

Issue Date: Thursday , September 24 , 2009

PROTECTING THE BEAUTIFUL AND ENDANGERED CREATURES

The government must support community-based projects in the forests of Assam to ensure the Golden Langurs' survival, writes **Ashish Kothari**



A Golden Langur in the Kakoijana reserved forest

"They're just about 50 metres away, let's go quietly," whispered my colleague as we peered through the dense foliage of the forest. Earlier that morning, rain had driven away the summer heat, but it was still humid and sweaty. Every once in a while, we had to flick or pull off a leech as we trudged up a steep slope.

We were in the Kakoijana reserved forest of western Assam, and on the lookout for the Golden Langur. I had heard that several villages here were involved in protecting the forest and its wildlife, and was on a visit with Arnab Bose of the NGO, Nature's Foster.

The sound of rustling leaves up ahead stopped us on our tracks. Arnab spoke quietly into his GPS set, listened to the response, and told me excitedly, "They're just ahead of us, 12 of them on a tree, let's go very quietly, this troop is rather shy. Kartik is standing just under them."

Kartik Oraon, I'd learnt earlier, was a local resident, an *adivasi* boy, who had been trained by Nature's Foster to use a GPS set while tracking the langurs. I was keen to find out more about him, for he must surely be one of the few *adivasis* in the area to have this skill. But first, the langurs. A few steps further up, we broke into a small clearing, and Arnab pointed up through the foliage. "There's one," he said. A langur was sitting on its haunches high up on a tree branch, looking down intently at us. Its jet-black face contrasted with its distinctly golden body, the fur glistening in the sunlight that had just pierced through the clouds. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw a movement on its right, and suddenly a crash, as one of the langurs jumped onto a lower tree branch. The other langurs too decided we were a bit suspicious-looking, and one by one, they all scampered across branches and jumped down to a tree below and out of our vision. Within a couple of minutes, they were all gone. But by then, I have had my first good look at these beautiful creatures.

Beautiful and endangered. The Golden Langur (*Trachypithecus geei*), found only in Northeast India and Bhutan, is threatened by hunting and the destruction of its forested habitat. It is on the list of endangered species of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, and on Schedule 1 (completely protected species) of the Wildlife (Protection) Act of India. Which is why any method of protection of the species is well worth looking into.

As the sound of the langurs moving through the vegetation died down, Kartik appeared. He had been tracking the troop since early morning, partly to help us locate it, and partly to continue his observations of langur feeding behaviour as part of a scientific study that Nature's Foster is conducting. He is one of the 12 local youths trained in such research, which they combine with their own considerable local knowledge to good effect.

Kartik is one of several villagers passionately involved in protecting the langurs and their habitat. Theirs is a story that is familiar to anyone working on community-based conservation in India. The forests of the Kakoijana hill range, once thick and diverse, had been decimated by a combination of factors.

In the late 1960s, the forest department cleared a part to raise a commercial teak plantation. Then, in the early 1980s, the Assam agitation (against outsiders settling in the state) created conditions for the absence of any responsible agency in the area, and elements within and outside the villages looted the forest for quick returns. By the latter half of the 1980s, much of the hill was virtually naked, and only then did the villagers at its foot realize the consequences — water sources drying up in summer, yet flooding in the monsoons. Not to mention serious shortages of fuel, fodder, and other forest products, and conflicts with wildlife moving into croplands in a desperate search for food.

In the late 1980s, the residents of Ujan Rabhapara decided to take matters into their own hands. They resolved in front of their temple not to cut any tree, and to help regenerate the degraded forest through various methods, including through plantations. Thanesar Rabha, an elder who was then the president of the village development committee, says, "The idea spread to other villages also, as everyone realized that a forest-less future was bleak."

