
TREASURE FROM THE PAST

OUR VANISHING WILD LIFE

Dr. Robin Banerjee

Let me start by saying that all lives on earth must be saved. The first step on wild-life preservation (both Flora & Fauna) was taken in 320.B.C. by the then Prime Minister 'Chanakya' during Gupta Empire. His recommendations are still found on the wall in Patna. Though the idea of wild life Patna. Though the idea of wild life preservation did not take permanent root till 1935.

Wild life plays the most important role in India's life since ancient time. In ancient India, people lived in "Ashrams". It was a sanatorium sanctum of all forms of life temples. and poaching, hunting felling of the trees are considered not only illegal, but also irreligious act. Those old "Ashrams" were infect our National Parks. The highest forms of understanding of nature and natural environment was shown in 'Kalidas's drama " Sakuntala to me. Specially the farewell scene of Sakuntala when all plants, forest, fawn, Jasmin creeper, bid farewell to ashram girl. The entire play was one cultural understanding of wild

life, natural environment and as a whole eco-system when men lived with nature.

Then came the unfortunate part of our time. We Pulled out from the eco-system, starting by disrespecting nature and made our own materialistic society. This materialistic idea was aggravated during the turbulent history of our country. Invasion, internal great destruction of the forest for special strategic reasons. The marching soldiers destroyed whatever came on their way and for two centuries it was the happy hunting ground of our ancient rulers. There are many stories of this hunting and killing. One hunter killed 4000 game birds on a single day, another one 2000 ducks. Another one killed 400 tigers in 25 years, and then did not think worthwhile in keeping any more records. There are people still to-day who boast of their records and tell with pride having scored a century in tiger shooting.

Lot of harm is being done by a few powerful writers to our magnificent tigers. With due respect and apology I must

mention the name of famous writer "Jim Corbett" In his book "Man-Eater of Kumaon", he gave an explanation how the tiger became a "Man-Eater". He described the man-eating tiger as a dreadful beast, killing, men, women and children. It dragged away by the throat, mutilating arms, heads, legs here and there. Such tale left on the mind of the readers a fearful impression of weeping widows, screaming children and mothers. The worst part was that dead tiger was chopped off by the villagers bit by bit. These descriptions paved the way of indiscriminate granting of license for tiger-shooting all over the country. Today the word "Man-Eater" has become a synonymy for all tigers, unless contrary is innocence. So everyone shoots a tiger and says it's a Man-Eater or a cattle lifter. But if a tiger can kill a man or cattle so can a man kill a man. Thus this does not make an animal a man-eater anymore than every-man a man killer. Certainly no-one would feel sympathy for the tiger who took away a sleeping young lady from her husband. A leopard who killed a boy or the rogue elephant who attacked human, are these exceptional cases. We cannot blame entire population of tiger because of one stray case. If wild animals are allowed to raise their voice of grievances, they would blame whole

human race for robbing of their foods, burning of their homes, cold-blooded killing of innocent animals, calves (even pregnant mothers are not spared). I can tell that many more men have been killed by men than by the wild animals in the last decade. To prove my statement I like all of you to open a news paper where you find all kinds of horrible crimes being committed every day by human. But do we raise our voices against the whole mankind for that! Only individual should be punished for the crime, then why not the same law for the wild animals. If all wild animals are vanished from the forest, the forest will be a store house of timbers and not a thrilling place will be left which gives inspiration and happiness to so many nature lovers.

Another blow came to the Indian wild-life during world war II. When the scattered army carrying fire arms wiped out wild-life in many parts of our country. Then came the biggest blow the striped skins caught the eyes of foreign buyers. The skins stripped off from the leopard's body and made attractive fashion models. The excessive demand for timber and extensive cultivation, felling of the trees and destruction of their homes, also helped vanishing of our wild-life.

Today there is only a few lions in a small patch in Gujrat Gir-forest. They are

in great danger and fighting a losing battle with Maldharies.

Indian Rhino suffers the most. Not for their coat, not for their meat, but for their horn, (although it is not a true horn.)

The snow leopard lives in snow clad Himalaya. Every year many people visit Himalaya to see it. But how many have seen a snow leopard in the wild? I am sure not even 1%. But if you go to a curio shop or to an Emporium you will see tanned skins of snow leopard, clouded leopard, marbled cat and many other wild animals.

The thamin deer of Manipur, stag of Kashmir and Musk deer are reducing in number and fighting to a battle of no return.

