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P O S O O W A

News & Events of the Assamese People Living Around the World
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A house on a treetop at a resort near Jorabat, Kamrup, Assam. Photo by Jugal Kalita

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My visit to Prajnalaya , the abode of knowledge

Ankur Bora, Texas



I have lived away from India for a long time, almost eight years now. Although I am not physically there, my thoughts are always with my country and my state Assam. My attachment to my homeland constantly finds expression in an innate desire to contribute something for the people who live there.

We often discuss the situation back home in Assam, through AssamNet , a mailing list of Assamese people. I am also a regular subscriber to Prantik, a well-regarded magazine founded by late Bhabendra Nath Saikia. It was through an issue of Prantik that I came to know of Prajnalaya. Prajnalaya is an institution where children of poor and uneducated parents get opportunities to learn, grow and flourish in a congenial environment. I was so moved by the story of Prajnalaya that I decided to contact the organization. I visited Prajnalaya in the month of April 2006 while I was on a trip to Assam. Prajnalaya is located in the interior village of Saraipani near the town of Titabar, Jorhat.

Prajnalaya was established by Mr. Jugal Bhuyan. Jugal Bhuyan had genuine love for the people of Assam when he joined the insurgency; he thought that he would be able to bring justice to the poor and underprivileged. However, it did not take long for him to realize the futility of violence and back to the mainstream. But, unlike many others who accepted government money for self-promotion, Bhuyan decided to serve the people by starting a residential school in his village. He brought meaning and purpose into his life by opening the institution of Prajnalaya. Diverting from a path leading to darkness to a path showing light, Jugal Bhuyan, with advice and inspiration of his long-term teacher and mentor Suresh Rajkhowa, realized that a prosperous society could be created not through violence but through noble work and

sacrifice.

Jugal decided to do something for society by engaging himself with these children, who had no parents to look after them. That is how Prajnalaya was born. Without taking a single penny from any government or private agency, Jugal built a bamboo house for the children on his ancestral land. His only capital at that time was a piece of land obtained from his grandmother's property and a few thousand rupees he had earned through manual labor. He started the school building with that money. His friend Bitu Gogoi, encouraged by Jugal's work obtained a loan of Rs 50,000, and with that money Jugal completed the school building and the residential building of Prajnalaya, called the Ashtha. In Ashtha, the children get free food, clothing and education.

Today, Prajnalaya, the school, has more than 180 students, and around eighty of them stay in the dormitory. Some of the students are orphans. Some of the parents are too poor to provide them education. Prajnalaya aims for the overall personality development of these kids, teaching them the rich cultural heritage of Assam along with the regular coursework.

The residential dormitory Ashtha also houses Anamika, a physically retarded girl. The girl, with serious wounds on her body, was found at the Gauhati Medical College Hospital. The parents of that girl apparently left her without any trace.

Childline, a Non-Governmental Organization based in Guwahati, rescued the girl in May of 2004 and bore all her medical expenses,



Flood relief at Prajnalaya

but it had to keep her in the office as no city orphanage was ready to accept her. These orphanages refused to take the child in, saying they did not have the facilities to keep a mentally challenged child. Prajnalaya got in touch with Childline as soon as they came to know of the girl. "We have named her Anamika, the girl without a name. We are glad that we were able to provide her with shelter," Jugal

contd to page 4..

Terrorist made Britain: from the nanny state to a sorry state

Rini Kakati, London



A year on from the London bombings and still the westbound Metropolitan line from Baker Street Tube station carries the city's memory. It is impossible not to fill with the emotions of the anniversary. As soon as I got ready for work to take the same route last Thursday morning, I heard on air about the terrorist plots at the various airports.

But for the grace of God and a truly remarkable performance by the police and the security services, the destruction would have been unimaginable: an act of indiscriminate slaughter of thousands of Britons in the skies above America with more victims than in the terrorist atrocities of 9/11. No words are adequate to condemn the callous planning for mass murder. Had they succeeded, the conspirators would have blown up themselves and ten passenger jets bound for American cities, timing their attack, perhaps to coincide with the anniversary of 9/11.

