

Anjan Baruah is slightly portly, middle aged and has an avuncular aura which belied his actual age. And he always has a *tambool* in his mouth which gave the impression that he is chewing a big wad of gum. *Tambool*, is the word for *paan* but not the kind of *paan* we are used to- this one was basically a small *paan* leaf, with some *choona* and a big piece of uncut, raw (not roasted) *supari*. And having tried it later, I can assure you eating fresh *supari* is not for the uninitiated. It is fine if one just sucks on it, but try biting into it and the head can go into a spin!

Mr. Baruah is our driver for the next 6 days. He picks us up from Guwahati airport and is driving us to Kaziranga National Park. The trip had not started on a good note. At the Delhi airport, we were made to wait in the aircraft for over 2 hours because of dense fog.

We pass Gauhati university – yes, for some reason, the university’s name is still the old one though the city changed its name to conform to the local pronunciation. I had spent a week at the University in 1996. The campus seems to have many more new and swankier buildings now. Even the road from the University to the city has much more habitation now than I recall.

We take the bypass road from the Brahmaputra bridge since the traffic in town is very bad. The bypass though faster, still has many flyovers under construction and so there are many traffic snarls. The city, atleast from the bypass, seems like any other Tier 2 capital city- lots of apartment complexes, big shopping malls and hospitals interspersed with the older shops and houses.

The bypass road leads to the Assam Trunk road which we take to Kaziranga. This road is the road which connects all of Assam, south of the river to Guwahati and so is the lifeline of South Assam. It is a toll road till Nagaon but surprisingly, has little traffic even though this is the road to Tezpur. Tezpur is north of the river and one crosses over the river beyond Nagaon.

We are hungry since it is almost 330 pm. There are many eating places on the way, but Mr. Baruah decides that he knows just the place for us to eat- Hotel Anurag.

From the number of taxis outside the “hotel”, it seems like a popular place. That turns out to be an understatement. There is a huge hall with a large number of tables and chairs cramped in. And each table has multiple patrons. However, the number of

customers inside is still less than the number of employees- there are a large number of young women, all dressed immaculately in saris who are our servers. The kitchen is separated from the eating place by a curtain and when one of the waiters comes out, one can see that there are more cooks inside the kitchen than the servers.

Even though the place seems fairly unhygienic, we console ourselves that since it had so many customers, the food must be fresh because the throughput must be large. More importantly, there seem to be just two items on the menu for lunch- a vegetarian and a non-vegetarian *thali*. A vegetarian *thali* has a bowl full of fragrant rice, two *katoris* of *daal* and literally one spoon each of 3 different vegetables. The non-vegetarian variety has a fish curry instead of one of the *daals*. The quantities seemed odd at first till I noticed that you could always ask for more if you liked one or more of the dishes in the *thali*. This I thought was a great way to reduce wastage. In a sense, they served a tasting menu after which you asked for seconds.

We finish our lunch and so does Mr. Baruah who only now helpfully informs us that the drivers do not have to pay for their food at this place. Reason enough I guess for him to keep us hungry for over 2 hours while we passed innumerable eating places on the way!

After about 4 hours on the road, we enter the boundary of the Kaziranga National Park. It is by now completely dark but the road, despite being an undivided two lane road, is well maintained with reflectors on both sides indicating the trees etc. There are also several animal corridors on the road for which the speed limit is 20 kmph. This, Mr. Baruah tells us, is enforced by speed cameras with a fine of Rs 5000/ for over speeding. However, the cameras are switched off and so we make decent time to reach our destination, Kohora.

We are staying at the Heritage Forest Inspection Bungalow which is located in the Kohora range. The park is divided into 4 zones- Agartuli, Kohora, Bagori and Burhapahar. The Kohora range is the largest. The park is bounded by the Brahmaputra river on the north and small hills to the south. The Inspection Bungalow, though Heritage, was apparently rebuilt in 2015 and is like any other remodeled circuit house- garish furnishings, tiles on the floor, fancy fittings in the bathroom plus a dirty, antiquated kitchen. The place, I am told, is meant only for VIPs.

