

# The Sunday

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## Sentinel

### S.O.S. MANAS

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**T**he ultimate years of the Assam agitation led by All Assam Students' Union (AASU) saw the complete extirmination of the rhinoceros from Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary of Nagaon district. This time, as the ABSU (All Bodo Students' Union) movement progresses, it is the turn of the well-known Manas Tiger Reserve.

The world renowned sanctuary is the refuge of more than 20 endangered species of wildlife including rhinoceros, wild buffalo, tiger, elephant, pigmy hog, hispid hare and golden langur. Manas has the second largest tiger population in India after the Sunderbans Tiger Reserve. Its 391 square km core area covers part of Barpeta district and eastern parts of Kokrajhar district forming parts of Kochugaon, Haltugaon and Aie Valley Forest Divisions.

Early this year when the agitation launched by ABSU (Upendra faction) intensified, most of the forest officials started to flee from their camps in the buffer zone. It may be mentioned here that the buffer zone has the status of reserved forest (RF) and an unspecified number of encroachments, Forest Villages and Taungiya Villages are there, mostly inhabited by the Bodo tribe. But the deserting of camps by forest staff, especially the foresters and guards has virtually left the remaining habitat in the hands of terrorists and extremists. While terrorist are using forests as cover and shelter, some poachers and timber smugglers have started their operation side-by-side. Nobody

knows exactly how many species of wildlife including rhinos have been killed and trees felled. It may be mentioned here that large elephant population and the bulk of rare golden langur population occur in the buffer zone area of Manas which has some excellent sal forest.

Of late, since mid-February, the impact fell on the otherwise well-protected core area of the Tiger Reserve. The worst is the situation in the western Panbari Range area of the reserve. The terrorists struck on February 17, first attacking the Panbari Range headquarters and then around midnight ran over the Lafasari Forest Camp killing two persons, one Game Watcher and one *Mabout*. Many others were injured besides losing a rifle and a gun to the terrorists. Panbari Range is in Kokrajhar district, on the west bank of Manas River. All the staff and guards of the 120 square km Panbari Range have already fled the area leaving the control to the Bodo terrorists.

Recently, it has been learnt that the staff in Mathanguri and Bansbari, the two key areas in Manas are also feeling insecure and may leave their camps at any moment. If this really happens, Manas will be lost forever. The gunning down of a game keeper D. Lahkar and the injuring of a casual labourer P. Das on April 4 and the subsequent burning down of Makhibaha camp and beat office in the heart of the area has signalled that the last days of this famous sanctuary are not far. Makhibaha is located at the center of the eastern half of the core area and is in Barpeta district.

The recent seizing of more than 13 trucks of timber at Barpeta Road, all clandestinely harvested inside the core area, east bank (Barpeta district) suggest that there is virtually nobody is there in the forest, or if somebody is, they are unable to do anything about it. Many hog deer have been killed by the poachers. Although no specific case of rhino poaching has been reported, many are feared to have been killed. Due to effective conservation over the years most of the wildlife in the core area have developed a marked tolerance towards human presence. Species like hog deer can be approached easily upto 25-30 metres. So they are falling very easily to the hunters.

It may be mentioned here that from many forest camps like Lafasari arms have been snatched away by the Bodo extremists and in some cases a few have also been killed (till date three have been shot dead and many injured). Some 21 forest camps (including those of buffer zone) and some departmental vehicles have also been burnt down completely. In not a single case has the staff put up resistance and arms have been snatched away without any trouble. Moreover, the carrying of arms by the forest staff deserves to be mentioned. Early this year when arms were snatched away by the Bodos in Kokrajhar district from the forest staff it was an interesting pointer in this direction. They put all their arms together in a bundle and kept them in a bullock cart while they

followed on foot amidst dense jungle and terrorist hide outs. When the extremists ambushed therefore, the staff had no other way but surrender. Perhaps they were not properly trained. But why is the Government and particularly the Forest department (Wildlife) silent? The situation in the core area is deteriorating by the day. Taking the full advantage, the terrorists have reportedly made some of their major hide outs in the Panbari Range area. The fear of Forest staff and their relative lack of arms training is genuine and well understood, but something must be done to avoid repetition of a Laokhowa here. Silence is not the answer.

The army or para-military forces must be posted in the deserted and vulnerable camps without delay. They should protect the core area – since the buffer zone is almost gone – from the poachers and wood cutters till normalcy returns. There are innumerable instances when the services of such forces have been enlisted in Dachigam National Park and Ladakh area of Jammu & Kashmir, Chitwan National Park of Nepal, nature preserves of China and many more. In Dachigam the army assistance has successfully saved the hangul (a rare deer) and its habitat while in Ladakh even birds like the Black-necked Crane are benefited. Army involvement in anti-poaching measures was so successful in the Chitwan National Park of Nepal that during the last decade poaching of the rhino has come down to virtually zero level.

The Forest department (wildlife) should take the initiative. Since it has failed completely to face the circumstances, it should not hesitate in such a move. It is not the question of credit or discredit of any organisation, but the survival of a site of international heritage. Considering their present morale, even providing more staff with better arms would not work at least in the present condition. I am sure, neither the army nor the BSF authorities will turn down such a proposal from the point of view of national interest.

Recently the government is seriously considering turning the Forest Villages into revenue villages in the buffer zone area (Kokrajhar district). While doing so the government must relocate those Forest Villages which are deep inside the forest to the edge or outside the RFs. Because Forest Villages, especially those located in the heart of the forests have become the most important threat to the forest cover as a whole. No more Forest or even Taungiya villages should be created in future if one really thinks of the ecological balance and the survival of existing forest cover.

### ***The Laokhowa case***

The seventy square kilometres Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary is a classic example where taking the full advantage of unrest, poachers have completely eliminated the rhino and bulk of

the deer. Between 1981 and 1983 more than 50 rhinos have been killed (official), with 40 in 1983 alone, while unofficial sources believe that the figure was much higher at 60+. However, both the sources are unanimous in one point – the complete extermination of the species from Laokhowa.

After visiting Laokhowa, I found that the government and more specifically, the Forest Department could have averted the massacre. There was just no initiative and everybody wanted to keep quiet fearing discredit for failure if the news were to be flashed at that time.

To set back in original shape, Laokhowa may require 50 or even more years provided there is enough security. The good work of about seven and half decades (Laokhowa was declared a RF / Game Reserve way back in 1907, one of the oldest in India) has been ruined in just one year (1983).

But Laokhowa is of much less significance to Manas in the total number of species of endangered wildlife. Assam's second largest rhino population, about 100 is also in Manas. Must we wait for another Laokhowa ?

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### ***Highlights***

Loss of life and property has not been the only effect of the Bodo agitation. It has left many sections, including the ecology of the region, hard hit. This week, the animals send out a Mayday call on the Sunday cover in **SOS Manas !** by Anwaruddin Choudhury.

Page two brings a tribute to Charlie Chaplin by Paul Malamud – Remembering the Tramps, while M.V. Kamath asks in his column **Ary we heading for a way?**

Page three brings a detailed horoscope for Taureans along with Globetrotting and the funny side of Elaine Palge by Leonard R Sussman, we also carry Comics and starcast.