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B. NARZARY NEW DAVP REGIONAL DIRECTOR

Shri Bidyasagar Narzary, Director Public Relations, Press Information Bureau, Guwahati has recently taken over as Regional Director of the Directorate of Advertisement & Visual Publicity, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of India in Guwahati, on his promotion to the Senior Administrative Grade of the Indian Information Service.

Shri Narzary was working as Director Public Relations, Press Information Bureau since 1997 before his present assignment. He joined the Indian Information Service in June 1984 and during the last 22 years of his service he has served almost all Media Units of the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting. With his wide and varied experience, his joining as Regional Director of DAVP will enhance the functioning of the organization in the field of advertisement and visual publicity related works of North Eastern Region.

MAJOR AND MEDIUM IRRIGATION PROJECTS IN ASSAM

About the status of the major, medium and minor ongoing irrigation projects in Assam, the Union Minister of State for Water Resources Shri Jai Prakash Narayan Yadav replied in Rajya Sabha today in response to a unstarred question by Shri Urkhao Gwra Brahma that the minor irrigation schemes are planned, implemented and funded by the State Governments as per their resources and priorities. The approved outlay for minor irrigation sector in Assam for 10th Plan is Rs.305.09 crore.

For major and medium on going irrigation projects he stated that Champamati Irrigation project was started during 6th Plan. Latest estimated cost of the project is Rs.128.68 crore. The project is scheduled for completion after 10th Plan and latest estimated cost of the Dhansiri Irrigation project is Rs.355.02 crore. Total expenditure incurred on this project upto March 2004 is Rs.179.42 crore. The project is scheduled for completion after 10th Plan.

EXTENSION OF RUNWAY AT SILCHAR AIRPORT

Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Civil Aviation, Shri Praful Patel stated in Rajya Sabha that a Task Force was constituted in 1998 which recommended extension of runways at Silchar, Lilabari and Dibrugarh Airport on priority by Airport Authority of India to a minimum of 7500 feet to enable safe operation of A-320 type aircraft. Work for extension of the runway and other associated works at Silchar Airport has been awarded in March 2005. Work is under execution. The length of the runway at Lilabari airport has been extended to 7500 feet while the work for extension of runway at Dibrugarh airport to 7500 feet is going on. Work of extension of runway at Silchar airport is likely to be completed by March 2007.

This statement was tabled in Rajya Sabha, in response to an un-starred question by Shri Karnendu Bhattacharjee, Member of Parliament.

VULNERABILITY OF ASSAM TO EARTHQUAKE

Assam falls in Seismic Zone-V, which is considered the maximum earthquake risk zone in the country.

The various measures initiated by the Government of Assam to strengthen the Disaster Management System include updating of municipal bye laws at district level to incorporate the required provisions of the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) codes; constitution of Hazard Safety Cell under the Chief Engineer, PWD (Buildings) to review the structural and architectural designs of all RCC, steel and masonry buildings. The Cell will act as Consultant to the state government for the vulnerability assessment and retrofitting of Government and lifeline buildings, and inclusion of Guwahati under the Urban Earthquake Vulnerability Reduction Project taken up as a part of the Disaster Risk Management Programme. The Building Materials Technology Promotion Council (BMTPC) has organized a workshop for the adoption of model building bye-laws, zoning regulations and development control regulations on July 1, 2005 at Guwahati with State level technical experts. The State Government has identified three engineering colleges/institute for undertaking training of in service engineers in earthquake resistant building design and technology under the National Programme for Capacity Building of Engineers for Earthquake Risk Management. Awareness generation programme have also been taken up for earthquake risk reduction. Steps have been initiated to include disaster management in school education and technical education.

This was stated by Union Minister of State for Home Affairs Shri S. Regupathy in a written reply in Rajya Sabha on August 24, 2004 on the vulnerability of Assam to earthquake.

NEIP IN ASSAM

For the successful implementation of the NEIP in Assam, Union Government extends financial assistance to various Departments of concerned states like the Directorate of Industries and institutions such as State Industrial Development Corporations, State Industrial Infrastructure Development Corporations etc. towards development of infrastructure with related facilities such as power, water, roads and communication facilities etc. Under the NEIP, Govt. of India provides finance for the development of (a) Growth Centre (GCs) and (b) Integrated Infrastructure Development Centres (IIDCs).

Further, the Central Government also provides a range of subsidies and fiscal incentives to eligible units in the Region under NEIP 1997. Important subsidiaries are interest subsidy, central investment subsidy, central interest subsidy, insurance subsidy etc. Main fiscal incentives provided under the policy are income tax and excise duty exemption. Excise duty exemption under the policy is for a period of ten years from the date of commercial production. This was stated by Shri S.S. Palanimanickam, Minister of State for Finance in the Lok Sabha today in response to a question by Shri Narayan Chandra Barkatoky, Member of Parliament, regarding the steps taken by Union Government for successful implementation of NEIP in Assam.

ROAD-CUM-RAILWAY BRIDGE OVER BRAHMAPUTRA RIVER

The Construction of Bogibeel bridge is likely to be completed in four years i.e. by 2008-09.

The stretch from Jonai to Lakhimpur of NH-52 is planned for widening to two lane under 'Special Accelerated Road Development Programme for North Eastern Region'.

A total length of 690 km. of National Highways has been taken up under East West corridor of National Highways Development Project (NHDP) in the state of Assam. Out of this 19 km. have already been four laned, 453 km. are under implementation and action has been initiated for award of work for the remaining 218 km. The entire work is likely to be completed by 2008.

This was stated by Union Minister of State for Shipping, Road Transport and Highways Shri K.H. Muniyappa in Rajya Sabha on August 25, 2005, in response to an unstarred question by Shri Silvius Condpan, Member of Parliament.

713 NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS APPROVED FOR DAVP EMPANELMENT

5591 newspapers including periodicals have been published in the country as on March 31, 2004. Out of this, 4114 were small, 1195 medium and 282 were big. A total of 2363 small/medium and big newspapers and periodicals empanelled with Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity (DAVP) as on December 31, 2004. Their details are, small-1539, medium-642 and big-182. Applications of 1429 newspapers were pending in DAVP as on December 31, 2004. These applications were scrutinized and the cases of 713 newspapers and periodicals were approved for empanelment with DAVP during February and March, 2005.

This information was given by Minister of Information & Broadcasting and Culture, Shri S. Jaipal Reddy in written reply to a question in Lok Sabha on August 11, 2005.

REGISTRATION OF TITLES OF NEWSPAPERS

The number of titles registered with the Registrar of Newspapers for India (RNI) as on March 31, 2005 is 60,374. Hindi tops the list with 24,000 titles followed by English with 8778. Marathi is placed next with 3380 titles whereas Urdu with 3079 titles occupies 4th position. 3862 of the registered papers are bilinguals. Of all the registered titles, 6529 are dailies, 20814 are weeklies and 17818 monthlies.

There are 7367 titles, pending as on July 25, 2005 for registration for want of required documents.

This information was given by Minister of Information & Broadcasting and Culture, Shri S. Jaipal Reddy in written reply to a question in Rajya Sabha.

