Forest-farm frontiers

KASHMIRA KAKATI

LATE morning on 18 February 1884, a deep thundering clang, never heard before in these parts, bore steadily down the 25 miles of newly laid Makum railway track in upper Assam. Riding exultant on that first train, Englishman T. Kinney described the view: ‘The train plunged into the heart of the primeval forest, and surely never from any other railway carriage windows in the world was such a scene viewed as greeted our eyes. South American lines have penetrated tropical forests before now, and have had "considerable jungle" to tackle. But I question if even any of these lines could show such magnificent timber with such matted and tangled undergrowth, dense cane brakes, inextricably confused creepers and parasitical growths, as the virgin forest on the Makum branch exhibits.’

Outside those windows, the wild animals of this primeval forest that heard the sound would have been mortally frightened. But the sound passed. As night fell, the ominous sound of the returning locomotive came bearing down again, somehow louder than before and wherever they were, those wild hearts turned icy cold with fear. Then mercifully the forest returned once more to its dank, silent gloom. It was a false reprieve.

That train was a business effort to get at the coal of the Makum coalfield, just across the Buridehing river, a large tributary of the Brahmaputra in upper Assam. The wide valley of the Buridehing, starting from the Patkai hills in the South and sweeping North to the upper Brahmaputra was a vast lowland jungle, growing lush for centuries. In the few preceding decades, some tea estates had come up along the banks here and there. So far they had been importing coal for their factories from Raniganj, on a 1000 mile journey, the home stretch by steamer up the great highway of the Brahmaputra.

The Makum coalfield lay within 25 miles of the tea estates, but it was still not an easy journey – the trip upriver of 60 miles from the nearest port, Dibrugarh, took 40 days. That train was definitely a reason to rejoice. Not long after, legend has it that an elephant walked out from these forests with oil on its feet and this, ironically, sealed the fate of his brethren for all time.

In less than 50 years since that first blazing trail through the forest, the grand, ‘primeval’ Dehing forests had been subdued by the formidable power of human enterprise. Coal, oil, timber and tea

together made it one of the richest corners of the British empire in India. It was a season of plenty in the El Dorado of Assam, and nobody noticed the wildlife fall through the gaps between the railway sleepers, into oil drilling holes or the coal mines. Few records shed light on what lived here at the time. There are the standard stories of elephant shoots and tiger hunts. There is an old, generic EIA report style statement from an observer commenting on the Digboi oil field in that century – 'The only inhabitants were elephants and rhinos, the odd jackal, snakes and many leeches.'

In anecdotal notes, a tea planter by the name of J.W. Tweedie describes the area around the present Jeypore RF – where I write this from – in the year 1896 as follows: 'Jaipur was the only garden in that part (Hapjan Parbut) and the nearest being Tingrai to the North, Tinkong to the West and Sonari to the South and miles of virgin forest between inhabited by elephants, buffalo, tiger and even rhino. There were only small patches of rice land cultivated by Assamese.' Tweedie's rhino always makes me wonder. In these dense subtropical dipterocarp forests, could it have been the Sumatran rhino that he spoke of? We will never know.

Driving along the Makum branch line now, or from 'Tingrai to Jaipur', paddy fields stretch as far as the eye can see, with not a tree to break the horizon. At Borbil, where the last rail of the Makum branch was linked 'in the heart of the forest', is now a row of truck garages where puddles of dirty mobil oil on the mud bizarrely shine up rainbow colours.

At Bogapani, before Borbil, elephants exit the forest and plod doggedly along what is probably a generations-old migration path, except that it now comprises miles of forest villages, encroachments, railroad, high-way and tea estates before they can safely make it to the shelter of some trees at the other end. On the way they get hit by trains, honked at by cars, chased and yelled at by people. Of course, the elephants think it is normal. They have not known anything else but this. The last of the elephants who would have remembered the Dehing forests as real forests, would have died of old age some decades ago, taking with them the memory of what is never again to be.

In this ragged, dishcloth landscape full of unsightly holes, some pieces of beaten-down forest have just struggled back to some semblance of health. These are the pieces where, in the few years since logging stopped, nobody big has thought it worth their while to come around. The forest has had something of a relative respite because only paddy farmers now come in before the harvest seeking wood for ploughs, and then after the rains for fuelwood, poles, bamboo and leaf to repair their huts.

The forests next to the tea estates struggle more to return to health as the workers' energy needs – fuel and meat – are still met from the forest, and the forest does not have the time to regenerate fast enough because it is a daily need for a greater number of people. These are the pieces of forest that are not part of India's protected area network and which await their final sentencing to death by oil or coal or hydropower in the files of the hallowed departments.

Starting out to count hoolock gibbons to see how they were faring in small forest fragments (very poorly), I stumbled onto these larger patches where the game is not over yet. The Dehing forests, although split into separate blocks by development such as roads and industry, together have one of the largest populations of this beautiful ape, one of the world's 25 most endangered primates. Going on to document the carnivores in the remaining Dehing forests, I was totally unprepared for what I was going to find.

A 100 sq km patch here had 19 species of carnivores – possibly the most recorded from any single site in South Asia. How on earth? They eat what? Seven species of cats alone, the highest number photo-documented at any one site anywhere in the world. Bears and wild dogs. Was it possible? And a tigress in the middle of it all. Animals like the mysterious clouded leopard that I would have bet my right arm could not live under oil rigs, much less next to a fertilizer factory. No matter how many times I blinked, there they were. In reserve forests and oil fields where nobody had thought to look. Or maybe they were there precisely *because* nobody had thought to look.

As we water and whittle down our legislated protection to our forests and wildlife for the benefit of numerous other considerations – mainly economic (the business train, so to speak) – couched in politically correct terms of course, even defining the critical wildlife habitats will be fraught with uncertainty. Simply because we do not have anything like a definitive map of our wildlife habitats, to be able to decide on which are critical. Large parts of northeast India are a case in point. I was just proven wrong on a throwaway reserve forest that has turned out to be a critical wildlife habitat – in terms of the wildlife, though not according to what the rule books say.

Just like the hoolock gibbon, a worryingly large proportion of many other birds and animals in danger are not in protected areas. Instead of hankering for designations – which frequently remain just that, designations, and nothing more – it might be more effective to try and work from the outside in. So the farms abutting the forests become the buffers for the forest, and the development happens outside that safety ring.

Depending on the resources available locally, simple alternatives could wean the farming community

off the forest. In oil and gas rich upper Assam for example, at the edges of the forests, huge fires burn where natural gas is flared off every single day. It would require a simple distribution grid to reach this gas to the people who could use it in lieu of wood from the forest. Market connectedness, now almost a given with the rapid development of rural roads, can encourage development of supplementary livelihoods for the cash needs of subsistence farmers. The large bodies of water, rivers and ponds, could be the crucibles for a fisheries revolution if only there was investment of know-how and capital into small fisheries, benefiting the locals. Then there is the NREGA, that could not only be supplementary income but, if the government so designs, involve farm workers or dependants in active restoration of the adjoining forests, achieving two goals with one strategy.

At final count, we will not be doing anyone any favour. I am amazed, then thankful, that although we may have lost the Sumatran rhino (and the ‘odd jackal’) some wildlife survived that hurtling train called development. It cannot be stopped, but this time we have a chance to realign the tracks to give a battered landscape a chance to heal itself.