The impact of ten Lockerbies in a single day would, of course, have been a disaster for both countries, with consequences far beyond the deaths, maiming and physical devastation. The laws of this country regarding civil liberties, community relations and political culture would all have been profoundly altered for decades to come.

Chaos at our airports, devastated businesses, and the wrecked tourism industry are only beginning to recover from the original attacks 5 years ago.

Indeed even though the plot has been foiled, the damage is already immense.

Meanwhile the government refuses to acknowledge that its own ill-judged policies are actually undermining the war on terror and are making Britain more vulnerable to attack. Mr. Blair, for example, still won't accept that his disastrous intervention in Iraq has inflamed hatred of the West and brought many of the current horrors to our door. And his subservience to President Bush over Lebanon has done nothing to redeem his reputation in the Muslim world.

What is particularly chilling is that the suspects arrested on Thursday were all British born Muslims, educated here, housed here, raised in the British tradition of a tolerant democracy under the protection of laws. Some young people are attracted to radicalism not by religion but merely by cultural and political

alienation. Joining a violent assault on the West, upon the very community in which they live, gives a sense of purpose to bored and rootless lives of the same kind that a generation ago made some Catholic Northern Irishmen choose the status of becoming IRA gunmen in preference to being an unemployed bricklayer or barman.

Ironically human right activists have made it significantly more difficult to deal with suspects who are believed to threaten our security; they can't be charged, because much of the evidence against them is inadmissible in court.

Passenger profiling and stop-and-search may irritate young Muslims. But that is not the fault of the authorities. It is not Sikh or Methodists or Zoroastrians flying planes into buildings or blowing themselves up on public transport!

We are all inconvenienced by this stop-and-search when we go even to a theatre at the West End. It is unfortunate that some Muslims fall under suspicion simply because they share certain characteristics with those responsible. Imagine how normal people react, for example, when traveling by air, middle aged Baptists are being subjected to body scans and have to walk across filthy airports without shoes.

A colleague of mine recently told me that he did not like being searched at the gate at the Stuttgart football ground during the



World Cup to watch England play Ecuador.

But, the German authorities had worked on the knowledge that English football hooligans tend to be white male and English, and so they were not taking any chances with anyone who remotely fit that description, no matter how old or well-dressed. The BBC insisted on Thursday morning describing those detained simply as 'British born'. Everybody was busy in reassuring "community leaders".

When 4 young Muslims blew themselves and 52 others to Kingdom Come on London's Transport Network last July,

Muslims were among the victims too. When terrorists attack, they don't care whom they kill. We are all targets. So, why the need to consult "community leaders"? The old man next door to us said to me "I don't remember Knacker of the Yard phoning the Bishop of Stepney before he arrested the Kray twins (who terrorized the streets of London's East end in the sixties)". It also reminds me of so many of our young boys in the remote villages of Assam when Army rounded them up and killed them in search of terrorists. They do not look for their parents or community leaders to explain their action!

In my early days in this country, I knew the word "home grown" only when Mr. Hughes, a hospital porter, used to deliver tomatoes and sweet peas to our house. Gradually as life went on, the expression took on another meaning for me. Being in this country, the first thing that impressed me is the homegrown qualities, natural indigenous qualities such as common sense, tolerance, fair play

and stoicism. For the vast silent majority, these are the characteristics that still define what it means to be British.

All such qualities were on display this week during the chaos at our airports triggered by the terrorist plot. No racist incidents, no riots; just a quiet acceptance and resilience.

So, for those of us who love this country because we have chosen to come and live here, it is the bitterest of ironies that the expression "home grown" today is applied to certain young terrorists who are born here and are bent on destroying the British values. They represent a minuscule minority of Muslims here. They have cast aside their own parents' proud traditions here, of decency, hard work and respect for others.

At the same time, great accommodations are required on all sides: politicians, community leaders and the wider public. After all, terrorism doesn't discriminate between Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews. It grows deadlier and more destructive by the day.