THE NEWS ROUND-UP**PROPOSAL FOR NEW RAIL LINES IN ASSAM**

Shri Lalu Prasad Yadav, Union Minister for Railways tabled in Rajya Sabha the statement of details of some of the proposals for new railways lines received from Assam during the year 2004-05 and 2005-06, action taken thereon and present status of those proposals as under :

Sl. No.	Name of proposal for new line	Present status
1.	Alternative Broad Gauge (BG) line from Jagiroad Railway station to Harangajao – Silchar (160 Kms.)	Proposal could not be considered in view of taking up gauge conversion of Lumding-Silchar-Jiribam
2.	Haibargaon – Mairabari (44.8 Kms) and Senchoa – Silghat (61.85 kms)	Restoration with gauge conversion from Haibargaon to Mairabari and Senchoa junction to Silghat town has been taken up
3.	Azra – Byrnihat (30 kms)	Reconnaissance engineering cum Traffic survey has been completed. Planning Commission has accorded 'In Principle' approval
4.	Tinsukia – Parsuramkund (90 kms)	The proposal could not be considered in view of acute constraint of resources and heavy throwforward of ongoing projects.
5.	Murkongselek- Pasighat (30 kms)	Updating survey for new line from Murkongselek to Pasighat was completed in 1999 as per which the cost was assessed as Rs.68 crore with a negative rate of return. In view of acute constraint of resources and heavy throwforward of ongoing projects, the proposal could not be considered.
6.	Naginimora-Amguri (35 kms)	Survey included in Budget 2005-06
7.	Makum-Saikowaghat (5 kms)	Survey completed in 2001-02 as per withich anticipated cost of the proposal was Rs. 15 crore with a negative rate of return. The proposal could not be considered in view of acute constraint of resources and heavy throwforward on ongoing projects.

This was in response to a starred question by Shri Dwijendra Nath Sharmah, Member of Parliament.

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MARTYR KUSHAL KONWAR

- Rupam Baruah

The patriotic flames of the 'Quit India' movement of 1942 engulfed the whole of Assam along with the rest of the country. People bravely organised the opposition to the British imperialistic war effort and mass agitation with the aim of full independence occurred everywhere in Assam. The revolutionary people, with both the means of armed and unarmed methods, defied the colonial rule and tried to hoist the national Tricolour on the foreign administration posts in the region. Against this spirited struggle of the people, the British government took ruthless and repressive measures such as indiscriminate firing on unarmed crowds, brutal and inhumane tortures for the patriots in the prisons and execution by hanging. So, many patriots laid down their lives in this struggle for the liberation of their motherland. The history of 'Quit India' movement in Assam is a saga of burning patriotism of such martyrs. One of those martyrs was Kushal Konwar who sacrificed his life smilingly for his motherland at the British gallows. As the current year marks the birth centenary of Kushal Konwar, let us remember the great patriot and martyr through this humble tribute.

Kushal Konwar was born on 21 March 1905 at Balijan Chariali near Sarupathar of the present Golaghat district. His parents' names were Sonaram and Konpahi. After finishing his primary education from Baligaon School, Kushal took admission in Bezbaruah English School at Golaghat. But when Non-Cooperation Movement started under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, he left school and joined the movement in a patriotic zeal. In 1925, he himself started a primary school at Bengmai but could not continue it because of financial difficulty. Later he joined a clerical post at Balijan tea estate. But his independent spirit soon drove him to leave the job under foreign masters and so, resigning the job from the tea garden in 1936 he wholeheartedly engaged himself in the freedom struggle.

Then came 1942 when the Indian National Congress, led by Mahatma Gandhi, took the resolution on 8 August to give the British the ultimatum for leaving India to the Indians. Thus started the 'Quit India' movement and 'Do or die' became the war-cry of the patriots. Though Mahatma Gandhi advocated for the philosophy of non-violence, the 'Quit India' movement, which is also famous in history as 'August Revolution', soon assumed the character of a true people's movement and the people adopted both unarmed and armed methods according to their own necessity and choice while agitating against the oppressive rule of the British government. So, along with 'Santi Sena' (peace force) there formed 'Mrityu Bahini' (death or suicide squad) also who believed in the path of armed revolution against a ruthless force that had no scruple of using arms on the unarmed people. The members of this 'Mrityu Bahini' engaged themselves in

subversive and sabotaging activities against the British War efforts. But Kushal Konwar was a follower of the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence and he always stuck to that principle. During the Quit India movement he led the people of Sarupathar as the president of the local Congress Committee.

On 10 October, 1942, a group of the 'Mrityu Bahini' of Golaghat derailed a military train near Sarupathar which resulted in the deaths of many British and American soldiers. In this connection police arrested 42 patriots of the locality including Kushal Konwar. They were taken to Jorhat jail for trial. By no means Kushal was associated with this sabotage activity as he was a true Gandhian. But the British held him chief accused for the derailment and deaths. Though no proof could be produced against him, yet the foreign government declared him guilty only on the basis of witness given by a turncoat (an approver). Actually it was a mock-trial, and Kushal was sentenced to death by hanging. But he accepted his death sentence with a philosophic calmness. He reacted like this, 'Man is Mortal. One has to die as he has been born. God has chosen me because He loves me. So I am happy.' When his wife with his minor child met him in the jail Kushal consoled the crying wife saying, 'If my death can be a factor to bring the freedom to our people, then I will be happy feeling myself the luckiest to lay down my insignificant life at the altar of our country's freedom.'

Before his execution Kushal looked unwavering in his behaviour and people noticed a glow of happiness on his countenance as though he was rather glad to die for his country. Finally, when the fateful day arrived on 15 June, 1943, Kushal walked up to the gallows with a smile in his face and as a devoted Vaishnav chanted a few lines from the 'Kirtan' before embracing his death. He was then only 38 years old.

Kushal was not a great leader of extraordinary capacity. Nor was he a dreaded revolutionary. And above all, he was by no means connected with the activity which derailed the military train and killed the Allied soldiers. He was a local leader of the Congress volunteers who believed in the path of non-violence. Therefore, he was not an element to be treated with such cruelty like a capital punishment. It is a fact that the British executed him illegally. But Kushal was a great patriot. He might not behave a big leader or a dreaded revolutionary, but he loved his country and its people no less than others. That is why despite his innocence and the illegal trial that ordered him death sentence, Kushal could accept his tragic fate with calm and quietness. He could say that if his sacrifice paved the way for his countrymen's freedom he would be happy in his death. Here lies the greatness of Kushal Konwar. When a man dies smilingly for others' happiness he is undoubtedly a great soul. As a great patriot Kushal could sacrifice his life for the liberation of his motherland and the future happiness of his countrymen.

As the proud citizens of an independent India we should never forget the fact that the freedom we enjoy today is the gift rendered to us by the immense sacrifice of the countless patriots and martyrs like Kushal Konwar.

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FEATURE**LIVED AS AN EMPEROR, DIED AS A SAINT**

- Nava Thakuria

He lived as an emperor and died as a saint in a foreign land. Today, the common people of Myanmar believe that Bahadur Shah Zafar, who ruled India centuries ago is a man of holiness. They, irrespective of their religions come to the Dargah of Bahadur Shah in Yangon and pray before his tomb with conviction that their wishes would be fulfilled.

