

THE ASSAM TRIBUNE

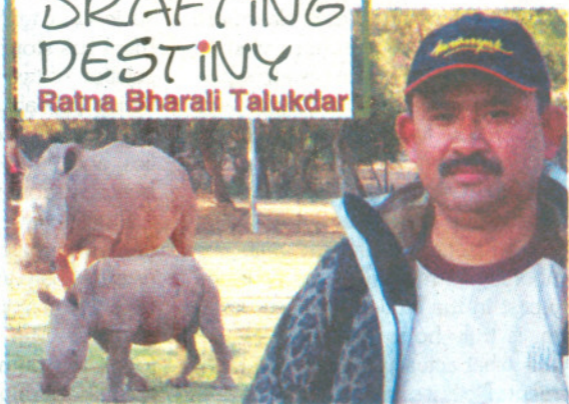
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# On nature's trail

**S**mall is beautiful, particularly when a small step marks the beginning of an incredible journey. Twenty-five years ago when Dr Bibhab Kumar Talukdar and some of his close friends decided to form a tiny neighbourhood nature's club titled Aaranyak to do something for environment conservation, they had little practical knowledge of what biodiversity conservation was all about. The group, all of them having finished their BSc final exam in 1989, had no clear idea of what to do and how to move forward, but they had a strong zeal to at least create some awareness in the neighbourhood about conservation of nature, till their results were out. The temptation was such that they were ready to invest even their pocket money. The saplings thus planted by the youths have turned into trees over the last 25 years, through a unique journey of glory and challenge.

Aaranyak came into limelight when it filed a PIL at the Gauhati High Court in December 1989, seeking a ban on fishing in the Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary, a home to one of the highly endangered avian species, the white-winged wood duck. That was, in fact, the first PIL as far as wildlife conservation efforts in Assam was concerned. They filed their second PIL in

**DRAFTING  
DESTINY**  
Ratna Bharali Talukdar



1993 when the Assam Government decided to de-notify three reserve forests. The verdict in both these cases bolstered the efforts of wildlife conservation and protection of the reserve forests in the State. Two back to back positive results, and that was what motivated Bibhab to completely devote his time and energy for Aaranyak.

“Such ideas were very new during the early part of the 1990s in our State, and the positive response of our efforts made me think that I should adopt an attitude to gather more knowledge on wildlife conservation and think big, so that our work and organisation can be sustained in the coming days,” says Bibhab, the secretary general of Aaranyak, who is a specialist in animal ecology and wildlife biology. He obtained his PhD degree from Gauhati University in 2000 for his research work on the status of anatidaes in Assam and the ecology of the white-winged wood duck.

In 2002, Bibhab could appoint four full-time employees for Aaranyak, which by then became a full-fledged scientific research organisation. Today it has the strength of 70 employees, all devoted to biodiversity conservation. It has successfully conducted wide ranging programmes including tiger research and conservation initiatives for monitoring tigers and their prey in the wilderness of Kaziranga, Manas and Orang National Parks and subsequently developed Tiger Informatics through geospatial and ecological research. Through its Gangetic river dolphin survey in Brahmaputra, primate survey in Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary, leopard conservation study, avifauna and elephant research and conservation initiatives, among others, Aaranyak has taken conservation efforts to new heights.

Under his leadership, Aaranyak has added another feather on its cap, i.e., the successful completion of a ten-year-long Wireless Communication Enhancement Project for Kaziranga National Park in collaboration with the UK-based David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation and Assam Forest Department in 2003.

The first Assamese to become the Chair of Asian Rhino Specialist Group under the Species Survival Commission of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) in 2008, Bibhab still holds the post, besides being the Asia Coordinator of International Rhino Foundation and a member of African Rhino Specialist Group of IUCN.

“As a student of Zoology, we had to often study those species which are almost alien to us, despite our own region being a biodiversity hotspot. I realised that this was mainly because there were very few studies on our own ecology and environment.” This realisation has been the guiding force for him to chart an incredible journey that took him to 23 different countries as part of his mission.

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