The police are just doing their job. They should be supported, not harangued. They don't always get it right. But as one officer said of the Forest Gate raid, he would rather have egg on his face than the blood of the innocent victims of terrorism on his hands. How very British!

We owe a debt of thanks to the police and security services that prevented an appalling tragedy this time.

My visit to Prajnalaya... (contd from page 2)

Bhuyan narrated the moving story to me. Anamika now not only has a home of her own with a loving and caring family, but she has also shown remarkable recovery. The girl is now beginning to feel comfortable, and the once shy Anamika is slowly opening up, making friends with the other children. .

The activities of Prajnalaya are interesting and innovative for a small town like Titabor. It has its own constitution. The Prajnalaya constitution states its mission as "Prajnalaya has been formed in a crucial period when everywhere one can see the ravages of human values. The principal objective of Prajnalaya is enhancing the eagerness and devotion of people to their culture, language, heritage, literature etc. and to indicate the goodness in man. Prajnalaya will try to restore the social values, which have been gradually lost. With deep optimism, Prajnalaya will try to influence its learners by taking sturdy steps towards guiding them to a more secured and self-reliant future."

Prajnalaya emphasizes teaching knowledge of self-reliance through manual labor and knowledge of native art and culture. They also teach the children to be responsive to society and serve their neighbors at the times of need such as during natural calamities.

Jugal Bhuyan along with other teachers and volunteers of Prajnalaya have shown tremendous dedication in working towards the upliftment of the Titabor area. I observed this clearly through my interactions at the institution and through my discussions with the nearby villagers. However, Prajnalaya will need outside help for its continued existence. Today, Prajnalaya, with its 180 students and around eighty of them staying in the dormitory, requires about twenty thousand rupees per month on average for its expenses, the school also needs filter for clean drinking water, mosquito nets for the children, school uniforms and utensils. Prajnalaya is also planning on innovative schemes such as starting organic fertilizer plants, building fisheries, and establishing weaving and handlooms to generate income and self-sustain these plans are capital intensive and any amount of generous monetary help from well-wishers will surely help them.

I sincerely wish that Prajnalaya will succeed and it will also inspire other Assamese youth to come forward for such noble efforts.

Note : Please contact Ankur Bora at ankurbora@hotmail.com to know more about Prajnalaya or if you plan to visit the institution.

(Ankur Bora is a Computer Engineer by profession and lives with his family in Austin, Texas, USA)



Rinku Dewri, a Ph.D. student in Computer Science at Colorado State University, at a recent picnic in the Rocky Mountain National Park.
Photograph: Bharat Barua

Alipukhuri-Patekibori: Our Heritage

Bijoy Bhuyan, New Delhi

The blue sky and the early morning breeze augured well for my journey both across time and space. The crowded bus creaked into a start on its journey to Dhing from Nagaon town. As we passed the town and the paddy fields started, my mind left the hustle and bustle of my co-passenger and I remembered how it all started. It was on my last journey to Bardowa that I met that *bhakat* with an



altruistic spirit to serve and guide. His age was difficult to guess and his eyes told a tale of pain and hope. I spent four hours with him, enthralled by what he shared. He had a message for me. An ancient message, a divine message lying dormant for the right moment; waiting for eons to be passed to me. Everyone we meet is destined to pass a message to us. His message was simple yet profound in its implication, he said in his deep rolling voice, “You should go to Alipukhuri – Patekibori, the birth place of the divine Guru” “But it is already afternoon”, I had gladly responded, “Will it be possible to reach that place now?” “You will visit and return too.” he had assured. And I had set out as directed by him. And I did reach Alipukhuri. I was happy. I had offered my prayers. “Do you also have any *puthi* (manuscripts) here, *atai*?” I had asked. The *bhakat* had actually showed me a manuscript. A manuscript in the divine Guru’s own writing. A manuscript that is four centuries old. A manuscript both divine and valuable. My heart was beating fast holding on to the feeling of a connection; a romance and a thrill ran through my veins. But my trained mind had alerted me, “What are we doing? What is happening here? In this lonely forsaken place, I am holding a treasure. How do these innocent yet devoted disciples protect this treasure both from the hands of cruel time and scheming people? They know the divine worth of this holy object but do not know how to preserve and conserve it for the future.”

