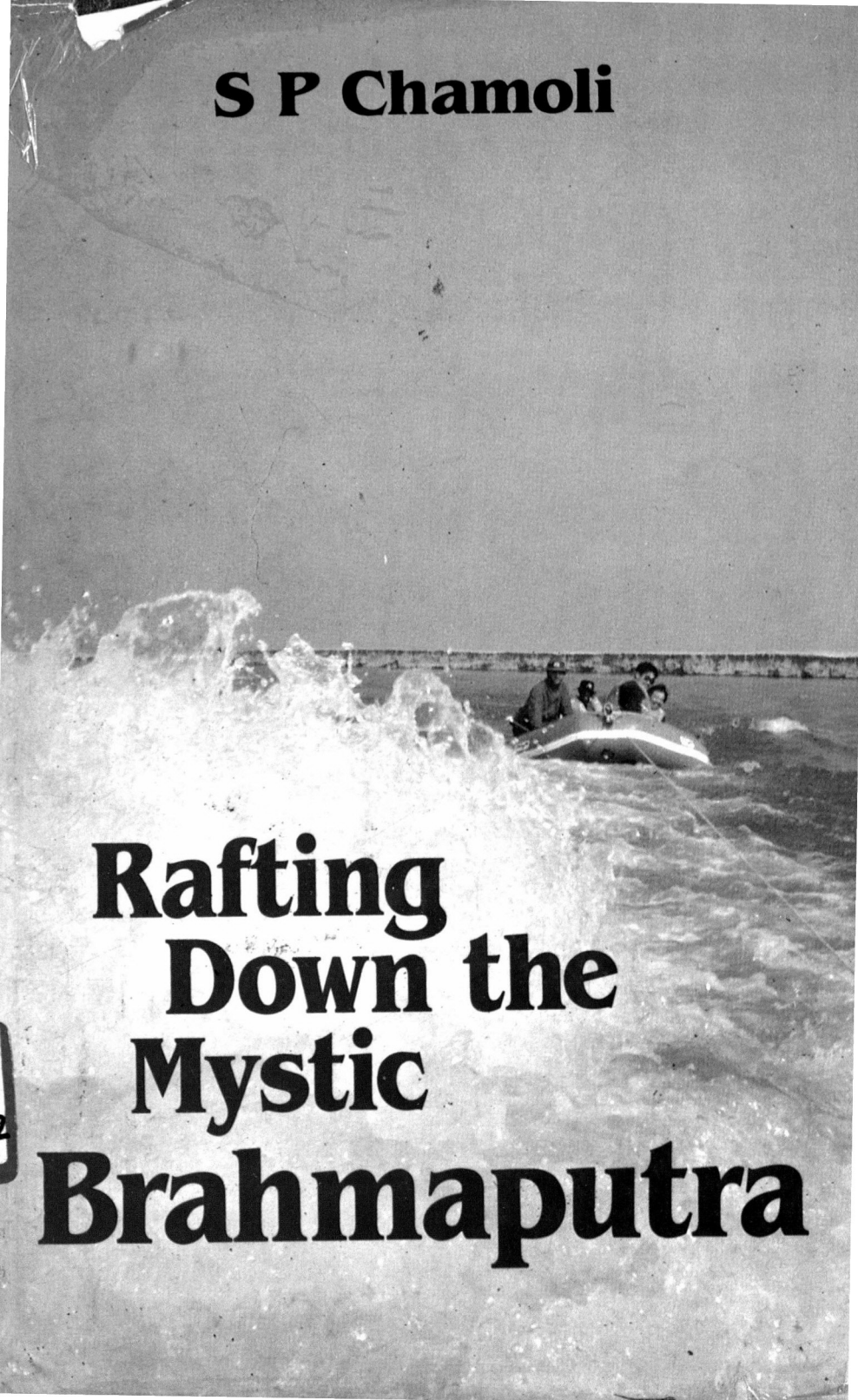


S P Chamoli



**Rafting
Down the
Mystic
Brahmaputra**

This book is the account of "a world record in white water rafting" (The Times of India) down the mighty Brahmaputra River, from Gelling on Indo-Tibet Border to Dhubri on Indo-Bangladesh Border by an Indo-Japanese rafting expedition team under the auspices of Indian Mountaineering Foundation, jointly organised by Himalayan Association of Japan and Indo-Tibetan Border Police. This account has been penned down by the leader of this maiden rafting venture. The mighty river has been rafted down in only 2 small rubberised AVON Rafts, through its unknown deep gorges of boiling white water rapids of Siang valley up to Passighat and thereafter long placid voluminous waters of plains of Assam covering a total distance of about 1300 Kms. in 25 days. The book gives first-hand account of the unexplored tribal area of 'Abhors' hills, inhabited by the 'Adis'—the animist of Arunachal Pradesh and worshippers of 'Dolo-polo' (the Sun and Moon God)—and 'Mishings' of Assam, which makes it an interesting reading.

