

The  
**SANGAI**

The Pride of Manipur



L M Khaute

# THE SANGAI

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**L.M. Khaute**



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*Dedicated to the memories of my parents  
Kraute Suangkhopau Vaiphei and Kholkhochin  
whose lives... a saga of love, prayers and sacrifices for  
their children.*

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**L.M. Khaute**

## DEER SANGAI

*A thousand years ago!  
When the world was kinder and nobler  
Than it ever was!  
When love and romance echoed through the ages,  
And when it was closer to the truth than ever before  
With man and nature mingled in unison,  
Thou were born; Oh! Deer Sangai.*

*The mind that hath conceived thee into what thou art,  
Of grace, meekness, innocence and splendour,  
Of the gentle noble soul of the wild world,  
And a loving tender pride;  
The hands that curved thy majestic antlers  
And shaped thee into eternal beauty!  
May praises be His! For His ingenuity!*

*Bliss was it in that wild of Siam and Shan,  
Frolic was it in that wild,  
Trotting thine way  
From the Chindwin to the Loktak,  
To find a new Haven like Heaven!  
And like a flower afloat on the Loktak!  
Captivating all that liveth! Oh! Deer Sangai.*

**L.M. Khaute**

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# SECTION-A

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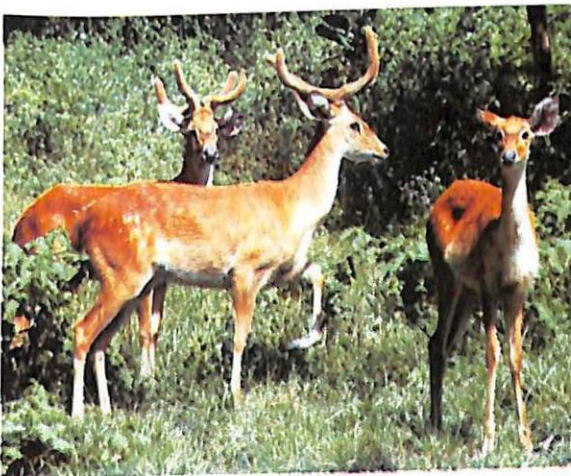
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# PHOTO GALLERY



*A Majestic Sangai*



*At the Second Home*

# 1

## *THE SANGAI* AN INTRODUCTION

**M**anipur, the Land of the Sangai! Until the seventies, as far as I remember, most houses in the Kuki-Chin villages were adorned with heads of wild animals killed by hunters. It was part of the custom signifying accomplishment, skill, valour and pride. Those days, heads of animals were taken to the clan chief in a traditional way, with the accompaniment of a song called 'haanla' and 'gunfire'. This used to be an eventful occasion in a tribal life. 1960s.. As a boy, I was particularly impressed by the antlers of a deer, locally known as 'Sapeng', hung on the wall inside the house of Grandma Hoiting Vaiphei, Chief of Mualkot in Churachandpur District, about three kilometres

south of Churachandpur town. My grandma, who died a centenarian, was a wise, dynamic, and kindhearted lady. She administered the village single-handedly for over five decades, as my grandpa had died early. She once said that in the early forties, wild animals, including the Sangai roamed around the marshy fields near the village. Those days, the forests were dense, and the plain areas swampy as the land could not be exploited due to scarce population. At one point, I had wondered whether the Sangai's domain ever extended to other parts of the State as this animal is known to have been confined only to its present sanctuary, Keibul Lamjao in the Loktak Lake.

In course of a tête-à-tête with Lamsei Baite IFS, Conservator of Forest, Manipur and some elderly persons, an interesting aspect of the Sangai habitation emerged. It was believed that this deer once roamed the Khuga valley. This is evident from a large number of heads of the animal preserved by hunters in Churachandpur District even today. A village has been christened 'Sangaikot', literally meaning the 'Sangai Corridor'. This village nestled between two

mountain ranges along the Khuga round-road. Through this corridor, the Sangai crossed over from the Sugnu and Kumbi valley to Churachandpur (Khuga) valley and vice versa. Further, according to chiefs of Hengken and Khodang villages, the Sangai was found in the village forest of Hengken, Dongjang and Tuining areas during the early part of 1920. Those days, the villagers used to hunt Sangai and Hog deer from the village forest. Even today, the villagers preserve heads of a few Sangai by displaying them on the walls of their houses. The villagers said that the southern part of Keibul Lamjao was contiguously forested with wetland species like *Phragmatis karka* right upto Makhao area along the Imphal River. The Sangai would have reached these areas after crossing Sangaikot Hills, where human settlement was little. Since the fifties, there was no report of the Sangai migration in these areas. This could be due to the rapid increase in human population and conversion of wetland into paddy fields.