The sudden halt of the bus jerked me out of my thoughts. I alighted and walked towards the house of advocate Lalit Chandra Bora, the president of Alipukhuri *Than* and a man with a missionary zeal that has not been diminished by the more than seven decades of service rendered for the good of the *Than*. The president had promised me a visit to Alipukhuri along with a few other concerned people. After a sumptuous

jalpan (breakfast) at the president’s house we started on our journey to Alipukhuri. Shri Devendra Nath Hazarika, an octogenarian and a repository of almost extinct and esoteric knowledge and crafts of yore accompanied us. The energetic and intelligent Mridu Mousom Bora a young professional studying manuscripts and an able photographer represented the future generation. We also enjoyed the company of Shri Shasi Bora, the General Secretary of the *Than*, and Shri Khagen Kalita, a Secretary of the *Than*, both selflessly devoted and diligently tied to the Cause and toiling hard to ensure the smooth running of the Alipukhuri-Patekibori *Than*.

The road reminded us that it was mid-monsoon and I thanked the rain gods for the brief respite. Yet the pathetic condition of the road, where it existed, made apparent how we neglect our heritage and civic duties. It was difficult to imagine that we were traveling to a place that was the bustling capital of the Bhuyan territory of yore. Srimanta Sankardev had transferred his capital to Bardowa from Alipukhuri-Patekibori, where he was born. Historical documents report that a road used to exist between the two places, remnants of which can still be found in places. Why have we not tried to develop these heritages? Why has it not occurred to anyone that a heritage tourism complex can be built to highlight these gems of spiritual splendor?

Finally we reached the birth place of the great saint marked at present by a *Namghar* surrounded by ancient *pukhuri* (pond), presenting a sublime and sad atmosphere again reflecting the nonchalant and indifferent attitude of ours and many past generations. Yet the spiritual simplicity of the people and the inherent divinity of the place inspired us. I tried to imagine how Srimanta Sankardev must have played as a child in these holy grounds under the supervision of that grand old lady – Kherxuti. The Guru must have spent his youth here pondering about art and culture, the society, and life. The seeds of the new thoughts must have been planted here to take root throughout the banks of the mighty Brahmaputra. His observations and experiences here must have influenced the great concepts that changed the Assamese society. I also tried to imagine what the great saint must have felt when he transferred his capital from Alipukhuri-Patekibori to Bardowa nine kilometers away?

We offered our prayers. It was a somber atmosphere. We sat in two lines on both the sides of the *Manikut* and offered the *praxad* – that simple yet meaningful mix of *maah*, *magu*, and banana, sprinkled with pieces of coconut, a whiff of aromatic ginger, all mixed on a fresh banana leaf. The two *bhakats* and the *sattradhikar* sat in the center and sang out a heart touching hymn. Tears came to my already misty eyes and I offered a silent prayer of gratitude for allowing me this opportunity to serve in my own miniscule way.



I shared my knowledge about handling and preserving manuscripts with my companions. My training at National Research Lab for Conservation of Cultural Property in Lucknow, National Mission for Manuscripts at New Delhi, National Museum at New Delhi, and in many other centers of excellence across the country came handy, as if destiny had prepared me for this moment. The sincerity and devotion of the *bhakats* were displayed in the rapt attention they paid me and in the eagerness to learn from a young man much younger in age. Mridu Mousom Bora and I then started to photograph each and every manuscript page, handling the pages with gentleness. The state of some of the pages saddened us. Water and insects had destroyed the writings at many places. Watermarks and stains had hidden many of those writings. The people around has taken advantage of our neglect and plundered the manuscripts. We came across a sketch of Chaturvuj Vastu, more enigmatic than Mona Lisa. Awe filled my mind. How is this part of the culture that is our identity? Should we try to save it for the future generations?

