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Mongabay Series: Asian Rhinos

India's Manas National Park illustrates the human dimension of rhino conservation

13 February 2017 / Bikash Kumar Bhattacharya

The fortunes of the park's rhinos are intertwined with ethnic politics in India's restive Assam State.

- Manas National Park, one of India's rhino conservation areas, is at the heart of a proposed homeland for the Bodos, an indigenous ethnic group.
- From the 1980s until 2003, the park was engulfed by armed conflict, and its rhino population was wiped out. During this period, the Bodos were frequently portrayed as hostile to conservation efforts.
- A 2003 peace accord paved the way for the establishment of autonomous local governance, and the restoration of rhinos to the park. Former guerrillas now serve as anti-poaching patrols.
- With the Bodos in power, a new group has been cast as ecological villains: Bengali Muslims living in the fringes of the park.

BARPETA, India — When Babulal Orang, a field staffer in the Manas National Park in the northeast Indian state of Assam, tried to stop a group of armed Bodo youths from entering into the park one evening in the late 1980s, he was threatened at gunpoint.

“Who are you to prevent us from entering the forest? Mind you coolie, this is our forest!” Orang recalls them shouting.

The word “coolie,” originally used by British colonial tea planters to refer to native unskilled laborers of Indian or Chinese descent, is still used as a slur in Assam. It is particularly directed at the Adivasi community, or the so-called “tea tribes,” the descendants of indentured laborers brought to the area from central India nearly two centuries ago.

By the time the incident took place, Orang had served the park more than a decade. It was the silent but passionate engagement of field personnel like Orang that won the wildlife sanctuary the status of a World Heritage Site in 1985. Still, his authority to guard the forest was questioned — not because he lacked credentials, but because he belonged to the Adivasi community.



Babulal Orang, a retired forest guard, with Binay Orang, the village headman of Raghavbil village. Photo by Bikash Kumar Bhattacharya for Mongabay.

The Bodo youth who shouted at him, on the other hand, are part of an indigenous group in Assam. Over the past century and a half, the Bodo have been gradually alienated from their ancestral lands by incursions of a number of communities, including the Adivasis, from erstwhile East Bengal and central India.

Fearing the loss of their tribal identity, the Bodos also lost their trust in the ability and will of the successive local governments, dominated mostly by Assamese middle-class leaders, to protect Bodo identity and indigenous rights. Inevitably, demands emerged for greater political representation and, eventually, political autonomy.

Manas National Park – home to threatened and endangered species like the tiger, pygmy hog, one-horned rhinoceros and Indian elephant – lies at the heart of this proposed state.

Predictably, as the area plunged into armed ethnic unrest, the wildlife sanctuary was caught in a grim war over identities and rights to resources.



Two forest guards on duty in Manas National Park, which is home to tigers, rhinos, elephants and other threatened and endangered species. Photo by M. Kundal Bora.

Territory and identity

“We Bodos have lived in the area since time immemorial,” said Bishiram Narzary, a former Elected Member in the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC), a local governing body that administers the Bodoland Territorial Administrative Districts of Assam. “We have traditionally used the forest resources in a judicious manner. Our ancestors hunted for subsistence, but they also nurtured the forest, its animals and its trees. Not only are the ecosystem services essential to us, but Manas itself is a part of our Bodo identity.”

Narzary, who held the forest portfolio in the BTC administration, suggested that the web of balance in Manas ecosystem was disrupted as the human population in the park’s fringes burgeoned.

First, the British colonial regime permitted the logging of large tracts of forest to meet the demands of the thriving timber industry. Then, vast swathes of lands were cleared for farms and tea plantations. Finally, the colonial government encouraged large-scale migration to this sparsely populated, resource-rich area. Communities that eventually settled in the traditionally Bodo tribal areas near Manas include Bengali Muslims, Nepali cultivator-graziers and tea-garden laborers or Adivasis.

In the meantime, a 1915 regulation banned the felling of trees in unclassified state forests — large parts of which were previously Bodo shifting cultivation fields — restricting the Bodos’ traditional agricultural practice. For the Bodos, according to Narzary, this led to increasing dependence on the forest resources. “In such a context, it was quite natural for the Bodos to react with hostility to the newcomers,” he said.

The hostility of the Bodos has been particularly directed against the Adivasis and the Bengali Muslims, the two other major groups that live in the fringes of Manas park. [Time and again, this hostility has translated into physical violence by armed Bodo militants.](#)

“From the late 1980s until 2003 was a dark period for Manas. We were fighting for the protection of our identity and traditional rights. Naturally, the park got caught up in the quagmire of civil strife. But after the BTC was formed in 2003 recognizing our [Bodos’] rights, [the park has been rebuilt successfully](#),” Narzary said.

