Over one hundred years of solitude: History of the Hollongapar Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary

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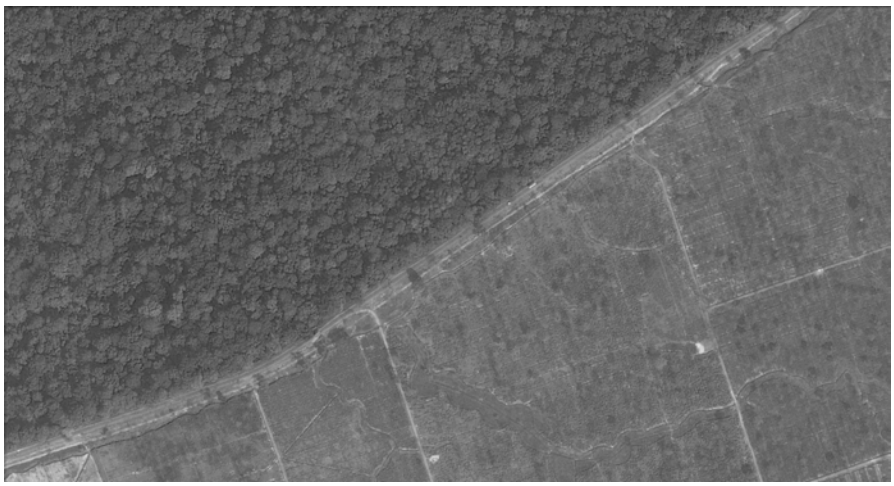

In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Márquez pens an interesting story that unfolds in a mythical place known as Macondo, somewhere between the mountains and the Caribbean Sea. It is the saga of a family trapped in solitude, both in time and space, and a wonderful account of their adventures and misadventures.

Much before this classic took the world by awe, several seas away in a remote corner of another continent, a similar tale had been composed. The writers of that multi-authored epic came from the Far West to change the fate of a *terra incognita*, where wilderness abounded and where a thriving civilization had long collapsed, unceremoniously and tragically. It was the story of an unbroken swathe of jungle nestled in the flood-plain of the Brahmaputra river in Assam and its transformation into parcels of land, surrounded by a brewing landscape. And it was the story of a family of several souls, whose fate was sealed forever in one such sliced piece: Hollongapar and its primates who continuing solitude of over one hundred years may last to perpetuity.

However, unlike the fate of Macondo's founding Buendia family—one that eventually perishes after six tumultuous generations—Hollongapar's family has successfully fought for and earned their lives against all odds. And in contrast to Úrsula's (the matriarch of the Buendia family) fear of the potential birth of a pig-tailed child in her family—one that eventually comes true at the end of the story—the pigtails of Hollongapar are struggling to further their lineage, ironically for the same reason—an incestuous legacy. Both are the products of extreme transgressions—one against culture and the other against nature. However, if one peeled the layers of the history of Hollongapar's forests, one would find the seed of this story formed long ago, the year 1687 to be precise. An Ahom king, Gadadhar Singha, mobilized several thousands of *dhods* (lazy persons) of his kingdom—who pretended to be sluggish in order to skip compulsory royal service—to construct a 212-km road through this forest that connects Kamargaon in Golaghat to Joypur in Dibrugarh. Aptly named the Dhodar Ali (the sluggard's road), the road came to delineate the southern periphery of Hollongapar. Perhaps a narrow brown strip of mud and dirt at the time, but a wide, rolling black belt of asphalt years later; today it separates two worlds—one that supports nature's and other nourish and nurture state's economy.

The Bhogdoi stream on the eastern flank of the forest, which was deepened to channelise the surplus water of the Disoi River and prevent flooding; also separates the forest from the small dusty and bustling town of Mariani today.

These forests once were an important resource for the Ahom kings, who could fall back on them whenever they needed timbers to build boats, an indispensible component of their naval fleet. Riding on their strength, the naval infantry of the Ahom kingdom had been able to defeat invaders as formidable as the Mughals. Just as the *sal* and teak forests of North and South India won the British Crown many a battle, so did these forests for the Ahoms.