The Sangai today is an endangered species. While in Bishnupur District as Superintendent of

Police in 1993, I often toured the Loktak Lake and Keibul Lamjao areas to watch the Sangai. I was told that to sight the deer, sometimes, one has to trek the sanctuary for hours. The rare moments I spent with the Sangai were while visiting the Iroishemba Zoological Garden and the Second Home in January 2008 with family and friends. The pages that follow hereafter bespeak an animal lover's sincere quest to discover the multi-faceted characteristics of this indigenous yet elegant deer of Manipur, dearly known by the name 'Sangai.'

## 2

### THE SANGAI, THE BROW-ANTLERED DEER OF MANIPUR (*Cervus eldi eldi*-M'Clelland)

**T**he Sangai is a noble wildlife! The name 'Sangai' was coined from the unique posture adopted by the deer while running. The deer particularly the male would stop momentarily after running some distance and then would begin to run again as if he is waiting for his mate or someone else. The name Sangai is derived from the word 'Sa' meaning 'animal' and 'ngai' meaning 'waiting-while-looking-on'. The Manipur Sangai is a rare and unique mammal and is one of the most beautiful deer on this planet. It is also known to the people of Manipur as the 'Dancing Deer'. The deer is a popular subject in local folklore and dance

tradition. Wildlife lovers across the continent have written a number of books on unique animal species. It is widely accepted that except in the Southeast Asia, which is known to be home to three distinctive species of Elds Deer, the brow-antlered deer is not found elsewhere. The Sangai belongs to one of the three subspecies of Elds Deer. The other two subspecies are Myanmar's brow-antlered deer or Thamin (*Cervus eldi thamin*). The Thamin (*Cervus eldi thamin*) is found in upper and lower Myanmar as well as in western Thailand, and the Siamese brow-antlered deer (*Cervus eldi siamensis*) in eastern Thailand and on the island of Hainan. It is widely believed that these three subspecies of deer were once the same species. The *Cervus eldi siamensis* was at first believed to have existed in Thailand and later migrated to Myanmar. Here it assumed the name *Cervus eldi thamin* after it had undergone certain physical changes. Later, the *Cervus eldi thamin* moved further to Manipur and acquired a few more distinctive characteristics before it assumed its present name *Cervus eldi eldi* (Brow-antlered Deer).

# 3

## MORPHOLOGICAL STUDY

**T**he Sangai is considered a medium-sized deer and measures about 100-110 cm in length. The stag measures about 115-125 cm in height at the shoulder and weighs about 95-110 kilograms. A doe is shorter and lighter than a stag. The length of the deer from its tail to its ear is about 145-155 cm. The Sangai has a short tail and does not have a prominent rump.

The beauty of the Sangai lies in its antlers, capturing the imagination of poets, animal lovers and story-tellers down the years. The Sangai has a distinctive crown of antlers measuring 100-110 cm in length with a very long brow line, which forms the main beam so that the two form a



continuous curve at right angles. True to its name, i.e., brow-antlered deer, the forward protruding beams appear to be coming out from the eyebrows. The antlers are asymmetrical. Initially, the beams are straight; however, with gradual increase in the length and the beams getting forked, they also get more and more curved. As the beams grow, tines (branches of a stag's antlers) gradually emerge and form an inward curve. The horns branch out majestically into antlers to form a crown on the deer's head like an exquisite piece of craftsmanship. The stag sheds its antlers every year between late June and early September. This annual phenomenon takes place to mark the completion of the estrous cycle (periodic state of sexual excitement in females) wherein the antlers played an instrumental role in attracting and luring females into mating as well as defending its sexual dominance. Once the mating season is over, the stag no longer needs its antlers until the next mating season.

The Sangai has coarse hair, the colour of which changes according to season. In winter, the deer's matted coat particularly that of a full-grown stag

changes from brown to dark brown. Similarly, the doe's coat changes from light brown to dark brown, albeit with a comparatively lighter hue. In both the male and female, the hair is smooth and thin yet uneven in length. The underparts are normally pale brown in colour. The young have brown spotted-hair, traces of which can also be seen in adults up to two to three years. The Sangai has splayed hoofs. Its sister subspecies *Thamins* and *Siamensis*, however, do not have splayed hoofs. Its legs are slender; its hoofs can be spread out. This special adaptation facilitates movement in its swampy habitat of floating phumdi in the Keibul Lamjao Sanctuary (now National Park). This is the secret behind the Sangai's survival in the swamp.

## 4

### REPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR

**T**he life span of the Sangai is about sixteen years. It attains its sexual maturity when it is four years old. The female Sangai can reproduce until it attains the age of ten years. The rutting period is from late January or early February to May, and the normal gestation period is 245-273 days. The deer breeds once in a year. Breeding lasts from the month of September to December. A doe delivers only one fawn at a time unlike other animals. It takes two to three weeks for the fawn to begin walking on its own.

