

On the cover

The leopard, a species whose future depends on those who carry the green baton.
Photographer: Vivek Sinha

Call of the wild
Sanctuary
A S I A

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Cover Story

16 Passing the Green Baton: Yesterday's heroes... tomorrow's hope

The pioneers who fought to save India's wildlife laid the foundation for modern-day conservationists. On the eve of a new millennium *Sanctuary* sifts through some leaves from the past, to provide those in whose hands India's green future lies a brief glimpse of the history they have inherited from stalwarts of a bygone age.



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32 Manas: Restoring Paradise

Years of social and political neglect, a violent movement for autonomy and the poaching trade have robbed the Manas Tiger Reserve of much of its wildlife. This has endangered animals such as the rhino, pygmy hog and hispid hare. S.P. Singh writes of the beauty of Manas, as well as its problems. He confirms that the first steps on the long road to recovery have been taken in this exquisite World Heritage Site in danger...



44 Travel: The Pin Valley National Park

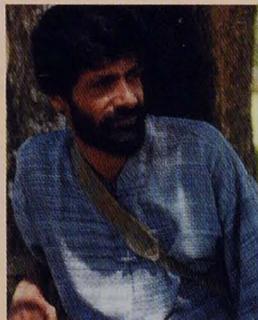
Few people are lucky enough to make it to such distant destinations as the remote and beautiful Pin Valley National Park high in the Himalaya. Yoginder Sikand was, and for the benefit of *Sanctuary* readers he writes here with admiration of this austere land, its peace-loving people and its exquisite wildlife. Apart from marmots and ibex, the author interacted with *Gaddi* shepherds from Kullu and residents of Buddhist monasteries and *dogharis* of the Pin Valley.

Contributors



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Manas:

Restoring Paradise

by S.P. Singh



Walking through the rain-drenched alluvial and highland savannah grasslands, I admired nature's ability to renew itself. The rains had turned everything green. Every blade of grass was alive with insect life. It was late in the evening and swifts flew overhead, hawking insects from the air in the company of tiny pipistrelles. I was in wild buffalo, elephant and tiger country and it humbled me to think of the many people who have given their lives to protect this forest. I was determined not to let their sacrifice be wasted.

Manas. The name itself has a lilt to it. Over the past year I have monitored this forest closely and can confirm that most plant and animal species are on the recovery trail. But not, sadly, the rhino. Poachers took advantage of the unrest and violence that resulted from Assam's long-standing Bodo agitation to kill almost all our rhinos. It will take years for these ancient mammals to return to Manas.

Walking through the forest I could hardly believe that Deb Roy *sahab*, the person who brought Manas to the status of a World Heritage Site, was no more (*Sanctuary* Vol. XIX No. 5, October, 1999). His death has left a pall of gloom over the staff and officers of Manas. As the Field Director of Manas today, my task of looking after this wild and wonderful forest has been challenging.

The Bodo agitation

Just one year after it was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1985, Manas began to suffer the tragic consequences of armed insurgency, poaching and the breakdown of morale among the forest staff. 20 years earlier, in 1967, a political organisation called the Plain Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) was formed to demand the formation of a separate Union Territory called 'Udayachal'. They believed that only geographical and administrative separation from Assam could help cure the problems of the Bodo community. Inside of a decade, the PTCA split and a splinter group called the Bodo Security Force (BSF) was born. Militant from the very start, this organisation changed the very course of history for Manas. In 1986, the entire area reverberated with demands for tribal autonomy. Various Bodo organisations came together under the banner of the Bodo People's Action Committee (BPCA) and many more insurgent organisations such as the National Democratic Front of Bodos (NDFB) and the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) sprang up. The movement became steadily more violent.

“To start the long road back to repair we must tackle the law and order situation and deal with the delicate socio-political turmoil in the region. The Forest Department cannot handle this problem in isolation.”