Bahadur Shah Zafar (1775-1862) was the last Mughal emperor in almost the entire undivided India. After the 1857 revolt by Indian soldiers against the British



Bahadur Shah Zafar's Dargah at Yangon

occupation, Bahadur Shah was deposed and exiled to Rangoon, now Yangon. He died there a sad and brokenhearted man. A plaque on the wall, written in Urdu, English and Burmese languages narrates the story, "Bahadur Shah, ex-King of Delhi died at Rangoon, November 7, 1862 and was buried near this spot." Another line says, "Zinath Mahal, wife of Bahadur Shah, who died on the 17th July 1886 was also buried near this spot."

The mausoleum, a must visit place for every Indian as also for every person for the sub-continent in the capital of Myanmar, includes a room for the tombs of his wife and granddaughter with a prayer hall in the front. Bahadur Shah Zafar's tomb that is covered with a green satin cloth is placed in an underground chamber.

"Bahadur Shah Zafar was kept in a shed attached to the bungalow of a junior British officer here. Along with him Zafar's wife Zinath Mahal and granddaughter

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Raunaq Zamani were also buried at the site. Of course, the British kept no sign of his grave, may be fearing for an uprising of a nationalist sentiment throughout India. Later, while digging for the foundation of a memorial hall in the site in 1991, the real mausoleum was found," informed Abdul Rahim, a senior member of the Bahadur Shah Zafar Mausoleum Committee that manages the heritage monument.

Speaking to this writer recently in his small office inside the prayer hall, Mr Rahim also added, "Bahadur Shah was not only an emperor, but also a poet-scholar and he is recognized here as a pir or saint. Along with Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus and Christians come here to seek his blessings."

Bahadur Shah Zafar was born in Delhi in 1775 and he was placed on the throne as the Mughal Emperor in 1838 after his father Akbar Shah's demise (his mother Lalbai was a Hindu). He took over the responsibility at the age of around 60, Bahadur Shah was the last ancestor of the Mughal dynasty, who ruled over India for 300 years. He was more interested in creative exercises than administration. More over, the East India Company of British had already expanded their domination throughout the country. Identified as a weak ruler, Bahadur Shah couldn't exercise his power almost beyond the Red Fort.

However, the great 'War of Independence' took place during his reign in 1857. The freedom fighters, Muslim and Hindu soldiers of the East India Company reposed faith on the leadership of Bahadur Shah and they nominated him as the supreme leader. The British, after initial setbacks crushed the movement. They had overthrown and arrested Bahadur Shah. Two of his sons Mirza Mughal and Khizar Sultan and a grandson Abu Bakr were also killed by the British army that formally ended the Mughal Dynasty that started with Babur in 1526. Bahadur Shah was then exiled to erstwhile Rangoon in 1958, where he lived his last days and died at the age of 87.

A scholar of Sufism, a poet and a ghazal writer Bahadur Shah penned his own epitaph before his death. The ruler turned saint wrote, "Kitna hai badnaseeb Zafar, dafn ke liye do gaz zamin bhi na mili ku-e-yaar mein" (How unlucky is Zafar! He couldn't find even two yards of earth for burial in his beloved land/country).

A large painting of Bahadur Shah Zafar, placed in front of the prayer hall greets the visitors to the campus that contain the line as "The Last Emperor of India Bahadur Shah Zafar Dargah." Interestingly, the great Indian freedom fighter Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, who led the Indian National Army against British pronounced the infamous call "Delhi Chalo" (March to Delhi) in 1942 to Indians thirsting for freedom from this historic place.

Till date, many high profile leaders from India, Bangladesh and Pakistan have visited the Dargah. Former Indian Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and A.B. Vajpayee (as a foreign minister), Vice President VS Sekhawat have also visited the tomb to pay their respects. The Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia and Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf had also paid visit to Zafar's mausoleum on different occasions.

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INDIAN INDEPENDENCE STRUGGLE AND ASSAMESE WOMEN

- Ditimoni Gogoi

Fifty Eight years have passed by since India became free from the tyranny of British rule. Barring the threats of various extremist groups, we celebrate Independence Day on 15th August every year with pomp and gaiety. So many years have passed, but the memory of the people who lost their precious lives to get India free from the British, are still fresh in our minds.

Along with the other parts of India, Assam also actively participated in the freedom movement. Assam was under the rule of the Ahoms for six centuries which came under British rule in 1826 through the Treaty of Yandabu. But the people of Assam who were accustomed to live independently could not bear the tyranny of the British and started revolting. In 1828, Gomodhar Konwar had to sacrifice his life for revolting against the British. As a consequence, his mother and sister had to face questioning by the British. That can be termed as the starting point. Several woman rebels had to face inhumane behaviour at the hands of the merciless British.

After the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, history witnessed mushrooming of various women organizations in the state. From 1915 to 1920, the women organizations spread all over the state and they were successful in arousing nationalism in the minds of the people.

Anne Besant's arrival in 1893 was a historic event for the women of India. This Irish women along with some other Indian women opened up new vistas in the country. Formation of Women's Indian Association in 1917 by Anne Besant along with Sarojini Naidu resulted in increasing awareness among the women folk. About 43 branches of this association spread all over India. Women of Assam were also inspired with the idea and put their efforts to form such an association in Assam as no branch of the Women's Indian Association was set up in the state till then. Initiated by Hemaprobha Das the Dibrugarh Mohila Samiti was founded. Instantly more such *samitis* sprung up at Nagaon, Tezpur and other parts of the state.

In 1921, Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Assam was another remarkable incident for the women of Assam. Assamese women were equally skilled in spinning thread and weaving. Gandhiji highly praised their skill and inspired them to produce more *swadeshi* clothes so that they could overcome the need for foreign clothes.

During 1921-22 the awakening of Sarojini Naidu, Vasanti Devi, Uma Nehru, Sarala Devi, Parvati Devi in all India-level instilled great inspiration in the minds of the women of Assam. With great zeal of freedom, Bidyutprova Devi encouraged other fellow women to defy CrPC 144 enforced by the British.

Girija Devi, Nalinibala Devi, Snehalata Bhattacharyya, Dharmada Devi along with Bidyalata Devi were active participants of the freedom movement of the 20s. Several women registered their names as congress volunteers and worked with great zeal to free India from the British rule. During those days the Assamese people fought unitedly irrespective of caste, creed and religion. Even the first Assamese martyr was from the tea garden community. She was Mungri alias Malati Mem from the Lalmati Tea Estate, Darrang.

Chandraprova Saikia, Sarala Das, Kiranbala Borkakoti, Kiranbala Agarwalla, from Darrang district, Shashiprova Chaliha, Swarnalata Baruah from Sibsagar district, Bhadreswari Devi and Lilawati Kakoty from Sibsagar district were some leading women who led and guided other women to fight against the British. They were the quintessence of leadership qualities possessed by the Assamese woman. Rajbala Das, Shashiprova Dutta, Ratna Bezbaruah also united the woman of undivided district. National leaders like Madan Mohan Malvya and Raja Gopalachari who came to Assam were astonished at the leadership qualities of the Assamese woman.

