MANAS is where I lost my heart. The days spent in my childhood village house, playing with my elder brother, smearing our bodies with clay, and enjoying the rustic beauty of the countryside.

Last year, during the rainy season I could manage to visit Manas twice; once during the onset of the monsoon and once towards its end. Manas turns almost inaccessible and formidable to visitors from outside. It is not easy to get permission from the Forest Department to enter Manas during this period. However, I was fortunate to get a chance to visit Manas – this time as a researcher.

I was eagerly yearning for another look at the biodiversity of Manas, its beautiful landscapes, its unparalleled ecosystems, its rivers and rivulets coming down from the hills of Bhutan, the different tribes of people who live near the fringe areas and their simple and effortless lifestyles.

The Manas Reserve, spread out into 2837.31 square km has been demarcated as an Important Birding Area, Elephant Reserve, Tiger Reserve, Biosphere Reserve and Natural World Heritage Site. Many different types of tribes live in this region, namely, Bodo, Assomia, Rava, Koch-Rajbangshi, Garo, Bengali, Saontal, etc, among which the Bodos constitute the majority.

There are three ranges of the Manas National Park in the Manas Tiger Reserve. Its total area is about 500 sq km – Panbari in the west, Bhuinapara in the east and Bansbari in between them. In the north spans the vast hilly area comprising the “Royal Manas”. A safari inside the Panbari range is practically impossible. But Bansbari and Bhuinapara ranges are open for tourists.

The river Beki, the lifeline of the Manas NTR, flows along the western fringe of the Bansbari Range. River Beki and River Hakua are two tributaries of the main Manas River. Beki has gradually been shifting towards the Bansbari Range due to various man-made and natural causes. The banks of the National Park have been eroding every year and in the past 15 years the river has shifted about four kilometres towards the east, towards the Bansbari Range. This yearly shifting of the river is still continuing.

And last year the situation was alarming. A part of the road that ran parallel to the river and leads to Latajhar was fully engulfed by the river as the monsoon set in.

When I visited Manas the second time the monsoon was on the verge of retiring for that year. But the meteorological department did forecast some heavy spell of rains during the middle of October. Near the bank of the river, we discovered the road had been completely washed away. The Beki has been continuously engulfing its banks and is now flowing near the foot of the forest check post at Panchmire. There on a number of lump of clays have sprouted some toadstools.

A herd of wild buffaloes on their journey towards the upper level in the forest. They are preparing themselves for the hardships of the ensuing long and difficult monsoon season.
The locals informed us that the inherent nature of Manas is gradually deteriorating due to the newly constructed dam intended for the two hydroelectric projects – one on Kurichu river and the other on Mangdechu river. These two rivers have joined with the Manas-Beki river system in their downstream. As a result, a large part of the Manas gets flooded whenever excess water is released from these two dams.

The earnings of the local people wane at the end of the long monsoon period spanning five months. Collection of firewood stops completely. The economy relating to the local tourist lodges becomes sluggish. People start a parallel source of income by catching fish in the Beki river along with working in the tea gardens. They also engage in other professions such as rearing cattles, livestock, etc. People swim into the river and collect trunks of trees that come downward from the hills along with the river water. They sometimes even risk their lives to do this. These are used as firewood and are also sold in the local market as per demand.

On the other side, in the Manas mainland the situation becomes grave. The water of the Beki river starts flowing in full swing through the natural streams and inundates the whole region. I came across a concrete bridge on my way to Bhutan where I saw flood water overflowing at a huge speed. Two armed guards remained posted there with sombre faces. Few hours later, at night, came the news that both the precariously maintained approach roads had been washed out by the ferocious flood water.

There are a couple of bungalows known as the Mathanguri Forest Rest House on the lap of the hill at the Bhutan border. On the way to Mathanguri, I noticed that the streams of different sizes had shifted their channels. In some places, the flow of water in the original streams had dwindled considerably. Earlier the flow in this channel was so forceful and tremendous that the concrete bridge over it had got completely washed away. A new bridge had to be constructed. But this year the flow in this channel is almost absent even after very heavy spells of rains as the channel has shifted its route.

As I was coming out of the park, I noticed water flowing through small streams in the deep forest. It was difficult...
to figure out whether the gypsy was moving along the road or not.

We had to wait for two days for the harsh weather to subside. As the water level inside the park was receding, we managed to get permission to enter the park. All the roads towards the park were closed. We could proceed maximum 6 to 7 km with some difficulty along the main road towards Bhutan upto the bridge which recently got washed away.

As the slanting afternoon sunrays beamed over the lines of trees, we noticed a thick layer of sand of about 10 inches and a layer of silt over it accumulated in the areas of the deep forest from where the flood water had subsided.

There is controversy about the floods and the ensuing siltation in the forest. While some say this is beneficial for the ecosystem of the forest, some others opine differently.

The positives are:
1. The fishes in the water bodies of the park proliferate easily. This is due to the fact that they are encouraged to lay eggs in the flowing flood water.
2. As the new and fresh flood water enters, stagnant hyacinths are forced to move away from the water bodies. As a result, migratory birds such as ducks, herons and pelicans find a favourable condition for foraging in the upcoming winter season.
3. Natural qualitative property of the water of the waterbodies is maintained naturally.
4. Siltation due to flood overlays the old and rotten vegetation of the forest floor which helps the new vegetation to grow. A new ecosystem comes up.

But then there are some negatives too:
1. A number of wild animals lose their lives due to the flood water.
2. Incidences of poaching of wild animals increase as poachers take advantage of the helplessness of these poor creatures as they try to flee away from the flood water.
3. Grazing area of the wild animals gets reduced; food for them becomes scarce.
4. When the river channels shift the ecosystem surrounding the old riverbed changes. The depths of the water bodies decrease. They become fragmented, the banks of the large rivers succumb leading to land erosion.
5. The anti-poaching infrastructure is jeopardised as roads and bridges inside the park are damaged.

Researchers have shown that swamp grassland in the Manas has increased slowly and gradually post the 2004 floods. However, parts of the river Manas near Mathanguri have withered and shifted away to some distances as the river Beki has moved towards the park. The siltation due to water logging is increasing every year for different reasons in the downstream of the river Beki. The sandy soil area in the park is increasing. The rivers are carrying chunks of stones from the hills and all these stones are getting deposited in the Bhabar Savanna area in the hills of the northern side of the park. And in the southern side where the depth of the channels is low and where the velocity of floodwater is less fine alluvium deposition occurs.

I sighted a number of herds of elephants in the long swamp grassland climbing upwards on the hills of the eastern side. I also sighted two Rhinos close to the fringe areas. Our forest guard companion immediately sent an SOS to the Beat Office. New life is springing up once again all over Manas. The park is once again making preparations for the upcoming winter seasons.

Innumerable incidents of turmoil and adversities have not been able to put down Manas during the past 111 years. This year too it has emerged victorious.

This is Manas, where I lost my heart.

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(Equipment used – Canon EOS 7D + Canon 500mm f4 IS II L USM + Monopod and Olympus OMD EM-1 + Zuiko 12-40mm f2.8 PRO)

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