



9 Memoirs of a Chota Sahib

John Rowntree

John Rowntree (1906–1975) was the last British Senior Conservator of Forests of Assam. He left Shillong with his family a few days after Independence and returned to England where he took up work as a journalist and media commentator. His *A Chota Sahib: Memoirs of a Forest Officer*, from where the lesson is an excerpt, is a light-hearted account of the times in Guwahati and its neighbouring areas on the eve of Independence as seen through the eyes of a British forest officer making the account not only local specific but also relevant to the present time.

Notice these expressions in the text.

Infer their meaning from the context.

- pug marks
- hot bed
- forded
- ingenious
- macabre
- epiphytes

We arrived at Gauhati after the long dusty journey across India and made our first home on the bank of the Brahmaputra as the cold weather was getting under way and the climate becoming bearable. The Public Works Department had given the walls of the bungalow a coat of fresh limewash and had painted the woodwork liberally with earth oil. In front was a raised portico which served as a car port, and on top, a veranda from which we had a splendid view of the river and its shipping and, beyond, the Himalayas. In the foreground was Peacock Island, with the dome of a Hindu temple just visible through the trees. I never discovered peacocks, but only monkeys on the island.

As the cold weather advanced the Brahmaputra shrank and the



distance between Peacock Island and the mainland grew less until, by the end of the hot weather, only a narrow dividing channel remained. There was a belief that if this channel ever dried up completely it would mean the end of the British Raj. In some years it very nearly did, but whether one could walk dry shod to the island in 1947, Independence year, I don't know because I no longer lived in Gauhati at the time.

Although Gauhati was the port of entry, so to speak, into Assam, most travellers passed through on their way between Calcutta and Shillong or to districts further up the valley. Occasionally, however, they stayed overnight, and sometimes we had unusual visitors, one of which was a tiger that had, presumably, been washed up by a flood. The pug marks of the large cat were clearly traceable through our compound.

The Kamrup district, of which Gauhati was the headquarters, extended to both banks of the river. The North Bank had a character all its own — a vast, remote stretch of flat, ageless land between the sandbanks of the Brahmaputra and the Himalayan foothills. It was a strange place, where the rivers dried up in the hot weather or suddenly disappeared under ground. Sometimes in camp we had to dig for water, which was so dirty that it had to be cleaned by dropping alum into the bucket to precipitate the mud. There were numerous *bheels* replete with wildfowl, peafowl strutted through the grass, and in the Manas Sanctuary bordering the Himalayan state of Bhutan, were a few rhino. The rivers were full of *mahseer*, and their banks a favourite site for the Governor's Christmas camps, which it was my task to build, and for which I sometimes received a polite letter of thanks from the great man.

This was the home of the Assam *cheetal*, and it was here that I once witnessed the delightful sight of a she sloth-bear carrying her cuddlesome cub on her back. Right in the middle of the wilds, a

Think as you read

1. Briefly describe the scene observed by the author from the veranda of his bungalow on the bank of the Brahmaputra.
2. What is the belief about the dividing channel between Peacock Island and the mainland of Guwahati that the author mentions?
3. What does the author say about the importance of Guwahati? Is the statement true in our time today also?



European and his wife had leased a piece of land from the forest department with a view to growing simul trees for the nearby match factory. They had rigged up miles of electric fencing in an attempt to keep out the deer, but with little success as far as the deer were concerned – they just jumped over it. On the other hand, never having met an electric fence before, I received the full treatment. I am afraid their enterprise was in no sense a very profitable one.

During the cold weather the North Bank was delightful. In the rainy season it was a hot bed of malaria and was best avoided. Travel at this time of year could also pose problems. The rivers were in flood and the bamboo bridges erected at the start of the cold weather were soon washed away. These bridges swayed and creaked alarmingly under a passing car, but were immensely strong and extremely useful. Once, I forded one of these flooded rivers on horseback. With difficulty, I persuaded my mount to plunge into the water, then slipped over his croup and hung on to his tail, which I was able to use as a rudder. When I pushed it to the right the horse veered to the left and vice versa, and we eventually made a safe landing on the other side of the river. More usually, crossings were made in a *mar* boat, a tedious performance at the best of times. The *mar*, which was a ferry, consisted of a plank platform covering two open boats placed alongside one another. These were either paddled across the river or, connected by a running cable to another stretched across the river, were propelled from one side to the other by the force of the current.