To free people from the addiction of *desi* liquor and opium, the women of the State fought bravely. During the Pandu conference, almost all the people participated in the meeting wore hand-woven clothes woven by Assamese woman which won wide appraisal from the national leaders.

Chandraprova Saikia was the great source of inspiration for the Assamese woman. She not only taught women folk to fight against the British but also tried to spread education among the women folk. She also took part in the Lahore conference held under the presidentship of Pundit Nehru in 1929. Supporting Nehru's proposal for complete freedom, she said that Indians should not compromise with the British with nothing less than complete freedom.

According to the proposal tabled by the Lahore Congress the woman of Assam along with other parts of India started celebrating Independence day on 26th January in 1930. Many women were arrested by police. According to the Indian Government Act 1935, the general election was held in 1937. Assamese women claimed nomination for Chandraprova Saikia but Congress rejected the proposal. In the same year Princess Amrit Kaur came to participate in the 11th conference of Assam Mahila Samiti. Addressing the gathering, Amrit Kaur highly praised great efforts and total involvement of Assamese women in the freedom movement.

Assamese women also participated in the Satyagraha started by Mahatma Gandhi on September, 1940. Naniprova Das, Joydalata Duara, Subhadra Devi, Dobhagi Devi and Swarnalata Duara from Assam were among some of the participants of the Satyagraha. In the All India Congress committee meeting held at Wardha, it was decided that it would start a woman's division. Inspired by this, a group of Assamese women sent a memorandum to Rajendra Prasad asking him to start a branch of this woman division in Assam also. The memorandum was signed by 23 women. As a result, the Axom Mohila Bibhag was started in 19th Sept 1940, with Puspallata Das and Amalprova Das as joint secretary.

Following the idealism of All India Women's Association the state branch also

put painstaking efforts to renovate and popularize weaving associations which became inactive for sometime.

The first district women's congress committee meet was held on January 27, 1941. Puspallata Das, Amalprobha Das and Punyalata Duara addressed the audience with their speech filled with nationalism. The conference held on June 27, 1941 was a great success which was participated by more than two thousand women. This conference was attended by Kuladhar Chaliha, Bisnuram Medhi, Dr. Bhubaneswar Barua, Toibulla, Fakharuddin Ali Ahmed and many others.

1942 was the peaking time of the Indian National Movement. On one hand, women had served the affected people of the World War II while on the other, they had to fight for their freedom. Annaprova Barua and Sudhalata Dutta had put great efforts to serve the war affected people while women like Kanaklata Barua had to sacrifice her life for the nation. In 1942, after the failure of Crips Mission, Indian National Congress announced 'Quit India' movement. In the meantime, British government declared all existing parties of Congress as illegal. Several top leaders were arrested and sent to the jail. Assamese women also jumped into the fire of this movement with the mantra 'do or die'.

In the month of September, 1942 the movement was at its height. Kanaklata Barua and Mukunda Kakoty were shot dead for trying to hoist the flag at Gohpur police station. Some of the freedom fighters resorted to the violent path. As a consequence, women became the worst sufferer. In the name of search operations, the woman folk experienced inhumane torture at the hands of the British police.

Assamese women also fought against the Crips' decision of grouping some part Assam with Pakistan. Amalprobha Das, Padmakumari Gohain were among those who fought against this decision. In July, 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru formed the Government and announced that hearing of the federal court is final and everyone would have to follow the grouping decision. But Gandhiji told the people that the hearing of the Federal court could not be the ultimate and asked them to fight against such injustice.

In a working committee meeting held secretly in 1947, Pushpalata Das on behalf of the representative of Assam tabled the proposal against grouping. Supporting her proposal she delivered a speech, which touched everybody present there. But there was no solution. The Axom Mohila Samiti conference of 1947 also warned the British Government not to cut any portion of Assam.

At last, however Assam was saved. The whole of the state remained with India and celebrated Independence day on August 15th, 1947 with other parts of India. The struggle was a long one. Freedom was achieved at the cost of several lives. For all this, we should remain grateful towards Assamese women who fought against the British to make the country free. And as we celebrate Independence Day this year, let us resolve to put our united efforts to develop this region to reach the highest economic, political, and social status in the country.

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BACKGROUND**FOREST SURVEY OF INDIA**

Forests are not only important source of subsistence, employment, revenue earnings, raw material to a number of industries but also play vital role in ecological balance, environmental stability, biodiversity conservation, food security and sustainable development. The forest resources, in general, have been under mounting pressure owing to unceasing human and livestock population. Excessive withdrawals of produce from the forests has resulted in the depletion and degradation of country's forests and has become a cause of serious concern.

Forest Survey of India (FSI) is engaged in generating information and database on forest cover and forest resources in the country besides providing services of training, research and extension. The present mandate of FSI is:

- To prepare a comprehensive State of Forest Report (SFR) including National Vegetation Map (NVM) once every two years. FSI will also prepare thematic map through use of remote sensing data with minimum essential ground truth verification (most ground truth verification would be done by the respective state governments) on a ten year cycle.
- To collect, store and retrieve necessary forestry and forestry related data for national and state level planning and to create a computer based National Basic Forestry Inventory System (NDFIS).
- To design methodologies relating to forest survey and subsequent updating. This would include methodologies for
 - Vegetation mapping including thematic maps through use of satellite imageries/aerial photographs
 - Ground truth verification
 - Growing stock and volume assessment.
- To undertake work in regard to preparation of first inventory in selected State/UTs on agency basis till the establishment of their own resources survey units.
- To impart training in modern forest survey techniques to foresters at various levels of responsibilities in the States/UTs/GOI.
- To advise the State/UTs on design and development of regional NDFIS.
- To support and oversee techniques/inventory work undertaken by State/UT Forest Departments.

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DEFINING POVERTY IN TRUE SENSE

- Tapati Baruah Kashyap

To define the term poverty is not an easy task. This is because of the fact that one who is not poor often fails to understand the agony and ecstasy of the poor and its implications on the existence of those people who are still below the poverty line. Poverty is defined not only as income poverty, but also human deprivation in terms of health and education, shelter, water supply and sanitation. Economists have found that measuring poverty is an extremely difficult task.

Poverty is to be seen more in rural areas than in the urban areas. Poverty is a major drawback all over the world. One in five people on the planet live in abject poverty. According to World Bank estimates, the percentage of people below the poverty line in the world has come down from 33 percent in 1981 to 18 percent in 2001. Still the problem fails to end with that since the number of poor people continues to go up in recent times.

What can be really done? Of late a committee, under United Nations, has just submitted its report. It recommends more aid from the developed countries to those underdeveloped and developing countries where the number of poor people abounds. And the report emphasizes more on African nations, as the number of poor in Africa has roughly doubled in the same period.

Glanceing at our country, we can feel the national scenario. Recent estimates made by the Planning Commission in the National Human Development Report, 2001, show that at the national level, the incidence of poverty by headcount ratio declined from 44.48 percent in 1983 to 26.10 percent in 1999-2000. The proportion of poor in the rural areas declined from 45.65 percent in 1983 to 27.09 percent in 1990-2000. In urban areas this decline was from 40.79 percent to 23.62 percent. But rural poverty is still higher than urban poverty.

