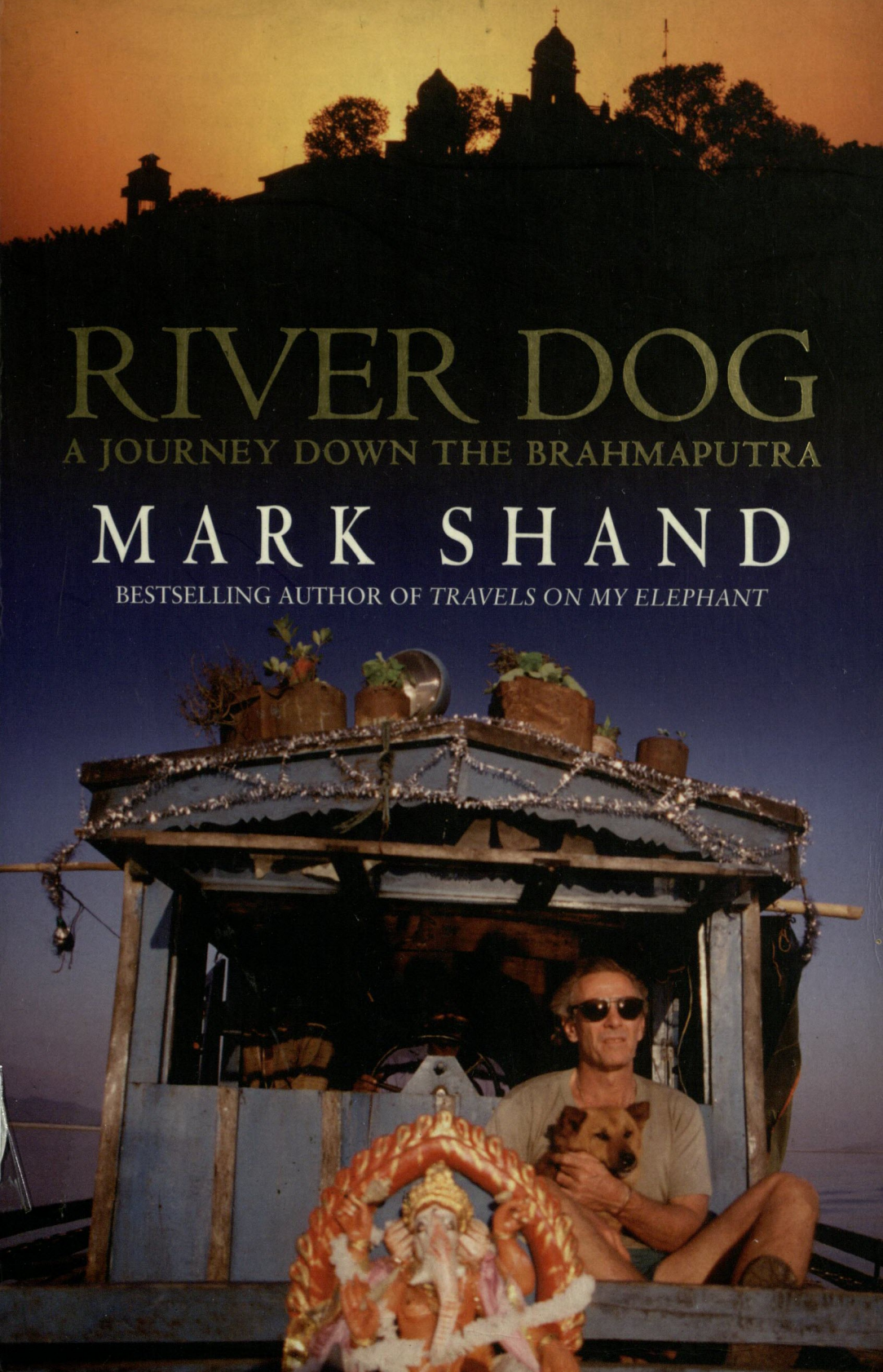
RIVER DOG

A JOURNEY DOWN THE BRAHMAPUTRA

MARK SHAND

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *TRAVELS ON MY ELEPHANT*



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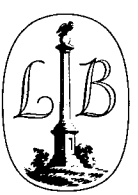

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ONE

A river born of legends, the Brahmaputra begins its long journey as a tiny glacial stream and sweeps eighteen hundred miles to end its journey, as wide as a sea, in the Bay of Bengal.

