

Kaziranga Under Threat

Biodiversity Loss and Encroachment of Forest Land

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Several highly polluting industries—stone quarries, oil refinery, parasitic rubber plantations—as well as encroachment from locals, are adversely affecting the biodiversity of the Kaziranga National Park in Assam. This article looks at how decisions taken in the past to establish regionalist claims over resources and industry have proved detrimental to the conservation efforts of Kaziranga.

Introduction

The Kaziranga National Park (KNP) is a world renowned protected area in Assam nestled on the banks of the river Brahmaputra in the foothills of the Karbi Anglong (KA) Hills. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site and famous as one of the few remaining places with a substantial population of the Asiatic one-horned rhinoceros. The park is spread over two districts—Golaghat and Nagaon—with majority of the area falling within the administrative boundaries of Golaghat. The forests surrounding KNP form a contiguous landmass spreading across the neighbouring KA district and offer prime habitat for wild animals in the Kaziranga-Karbi Anglong Landscape (KKAL).

In recent years, KNP is battling a host of problems such as rhino poaching, erosion and flood. As against this, forest areas outside the park's jurisdiction are getting increasingly exposed to onslaughts of unplanned and unmindful anthropogenic activities. There have been massive changes in land use in the KKAL, significantly altering the topography of the region and disrupting the well-being of animals and humans alike. Conversion of forest land for non-forest uses is threatening to disrupt the ecological balance of the area, as well as eroding the culture of human-animal coexistence existing therein.

I visited the area to collect data for my doctoral study on human-animal conflict (HAC) in the area. Close interaction with villagers, functionaries of conservation organisations and forest officials had enabled me to gain significant insights into the problem of habitat loss and degradation in the area leading to HAC. In the following paragraphs an attempt has been made to highlight some of the most pressing concerns of habitat degradation around KNP and the accompanying politico-ecological considerations.

Stone Quarrying in the Mikir Hills

The Mikir or Karbi Hills lie on the southern side of the KNP and a portion of the hills fall within the 15 km radius around Numaligarh Refinery declared as a “No Development Zone” by the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF) in 1996. Thus, prior permission needs to be taken by the quarry operators from the MoEF to conduct activities in this area.

Initially quarrying in Mikir Hills was small-scale and largely manual but around 2005 when the demand for stones increased for constructing the Bogibeel bridge over Brahmaputra, tenders were awarded to big companies which used blasting devices and heavy machinery to extract stones. After severe criticism and pressure from environmental groups and local residents blasting was banned. However, quarrying and operation of high decibel stone crushers continued.

In 2006, the Assam Forest Department invited fresh tenders to open a quarry in Mikirchang, located at an aerial distance of 9 km from the park ([Protected Area Update 2006](#)). This move was again contested by conservation groups and a written complaint was registered with the MoEF by the biodiversity conservation organisation, Aaranyak, on the matter.

Responding to the complaint, the ministry sent a letter to the Assam government questioning the latter’s actions and reiterating that no quarrying activity could be permitted at Mikirchang near KNP, as that area was a “No Development Zone” ([Staff Reporter 2006](#)). A Right to Information (RTI)[\[1\]](#) query filed with the director of KNP in February 2011 by Rohit Choudhury, a local resident of Bokakhat, revealed that there were 19 stone crushing units within a radius of 10 km of the KNP with licenses valid upto 31 December 2011. The reply also stated that seven of the units are located at the “Industrial Estate Area” in Garmur, Bokakhat.

Interestingly, response to the RTI filed by Choudhury which was also forwarded to the MoEF (Wildlife Division) divulged that they did not have any information regarding the stone crushing units and no clearances had been granted by the wildlife division for stone crushing units in the vicinity of KNP, Assam[\[2\]](#).

