

BALIPARA FOUNDATION

Assam • India

BISWANATH

Sonitpur, Assam



EASTERN HIMALAYAN
NATURENOMICS™ FORUM

INTELLIGENCE REPORT



Intelligence Report of Sonitpur, Assam

Understanding Biswanath

Biswanath is a town and subdivision in the Sonitpur District of Assam. According to the 2011 census, the subdivision has a total area of 1,044 km², comprising 1,037.76 km² of rural land and 6.02 km² of urban area. The literacy rate in Biswanath is 51.43%, with 57.40% of males and 45.24% of females being literate. Assamese is the local language spoken in the region, and the postal code is 737111.



Population

Biswanath subdivision has a total population of 346,624, with 19,145 residing in urban areas and 327,479 in rural areas. The population density is 332.1 people per square kilometer. The subdivision comprises approximately 70,998 households, including 4,454 urban households and 66,544 rural households. The average sex ratio in Biswanath is 1,006 females per 1,000 males, which is higher than the Assam state average of 958. Additionally, the child sex ratio in Biswanath is 1,321 females per 1,000 males, significantly higher than the Assam average of 962.



Literacy

Biswanath Town village boasts a higher literacy rate compared to the state average. In 2011, the literacy rate in Biswanath Town was 86.29%, significantly surpassing Assam's average of 72.19%. Specifically, male literacy in Biswanath Town was 92.23%, while female literacy stood at 80.20%.

As per constitution of India and Panchyati Raaj Act, Biswanath Town village is administrated by Sarpanch (Head of Village) who is elected representative of village. In Biswanath Town village out of total population, 88.80 % of workers describe their work as formal employment or earning for more than six months while 11.20 % were involved in other activities providing livelihood for less than six months.



Biodiversity

The biodiversity of Biswanath is influenced by its location in the Eastern Himalaya, which is considered a biodiversity hotspot. The region's diverse habitats, such as forests, wetlands, and agricultural fields, provide suitable environments for many species of flora and fauna.

Flora: With a diverse array of flora due to its rich climate and ecosystems, the region is home to notable species including Assam's teak and sal, along with various types of bamboo. Medicinal plants such as tulsi and neem are prevalent, while fruits like Assamese orange and pineapple are commonly cultivated. The region also features flowering plants like rhododendrons and orchids, aquatic plants such as water lilies, and various ferns in the forest undergrowth, all contributing to the area's ecological richness.

Fauna: The region's rich biodiversity also extends to its wildlife. Some of the common animal species found in and around Biswanath include One Horned Rhinoceros, Bengal Fox, Indian Flying Fox, Indian Softshell Turtle, Calotes, Royal Bengal tigers, Asian elephants and various species of birds like Great Hornbill, Asian Koel, Red Jungle fowl, Greater and Lesser Adjutant storks, Common Mynah, amongst many others. Other wildlife includes various species of butterflies and reptiles.

The rich biodiversity of the region, particularly in its forests and wetlands, however have been under threat due to habitat loss, poaching, and other human activities. Some of the few notable endangered species found in the region are Assam roofed turtle, pygmy hog, gharial, white winged duck, Bengal florican amongst a few others. Birds of various colours and sizes are also found here including some species of migratory birds.



Indigenous communities in the region

The Assamese community, one of the indigenous ethnic groups of Biswanath, upholds a rich cultural heritage with its unique language and traditional practices deeply rooted in the region's history. The community includes various tribes and sub-tribes, each contributing to the area's cultural diversity. Alongside them, the Bodo and Mishing communities enrich the village's cultural fabric with their distinct languages and customs. The Bengali and Gorkha communities are also present in the surrounding areas. Additionally, the tea tribes, Sonowal Kachari, and Karbi communities, with their own languages and cultural traditions, play a crucial role in the social structure, predominantly through agriculture and allied activities. Recognizing and preserving the rights and cultural heritage of these indigenous groups is essential for fostering sustainable development and promoting biodiversity conservation in Biswanath and its neighboring regions.



Tourism as its main attraction

Biswanath's economy benefits significantly from tourism, largely due to its proximity to Nameri National Park and Kaziranga National Park. Nameri, located about 35 kilometers from Biswanath, offers eco-camping experiences that immerse visitors in its serene forest and riverine environments, making it a popular destination for eco-tourism. Kaziranga National Park, approximately 100 kilometers away, is renowned for its thriving population of one-horned rhinoceroses and offers exhilarating safari experiences amidst its diverse wildlife and expansive grasslands.

