

A "STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL": THE CLASH BETWEEN ELEPHANTS AND HUMAN SETTLEMENTS IN THE WILDLIFE RESERVES OF ASSAM

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To think of a wildlife reserve is to think of calm and tranquility. Its hues are the lush green of forests, the deep blue of rippling and rushing water, the rich browns and blacks of earth and foliage. Here, the bright pop of a sudden flower. There, the sleepy gold of sunlight in the late afternoon. Above it all unfolds the kaleidoscope of a sky freed from skyscrapers—blues, greys, pinks, purples, and the brilliance of a thousand stars.

But 12 km from the Guwahati city center, Assam's Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary is not always tranquil; in fact, it is the center of a simmering conflict between humans and nature.

In 2004, three nature reserves were stitched together to create the Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary.¹ However, this close to the Brahmaputra river, floods are inescapable, and so too is the devastation that comes with them. Thus, land within the sanctuary has been settled over time by communities displaced in part by these natural calamities. The communities have often been referred to in the local media as "encroachers," a word that obscures both the reasons for their migration to the sanctuary as well as these communities' "sociocultural relationship[s] with nature," according to Bhasker Pegu and Manoranjan Pegu.²

It's a bias that has had nasty consequences. On November 27, 2017, the calm of the wildlife sanctuary was engulfed by a chaos that locals called "war-like"³ when, following a decision by the Guwahati High Court, police arrived to evict the communities from their homes.⁴



Indian police arrive in the Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary in Assam to evict communities that had settled there. (Photo credit: Kuntala Roychoudhury.)

The scene was reminiscent of war. According to local media accounts, the eviction drive carried out over November 27 and 28 involved 1,500 police personnel and 300 labourers to help with the destruction of the settlements' structures.⁵ The community protested and the police responded with violence, leading to the injuring of at least four people. To raze the houses, schools, and places of worship, the police made use of bulldozers—and, unconventionally, elephants.⁶



Indian police make use of elephants during a November 2017 eviction of communities that had settled in the Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary in Assam. (Photo credit: Kuntala Roychoudhury.)

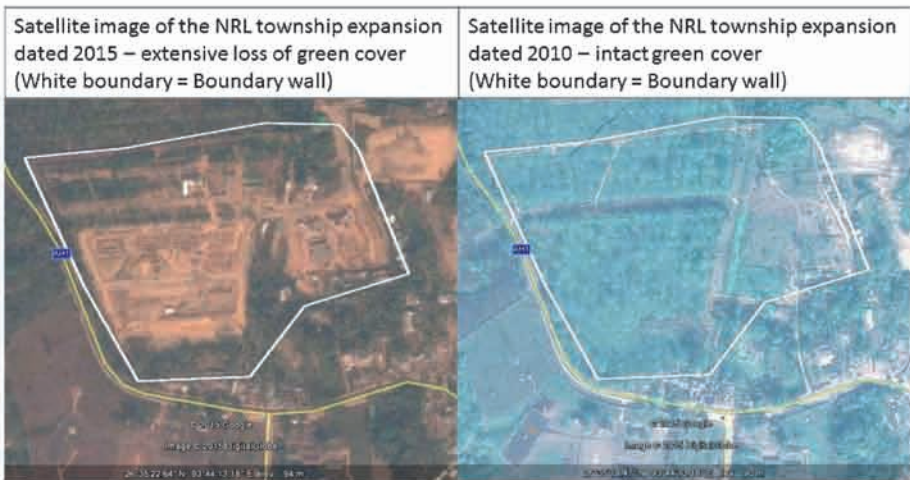
It is the sight of the elephants that perhaps provides the most striking example of the conflict between nature and humankind unfolding at the heart of Assam's wildlife reserves.

Three hours to the northeast of Amchang sits Kaziranga National Park, where human activity and construction has threatened the lives of the local elephant population, as the development of land around the wildlife reserve has disrupted their access to grazing ground.

One project in particular, the expansion of the Numaligarh Refinery Ltd. (NRL) township and golf course, has directly led to elephant deaths. The construction of a 2-km boundary wall was reported to have led to the demise of an elephant that hemorrhaged from trying to break through the wall to access watering holes and grazing ground. Despite being ordered to demolish the wall, at least part of it still remains.⁷



A picture showing part of the Numaligarh boundary wall, which has disrupted the corridors used by elephants in the area, causing confusion and the death of at least one elephant. (Photo source: Northeast Today, August 25, 2016 <[http:// www.northeasttoday.in/ngt-asks-nrl-to-pay-compensation-pull-down-boundary-wall/](http://www.northeasttoday.in/ngt-asks-nrl-to-pay-compensation-pull-down-boundary-wall/)>.)



(Graphic source: Rohit Choudhury.)

In Tezpur, not far from Kaziranga National Park, construction has also claimed elephants' lives. In 2016, a mother elephant died from injuries sustained when she and her calf fell into a pit at a construction site in the district.⁸ The calf was relocated to Kaziranga, but was reported to have died in the absence of the care of its mother.⁹

Human activity in and around the Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary has also led to animal deaths. At the Narengi Cantonment on the border of the sanctuary, the Indian Army has placed rows of spikes to prevent elephant herds from pilfering supplies stored in the cantonment's depots and kitchens. But the strategy has come at the cost of the lives of at least two of the sanctuary's elephants, which died from septicemia.¹⁰

Correspondence and meetings in late 2018 and early 2019 between the Army and Guwahati's wildlife division, including warnings from the latter sent in December 2018 regarding the potential for elephant deaths, illustrate the continuing tension between human activity and wildlife protection in this region of Assam.¹¹

The predicament of the indigenous Mising communities, who are among those who had settled in Amchang, is a prime example of the vicious cycle of this nature-human conflict.