This ingenious device worked very well, but constant adjustments had to be made to allow for the rise and fall of the rivers. A whole series of ghats, or landing places, had to be constructed at different levels on the river bank. Fortunately traffic was light and, although

Think as you read

1. What character of the North Bank of the Brahmaputra does the author refer to?
2. What information does the author give us about Manas Wild Life Sanctuary?
3. Describe the author's experience of crossing a flooded river on horseback on the North Bank of the Brahmaputra.



crossing took time, there were few delays. The other difficulty about travel anywhere in Assam during the rains was the fact that the dirt tracks soon became unusable by normal cars, and the Jeep had yet to be invented.

Once when touring with my family on the North Bank, we left our return rather late, or rather the monsoon broke rather early, and although the roads were still motorable, driving became distinctly dicy. Most of the main roads were built on top of embankments to raise them well above the normal flood level, and they were narrow, single-track affairs. The road we were on became increasingly greasy, one skid led to another, and finally we slithered over the edge into a paddy field some six feet below the road. Paddy fields are divided into small enclosures by low banks in order to prevent the flood water running away, and we had one of the most bumpy rides of my experience before finding a way back onto the road.

At the start of our travels, before the rains broke, the roads had been so dry that the surface was almost invisible under a cloud of dust. Driving was difficult and one's destination uncertain. At one place, road work had been in progress, and one of the favourite hazards of road workers, a ramp, lay concealed from sight under the dust cloud. No warning signs were in use, or if they were they were not visible, nor was this one of the puny ramps usually encountered in civilised countries, but a step about six inches high. Needless to say, the impact when we hit it was considerable. As the car was carrying my wife, myself, the baby and her ayah, our servants and the usual mass of camp equipment, it says much for the motor engineers of those days that not a single spring was broken on either of these occasions. Probably the fact that we were packed like sardines in the car saved our bones.

The South Bank was more homely; distances were less and the terrain smaller. The reserve forests were mostly in one block. It was a

Think as you read

1. Relate the author's experiences of the road accident during the monsoon on the North Bank.
2. Relate the author's reminiscence of the forest bungalow at Kulsi.



country of low hills and valleys, the trees interspersed with villages and cultivation, and the forest itself, mostly of sal, had more the character of English woodland. Two comfortable forest bungalows served our needs. One at Kulsī was delightfully situated on a wooded spur above the river; the other, Rajapara, in a clearing, would have been equally charming if it had not been for the bats which lived in the roof. Their droppings were a constant reminder of their presence and the fusty smell of bat was ever with us. Larger, but less smelly, were the huge fruit-eating bats, with a wing span of five feet, which lived in a tree outside the bungalow and issued forth at dusk in search of food — a strange host of ghostly shapes gliding through the air on silent wings. Close to the bungalow was a large *bheel* where an earthquake had once lowered the surface, and the land became inundated with water. It was an eerie spot where tree skeletons still rose out of the water — a reminder that it had once been dry land.

In spite of its somewhat macabre associations, however, Rajapara was a pleasant place to work in, and the paddy fields where the jungle fowl gleaned the grain after harvest, and sometimes found their way into the pot, were cheerful, sunny and open spaces. But Kulsī was my favourite. The bungalow was surrounded by teak plantations, planted some sixty years before and now almost mature. In fact, growth in the Assam climate was too rapid to produce first-class teak and the local variety, though a useful furniture wood, was never up to Burma standards. Close by was a rubber plantation of *Ficus elastica*, but no tapping had taken place for some years, since Indian rubber was no longer able to compete with para rubber commercially. *Ficus elastica* belongs to the fig family, of which several species are found in Assam. Some grow to an immense size, having started life as climbing epiphytes on other trees. Eventually the host tree becomes completely encased by the *ficus* which forms a smooth bark around it — the host dies and the epiphyte takes over. Some, like the banyan, send down aerial roots from their branches which help to buttress the huge bulk of the tree.