Mr. Raju, the Liason officer for Kaziranga is waiting for us. We are the guests of the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and hence are given somewhat extra attention. The Bungalow has 5 rooms and is served by 2 waiters, 1 cook and a caretaker. Incidentally, the waiter and the caretaker are also called Raju! The bungalow abuts the Hathikuli Organic tea estate which is quite nice. Just outside the compound, the tea estate has a fancy café which serves and also sells the tea from the estate. The tea, which we tasted, was very good but was exorbitantly priced. The organic label is possibly the reason but I am not enough of a tea connoisseur or an organic food buff to buy it.

The tea estate is quite big and extends for several kilometers along the highway. There is also a tea factory which, like the others I saw on the trip, has a large board outside claiming "No Child Labour". One can also see old, British era bungalows on the estate for the managers and other senior employees. The whole place evokes scenes from the Dilip Kumar film, Sagina Mahato. And in the early morning, with wisps of mist hanging over the tea bushes, it brings to mind Rajesh Khanna walking in a tea garden and singing "Aa jaa O aa jaa.." from the forgettable Shakti Samant film, Anurodh.

Mr. Liason Raju has organized 4 safaris for us- one elephant safari which is apparently a must do and 3 safaris to 3 of the four ranges in the Park. We settled in our rooms and went down to the dining area for a meal of rice, chappatis, dal, mutton and a vegetable.

The next day, we called Mr. Baruah at 6 AM since the elephant safari in the Central Kohora zone starts at 630AM. There is another one at 530 AM but we decided against it. There is a motely crowd of NRIs, Bengalis (of course), some foreigners and a few local Assamese waiting with us. The Park officials check our Adhaar cards- something which always causes immense confusion with the NRIs who try hard to convince that NRIs cannot get an Adhaar card and have to use their OCI cards. The Park officials do not buy this at first but after some back and forth, the matter is somehow settled.

Near the waiting area is a large installation- statues of 3 forest guards and 2 rhinos. A plaque informs us that this was made with the ashes from 2014 rhino horns which were culled to deter poachers. It is hard to imagine 2014 horns producing enough ashes to make such a large installation. What is more, among the 100 odd rhinos that we saw in the Park, possibly 5 were without their horns.

The elephant safari has about 10 elephants taking people on a short tour through the grasslands. The grass is appropriately called elephant grass because it is tall. It has been a few months since the monsoon and so it is quite dry. The whole area is the flood plain of the Brahmaputra and so usually gets flooded during the monsoon. In fact, at various places in the park, there are markings indicating the water level in various years. This also explains why all the buildings in the park are built on stilts.

The safari lasts about an hour during which we did see several rhinos, a wild boar, assorted birds as well as a few deer. Although over the next few days we saw many more animals, including tens of rhinos and dozens of hog deer and swamp deer, the experience on the elephant was memorable.

As we are leaving after the safari, we see that there are about 200 open Gypsy jeeps waiting to enter the park for the morning jeep safari. Since the road is a single lane one, the line of jeeps extends for about a kilometer. This apparently is the peak season for the Park. Looking at the number of jeeps, I wonder how the animals would react to such heavy traffic. The rhinos and the elephants possibly won't really care- but the deer and other smaller animals would be petrified by all the activity.

Later in the morning we go to the Orchid Park which is also in the National Park. The Orchid Park is not just about orchids, though there is a small, but well stocked orchidarium in it. There is also a herbarium with medicinal plants, a bamboo grove with many different varieties of bamboo, a picnic area and several small, one-room displays of local dresses, weapons, musical instruments, spices etc. What is interesting is that there are several women are weaving saris including one who is using a Jacquard loom complete with punch cards. There is also a small performing space where traditional folk dances of the region are performed in the evenings.

This place is that it is owned by a village cooperative. But more importantly, all the people employed are from the village. Thus, at the orchidarium, there are several young men and women, who give you a guided tour explaining everything about orchids. From the information that they seem to have, it is clear that they have undergone some kind of training. This is also true at the herbarium, bamboo grove and other places. This sort of place would have cost a fair amount of money, both to build and maintain- but it seems to be doing well with lots of visitors each of whom is paying 150/ as admission fees.