Wild life is essential to man's own existence. Most of the animals have become extinct, because of destruction done by human.

Foreign exchange earning also playing a havoc in wild life. As for example the Rhesus monkey once covered a large area, was admittedly a nuisance to some places. But an export rate of 5000 to 8000 a year, has wiped it out from many places causing a serious upset in the balance of nature.

A panther skin today will bring a foreign exchange of 1000 to 1500 dollars. Hence they are butchered by trapping and

poisoning.

In old days "Sikar" agents invited foreign tourists with a "guarantee" of a tiger within fortnight, to earn foreign exchange.

The frog legs have also received big publicity. It was told that 88 lakhs were earned last year at an average price of one dollar per kilo. Hence, 1,200 tons of legs are required for this amount, that means 2,400 tons of life forges (say 5 crores in number). Frog eats half of its body weight of worms and insects each day, hence out of the result of this export leaves behind 108 thousand tons of insects remain uneaten every year, which will cause lot of harm to our vegetation and a serious upset of nature balance.

Let us face the fact that the Taj may be rebuilt but our forest and trees, our wild birds and animals once exterminated cannot be recovered.

D.D.T. is sprayed from the air to save our crops from insects. The insecticides do not discriminate. The disaster affect on wild life, (many of which are beneficial to man) resulting from indiscriminate spraying is powerfully described in a book called "Silent Spring" by "Richard Castle".

Man does not live by bread alone. The cultural development of any country is not only judged by its art, architecture,

philosophy and literature, but also depends on how it preserves, but also depends on how it preserves its heritage have come and gone, living intact the geophysical structure of the country- they ruled over. But when and where natural resources were thoughtlessly abused. Entire civilization was wiped out of existence, after living dissolute and dismal destruction in their wake. The Maya civilization in Mexico and the "Asserian" civilization in "Syria" vanished not because of their own wanton abuse of land.

The Economy of India depends upon the careful control of her vast natural resources, where wild-life plays a most important role. It is also a source of foreign exchange earnings through tourism.

To-day only few literate people are aware of the threat to the natural resources of our earth. The galloping destruction of the forest, the degradation and pollution of natural environments all around us leads to a final countdown of the earth. Every year this danger is growing bigger and bigger and I can tell you that the situation will arise very soon and it will be out of our hand with an eventual mean all the citizen of the world, private organization, industrialist, Commerce, Government and Authorities

of all level are prepared to accept full responsibility for conserving the world and thus ensuring the man's own future.

It is impossible to expect any real progress in conservation unless we control the human population. The cattle population in India with many unhealthy cattles causing a great alarm in conservation. There will be no space worth-living unless we refrain from destructing forests, animals and its environment. Man's own survival will be doubtful if we do not act now. The earth is carrying its ever growing burden of human passenger, hence human population must be brought into the balance with resources. It is not an easy task, but us call on all men and women every where in our planet earth which is the only oasis we had to live in to control birth rate. To join our hands in putting an end of destroying its natural inheritance make friendship with them and thus allay for survival.

For a longtime the conservationist have given warning that our environment is being poisoned and polluted and that our very lives are in danger. But the sad part is that the warning is taken as a cry of the old saying "WOLF, WOLF" and that the air pollution were not as bad as it is painted, and it is just a step for our progress. But to-day is confirmed that the

poor conservationist were correct.

I am quoting the following from W.W.F. publication.

1. In 1968 in U.S.A. 15 million fish died as a result of water pollution.

2. In 1930 over 40 thousand Blue Whales were in the World's ocean but to-day it is less than 1000.

3. Half a million parrots are killed every year in Amazone Basin to provide only 10,000 live specimen for U.S.A. pet trade.

4. In 1930 there were 40,000 tigers in India but to-day approximately 1800 tigers are there and in another two years if protection is not rigid there will be no tiger in India.

5. In the last 20 years the oil prospectors in Chad have killed 10,000 adder and 40,000 oryx i.e. 90% of the total population.

6. 2,00,000 occlots and 20,000 jaguars are killed for fur each year in the forest

of South America.

7. 800 species of animal are in imminent danger of extinction. This includes the Orang Utang, the mountain Gorilla, pigmy Chimpanzees. 7 species of tiger, pigmy Chimpanzees. 7 species of tiger, 7 species of leopard, 8 species of Whale, 5 species of Rhino, Polar and grizzly bears and many species of birds.

The delicate balance of Nature is already affected, and man after destroying the animals of our planet may end by destroying himself.

