

LESSONS *from* MANAS?

— by Pankaj Sekhsaria —

For years, the Manas National Park and Tiger Reserve in Assam has been one wildlife area in the country that was in the news for all the wrong reasons – militancy, destruction of Forest Department infrastructure, attacks on wildlife staff and poaching to the extent that the rhino was virtually wiped out from the Park. A far cry from the time when Manas was considered one of the finest and richest wildlife areas in India

What happened and is happening in Manas is as good an example as any that Protected Area management and wildlife protection is but a subset of the overall political-social context in which it is located. For about a decade now, I have been editing the bi-monthly newsletter the *Protected Area Update* that carries news and information on wildlife sanctuaries and national parks from around the country. Scanning the back issues of the *Update* gives one a good sense, if not a comprehensive picture, of the trajectory of developments here. The trend is clear. For at least the last couple of years, news from Manas has been more of the positive kind. It cannot be a mere coincidence then that this is about the same time that the Bodoland Territorial Autonomous District (BTAD) was formed with special political and administrative concessions under the 6th Schedule of the Constitution of the country.

This is, obviously, not enough by itself. Other players have been involved too. A number of Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) came together to form the Manas Biosphere Conservation Forum in February 2003 and work towards better protection and management of the Park. Early 2005 saw the formation of the Manas Maozigendri Eco-tourism Society (see page 42, Birding in Eastern Manas) as part of a promising community-based tourism project involving residents of the area, the local unit of the All Bodo Students Union and outside expertise in the field of tourism.

The State Government and Forest Department, meanwhile, have been working towards better protection and improving infrastructure like roads and forest camps, along with special efforts at attracting more visitors and tourists. The state and Forest Department apparatus and infrastructure were badly hit and rebuilding will not be easy or quick, but clearly the will is there. The department has also continued to support and interact with a range of NGOs who are working here, and importantly, an effort is also on to make local communities a part of the process.

The newly formed BTAD too has taken special interest in matters related to the forests and wildlife of Manas, and in restoring its past glory. In June of last year, BTAD authorities, in fact, commissioned a group of wildlife experts to put together a



Manas still supports a fairly large population of gaur. These bovines have managed to do well as they could escape the vulnerable grasslands and make for the hills. They are relatively secure in the northern parts of Manas, where less wildlife blood was spilled. Things are certainly moving in the right direction in this gem of wilderness located on the banks of the river Manas.

document to explore the 'Prospects of Wildlife Areas in BTAD'. Not surprisingly, Manas was to occupy centre stage in this plan, which also included the celebration of the Manas Centenary Festival. Pride in one's heritage can indeed be a very powerful conservation tool.

Perhaps, the most positive indication of the improved security situation and confidence came in the middle of 2005 when the Park authorities announced that they would work on a scheme for the reintroduction of the rhino in Manas.

Though it would be a little premature to say that the situation in Manas is normal, it cannot be denied that things are certainly moving in the right direction – a new dawn may indeed be creeping over the horizon for this gem of a wilderness located on the banks of the Manas river.

There is another consideration here that begs attention, one that has implications for many other parts of our natural landscape, otherwise beset with varying problems of militancy and armed insurgencies. All problems cannot be treated merely as those



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of law and order; all solutions cannot be found in the gun and guard regime. The hope in Manas comes from a long ranging, complicated, ongoing political process that involves dialogue and negotiation with the people, taking into account their histories, aspirations and dreams about their own development and future. This really is the path that will offer us solutions that are both meaningful and long lasting... and this perhaps, just perhaps, is the main lesson to be learned from Manas' new dawn. 🐘