Arriving in the Upper Brahmaputra valley at the behest of the Ahom king to aid the kingdom in defeating Burmese invaders, the British had no

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intention of staying back in a land full of "inferior" jungles, wild beasts and a sparse human population; it was not tempting enough to seduce their colonial lust. Then, someone struck 'green gold' in the valley. And a war against these forests began. Forgotten were their glorious contribution to Assam's past and the promise they held for its future. Use of these vast forests now took the form of desecration rather than veneration. The coming of the colonial British changed the historical trajectory of Hollongapar forever.

One fine morning in the late nineteenth century in Hollongapar, a pair of gibbons wakes up from deep slumber. The sun had just emerged from the horizon and the cool breeze of the morning had a nostalgic feel. The pair couldn't help themselves but sing. A song of freedom, of contentment, and of a carefree future. A song of the deep rainforest! Swinging from one branch to another, they looked ethereal. They traversed through the canopy, merging with the dappled sunlight and leaves as they went further.

Suddenly everything turned quiet! The breeze carried an unfamiliar whiff, the sun seemed to blaze harder; they had reached the end of a seemingly eternal freedom.

They found the forest before them had gone. The umbilical strip of trees that kept it connected with the swathe of forests on the other side had been snapped, replaced by numerous saplings of a shrub the world would later know and cherished as Assam tea.

Since that eventful day when they had discovered a new world beyond the tree line, the gibbons watched tea saplings coming into their jungle from every direction. By the time the pair reached a ripe old age, the saplings which now became bushes, had enveloped the entire forest within it. Their hearts knew there was no escape from this isolation.

The forest kept shrinking further until one day, it suddenly stopped. Several khaki-clad white men were seen in the forest, clearing edges, erecting pillars and measuring its periphery. The gibbons watched, uncomprehendingly. Their home even got a new name—the Hollongapar Reserve Forest. That was the summer of 1881.

Only last winter their son had left the family and was seen courting a female in the vicinity of the group. Soon, one more pair of songs added to the forest orchestra, a sign that their son had successful wooed his lover. They might now have a second generation roaming in the remaining forest. But unbeknownst to them, somebody had already decided their fate. Nobody knew who saw it first–some say it was the stump-tailed macaques during their foraging tour—a clearing as straight as the trunk of the *hollong* through the middle of the forest. Looking at the unfamiliar bare strip, the oldest female, who was leading the troop, decided to abort the tour and adjusted her troop's route for the rest of the day, never realising it was the start of a new routine that would last forever. Months later, she saw two long 'poles' lying parallel to each other on a raised platform all along the clearing as far as her eyes could see. Their forest was neatly sliced into two unequal parts.

She would never forget the day when a moving beast whizzed passed her with a deafening sound, leaving a trail of black smoke hovering over the forest. The smoke infiltrated the fragrant forest air with its soot and an obnoxious smell that overpowered all senses.

She wondered about the gibbon pair on the other side of the clearing, who would perhaps never been able to free themselves from the clutches of solitude. And she wondered about the rest of the valley, its forests, its creatures, many of them her kin and cousins, and about her own future.

Source: http://siris-archives.si.edu as mentioned in http://tinyurl.com/3szadnc

Illegal logging inside the Dangori Reserve Forest

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With time, the moving beasts called trains made their brief but unpleasant appearances more frequently, carrying away coal, tea and oil from the valley and bringing in dark-skinned people from far away lands. These terrified and fragile looking, near skeletal people arrived in huge numbers and many settled down along the edges of the forest.

Initially, after their arrival, they were seen working in the middle of the bushes, plucking the leaves with their feeble but deft hands. Their dark-skinned bodies and gaunt faces distinct against the light green of the bushes. Men and women, boys and girls, young and old, none rested. Only the toddlers, who slept on the cloth hammocks tied to the unfamiliar *Albizzia* trees amidst the bushes, were free from everything.

Much later, the new people began to come into the forest to collect *outenga*, *dhekia*, bamboo, honey and many other things. First only a few, but slowly hordes of them. Abject poverty, frequent hunger and an uncertain future pushed them deeper into the forest.

The journey these wretched people had made to this 'Promised Land' had been marred by unthinkable miseries. During the sojourn many lost their lives to epidemics that broke out on the ships that sailed the Brahmaputra. Those who discovered the betrayal of the contractors who had lured them with promises of a better future and dared raise their voice, were rested forever at the bottom of the river. Only those who defied everything reached the valley. Shaken and terrified to the core; each one's dream had long died in the arduous journey, each one had already resigned to his fate. Exactly the kind of labourers their white masters were looking for.

