

HT. 2/9/99

## Birdsong and rain

THE DULCET notes of the koel calling out to its mate have always fascinated me. As spring turns to summer and the mating season begins I find myself desperately peering at trees to get a glimpse of the bird with the golden voice. But the koel is a shy bird and keeps itself well camouflaged in the thick foliage of some tall tree. All my attempts to get a glimpse of the bird were in vain. So it continued to live in my imagination — magical, mystical and elusive. As a child I have been told fascinating stories about how the koel would lay its eggs in a crow's nest and leave it to them to bring up its young. I could not believe that a bird with such magic in its voice could resort to such devious tricks or be such a bad mother.

Now I work in the World Wide Fund for Nature in the hope that I will see more of those beautiful creatures of nature — bears, tigers, dolphins, golden orioles, cuckoos and the exotic butterflies. Most of my time is spent in the air-conditioned luxury of a spacious building in the heart of Lutyens' Delhi. But the building is close to Lodhi Gardens and is surrounded by some magnificent trees that I can see from the large windows next to my desk.

While lesser mortals may doubt WWF's efforts to protect the wild creatures of nature, the birds and beasts seem to have greater faith in the NGO. Last week I had my first close look at a koel. The bird with the golden voice was sneakily trying to lay its eggs in a crow's nest when it was caught in the act. A flock of angry crows was chasing the koel with loud death calls. They swirled and swooped at the terrified koel as it tried des-

USHA RAI

perately to seek protection in the WWF. It went and hid in some bushes beneath an air-conditioner.

A handful of young animal lovers immediately rushed to rescue her. The crows were chased away but they kept returning, determined to do away with the sly koel. The koel kept herself well concealed in the thick foliage of the WWF garden.

A few days later, the same drama was enacted all over again. But we could not make out if it was the same koel still trying to lay its eggs in the crow's nest or if it was another koel in a hurry to lay her eggs. Within the WWF a debate began on whether this could have been the koel's first session of mating and egg laying. Was it lack of experience that led to the bird being caught in the act? There were others who felt they should not protect the koel who was too lazy to bring up her brood.

I did not join the debate. I just wanted to protect the koel that not only had a melodious voice but was quite attractive in her speckled white and brown feathered coat. So what if she was not a good mother!

The wonderful sight of the koel would have seen me through six months of human travail. But the next day my cup of joy brimmed over. In the first thin drizzle of the monsoons I saw a juvenile spotted owlet sitting on a silver oak just outside my office window. It sat there cool, unruffled, throughout the day. Late in the evening when the street lights were switched on the nocturnal owlet went out hunting. I am hoping she will return to grace the silver oak again.



## An outing in the wild

A five-day tour of the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve and the adjoining Katerniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary, in Bahraich District of Uttar Pradesh is ideal for wildlife viewing, as Usha Rai found out.

It was 9 a.m. of an early December morning and the mist wafted gently like balls of cotton wool over the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, in the Lakhimpur-Kheri district of Uttar Pradesh. It was unbelievably quiet and peaceful at the 884 sq. km Reserve. After the monsoon which extended this year into November, the sal and the teak, washed clean, stood tall and proud.

Three elephants, one of them a 16-year-old male rescued from Corbett National Park a couple of years ago, stood waiting to take the small team of visitors to the rhino enclosure in the south Sonaripur Range of the park. The well-trained elephants got on to their knees so that visitors could mount them with the help of a small ladder.

With the mahouts gently prodding them with their knees and feet, the elephants moved into the 26 sq. kms enclosed grasslands which is home to 16 rhinos. In fact, Dudhwa is the second home of the one-horned rhino outside Assam after Kaziranga and Manas national parks. Almost 160 years ago, the last wild rhino of the Dudhwa Terai belt was poached. In 1984, it was decided to bring back the rhino into a fenced-off area in Dudhwa whose natural vegetation includes as many as 14 plants (including grasses) that form the diet of the rhino. The seed population of five rhinos, with another three from Nepal, has grown to 16 today.

The elephant ride to the rhino grasslands is also in a way a tribute to a valiant, successful effort at conservation. Authorities who are now confident of the stability of the rhino population, have begun allowing tourists into the rhino enclosure.