Assam has an extremely high proportion, more than a third (36.09) of its population, under the poverty line. The percentage of poor in Assam is the highest among the seven states of the North-East. It has higher percentage of poor people than the all India figure of 26.10 percent. In Assam the rural urban divide is apparent. Two out of five people in rural areas are likely to be under the poverty line, while in urban areas the ratio is less than one in ten. Rural poverty is very much higher (40.04 percent of population in 1999-2000) than the all India figure of 27.09 percent. Conversely urban poverty is about a fourth of the all India figure of 23.62 percent. Urban poverty reduced from 21.73 percent in 1983 to 7.73 percent in 1993-94. Though there has been some improvement in percentage terms, the absolute number of poor shows only a marginal decline between 1993-94 and 1999-2000 (from 96.36 lakhs to 94.55 lakhs) and an increase from 1983, when the numbers of poor were 77.69 lakhs.

A survey was conducted in 1999 for the State Human Development Report, covering (though 17,140 sample households) all the 219 development blocks and 52 urban centres in Assam, to measure human poverty. The three determinants utilized are deprivation in longevity, knowledge and decent standard of living. The deprivation in longevity relates to survival that is the vulnerability to death at a relatively early age and is represented by the percentage of people not expected to survive beyond 40 years of life. The deprivation of knowledge is measured by the percentage of illiterate persons. Finally the deprivation of a decent standard of living is represented by percentage of people without access to healthcare services, safe drinking water, pucca dwelling and sanitation facilities and the percentage of malnourished children. A Human Poverty Index (HPI) concentrating on the deprivation of the three essential determinants of the quality of life was calculated.

The main findings say that poverty is more widespread in the western and southern parts and in the hill districts of the State. And as one move eastward from western border districts of Dhubri, Kokrajhar and Goalpara, the concentration of poverty falls and the district HPI values lie more or less around the overall State HPI, with the exception of Kamrup which has a relatively low HPI value. Kamrup has a high concentration of urban population, with Guwahati city-the gateway to the entire North Eastern region and shows a relatively low incidence of poverty.

Income, employment and poverty are three inter-related and central areas of concern. Assam has not been able to progress as much as the rest of the country. Unless it grows faster than the rest of India in the coming years, the gap between Assam and India will continue to be wide. An analysis of the income trends shows that in the 1970's per capita income declined due to increase in population; since the 1980's the decline has been move due to a slowing down of the economy.

What should be the appropriate measures to tackle the problems like poverty?

The State Government needs to prioritise and target especially relatively backward regions of the state and groups of disadvantaged people. A development strategy which is decentralized and seeks to involve a number of poor people and the larger community, which has potential advantages, needs to be developed by the Government.

The promise of guaranteeing employment to the poor was made in the Common Minimum Programme of the United Progressive Alliance Government in power. If well managed, globalization enhances the prospect of eliminating extreme poverty from the world enabling all children to go to school, giving all people access to basic healthcare, providing everyone with enough for a decent life. But if badly managed it is entirely plausible that globalization will mean that the poorest people and countries will become more marginalised in the face of growing abundance elsewhere.

To make education about poverty part of the school curriculum may be the first effective step towards eradicating it. When people can really feel for the conditions of poor people, then half of their problems will change. What we really need is our sympathy and concern for the present conditions of these people who live below the poverty line.

HARNESSING NORTH EAST ECONOMIC POTENTIALS

The North Eastern Region comprises eight States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. It covers an area of around 2,62,500 sq. kms, representing approx 8 per cent of the total area of the country and has a population (2001 census) of 39.04 million i.e., around 3.80 per cent the country's population. The Region has a unique geographical configuration with 98 per cent of its borders shared with neighbouring countries of Bhutan, China (Tibet), Myanmar and Bangladesh. Geographical contiguity with the rest of the country is through a narrow 20 km wide 'chicken's neck' corridor near Siliguri.

Despite being rich in natural resources with fertile land, rich forests and substantial mineral and hydrocarbon deposits, development in the North Eastern Region has lagged behind the rest of the country due to historical reasons. This caused a set back to investment in the region, particularly private investment, affecting development. The Government has, therefore, taken a number of initiatives in the recent past to bring these States at par with other States.

Special strategies have been formulated for removal of bottlenecks, provision of basic minimum services and creation of a development friendly environment. The handicap of resource-constraint has been met through special dispensation for the States in the Region. All the eight constituent States of NER are treated as Special Category States. Ninety percent of their Plan allocations are treated as grant and ten percent as loan by the Central Government (from 2005-06 onwards the loan component is to be raised by respective States). Moreover, they are permitted to use up to twenty percent of the Central Assistance for non-plan expenditure. The development concerns of these States are pursued through their respective five year and Annual Plans as well as those of the Union Ministries and Central Agencies. In addition, projects of interstate nature in the region are funded through the North Eastern Council, which has separate additional budget for the purpose.

In order to further sharpen the focus on the development of the Region, a dedicated Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region has been set up by the Union Government. The National Common Minimum Programme of the Central Government spells out the agenda for the North East which provides: "All North Eastern States will be given special assistance to upgrade and expand infrastructure" and "the North Eastern Council will be strengthened and given professional support".

The major activity of the Ministry is the operation of the Non-lapsable Central Pool of Resources (NLCPR). The Pool was created from the unspent balance out of the mandatory provision of 10 per cent of Gross Budgetary Support earmarked for the North Eastern Region in the budget of central Ministries/Departments. The broad objective of the NLCPR scheme is to ensure speedy development of socio-economic infrastructure in the NER by increasing the flow of funds for the new infrastructure projects. Projects for the development of socio-economic infrastructure such as power, roads & bridges, education, health, water supply and sanitation, sports and tourism etc. are considered for providing support under the Pool. So far a total of 663 such projects have been sanctioned at an approved cost of Rs. 4151 crore under NLCPR.

As a result of the Government's Policy towards NER, the budgetary provision for the Region in the central plan of various central Ministries/Departments has steadily increased from Rs.3211 crore in 1998-99 to 9306 crore during 2005-06. The actual expenditure in the Region has risen from 6.63 per cent in 1998-99 to about 8.5 per cent in 2003-04. A number of innovative schemes, programmes and projects are being launched by various Ministries/Departments for the rapid growth and development of the Region.

The North Eastern Council (NEC) in keeping with the mandate under the NCMP, the NEC has been restructured. The Prime Minister set the tone for the reconstituted NEC while addressing its first Meeting on April 12, 2005. He called upon the Council to focus on the twin issues of development and security. He desired that income level of rural families have to be substantially enhanced by harnessing the vast potential of the Region in the fields of Agriculture, Horticulture, Medicinal and Aromatic Herbs, Bamboo, Water Resources, Power Resources and Minerals

A Committee has been appointed by the Chairman, NEC to draw up a Blue Print for formulation of a Comprehensive time bound Road Map for Speedy Socio-Economic Upliftment of the NER. The "North East Vision - 2020" document is being prepared taking into account the heightened consciousness of the people in the NER, their aspirations, needs and sensitivities. It would encompass all the key sectors of the economy and the vast resource potential of the Region.