Like Paul Robson's Mississippi, Bhupen Hazarika's *Burah Luit* kept ferrying these destitutes into the valley, neither affected by the miseries nor moved by their cries. It flowed relentlessly; at once providing hope by enriching the land with its deposits and eroding the same land as if venting its anger. The poor peasants on its banks were always in a conundrum whether to venerate the whimsical river or be terrified by its might.

India was winding up the third anniversary celebrations of its newly-acquired freedom when the young Soneswar prepared to retire to bed. He had been preoccupied with a single thought the whole day. The river was rapidly approaching his land; if it got washed away Soneswar would have no other livelihood. He knew that his fight against the might of the Brahmaputra was an unequal one and sooner or later, he would have to accept the inevitable. But it hardly occurred to him that it would come so early. That evening, the entire valley shuddered in a tremor that shattered everything including Soneswar's hopes. It was the worst earthquake the valley had witnessed in a century.

The next day, he sensed something strange about the Brahmaputra. The '*Old*' river had surprisingly gathered much strength overnight and was looking mightier than ever before. Within a fortnight, Soneswar had lost his land. He was now one of the many ecological refugees that Brahmaputra creates year after year.

Months later, after the quake, several miles away, the seeming tranquility of the Hollongapar was about to vanish forever. Soneswar was among the first to clear a patch of forest for a new beginning; away from the unpredictable vagaries of nature and in hope for a better future. Many joined him; almost everyone had similar stories to tell. Within a decade or so, Hollongapar was virtually sieged by Madhupur, Lakhipur, Rampur, Fesual, Velleuguri, Afolamukh and Kaliagaon

leaving human footprints everywhere in the rapidly shrinking forest, which retreated to a mere shadow of its past.

As for the gibbons, the stumptails and others, the solitude was nearing eternal.

The final blow came in 1965 when a huge chunk of Hollongapar was taken away to establish several hutments for the Army under the pretext that the nation's safety was paramount. Within that chunk, everything was cleared. The tall *hollong* trees, the thickets of bamboo; the undergrowth of palms, the carpet of *aathubhanga*. Nothing survived the mayhem. The slow loris too could not outpace the human's axe. And the pigtails and the langurs? These fortunate ones were able to pack themselves into the remaining parcel of forest, competing with each other over depleting space and food.

For the last three years, I have watched closely the remaining populations of primates in Hollongapar. The forest has received a promotion for successfully protecting its primates for so many decades: it is now the Hollongapar Gibbon Wildlife Sanctuary —the tall tree and the ape are synonymous with this forest island.

The Dhodar Ali and the railway track have prevailed. The moving beasts still make regular appearances and carry on their tails tea, coal and oil. But it has stopped bringing the dark-skinned souls – known to us today as the "tea tribes". Old Soneswar is still there, still hoping for a better future and struggling to eke out a living on his meager piece of land. The Army camp and the tea gardens are bustling with their usual activities. Only the bushes and the white masters have been replaced but their legacy endures. The old female stump-tailed macaque, one who first saw the railway track, is no more, but her descendants have survived this solitude. But, only a few hundred are left. They still come up to the railway track and still never dare cross it. Unlike their predecessors though, they have to comb the entire forest looking for food and shelter. Even for this, they have competition— with other primates as well as the dark-skinned people who still come inside the forest in huge numbers, pushed by the same century-old forces.

The pair of gibbons on the other side of the railway track have long gone but three other families are still around. They often come to the edge of the forest, sometimes catching a glimpse of their own kind on the other side of the track, instinctively burst into song.

Today, their voices carry more aggression, and perhaps a note of desperation too. But, maybe both of them understand the futility: neither of them will be able to cross this gap to claim other's territory or even to console each other. Although the gap is only a few strides, their separation looks eternal.

In Hollongapar, everything has survived these tumultuous centuries: the animals, the trees, the people, the solitude, the poverty, the hunger, the hope. Except the Assamese macaque, for none have been sighted since 2005. Is it the beginning of the end? Or are *one hundred years of solitude* too soon to write a requiem for Hollongapar and its primates?

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