Orang, who survived a fatal confrontation with heavily-armed poachers sometime in the 1980s, is, however, concerned about his community’s stake in conservation. “Our efforts in conservation in Manas were hardly recognized at the local level. Now, after the formation of the BTC, they [Bodos] make us feel more unwanted.”

Conservation efforts are often intertwined with identities and social networks. [This human dimension of conservation](#) gains even more urgency when conservation sites are in landscapes as culturally diverse and politically volatile as the Bodoland Territorial Administrative Districts of Assam in India’s ethnically-sensitive northeast.



One of India’s greater one-horned rhinos, photographed in Assam State’s Kaziranga National Park. Photo by Udayan Dasgupta for Mongabay.

Rhinos in Manas National Park: then and now

In the first half of the nineteenth century, John Butler, an officer in East India Company's Bengal Native Infantry, recorded his treks through the wilds of the Indo-Bhutanese borderlands. In his book, "A Sketch of Assam," published in 1847, Butler mentioned having encountered one-horned rhinoceros. He noted that rhino calves could be seen tamed, and attended by a single man in grazing areas. These tamed pachyderms could be bought from their native owners for 100 to 150 rupees, Butler wrote, and many were bought by European booty-seekers who sold them in Calcutta for 500 rupees per individual.

Susan R. Ward, who traveled through the area nearly half a century after Butler's visit, confirms his observations. Ward's "A Glimpse of Assam" (1884) narrates an incident of hunting an adult rhino and her calf in the forests of Bashbari — which is now one of the three ranges of the Manas National Park.

Even after India attained independence, the extractive thrust of imperial forestry continued into the post-Colonial regime. As the population grew, the agrarian frontier, too, continued to expand, leading to an inevitable shrinkage of wilderness in Assam.

The rhino population, however, remained relatively stable in the area until the early 1980s, with Manas itself housing more than 100 individuals. Budhu Orang, 73, a plantation worker in Fatemabad Tea Estate adjacent to the park, fondly remembers encountering wild rhinos in his youth. "When I was young, I went to collect fuelwood or to catch fish in the *Pung* (water-bodies) inside the forest. I'd seen wild rhinos many times near the swamps inside the forest. It was a common sight."



A one-horned rhino in Kaziranga National Park. Rhinos are strong swimmers, and spend much of their time in water, especially during the hot season. Photo by Udayan Dasgupta for Mongabay.

Bodo autonomy and the fate of rhinos in Manas

The rhino's fate changed drastically in the late 1980s, as violent ethnic agitation demanding Bodo political autonomy engulfed the area. The dense forests inside the park became a [sanctum for armed rebels](#); Manas was not only used for rebel camps but also opened for plunder. [Reports](#) indicate that in those years, rhinos, deer, tigers, elephants and other species fell prey to armed poachers, and the park's ecosystems were devastated. [According to an Indian Forest Service official](#) the insurgency years also saw the killing of six forest staff and several domesticated elephants, as well as the destruction of 30 of the forests rangers' guard posts and offices.

Within the span of a decade, the park's entire rhino population was wiped out.

A relative peace was finally obtained in 2003, with the recognition of Bodo autonomy and the formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) as a means of local governance. [Rhinos were reintroduced](#) in 2006 through [The Indian Rhino Vision 2020](#), a multi-partner program involving the BTC, the government of Assam, WWF-India, the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. As of now, park officials put the rhino population in Manas at 32.

“We are happy to see rhinos once again in Manas, said Bhanu Medhi, a retired forest guard who now resides in the nearby Giyati village. However, Medhi and other villagers opined that the “new rhinos” are different from the old ones. Habituated to humans, these translocated animals are more vulnerable to poaching, Medhi stated.



A peaceful scene in Manas Park, which has been at the center of a bloody conflict over land rights and ethnic identity in northeastern India. Photo by M. Kundal Bora.

From one villain to another

During the years of armed conflict, the local Assam media almost uniformly depicted the Bodo population — and their practices — as detrimental to the environment. For example, *Asomiya Khobor*, a popular Assamese daily, ran a news item on Sept. 8, 2003, with the headline “Bodo aggression leads to deforestation in Sonitpur.” The same issue was reported in *Asomiya Pratidin*, a widely circulated Assamese newspaper, on Sept. 10, 2003, under the headline: “Sonitpur forests are threatened with extinction as aggressive Bodo settlers clear forestland for cultivation.”

Although factually correct, articles like these glossed over the political and historical context that drove large chunk of Bodo populace to the fringes of forests. Throughout Assam, tribal communities have been relegated to hills and forests as they try to escape the bureaucratic tentacles of the expanding modern state.