We made arrangements to ensure the minimum facilities necessary for the manuscripts and went to look for other wonders that might be lying around the compound. The table that the great saint had used to write on was a masterpiece of artistic ability and the imaginative creativity of the craftsmen of past was still marked on every aspect of the table. Whatever has escaped the ravages of rust and neglect - the beautiful peacock on the doorway and the other wooden crafts lying here and there - told the same story; a tale of past excellence and of a civilization of glory. The wooden crate used to store manuscripts also had its own stories hidden in layers of overlapping paints. Why cannot we use the modern techniques to find out the mysteries between these layers?

With the sun on top, the *bhakats* started cutting mangoes picked from the trees of the compound. They carefully picked out the damaged or black parts and laid the fresh yellow fruits on green banana leaves with a pinch of salt by the side. The atmosphere suddenly became very sanguine. The taste of the mangoes, the humbleness of the *bhakats*, the eagerness of the villagers who were patiently waiting and watching, the sunny day in the midst of a ravaging monsoon – all encouraged me and filled me with hope.



We went out to look around the tanks with new enthusiasm and vigor. I met the villagers, simple minded farmers, who had settled here decades ago. They wanted the place to be preserved and in their own simple way knew the importance of the saint born so near to their abodes. The neglected banks of the ponds were littered with broken pieces of dated articles that were witness of our historical past. I collected some of these. But who can tell there tales? What battles, festivity, famine, flood, and changes these articles have seen? Where are the archeologists to test and date them?



Three large stones caught my eye. A stone inscribed with messages that has almost been eroded was lying next to an ancient stone well. The purpose of the third stone, smoothed and polished, I could not guess. The people around told me that it was taken from the compound two decades ago and that was still lying in the open. It is a pity, not to mention the religious aspects. Why did we try to remove it. But are we even aware of its significance? Do we even think of it as a crime?

We invited many potters to Alipukhuri to make rings for the wells on a high land (*bori*). Thus this well was built. And I did spot an ancient well, filled with water, but an overgrowth. We decided to pull up the overgrowth. We gathered a few villagers who were willing to help us in our endeavor. We cleaned the well, removed the overgrowth and dragged a concrete culvert to ensure the safety of the well. The still visible baked clay rings are fragile and can be broken by innocent actions of even the children who play around.

The villagers also helped us carry the valuable stones to the *Namghar* and place them on a brick stage that we erected. The stones were put on sacks and tied to a bamboo pole for all of us to carry the heavy load. On the invitation of the *bhakats* we sat down for a simple yet delicious meal laid on banana leaves. It was a satisfying meal – a meal so tasty I can remember only few to match.

My companions promised to send me the photographs that we had taken. They also promised to provide me with historical documents and reference materials. I in turn promised them to try my best to take their message to all I can. Their aspiration to endow Alipukhuri-Patekibori with its deserved place as a spiritual and historical monument of significance cannot be denied. Isincere efforts and the blessings I will be



Pioneer of Asom Tea Industry: Maj Gen Francis Jenkins

Bijoy Kumar Bhuyan, Guwahati

The role of Major General Francis Jenkins role in the promotion of Asom tea cannot be forgotten. I quote what Dr S K Bhuyan has written about him in his book- 'Early British Relations with Assam' (published by Government of Assam, 1949) - "In some quarter Maj. Gen. Jenkins is also credited as the discoverer of the tea plant in Assam, known as *Thea Assamica*, identical with the tea of commerce then in circulation, other rivals to the honor of the discovery being Captain Charlton and Mr. Charles Alexander Bruce." When we remember that the Agricultural Society of Calcutta presented to Jenkins a gold medal in recognition of his service in connection with the discovery of the plant, and the following testimony of William Robinson who knew him so intimately, we cannot but think that Jenkins had a very significant share in imparting to the Assam plant its vast potentiality as a commercial commodity of international value.

