



## Conservation challenges of Manas Tiger reserve : political unrest and community attitude

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### Abstract

India is no exception with many forested areas, including protected areas, experiencing conflicts of varying intensity owing to numerous complicated issues ranging from cultural identity to socio-political and environmental security. Such conflicts not only act as a major impediment to scientific monitoring, protection and management in the biodiversity-rich areas, but also lead to abuse of wildlife and natural areas by conflict parties and opportunistic elements in the absence of adequate protection and monitoring forces (Goswami, 2011). The story of Manas Tiger Reserve is also coinciding with the cases of resource conflict and socio-political disturbance of rest of the country. However, the initiation of community protection groups and their sudden crisis turn the whole conservation and coexistence mechanism to a different angle. This ultimately damages the sustenance of the reserve. The present paper tried to pull up the cause and socio-political interest grown up around the park in last few years after the new BTC administration came in operation.

**Keywords :** Community, Conservation, Manas Tiger Reserve.

### 1. Introduction

The British domination to India began a disruption of the communal systems, leading to an open access to natural resources (Gadgil and Iyer, 1989). The British system led to an exploitative system of forest management being put in place (Nanda, 1999). This system was maintained by the Indian Government after Independence (Nanda, 1999). However, in many cases it has drifted into problems resulting in a major loss of the forests due to a "tragedy of the commons" (Baden and Noonan 1998) whereby without an acceptance of a major authority with responsibility for the forests, open access to cutting has resulted in major forest degradation and often total loss of the forests (Gadgil and Iyer, 1989). However, Establishment of protected areas (PAs)

has been the most widely accepted means of biodiversity conservation and it also implies some restriction on the use of its resources (Hales, 1989). Local communities are vulnerable to the establishment of PAs, particularly in developing countries since their livelihoods dependent on those resources (Rodgers, 1989; Gadgil, 1990; Mishra *et al.*, 1992). Many traditional societies in developing countries have exploited edible wild plants to provide an adequate level of nutrition, income generation and livelihood management. As per estimate, 350 million people living within or adjacent to dense forest receive several life supporting commodities from forest (Arnold, 2001). This contemporary debates over forest conservation and its socio-political acceptance in Assam is mainly based on the socio-political

relations rather than its historical truths alike rest of the subcontinent. Conservation is focused to rights over natural resource and political unrest. In Manas Tiger Reserve, the tribals and other communities have been living close to the forests for the time immemorial and the growing pattern of conservation mechanism directly influence the human society and as usual the question of 'whose forest?' is still vibrant in the periphery of the reserve.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Study area

The Manas Tiger reserve (MTR) is situated on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra river maintain a natural tracts of 2840 sq. km. There are numerous rivers crisscrossing the Reserve, namely, Sankosh, Saralbangha, Hel, Tanali, Courang, Sidli (Bhor) Aio, Manas, Beki, Pathimari, Kaladia, Tihunala, Morapagaldia, Nala, Braalia, Pbornodi and Dhansiri. The Reserve runs along the Indo-Bhutan international border, with contiguous wildlife habitats in Bhutan. The river Manas flows from the gorges of Bhutan and splits into two major streams as it enters India at Mathanguri. While the core zone, the Manas National Park (519.77 km<sup>2</sup>), offers fine wildlife habitat, the rest of the Reserve is a collection of eighteen Reserved Forests intertwined with revenue villages. While traversing the Reserve from West to East, one comes across Sal forests, both virgin and degraded, moist deciduous forests, isolated patches of ever-green forests, riverine forests, grasslands of both savannah and terai types, and miscellaneous forests. Manas habitat provides an excellent abode to the tiger as well as its prey species. These species migrate freely across the international border. Prior to declaration of the sanctuary, the area was Reserved Forest (R.F.) called Manas R.F. and North Kamrup R.F. The Raja of Gauripur and the Cooch-Bihar Royal Family were using these areas as a hunting preserve. The sanctuary was later extended by two successive additions in 1951 and 1955 to 391 km<sup>2</sup> by including the entire North Kamrup R.F. and

the Manas R.F. Later the Kahitama R.F., the Kokilabari R.F. and the Panbari R.F. were added and the area was declared as Manas National Park in 1990. Delineation of buffer zone Comprises 2317.35 km<sup>2</sup> 8 RFs to the east and 10 RFs to the west with around 125 forest villages in the western buffer, a few in the eastern buffer but the areas have moderate to bad encroachments. The statuses of encroached areas are reported over 1600 hectares and 500 households since the last ten years (Project Tiger Directorate, 2006). However, there is a strong political angle of such encroachments, which need proper understanding.

