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Wildlife Issue

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SOME REMINDERS FROM THE PAST

- S.S. BIST*

The British introduced organized forestry in Bengal way back in 1864. But there is nothing on record to indicate that protection and improvement of wildlife was high on their agenda. They did have a fascination for hunting, shooting and fishing. They also realized the economic importance of elephants and various other wild animals and birds. Therefore, to begin with, the foresters engaged themselves with 'game management' in the government-controlled forests. As much of the 'game' also existed outside the government-forests, rules for protecting 'game' in the non-forest areas were also framed, and the responsibility for enforcing these rules fell by default to the lot of the forest officers. Some 'game reserves' were set up in the early part of the Twentieth century. With the passage of time 'game' gave way to 'wildlife'; 'hunting' to 'conservation'; and 'game reserves' to 'sanctuaries' and 'National Parks'. The transition from 'game management' to 'wildlife conservation' has witnessed some radical changes in the concepts, practices and policies as followed by the forest officers -sometimes resulting in complete 'about-turns'. In some cases, the change was late in coming resulting in irreparable loss of wildlife and corresponding habitats. There were also cases of opportunities lost or tasks left incomplete. Some examples from the history of wildlife management in West Bengal are presented below to illustrate these points.

Tiger Conservation

Tiger is the National Animal of India. This is an endangered species and gets the highest protection under Schedule-I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. In 1973, Government of India launched 'Project Tiger' and set up a

network of tiger reserves in the country for protecting tigers and their habitats. There are two tiger reserves in West Bengal, viz. Buxa and Sundarbans. The Central as well as the State Governments spend large amounts of money every year on tiger conservation. The dwindling population of tigers is one of the most discussed about news-items in the media. In this backdrop, it now looks inconceivable that just before 1970, tiger was being persecuted in West Bengal by the foresters almost with a vengeance.

In the forests of North Bengal tigers were regarded as nothing but a trophy sought after by any hunter worth his salt. Maharaja of Coochbehar was responsible for killing 365 tigers from 1871 to 1907 in North Bengal. In the hunting rules framed in 1915, Governor, Gazetted Forest Officers, Range Officers, Commissioner, Deputy Commissioners, Superintendents of Police, Sub-Divisional Officers and 'guests of honour' were exempted from seeking hunting permits for all wild animals including tigers. Ministers were added to the list in 1940, and the Chief Secretary and the Forest Secretary in 1957. Shooting of a tiger by a young Assistant Conservator of Forests demonstrated his eligibility for next promotion as a Divisional Forest Officer. The tiger hunting in North Bengal continued unabated till it was suspended by the Conservator of Forest, Northern Circle vide his Order No. 7632-CFN dated 1.9.70 for a period of 5 years. The last tiger (a man-killer) in North Bengal was killed during 1971-72. But soon after the promulgation of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, the tiger hunting was completely banned. About 250 tigers were legally hunted in North Bengal since the

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independence. Did the ban on hunting come too late? The question becomes pertinent in the context of the very low population of tigers we now find in Buxa Tiger reserve and other areas of North Bengal.

In the Sundarbans, tiger was considered a 'pest' as it disturbed forestry operations and posed threat to human life. The foresters were always looking for innovative ways of eliminating this pest. During 1905-06, the Government fixed a reward of Rs. 50 each for tigers shot east of the Passur river and Rs. 100 each for those killed to the west of it in the hope that the offer might induce local sportsmen to try their luck. By 1908-09, the activity of man-eating tigers in the Sundarbans led to Government sanctioning the increase of the reward for the destruction of tigers to Rs.200 and the extension of this increased reward to the whole division. The Conservator of Forests of Bengal made the following remarks on the Sundarban tigers in his annual report for 1907-08: "The pests are particularly active in the Khulna coupe of which the closure was only prevented by the putting down of poisoned deer which are believed to have accounted for one or two of the most aggressive animals. Other possible methods of trapping or poisoning these pests, which apart from the number of lives taken by them, probably caused Government a loss of revenue exceeding Rs.25,000, are under consideration." The annual report of 1908-09 explains the 'other possible methods' thus: "Efforts were made to destroy some of these animals by clearing path of root-suckers and setting spring bows with poisoned arrows, but this method was not successful owing to the traps being flooded by the spring tides. It will be tried again in the cold weather and should be successful."