Brahmaputra means the 'son of Brahma', the great Hindu god of creation. And, as Jere Van Dyk, another twentieth-century explorer wrote, 'like a Hindu deity the river has many avatars, or incarnations, changing its names and nature with the myriad cultures and landscapes'. In western Tibet it is the Tamchok or Horse River, while in central and eastern Tibet it is simply the Tsangpo or The River; in Arunachal Pradesh in north-east India it becomes the Siang; in Assam it's known traditionally as the Lohit or Red River; and in Bangladesh it becomes by turns the Jamuna, the Padma and finally the Meghna.

The true source of the Brahmaputra lies some sixty miles south-east of Mount Kailash, in the ranges of the Chemayungdung mountains. The spring which spills from the glacier is known as Tamchok Khambab – 'coming out of the celestial horse's mouth'. The Tibetans say that the water is cold, the sands are composed of

cats' eyes and emeralds and those who drink from the newborn stream become as strong as horses. From here the Tsangpo, the highest river in the world with an average elevation of around 4000 metres gathers breadth and volume from the melting snows and winds its way eastwards, separating the great Himalayan ranges from the vast, empty deserts of Tibet.

In eastern Tibet the snow-capped massif of Namche Bawar (7765 metres) blocks the Tsangpo's eastward progress, forcing it into a dramatic hairpin bend. From here it drops a phenomenal 3050 metres over 150 miles, twisting like an angry serpent through a series of tortuous and precipitous chasms that form what is now officially proved to be the deepest valley in the world – the 5030-metre Tsangpo Gorge.

As the Siang, the river thunders over the McMahon Line, the disputed India–China border, and through the remote and forbidden state of Arunachal Pradesh, the 'land of the dawn-lit clouds', one of the last unexplored regions on earth.

Fortified by tributaries, the river broadens majestically, sweeping westwards through Assam, from where, fuelled by further tributaries from the north and now known as the Jamuna, it races south, rising into Bangladesh like a tidal wave. Every monsoon season it engulfs around two-thirds of this densely populated country, leaving millions homeless.

Here, it meets at a major confluence another great river nearing its journey's end – the sacred Ganges. Like twins separated at birth to pursue their own destinies, the Ganga, the 'mother of all rivers', and the 'son of Brahma', the father of all rivers, join thousands of miles later in their old age and flow together as the Padma towards the sea.

To complete the trinity it finally becomes the Meghna, fragmenting into a maze of watery arteries, like the roots of some colossal, ancient tree, rushing down into the Indian Ocean as the largest river delta in the world.

By the beginning of the twentieth century exploration of Tibet was, in effect, done and dusted. The mystical legends of Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar had been reduced to solid geographical fact, and the sources and courses of three of the great Asian rivers located and traced. But for centuries the exact course of the Brahmaputra of India or the Tsangpo of Tibet had puzzled geographers, mapmakers and explorers. Were they two separate rivers, or one? No one knew, because no one had been able to penetrate the Tsangpo Gorges. To all intents and purposes, the Tsangpo seemed to disappear when it hit the Namche Bawar. Fanciful tales, lack of precise information and inaccurate maps had led to a popular belief that the Brahmaputra started south of the Himalayas, while the Tsangpo was thought to be an extension of the Irrawaddy in Burma. Indeed, one imaginative map of 1654 showed its source in a lake north of Burma.