These were dark days for Manas. The forests adjoining the core area were among the first to be affected as extremists took shelter in inaccessible belts. They clashed with the forest department staff posted at various camps and beats. These were unequal battles. The forest staff were not trained for guerrilla wars, nor could they use the kinds of automatic weapons, mines and explosives that were being used against them. Many forest officers and staff were killed or injured. Others were forced to abandon their posts.

No rhinos in Eden

Miraculously, the core area remained unaffected till 1988, perhaps because the wildlife staff were armed and had a reputation for being ruthless enough to return fire for fire. But in February 1989, the core area too was overwhelmed. First, an interior and isolated anti-poaching camp called Lafasari was attacked. This was followed by a series of brutal raids on other camps in the core area.

There was no question of ethno-political unrest being handled by the Forest Department on its own. But no one else was able to solve the problem either. The resultant



BITTU SAHGAL

Orchids: only one among the hundreds of plant species recorded in Manas.

violence threw all wildlife management plans and anti-poaching activities out of gear. The sustained attacks left our staff in disarray. Our infrastructure was broken down, arms and ammunition looted, buildings and bridges burned and culverts destroyed. In the process, many of our staff were murdered, as they were soft targets. We had to evacuate them to save their lives. This left a wide breach in the defence of Manas and poachers who had been kept at bay for decades stepped in.

Rhinos follow set behaviour patterns. They walk familiar routes and are large and easy to follow. Using pits with sharp wooden stakes, guns and even explosives the poachers began to pick off rhinos for the value of their horns... delighted that the blame for rhino poaching was being laid on the Bodo militants. By some estimates more than 60 rhinos were lost to these criminals. Their horns fetched high prices on the international market, easily accessed through the porous international border with Bhutan. This virtually wiped out rhinos from Assam and it will take extraordinary effort, money and will to nurse the species back.

A peaceful people

It is important at this stage to say something about the Bodo people. These simple and innately peace-loving people have lived on the fringes of the Manas National Park for long years, and have coexisted with wild animals very well. Their dependence on forest resources for sustenance taught them much about jungle craft and they never over-exploited the forest. Even Bodo children know their forest well and are able to obtain both food and medicine from wild plants.

Wild buffalo depend on the health of riverine grasslands. Progenitors of the domestic water buffalo, they are threatened by genetic swamping from livestock.



THAKUR DALIP SINGH

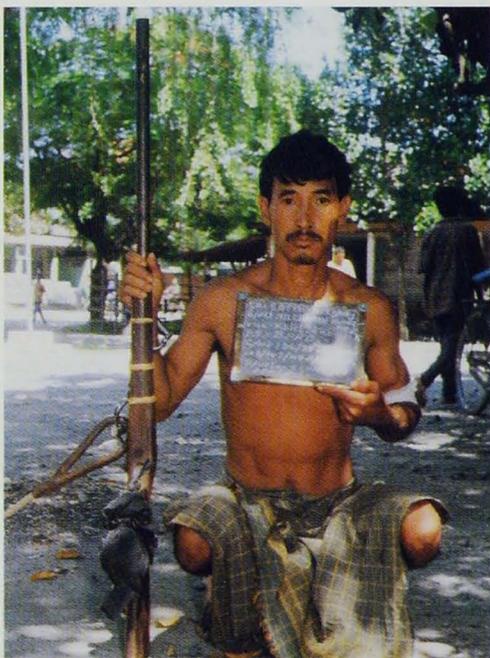
“I can hardly believe that Deb Roy saheb is no more. He brought Manas to the status of a World Heritage Site. His death has left a pall of gloom over Manas.”

I have studied the Bodos and know their culture to be entwined with that of the forest. In fact many of their traditions have great significance in nature conservation.