Studies have shown that during the gestation period, the females average ten to seventeen estrous cycles, and after mating females enter the anestrus cycle, during which they are not

sexually active. It is also observed that ovarian functions in females are activated by the presence of males. The deer is a seasonal breeder and its peak breeding season is March. The males are generally very aggressive before they enter into mating, but not so during the peak period of the rutting season. There is no sign of the adult female showing preference to adult male. The Sangai prefers to move about from one place to another during the rutting period. When a stag raises its head upwards and displays the incisors, it is considered an act of aggressiveness. In Keibul Lamjao, it is observed that the Sangai rubs its head or pre-orbital organ on the bushes and hits the bushes violently with its forelegs or antlers. Rutting fights are enacted to determine the rank of the stag – who will dominate who. A solitary stag shows the tendency to be a little more hostile than the others towards another grown-up stag. This would either invite a confrontation from its rival or ensure its rival's exit from the scene out of fear. These fights normally take place during the months of February and March. During the fights, the deer interlock their antlers and fight very violently. To regain strength in the middle of the fights, the stags would move a little

backward to resume the fights moments later. The victor stag raises its head with a great sense of pride and the vanquished lowers its head and then leaves the scene. This habit of fighting has led to a number of deaths. As per official records, two stags lodged in the Manipur Zoological Garden died in March 1990 after fighting over possession of a receptive doe.

A stag pursues a doe by showing intimidating posture till she experiences the peak of its heat. This behaviour is generally observed for about 48-hour duration. During this duration, the doe would respond to the stag's gestures. When the female is ready to reciprocate to the overtures of the male, she would rub her nose against the flanks of the male while keeping its hind legs apart and lowering its head. Then the stag climbs on her, thrusting its forelegs straight on her body and resting its head on the doe's withers with its tail straightened downwards. The male would then gradually raise its body till its legs are straight up. The mating lasts a few moments. After the mating is over, the male is content and calm, whereas the female flaps its ears in quick succession and wiggles its tail.

## 5

### 'THE DANCING DEER'

**T**he Sangai is the essence of life in Manipur and the pride of the Land. It has charmed and endeared itself to the people since many years. Many had sung its praises, composed poems, written about its uniqueness, and it is a subject of folk tales down the years. It exists only in this tiny fringe of India bordering Myanmar. The movement of this deer in the floating biomass (phumdi) is very peculiar. Instead of bounding with fore and hind feet coming on the ground at the same time, it seems to be proceeding on its hind legs, the body being held almost vertical. This action prevents it from sinking in the quagmire and enables it to move about with ease on the floating phumdi. This graceful posture and unique movement have

impelled some deer lovers to call it the 'Dancing Deer of Manipur'. No other animal is known to possess this artistic yet clever maneuverability and survive in such unique habitat for generations.

# 6

## POPULATION

**T**he population of Sangai is very fragile. As per available data, in the year 1955, Sangai population was estimated to be one hundred animals. In 1975, during the first aerial census a small herd of fourteen deer (6 stags, 5 hinds, and 3 fawns) were found living in the Keibul Lamjao Park. However, with the declaration of Keibul Lamjao as a national park and subsequent protection and conservation measures taken up by the State Government, the deer population has increased substantially. In 1977, another aerial survey was carried out, which revealed the presence of eighteen animals. During the last aerial census carried out in 1993, ninety eight animals were counted.



Later, the census method was switched over to 'ground census', and since the year 1994, ground census has been held almost every year. Ground census is difficult during rainy season. The best time for carrying out ground census is from February to April when the vegetation gets dried and the phumdi settles on the lake bed. The Forest Department adopted a simple method of conducting ground survey—counting simultaneously from vantage posts, viz. Toya Hill, Pabot Hills, Chingmai, Sagram, Keibul Hills, etc. At each vantage point the deer is counted with the help of powerful binoculars between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. followed by the next day between 6 a.m. and 7 a.m. The ground survey carried out in 1994 revealed the presence of about one hundred and thirty-seven animals in the sanctuary. It was noticed that there seemed to be considerable variation in the population figure arrived at through aerial and ground survey. However, the Forest Department is affirmative that the Sangai population is steadily increasing. In March 1995, one hundred and fifty-two Sangai (58 stags (male), 69 hinds (female) and 25 fawns) were found to

inhabit the park along with one hundred and eighteen hog deer and one hundred wild boars. In 2000, its number increased to one hundred and sixty-two. During the latest survey in 2003, the deer's population was estimated to be one hundred and eighty animals (65 stags, 74 hinds and 41 fawns). It is estimated that the animal's population grows by 9 per cent per annum. During the period 1977 to 2003, the sex ratio was between fifty-five males per one hundred females and one hundred and three males per one hundred females, respectively. In 1999, the number of males was higher than that of the females. The mean sex ratio, however, stands 79.4 (2.5) males per 100 does. The doe to fawn ratio was 37.1 (3.8) fawn per 100 does.

These figures show how endangered this species is today. The deer is extremely vulnerable to natural calamities like floods, earthquake, wildfire and animal epidemic. The *Sangai* was reported extinct in 1951, but after being rediscovered in July 1954, it has finally become Keibul Lamjao's prime attraction.



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