Humans had created concrete embankments on the Brahmaputra to protect from floods. But when the embankments were breached, the sediment mixed with floodwaters. In a process called "sand casting", sand was left behind on farmland, making it hard to cultivate.¹²

Communities affected by this type of disaster—such as some among the Mising—were then forced to migrate in search of land, sometimes arriving in areas that already were or would later become wildlife reserves as claimed by the media. It has been further contested that, under the auspices of conservation and wildlife preservation, these communities were and are being displaced by the government, with little attention paid to the reason why the communities ended up in the reserves in the first place—and even worse, with little done to address the lost livelihoods and housing of the now doubly displaced community. All of these contestations remain to be proven by the stakeholders involved.

What is the result? In November 2017 in Amchang, nearly 700 families were rendered homeless in the name of conservation following the days of the eviction.¹³ Ironically, the Government, in a complete volte-face, petitioned the Gauhati High Court to suspend the eviction process until March 2018, with a prayer to ascertain the number of landless and erosion-affected families and verify any errors in demarcation of the boundary wall of the wildlife reserve. Since then, the affected community has returned and continues to live on ground zero. The silence on the part of the authorities is deafening, as the status quo continues, waiting to explode on another day and another time in the future, creating the treacherous landscape of a unique conservation conflict.



Houses in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary were demolished as part of a November 2017 eviction drive. (Photo credit: Kuntala Roychoudhury.)



Houses in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary were demolished as part of a November 2017 eviction drive. (Photo credit: Kuntala Roychudhury.)



The November 2017 eviction drive in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary involved 1,500 police personnel and led to clashes with the community that was being evicted. (Photo credit: Kuntala Roychoudhury.)

Meanwhile, amidst it all, nature continues to suffer, with flora and fauna alike at the mercy of human progress. For the elephants, this means not only a loss of habitat but also direct terrorization by humans, who, even while trespassing on elephant land, resort to dire tactics to keep the animals away.



Violent encounters between humans and elephants in Morangi Teliya Gaon, Golaghat. (Photo credit: Rahul Borua.)

Most perversely of all, the elephants can even become pawns in the humans' conflicts with each other, as they did on November 27 and 28. Elephants that should have been meandering through the jungle in search of

food and water were instead forced to play a part in the displacement of the community in Amchang. Having already lost their own homes to human development, they were then used by human society to victimize some of its most vulnerable.

For both the elephants and the displaced communities of Amchang, it is a "struggle for survival"¹⁴ in a wildlife sanctuary that is far from the tranquil refuge that it should be.

Endnotes :

- ¹ Pisharoty, S. B. (2017, November 29). Over 700 families left homeless after Assam government's eviction drive at Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary. *The Wire*. Retrieved from <https://thewire.in/environment/700-families-left-homeless-assam-governments-eviction-drive-amchang-wildlife-sanctuary>
- ² Pegu, B., & Pegu, M. (2018, October 11). The conservation discourse in Assam must consider a sustainable rehabilitation plan for the Mising tribe. *Economic & Political Weekly*, 53(41), no pages. Retrieved from <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/conservation-discourse-in-assam-must-consider-sustainable-rehabilitation-plan-for-mising-tribe>
- ³ Interaction with locals by Kuntala Roychoudhury during the Amchang eviction in November 2017.
- ⁴ Pisharoty (2017), op. cit.
- ⁵ Loc. cit.
- ⁶ Loc. cit.
- ⁷ Numaligarh wall: Assam govt directs company to 'demolish entire wall'. (2019, February 19). *Down To Earth*. Retrieved from <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/wildlife-biodiversity/numaligarh-wall-assam-govt-directs-company-to-demolish-entire-wall--63280>
- ⁸ Parashar, U. (2016, November 24). Patanjali may face probe after elephant dies in its Assam plant pit. *The Hindustan Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/patanjali-may-face-probe-after-elephant-dies-in-its-assam-plant-pit/story-Z1srHpaNBjKrcNXTtiez0O.html>

- ⁹ Letter dated 27.12.2018 addressed to Col. Adm. Comdt, Narengi Army Station Guwahati from the Office of the Divisional Forest Officer, Guwahati Wildlife Division accessed by Kuntala Roychoudhury through the "Our Assam, Our Wildlife" whatsapp closed group dated 12.03.2018.
- ¹⁰ After elephants deaths in Assam, Army begins removing spikes cemented to keep the animals off. (2019, March 14). *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/after-elephants-deaths-in-assam-army-begins-removing-spikes-cemented-to-keep-the-animals-off/article26525505.ece>
- ¹¹ Naqvi, S. (2019, March 12). Iron spikes put up by army to repel elephants allegedly kill pachyderm near cantonment in Guwahati. *The Hindustan Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/iron-spikes-used-to-repel-elephants-allegedly-kill-pachyderm-near-army-cantonment-in-guwahati/story-PlqduNhNcRJoQgRAdYSxFL.html>
- ¹² Rahman, A. P. (2016, August 18). After the flood, the Brahmaputra leaves behind a desert in Assam. *Scroll.in*. Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/814152/after-the-flood-the-brahmaputra-leaves-behind-a-desert-in-assam>
- ¹³ Pisharoty (2017), op. cit.
- ¹⁴ Pegu & Pegu (2018), op. cit.