In 1832, Lord William Bentick deputed Captain Jenkins to report upon the resources of the country. The subject of the tea plants was brought to his attention by Mr. C. Alexander Bruce. To Captain Jenkins, no less to Mr. Bruce, is Great Britain indebted for the discovery of the indigenous tea plant in Assam; and the merit is much the greater, for the spirited manner in which he has taken the necessary steps to promote the culture of the tea plant".

It may be recorded that Maniram Datta Barua, Dewan of Assam Tea Company, gets also the honor of the discovery of the tea plants in Asom as pressed by late Srijut Benudhar Sarma, eminent historian. Maniram Dewan was the proprietor of two of three tea gardens then belonging to private speculators.

Major General Francis Jenkins was the longest serving Commissioner of Assam and Agent to the Governor General for the North Eastern Frontier of India from 1834 to 1861. He was born at

the picturesque village of St. Clement, Cornwall, U.K. on August 4, 1793 and he died of fever at Guwahati on August 28, 1866. He left Cornwall as a boy of 14 years old and never returned to his native place. He was a brilliant

graduate of Oxford. He came out to the East as an officer in the Mecantile Marine under Admiral Lord Exmouth, who transferred his services subsequently to the Govt. of Lord Bentick. He fought in Egypt where he was wounded. He was a man of versatile ability, a genius, a great administrator and a scholar. Jenkins was deeply interested in the history and antiquities of Asom. He contributed a number of articles to the pages of the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, and inspired others to contribute on subject relating to Assamese history, philology, topography, mineralogy, etc. The first noteworthy history of Asom was compiled in 1841, by William Robinson at the instance of Jenkins to whom it was dedicated.

Jenkins, pioneer of an industry which has made Asom known all over the world, by far his greatest service rendered to Asom was the stimulus he gave to the tea industry. It was due to his encouragement and help that the Assam Tea Company was established in 1839, with one John Jenkins as Chairman of its Board of Directors.

Jenkins' love of Assamese people and Asom promoted him to settle down in Guwahati after his retirement. The only memorials of Jenkins at Guwahati are the Jenkins Road, the Jenkins Ghat and the tomb at the old cemetery (present site of Institute of Engineers in Panbazar), and according to eminent researcher on Guwahati Kumudeswar Hazarika Jenkins Road is present M G Road and Jenkins Ghat is Sukleswar Ghat).



Alipukhuri-Patekibori (*contd from page 6*)

able to contribute through my efforts for preservation and development of this place. I know that we are all proud of our heritage and culture. I am, therefore, hopeful that many will come forward to contribute - in their own ways, by their own means.

As the Sun set in the west, the message I received was not of darkness, but of the new morning that will bloom again with the first rays caressing the sleeping earth to wakefulness. Indeed there is hope. The glory of the past will regain its lost grandeur. The Great Guru will shower his blessings on us in our effort.

As an appeal to all people who are concerned, here we are stating some of the requests put forward by the Alipukhuri Than committee:

1) The proposed project will help in performing regular and yearly functions and rituals of the Sattrā like, bhaona, Sattriya dance, Tithi of Mahapurushas and create a congenial atmosphere for regular study and practice of vaishnavite literature and culture in this remotely located Sattrā.

- 2) The project will also help in collecting and studying old manuscripts and puthies of medieval times and artifacts lying unnoticed in and around the Alipukhuri village since the days of Mahapurushas.
- 3) Proper investigation, survey and excavation works will unearth some undiscovered history of Neo-vaishnavite period. This will enrich the present archives cum library of the Sattrā to draw the attention of the visitors.
- 4) With the commencement of development works the number of religious devotees and tourists will increase resulting in the revival of original charm and dignity of the historic Sattrā as well as economic development of the area in course of time.
- 5) Construction and beautification of the old buildings, roads and tanks will definitely attract the attention of the visitors.
- 6) Above all, the development activities undertaken at the Sattrā will make a bridge between the two communities living in the area since long past. Mentionably 98% inhabitants of Alipukhuri village is Muslims, who are interested in the reconstruction and beautification of this historic and religious site and shows keen interest in helping the concerned authority.

(*Bijoy can be reached at: puthipateki@yahoo.com*)

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