The recent addition of Kaziranga National Park to Biswanath has further boosted its tourism appeal, drawing more visitors to the region. This expansion enhances the park's ecological significance and supports local tourism growth. Accommodations such as homestays, resorts, hotels, and guest houses in Biswanath provide a range of lodging options for tourists, generating additional income for local residents and contributing to the area's economic development through eco-tourism.

Although Biswanath's rural economy is primarily based on traditional agriculture and horticulture, there are ongoing efforts to promote sustainable and eco-friendly practices. Initiatives such as organic farming and eco-tourism aim to balance economic development with environmental conservation, ensuring that the town's aesthetics and resources are preserved for future generations.



Rural Economy

Biswanath's economy is predominantly agrarian, with agriculture and related activities at its core. Traditional farming practices dominate, focusing on crops such as paddy, tea, pepper, and a variety of fruits and vegetables. Horticulture is also significant, with the village producing litchis, jamun, bananas, and ginger, which bolster the region's income and provide livelihood opportunities. Additionally, sericulture, handicrafts, and livestock rearing- including dairy farming and poultry, play key roles in the local economy. These activities not only generate income but also meet daily consumption needs for the community.



Rural futures index survey: In-depth socio-economic profiling of Biswanath Town

The Balipara Foundation conducted a comprehensive research survey based on secondary sources, including government documents, newspaper articles, and interviews with local residents. The study aimed to highlight the significant relationship between nature and the economic and cultural well-being of indigenous and rural communities.

Through analyzing these sources, the research explored how the community's interaction with nature has evolved, examining changes in attitudes and the well-being of indigenous farmers and local forest authorities. It also investigated the links between social, economic, and cultural well-being and ecological factors, providing a holistic view of human satisfaction and overall well-being in Biswanath.



Socio-political context

Governance and Administration: The governance and administration of Biswanath, Assam, is structured to ensure effective management and delivery of public services, as well as to maintain law and order in the region. Biswanath falls under the administrative jurisdiction of the Assam state government. The Deputy Commissioner

is the head of the district administration and is responsible for implementing government policies, maintaining law and order, and overseeing development programs. Biswanath district is divided into sub-divisions, each headed by an SDO who manages administrative functions at the sub-divisional level.

The State Police Administration is responsible for maintaining law and order, preventing and investigating crimes, and ensuring the safety and security of the district's residents.

At the Rural Administration, there is Zilla Parishad at the district-level who is responsible for overseeing the implementation of development programs and schemes in rural areas. There are Block Development Officers who head the development blocks within the district and are responsible for implementing rural development programs at the block level. At the local level, are the Gram Panchayats who are responsible for local governance and development activities in villages.

Cultural Diversity: Biswanath is marked by rich cultural diversity, reflected in its array of indigenous communities and their traditions. The Bodos celebrate Bwisagu, known for its traditional music and dance, while the Mishing community observes Ali-Aye-Ligang. The Karbis are known for their Rongker festival and distinctive attire, and the Sonowal Kachari and Deori communities celebrate Bohag Bihu and Bohagiya Bishu, respectively, with unique rituals and crafts. The tea tribes and the Gorkhas contribute to the region's cultural blend, with festivals like Tusu Puja and Dashain. Traditional Assamese cuisine, including rice, fish

curry, and pitha, is complemented by ethnic dishes from various communities. Arts and crafts, such as handloom weaving and bamboo work, add to the cultural richness, while festivals like Bihu, Durga Puja, Eid, and Christmas highlight the region's religious diversity and communal harmony.

Social Structure: The social structure of Biswanath is defined by a tightly-knit community where family and extended kinship connections are fundamental. Respect for elders, adherence to traditional customs, and participation in community gatherings are central to the social fabric of the region.

Infrastructure and Development: Biswanath has made strides in providing essential amenities like healthcare, education, road connectivity, and clean water and sanitation. However, recent construction activities have led to increased air pollution in the area.

Conservation and Environment: The residents of Biswanath maintain a strong bond with nature and actively participate in local conservation efforts. The addition of Kaziranga National Park to the region has boosted employment in related fields. Additionally, NGOs, colleges, and universities are actively involved in raising awareness about conservation.