A consecutive RTI application filed by the same applicant in May 2011 brought out major discrepancies in the Assam government’s notification of Garmur, Bokakhat as an “Industrial Estate Area”. The government’s notification No FRM150/96/Vol1/Pt V/450 dated—May 1995 issued by the Forest Department stated that the minor industrial estates may accommodate only saw mills which did not use as raw material timber brought in from outside the state of Assam and there was no mention of stone crushing units[\[3\]](#). Also, contrary to the information provided by the Department of Forests about the presence of an “Industrial Estate Area” in Garmur, Bokakhat, the General Manager, District Industries & Commerce Centre, Golaghat (to whom the RTI was forwarded) categorically replied that the centre, “has no Industrial Estate/Area in Garmur Bokakhat.”[\[4\]](#)

Acting on the responses, Choudhury filed a petition in the National Green Tribunal (NGT) on 17 December 2011 citing the gross flouting of environmental rules around KNP. Following this petition, the NGT passed an interim order on 15 February 2012 directing the government not to renew or issue fresh permits to stone crushers or stone quarrying units in the area. Although, officially the government denied renewing or issuing any new permits after 31 December 2011, but quarrying operations are still being carried out clandestinely (Staff Reporter 2015). The quarrying in the Mikir Hills is a very lucrative industry facilitated by a nexus of businessmen, politicians, forest officials and even insurgents.

Encroachment

In 2012, the then Union Minister for Environment and Forest, Jairam Ramesh in a [written reply to a question in Lok Sabha](#) stated that all five national parks of Assam have encroachments and KNP (in additional areas) had the highest area (7790 hectares) under encroachment ([Ministry of Environment and Forests 2010](#)). The KNP was declared a national park in 1974 with an original area of 430 sq km. Since 1985, the Government of Assam had notified six proposed “addition” to KNP in order to secure corridors for migration of wild animals, and escape routes in case of high flooding and for extending the park by inclusion of the *chapories* (sand banks) of Brahmaputra to compensate for loss of park area due to erosion. However out of the six area additions only in the first, fourth and sixth addition, the land settlement procedure has been completed with final settlement in the other addition areas still pending due to court cases relating to land dispute.

The forest department claimed that there was no encroachment in the core area and the settled additions of the Park but acknowledges the presence of unauthorised settlers of suspected origin in the addition areas where dispute is still on. The encroachment by alleged illegal Bangladeshi immigrants has remained a bone of contention between anti-immigrant groups and the government. These groups allege that the ruling Congress party patronises the encroachers and thus, no action is taken to evict them from park land. In a recent development, the Gauhati High Court constituted a high-powered committee to verify the allegation that the Assam government is trying to settle illegal Bangladeshi migrants in the national park ([Times News Network 2014](#)).

Numaligarh Refinery

The Numaligarh Refinery Limited (NRL) is located in the eponymous town of Numaligarh falling under the Bokakhat sub-division of Golaghat district. The refinery had been set up in the region following the commitment made by Government of India in the historic “Assam Accord” [5], signed in 1985 and was conceived as a medium for rapid economic development of the region. The KNP is not more than 20 km from the refinery and the Garampani reserve is also merely 25 km away from it. The refinery got an environmental clearance from the MoEF in 1991 and commercial operations commenced from October, 2000.

When the refinery was proposed by the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas at

Numaligarh, a site visit was conducted by the MoEF under the guidance of the Indian Oil Corporation Limited. Although the proposed site was in close proximity to the KNP, the site visit report downplayed this factor and gave the green signal. The matter was taken up by an environmental group called the Bombay Environmental Action Group (BEAG) who insisted that the government should prohibit the setting up of the Refinery in such an ecologically sensitive zone under the Environment (Protection) Rules, 1986. However, by then the proposal had reached the Prime Ministerial level and thus when the BEAG wrote a note of dissent to the then Union Minister of Environment and Forests, Maneka Gandhi, she cited the advanced stage of the proposal not to reverse the order. She, however, acknowledged that the refinery should not have been set up in the proposed site because of its ecological sensitivity. Consequently, the MoEF declared a 15 km area around the Numaligarh Refinery (except the northwest area where the zone extends till the eastern boundary of the KNP) as a "No Development Zone" and placed restrictions on the expansion of the industrial area, townships, infrastructure facilities and such other activities which could lead to pollution and congestion (Kapoor et al 2009). The MoEF's correctional measure is of little solace as the harm has already been done.

Bamboo Harvesting and Illegal Timber Trade

Bamboo is a viable environment friendly option to wood pulp in commercial paper making, because of its quick renewability and the other ecological functions it performs. Within Assam, the KA district is the largest producer of bamboo and almost 40 % of bamboo at the Hindustan Paper Corporation Limited mill in Jagiroad is supplied by this district. The supply of bamboo to the mill is done by private contracts after successfully bidding for the process. These agencies do not distinguish between matured and tender bamboos and engage in indiscriminate felling leading to a disruption in the natural regeneration process and the ecological balance of the forests in the district.