The Ministry has also taken a major initiative to seek International Cooperation for Development of the Northeastern Region. Under this initiative, 5 core Sectors were identified for preparing Vision Documents in order to facilitate Externally Aided Projects (EAPs). They include Integrated Road Project, Urban Development Project, Trade and Investment Creation Initiative, Water Resource Development and Integrated Energy Project. The Urban Development Project and the Integrated Road Project have already started with the technical assistance grant from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) of US \$ 2 million and US \$ 0.8 million respectively. Consultants have started the work and the blueprints are expected to be ready soon. ADB has indicated a back up loan of US \$ 400 million and US \$ 200 million respectively for these Projects. While other projects are in the process of discussion with multilateral agencies, an agreement has been signed with the ADB for Trade and Investment Creation initiative during 2004-05. This initiative is likely to result in a large number of EAPs in the Northeast Region, enhancing the resource-flow to the Region substantially. This will also bring institutional reform as well as modern project management technology in various sectors.

To facilitate private investment on the basis of public-private partnership, the Ministry has decided to launch a Project Development Fund. The objective of this Fund would be to develop projects with a high potential and to pose them before potential investors. The Region has considerable potential in hydroelectricity, mineral based industries including hydrocarbon, tourism and bio-technology etc.

The NER is well placed to take advantage of the Look East Policy of the Central Government. It has a great potential as an important tourist destination. It is also one of the two hotspots of biodiversity in the country. It is expected that with the efforts of the Ministry of DoNER, the Region would be able to achieve its full potential of economic prosperity and consequently social harmony.

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PRIME MINISTER'S INDEPENDENCE DAY ADDRESS

Speaking from the historic Red Fort here today, on the 58th anniversary of Independence Day, Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh made employment generation a key commitment of the Government. Days after the Union Cabinet approved the National Rural Employment Guarantee Bill, that will now be tabled in Parliament, Dr Singh said, "Indiraji had given the call to banish poverty, "garibi hatao". Today we commit ourselves to eradicating poverty by creating jobs, "Rozgar Badhao".

Prime Minister quoted Mahatma Gandhi, who said: "I will work for an India where the poorest of the poor feel that this country and this nation belongs to them and that they have a major role in its construction. An India where there is no higher class or lower class among all people. An India where all communities live in friendship and harmony. An India where women have the same rights as men. The Swaraj I dream of is a Swaraj of poor people. I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that Swaraj cannot be complete till the poorest have a guarantee of being provided with the basic necessities of life".

Economy on the move: "Our country is witnessing unprecedented economic growth today. Last year, our economic growth rate was 7%, coming on top of over 8% growth, and it is likely to be similar this year as well. We have not witnessed such consistently high growth rates since 1996. I am confident that if we maintain this momentum of growth for the next 5-10 years, then it would be possible for us to eradicate poverty, ignorance, hunger and disease from our country. This is no longer just a dream but is now a possibility."

Initiatives for Rural India

1. Krishi Vigyan Kendra to be created in every village by 2007.
2. National Rainfed Area Authority to be set up.
3. Funding for Bharat Nirman – budgetary focus on outcomes, not outlays alone.
4. Appeal to all political parties to address water issues from a national and holistic perspective.
5. Reiterates commitment to preserve environment and wildlife.
6. Revamping of Khadi & Village Industries Commission, to create jobs.

Social Welfare Initiatives

1. Pension for Freedom Fighters
2. Prime Minister's Scholarship Scheme for children of ex-servicemen and security personnel - 5000 children would be provided scholarships for college education every year.
3. Focus on elementary, secondary and higher education. "New wave" of development for old Universities in Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai.
4. Development of sports - India to bid for Asian Games.
5. Focussed commitment to combat HIV/AIDS.
6. New 15-point programme for welfare and empowerment of Minorities.
7. Empowerment of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes through investment in education, assurance of employment and tribal rights.
8. Empowerment of women - Legislation against domestic violence against women, legal protection of property rights.
9. Development programme for skill enhancement of artisans and weavers.

Infrastructure Development

1. Six-laning of Golden Quadrilateral.

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2. High-speed rail freight corridor – Mumbai-Delhi-Kolkata – with Japanese aid.
 3. Urban Renewal Fund – special focus on revitalization of Mumbai. Development of non-metro urban centers.
 4. World class airports to be built.
 5. New thrust to civil nuclear energy development.

Governance Issues

1. National Campaign for Cleanliness of villages, towns and cities to be launched.
2. National movement against wastage of water.
3. Review of Armed Forces Special Powers Act complete. AFSPA to be made more humane to ensure protection to human rights.
4. Government to ensure that outlays of expenditure are visible to citizens as outcomes of progress.
5. Handling of tsunami and recent floods, including in Mumbai - National Disaster Management Authority created.

National Security and External Relations

1. Reiteration of commitment to discussion and dialogue with all disaffected groups, provided they abjure the path of violence. Doors are always open to anyone interested in dialogue.
2. Reaffirmation of commitment to fight terrorism. Pakistan must dismantle entire infrastructure of terrorism. Success of Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus link shows way forward in Jammu & Kashmir.
3. Need for holistic response to extremism. Development and security are inter-linked. Assurance of life of dignity and self-respect for all people. POTA repealed.
4. India's firm commitment to make South Asia a region of peace and prosperity. Well-being and welfare of neighbours in India's interests. Warm greetings to people of Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Mauritius and Nepal.
5. Discussions proceeding on Iran- Pakistan- India gas pipeline.
6. Movement forward in relations with all countries. Successful meetings last year with leaders of United States, Russia, European Union, Japan, China and several important and friendly countries. Summit meetings with leaders of United States, Russia, China and Japan have significantly improved bilateral relations, and strengthened India's global profile.
7. Success of Look East Policy in improving relations with countries of East and South-east Asia.

Prime Minister's Closing Remarks:

"There comes a time in the history of a nation when it can be said that the time has come to make history. We are today at the threshold of such an era. The world wants us to do well and take our rightful place on the world stage. There are no external constraints on our development. If there are any hurdles, they are internal.

We must seize this moment and grab this opportunity. We need to have the resolve to make our country prosperous. We must have the self confidence to realise that we are second to none, that Indians are as good as the best. Our political system and leadership must show sagacity, wisdom and foresight so that we are able to make the best of this moment and make India a truly great nation.

Let us come together, as one nation, strengthened by our plurality, to work shoulder to shoulder and build a new India. An India where there are no barriers between the government and the people. An India where each and every Indian can stand proudly and proclaim that he is an Indian. Let us work together to build such a nation."

NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH MISSION

- **B. K. Sinha**

India is the second most populous country after China. In the 50 years since 1951 the population of the country has increased from 36.11 crore to 102.87 crore (presently about 110 crore).

In the last decade, India added about 18.6 crore to its population that is more than the population of the undivided State of Uttar Pradesh. Although the annual rate of growth of population for the country as a whole declined from 2.14 per cent to 1.93 per cent during the decade 1991-2001, the growth rate of population in demographically backward States has increased during the decade. It is felt that although progress in some States is satisfactory, poor performance in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Orissa, Uttranchal, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh is proving to be a drag on national achievement.