Discussant topics and key findings

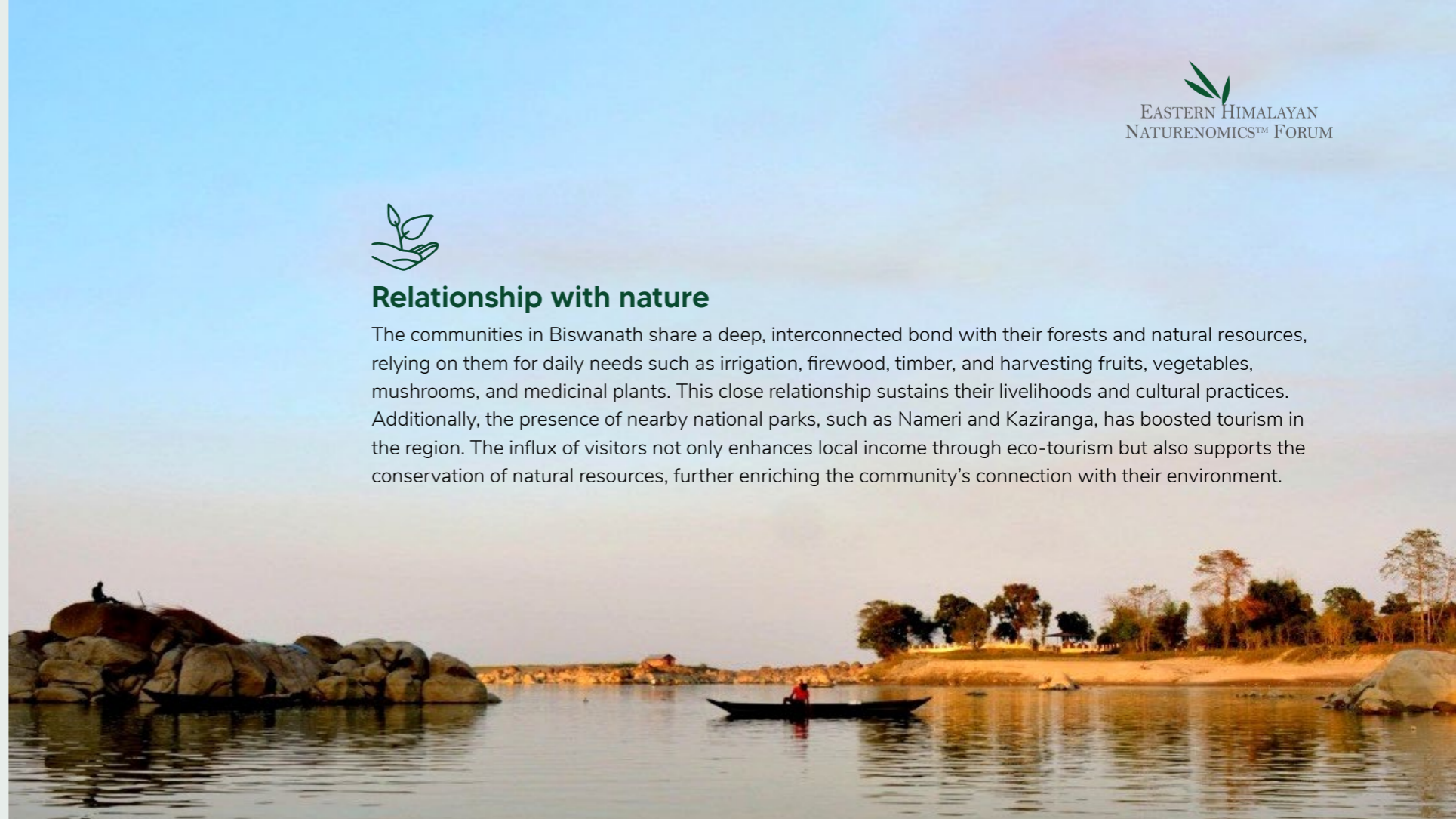


Income and Livelihood

Agriculture and tourism are the economic pillars of Biswanath, providing livelihoods for most of the population. The majority of the local labor force is involved in farming, particularly in paddy and tea cultivation, demonstrating their expertise in maximizing limited land resources. Additionally, around ten to fifteen percent of the community engages in weaving traditional attire and bamboo crafts, offering extra income and helping preserve cultural heritage.

A smaller percentage of the workforce is engaged in sales and other business-related jobs. These ventures cater to local needs and contribute to the economic diversity of the village. Women make up approximately 30% of the village's labor force and play crucial roles in various sectors.

In Biswanath, income and livelihood patterns are closely connected to its rural environment and cultural diversity. The community's dependence on agriculture, tourism and traditional skills, along with the active involvement of women, shapes a distinctive economic landscape that mirrors the vibrant heritage of an Eastern Himalayan town.



Relationship with nature

The communities in Biswanath share a deep, interconnected bond with their forests and natural resources, relying on them for daily needs such as irrigation, firewood, timber, and harvesting fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, and medicinal plants. This close relationship sustains their livelihoods and cultural practices. Additionally, the presence of nearby national parks, such as Nameri and Kaziranga, has boosted tourism in the region. The influx of visitors not only enhances local income through eco-tourism but also supports the conservation of natural resources, further enriching the community's connection with their environment.



