

The Sanctuary Interview

Meet Pradyut Bordoloi

State Forest Minister, Assam, India

He has the distinction of being one of the few Indian politicians who is popular both with activists and the establishment. Young, dynamic and in a hurry to get things done, he takes his responsibility towards wildlife very seriously. He spoke with Bittu Sahgal on the eve of the Kaziranga Centenary Celebrations, which he hopes to use as the cement to bind conservation groups and political parties in Assam behind the objective of protecting Assam's wildlife.

Your eyes light up when we speak about Assam's wildlife and forests. What is it about nature that moves you?

I grew up in the midst of rainforests in Upper Assam. Margherita, the place where I was brought up, is located in the foothills of the Patkai range that separates India from Myanmar. This is the northeastern-most tip of India, where nature takes on a larger-than-life character. It is not just tall trees and swift rivers, my childhood memories involve stories told about nature as god. Anyone who has grown up dwarfed by a rainforest not merely falls in love with it, but remains in awe of it forever.

So you are a true son of Assamese soil?

You can't get much truer than me! I was actually born in Margherita, where my father was an employee of the British 'Assam Railways & Trading Co.' (AR&T Co.) from the 1940s, till it was nationalised in the 80s and became part of Coal India Ltd. I did my schooling in Margherita and only left to do my college in Guwahati and my post graduation in New Delhi. The forest has injected in me an inexplicable sense of fulfillment. Conversely, the destruction of wild nature produces an almost unreasoning sadness and anger.

How does this love mix and match with the other, polarised, portfolio that you are handling—power?

Are forests and power polarised? I am sure no one will suggest that we need no power at all. And, because I look after forests, I am able to ensure that power projects cause the least possible harm to the forests I love and on which the lives of our people are so totally dependent. In my view, this makes the portfolios 'in harmony', not in conflict.



Pradyut Bordoloi speaking to a room full of Kaziranga supporters during a visit to Mumbai.

But we hear about over 150 large dams being planned for the Northeast. These will surely destroy forests. Will Assam's demand for power come at the cost of its wildlife in the days ahead?

Some damage has already been done and I cannot possibly claim that 'no' damage will be done to the ecosystem. But if you consider the sheer potential of hydroelectric power generation in the northeast, we cannot shut this region off and deny the availability of cheap power to the nation. But there has to be a prudent use of our natural resources. You will discover that just a handful of dams can meet the entire requirements of the state. We could, theoretically, ensure that every family has access to electricity. Our policy is

to strike a balance between ecological conservation and development. We should generate enough, not too much. It is when 'too much' is sought that the problems arise.

What about the Lower Subansiri dam?

Yes, Assam is the state that is likely to suffer the downstream impact. My Chief Minister and my Cabinet colleagues are acutely aware of the potential downstream impacts and we are in discussion with the Government of Arunachal Pradesh and with the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) about these. Our primary concern is that our agriculture and our soils must not be damaged either by reduced flows or by sudden large releases during the monsoon. We are also very concerned about the impact on the typical flood plain ecosystem and



The people of Assam have ensured the protection of the great Indian one-horned rhinoceros, which most people had written off as a lost cause five decades ago.

on the wildlife downstream. Fortunately, the dam is only just being started and it is not going to have a huge reservoir. I also know that the Supreme Court too has laid down very stringent conditions, which we are going to monitor closely. I am confident that our genuine concerns will be respected and taken care of by the project authorities.

And if they are not?

That is a hypothetical question, which is impossible to answer. I repeat, we are in touch with the Hon. Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, the Hon. Minister of Environment and Forests at the Centre and also with the NHPC. We have no reason to believe that our concerns are not being addressed.

Let us shift focus a bit. Has your life ever been threatened by a wild animal?

