

Interdisciplinary research is a demanding taskmaster Or, a mind-bending year in Bodoland

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Having spent close to two decades approaching biodiversity conservation from a largely ecological perspective, I made the decision to engage with interdisciplinary research and joined the Applied Biodiversity Science (ABS) program in 2009. After close to 3 years of intensive training in the social and biological sciences and taking courses in 5 affiliated departments, I was pronounced ready to embark on my first independent research journey. Since I had elected to examine the sociopolitical and ecological dynamics mediating the governance of one of India's premier tiger reserves, I found myself in the state of Assam in Northeast India beginning the summer of 2013.

The Manas Tiger and Biosphere Reserve (MTBR) is located in the northwestern corner of the state of Assam and covers an area of 2840 km². MTBR falls completely within what is informally known as Bodoland, a semi-autonomous political unit within the state of Assam formed in 2003. This was the result of a decades-long struggle for political autonomy by the Bodo community. Bodos are a so-called tribal group and are part of a "greater Tibeto-Burman linguistic and ethnic community" considered to be the earliest inhabitants of present-day Assam¹. Approximately 20% of MTBR comprises the Manas National Park (MNP) within which any and all forms of human-use are effectively deemed illegal. The rest of the MTBR is divided into a number of Reserved Forests (RFs) of varying sizes. Certain types of anthropogenic activities are permitted within RFs but only after a lengthy, complicated process that is virtually inaccessible to those most in need of such resources. I chose to focus exclusively on three of the largest RFs within the MTBR. Precisely, I chose these areas because they form what UNESCO's (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) Man and Biosphere Reserve Programme explicitly describes as zones

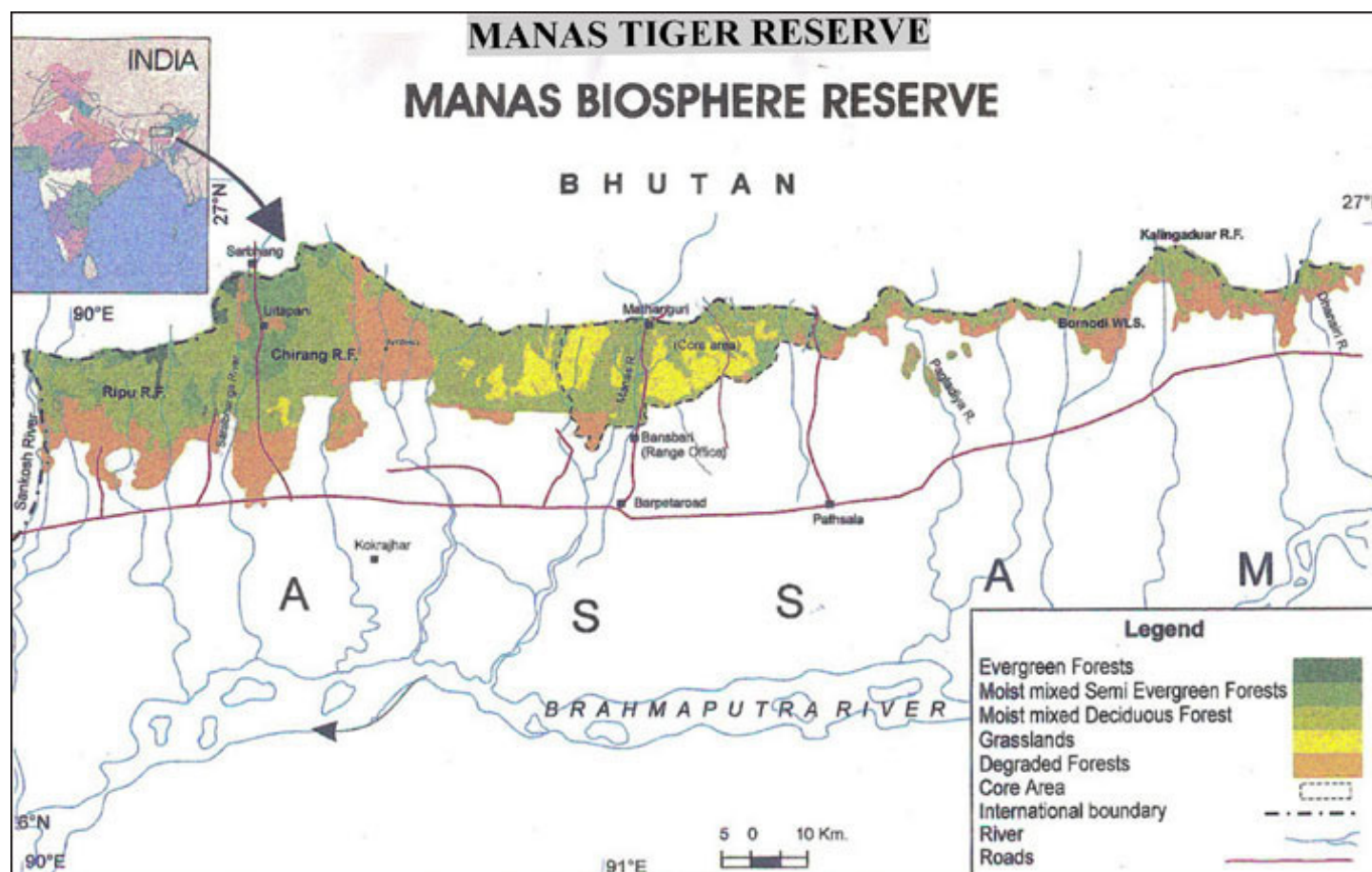
for the maintenance and development of “ecological and cultural diversity... securing ecosystem services for human well-being” for “management of complex social-ecological systems.”²²