In the name of wild life and God let me quote one stanza before I conclude.

"do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the place you can,
At all the times you can,
To all people you can,
And last as long as ever "you can". ●

Dr. Robin Banerjee, the world famous naturalist and wildlife photograpnar is Founder President of KWLS.

Think twice before killing an animal, think twice before you catch a butterfly, think before you cut a tree, because it may be the last species of the world.

– Dr. Robin Banerjee

LEGENDS OF THE WILD

Ananda Banerjee



This is no tiger story though every time I have visited a tiger reserve, I have spent several patient hours to spot one. I, for that matter anyone who ventures into the jungles, is most concerned about spotting a tiger, a unique bird, the rhino... In the process, we do not see what the wild has in store for us -- its hidden secrets. As a forest guard had once told me, "There are layers in each jungle. The deeper you go, the more they open up." How right he was. Each spot has a story to tell. Did you know that the pond from which Shraavan Kumar filled water for his blind parents before being killed by King Dashrath's arrow is still present in the Kanha tiger reserve? Read on for more such legends but this is not a complete list.

TIGER SATI AT SARISKA :

It is believed that a long time ago, at a village in Sariska, a boy was left with his ageing grandparents while his doting parents went to work. During the course of the day, the boy got lost in the forest. When the parents returned late in the af-

ternoon, they searched everywhere but could not find him. Soon the word spread and villagers organised a search party to look for the kid. The next day, they came across pugmarks and began tracking them. This way they reached the tiger's lair behind a rocky outcrop. Seeing a few scattered bones, they reached the conclusion that the boy had been killed and devoured by the tiger that was resting nearby. Out of rage, they attacked and killed it instantly. While carrying away the carcass, the boy appeared in a playful mood from the cave. Realising that the big cat was, in fact, protecting and sheltering the boy, the villagers were apologetic and narrated the incident to the village council. The boy's mother was so moved to tears by this unjust act of human folly that she jumped into the tiger's pyre and committed sati. This was her way of seeking absolution from guilt. A temple still marks the place and is known as the Nahar-Sati temple (for the Mewaris nahar means tiger). In the buffer area of the sanctuary, about 21km from its main en-

try point, lies the Kankwari fort. It is flanked by hillocks covered with lush plantations and sprawling green meadows.

Aurangzeb dispelled his brother, Dara Shikoh, from the capital after a serious tiff and condemned him to a life-long exile here. It is believed that nearly a thousand soldiers were ordered to stay at the fort, especially built for the confinement, round-the-clock and ensure that he did not flee.

NOT JUST RANTHAMBHORE FORT :

Though the Ranthambhore fort is a well-known landmark, not many are aware of the two other forts that are located in the tiger reserve. One is the Khandar fort that is sprawled out near the Chambal river. No tourist ever comes here but, perched on top of a hill, this one remains a timeless marvel of erstwhile Rajputana. Though in a state of ruin and neglect, the fort is believed to have been opulent at one time. In fact, there are a number of ornate temples, including those of Jain gurus Chaturbhuj, Gobind Devji, Hanumanji, Jagatpalji and a Jayanti Mata, as well as chattris of successive Mewari kings. Two big stepwells— Ramkund and Lakshmandkund—inside the fort complex, are evidence that the rulers harvested

rainwater. From the top, one gets to see the spectacular undulating terrain of the forest and the colourful mofusil town of Khandar with camel carts making way through the serpentine lanes of the buzzing market. The other fort is Utgir that lies in the Kcladevi sanctuary, which is part of the Ranthambhore tiger reserve. It is used as a shelter by shepherds who bring their cattle to graze here. Not much is known about this fort which is said to belong to the once princely state of Karauli and was used by the Raghunathpur hunting company to organise tiger hunts. In its scale and beauty, it is no less than the Ranthambhore or Khabdar forts.

KANHA S RAMAYANA LINKS :

Ramayana finds a prominent place in both Bandhavgarh and Kanha. According to legend, there lived a poor boy called Shraavan Kumar, the dutiful son of a blind couple who fulfilled their every wish. One day, his parents expressed the desire to go on a pilgrimage to Kashi (Varanasi) for a holy dip. It was a long way off and Shraavan had to walk day and night for hours, carrying his parents in two baskets attached to a bamboo pole slung across his shoulders. One evening, they reached a forest where Shraavan's parents asked him to fetch water. Parking them under a tree, he went in search of a pond. At the

same time, Dashrath, the king of Ayodhya, had come hunting. He was celebrated for his fine marksmanship and could find his desired target just by hearing a feeble sound. So, when he heard the rustle of Shraavan filling water, he thought it to be a wild beast and immediately shot an arrow. Seeing he had unwillingly killed Shraavan, the repentant king carried him back to his parents. Offering them water, the king sought their forgiveness. The anguished old couple cursed him instead, saying he would die of grief of losing his son. King Dashrath indeed died when his eldest son Ram was condemned to a 14-year exile.

