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# Outlook



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Society / Requiem For Ranthambhor

## Requiem For Ranthambhor



Sandeep Adhwaryu

Tigers roamed here once. Now, it's a jungle of caterwauling tourists.



M.S. Gill

27 February 2006

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Ranthambhor and its tigers were recently in the news. Poaching seems to have all but exterminated the already limited numbers. Horror and anxiety led to immediate, apparently energetic steps: the mantra of a CBI inquiry, the naming of central and state committees featuring icons of the green brigade and the like. Recommendations, meetings and promises followed...also a slowly creeping somnambulance.

I have had a link with Shivpuri, northwest Madhya Pradesh, since 1950, when our people began to restore neglected farmlands on the fringe of the forest. I spent long school and college holidays there. The population was small, the forests of young India were abundant, the tiger, blue bull, chinkara and wild boar roamed everywhere. It had been the finest tiger-shooting area of the maharajas, and viceroys came here regularly. The first time I went there, we walked eight miles through the jungle to our farmer-uncle who then used to live in a thatched hut. We slept on paddy straw, and shouted all night to keep the deer away from the half acre of wheat. In the morning, we saw huge pugmarks in a slightly wet water course. A tiger had been by. At that time, the jungle stretched westward across the Chambal to Ranthambhor. The tigers roamed free and far through these forest corridors.

Alas, the forests have gone, the Shivpuri hills are bare and pockmarked by illegal slate mines. There are no tigers or even panthers any more. In the monsoon, we no longer hear the roar of a rutting male from the hill opposite. All is quiet. A game park has been established. It has only some deer and crocodiles in the lake. Cattle with nothing to eat roam everywhere. What hope can there be for wildlife in a situation of unlimited human and cattle numbers and no forest for food and shelter?

We have been going to Ranthambhor for more than a decade now. The first time was a revelation and a delight. From the barren plains you suddenly enter a forest gorge—a central Indian Shangrila! There was the great fort on a high plateau in front and the dung-coloured, dusty central Indian forest everywhere. The great Fateh Singh was with us. We followed every pugmark, saw some tigers, even a mother with three grown young ones.

Over Christmas we went again and spent a few days. We saw two tigers, on two different days. One just crossed the road, quickly

walked up a hill, and went behind rocks and bushes; the other was sighted walking down a dusty forest road, in the late afternoon. He sat down in utter boredom, indifferent to the not-so-silent tourists, hemming him in in large vehicles. After some time, he got up, languidly walked past and around a truck, and climbed the hill.

Going through the gorge, I found a large number of vehicles and visitors, all caught in a traffic jam. I enquired about this spectacle, slightly hard to anticipate in a forest. There is a small temple at the far end of the fort. I had been there earlier—it used to see modest footfalls, there were the usual shops selling gee-gaws, littered plastic and all that. It seems in the recent past, the temple has been promoted as a high-pressure pilgrim point, as is happening elsewhere in the country. Every Wednesday, a large number of people transit through the park with a lot of bustle, noise and little comfort to the wildlife. What's more, once a month, a large number of devouts undertake a parikrama of the outer periphery of this largest Indian fort, covering a table mountain bigger than the one in Gwalior. It is not necessary to describe the disturbance to the animals and the damage to the forest. What used to be a small, controlled pilgrimage has now become a torrent. A lunatic idea, executed even as those in authority looked away. Now I simply don't know what can be done to save this greatest of India's heritage parks. This is something every committee, every official avoids talking about.

What indeed can be done? I try to make sense of the problem. The city creeping up to the park gates may be one aspect of it. But the large vehicles, and the unrelenting commercial tourist pressure, now brought to fever pitch by greedy promoters, certainly need to be thought about. After all, nature never visualised a situation where small numbers of shy animals would be surrounded and almost oppressed by large numbers of chattering, unknowing, eager visitors of another specie. This is a question facing everyone from Kenya and South Africa to India. In those countries at least, policies and earnings have ensured comprehensive, sophisticated park management arrangements by well-trained and fully-supported staff. I don't see that anywhere here. The staff is limited and meagre. They are poorly paid and ill-equipped. They have no worthwhile vehicles. They do not have any weapons to face well-armed poachers and the management expenses are a divided burden between the state

and centre.

The situation is very difficult and worrying. In my own four decades of observation I have, as a spare-time mountaineer, seen the Sikkim forests disappear, leaving behind shale hills. The Shivpuri forest and tigers are also no more. I think the fundamental pressure is one of population. For each one in 1950, we are three now. It's a depressing thought—in 50 years we have seen half the forest and wildlife disappear. If population growth—particularly in the heartland states where the remaining forests and wildlife are—continues to grow at this rate, the remainder of our forest treasures, including the tiger, will disappear in the coming decades. We will then travel to England to rural Lordly Estates to meet a few of our fellow-citizen tigers, bred in helpless captivity, for the pleasure of strangers. What a sad day it will be, but luckily I won't be around.

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M.S. GILL

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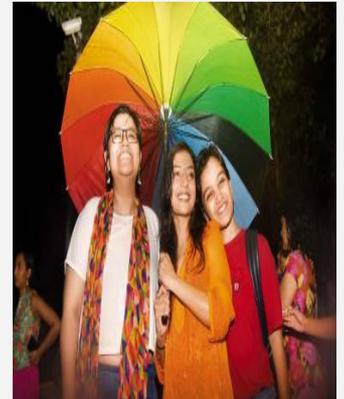
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