This team of adventurers have endeavoured to solve the missing link of the world's last stronghold and age old riddle of mighty Brahmaputra River by rafting down the unknown gorges and slowly forced to divulge its secrets, which could not be explored until this rafting expedition.

The rafting down of Brahmaputra from its Himalayan heights of Tsangpo 'Gorge' used to hold similar challenge to rafters, as climbing of Everest for the mountaineers before it was first climbed in 1953.

So far no book has been published on Brahmaputra River. This study reveals the mystery of the mighty Brahmaputra which was attempted by many expeditions and survey parties in 19th and early 20th century and still remained a challenge.



S P CHAMOLI is a well known mountainer. His outstanding achievements included the successful leadership of expeditions to various challenging peaks, Neelkanth (ht. 21,640 ft), Kedarnath dome (ht. 22,410 ft.), Saser Kangri-III (ht. 24,695 ft), Nanda Devi (East) Peak (ht. 7434 mtrs) and Swarga Rohini (ht. 6,252 mtrs). He was the leader of successful "Joint Indo-New Zealand Himalayan Traverse Expedition" in 1981, which trekked laterally about 5,000 kms. of entire Himalayas in fast moving alpine style from Kanchenjunga in the East to Karakoram in the West, after negotiating 106 difficult passes between 10,000 ft. to 20,500 ft. height in 260 days. As a skier he skied down from summit of Kedarnath dome upto 17,000 ft.

In 1986, he rafted down the Ganges, Indus and Zanskar rivers and carried out maiden rafting down of Shyok River in Karakorams. He was captain of Indian rafting team to World Rafting Competition held at Nantahala in U.S.A.

Under his leadership the Indo-Japanese Rafting Expedition Team successfully rafted down this mighty Brahmaputra River from Gelling on Indo-China border upto Dhubri on Bangladesh border covering a total distance of about 1300 Kms. for the first time which remained a great challenge for adventurers so far.

He is receipt of Samar Sewa Star, Sainya Sewa Medal, Raksha Medal, Sangram Medal and President's Police Medal, for Meritorious Services and President's Police Medal for Distinguished Service.

**RAFTING DOWN
THE MYSTIC BRAHMAPUTRA**

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S.P. CHAMOLI



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Foreword

The proposal brought forward to me by the Indo-Tibetan Border Police to the effect that they contemplated to raft down the turbulent Brahmaputra river (known as Dibang in Arunachal Pradesh) in collaboration with the Himalayan Association of Japan, I immediately agreed and recommended the proposal of the joint expedition as none had earlier rafted down this mighty river from its entry into Arunachal Pradesh upto Bay of Bengal. This river, in fact, is looked upon with great deal of awe and respect by the Arunachalees throughout the Siang Valley and considered as a great challenge for navigation. There are few deep canyons in the beginning near Tuting which have never been ventured by any human beings. Consequently I considered launching of this joint Indo-Japanese rafting expedition as a unique event for our remote State and had a privilege to be its Chief Patron. This would give a rare chance to our State to expose its panorama and exquisite beauty and also a tremendous adventure potential to the outside world. Moreover, this expedition could also be a medium of exposure to the Arunachalees to see the advanced technological innovations made by the outside world like Japanese people and thus induce in them the curiosity for adventure sports.

I vividly remember the day at Gelling when I flagged off this joint Indo-Japanese Rafting Expedition down the Brahmaputra. This expedition is indeed unique of its kind and the rare fit of human enterprise and endurance. As I bid farewell I was fully conscious of the dangers and hazards that lie ahead and hence worried about the safety of the team members. But, the spirit of the adventure surpassed the emotions. I prayed a silent prayer to invoke the blessing of the Almighty 'Donyi-Polo' for their safety. After handing over the National flags of both Japan and India and also of ITBP and Haj, the two rafts set out with these men to face the challenge of the mighty Brahmaputra.

S.P. Chamoli, Commdt. was the leader of the expedition. He is a mountaineer of international fame with his nine months long Himalayan traverse, keen skier and his participation of world rafting competition to his credit. I saw in him a man of self confidence with lot of experience. By dint of his spirit of adventure and love of nature he set out for the rafting expedition.