Within half-an-hour of entering rhino space, a mother rhino and her calf were sighted though they were almost hidden in the tall elephant grass of Terai. The elephant dared to bring us within 20 feet of the rhinos and Mama Rhino, probably used to visitors with their cameras and binoculars, posed for pictures even as she guarded her young one.

After an hour's journey through rhino land, the party returned via the lake where long, fat pythons could be seen basking in the sun. The next day, there was another trip to the rhino enclosure and this time, within minutes of entering the grasslands a tiger was sighted, squatting on one of those few paths that cut through the grassland. The visitors almost whooped with joy but better sense prevailed and they watched in pindrop silence as the majestic fellow ambled away.

Though Dudhwa boasts of over 70 tigers, they are not easy to sight. However, it is easy to spot pug marks of tigers, tigresses and cubs. Park officials, however, may sight a tiger a week and for bonus, a leopard or even a sloth bear. Though the visi-

tors on this trip were not that lucky, the sight of a bear's den hidden behind a bank of trees was enough to add to the excitement of the morning. On the second day too, a mother rhino and a calf was sighted and this time round, the tall grass did not hamper one's view.

As one drove back to the forest lodge, still chatting away excitedly above the morning, the jeep braked hard as a serpentine eagle was sighted, sitting at eye level barely three feet away. It seemed sculpted on the tree till it noticed us and flew higher up on the tree.

After a quick lunch, the group drove down to the Kishanpur sanctuary, about 30 kms from the Dudhwa lodges, to watch the barasingha or swamp deer at Jhadital. Climbing the watch tower near the lake, binoculars were focused on Jhadital and lo and behold, a herd of 40 to 50 swamp deer could be seen, the males sporting splendid horns. Rupak De, the field director of Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, said there were 700 swamp deer in the Reserve and on some days you could see a herd of 400 swamp deer at Jhadital. Though the team was not fortunate enough to see swamp deer locking horns in their battle to win over the females, it was the rutting season and their low enticing calls were clearly audible.

A trip to Dudhwa is incomplete without a visit to Kishanpur, watching that wonderful terrain and the deer which come out one by one as the sun mounts the sky.

Because of its distance from Delhi - 430 kms by road, Dudhwa is not as popular a wildlife destination as Corbett National Park, which is just a seven-hour drive from the Capital. But the longer journey would be worth your while. For where else in the country, except in Assam, could you see five species of deer - swamp deer, cheetal, hog deer, barking deer and sambar. Dudhwa is also home to the rare, endangered hispid hare, wild boar, porcupine, otter, monitor lizard, turtle and an army of rhesus monkeys and langurs.

Of the nearly 1,250 species of birds found in the Indian sub-continent, over 400 can be spotted here. In fact Dudhwa is a favourite haunt of bird watchers who come to see, among others, the endangered Bengal florican and the swamp partridge.

A five-day package to Dudhwa Tiger Reserve and the adjoining Katerniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary, in Bahraich District, about a four-hour drive from Dudhwa, would be ideal for wildlife viewing. It is also possible to cross the border into Nepal for a couple of hours from Dudhwa and Katerniaghat. The WWF Tiger Conservation Programme has been supporting both protected areas. The area has seven tigers, a sizable population of swamp deer, hog deer, etc. Because of the ideal

terrain, three rhinos and four wild elephants from Nepal have crossed over and sought shelter in the greener jungles of Katerniaghat.

The boat ride down the Gerwa river that cuts through Katerniaghat is a memorable experience. Except for the Forest Department's two motorised boats, there are no other boats on the 10-km loop of the river. The river is serene and peaceful, the only sounds those of the birds and the motor boats. Both sides of the river are ringed in by trees, bamboo and dense foliage. If one is lucky, one could sight a rhino or an elephant at the water's edge. Dolphins can be seen frolicking in the waters, gharials, cormorants, herons, kingfishers and the pied kingfisher which can be mistaken for 'a tiny Dalmatian in flight'.