Trying to find a place which serves something other than “ethnic food” (cognate for the ubiquitous *thali*) is not so easy. We come across a place called John’s Kitchen which looks promising but it is closed. And so we settle for, yes, the *thali* once again at a place called Rhino Café.

Our jeep safari driver is Dulal- a young, taciturn man whose green Gypsy is ten years old. He had started doing the safari business about 4 years ago when he had bought the vehicle from another driver. Seeing the 200 odd jeeps entering the forest in the morning, I am not too keen to go to the same range in the afternoon. And so Dulal takes us to a different zone, the western Bagori zone. Here the jungle is a bit dense though there is still a lot of grassland. There are few people in this zone and so one could enjoy the forest in peace. We manage to see dozens of rhinos, both adults as well as rhino calfs. Also a fair number of wild boar, swamp deer, hog deer, wild rooster, elephants, langurs, monkeys, monitor lizard as well as many varieties of birds.

On getting back to the rest house in the evening, we are told that a tiger was spotted in the Kohora zone which we had avoided. And sure enough, like always, there are some new guests at the rest house who tell us, in a smug, gloating tone that they had seen the tiger in the afternoon safari! This is something I have noticed in almost all the National Parks I have been to. There are always people who manage to see the tiger (since almost everyone is there only for the tiger as if the hundreds of other species in the forest simply do not exist) and then gloat about it.

Dulal took us for 3 safaris to three different ranges in the Park. The next morning, we go the Eastern Agaratoli zone which has the wetlands. Being very close to the river, this is supposed to be very good for birding. Interestingly though, we saw more birds in the afternoon at another range than we get to see in the morning in this birding range. However, the forest here is dense and there is not as much grassland as in the other ranges. Driving through the forest, with very few other visitors makes the trip worth it.

For lunch we decide to try our luck again at John’s kitchen which is thankfully open. The eponymous kitchen’s owner is a biker as is evident from all the memorabilia in the restaurant- decals, patches to be put on jackets, photographs of John with his motorcycle on Khardungla etc. He lives in Guwahati but we are told that he visits the place frequently. While we are there, a set of bikers from Mumbai come in there for a

meal. The food, standard food-cart Chinese (what we used to call Hasty-Tasty) is quite a change from the *thali* and is much relished!

Our final safari is now at the Central Kohora zone where thankfully there are fewer jeeps. Since this is the zone where the tiger spotting was done yesterday, our Dulal decides we would stop on the trail where the tiger was seen and wait for it to come out. And so we wait for about an hour. Seeing us, again in a scene I have witnessed at other parks, several jeeps also decide to wait- everyone assuming that the others must know some deep secret about the whereabouts of the tiger!

The jungle is silent except for occasional jeeps which are going deeper into the forest. We do spot a few birds and at one point, hear what seems like an alarm call from the hog deer but no show. Since it was getting dark, we decide to go back.

As we drive back, we see a bunch of jeeps standing near a clearing. The view is that of a water body some distance away. And there it is- a herd of deer, frozen by fear, while a tiger, with a fresh kill in its mouth pacing around the water looking for a place to enjoy its meal. The sun is setting and the play of orange light on the water with the forest at the back and the herd of deer makes for fascinating viewing. The tiger though is only faintly visible to the naked eyes but quite clear with binoculars.

We leave early next morning for Shillong. At Mr. Baruah's insistence, we again stop at Anurag Hotel for a meal on our way since the drive is long. Near Guwahati, we turn off towards Shillong. The 4 lane road is very good. For several kilometers, we drive along the border of Assam and Meghalaya with Assam on one side of the road and Meghalaya on the other. The difference between the two is something which will strike us throughout our trip.

The houses in the villages in Assam that we saw on our way are almost all made of bamboo plastered with mud. But more importantly, the villages give an impression of squalor and destitution- something I have seen while driving through Eastern UP villages. There are of course a few pucca buildings in every village, but these are mostly government buildings- schools, primary health centers etc. Even the roadside shops seem to be dingy and dirty.

The villages in Meghalaya on the other hand seem quite clean. The houses, though quite small are all brick and cement. But interestingly, there is no sign of squalor and the roads, the lanes as well as other public spaces seem clean.