With risk of becoming the most populous country in the world by about 2050, designing of appropriate and effective strategies to address the problem of population growth is an important challenge facing the nation. The growth of population naturally has greater impact on demand for essential items including hospitals, schools, jobs and other public utility services, which will have substantial implication for economy as well as environment.

Under the National Common Minimum Programme of the UPA Government, 'Health' has been identified as one of the seven thrust areas to provide integrated health services to people, especially to poor through enhanced allocation for Public Health Sector, increased decentralization to State and District level, involvement of communities and Panchayati Raj Institutions, strengthening Public Health Infrastructure, mainstreaming AYUSH and addressing concerns for nutrition, sanitation and hygiene and safe drinking water.

Since Independence, a vast public health infrastructure comprising of 1,45,000 Sub-centres, 23,000 Public Health Centres (PHCs) and 3222 Community Health Centres (CHCs) has been created. However, it is estimated that this infrastructure is able to cater only to 20 per cent of the population, whereas 80 per cent of healthcare needs are still being provided by the private sector. Poor access to health leads to avoidable incidence of morbidity, mortality and out-of-pocket expenses, often leading to indebtedness. In rural areas especially, there are pockets of under-served populations where the vicious circle of poverty, malnutrition and poor health reinforce each other.

With the sole objective of meeting the basic requirement of Health for all, the Union Government launched the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) on April 12, 2005 throughout the country with special focus on 18 States i.e. the States of Himachal Pradesh and Jammu and Kashmir, 8 Empowered Action Group States

(Bihar, Jharkhand, M.P., Chhattisgarh, U.P., Uttaranchal, Orissa and Rajasthan) and 8 North-East States (Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura). The Mission aims at provision of comprehensive and integrated primary healthcare to the people, especially to the rural poor, women and children.

The key strategic interventions under the Mission include positioning of 2.5 lakh Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) in 10 high focus States i.e. Assam, Jammu & Kashmir and 8 EAG States and upgrading of CHCs to a new standard of healthcare namely, Indian Public Health Standard (IPHS) so as to ensure 24X7 quality referral hospital care, inter sectoral convergence of programmes related to Health & Family Welfare, Nutrition, Sanitation & Hygiene etc. at village, district and State level and achieving the Goals of National Population Policy & National Health Policy. The ASHA will mobilize community, women and children for the health related services and also escort pregnant women for institutional delivery under the Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY). The main goals of the NRHM are as follows: provide effective health care to rural population; improve access to health care; enable community ownership and demand for services; strengthening public health system for efficient service delivery; enhance quality and accountability; promote decentralization; mainstream AYUSH and integration with other sectors namely ICDS, nutrition, sanitation & hygiene, drinking water etc.

The NRHM also plans to train and enhance capacity of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to own, control and manage public health services. The Mission also envisages the following roles for PRIs: States are required to commit for devolution of funds, functionaries and programmes for health to PRIs; the District Health Mission should be chaired by Zila Parishad. The DHM will control, guide and manage all public health institutions in the districts namely, sub-centres, PHCs and CHCs; ASHA would be selected by and be accountable to the village Panchayat; Village health Committee of the Panchayat would prepare the village Health Plan and promote intersectoral integration; each sub-centre will have an Untied fund for local action @ Rs.10,000 per annum, which will be deposited in a joint Bank Account of the ANM and Sarpanch. This fund will be operated by the ANM in consultation with the Village Health Committee and PRI involvement in Rogi Kalyan Samitis for good hospital management.

Many States even with unfavourable socio-economic indicators have successfully implemented the Population Stabilisation Programmes bringing down fertility levels. The target of achieving the demographic goals of National Population Policy, 2000 largely depends upon effective implementation population stabilization programmes in the States with high population growth. Urgent and focused interventions are required to be undertaken to address the issues of reproductive and child health care in these States for the attainment of the goals set in the NPP, 2000. The new initiatives like NRHM, RCH-II etc. would provide the right impetus for improving the health and family welfare services, which would bring out a significant improvement in demographic scenario in high fertility states.

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MANAS – PARADISE ON EARTH

- S. Thakur

Somebody had once said of Manas that planet Earth must have looked like it (Manas) before man set his foot on the planet. Nothing can be a better description of or a more fitting tribute to the magnificent Manas, which is a manifestation of nature in her unblemished self. Combining in itself pristine forests, breathtaking scenery, and a bewildering variety of wildlife and flora – a rare occurrence anywhere on Earth – Manas is indeed a paradise.

A night's stay at the quaint forest bungalow at Mathanguri, the most preferred tourist spot in Manas, could be as exhilarating an experience as one can hope to get in any jungle. With the roar of the gushing Manas that bifurcates into two channels just below the bungalow atop the hillock, and the vast expanses of the Bhutan hills providing the backdrop, it is a true Eden where you can feel your senses opening up to the loveliness and the wonders of the world of nature.

Nestled in the Himalayan foothills of Bhutan, the Manas National Park spreads over an area of 519.77 sq km. The national park is the core area of the sprawling Manas Tiger Reserve, which encompasses an area of 2,837 sq km running into five districts – Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Barpeta, Nalbari, and Darrang. The 19 Reserve Forests within the Tiger Reserve also forms the Park's buffer zone.

The significance of Manas lies on many counts. Considered among the best national parks in the world, Manas is also a Tiger Reserve, a Biosphere Reserve, an Elephant Reserve and a World Heritage Site. A prime tiger habitat that harboured the country's second highest concentration of the great cat till the late 1980s with a count of 125, it is one of the earliest Tiger Reserves of the country, formed in 1973. In view of its pristine natural eco-system representing the overall biota of the region, it was elevated to a Biosphere Reserve in 1989 under the UNESCO's Man and Biosphere (MAB) Programme. It was recognized as a World Heritage Site in 1985 as a site of outstanding universal value.

Among the oldest protected areas in the State, Manas has a long conservation history. It used to constitute, and still constitutes, a part of the largest conservation area in the region with contiguous forests in Bhutan (Royal Bhutan National Park) in the north and the Buxa Tiger Reserve of West Bengal in the west. The Sonkosh river in Kokrajhar district marks its official boundary in the west. Towards the east, the Manas Tiger Reserve extends up to the Dhansiri river in the district of Darrang. The total east-west length of the Tiger Reserve is 230 km.

The conservation process of Manas began during the days of British rule in India. The British were quick to realize the importance of protecting these virgin forests, and soon Manas was accorded the position of a Proposed Reserve Forest (PRF). That was in 1905, the same year that Kaziranga also got the PRF label. After it became a Reserve Forest (RF) in 1908, it was upgraded to a Wildlife Sanctuary in 1928, covering an area of

360 sq km (Manas and North Kamrup RFs). It was further extended to 391.02 sq km in 1955. In spite of it being a mega biodiversity hotspot, Manas had to wait for over six decades to attain the status of a National Park, in 1990. Its area was enhanced to 519.77 sq km with the addition of Panbari, Kahitama and Kokilabari Reserve Forests.

Manas is one place where one can see the big five of the Indian jungles – the tiger (the lion is found only at Gir in Gujarat), the elephant, the rhino, the buffalo, and the gaur. The other major predator of the Indian jungles, the leopard, is also quite common at Manas.