In the mid-1990s, members of Nature's Foster heard about the villagers' initiative while on a nature education trip to the area. This was also the time they found the presence of some Golden Langurs. Excited, they and other NGOs proposed that the area be declared a wildlife sanctuary. But simultaneously, on discussions with villagers, they realized that a community-based approach may work better than a legal designation managed by the forest department, which had inadequate resources and political will. Thus began a quiet, slow process of engaging with the local communities, addressing not only conservation issues but also problems of livelihoods, agricultural production, water, health, and education. As Arnab explained, the going was far from easy. The timber and poaching mafia had to be tackled, and the forest department won over to a community-based approach. There was also the cultural challenge of dealing with very diverse local communities — the hill range is surrounded by 28 villages with Rabha, Bodo, Garo, Koch Rajwansi,

Santal, Nepali, and Bengali (Hindu and Muslim) communities.

As we drove around the 1,724 hectare hill range, the effects of this work were clearly visible. Where the effort has started two decades back, as at Ujan Rabhapara, the entire hillock is forested. Where it is more recent, the lower slopes are regenerating well but the higher parts are still barren as outside forces manage to get there to cut trees. The forests protected by Siponsila, Chorapara and Jhakuapara-II Pahartali (where we saw the langur troop) are amongst the densest and the most diverse, partly due to their relative inaccessibility.

Most villages joined the effort in this millennium. Hence many areas are only regenerating now. There is the added problem of the domination of teak, an exotic species originally introduced by the forest department into Assam. Nevertheless, wildlife appears to have been benefited significantly, if the langur population is anything to go by. A 2008 census yielded over 488: though there is no comparable figure for the 1980s, local and NGO accounts suggest that the numbers were far smaller. Recently, four langurs from Kakoijana even crossed over human-dominated areas and settled in another hill (Bhumeswar), about 10 kilometres away, perhaps an indication that parts of Kakoijana are reaching saturation level.

Other wildlife to be seen constitute the pangolin, barking deer, crab-eating mongoose, Rhesus Macaque, and over 150 species of birds. Nature's Foster is hopeful that hornbills, once common here, will repopulate the area once the trees grow taller and provide nesting habitat.

Villagers use various means of protection with orally transmitted or written rules. No live tree is allowed to be cut, but fallen branches can be collected. No hunting is permitted. Violators are fined amounts ranging from Rs 51 to Rs 5,001.

A very recent initiative by the villagers provides hope that the community-based conservation project will sustain itself. In 2008, the villagers formed the Pateshwari Golden Langur Green Conservation Foundation with help from Nature's Foster. This consists of 16 villages; the other 12 are also forming a federation (having differed from the first 16 over the name, but otherwise pledging to work together). The federation presents a unified front to external forces and agencies, and helps to resolve inter-village issues. This is especially important in situations where the villagers are threatened by the timber and poaching mafia, as has happened with Kartik Oraon and the residents of Siponsila while patrolling the forests.

The federation is also currently trying to understand the legal status of the area, to discuss how it can get a more secure backing for its initiative. Fortunately, Nature's Foster and other NGOs have dropped the demand to make it a wildlife sanctuary, realizing that the top-down restrictions and management prescriptions that this will lead to may alienate the villagers. The communities now need help in understanding the pros and cons of various conservation categories under the wildlife act (conservation reserve and community reserve), biodiversity act (biodiversity heritage sites), forest act (village forests), forest rights act (community forests), or other national and state laws. They are clear that they want the helping hand of the forest department, but not its dominating influence. So far, the department has reportedly not interfered in the community efforts, and is present in about a dozen villages with joint forest management projects on lands below the hill. But this and other government departments, as also NGOs, need to help the villagers with livelihoods and employment opportunities, desperately needed in many of the settlements. They must also help tackle the challenge of local caste, gender and class inequities (by bringing more women into the federation decision-making committee, for instance).

One hopes that the government will continue to see the wisdom of supporting Kakoijana as a community-led effort through sensitive need-based inputs. In fact, Kakoijana is only one of the several community-based initiatives for conserving the Golden Langur and its habitat, others being the well-known Chakrashila Wildlife Sanctuary, and some parts of the buffer area of the Manas Tiger Reserve. In recognizing and supporting these initiatives, Assam's agencies will join a growing league of governments, NGOs, and donors who are recognizing the role of community conserved areas in securing the future of nature and wildlife.

The author is with Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group, Pune

