In this issue, we travel along some of India's greatest rivers, from the mountains of Uttarakhand to the lush greens of the Western Ghats and the sites of Karnataka's great empires

PHOTOS: STEPHEN ALTER

With the River by My Side

Travelling on a river makes one acutely aware of the ceaseless flow of time, evoking metaphors of continuity and change but also the impermanence of life

Stephen Alter

IN THE faint first light before dawn, a thick shroud of mist lies over the water, obscuring everything from view, except for the narrow wooden boat in which I am seated. Neither bank of the river is visible, as if we are passing through a void. The boatman, who stands behind me, dips his bamboo pole in the water to steer us across. A sluggish current creates pleated lines of ripples that fan out from the boat's tapered prow before disappearing into the opaque mist, which is the same pale grey colour as the river.

We are crossing a branch of the Brahmaputra in Dibru Saikhowa National Park, near the eastern border of Assam. Our destination is an island in the river that formed after the last monsoon as the flooded current receded, leaving an exposed strip of silt and sand. When our boat reaches the opposite shore and we clamber off, there is still nothing to see. Half an hour later, as the rising sun burns through the mist, we can make out a field of tall grass that has grown in the six months since this land was formed. Known as chapori, these seasonal islands divide the current of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries into dozens of braided channels. Grasslands and swamps along the river attract migratory birds in winter, as well as birdwatchers like us.

Ten years earlier, I travelled to the headwaters of the Brahmaputra in Tibet, where it is known as the Tsang Po. Approaching Mt Kailash, our Land Cruiser forded the river, which was less than half-a-metre deep and barely ten metres wide. It was hard to believe that this modest stream, which flows eastward across Tibet and then cuts through the Himalaya in Arunachal Pradesh, is the same river that pours out into Assam, where it is several kilometres wide.

A month after visiting Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, I find myself in the Sundarbans delta, where the combined waters of the Brahmaputra, Ganga and Meghna disperse into the Bay of Bengal. Once again, the distributaries of these rivers weave their way through a maze of sedimentary islands, but the scale is far greater than it was in Assam. Instead of seasonal grasslands, the Sundarbans are covered in mangrove jungles. The slow-moving rivers and tidal currents eat away at the shorelines while the knotted roots of the trees cling to the muddy soil. This time, my boat is much larger, propelled by a diesel engine. In addition to birds like curlews and lesser adjutant storks, we are searching for crocodiles and tigers.

As a nature writer, I have travelled to many different parts of India in search of wildlife and wild places. Almost every one of my journeys has had a river running through it, accompanying me like a constant companion. Whether it is turbulent rapids in the mountains or calm, slow-moving currents on the plains, I find the presence of flowing water familiar and reassuring.

My hometown, Mussoorie, lies within the watershed of the Ganga, a river I have known since childhood. As a boy, I almost drowned in its swift waters, at a place called Shivpuri, above Rishikesh, where we had gone for a family picnic. My cousins, brothers and I built a makeshift raft of logs and I set sail on this without realising how quickly the current would draw me out into the middle of the Ganga. Fortunately, my aunt rescued me, or that would have been my last river journey.

Years later, I trekked from Rishikesh to the four main sources of the Ganga in Garhwal, following old pilgrim trails of the Char Dham Yatra. Over the course of that journey, I walked along each of the primary tributaries. For days on end, the rushing sound of these rivers was constantly whispering in my ears. Only when the path climbed out of the valleys to cross over ridges did I ascend into silence. The absence of the river's voice left me unnerved and strangely lonesome.

Reaching Yamunotri, after three weeks of trekking, I bathed in the hot springs near the source of the Yamuna. The next stage of my pilgrimage led me eastward over the mountains to Gangotri. Following the Bhagirathi upstream, I camped beside the mouth of Gaumukh glacier. Its meltwaters emerge from the ice as a milky current full of fine silt that glaciologists call rock flour. From there, my yatra took me to Kedarnath, above which the Mandakini seeps out of glacial ponds overlooking the temple. On the last stage of my journey, I trekked up the Alakananda valley to Badrinath. With each step of my pilgrimage, I was aware of the myths and lore of this riverine landscape — stories of deities, demi-gods and legendary heroes who travelled these paths before me and were blessed by the sacred waters of the Ganga.