Lately illegal felling in Karbi-Anglong has risen to alarming levels. Illegal saw mills have also mushroomed to process the logs and these are running openly without being apprehended by the administration. The proliferation of militancy in KA has boosted the illegal trade in timber because some of the militant groups are known to raise funds by engaging in illegal timber trade. Their violent and gun-wielding ways also deter the forest department staff from apprehending them or stopping them in their activities.

Plantations

Tea is a major cash crop of Assam and the state alone accounts for more than half of the area under tea cultivation in India and also produces more than 50 % of the total tea production of the country. While the tea industry has definitely contributed to the economic development of Assam, it has also had detrimental effects on the environment.

If we looked at the recent acreage statistics^[6], we would realise that the process of conversion of agricultural and forest land for tea cultivation has gained steam in the last few

years. The huge subsidies offered by the Tea Board for setting up tea plantations has led to the mushrooming of small tea gardens by small scale farmers in many parts of Assam. In Golaghat paddy fields and unclassed forest areas, both in the foothills of KA and as well as near North Nambor Wildlife Sanctuary, were being gradually converted to tea gardens.

Apart from tea, rubber plantation is being vigorously promoted in Assam by the government. The National Rubber Board is now planning to make Assam one of the leading states in rubber production and is offering subsidies and cash incentives to farmers in Assam to plant and/or replant rubber. At a time when commercial plantations are being discouraged by experts in ecologically sensitive areas, the promotion of rubber plantation in Assam comes as a shocker ([Press Trust of India 2012](#)). The monoculture rubber plantations have been proved to have negative environmental consequences like biodiversity loss, climate change and ground water depletion (Sturgeon 2011; Majumder et al 2014). The promotion of rubber plantation in biodiversity rich areas such as KA can do irreparable harm to the flora and fauna of the region.

Jhum Cultivation

Jhum or shifting cultivation in Assam is practised in two districts: KA and NC Hills. In KA, like in other parts of the country, there has been a rise in population^[7], coupled with scarcity of land which has resulted in shorter jhum cycles. The shorter jhum cycles limits the natural regeneration of plants which can check the negative impacts like soil erosion and depletion of biodiversity. As productivity is dropping due to shorter cycle, newer areas are being brought under cultivation leading to further loss of forest cover.

Conclusion

There are competing claims and values of natural resource use throughout the KKAL which accounts for a unique political ecological landscape of the area. Each of the causes of habitat loss and conflict enlisted herein are embedded deep in the sociopolitical affairs of the region which need detailed explanation and exploration for holistic understanding of the problem. For instance, the NRL was proposed under the Assam Accord and thus carried sentimental value for the indigenous Assamese people. The overriding regionalist sentiments inhibited people from raising concerns about setting up the refinery in an ecologically sensitive area. It is only now that people are realising the ill effects of the decision but then again such understanding is still highly localised. Similarly, the issue of eviction around KNP is fraught with concerns of indigeneity and traditional rights, ethnic as well as religious tension and vote bank politics.

Notes

[1] Reply of SPIO, Kaziranga National Park dated 28 March 2011 to RTI Application dated 21 February 2011 filed by applicant Rohit Choudhury

[2] Reply of Deputy Inspector General (WL), Ministry of Environment and Forests dated 31 March 2011 to RTI Application dated 21 May 2011 filed by applicant Rohit Choudhury

[3] Reply of the SPIO, o/o the Director, Kaziranga National Park dated 14 June 2011 to RTI Application dated 21 May 2011 filed by applicant Rohit Choudhury

[4] Reply of General Manager, District Industries & Commerce Centre, Golaghat dated 2 February 2011 to RTI Application dated 21 May 2011 filed by applicant Rohit Choudhury

[5] The Assam Accord was signed between the Central Government and leaders of the Assam agitation in 1985 to bring an end to the popular movement against undocumented immigrants in Assam. Under this Accord, a package for the economic development of Assam, including a second oil refinery, a paper mill and an institute of technology, was pledged for the region.

[6] See India Tea Association's statistics for details

[7] According to census data of 2011, there has been an 18.69 % rise in Karbi Anglong's population since 2001.

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