The following figures compiled by Shri

A.C. Gupta, formerly of the Indian Forest Service, gives an idea about the tigers killed or trapped in the undivided Sundarbans before independence¹:

1881-82 :	3
1883-84 :	8
1907-08 :	9
1911-12 :	61
1914-15 :	36
1915-16 :	33

After independence, the number of tigers hunted in the Sundarbans came down substantially (23 tigers were killed between 1947-48 and 1958-59; and 6 tigers between 1965-66 and 1972-73)². But the desperation of the forest officers to get rid of tigers is reflected in the fact that free permits were being issued in the early fifties for tiger hunting in the district of 24-Parganas. The annual report for 1957-58 notes that: "Tigers of the Sundarbans are born man-eaters and it becomes necessary to adopt special methods (trap-guns) for their destruction especially of the trouble makers in the working areas. No reward was paid during the year for the destruction of man-eaters as none could be killed." Sundarbans, despite all the anti-tiger policies followed over a century, was included in the first lot of nine tiger reserves set up in the country in 1973!

Referring to the future of tigers, Mr. L.R. Fawcus, a senior officer of the Indian Civil Service, wrote in his report (1943) to the Government of Bengal: "It is mainly the spread of cultivation which has caused the number of tigers in Bengal to diminish, for want of its essential natural haunts, and there is little doubt that so long as the great forests of north Bengal and the Sunderbans remain, the fear that the tiger will become extinct or even uncommon is remote."³ Alas, while West Bengal still has those great forests of north Bengal and the Sundarbans, the tiger has

¹ Ref. West Bengal Forests; Centenary Commemoration Volume (1964)

² Ref. Annual Reports of the West Bengal Forest Department.

³ Report of the Game and Game Fish Preservation Committee on the existing species of Game in Bengal (1943)

become either extinct or uncommon in them!

Tribal Hunting

Poor condition of wildlife in the private forests of southern West Bengal engaged the attention of forest officers in the early 1950s. The annual report for 1952-53 records that: "It would be harsh but not incorrect to say that the local people — ruined their forests and wiped out the game. — At present the Santhals are the worst of human predators. On occasions hundreds of them accompanied by their pariah dogs and armed with all kinds of crude weapons would creep through the forest patches in a long continuous line and destroy every thing in front of them. Even the smaller birds and rats are not spared." The report further states:—"The forests under private ownership in the (Midnapore) division having been cut on very short rotations and annually burnt by Santhals and other aboriginal tribes were depleted of game —". The forest were soon taken over by the Forest Department under the provisions of the West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act, 1953. But the position did not improve. The annual report for 1955-56 mentions that: "—Annual tribal hunts in the hottest part of the year continue to do considerable damage to forests as well as their 'voiceless denizens'. The key to our success lies in the development of correct attitudes in the people at large." The topic was one of the earliest issues taken up by the State Wildlife Board constituted in 1955. But nothing happened and it was noted in the annual report for 1965-66 that: "— tribal hunts of unusual dimension are permitted under government blessings every year to accommodate the so-called tribal customs. By the nature of this 'Shikar', nothing is expected to survive and the result can be better imagined than written or seen." The annual report for 1972-73 recorded: "Adibasi Shikaries of all the districts of this (Southern) Circle kill wildlife—both with bows and arrows and with guns indiscriminately,

under the pretext of tribal hunt. All possible steps are being taken to enlighten them through publicity about the after-effects—. Apparently, they could not care less for posterity." However, even in the year 2008 the people in question remain to be enlightened. Tribal hunting in South Bengal continues, albeit on a somewhat reduced scale—thanks to the forest protection committees operating in the southern West Bengal and also because there is not much wildlife left to be hunted. The issue is no longer discussed in the meetings of the State Wildlife Advisory Board!