I am very happy to note that the leader of the expedition of this most successful rafting is publishing the vivid account of the rafting in the mighty Brahmaputra river. Trust, this first hand account of the rafting adventure fraught with exciting and hair raising moments will go a long way in providing inspiration to many adventure lovers in this country and a broad to visit our North-Eastern most heritage which holds tremendous amount of adventure potentials.

I do hope this book will unfold a new chapter and imbibe our younger generations of the tribal people to embark upon the sports of adventure for all time to come.

I convey my good wishes for grand success of the book.

Gegong Apang

*Chief Minister
Arunachal Pradesh*

Preface

Of all the talents gifted to man by Nature curiosity and courage are the noblest, for they arm man with means to earn ineffable joy and rare enlightenment that enriches his personality and advances the frontiers of human knowledge. But for this Columbus would not have ventured out into the unknown Atlantic deep and discovered America by default, Vasco da Gama would not have voyaged to the mysterious East and discovered India without fault, the legendary Sindbad would not have sailed round the world seven times, nor the sublimity of Indian culture and ethos reached the shores of Indonesia and the far East. All this was brought home fresh in 1977 when the inimitable Sir Edmund Hillary, who alongwith Tensing blazed the historical trail to summit the Everest, successfully launched 'From the Ocean To The Sky Jet Boat Gangetic Expedition.'

That, perhaps, provided the clue.

It was Sadashige Inada, the dynamic President of the Himalayan Association of Japan, who first in 1990 conceived the idea of rafting down the turbulent Brahmaputra, and when he broached the subject to me, it found an instant appeal. I seemed obsessed rather. It made me sit up and think, for, Brahmaputra is such a mighty river in the

Asian Continent, the mightiest river in India, that the sheer massiveness of its proportions is staggering, the width of its sweep gigantic, its currents and cross-currents inexorable, forbidding and temperament masterful—the only river in India bearing male appellation symbolic of pure physical power with enormity writ large on it. Would I not be risking valuable lives if we take a plunge? I asked myself. But the very formidability of the challenger constitutes the stuff adventure is made of. And that made me decide. I sat back and thrashed out plans to get the whole thing going.

ITB Police was the natural choice for teaming up with Japan. For one thing, the Organisation happens to be a 'parvat-putra', 'the upland son', whose members spend their life-time on the bare Himalayan ranges by virtue of their deployment up there. While on patrol duty, they have to negotiate fast running streams and rivulets of various descriptions which they often do with indigenously contrived rafts—all the more reason for taking up the adventure, which, incidentally, could be the first organised rafting expedition in the Brahmaputra. Such unrelieved exposure toughens the boys up transforming them into seasoned timber. And when the going gets tough, the tough should get going.

S.P. Chamoli, ripe with experience in rafting down about half a dozen rivers in India and the U.S.A. was the obvious choice to lead the 15 member team comprising Indian and Japanese dare-devils with K. Yagihara as co-leader.

On the face of it, characteristically, the venture appeared preposterous, rather impossible to accomplish. But, as the following pages bear out, history lay waiting for the indomitable human will to chart the uncharted course, to quench its ancient thirst for the churning white waters, to taste its remorseless devastating buffets, to delve into its steep roaring rapids, to dash headlong into its mazes of treacherous whirlpools, to daunt the 4°C chilly waters, to tread through its serpentine loops and to cruise ultimately

to a relaxed triumph, glory and a place in the sun on the moving waters of time.

The battle-scarred odyssey, which traversed a distance of 1300 km bristling with grade-six rapids in four weeks time, has opened up a new vista for the venture-some, sport-lovers, ecologists, geologists and those endowed with riverine proclivities to come closer to the torrentially rich vagaries of the 'Tsangpo' (Tibet), the 'Dhiang' (Arunachal) or the celebrated Brahmaputra to garner experience and joy unequalled anywhere else.

Grateful mention needs to be made of Gegong Apang, the Chief Minister of Arunachal, who was instrumental in arranging permission for and the supply of administrative needs essential for the launching of the Expedition.