As the boat chugs along, it is quite possible to spot a serpent eagle swooping to pick up a dead snake before settling on a tree to make a meal of it. Among the many birds that can be sighted are the pallas fishing eagle, black ibis, cormorants, herons, kingfishers and the pied kingfisher which can be mistaken for 'a tiny Dalmatian in flight'. An early morning excursion to Mahadevtal is a must for bird watchers. Don't forget the binoculars and tread warily for the rare, endangered swamp partridge is a shy bird.

Bookings for accommodation have to be made well in advance for there are only two rooms available at the Forest Department Katerniaghat, at Nishangarh and at Morpiha. The guest house at Nishangarh is one of the more enchanting ones. Of 1875 vintage, this teak lodge has a large, welcoming fireplace. ■

Above: The crested serpent eagle and below, a rhino and her cub stroll along the grasslands  
Pictures by Ranjit Talwar

### Fact File

**How to get there:** Dudhwa is 430 km by road from Delhi and 219 km from Lucknow.

**The nearest railhead is Dudhwa (4 km) and the nearest airport is Lucknow. Limited accommodation available at the Park.**

**For reservations, write to: The Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), 17, Rana Pratap Marg, Lucknow - 226001. Ph: 0522-283902.**

**Tariff: Rs. 400 per day per person (for Indians) and Rs. 1,200 (for foreigners).**



## Cruising down the backwaters



India is blessed with natural beauty and one place that truly lets you savour this tropical excellence is Kerala. The State's vast backwaters are truly stunning and tranquil. The backwaters of Kochi are linked to other lakes towards the south by narrow canals and rivers and this makes navigation possible for 900 km of the 1,500 km area.

The canals are covered with a lush green canopy of coconut palms all through the route from Kochi to Kollam. Chinese fishing nets hang from huge wooden frames on both sides of the navigation channel for several kilometers.

The best way to travel through these waters is by traditional country boat. These boats do not pollute the water or disturb the serene atmosphere. They are propelled by Yamaha engines at a comfortable speed so that travellers can leisurely soak up the beauty enroute.

To promote backwater tourism, operators have introduced houseboats. The huge country boats once used to transport goods have been converted into floating houses. In fact, they have all the essential luxuries of a hotel. Sumptuous would be a good word to describe the cosy bedrooms with attached bathrooms and scrumptious would be a good way to describe the traditional cuisine comprising fresh sea/river fish, rice, etc.

Tourists sail from Kollam or Kochi to a nearby lake and anchor there for the night. If you've timed your cruise for a full-moon night, the experience becomes otherworldly. Imagine being on boat anchored at the centre of a big lake. You are surrounded by a vast expanse of water reflecting like silver plates. The cold breeze from the sea embraces you while the boat rhythmically rocks with the gentle waves. The array of stars is magnificent.

During the day, anglers can drop their lines and contentedly spend the day fishing. You can also swim in the river or lake.

The idea of a backwater cruise is a good one but sadly it is not being properly promoted. The State Government and tour

operators began with a lot of enthusiasm. Even a few hotel owners have built houseboats and anchored them at Kochi, Kollam and Alappuzha.

The package per day ranges between Rs. 5,000 and Rs. 11,000 including food. Some operators claim that there has been a 25 per cent growth in the number of foreign tourists who want to spend a holiday in the backwaters of Kerala. But actually there aren't enough high-spending tourists coming in.

There are also worries about maintaining hygiene. A large number of temporary latrines have been erected on both sides of the canal and around the edge of the lakes. And the Chinese nets hanging on both sides of the canals present a risk as the width of the navigating channels is narrowed down.

But the cruise is such a unique experience that everything possible should be done to facilitate it. It's idyllic for those who want to leave the hurly-burly of the metros behind and spend a day or two in tranquillity. ■

### Fast Facts

- \* Operators are based in Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Alappuzha and Kochi.
- \* The two major tour operators are Tour India Limited and Great India tours, both Thiruvananthapuram-based.
- \* The Casino Group of Hotels (Kochi), The Kollam District Tourism Promotion Council (Kollam) and the Ajit Associates (Kochi) operate houseboats.