Corridors for Wildlife

Corridors are also among the most talked about issues with regard to wildlife management in West Bengal, particularly in the context of human-elephant conflict. Fragmentation of forests for creation of tea estates in the nineteenth century; deforestation for undertaking developmental projects immediately after the independence; and establishment of army cantonments after the Sino-India war in 1962 are the major factors leading to loss of habitats for elephants and other mega-fauna in North Bengal and the blockage of their normal paths of movement. But the Forest Department has also made its own contribution to the loss of corridors as the following remarks by Shri A.C. Gupta would reveal*:

"The Kumari forest, which holds a salt-lick in Rongo compartment No.1 on the left bank of the Nuxal Khoia has been generations past, a rendezvous for scores of herbivore animals from the adjoining Bhutan, the foot hill forests of Kalimpong and the farthest end of the Tondou forest. There is no other salt-lick to serve the animals of these forests. Upto the outbreak of World War II the sanctity of the salt-lick was respected, and many well-trodden game paths converged to the salt-lick from several directions through dense forest. There was a large concourse of wild animals, elephants,

* Ref. Journal of Bengal Natural History Society; April, 1958.

gaur, sambhur, cheetal, muntjac and others, to be seen in the precincts of the salt-lick and as an Assistant Conservator serving in those parts some 30 years ago, I remember I used to be afraid even to approach the salt-lick. The war proved to be the undoing of many things, and the preservation of wild life was one among these. Throwing the basic principle of management of forests and of wild life to the winds, most accessible parts of forests were heavily exploited, and large clearings were made all over for labour force establishments. This fever of unbalanced action lasted for several years after the termination of the war in 1945, and a very great deal of damage was done. — Extensive clear-fellings were made in Kumani Block along the game paths, a large clearing was made fairly close to the salt-lick and a forest village established therein, and finally the Rongo Block in which the salt-lick occurs was transferred to the Directorate of Commerce and Industries for the cultivation of medicinal plants. It seems strange that in the Working Plan for the management of Kalimpong forests, which was drawn up during the years, 1946 and 1947, and which prescribed the clear-fellings in Kumani Block, no provision was even made for the exclusion of forested strips along the permanent game paths leading to the salt-lick to serve as corridors. While dealing with nature human actions are often of far-reaching consequence, and the damage once done may prove difficult to repair. The facts enumerated above should prove that the actions taken over a period of time were based neither on a sound local knowledge nor on knowledge of the laws of nature.²

Protected Areas

During the 1920s the floods of the Sankosh river destroyed a large part of the forests of Balapara and Barabisha under the Bholka Range of Buxa Division converting it into large stretches of savannah grass. This area had

continuity with the forests of Assam and supported such important species as rhinoceros, tiger, sloth bear, gaur, wild buffalo, pigmy hogs and Bengal florican. The forest officers made special efforts to reclaim the savannah areas for tree crops and experimented with various combination of tree species. In January 1954, Shri V.S. Rao, Conservator of Forests, Northern Circle, inspected these forests. In his inspection note³, he referred to grasses as 'troublesome intruders' in the plantations and extolled the virtue of Jarul for being efficacious in suppressing grasses. Ironically, in the same Inspection Note, he also wrote about the possibility of establishing a game sanctuary in Bholka Range. A proposal was accordingly initiated by the Forest Directorate. But it was not accepted for the reason given in the annual report of 1953-54: "It has been decided that as the Bholka forests (Balapara-Barabisha region) enjoys a measure of protection, being out of the way, (it) need not be considered for a sanctuary just yet." The proposal was revived in 1956-57 but, presumably, not pursued. In the following years, replacement of grasses with Jarul, Teak and other tree species continued. In February 1983, when Buxa Tiger Reserve was established, Bholka had lost all its grass lands and most of its mega-fauna except a few elephants and gaur visiting occasionally from Assam. The area was not considered fit to be included in the Buxa sanctuary. The irony of the situation reappeared recently when a senior forest officer proposed that rhinoceros should be re-introduced in these forests and a habitat should be created for them by replacing tree-crops with grasses!

The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 does not provide for establishment of temporary sanctuaries. But such a practice was in vogue prior to the independence. Three temporary sanctuaries were maintained by the Forest Department at Bhutri (8 sq mile); Pana (5 sq

² Ref. Inspection Notes of Shri V.S. Rao, Conservator of Forests, Northern Circle, West Bengal (1959)

mile); and Gaburbasra (15 sq mile)-all under Buxa Division, from 4.9.35 to 30.9.38. The areas were quite rich in wild animals including tigers. The reason for not continuing with these sanctuaries is not known. One possible reason could be the onset of the World War-II. In 1951, these forests were brought under the newly created Coochbehar Division and subjected to regular forestry operations and planted mostly with teak. The forests also suffered heavily on account of illegal fellings carried out by the workers of the adjoining tea estates. In 1990, the forest blocks of Rangamati, Bharnabari and Bhutri (41.20 sq km) were notified as a sanctuary and made a part of the Buxa Tiger Reserve. But it was too late by that time. These forests, which no longer sustain tigers or their prey-species, had to be excluded from the Critical Tiger Habitat of Buxa Tiger Reserve as notified by the State Government in 2007.