But there was another body of opinion. As early as 1715, a young Jesuit priest, Ippolito Desideri from Pistóia in northern Tuscany, had gained information while travelling in western Tibet that these two rivers were one and the same: 'Flowing from west to east it [the Tsangpo] traverses the centre of Third Tibet [Tibet proper] and then turning to the south-east enters the country of Lhoba whence it descends to Rongmati [Assam], a province of Mogor [Mogul India] beyond the Ganges, into which this principal river of Tibet at last flows.'

Unfortunately this priceless information lay gathering dust for another 150 years, along with all Ippolito's other Tibetan work, on the bookshelves of a country villa in Italy.

Seventy years later, in 1785, Major James Rennell, Surveyor-General of Bengal, reached the same conclusion as Ippolito. Known as the 'father of Indian geography', Rennell wrote, 'This river must needs have a very long course before it enters the Bengal provinces, since four hundred miles from the sea it is twice as big as the Thames . . . [There is] the strongest presumptive

proof possible of the Sanpoo and the Burrumpooter, being one and the same river.'

However, to dispel the more popular belief about their being two entirely separate rivers, positive proof was needed. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, having annexed Assam in India's north-east frontier after the Anglo-Burmese war, the British launched a two-pronged attack. While continuing to trace the course of the river downstream from Tibet, they now started sending expeditions upstream, to follow the tributaries of the Brahmaputra from the south through the unexplored and inhospitable jungles of what is now known as Arunachal Pradesh.

There the British endured terrible hardships and danger, not only from the fever-ridden forests, but also from the indigenous tribal people, particularly the Abors – a fierce tribe described as 'a very rude barbarous people of open manners and warlike habits' and 'very averse to receiving strangers'. The Abors, or Adis as they are known today, continued to be a thorn in the side of the British for another century.

By 1878, nonetheless, the gap was closing. There now remained only about three hundred miles of territory left to explore, where the river itself seemed to disappear into the bowels of the earth, through the great range of the eastern Himalayas.

It would be another thirty-five years before British explorers effectively established the Tsangpo and Brahamputra connection, though even then large sections of the Tsangpo Gorge remained unpenetrated. The speed with which the river fell in those unknown stretches was so rapid that it gave rise to one of the great romances of geography: the belief that hidden in the depths of the gorges must be a Tibetan equivalent of the Victoria or Niagara Falls. It took a further eleven years before the myth of the 'fabled falls' of the Brahmaputra was exploded.

There then followed a hiatus of some sixty years or so before any further exploration of the Brahmaputra was undertaken. This

owed as much to politics as anything else. China invaded Tibet and refused to recognise the McMahon Line, the disputed border that divides Tibet and India along the eastern Himalayas, drawn up at the Simla Conference of 1914 between the British and the Tibetans. Then in India, after Partition in 1947, Prime Minister Jawaharial Nehru instituted a policy of restricting all outsiders from the region known as NEFA (North-East Frontier Agency), now Arunachal Pradesh, in order to protect the unique culture and autonomy of the indigenous tribal people. Further south, meanwhile, Bangladesh and India, never the most harmonious of neighbours, continued to squabble and differ over control of the subcontinent's greatest river.

By the late 1980s the political situation had if anything worsened. In 1962, China had blitzkrieged into India. Now rumours of war were again rife. Once again, Chinese and Indian troops had massed along the McMahon Line as India had recently declared Arunachal Pradesh a federal state. Farther south in Assam, another conflict was gaining notoriety – traditional guerrilla factions were fighting for autonomy. Foreigners were hardly welcome in any of these areas.

But by the 1990s the political climate had changed dramatically. Tibet had become more accessible and a limited number of Indian pilgrims and even some foreigners were once again allowed in to visit Mount Kailash. Further east explorers, mountaineers, climbers, rafters, white-water kayakers, trekkers, canyoneers, Tibetan scholars and scientists were flooding into the Tsangpo Gorges. However, the border area below the gorges where the Tsangpo/Brahmaputra leaves Tibet was still completely out of bounds.

