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Shivpuri Diary



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M.S. Gill

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I was in Shivpuri, Madhya Pradesh, for my Christmas break. When I went there last summer, there had been no rain for many months, and a dustbowl faced me from Agra to Shivpuri, with disconsolate men and cattle wandering about in search of water and anything green to eat. This time I found oilseeds everywhere, thanks to the late monsoon rain, which had allowed quick sowing. Yellow fields of mustard dotted the pleasing landscape. A bumper oilseed harvest across the dry lands of Rajasthan, Bundelkhand and Gwalior-Shivpuri appears to be on the way.

I stayed at the MP Tourism bungalow in Shivpuri, overlooking the Chandpata lake, the result of a moon-shaped dam built by the Scindia raja at the beginning of the 20th century. The attractive castle-like rooms in pleasant tribal pastel shades, with Oraon folk designs painted in white on them by a leading national tribal artist, were beautiful. The managers, alas, had hammered nails into them and hung fire extinguishers! I bullied the managers for the removal of the extinguishers and asked for a brochure on the art and artist to be ready for tourists the next time I come. Close to the resort, down by the banks of the rivulet meeting the lake, was an ancient shrine amid peepal trees next to a spring. Long ago, the raja had built a gravel-surfaced platform overlooking the river. In the month of Saavan, in drizzling monsoon rains, people from Shivpuri come to picnic there.

Reserved for the Wolves

One afternoon, I went on a drive around the Madhav National Park, a deciduous forest growing over rolling volcanic hills. The colours are greys and browns, so different from the Himalayas or the rain forests of eastern India. The volcanic past stares you in the face. The rocks are layer upon layer, as if the molten lava had poured out just yesterday and cooled in serrated levels of burnt black rocks. The soil is thin, so the katha trees and other varieties take decades to grow and have to be protected like little children. Cut them and barren rocks will stare you in the face. Unfortunately, that is happening now.

We saw the game the park has at present. As we drove around the lake in the afternoon sun, huge crocodiles lay basking on the banks. I am told the lake has at least 200 of them. They have

spread into every small pond around, as crocodiles can walk long distances when they wander around in search of a cool mud bath. My family farm has a stream at one end, below the hill, fed by the leakage from three local dams that are linked to each other. When I was a boy, everyone used to jump from overhanging trees into the cool waters. Poachers came from Shivpuri at night to shoot and fish with their ancient guns. Now, I am told there is a huge 15-foot crocodile lolling about on our bank. They assure me that, like the tiger, crocodiles do not attack people unless they have tasted human flesh like the tiger. But I would not risk crossing the stream now. After all, the sports minister cannot be given to a mere crocodile; next year he may be needed for the wolves!

We saw neelgai, spotted deer, chinkara, foxes, a rare vulture, partridges scurrying around and brahminy ducks (surkhab). A panther family lives below the dam in the deep forest that we crossed, but the happiest moment for me was when a school boy told me he had seen a tiger drinking from the lake the previous day as he and two companions paddle-boated half a kilometre from the tourist bungalow. It had strolled down from the forest to have a drink. I checked with the forest officers. They too had seen pug marks and a kill. But this afternoon sighting by three boys at close range was most heartening. Was the tiger once again back in Shivpuri?

Only a Pot to Lose

When we went to the Shivpuri jungle in 1950, daaku Maan Singh was the great Robin Hood of India. He was a romantic figure. My uncle lived alone in a hut on the jungle farm. He had sown an acre of wheat and the deer came every night in their hundreds to eat it. He cooked his own daal and made his own rough chapattis. One evening, 30 men came, led by an obvious 'sardar'. He asked, "Sardarji, can we stay here?" The answer had to be 'Yes'. They went to the stream under the hill and camped with the guards for the night. Early next morning, they moved on. As they passed my uncle, the leader said with mischief in his eyes, "Sardarji, do you know who I am?" My uncle said, "I can make a pretty good guess." The man stroked his curling moustache and asked, "Aren't you afraid?" My uncle replied, "Why should I be? My only possession is this pot. You can take it if you want." Maan Singh laughed, said 'Sat Sri Akal', and waved a farewell as he walked away.

(Dr M.S. Gill is the Union sports minister)

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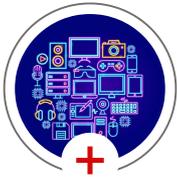
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