A small earthen bund marks the spot where this mythological incident occurred inside the Kanha tiger reserve. It is now recognised by a signage post that reads Shraavan Tal. A short distance away is the spot known as Shraavan Chita where he was cremated. Strangely, the colour of the soil is strikingly different from the surroundings. Till date it remains a barren patch that can be seen while moving on the Bamni-Dadar-Keraghat jungle road inside the reserve.

BANDHAVGARHS BIG MOMENTS

The legend of Ram looms over Bandhavgarh tiger reserve, 230 km away. The Bandhavgarh fort is associated with Lord Ram, the Mauryan kings, Mughal

emperors Humayun and Akbar and sufi saint Kabir. The fort derives its name from the most prominent hillock of the area which Lord Ram assigned to his brother Lakshman to keep a watch on Ravan's Lanka. Hence, the name Bandhavgarh (bandhav meaning brother and garh meaning fort). Amid a heap of scattered ruins of arches, temples and idols are 39 man-made caves which have inscriptions in Pali and Brahmi scripts from the very first century alongside ancient cave paintings depicting wild animals. These are yet to be studied and documented properly. It is widely believed that when Sher Shah Suri attacked Delhi, Humayun's mother hid along with him in the Bandhavgarh fort and so did his pregnant wife, as it was very secure. Ultimately, Akbar was born in the Kalinjar fort that lies to the north of Bandhavgarh.

This was one of the reasons why Akbar was so fond of this fort and kept a close watch on the developments in this area. Thus, when he heard of Tansen's glory, who was then associated with the Bandhavgarh royal court, Akbar sent Birbal to fetch the legendary singer to become one of the 'nine gems' of the Mughal court. Till date, one of the inner palaces in the fort is named as the Birbal Bhawan. The renowned saint Kabir is said to have taken shelter in one of these caves

for meditation. The Kabir Chabutara, or the seat of Kabir, near the source of the Narmada, is located at the Achanakmar-Amarkantak biosphere reserve, which lies at a short distance from Bandhavgarh. It is now a pilgrim spot for the followers of Kabir.

PIR BABA AT JIM CORBETT :

For every wildlife enthusiast in this country, the Corbett tiger reserve holds a special place because of the widely circulated stories of the hunter-conservationist. Even as hundreds of tourists flock to see the tiger each year, not many have heard of the Pir Baba who is said to protect both the people and animals. At three places inside the dense sal forest -- Pir Kalu Shah Baba at Paater Pani, Mor Ghaati and Fatto -- the mazaars are tucked away from the busy tourist route. Every year, especially in the winter months, there is a constant beeline of forest guards and mahouts who come to offer moulds of jaggery as sacrifice (bali) so that they are protected against dangers lurking in this deep forest I, too, have done that on numerous occasions.

What have I got in return? The courage and will to venture into the forests time and again.

RANTHAMBHORE :

Rana Hamir was a 14th century ruler of Mewar, Rajasthan. Alauddin Khilji engaged him in a war, which he almost won, but Khilji bribed Hamir mahout into raising the black flag at the frontline, thereby misleading the sentinels at the Ranthambhore fort into believing that their king had been defeated and perished. The soldiers at the fort prepared to die in yellow robes, some even committed suicide, while the royal women, fearing indignities by the invaders, committed jauhar by collectively jumping into a pyre. Queen Padmawati put honour before compromise and jumped into the ravines. Now, there is a commemorative well at the spot, placid and quiet. In summer, you can spot tigers drinking water on the opposite banks. An enraged Hamir, seeing his fort palace ravaged by fire and full of dead people, killed his mahout for betraying him and ordered that his face be cast in stone at the gates to remind everybody that traitors would never be forgiven. Such it is today, the sculptor having imprinted the shame in the mahout eyes. As for the king, he beheaded himself before Lord Shiva. ●

*Ananda Banerjee is a conservation journalist and photographer based in New Delhi, India. He contributes a conservation column in livemint.com/*The Wall Street Journal* in India and is author of *Common Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*.*