India too was beginning to relax her grip, a little. From 1994, permits for groups of four or more foreigners could be obtained, with difficulty and great expense, to visit a few carefully monitored areas of Arunachal Pradesh. But not for where I wanted to go. And

I certainly did not want to travel in a group. Apart from joint foreign rafting expeditions with the Indian army and border police, the border area where the Brahmaputra entered India was, like Tibet, forbidden territory, as was farther south.

Assam, more auspiciously, although still volatile and carefully monitoring foreigners, was now open. And poor old Bangladesh suffered from completely the opposite problem – a lack of foreign visitors. I did not foresee any difficulties there.

Over the years since the late 1980s, I had monitored the situation quietly, gathering research and information, making contacts and biding my time. Meanwhile I had been involved with much more important things – getting married and having a daughter. But the river was waiting, and I was getting impatient. And the moment I decided that it was time to get going, things began to fall into place. One thing in particular was the final catalyst I needed to embark on what for years had seemed a totally overambitious dream. It was a meeting with the man who had given me the inspiration, who had in effect thrown down the challenge all those years ago – Charles Allen.

It was spring 1996, and I was living in the English countryside writing another book about elephants. My former travelling companion and great friend from India, the photographer Aditya Patankar who had accompanied me on all my elephant journeys, was staying with me recovering from a hip operation. Charles was coming to see Aditya to discuss the photographs for a new book on India, though Aditya was a little worried that he might not turn up. 'Charles,' he explained, 'can be a little vague. He once flew out to India to attend an important wedding. The son of a maharajah friend of ours was getting married. Charles arrived a day late.'

I admit I was apprehensive too, but for different reasons. I was about to meet a legend: a man who had grown up in the jungles of Assam; who had already written a dozen or so books; who'd been

one of the first foreigners to reach the Cow's Mouth, the traditional source of the Ganges; and who had trekked and climbed extensively throughout the world, including an arduous solo walk through the Himalayas. He was one of my heroes: a gifted writer, an explorer, and a scholar to boot.

At least I knew now that he was vaguely human, fallible, for over the years I'd built up a rather frightening mental portrait of my hero. I'd imagined a man who would not suffer fools gladly – one of those dry, silent, mountaineering types, bearded, weather-beaten and flinty-eyed, with perhaps a finger or two or a toe missing from frostbite, and a half-translated Sanskrit manuscript stuffed casually in his pocket. I was convinced that he wouldn't take me seriously.

As it turned out, neither Aditya nor I need have worried. Charles arrived bang on time, and he didn't have a beard either. In fact, he was meticulously clean-shaven, trim and fit, with an alert, upright, almost military bearing – a real pukka sahib. A pair of running shoes peeked out incongruously from under his neatly pressed corduroy trousers and behind metal-framed spectacles his eyes glistened with curiosity, humour and excitement. I could tell instinctively that this was a man who was up for adventure, and the minute he opened his mouth I was spellbound.

It was like being pulled along in the slipstream of a shooting star. Over lunch Charles talked, and talked. All I did was listen as one extraordinary story dovetailed into another and then flashed off at a tangent. It was both fascinating and frustrating trying to follow him: in about twenty minutes we had been up the Himalayas, down the Himalayas, into tantric rituals and out through the unimaginable splendour and extravagance of the great Indian durbars in the days of the British Raj. But there was only one place I wanted to go – down the Brahmaputra. And I had the world's greatest historical expert sitting right here. I couldn't contain myself any longer.

'Charles,' I interrupted. 'In your book, *A Mountain in Tibet*, there is that line you wrote about the last great Asian adventure.'

He looked at me, confused.

'Hang on,' I said, 'I'll show you.' I rushed out and returned with a huge plastic folder that I slapped down in front of him. 'Take a look at this,' I said proudly. 'I've researched every inch of the river. Do you think it's possible to do?'

It was as if a tap had been turned off hastily, the silence only broken by the sound of the occasional drip as Charles very slowly, very methodically started to turn the pages of my Brahmaputra file. He had turned, I noticed, a strange ashen colour.