UNDERSTANDING the text

1. Give an account of the author's experiences of the floods on the North Bank of the Brahmaputra during the monsoon.



2. Relate the author's observation on the use of *mar* boats as a mode of river transport in Assam.
3. Give the author's description of a sal forest.
4. Describe the author's experience with bats in the Rajapara forest bungalow.

TALKING about the text

1. The author makes a reference to "Peacock Island" located close to the Forest Officer's bungalow on the bank of the Brahmaputra. Can you make a guess which island the author is referring to? What is the 'Hindu temple' mentioned in the lesson (You may consult any books on the temples/heritage sites/history and archaeology of Guwahati)
2. Today Guwahati (note the change in spelling) is highlighted as the "Gateway to the North-East". What was the status of Guwahati like in the period around 1947. (You may draw references from the lesson.)
3. The author mentions a rubber plantation near Kulsi. Why had no rubber-tapping taken place for some years then? Find out the present situation of rubber plantation in the State.

THINKING about language

1. One of the interesting features of the vocabulary of English is that it is enriched by borrowings from a large number of languages. Likewise, English has enriched the vocabulary of other languages too. There are a large number of borrowings from English in Assamese and vice-versa. In this lesson you will find a few words that are borrowings from Assamese. Read these sentences:
 - (a) More usually crossings were made in a *mar* boat.
 - (b) Close to the bungalow was a large *bheel*.
 - (c) This was the home of the Assam *cheetal*.

Find out a few more examples of (i) Assamese words that are used in English and (ii) English words used in Assamese.



2. Notice the underlined words in these sentences and tick the option that best explains their meanings:
- (a) The pug marks of the large cat were clearly traceable.
- (i) stripes on the body
 - (ii) dots or spots
 - (iii) footprints
 - (iv) scratch marks left on the body
- (b) The rivers were full of mahseer.
- (i) sand banks
 - (ii) large reptiles like crocodiles
 - (iii) tortoise
 - (iv) fresh water fish
- (c) I once forded one of these rivers on horseback.
- (i) jumped across
 - (ii) crossed the river without using a bridge
 - (iii) swam across
 - (iv) crossed the river by using a bamboo bridge
- (d) It was an eerie spot where trees skeletons still rose out of the water.
- (i) very charming
 - (ii) causing a strange fear
 - (iii) noisy
 - (iv) very quiet

WRITING

1. Deforestation in Assam and elsewhere has resulted in loss of habitats for wild life besides destroying the ecological balance. Design a poster on the evils of deforestation. (Hints: The sal forests around Kulsi today have nearly disappeared.)
2. Write a letter to the editor of a local English daily drawing the attention of the State Government and the Inland Water Transport Corporation for exploring the feasibility of introducing regular water-transport facilities along the Brahmaputra to touch important river side towns.
3. Write a factual description of a flood situation.



THINGS TO DO

- In the lesson Rowntree makes references to the “cheerful, sunny and open spaces” of Rajapara. Other places in and around Guwahati and the other towns of Assam were no different in those days. Study the demography of your town/city (or your nearest town/city) and write an account of the demographic and environmental changes affecting the one time “cheerful, sunny and open spaces”.

ABOUT THE

THEME

A real-life personal account of experiences of the author in Assam during pre-Independence time.

SUB-THEME

Nostalgic expressions of experiences gleaned in and around Guwahati.

COMPREHENSION

- Understanding personal experiences.
- Relating those experiences to the present time.

TALKING ABOUT THE TEXT

- Sharing experiences.
- Reflecting on past experiences in the context of the present time.

THINKING ABOUT LANGUAGE

To make pupils aware of

- the enrichment of languages through mutual borrowings.
- idiomatic expressions and specific choice of words.

WRITING

- writing posters to highlight contemporary ecological concerns.
- writing for the media on a social issue.
- first person narration of incidents.

THINGS TO DO

Gathering and processing information to develop an article/essay.