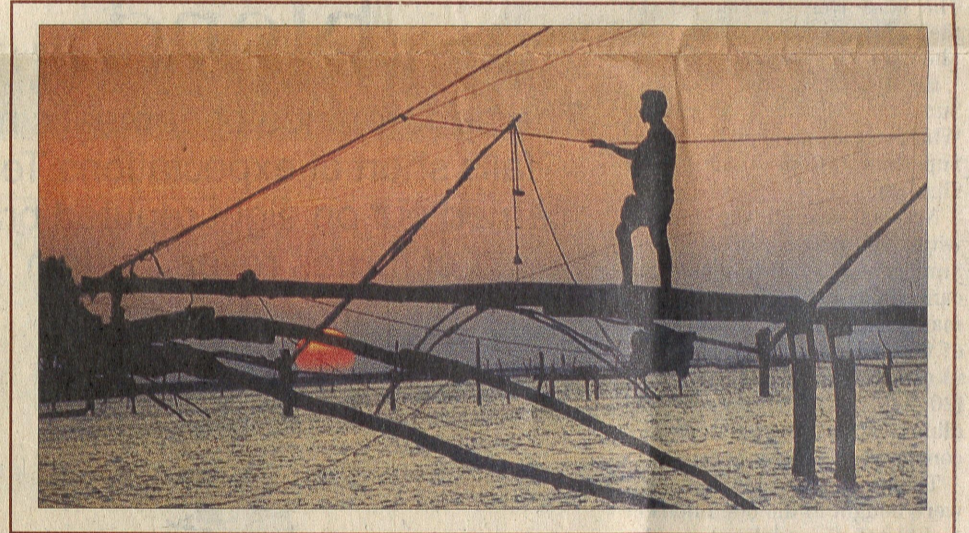
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Pictures by K.K. Mustafah  
Above: Houseboats, an interesting way to travel through Kerala's backwaters and left: Chinese fishing nets are a common sight along the backwater routes.



## Banking on Bali's charm

The Indonesian Government is looking to Bali's tourist industry to help pull the country out of its economic doldrums, writes Kalinga Seneviratne.

Bali's unique Hindu culture and its natural beauty have long drawn travelers to its shores, but the island's tourism and revenue potential have never been of greater value to Indonesia than at present.

That is because Bali, off the distant eastern end of Java island, continues to pull visitors in although many countries have issued travel warnings to its citizens after the May riots in Jakarta which claimed some 1,200 lives.

Today, the Indonesian Government is banking on Bali's charm to help pull the country out of its economic doldrums. Indonesian tourism needs to be pulled back from the brink of bankruptcy. What is needed is a destination to pull in tourists and Bali is in the best position to do it. Bali is a cheap location now," said Rico Yahya, Vice Chairman of the Indonesian Hotel and Restaurant Association. Bali has been a bright spot in Indonesia's tourism this year, which has been hurt by political instability marked by Suharto's forced resignation after 32 years.

Only 1.3 million visitors travelled to Indonesia in the first five months of 1998, bringing in a revenue of \$1.4 billion. In contrast, some 5.2 million visitors came to Indonesia last year, raking in \$6.77 billion in revenues.

Bali itself has suffered from a tourist slowdown, although the unrest in Jakarta took place far away from this island resort. "We have a major problem," N. Sugiri, Director of the Bali Government tourist office, said in an interview. "That's to do with politics and safety. Even though Bali is

very safe to travel in and we have had no political unrest here, many people overseas are not convinced. In addition to the bad publicity from the riots, the Asian economic crisis has resulted in a 30 to 40 per cent drop in tourist arrivals here this year," he adds.

The Asian crisis has badly hit Bali's markets in Singapore, South Korea, Japan, Thailand, Malaysia and Taiwan. The crisis has actually helped tourism in a cruel way with the massive devaluation of the rupiah making holidays in Bali cheaper for European, North American and Australian visitors.

Sugiri is relieved though, that the Australian market has not been affected at all by the political and financial crisis. "The Australian market has in fact increased this year because it's cheaper to have a holiday here now," he pointed out.

Australia is Bali's biggest market with more than a million Australians visiting the island each year. In fact, locals here laugh when they call Kuta beach an "Australian colony". "When tourists from other countries stopped coming here after the May riots, Australians still continued to come. They have not deserted us," said Budiarti, Assistant Communications Manager of Kartika Plaza Beach Hotel.