The Bodo community, for instance, comprises several totemic clans such as the *Mushahari* or tiger clan, which actually claims its descent from the tiger. According to custom if a clan member witnessed the death of a tiger he was required to observe a period of ritual mourning for a full week, just as he would on the death of a parent. Killing a tiger, or consuming its meat, was unthinkable. Bodo clans such as the *Narzari*, *Basumatary*, *Swargiary* and *Doimary* have different totems that they respect and defend. Put simply, the Bodos are children of nature. But sadly much of their tradition has been eroded because of a combination of the influence of urban lifestyles, socio-political turmoil and overwhelming poverty.

Simple and peace-loving they may be, but the Bodos are also strong-willed and independent. The struggle to retain their distinct identity and culture dates back to British times when an organisation called the Tribal League was formed in 1930. The League demanded separate tribal belts and

A poacher is apprehended in Manas.



MANAS TIGER RESERVE

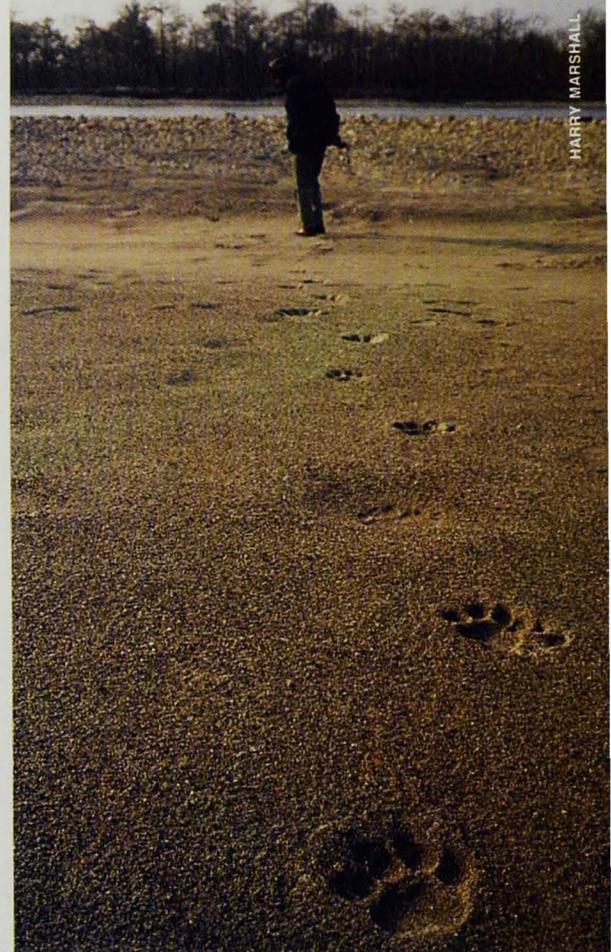
blocks and insisted on rights and privileges to protect their interests. This, however, did not improve their condition and the Bodos have consequently felt unfairly treated for generations.

Restoring paradise

Poachers who operate for profit are relatively easy to handle. But if the community that fringes Manas is not won over, protecting this heritage will be well nigh impossible. We need these people to isolate those who would profit from poaching, timber smuggling and other wildlife crimes. We also need the support of the community to win their cooperation so that encroachments are stopped. While Manas is justifiably praised as a World Heritage Site, it has not enjoyed the corresponding benefits of financial, political and administrative support.

To start the long road back to repair we will have to tackle the law and order situation and deal with the delicate socio-political turmoil in the region. It would be a gross error to ask the Forest Department to handle this problem in isolation. To my mind we now have two overwhelming priorities: First, we must deploy a well-armed force capable of tackling extremists inside Manas and second, we must seek the cooperation of communities on the fringes and mobilise them to protect Manas.

We have deployed armed forces in Manas in the past, but not by far in sufficient strength. Moreover, time and again the Government redeployed these forces elsewhere in response to other crises and this emboldened both militants and poachers who would wait their chance to launch fresh attacks and to raid our armouries. No one really supported Manas. Ironically, the response to the looting of arms and ammunition from various camps was to withdraw such self-defence weapons from forest staff! As I write today, unarmed forest staff is manning as many as 23 camps. Our only recourse in an emergency is to call upon the armed forest staff and the Assam Forest Protection Force based at the Bansbari Range Office and at the headquarters at Barpeta



Deb Roy inspecting tiger pug marks in Manas.