Local journalist Mahesh Deka points out another interesting fact: as the Bodo movement gained momentum in the 1980s, some Bodo leaders started to encourage poor Bodo families scattered across Assam to migrate to districts with considerable Bodo population — for example, the Sonitpur district. The intention was clear: territorializing Bodo ethnicity, and paving the path for the proposed Bodoland.

“The promise of a better future in the proposed Bodoland was enough to lure many impoverished Bodo families into settling in these forests,” Deka said.

Moreover, the introduction of the Forest Rights Act, 2006, which conferred certain rights to the indigenous communities over forest resources, also drew many Bodo families to settle in the forest lands.

Bengali Muslims, the new “other”

The portrayal of the Bodos as an obstruction to conservation has waned following the recognition of Bodo autonomy and the into conservation efforts in Manas National Park.

Now, (Indian) Hindu nationalist discourses are gaining ground, propelled by the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) election into power in 2016 state polls. And [the media’s focus has shifted to a common “other”: Bengali Muslims.](#)

Local media was quick to pick up the trend of portraying Bengali Muslims as a threat to Assam’s wildlife after Narendra Modi, then the BJP’s prime ministerial candidate connected the community with rhino poaching in one of his 2014 campaign speeches.

The same rhetoric can be seen in local media coverage of the [recent selective eviction drive](#) against Bengali Muslim immigrants near the Kaziranga National Park in Assam.

Shalim Hussain, a research scholar at New Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia University, draws attention in [a recent article](#) to the trend of pinning the crime of rhino poaching on Bengali Muslims. He writes that no empirical data, facts or figures support these allegations.



The Fatemabad Tea Estate, adjacent to Manas National Park. During British Colonial rule, demand for plantation laborers swelled Assam's population. The newcomers settled in areas traditionally inhabited by the Bodos. Photo by M. Kundal Bora.

Poaching, anti-poaching and politics in Manas

“Whenever any incident of poaching is reported in the park, the first instruction that comes from the authorities is to provide information on the Bengali Muslim settlers residing in my village,” said Binay Orang, the headman of Raghavbil, a village fringing Manas National Park.

His village lies just on the edge of the Manas/Beki river that gently flows through the west of the park. Sitting on his tiny courtyard, Binay Orang pointed towards a Bengali Muslim settlement on the other side of the river, where dozens of huts and a few concrete houses dotted the sandy riverbank. “Bhangarpara *Bazar* was originally over there, but now it takes place on this side of the river,” he said.

This was the *bazar* (market) where the menfolk of Khagrabari — a remote village adjacent to the park — were busy in their normal chores in the afternoon of May 2, 2014. Back in the village, in their absence, armed [Bodo militants massacred 38 persons, mostly women and children, all of whom belonged to the Bengali Muslim community](#).

Kasem Ali, 30, a Khagrabari villager who survived the carnage by hiding himself in the nearby jungle said, “When all of a sudden fire was opened, many people ran to the direction of the forest camp. Instead of protection, more firing came from the camp. I then ran to jungle and hid myself there until the arrival of the army in the village.”



An Adivasi women carrying firewood collected from the park. Photo by M. Kundal Bora.

Later, [eight forest guards were arrested](#) for their alleged involvement in the Khagrabari killings.

Nilim Dutta [has pointed out](#) that the violence was precipitated by false and malicious accusations that the victims of the massacre were illegal Bangladeshi migrants encroaching on the forestland of the park.

“Whenever something bizarre happens — not to speak of poaching — in the park or its surrounding, the finger of suspicion is instantaneously directed at us,” said an exasperated Iman Ali, who lost his wife in the Khagrabari massacre. “They want to portray us as encroachers and poachers, and wipe us out. But we are not encroachers. We live in a revenue village. See, I have the *patta* of my land,” he added, waving a piece of paper in his hand: his *patta* or land-holding document.

[Observers](#) were of the opinion that armed forest guards – the park’s anti-poaching corps, which includes former Bodo Liberation Tiger guerrillas — acted on the instruction of the Bodoland Peoples’ Front (BPF), the political party formed by ex-Tiger leaders that has been in power in the Bodoland Territorial Council since its inception in 2003. Many [claimed](#) that the violence was intended to ensure that BPF candidates continue to [dominate local elections](#), a charge BPF leaders deny.

The park itself is also invariably entangled in the internal politics of the Bodo elites. Because the successful restoration of Manas National Park has become one of the yardsticks to measure the success of the BTC, the park sometimes bears the brunt of internecine feuds among the Bodo leadership. Babulal Orang hinted at one such poaching incident in 2014 — the year he retired from the park as a forest guard. Though he refused to disclose any details for fear of reprisal, he believes that it was the result of one such feud.

No one knows what the future holds for the communities on the fringes of the park, and for the park’s flora and fauna. Nevertheless, a glimmer of hope can be found: despite a grim war over identities, Manas, and its wildlife, is thriving once again.