Few protected areas can match Manas in its diversity of wildlife, which boasts of the highest number of protected species in India with over 40. Home to as many as 21 of the 41 Schedule I (Indian Wildlife Protection Act 1972) species of mammals, the Manas National Park is the haven of 60 mammals, 42 reptiles (11 families), over 370 birds, seven amphibians (five families), 54 fishes (19 families and nine orders), and over 100 insects.

Of the 21 endangered mammal species found in Manas, some, such as the pigmy hog, the hispid hare and the golden langur are endemic to it. In fact, Manas boasts of the only viable population of the pigmy hog, the smallest and rarest wild boar, anywhere in the world.

The avian population in Manas is as impressive as other life forms found in abundance in the Park. Of the 370-odd species of birds, ten are listed in the Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act. These flying seraphs, with their lustrous plumage and animated chirping, lend a unique touch of colour and vibrancy to the forest.

Since time immemorial the abundance and diversity of wildlife in Manas has been the stuff of folklores and legends. It has few parallels in wildlife diversity as well as scenic beauty. Celebrated as the abode of tigers, leopards, bears, elephants, rhinos, buffaloes, gaurs and as many as five species of deer, Manas has come to symbolize the most vibrant wilderness in the State.

The life-giving Manas river, to which the National Park owes its name, is the largest Himalayan tributary of the mighty Brahmaputra. Emerging out of the rugged mountainous terrain of Bhutan, the Manas splits into two major channels – the Beki and the Hakua -- besides a number of smaller streams as it enters the plains of the reserve at Mathanguri. These channels, together with other smaller rivers running through the reserve, carry enormous amounts of silt and rock from the foothills. In the process, they create alluvial terraces, comprising deep layers of deposited rock and detritus overlain with sandy loam and a thin layer of humus, so essential for the forest.

Floods, though occur regularly, have not been much of a problem in Manas. This is because of its topography that gently slopes towards the south from the north. The area of the Beki basin towards the west of the Park, is inundated during the monsoon, but rarely for long due to the sloping relief. Mortality of wildlife due to flood has been negligible, as animals are able to take refuge on the islands of high ground.

While the famed Kaziranga National Park celebrated its centenary this year in a grand and befitting manner, few are aware of the fact that the Manas National Park too

has a history as old as that of Kaziranga, and its hundredth anniversary coincided with Kaziranga's, and is scheduled for November this year. By no means less endowed and less exciting than Kaziranga in terms of biodiversity (in fact, Manas' biodiversity is regarded as richer), Manas has been relegated to the background ever since it was affected by the decade-long social unrest from the late 1980s that did substantial harm to its flora and fauna. The faunal life of Manas was the worst hit, as hundreds of animals – elephant, deer, rhino and tiger—fell prey to poachers, insurgents, and all sorts of wrongdoers. The tiger population plummeted to 64 (1997 count) from a peak of 125 in the late 1980s; almost the entire rhino population (around 100) was wiped out; the over 1,000-strong elephant population dwindled to half that figure, as did the buffalo population. The disturbance also resulted in the UNESCO declaring Manas as a 'World Heritage Site in Danger', and unfortunately, that status still continues.

But things have taken a turn for the better since the past couple of years, with tourists once again flocking this wonderland of nature in large numbers. The last tourist session, in fact, had witnessed a record arrival of tourists.

“The arrival of tourists in large numbers is indicative of the fact that normalcy has returned to Manas. It is a very positive development, as it sends out the right signal to the everyone that Manas is a safe place to visit,” Abhijit Rabha, Field Director of Manas, says.

The security-related infrastructure of the Park too remains an area of grave concern, as most of the camps and beats destroyed during the disturbed period are yet to be restored. This is of utmost importance, as any further delay in revamping the Park's security could cause irreparable damage to its forest wealth.

That Manas was able to withstand the fury of the disturbed period is a tribute to its unique vegetation, which has tremendous regenerating, self-supporting and self-sustaining capacity due to the high fertility index.

The unique location of Manas at the confluence of Indian, Ethiopian and Indo-Chinese realms makes it one of the richest biodiversity areas in the world. Adding to the grandeur of Manas is its spectacular landscape with a variety of habitat types that support diverse fauna.

While the Manas National Park still contains most of its pristine forests, the Tiger Reserve has witnessed widespread degradation over the last two decades. On the eastern side, Chirang, Kachugaon, Haltugaon, and Aie Valley have lost as much as 50 per cent forest cover. On the east, Kalingduar, Dadhara, Batabari, Subankhata, Daranga, Mora Pagladia, Barnadi sanctuary, etc., have suffered large-scale deforestation.

The poor economic condition of the fringe villagers and their dependence on Manas for fuel wood and animal fodder, the ever-increasing human as well as cattle population, the abysmal lack of awareness about the need to preserve a biodiversity hotspot like Manas, and the protected area restrictions that took away the villagers' traditional rights on the forest, are the socio-economic factors that have had an adverse effect on conservation in Manas.

“Traditional rights of the forest villages were lost with the declaration of protected area. The restrictions imposed had a negative impact on the villagers who were already poor, and gradually they got more alienated. The manifold increase in human and cattle populations over the years has also contributed to the worsening of the conflict situation,” Rabha says.

The poor security scenario at Manas is compounded by the constant friction between the fringe villagers and the Park authorities, which often assumes the ugly form of downright hostility and confrontation.

Taking advantage of their poverty, gangs operating from outside often engage the villagers in large-scale illegal activities like poaching and tree-felling. Little effort has been made by any agency (both government and non-government) to better the lot of the fringe villagers or to create awareness about conservation. The concept of conservation through participatory development is yet to gain grounds in Manas, with the Kokilabari area being the notable exception.

While the relationship between the fringe villagers and the Forest Department is not exactly healthy in most parts of Manas, the Kokilabari area under the Bhuyanpara Range has shown that it is not difficult to work hand in hand, when conservation becomes the common objective. The concept of people’s participation in the conservation process, though still at its nascent stage in Manas, has definitely made a head start at Kokilabari, thanks to the initiative of an enterprising NGO called Maozigendri Eastern Manas Eco-Tourism Society, the local Chapaguri-Kokilabari unit of the All Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU) and some innovative thinking on the part of the Park authorities.

The impact made by the combined effort of the three is visible on many fronts. Poaching and tree-felling in and around Kokilabari has come down to a trickle, a number of poachers have surrendered, the soured relationship between the department and the fringe villagers has softened a lot, and most significantly, there is now a growing awareness about the need to protect, preserve and promote Manas.

The transformation at Kokilabari is nothing short of the amazing, considering the fact that it was among the most vulnerable and disturbed areas in Manas, where killing of animals and tree-felling were rampant till very recently. The last rhino of Manas was killed in Kokilabari three years back. It used to be a major hub of trade in animal body parts as well. The notoriety of poachers from Kokilabari was such that they were “hired” to hunt even in faraway forests like the Kaziranga National Park.

The NGO consisting of local educated youths was formed about three years back under the initiative of the ABSU and with active support of the Park authorities. Since then, it has been instrumental in creating awareness among the villagers and putting a check on the anti-social elements that had been exploiting Manas.