### 2.2 Materials and Methodology

The paper is basically depends on long term understanding of socio-political scenario of the MTR. However, secondary sources are used to draw various results in connection with the study. The published records, research papers and reports were extensively studied to construct a base for the paper. Various stakeholder consultations were also use in different levels to get suitable line of socio-political understanding and community attitude towards the reserve.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The tropical forest management based on the European concept has failed (Jha 2000) and must be changed. The scenario of Assam's jungle is also same to the rest of failed stories of forest management. In Assam, open access further resulted from the major political turmoil through militant groups reducing the Assam Forestry Department's control even further. Due to the consequence of ethnic violence, extremist domination of the forest, and illegal log cutting and smuggling in western Assam one third of the Reserve Forests have become decimated in the last decades. This one third of the "protected" Reserve Forests that is adjacent to communities essentially has few or no trees. The areas of MTR were among such forest areas, which face a serious loss for political changes. With accords being signed by BLT with the Central Government, with the formation of the Bodoland

Territorial Council (BTC) to participate in administering areas under agreements, and with the cessation of major illegal logging and smuggling, there is appeared an opportunity to assess how to move ahead in the slow process of reclaiming the forests. Conservation workers had keep on trying to instigate new tools with the support of local communities. to bring back the forests from the crippling period they have experienced

In the meantime, the Indian forestry started changing from the classical approach to a people's participatory approach (Banerjee in Jha 2000). The 1988 Forest Policy created a paradigm shift in National Forest Policy (Jha 2000; Wildlife Protection society of India 1998) because it emphasized the role of people in forest management (Jha 2000). The Assam Joint Forest Management Law while attempting to motivate communities is very top down and shows a lack of incorporating community input into its creation. The first such initiative was started in 1998 in the midst of the period of militant agitation, Community Conservation Inc (USA) & Nature's Foster initiated the Golden Langur Conservation Project (GLCP) to protect and conserve the endemic Golden langur and its habitat which includes much of the Manas Biosphere . Prior to that Natures Beckon, the pioneer conservation activist group of NE India had extensively tried to communicate the pro-conservation dialogues in these areas. However, as part of the GLCP, a major awareness campaign was instituted which reached to a large number of villagers across the Manas Biosphere Reserve. Over time, this resulted in the formation of community groups to protect their natural areas. However, the initiative of community base conservation faced a serious trouble when large scale of non government funds involved in whole process.

### **3.1 Tribal and Tiger : a coexistence crisis**

The Royal Bengal tiger *Panthera tigris tigris* (Linnaeus, 1758) is the National Animal of India. It is an intimate part of the history and culture of this region. This species is the most threatened

large carnivore in India. It has been used as the main flagship species in India to protect a wide diversity of other species. However, most of the tiger habitats are wide and close to human dominations. The contemporary conservation practice also started recognizing the need of community intervention for effective conservation of these large cats. Despite this, the principal threat to its sustainability have been rapidly increasing mainly due to habitat destruction, decline in prey base caused by over hunting, commercial poaching and poor tiger-human conflict management. In MTR habitat suitability become primary question for survival of the tiger along with rest of other large mammals like elephants and gaur, which are free moving across the tiger reserve area. Rhino is recently added to a confine zone of the national park boundary with involvement of a huge funds from western countries. That is totally a separate issue, which need a proper evaluation before giving any concluding remarks. However, the Bodo community dominated the MTR area were traditionally pro-conservation in nature and socially accept forest as a part of their culture and wisdom.

