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The title name of the North Bengal University Journal of History is 'Karatoya' — the ancient sacred river of North Bengal. This 'Brhat parisara punya Karatoya mahanadi' is associated with myth, tradition, material and cultural history of North Bengal. Even to-day, the Karatoya with her narrow flow reminds the sweet memories of the bygone days, the tales of ups and downs in the life of the people of the soil. Ancient Pundranagara was situated beside the Karatoya.

There is a legend about the naming of the Shiladevir Ghat on the Karatoya which was so named after Shiladevi, a princess of the last ruling Hindu family of Mahasthangarh (identified with Pundranagara). The legend says that the beautiful princess who was the daughter or a sister of the last Hindu King Parasurama had drowned herself in the water of the Karatoya to save her dignity from the invading Muslim soldiers after the defeat of the king. From thence the spot came to be known by the name Shiladevir Ghat still bearing the tragic memory of the princess. The mazar of Hazrat Fateh Ali Askali on the bank of the Karatoya in Bogura is a sacred place to the muslims. The united flow of the Tista-Karatoya once brought material prosperity to the inhabitants of the valley. The vast river crossed by Hiuntsang on his way to Kamarupa was no other than the Karatoya or Ka-lo-tu of T'sang-shu. Karatoya is described as a holy river in the tirthayatra section of Vanaparva of the Mahabharata. 'Karatoya mahatmya' has found its expression again and again in the Puranas. The ancient manuscript named 'Karatoya Mahatmya' by Pandita Parasurama (12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> Century AD) announces her height of glory as a sacred river for pilgrimage.

Originating from the Himalayas the Karatoya enters Bengal from the border of Bhutan in the north through the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri. Its northern most stream is known as Distang or Tista. Trisrota is its sanskritised form. The three streams of the Tista flowed separately towards the south. The eastern stream was called Karatoya, the middle one Atrai and the western one was known as Punarbhava. Once Mahananda and Punarbhava emptied their water in the Karatoya. Atrai also emanating from the Tista flowed through the Chalan bil and ultimately joined the Karatoya. Thus the river Karatoya carrying the full flow of the Tista from the upper stream never suffered from any physical delicacy. Swelling with the nutrient flow of water at variant stages, the Karatoya continued to exist as an exceedingly strong-flowing river upto the devastating flood of 1777 at the Himalayan plateau from whence the vast water of the Tista found its way to flow through an older chanel to be emptied in the Brahmaputra.

Yet evidence proves that the Karatoya was regarded as the river of greatest celebrity in Hindu fable even in 1810. Even today, during the dry days of Chaitra, one can witness the amazing beauty of the ever-flowing Karatoya though not vibrant and broad-bosomed.

Number of myths and legends are handed down to the posterity centering round this sacred river which according to mythical legends, was created with the drop of holy water fallen from the palm of Mahadeva at the time of accepting Gouri as bride during Kanya-sampradana' ritual. The chanting of the following hymns at the time of taking holy bath in the Karatoya portrays the actual reverence the people had for this serene flow:

*Karatoye sadanire*

Saricchresthe subisrute

*Paundran plabayase nityam*

*Papamhara karodbhabe*

(The Karatoye, you are ever filled with water; you are the excellent and well renowned. You are always inundating the Paundra country. May your grace release me from all my sins).

Hence, the name is borrowed with a view to expressing a deep sense of adoration to the great heritage of North Bengal.

### **Sources**

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