

**Gold washers, Fishermen, and Boatmen:
Was there a pre-modern life of the Brahmaputra?**

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The modern Brahmaputra is not often associated with the lives of gold washers, boatmen, and fishermen. Until not long ago, these artisans profoundly affected the daily life of the river. The Brahmaputra - full of water, mud and silt and powerful currents and blessed by a long spell of monsoon and a vastly expansive floodplain ecology - was home to a range of complex yet interlinked artisanal activities. These artisans did not tame the river but had learned to synchronize their craft with the ferocious currents and impulsive temperament of the river. Their intimacy with the river and their labor on the river was crucial to the making of pre-modern Assam polity and economy. All of them understood the river differently. The intimacy did not always pay off; the river was often ruthless but these artisans survived it for centuries. By the late 19th century these artisans had either disappeared or had metamorphosed into something else. Some of them left only traces of their name. This talk explains the art of living with the Brahmaputra in the pre-modern times and explains the pain and consequences of the transition to a modern time.