And what a treat it was—the friendly hospitality of the enthusiastic people of the Brahmaputra valley turning out in large numbers bedecked in their gay, colourful, tribal costumes, bringing traditional food and drink along, waiting hours and days at every conceivable point to contact enroute, to make the battle-weary Expeditionists feel at home and to cheer their spirits up. These smiling, singing, happy faces of India were especially enthused to meet our Japanese friends whose ancestors had fascinated their consciousness with inspiring exploits of bravery coming down to them through song and tale heard from elders but whom they were seeing for the first time. Their mongoloid features akin to their own brought them still closer. And today they had offered the latest equipment and vital gear to materialize an ancient dream that lay nestling in the heart of man nagging him all the while until yesterday.

Leading an expedition is one thing and describing its thrill in writing quite another. The author, however, has done more excellent job in his maiden venture.

D.V.L.N. Ramakrishna Rao

Director General

Indo-Tibetan Border Police

Acknowledgement

Our adventure of rafting down the Mystic Brahmaputra River could not have happened without the constant encouragement and support of DVLN Ramakrishna Rao, Director General, Indo-Tibetan Border Police and Sadashige Inada, President, Himalayan Association of Japan, who stood behind us like solid rocks and ensured all possible help right from the idea of Brahmaputra Rafting Expedition to its successful completion and writing of this book. I wish to express my deep gratitude and thanks to our two great patrons and adventure lovers. The success of this Expedition will further strengthen the ties between both Organisations, which are committed for the promotion of adventure activities in the Himalayas having achieved first ascents of many mountains and descents of the massive river.

My special thanks to Gegong Apang, the Honourable Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh and the State Administration of this beautiful state, who did not spare any effort to bring out the forbidden land to the forefront of adventure tourism and now prepared to share its rich tribal heritage with the so-called modern world. Their contribution towards the success of the Expedition is laudable.

Akshay Kumar and Ajai Mehra, have been of great help in guiding through the white water rapids full of turbulences and dangers of this massive river, whereas our ground support party consisting of Dr. Bhasker Ray, Devendra Dutt Mulasi and Bhoop Singh and others supported us all through the untrodden tracks, river banks and remote parts of Arunachal Pradesh, without which this venture could not have been possible.

The Directors General of Central Reserve Police Force, and Border Security Force, provided their vehicles and patrol boats with security cover during our long and hazardous journey. Assam Administration, especially the Director General of Police and IGP Ram Mohan provided us security and help and made our long journey safe.

My Co-Leader Kuniaki Yagihara and four other Japanese members shared the excitement, thrill, inconveniencies together and inspite of innumerable problems and difficulties, continued their broad smile all the way, which was the most encouraging gesture on their part which further -strengthened the bonds of freindship, mutual understanding and goodwill between our two groups with different nationalities and will always be remembered.

I am also grateful to Capt. M.S. Kohli, President, Indian Mountaineering Foundation, senior officials of Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of External Affairs and Defence, who for the first time, permitted any foreign Expedition to enter into the restricted areas of Arunachal Pradesh. I am thankful to DIG's S.H. Khan, Hukam Singh and many other coleagues of I.T.B.P. who supported us directly and indirectly and thus afforded us an opportunity for the first descent of this formidable river.

Lastly but not the least, I want to express my sincere thanks to Lal Chand Arora, who spent long hours for days and months together in transcribing and typing the manuscript which was a strenuous task and finally shaped this book. Where as Subedar Bihari Lal took great pains to prepare sketches and maps for this book in fact,

there are innumerable people right from Arunachal, Assam and Delhi, who encouraged and helped us in many ways, to them also I owe my deep gratitude.

I am also thankful to my wife Madhuri and my son Naveen, who made innumerable suggestions in writing this book and encouraged me to take up the adventure inspite of the hazards and risks involved, notwithstanding the inconveniencies caused to them.



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Introduction

River Brahmaputra is one of the biggest Himalayan Rivers, well-known for its devastating floods which uproots hundreds of villages and thousands of people in Assam and Bangladesh in the Eastern Indian Sub Continent every year. This massive river practically drains out half of the Himalayan glaciers from both the sides of the Himalayas collecting huge volume of water. As such it remained untamed by human beings, where, even bridges could not be constructed barring at one or two places. This river was a great challenge to the explorers, surveyors and adventurers in the past two centuries. Down the famous "Tsangpo gorge" there were gorges where no human being could enter so far and as such this gap remained as "Missing Link" in the Survey of India. The source and the course of Brahmaputra also remained a matter of great controversy in the past, as the Brahmaputra valley down the plains as well as in the high Himalayan regions was inaccessible area inhabited by Adi tribes, known as strong defenders of their privacy who did not allow outsiders to encroach upon their freedom.

