount of money the Jains spend otherwise. They are

just making a park of sorts, but it all seems too low key for such a place. But the whole area is quite inspiring in a way, although I suspect life is quite hard for the non-tourist and for the tiller. But the surroundings do have a certain peace to them which gels with Buddhism and Jainism, as far as my superficial understanding goes. Even brash technologists like us stopped for a while to contemplate and to enjoy the evening breeze in the quiet. Or quietude, if you want a fancier word. The sunset colours in such open spaces (in contrast to the blue sky on a clear day), although easily explainable by atmospheric radiation equations, add some mystical quality to such scenes.

We returned to complete a trio of religions by visiting the Patna Sahib gurudwara. This, like all the others I've visited (in Amritsar and Nanded, two of the other biggies, making me 3 for 5, the remaining being in Anandpur Sahib and Nakana Sahib in Pakistan), was openly stirring, with the chanting and the participative, cumulative buzz of men, women and children. At the entrance, a middle aged devotee spotted us as outsiders and gave us fundaes, in a fluent and artistic manner for a good twenty minutes. Just about enough to make us appreciate his skill in talking non-stop, without starting to fidget.

The breakfast menu on the street is bel ka sarbat, and shuddh chane ka sattu. I didn't get to try it this time. What we did do was dine at Budha Vihar on Platform No 1 of Patna station, which though a non-fancy sounding address, is actually pretty decent. Good variety on the menu card, two floor spacious dining, easy access to the station and outside and good lassi. Patna station at that time of the night is a bee-hive. Passengers going to Darbhanga, Islampur, Ara, Buxar, Gaya (in those times when tracks are not blown up by Maoists or others), Rajgir, Barauni, Jhajha and destinations farther afield. Earlier in the day, I had seen buses bound for Laheriya Sarai, Muzaffarpur, and other exciting destinations (you want to hear more exotic locations in North Bihar, try Jhanjharpur and Loukaha Bazar). Patna even has a decent local bus service, much to my surprise.

The cycle rickshaws are the heart of the transport system, and they have a neat arrangement of ringing bells by just pressing the left brake handle, and the movement of the front wheel is enough to trigger the sound. I've been observing the elaborate designs of the back covers of these rickshaws and each city has some unique motifs. Guwahati of course has a fancy rickshaw model, developed by the Design Department at IIT Guwahati and seems to be a success. Lighter, more space, well covered, easier maintenance, etc.

I did not bathe in the Ganga in Patna like some of my other friends did. This was off an island in the middle of the waters, and the clay is supposed to be good for one's hair,

and indeed, one of them had shining and lustrous hair like they have in the Garnier ads. Must try it some time, Ganga, not Garnier.

Bhalukpong

Unless we make an outstation trip with parents, this is the last trip for us during our North east sojourn. To Bhalukpong, which is worth visiting just for the name and the opportunity to see signs saying B. Pong. It is also called Bhalukpong, and basically refers to a hot spring in that area which was shaped like a bear's footprint. The town straddles the Assam Arunachal border and technically, you need an inner line permit to visit the A.P side of the town, but there is so much back and forth that for just the town itself, the police look the other way.

We left on a partly cloudy morning and after a planned, sit-down breakfast at the gate (vadas, idlis and dal vadas with sambar and tomato chatni). We took the route on the north bank, through Darrang, Udalguri (the Bodo part of Darrang) and Sonitpur districts. The towns we passed were Baihata, Dumunichowky, Mangaldoi (HQ of Darrang), Kharupetia, Dalgaon, Rowta, Orang, Dhekiajuli, outskirts of Tezpur (HQ of Sonitpur) and Balipara. Almost all of it is in picturesque terrain and after Balipara we enter the Nameri national park, which is even better.

The drive was in a Versa van with a driver and an Assam tourism fellow (answering to the glorious name of Dimbeswar Sarma) for company. The road is OK except in Udalguri district and in the national park itself, where it is quite bumpy. Kharupetia is supposed to be the veggie capital of the state and 60% of the veggies sold in the state pass through this place. We could not really capitalize on it on the way back, it being evening by then.