My constituency is large, sprawling and known for its elephant habitats. We have as

many as 14 reserved forests in our care. And since a major part of my constituency bordering the Changlang and Lohit districts of Arunachal Pradesh can only be accessed through unmotorable forest roads one often has to walk, or navigate 'roadless wildernesses' using a four-wheel drive. On every trip, the thought of an encounter with elephants does cross my mind. Once, on a routine visit in 1999 while driving along a single-track dirt road, we came face-to-face with an aggressive male elephant in *musth*. He charged at us and we had to reverse at breakneck speed for three kilometres with virtually no space to manoeuvre the vehicle. I was shaken to the bone. Our vehicle was a write-off. My driver actually got a heart attack and was hospitalised that evening. I have always loved elephants and still do, but never in my life will I take them or their moods for granted.

You were the force behind the highly successful elephant festival held recently. Do

you think such events can actually help protect the animal?

Yes I do. When the forests were vast, elephants and humans had barriers between them. Today, these barriers are falling. The elephant festival served to remind people of their own cultural connection to the pachyderms. You must remember that in the past few years, over 200 people have lost their lives to elephant attacks and in retaliation even more elephants have been killed, sometimes by using poison-tipped arrows, or lacing pesticides in jackfruit and other elephant foods. The elephant festival helped children and their parents to 'renew their bonds' with an animal they deeply love and respect. We are just showcasing our heritage and sensitising people through this festival.

Is this then the rationale for the Kaziranga Centenary Celebrations? To help save the rhino?

Yes it is. It is also to showcase the success of the people and the state of Assam in protecting the rhino, which most people had written off five decades ago as a lost cause. By drawing national and international attention to the fragile situation in which the rhino and its lovely

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home finds themselves, we hope to add figurative armour to its defence. Actually the Kaziranga Centenary is also a biodiversity festival. It is to show that we have much more than the rhino!

Will such celebrations actually help improve the conditions of life and the facilities available to the rhino's defenders?

You tell me what you think Bittu. For the past six months, we have been working to identify every single human being living and dead who has contributed to the survival of the rhino. We wish to honour them and improve their lot. The spotlight during this festival will not shine on politicians, or VIPs. It will shine on the rhino and its defenders.

Do you have real hope for the rhino? You believe it will survive these difficult days?

I have heard you refer to Kaziranga as one of India's most successful conservation stories. I am hoping that, apart from triggering justifiable pride in the people of Assam, we can actually motivate other states in India to emulate the excellent example of our forest staff and the many individuals in Assam who

have risked so much to protect this World Heritage Site and its biodiversity.

But do you have the funds to do this? Are you satisfied with the budget allocated to wildlife by the State of Assam?

How can I be satisfied? I would always like to do more than we are currently able to do. But given our limited resources, I am fortunate to have with me a team of dedicated 'warriors'. I doubt that anyone could find a more reliable 'army' than the one we have in Assam. Only we know the odds that were ranged against us, yet we prevailed. We do want more money. But we cannot use lack of funds as an excuse. Under any circumstances, the rhino's future must be secured or future generations will never forgive us.

It is true that the rhino is safer today than it has been for over a century, but what about the other wildlife of Assam. Are forests like Manas and Dibru Saikhowa being given step-motherly treatment?

You forgot to mention the dolphin or *sibu* as we call it in the Brahmaputra or the Kulsu river, and the hoolock gibbon and the Bengal

Florican or the golden mahseer of Jia Bhoroli and the tiger and our orchids, the fish in our wetlands and the diversity of insects that we have not even been able to fully document. Bittu, we have a huge task ahead of us. No one minister, or one group, no matter how well intentioned, can win the battle to save our wilds in the long run. Elephant festivals and the Kaziranga Centenary Celebrations are a way to remind all people to think of nature, all of nature, in the process of negotiating each day of our increasingly hard-pressed lives.

How would you like history to remember you?

As a thinking politician. A minister who performed. Someone who placed biodiversity conservation in the right perspective for this part of the world.

Any message for the children?

Nature is your friend, you must protect it. You are blessed to have such a priceless treasure trove of biodiversity. I promise to work with others to protect this wealth of yours. As for the damage to your rivers, soils, forests and wildlife, tell those in charge of your country: thus far... no further! 🐘

Dedicated forest guards have played an important role in the conservation success story of Kaziranga. The Centenary Celebrations aim to identify and honour all those who have contributed to the survival of the rhino down the ages.