The silence continued. I looked at Aditya. He looked back at me, and shrugged, a puzzled expression on his face.

'Er, Charles,' I ventured at last. 'Is there a problem?' Perhaps he had found a mistake.

Charles closed the file quietly. He stared at its cover for a moment, and sighed.

'Yes, there is a problem,' he answered finally, his voice a mere whisper. He seemed suddenly to have shrunk in size. 'But it's not about the river. I've always believed it's possible. Your file confirms it more than ever. The problem . . . ' He paused, as if he were searching for the words. 'The problem is that I was planning to do it. I've dreamed about making this journey ever since I wrote my book.'

Oh fuck, I thought. So that explained his strange reaction. I couldn't believe it. I was gutted.

There was another long, awkward silence.

'Perhaps we should all have a drink,' Aditya suggested diplomatically, hobbling out of the room.

'Well, Charles,' I said at last through gritted teeth, wishing he had never entered my door. 'You must do it. It's your story, and you're the expert.' It was a struggle to sound gracious. In the past, in the tradition of the great Victorian explorers, we would probably either have stood up, shaken hands solemnly, wished each other

fame and fortune and agreed may the best man win, or challenged each other to a duel. At that moment I was mentally selecting my choice of weapon.

Charles shot to his feet and eyed me intently, as if he were making a momentous decision. Thinking he might attack me, I prepared to defend myself. But unlike me, he was a true gentleman, a pukka sahib. A wry smile flickered across his face. 'What a buggers' muddle,' he said suddenly, and then he laughed. 'Although it really pisses me off and I'm as jealous as hell, you must do it, Mark. I think you're just mad enough to pull it off. And, to be honest, I'm working on something else at the moment. Something *really* extraordinary.'

'What?' I asked, intrigued.

He laughed again. 'Forget it. Knowing you, you'd steal that as well.' Charles was back to full speed, bristling with energy: the tap turned on as suddenly as it had been turned off. 'Now, let's look at maps.'

For the rest of that afternoon, Charles told me everything he knew. He brought the river to life: its colour and size, its smells and moods, the stories I would never find in a library, a wonderful, evocative alchemy of strange tales and bizarre anecdotes that only someone who'd lived there could create.

'You must try to find the lost copper temple and what the British troops called "the penis park",' he announced, stabbing his finger on an old map of Upper Assam. 'They were somewhere near here. I remember my father talking about them when I was a child. And if you go to Shillong, see if you can track down Million, Billion, Trillion and Snow White. They'll be very old, though – probably dead. It was a long time ago.'

He noticed my astonishment.

'The war was on and Shillong was full of troops,' he explained, 'and they had a ball, because the women there, the Khasis, were, how shall I put it, pretty liberal with their favours. Particularly

these four beautiful girls. They were infamous. Of course I was only a young boy. I named my chickens after them.'

As the afternoon wore on, Charles and I also discovered that we shared a common hero – the indomitable Kinthup, one of the extraordinary nineteenth-century Indian pundits, the geographer-spies employed by Her Majesty's Government. Kinthup's mission was to trace the course of the Tsangpo/Brahmaputra by throwing five hundred marked logs, each a foot long, downstream. It took him four years of almost inconceivable hardship, determination and bravery, and he was all but forgotten at the end of it. His resolve, his tenacity, his devotion to duty – and his attachment to the river – inspired us both. He never let it get the better of him: he never gave up. If I had only a fraction of Kinthup's courage on my own journey, I realised, I might just succeed.

By the end of the day, Charles and I had become firm friends, and although he wouldn't be coming with me, he was, I sensed, a man I could travel with. There are very few people one can say that of. And, without being presumptuous, I had this curious feeling that he thought the same about me. As I waved him goodbye, he wound down the window of his car. 'I just might join you in Assam,' he said wistfully. 'I've always wanted to find that penis park.'