SAMSUL HUDA PATGIRI

# THE BRAHMAPUTRA

## A LIVING RIVER

**By Mrinmoyee Sarmah**

In the winter of 2024-25, my colleagues and I walked 250 km. along both banks of the *Brahmaputra*. We wanted to understand how people and wildlife share this river – where coexistence works, and where it doesn't. Our focus was the stretch that links four Protected Areas: Pani Dihing in the east, Kaziranga and Laokhowa-Burhachapori along the southern bank, and Orang in the north. The river connects them all – its grasslands, oxbow lakes, and shifting *chaporis* (river islands) forming a living corridor for elephants, rhinos, tigers, and more.

### Listening to the River and its People

We spoke with people who live on the river's edge – on its banks and its islands. We asked: when do animals become a threat? How do these encounters shape daily life? And how do people make sense of these interactions?

*The Brahmaputra is a great river, where downstream wildlife still moves freely, largely free of dams. Here, human and wild lives remain intertwined.*

The *Brahmaputra*, is rare: a great river largely unbroken by dams, where wildlife from river dolphins to storks, buffaloes to fishing cats still moves freely. It's a landscape of intense encounters, where human and wild lives are tightly intertwined.

What stayed with me most were the stories – not just of conflict, but of endurance. In those stories of loss, I found something deeper: a quiet, fierce commitment to surviving alongside the wild.

## How the Brahmaputra Connects Life

Over the years, Assam has seen something rare: large mammals making a comeback. Rhino numbers have grown five-fold since the 1960s. Between 2017 and 2024, the elephant population rose by over two per cent, and tiger numbers have tripled since 2006. Most of them are still concentrated in Protected Areas but they don't stay there. They move. And what allows them to move are the spaces in between: farmlands, tea estates, rivers, and riverine forests that are not protected on paper, but are vital on the ground.

The *Brahmaputra* is the artery that connects it all. Elephants, rhinos, and tigers have used its banks and islands for generations to cross over, forage and disperse. Elephants swim across it during monsoons to reach the grasslands of Majuli Island. Tigers use its islands to leapfrog west or east of Kaziranga and rhinos, especially males, follow its course to carve new territories.

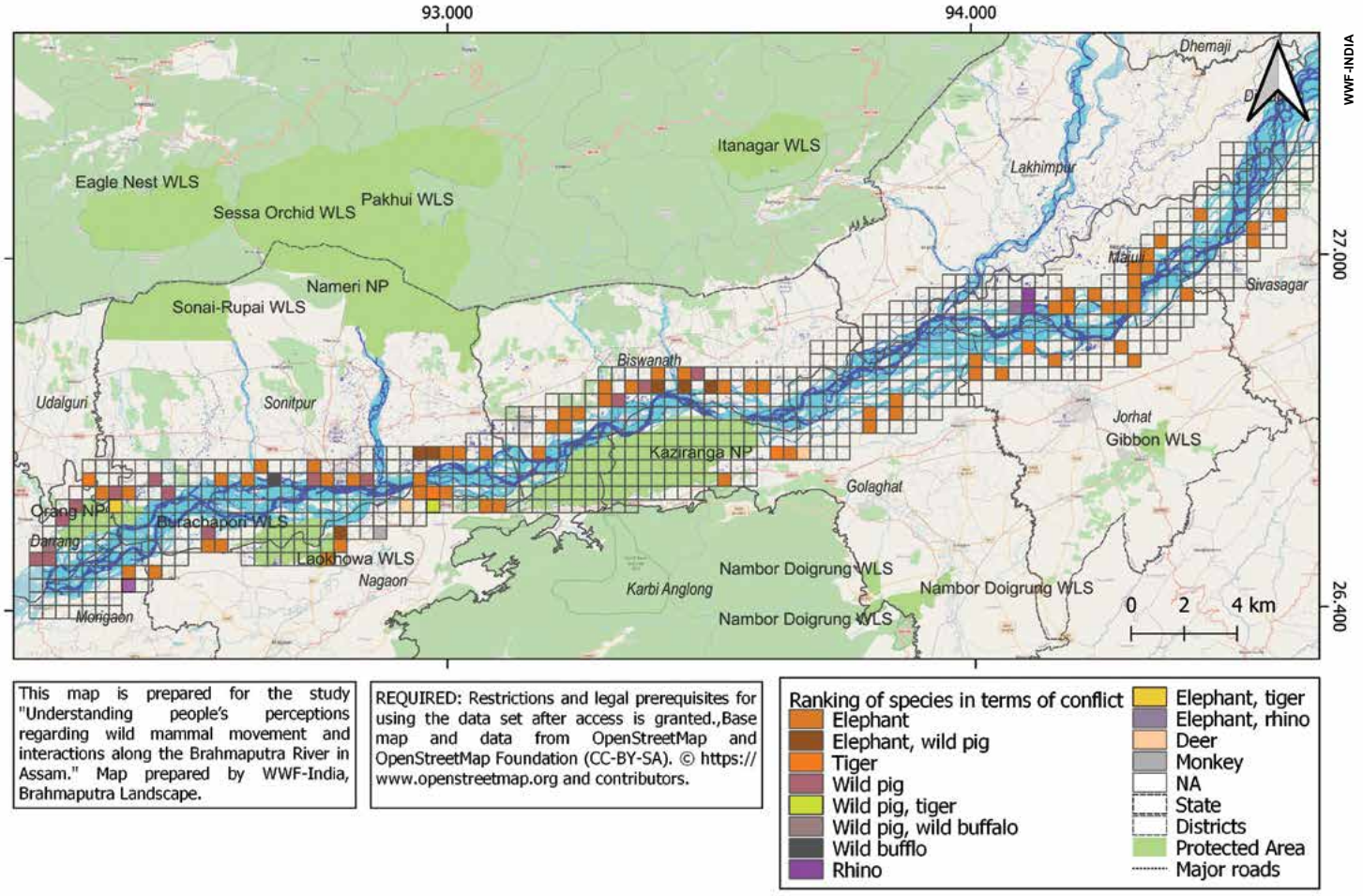
Standing on its banks and looking out at the massive expanse of water, the *Brahmaputra* feels more like an ocean than a river and tracking animal movement across this vastness is no easy task. But over time, footprints, dung, camera traps, and the occasional direct sighting have helped build a picture. Unsurprisingly, wildlife use of the river is highest near Protected Areas, but some individuals venture *far* beyond.