Jaldapara sanctuary, situated on the flood-plains of the river Torsa is undoubtedly the pride of West Bengal. The trouser-like shape of the sanctuary and the attendant problems of protection of rhinoceros and other wild animals in the two legs on the southern fringe have engaged the attention of successive generations of wildlife managers. During 1935-36, an idea was mooted to consolidate the sanctuary by acquiring the triangular bit of land between the two legs. The annual report of that year records: "The shape of the Jaldapara Rhinoceros Sanctuary, which is in the form of a two-pronged fork with village cultivation in the cleft, is not ideal and as the head of game in the forest increases, interests are bound to clash and a decision will have to be made one way or the other. As this forest area is one of the few remaining in Bengal where the rhinoceros is to be found now and as the khas cultivation area concerned is of poor quality, it would seem that it will be best as soon as possible to reserve the whole block enclosed in the fork." Unfortunately, the proposal did not materialize.

The proposal was revived in 1955-56. The matter was reportedly lying pending before the Deputy Commissioner of Jalpaiguri in 1957-58. The idea was endorsed by the State Wildlife Board. The Rhino Inquiry Committee appointed by the State Government in 1973 also recommended the acquisition of the land in question. A lot of water has flown down the Torsa since 1935-36, but the proposal remains a distant dream for the managers of Jaldapara sanctuary.

At present, West Bengal does not have any Protected Area in the bio-geographic province 6B (Deccan Peninsula-Chotta Nagpur) represented by the forests of the southern West Bengal. This was not a deliberate omission. A proposal to set up a sanctuary at Belpahari over about 150 sq miles of forested area (locally known as Mayurjhama) around the tri-junction of the districts of Purulia, Bankura and Midnapore was put forward by the forest officers in 1955-56. The relevant annual report stated that: "There are sources of perennial water in this area which will be very useful for wildlife." The proposal, which had the approval of the State Wildlife Board, was initially kept pending as the legal formalities to declare the area as protected or reserved forests were not yet complete. The proposal was alive even during the 1960s but it could not be implemented on the ground that "— biggest limiting factor is scarcity of water. Whatever water-holes are there ... there are villages..."⁸ The proposal was revived in November 1978 when the Indian Board for Wildlife advised the Government of West Bengal to set up Mayurjhama sanctuary in Midnapur district and link it to Dalma Sanctuary in Bihar (now Jharkhand). But nothing materialised. Yet another endorsement to the idea of the Mayurjhama sanctuary came from the Asian Elephant Specialist Group of the IUCN in the 1980s. This time the stumbling block was said to be problem of relocating a

⁸ Ref. Annual Report for 1965-66

large number of hamlets which had in the meanwhile cropped up in the forests. Finally, the State Government notified Mayurjharna Elephant Reserve over 414 sq km in October 2002. But, an Elephant Reserve is not a legal entity and by no means a substitute for a sanctuary. Mayurjharna at present is a Naxal-infested area and it looks unlikely that it would ever be constituted as a sanctuary.

To make up for the gap in the Protected Area network in West Bengal, The Wildlife Institute of India has recommended setting up of a 100 sq km sanctuary in the Ajodhya Hills (Purulia)⁷. The Zoological Survey of India has also endorsed this proposal. But in the present socio-political scenario, it would be difficult to enforce all the legal prohibitions and restrictions expected of a sanctuary. An alternative proposal for establishing a

Conservation Reserve over 50.65 sq km in the Ajodhya Hills' has been submitted to the State Government. One sincerely hopes that yet another opportunity will not be lost.

Looking back in the history of wildlife management in West Bengal, one finds numerous examples of what would now appear as blunders, faux pas, or omissions, but it will be unfair to find fault with the foresters of the yester-years. They did their best to protect wildlife within the limitations and constraints of their times and also the policy set by the Government and laid the foundation of wildlife conservation in the State. We can not set right many of the mistakes or omissions of the past. But they do serve us with valuable reminders to do all that is possible for saving our valuable wildlife before it is too late.



⁷ Ref. Wildlife Protected Area Network in India : A Review; Wildlife Institute of India (2002)