In concern to tigers, the scenario get changed after MTR area come under the umbrella of community protection. The core area of the Tiger reserve i.e the Manas National park was covered by the Manas Mouzigendri Ecotourism Society (MMES) and Manas-Agrang Society in Bhuyapara (Eastern) Range, Sankar Mihinga Onsai Aat in Bansbari (Central) range and Panbari – Manas Forest Protection Society in Panbari (Wsetern) range and beyond protected area the initiatives of Green Forest Conservation at Kachugaon RF and Raimona RF (Kachugaon & Raimona Camp), Biodiversity Conservation Society, Ultapani at Ripu & Chirnag RF (Ultapani camp, Jharbari Camp, Runikhata Camp), New Horizon, Koilamoila at Manas RF, Raigajuli Ecotourism & Social Welfare Society, Kuklung area. However, there is absence of proper support from concerned agencies & departments for sustainable running of this unique community

initiative grown up with the help of few local conservation actors like N. K. Dey, who coordinates the community protection forces within the Manas Biosphere Reserve and Late Rajan Islari, who began his conservation efforts in 1996 with the Indo-US Primate Project and plays a pivotal role in the Forest Protection Forces, to conserve the dwindling forests which is also an important tiger habitat in collaboration with BTC authorities. The bureaucratic bungling and casual approach of the Forest Department is resulting in irregular support to the groups and thereby creating confusion and conflict among the group members. The NGOs collaborated to support the initiative with western funding, seem to consider it as a project and acting as merely fund channelizing agent without getting involved in the activities of the community groups in its letter and spirit. In the mean time the Forest Rights bill had stand as a major issue of conservation concern. The forest department and some environmental groups had questioned the feasibility of the bill towards effective conservation approach with legal community rights over forest. The concept of conservation was titled to such an extent that the theory of co-existence was pushed backward. Many of the human right activists called it a battle between those supporting the bill and these conservationists who opposed it in the name of Tigers Crisis. The forest villages of Bodoland Areas are also suffered a lot and massive encroachments were backed to support vote bank politics.

### **3.2 Making of Manas : Political unrest and community attitude**

The New administrative structure in BTC has also initiated innovative steps for the long term survival of the forest in Bodoland forest. It was realized that the forests being guarded by scanty number of forest staffs with insufficient facilities, it is likely that most of the areas are without any protection. In the same time the community motivating towards Participatory approach had been started with the formation of Manas Biosphere Conservation Forum by some of the leading NGOs of the state. In such context,

Bodoland Forest Protection Volunteers (BFPV), a 100 man volunteer group from nearby community has initially been established by BTC forest authority with the help of local NGO to assist forest department in anti poaching and anti smuggling activities. Soon the BTC was helping the new community groups with support for uniforms and to create camps and in some cases using the limited funds for salaries for the protection forces. Because of the complex political situation the BTC was in, different NGOs come forward to support them in terms of international financial support and moral support in the innovative approach they were taking. However, the lack of bare minimum support and guidance on regular basis is a great set back for the whole initiative and adversely affecting the conservation zeal of the community. Under the constrained situation, often on the verge of closing the protection camps, these community groups critically begin to analyse the functioning of the Department as well as attitudes of western funding based NGOs. It consequently effected the motivation of the inmates of the protection camps and the members in general of the village community conservation organizations. A realistic conclusion on the future and prospects of this noble and unique initiative requires further introspection on the part of all concerned and further discussions, since it is linked with the future of a very important tiger habitat – Manas.

### **4. Conclusions**

The Man and Biosphere Programme (Krishnan, 1996), of which Manas is one Reserve, opens a second venue to create a community co-management institution for the Reserve Forests of Manas (Horwich *et al.*, 2010). The authors are of the firm opinion that the initiative is a unique process of regaining the faith of the local community to protect the forests of BTC as their heritage as well as strengthening the forest department with community support. This need to be supported at its best which requires addressing large numbers of site-specific problems else it will leave us with an incomplete and insecure tool that provides neither enough incentives nor the

security to ensure community participation for the protection of this habitat which is the home of many important species like Tiger, Elephant, Golden Langur and many more. However, Biospheres are not technically legal protection mechanisms and additional laws would need to be put in place to protect the community groups. The

Biosphere structure for community participation, although in place, has never been used (Singh, 1999). Despite the lack of a legal precedent for community co-management in India, the existence of such community groups in MTR provides a positive position to explore a legal community co-management system in policy level.

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