No railway line after the Changsari crossing till we entered Tezpur town, and the only noteworthy railway sighting was the junction just east of Balipara where you can see the upper Assam line to Lakhimpur, Dhemaji and Murkongselek head off and the curved line taking off to Bhalukpong, the only Indian Railways station in Arunachal. This latter line is not operational now for some unexplained reason.

At the Changsari crossing, we had the auspicious sight of the Kamrup Express, so at least I was in good spirits. With stops for this and that, we reached the Bhalukpong lodge a little after two. The setting of the B-pong place was great, with a boundary wall separating us from Arunachal, the Jia Bharali river in front of us, and the hills of Nameri park in front. And enough creature comforts to satisfy everyone. We were willing to do something that day, but it took time to get permits and the vehicle got stuck somewhere

while going around getting stuff organized and the net result was that we just watched the sunset, had an hour's stroll into Arunachal (all signs in English only) and just took it easy.

The next morning, the programme was to do river rafting on the Jia Bharali. Those who remember the riddle of the goat, the tiger, the stack of hay and the boatman would recognize the situation. We have to raft downstream starting at some point. We were upstream of that point to begin with. The boats and the boatmen were downstream of where we were. The vehicle to carry us was upstream. All very complicated. Suffice it to say that the driver crossed a certain stretch of the park road 8 times in the space of about 14 hours to get everything in place.

The eco camp was good, with neat tents and some stuff to do and read, and hang out, and also a good restaurant where we had good old toast butter to fortify us. D was asking whether it was OK to eat before the river rafting. That was pretty funny. Turns out she was expecting some bucking bronco-like ride over the Jia Bharali and hanging upside down or something. What it was was a gentle ride over the river waters in the direction of the current, with a few fast passages. Exciting enough for me, and soothing as water travel always is, but not wildly heart thumping or something. These were not classed white water rapids. But it took close to two hours in green surroundings and we did spot a wild elephant and some birds on the banks and stopped once to let T have a quick swim in a placid offshoot of the river and so forth, so a good time had by all.

The Bhalukpong eco-camp is a new avatar of some old British angling and wildlife centre, where they used to hang around looking for big mahseer and the like. It is now run as a club, but with govt approval and is worth a look. The camp also has an interesting centre for breeding the endangered pygmy hog, which is there in the wild only in the Manas park and in a controlled environment near the Guwahati zoo. This place in Bhalukpong is a halfway house for these animals to hang out for a while before being released in a couple of places in the state. We saw a few of those, behind an electric fence to protect them from all sorts of predators (pythons onwards) and they are smooth haired, brown, harmless looking fellows rooting around, like pigs are apt to do. DB impressed the center-in-charge there with the info that pigs and hogs are the only creatures not able to look up at the sky, because of their neck structure.

After this, we went into Arunachal, for a bit. The road starts climbing almost a few hundred meters of the border and the end of Bhalukpong town. Then it becomes picture postcard land and the first landmark is where Madhuri Dixit and someone else shot for some movie. Rocky bank, pristine river, hills on both sides, you get the scene.

Our destination was the town of Tippi. We passed a sign saying Tippi Piggeries, Piglets available for sale, but decided against it, although we had people in our group who operate quite a menagerie at home, dogs, cats, squirrels, goats and other creatures. There is an orchid research centre at Tippi in idyllic surroundings. We saw some natural orchids and some cultivated ones in a variety of colours, from all over India, at least. Plus some species exclusive to Arunachal, and discovered there. Considering they discovered a new species of primate in the Arunachal forests as recently as a decade or so ago, a few dozen varieties of orchids may not be a big deal. My idea of these orchids was these big fleshy, colourful things in that typical shape. What I found was that there are several smaller ones, equally good to look at and growing on trees and creepers. Overall, botanical heaven for those interested in such things and not at all bad for the rest of us.

Veg Rajasthani thali at Bhalukpong, Arunachal Pradesh, and then we hit the road. Actually, we hit the road pretty hard at several bumps on the way, and though I tried to think of it as road rafting, it was somehow not the same. But we made it in one piece each, with a couple of small halts, the way we came, and went to the IIT Guest house for a sumptuous dinner.