SACRED PATHS

(Top) The confluence of the Alakananda and the Mandakini at Rudraprayag, Uttarakhand; the Indus near Leh in Ladakh

To know a river, one must sleep on its banks, bathe in its currents and drink deeply from its many sources. Pitching my tent on the sand, I have been lulled into dreams by the murmur of the Tons, Aglar and Song, three streams that flow out of the foothills near my home. Diving into clear, sunlit pools of the Ramganga, in Corbett National Park, I have felt the gentle tug of its waters and watched golden mahseer dart away into the fluid shadows. And the cold, clean taste of countless Himalayan springs that burst from rocks near the snowline still lingers on my tongue.

But rivers contain much more than just water. They are full of aquatic plants and creatures, as well as being a lifeline for the many species that inhabit their banks. The Chambal is one of the least polluted rivers in India and a haven for endangered wildlife. Flowing out of eastern Rajasthan, it forms the border between Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, before ultimately joining the Yamuna. On boat rides along sections of the National Chambal Sanctuary, I have watched Ganges river dolphins breaching the calm surface of the river with their long, toothy snouts, bulbous heads and agile flippers. Though blind and navigating only by echolocation, these freshwater mammals evolved more than 500,000 years ago and are 200 millennia older than our species, though their fate now lies in our hands. Both mugger and gharial crocodiles live in the Chambal too, thanks to conservationists who have reintroduced them in the sanctuary. As we drift by a grassy sandbank, I can see three gharial sunning themselves with their mouths wide open, while next to them is an Indian softshell turtle and a rare painted roof turtle, which has a multicoloured head. Further on, we spot dozens of waterbirds, including Indian skimmers, black-bellied terns and bar-headed geese.

Travelling on a river, even if only for an hour or two, we become acutely aware of the ceaseless flow of time. As the water moves inexorably forward, it evokes metaphors of continuity and change but also the impermanence and transience of life. Though we float on the moving surface there are deeper undercurrents that draw us from the past into the future through the natural law of gravity that gives the river its vital force.

Some rivers are older than the landscape through which they pass, reaching back to a time when the earth was formed. The sources of the Brahmaputra, Karnali, Sutlej and Indus lie within a radius of no more than 50 kilometres surrounding Mt Kailash. Though these great rivers arise at the edge of the Tibetan Plateau, they carve their way through the highest mountains in the world. As the Himalayas thrust upward over millions of years, these ancient streams, which once flowed into the Tethys Sea, continued their journeys, eroding the walls of rock that arose on either side. The abrasive force of water cut through layered strata of the earth's crust as it was tilted skyward by the collision of primordial continents.

Nowhere is this clash between hydrological and geological history more apparent than along the Indus, as it passes through Ladakh. This seemingly eternal river has followed its winding course since long before the Himalaya were formed, tossing and tumbling over boulders, stones and pebbles that the water polishes and grinds into sand. Eroded flanks of the mountains on either side of the river are scarred and twisted by tectonic forces that lifted giant slabs of rock more than eight kilometres into the clouds but failed to block the persistent flow of the Indus. Driving along the highway that runs parallel to the river, from Leh to Kargil, it feels as if the landscape is a timeless epic that the waters of the Indus have etched in stone.

Further downstream lies the confluence of the Indus and Gilgit rivers, where three mountain ranges converge. Early geographers called this "The Fulcrum of Asia." To the north stand the Karakoram, to the east are the Himalaya and on the west the Hindu Kush, all of which bow down in front of the Indus as it bends southward and sets its course for the Arabian Sea. Travelling in the company of this venerable stream, one cannot help but feel that its flowing waters will outlast human history and wash away any memory of our tenuous journeys.

Stephen Alter's most recent non-fiction book is *The Cobra's Gaze: Exploring India's Wild Heritage*. His latest novel is *The Greatest Game*, a sequel to Kipling's *Kim*