

Glimpses of Bodoland, Assam

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues



Approaching Guwahati airport



Freshly extracted jute fibres hung out to dry in the sun



A lone wild water buffalo resting near the waters of the Manas River

The Indian state of Assam has a special place in world history. It is, after all, the only other region in the world, besides southern China, to have a native tea plant variety, *Camelia sinensis* var. *assamica*. When the East India Company began commercial production of tea in Assam in the mid-1800s, it broke the long-held Chinese monopoly on the tea trade.

Today, Assam serves as the gateway to the enigmatic northeast corner of India, with its largest city Guwahati, well-connected by air to most major cities in India. In stark contrast to the city I had left behind (Mumbai), the approach to Guwahati was blanketed with bright-green paddy fields, juxtaposed against the dark, forest-covered mountains. Green continued to be the colour of the trip, with sprawling tea estates adding their own pleasant shade to the mix.

My journey to Assam was prompted by a slowly disappearing tradition – Bodo weaving. The Bodos are Assam's indigenous people and a majority of them live in Bodoland, an autonomous region within the state, close to the India-Bhutan border. One of the prized traditional skills of the Bodo people is weaving and every Bodo home has a loom. In the past, in her spare time, the woman of the house would weave clothes for herself and her family. Traditional clothing items such as the *dokhona* (a sari-like garment worn by Bodo women) and the *gomosa* (a multipurpose shawl-like garment) were woven at home. This skill was passed from mother to daughter and was highly valued in a prospective bride. Sadly nowadays, much of the younger generation has moved on to office jobs and the tradition is at risk of dying out.



Close-up of the fabric being woven by Munita, a weaver at the ant centre

I was hosted by a remarkable nonprofit called 'the ant' (www.theant.org), which among several other rural development projects, has been able to tap into the traditional weaving knowledge of Bodo women, to create livelihood opportunities for them. The women are commissioned to weave fabrics, which are later fashioned into



Munita, a Bodo weaver at work in the ant centre

garments, sold in India, and exported internationally as well. These exquisite handwoven fabrics have intricate motifs inspired by nature, including representations of plants, birds and animals.

As I continued my travels through the rustic yet stunning landscapes of Bodoland, I was fascinated by the luminous golden fibres hung out to dry in several locations. I learnt that the fibres were from the jute plant. Assam is one of the largest jute-producing states in India, thus contributing to India's position as the top jute producer in the world. In addition to the fibres extracted from the stem, every part of the jute plant is utilised. The stem cores are used for house-building or as firewood, and the leaves are cooked with pork to prepare a traditional delicacy known as *narzi*. Very much an acquired taste, I'm told.

Bodo cuisine was a rather novel experience for me. While rice is a staple, foraged greens form a big part of their diet. Silkworms and freshwater snails are a delicacy, while river fish and pork are the preferred meats. A fiery chutney made from the world famous Bhoot Jhalokia chili (Ghost Pepper) accompanies every meal, though the Assamese variant is not as hot as the Naga one.

Manas National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is also located in Bodoland. This protected

forest is home to several rare and endangered species including the one-horned rhinoceros, the Bengal tiger, and the Indian elephant. But Manas is most famous for its pure, wild water-buffalo population, of which less than 3,500 individuals are believed to exist globally.

Bodoland, located three to four hours by road from Guwahati airport, has a lot to offer the discerning traveler. It is beginning to receive attention from both Indian and international audiences.



Phoolshree, a Bodo woman fishing with tools made of woven bamboo strips

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All photos by the author