The Outsider

Conducting ethnography (the systematic study of people and cultures) within a zone where the local people speak at least eight different languages became a challenge from the outset. Though a vast majority of people spoke either Hindi (India’s national language), which I am fluent in, or Assamese (Assam’s state language), which my research assistant was a native speaker of, it was still discomfiting to not be able to get responses in a person’s first language. Though training in qualitative research methods in the social sciences had prepared me to accept the reality of being an outsider, the day-to-day experience would occasionally be a challenge. The curious glances, the suspicious looks, the whispered

gossiping, and the wide-eyed stares would begin to grate during long days of spine-jarring off-road travel in the hot, humid weather. During such times I would find myself wistfully reminiscing of days as a wildlife biologist. In those days, interaction with human was not as intensive or extensive; research would consist of following a primate troop or sitting by a fig tree taking notes as a diversity of birds gorged on its fruit. My fellow human are much more complicated.

My ethnographic situation was further compounded by the fact that I was often perceived as a foreigner by Bodoland residents (although I was born and raised in India). For them to then hear me speak fluent Hindi would be a source of much bemusement and amusement. Interestingly, if I happened to mention during the course of a conversation that my wife is from Assam, I was then usually referred to as a “son-in-law” of the state and hitherto apprehensive attitudes would give way to an almost “he is one of us” conviviality.



The Importance of Context

My fieldwork thrust me into a system that was alive with a bewildering array of dynamics – socio-cultural, political, economic, and ecological. It was challenging to wrap my head around them as they interacted, influenced, and produced each other. These dynamics were often manifested in unpredictable ways that defied the flimsy theoretical boundaries I attempted to place around them in my effort to comprehend them. However, such engagement brought to the forefront the importance of context, both contemporary and historical. The words of one of India’s foremost political ecologists came frequently to mind during the course of my year in Manas. “You have to get a sense of the history of place and that’s where archival research becomes invaluable. I know it can be painful, often downright boring work but there is no escaping the archives!” he said with a slightly weary been-there-done-that smile. A year later, I sifted through photographed copies of yellowed documents, often disintegrating in neglected archival buildings lacking even basic environmental control. The pain and boredom paid off and the current opinions and attitudes of livelihood issues from members of a certain, so-called tribal began to make sense when placed in context of the political and cultural history of their economy.

A Diversity of Narratives

The cultural and political diversity of the Manas landscape was suitably matched by the diversity of environmental discourses I encountered. Listening and subsequently mulling over what I’d heard both in terms of the structure of particular arguments as well as the use of specific words reminded me of a favorite description of the core distinction between the biological and social sciences – “The social sciences ask how we know what we know?” For example, it was fascinating to hear bureaucrats refer to members of a community who have historically practiced and continue to practice a largely subsistence form of agricultural production as being “lazy” and “lacking in enterprise”³. Such statements seemed to either willfully ignore or be ignorant of elements of local geology that form the ecological framework for a particular mode of agricultural



Above. Instances of timber harvesting in Bodoland. Along with Reserve Forest Rangers, my field technician and myself observe the results of selective harvesting and clear-cutting in MTBR.


production. Similarly, narratives pertaining to inter-ethnic conflict were produced through an overall invalidation of the other through particular constructions of migratory history, land-use, cultural norms, and demography. These perspectives served to order ethnic groups into causal structures that are instrumental in achieving specific political goals⁴.

A Dynamic Landscape

Rising from the foothills of the Eastern Himalaya of Bhutan, the MTBR is a dynamic landscape. The rivers emanating from the mountains of Bhutan are the very embodiment of caprice; they frequently change course, periodically flood their banks, and are occasionally subsumed under the sandy-gravelly land substrate, only to surface many miles further south. Local communities have historically adapted to this capriciousness by practicing shifting cultivation. Such systems of agricultural production are in constant flux, not only in response to hydrology but to additional factors such as ongoing urbanization (creating a labor shortfall through urban migration), struggles for political autonomy, and novel agro-technologies (such as high-yield varieties of rice, pesticides, and herbicides).

Given this constant flux, Indigenous ethnic groups have historically used forest resources as a means of managing livelihood risk and uncertainty. Thus extraction of forest resources (e.g. timber) has been an integral part of local economies for centuries⁵. Recently, ongoing illegal timber extraction from the RFs of Manas have begun to flourish into an informal economy that fuels local militant groups vying for a homeland separate from Assam. This informal, often illegal economy lines the pockets of various arms of the Indian bureaucracy, feeds local political coffers, supplies expanding urban economies in other parts of Assam, and provides a source of livelihood to residents of an area that, as of yet, has very limited industrial infrastructure and a severe paucity of urban job opportunities.

In summary, any form of biodiversity conservation and management in the RFs of the Manas Tiger and Biosphere Reserve has to articulate with notions of ethnicity, exigencies of transforming economies,

livelihood issues, as well as hydrological and geological realities. During my conversations within the Manas landscape people rarely talked about the environment or nature. Instead, they spoke on issues that, though not traditionally thought of as environmental, are every bit so. Quite simply, they are “translated through lenses that are far more urgent in people’s day-to-day lives.”⁶ 

References

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