Road, miles away. This is hardly effective as the miscreants make good their escape long before relief arrives.

The option of seeking people's cooperation is inevitable if a lasting peace is to return to Manas. As of now, widespread ignorance of the purpose of wildlife protection and a feeling of alienation and hostility towards the park authorities exists among locals. This harms conservation goals. We are trying our best to remedy this situation, but need the help of sociologists, anthropologists and others that the Bodos may trust. I must admit, of course, that no serious attempt to involve fringe people in the management of Tiger Reserves has been made in the past. But in more recent times we have made a beginning. In 1996 and 1997, for instance, workshops were organised with the active participation of political, executive and forest officials. NGOs and local representatives of communities also attended, but the mechanisms to translate decisions into field action were not in place. I can only hope that people in positions of power and influence on all sides of the Bodo issue will see the wisdom in helping to galvanise a return to sanity. The Bodos, whose ancient heritage is at risk, will be the first beneficiaries. Just as the tiger is the symbol of the health of the forest, I believe it is the symbol of the health of the Bodo culture. There is a commonality



The hispid hare or Assam rabbit, one of nineteen endangered animals protected in Manas.

here that can be built upon and this can be supplemented by the wise sharing of forest resources - water, grass, fuelwood, fruit, food, medicinal plants and construction materials. The core of the Manas Tiger Reserve is rich in such flora that spills into the outer fringes, where villagers can safely harvest it.

A return to sanity

While such plans unfold, the reality is that every time a guard steps into the forest in Manas his life is at risk. The law and order situation is fluid, making it difficult even for officers to freely mingle with locals whose help we so desperately seek. Then there is that all-pervading problem - funds. In recent years we have had difficulty even in undertaking routine maintenance work, leave alone the repair of roads, bridges and guard huts. In such circumstances I feel frustrated with my inability to go to people and offer them tangible benefits from the Forest Department, which I keep saying seeks to assist them.

Other limitations include the lack of updated documentation or even the training of staff in dealing with the multifarious problems they confront. Despite this we are plugging on. We have engaged villagers in discussions about the future of Manas. We see ourselves as facilitators, not rulers. And

people have begun to respond favourably, particularly when they see that we are genuinely interested in solving their problem, even if we do not have a magic wand with which to achieve this purpose.

When a Stakeholder's Workshop was held in September 1998, more than 150 persons participated, including villagers, forest staff, NGOs, teachers and students. Within our limited resources we hold medical camps for villagers and veterinary camps for livestock. We distribute solar cookers, medicines and solar light panels to villages. Students are encouraged to start protection groups and eco-clubs. The *Manas Bandhu Group* (Friends of Manas), comprising villagers and students around the periphery of the reserve, actively helps us maintain a dialogue with villagers.

Some young volunteers who see Manas as a precious heritage go further and assist us in defending animals from poachers, who have recently taken to killing deer to supply the meat to nearby markets. We are also doing our best to improve the availability of water for locals and are even constructing Community Centres for their use. Adequate or not, these are the first steps towards winning support for Manas from the people who matter most - the Bodos.

Peoples' support

In October 1998 I received one of several calls that I handle weekly from a local school asking help to hold an awareness camp and meetings in the fringe areas of Manas. Such calls renew my faith and fuel my purpose.

Some protected area managers treat these

requests as an extra burden that slows down their task of protecting trees, tigers, elephants or rhinos. In the case of Manas I can safely say these activities constitute the most dramatic strategy for the recovery of Manas. Not merely because the children we interact with will grow up appreciating their heritage, but because militant groups and poachers who see such events unfold get a simple message: The Bodo people support the protection of Manas and its endangered wildlife.