It is time for a late lunch and once again, Mr. Baruah decides where we need to stop for a meal, though this place is a lot cleaner and offers somewhat more variety than a *thali*. Close to Shillong, we consult Google maps and suggest to him that he should take a shorter route into town. But Mr. Baruah insists on taking the longer route since there would be less traffic. Clearly, he thinks that GPS technology is for novices and cannot supplement his years of driving on this route. As it turns out, there is a funeral procession ahead of us and it takes us twice as long to get to our hotel.

Taj Vivanta is located in the center of town. Just next to the Police Bazar which is a cross between Karol Bagh and Connaught Place. We go out for a meal at night to savor some Khasi cuisine but it seems that all the eating places are full. This is the holiday season especially since Christmas is big in Meghalaya which is 70% Christian. Even at 8 pm, it seems all the youngsters in Shillong are out partying here. We settle for some Chinese food at a nearby restaurant which is clearly not as popular with the locals and so manage a table.

In the morning I go for a walk near the hotel. The central square opposite the hotel which was the hub of all the activity last night is still filled with people. But these are tourists and locals who are trying to find a taxi to take them to various places in Meghalaya as well as to Guwahati. The taxi drivers are not just the locals but also Sikhs, Biharis and also Bengalis. There are several tables laid out around the square where breakfast is being served for the hungry passengers- everything from aalu paranthas to luchi-aalu as well as rice and pork curry. The stalls are run by people from other states and not just the locals.

The streets, even around this busy part of town are fairly clean of garbage. The cleaners are busy early morning as I notice on my walk. There are almost no Uncle Chips wrappers or indeed Shikhar satchets to be found on the roadside. In fact, unlike most hill stations, I did not notice any place where garbage had been dumped on a hillside next to the road.

The next day we drive to see the Sacred Forest and Cherapunji. The drive, unlike the one from Shillong is along fairly deserted roads. We drive along the crests of several

hills, then go down, cross a small river and then climb up to another series of crests. The view is spectacular with wooded, green hillsides and deep gorges. Mr. Baruah points out the plains in the distance and informs us that that is Bangladesh. He also tells us that most of the garments sold in these parts are smuggled from Bangladesh, which of course is one of the largest exporters of garments in the world. This makes sense since even in small hamlets throughout our trip, we saw young men and women wearing fashionable clothes of global brands. Meghalaya it seems is a large market for seconds from the exporters of Bangladesh.

After driving for about 30 kilometers, we reach a fork with one road going to Cherapunji and the other to our destination, the village of Mawphlang. The Sacred Forest is a short distance from the village. The village, once again looks very clean and well maintained. There is a barrier with a ticket counter on the road to the Forest. A local girl is staffing the counter and tells us to show the ticket to the kiosk near the Forest. The person in the kiosk will assign a guide who will take us into the Forest.

Our guide is a young boy from the village who has just finished his school. He asks us to meet him at the entry to the forest. We walk through a rolling meadow to the forest. The scenery around is very serene- rolling meadows with hills at a distance. No wonder the British called Meghalaya the Scotland of the East.

The guide apologizes for the fact that several tourists will have to share a guide since most of the guides have gone to a neighbouring village for the funeral of a headman. He then delivers a short lecture on the anthropology of the Khasi tribe which inhabit the village- it is a matrilineal society where the lineage passes on through the youngest daughter; each village has a "king" who is elected. The king used to come annually to the sacred forest to worship the forest deity and there were an elaborate set of rituals which were followed. These included some ceremonies near the entrance of the forest and then the main ceremony at a clearing inside the forest. The main ceremony included beheading a bull or a goat but now that has been replaced by a rooster. In case certain ill omens were sighted, then the rituals were not performed but some other rituals needed to be done to propitiate the evil spirits.

We go inside the forest to the clearing. The forest is dense with tall oak and other trees as well as a lot of undergrowth. The clearing where the main ceremony takes place has several monoliths where the rituals are carried out. Nothing is to be cut or removed



from the forest- thus for instance, near the clearing, a huge oak tree has fallen because of termite infestation, but has not been removed.