The entire area of Eastern India was earlier known as Assam and the Brahmaputra valley being its inaccessible main heart-land, where different cultures, religions and

tribal societies, confined to their own geographically interlocked areas, full of thick forests, marshy land and steep mountains has always been full of mystries. The old tantric and mystic cult profusely flourished in this remote land where Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Buddhism and Animism, all prevailed. River Brahmaputra was the only communication link through which the movement could be possible with the outside world. As such, the River can be called "Artery" of Eastern Indian Sub-Continent.

Brahmaputra is a massive river, having cascading waterfalls, big waves and challenging white water rapids with deep gorges, looked upon with great awe and remained a great challenge to the adventurers so far. Indo-Japanese Brahmaputra Rafting Expedition team, under my leadership, for the first time rafted down this massive and formidable river from Gelling on the Indo-Tibetan Border in Arunachal Pradesh upto Dhubri on Indo-Bangladesh border with 5 Japanese and 10 Indian members. Our small courageous band of adventurers, ran through the entire length of 1300 kms in 25 days, in which the initial 300 kms section of white water rafting was a big challenge of turbulent high waves, and can be compared with one of the biggest adventures in the world of rafting.

When our Expedition was flagged off, just below Gelling hardly 5 kms from Indo-Tibetan border in Arunachal Pradesh, every one of us was aghast at the speed of the water and difficulties of the rapids anticipated to be faced in subsequent downward journey. We all had become aware how dangerous the river could be. The river had continuous surprises one after the other in store for all of us when we rafted down through the icy turbulent waters just above the freezing point in quick succession of stoppers, haystacks, rapids, cateracts, standing waves, deep gorges, riding over waves after waves of huge massive waters with fun, excitement, facing the dangerous challenges of the river with courage and confidence.

It is a racing mountain torrent when it starts coming out

from the Tsangpo Gorge below Gelling with thundering mass of white water, for nearly 300 kms, it foams and churns its way through a series of wild and breathtaking gorges until it reaches Passighat and thereafter, mellows down and known as 'Brahmaputra'. In such an extremely frightening and exciting big 'white water' rafting venture where the stakes were so high, our team members from both the countries, India and Japan, had shown a great amount of courage, compassion, determination and on the top, the united team spirit which ultimately resulted into achieving the success by overcoming all the hurdles and dangers, inherent in such highly risky ventures.

We enjoyed warmth and most memorable hospitality of simple, innocent 'Adi' tribals of Arunachal Pradesh, who welcomed our team everywhere, on the river banks awaiting for days together and entertained us with tribal dinner, dance and drinks whole-heartedly whatsoever was possible and available within their limited means. We could have never expected such rousing welcome in this remote "Siang Valley", every moment of our stay was pleasant and enjoyable whether we were camping in the dense jungles or in the remote villages. Though, the 'Adis' did not understand our language yet their whole-hearted cooperation, enthusiasm and help from time to time had made our difficult historic rafting journey unique and immemorable.

The general impression to the outside world that the 'Abhors' or 'Adis', which they prefer to be called now, are hostile and inhospitable, seems to be based on erroneous impressions created by the imperial rulers without caring for the simple, free and frank nature of the tribal people who are the jealous defenders of their freedom and prepared to make supreme sacrifice for guarding their close knit society.

Our's being the joint expedition, many members who were thrown out of the raft and were rescued after lot of floating and swimming in the turbulent Brahmaputra in

its initial stages, had all displayed a great sense of adventure and courage during this Expedition. It was for the first time that they were rafting in such a long and voluminous Himalayan River. In spite of this fatal incident, the team kept united and continued to raft till its completion, an example of their great determination and passion for high adventure.

We spent many beautiful wintry cold and moisted nights of January, camping under twinkling stars in the dense forests of Arunachal Pradesh and on the sandy banks of Brahmaputra in the plains of Assam, shared our foods and experiences, which developed into the lasting bonds of friendship among us.

Being the overall leader of this Expedition, I received full cooperation and support from all the team members, particularly from Japanese members, and did not have even a single incidence of any disagreement during the entire Expedition, which is bound to be in such risky ventures where stakes are high.

I have made an attempt to present an account of our successful venture, to share our unique journey undertaken in two small rubber rafts, riding over the high waves and swirling currents through the unknown gorges, equally sharing the enchanting beauty of wilderness of Arunachal and its colourful tribals, so that the readers may enjoy the thrills of river rafting and rich heritage of the people living on its banks. I am hopeful that the readers will find the book interesting and informative. I also feel this book will be a continued source of inspiration for the young adventurers to accept such challenges in life.

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