Deforestation patterns

In Biswanath, traditional shifting cultivation has significantly contributed to deforestation, resulting in soil degradation, reduced groundwater levels, and decreased biodiversity, negatively impacting both local communities and wildlife. The problem is exacerbated by infrastructure development, illegal logging, and the conversion of forested land for agriculture and other uses. These challenges highlight the urgent need for sustainable land-use practices and robust conservation strategies to combat deforestation in the region.



Climatic conditions of the region

Biswanath, Assam, has a subtropical climate with warm, humid summers and cooler, pleasant winters. It experiences significant rainfall during the monsoon season from June to September, with annual precipitation ranging from 2,000 mm to 3,000 mm. The region faces high humidity throughout the year, particularly during the monsoon. Additionally, Biswanath is prone to annual floods, which are caused by heavy monsoon rains and river overflow, impacting agriculture, infrastructure, and local communities.

Establishing agricultural intervention models for Biswanath that focus on flood resilience is crucial. These models should incorporate flood-resistant crop varieties, elevated planting techniques, and improved drainage systems to mitigate the impacts of annual floods. Comprehensive research assessments should guide the development of these models, ensuring they are tailored to the region's specific climate and flood patterns. Implementing such strategies will enhance crop yields, reduce damage from flooding, and improve overall agricultural productivity in Biswanath.



Climate Vulnerabilities

Biswanath, like many other regions, faces several climate vulnerabilities that impact its environment and communities. The town being situated at the bank of Brahmaputra river, makes it susceptible to floods and soil erosion during the monsoon season, posing risks to infrastructure and livelihoods. While the monsoon brings abundant rainfall, water scarcity can become a concern during the dry season, affecting agricultural practices and daily water needs. Deforestation and habitat degradation contribute to biodiversity loss, disrupting the delicate ecological balance and affecting local flora and fauna. Changes in climate patterns also impact agricultural productivity, leading to crop failures and potential food security challenges. Additionally, climate variability can affect human health and may exacerbate existing health issues. Biswanath's tourism sector, being dependent on weather conditions and natural beauty, can also be sensitive to climate variability. To address these vulnerabilities, sustainable land-use practices, biodiversity conservation, and climate-resilient infrastructure are crucial for building resilience and adapting to the changing climate. It is essential to consider these vulnerabilities and implement appropriate measures to safeguard the well-being of town and its residents.



Transport and communication

Biswanath is accessible by road, with well-maintained motorable roads linking it to nearby towns and cities. The nearest major town is Tezpur, about 30 kilometers away, and Guwahati, the largest city in Assam, is approximately 250 kilometers away. Regular bus services and shared taxis connect these routes, serving both locals and visitors.

The nearest airport is Tezpur Airport, located about 30 kilometers from Biswanath. From the airport, taxis or pre-arranged transportation services can be used to reach Biswanath.

The nearest major railway station is Biswanath Chariali Railway Station, which is well-connected to other major cities. Taxis and shared vehicles are available at the station for convenient travel to and from Biswanath.



Our engagement in Biswanath

The Balipara Foundation, in collaboration with Assam Forest Department, Government of Assam, Kaziranga National Park, and Wildlife Conservation Trust, hosted the Regional Assam Eastern Himalayan Naturenomics™ on 27th-28th June 2024. The Forum, titled "Safeguarding The Natural Assets : Insights from Forest Rangers and Guards in Protected Areas," took place over two days at the State Institute of Panchayat and Rural Development in Biswanath Chariali, Assam.

The Forum offered foresters, guards, and rangers a platform to share their experiences in protecting biodiversity amidst climate challenges. It highlighted their innovative solutions and conflict management skills, showcasing how they address climate-related issues while being inspired by Assam's rich species diversity. Their stories underscored their deep connection to the environment and commitment to its preservation. The Forum celebrated their achievements and provided valuable insights into practical biodiversity conservation strategies in challenging conditions.

One forest guard shared, "I come from the river island of Majuli, and while on duty, I witnessed the beauty of river dolphins for brief moments of 20-30 seconds. Their beauty mesmerizes me, and I am proud to contribute to their preservation and protection."

A key takeaway from the discussions was the importance of balancing personal well-being with species protection. Given that foresters and guards frequently face emergencies, it's crucial to address their specific challenges. To enhance their ability to handle such situations, basic training on first aid, CPR, and emergency response to incidents like heart attacks and injuries is essential. In response, the Wildlife Conservation Trust (WCT) organized a one-and-a-half-day training program focused on trauma management techniques covering various emergency scenarios such as injuries from animal or human attacks, vehicular accidents, falls, bites from snakes or scorpions, burns, heat strokes, high fevers, epilepsy, and other medical conditions.

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