After the mandatory selfies inside the forest, everyone comes out. There is a heritage village under construction near the ticket kiosk- complete with bamboo huts on stilts, communal huts and even a totem pole. The kitsch is like a hybrid of Dilli Haat and Crafts Museum.

The drive to Cherapunji, or Sohra as it is called locally is equally scenic, though the road is now not as good. We pass a village where there is surprisingly a traffic jam- it turns out that the funeral that the guide at the Sacred Forest mentioned was in this village and there seems to be some kind of feast at the "king's" house where people from neighbouring villages or possibly people from the clan are invited.

Mr. Baruah again gives us his expert opinion on Cherapunji- apparently he spoke with some local while parked at the Sacred Forest and it seems that there is nothing to see in Cherapunji itself. However, the place to go to is the Garden of Caves near Cherapunji. We have little option but to go along with his suggestion.

And it turns out to be a wise decision- not just because every tourist in Shillong has decided to visit Cherapunji today but also because the place is very unusual. The parking is full- two buses with Bengali tourists has just arrived. They seem to be engaged in a huge argument amongst themselves which delays our getting the tickets since they are all crowding around the counter.

The toilet here is once again managed by a few local girls. The local population must be highly literate since the sign on the toilet is not the usual – Urinal Rs 10, Latrine Rs 10 but instead, Urinal Rs 10 and Defecation Rs 10!

The Garden is exceptional- one follows a trail with proper signage guiding you from one viewpoint to the next. In all there are 15 of viewpoints which include several natural caves and caverns, a rope bridge, some natural rock formations in various shapes and several waterfalls. It is very well managed with each view point having, a local boy or girl guiding you to the next point.

Our flight from Guwahati is in the evening the next day. We had booked the evening flight since we were told that there could be unexpected traffic jams between Shillong and Guwahati. But we decide to take a chance on the afternoon flight and so leave

Shillong after breakfast. The drive is uneventful till we come to a dam. The two lane road goes over the crest of the dam but one of the lanes is being repaired and so only one way traffic is allowed. The cops at the dam regulate the movement of vehicles, allowing some 100 vehicles to pass from each direction alternately.

It is the other side's turn now and so we park behind a long line of cars. What amazes me is that the cars coming behind us also dutifully park in the same line. My thoughts go back to years ago when I used to drive to Dehradun. On the way, at Suketi Dhanda, there was a railway crossing (now thankfully an over bridge) which was invariably closed when I got there. But, everyone just went ahead and took over both the lanes. This meant that even when the gate opened, there was no way for traffic to move from either direction. No one lost any money betting on the impatience, sense of entitlement and, the stupidity of drivers in the cow belt.

But maybe I had given the people of these parts too much credit too soon since a big SUV goes right ahead and blocks the other lane. Clearing the dam takes about half an hour and soon we reach the outskirts of Guwahati. The bypass road to Guwahati is still not complete and a series of under construction flyovers cause major jams. With every jam, we lose a little bit of hope of catching the earlier flight. Finally we are on the airport road and now fairly confident that we will make it since it is only a couple of kilometers and there is not too much traffic. Mr. Baruah though is less concerned about our catching the flight than with our having lunch and suggests we stop for lunch.

There is no way we could have risked stopping now. So for the first time on this trip, we turn down his suggestion. However, it turns out a little ahead, a dumper truck has overturned blocking both the lanes. The road cannot be cleared since there is no way for a crane to reach the accident site since the road is jammed with vehicles. Maybe it would have been better to take up Mr. Baruah's suggestion to stop for lunch. At least we would not be moaning over our misfortune on empty stomachs!

The crane finally reaches the site and removes the dumper and we reach the airport. While our son rushes to the ticket counter to see if we can change our flight, I need to settle the accounts with Mr. Baruah. True to character, Mr. Baruah had already worked out the amount due and recorded each transaction in a small notebook he carried. Rarely have I met a driver who was so methodical about everything- from driving at a fixed speed no matter how good the road down to keeping meticulous accounts. The

dense forest, the grasslands, the animals and birds were all memorable. But Mr. Baruah was surely one of the major highlights of the trip.

As it turned out, we did manage to change our flight and the flight was on time.