Satellite tracking reveals that elephants time their movements according to the seasons. After the monsoons, they emerge onto the *chaporis*, raiding paddy fields before retreating to the security of forests. Solitary tuskers, though, often stay year-round, moving between islands and farms with quiet familiarity.

As animals navigate this mosaic, so do people. Some now see more wildlife than ever before – what they often call "straying" – and not all encounters are peaceful. But speaking with local communities revealed a deeper story: one not just of conflict, but of resilience. People are learning to read the rhythm of the river and its wild visitors, adapting to a shared and shifting landscape.

## Rhythm of the Floodplain

Every monsoon, the floodplains, including the *chaporis* (low-lying, flood-prone riverine islands), are awash with rich alluvial deposits brought in during the monsoon. Some *chaporis* are washed off while others are created, making the riverscape an ever-shifting spectacle.




*Ranking of conflict species across the Brahmaputra landscape based on local perceptions of human–wildlife interactions.*

*The* Brahmaputra *is more than a river. True to its name,* Mahabahu – *"the mighty arm" – it sustains both people and wildlife. Communities here aren't just surviving, they're adapting. Their lives are a daily negotiation with floods and animals alike.*

These deposits are highly fertile, encouraging the growth of grass and the natural succession toward woodlands on undisturbed islands. Some *chaporis*, such as the one created by the Forest Man of India, Jadav Payeng, near Majuli are now effectively rewilded and offer refuge for elephants, rhinos and even the occasional tiger. Communities that inhabit the islands have traditionally been dependent on fishing, livestock rearing, and farming as their main sources of livelihood.

Speaking to the villagers – from elders to youth, men and women alike – I encountered a wide range of emotions, from frustration and fear, to anger and resentment. Yet, most of them indicated a sense of acceptance – tolerance even – towards the wild animals.

Through structured interviews, I was able to understand people's perceptions, enabling me to map the spatio-temporal patterns of human-wildlife conflict along the river. I discovered that the people were not only able to understand the movement pattern of these large mammals, but also correlate it with the hardships they faced. Of the various types of losses incurred, the people ranked crop damage as the topmost priority, property damage as second, and livestock damage as third, all of which need to be addressed. Crop damage was mainly attributed to elephants and wild pigs, while livestock depredation to tigers and leopards. Property damage was mainly caused by elephants, and human injury or loss of life was attributed to both elephants and tigers.

Crop damage was a particularly magnified issue, caused not only by elephants but also macaques, deer, wild pigs, wild buffaloes, rhinos and others. It was the most widespread of issues along the length of the *Brahmaputra* river. Similarly, property damage was recorded wherever elephants are known to roam; conflict peaked during the harvest season, between October and December. In some places, such as around Kaziranga, emotions ran high on account of increased negative interactions with

In Assamese, the *Brahmaputra* river is also known as *Mahabahu* (mighty arm), for it stretches across the land like a protective arm, a force of nature that gives and takes, nurtures and destroys. More than just a river, it is a means of survival for the people and wildlife, nurturing a culture that has grown from its waters. The name *Brahmaputra* means 'the son of Brahma', and beyond its mythological origin, its ecological significance is deeply intertwined with its cultural importance.

BIDYUT KALITA/SANCTUARY PHOTOLIBRARY

*An elephant herd (above) moves through a farmland as onlookers watch. In parts of the Brahmaputra landscape, rising encounters with elephants and tigers are stirring deep and increasingly polarised emotions.*

tigers and elephants. However, most people attributed these conflicts not only to growing wild populations but also their basic instincts – food (primarily crops and livestock) was considered the most prevalent reason for animal movement, closely followed by the need for shelter and space to give birth, as well as straying from nearby Protected Areas.

## Faith, Loss, and Living Together

An elderly gentleman told me, *"We live on their land. They don't come to harm [us]. They come to eat, like we do."* According to them, there is little in their natural habitats to eat, which draws them towards villages. Another elderly lady said, "When the elephant comes, we don't light fires. We don't throw stones. We hide. Because *Baba* has come." I came across several places where elephants are regarded as *Baba*, an endearing title for a god, while tigers are seen as the vehicle of Goddess Durga. These beliefs create a cultural barrier against retaliation. In areas where such beliefs were strong, I noticed a certain tolerance in the way people spoke about wildlife. This doesn't mean the pain was any less. It showed me that faith and nature are intertwined. In some communities, people had set rules for themselves, such as avoiding going outdoors at night, as a way to coexist.

The *chaporis* present a unique example. Many are fragile. They flood easily, erode quickly, and during monsoons sometimes vanish overnight. People have been relying on them for generations. When I asked an old gentleman why he would risk grazing cattle where wild carnivores prowl, he replied, "We don't see them as a threat. They are wild, but they don't harm unless we disturb them."

The resilience of these communities stood out. They live with the river's bounty and its wrath. In some villages, people pointed to where their homes once stood, now claimed by the current. Elsewhere, houses perched on bamboo stilts face the full brunt of the monsoon. Elephants or rhinos sometimes trample their homes or bamboo cattle sheds. Life here is a constant negotiation with the river and the wildlife.

Such evolved attitudes are conspicuously absent in much of the Global North; communities living in Europe, the U.K. and the USA often respond with lethal aggression towards wild animals that raid crops, or lift domestic animals.

*When I asked how conflict could be reduced, most said: protect both people and wildlife. But the strongest message was this: include communities, support livelihoods, restore habitats, and raise awareness.*

## Reimagining Ancient Elephant Strongholds

In the vast fertile plains stretching from Teok to Disangmukh along the southern bank of the *Brahmaputra*, vast wetlands are interspersed with flooded areas and seasonal farmlands, where elephants and occasionally rhinos and tigers have been observed by people. According to the people living in these parts, encounters with elephants have a historic connection. These lands have been natural elephant habitats since the time of the *Ahom* rule, and over generations, the locals have learned to live in harmony with wildlife, despite the damages and challenges it brings.

Between Jorhat and Sivasagar lies a region historically identified as a stronghold of elephants. During the *Ahom* rule, this stretch was famous as a resting and domestication zone for elephants, referred to as *Hatishal*. Elephants played a crucial role in the *Ahom* kingdom, not only in war and transportation but also as powerful symbols of royalty and prestige. Even today, wild elephants find these places suitable and tend to remain in the area, moving in search of food. According to locals, there were historically well-known elephant migration routes passing through this region. Many believe that elephants still attempt to follow these ancient paths, but land-use changes brought about by development have made these routes increasingly difficult to navigate, contributing to negative interactions.

## Fragile Islands, Fierce Resilience

I've lost count of how many times I stood on the banks of the *Brahmaputra* – northern and southern banks – watching the river shift and swell. After a few weeks, it became a constant. I assumed people's answers to my questions would be, too. But like the river's curves and its uniquely shaped islands, their responses surprised me. Yes, elephants came up often but so did wild pigs, deer, even macaques. It became clear: conflict can't be generalised.

The *Brahmaputra* is more than a river. True to its name, *Mahabahu* – "the mighty arm" – it sustains both people and wildlife. Communities here aren't just surviving, they're adapting. Their lives are a daily negotiation with floods and animals alike. But this fragile coexistence is fraying. Retaliatory killings by poison, electric fences, or protest aren't rare when crops are destroyed and lives lost.

When I asked how conflict could be reduced, most said: protect both people and wildlife. But the strongest message was this: include communities, support livelihoods, restore habitats, and raise awareness.

The *Brahmaputra* taught me that conservation isn't just about protecting land. It's about relationships between people and the wild, survival and belief, a river and its living corridors. In the end, it's about listening to those who know the river and its creatures as deeply as they know their own lives.

The *Ahom* dynasty ruled Assam for nearly 600 years, beginning in 1228 when Sukaphaa, a Tai leader, crossed into the *Brahmaputra* Valley and established his kingdom. Over time, the *Ahoms* built a strong, well-organised state that managed to resist multiple Mughal invasions and unify much of Assam under one rule. They developed an efficient system of governance, encouraged agriculture, and contributed significantly to Assamese language, culture, and identity. Their long reign left behind a lasting legacy in the form of architecture, literature, and a cohesive social structure.