Still, the Australian market could be affected not by political strife but by criminal activity. Australia's largest-circulation newspaper, Daily Telegraph, has reported on attacks on Australian tourists in recent months. This prompted the Australian Foreign Affairs Department to print 50,000 colour brochures warning of dangers to tourists.

Industry sources were reluctant to discuss this, but others say crime may be one result of migration by Indonesians from other parts of the country in search of jobs amid the recession.

But Sugiri is quick to point out that unlike other places in Asia, Bali, particularly Kuta beach, does not have an image as a sex and drugs destination. Not in the open anyway. "Bali promotes cultural tourism, massage parlours are not our main purpose to promote tourism here," he said. "Prostitution, massage parlours and gambling are not encouraged."

Though Indonesia is a predominantly Islamic country, 90 per cent of the Balinese are Hindu, a religion which came to this island from India many centuries ago.

Locals admit to being increasingly worried about the influx of non-Balinese in search of employment. "Lots of people from Java come here to find jobs in tourism. It's giving us competition," complained hotel waitress, Wati. "Tourism is not booming, yet it gives us some work, unlike on other islands where there's no work."

In recent months, there has also been an influx of Indonesian Chinese into Bali since they see this largely Hindu island as a safe place to live. Many have come to buy houses, set up business and seek protection for their families. Locals are tolerant of other ethnic and religious groups. "As an Indonesian citizen born in Bali, I have never noticed racial resentment in the Balinese community," observed Joger, a souvenir seller. But speakers at a recent seminar here on avoiding ethnic tensions which have engulfed other parts of Indonesia warn that large-scale arrival of non-Balinese could cause some trouble in the future.

For example, they say if the ethnic Chinese get into the tourism industry but do not share its benefits with the local people, there could be resentment. "What we can do is to include all components in our society, both original inhabitants and newcomers, to preserve our culture," argued lawyer, Wayan Sudirta.

Said Sudirta: "If tourist operators continue to exploit the island and have only a marginal impact on the island's prosperity, some day people will reject tourism." ■

Inter Press Service

**I**f the Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister, Mr. Digvijay Singh romped home in the recent Assembly elections, it is because of the State's sustained efforts at improving the lot of the common man even in the remote tribal pockets of the State.

Not only was Madhya Pradesh the first state in the country to prepare a State Human Development Report on the lines of the UNDP's report, but it has now come out with a second report which was released by Nobel Laureate, Prof. Amartya Sen. With the publication of these reports, not only has the State very clearly expressed its intention of providing basic, life-improving necessities for the people, but has put itself up for public scrutiny. While the first

Madhya Pradesh is the only State that has consistently put itself up for public scrutiny. Its Human Development Report, brought out for a second time, documents problem areas as well as achievements, says Usha Rai.

report was a benchmark on gaps in attainments, the second report spells out the strategies adopted primarily through decentralised action.

Districts are listed according to the order of their achievements in the Human Development Index (HDI) and the kind of gender sensitivity displayed. In fact Rajan Katoch, Project Director for both reports, says "placing districts according to their HDI means people know where they stand, vis-a-vis others in the State." Rankings have been used by elected representatives to get a better deal for their districts.

In a country where everything seems to be falling apart, it is good to know that at least one State, Madhya Pradesh, is on the verge of pulling itself out of BIMARU (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh) status.

To ensure that social sector goals are attained, the State budget for social sector has gone up from 18 per cent of the total budget in the Eighth Plan to 42 per cent in the Ninth Plan.

Since the Report is the joint effort of the Madhya Pradesh Government (Rajan Katoch, R. Gopalakrishnan and others) and an NGO, Sanket, based in Bhopal and Delhi, it has an earthy flavour. Mr. N.C. Saxena, Secretary, Rural Areas and Employment, has provided the background in the chapter on people-oriented management of forests. There is therefore a realistic evaluation of the tribals and villagers' rights over forest produce. Another adviser, P. Sainath, the author of 'Everyone loves a good drought', has also helped ensure that the Madhya Pradesh Report is indeed a human document.

Universal access to elementary education has been a distant dream in this country. But in Madhya Pradesh, the universal elementary educational goal is likely to be achieved in the next two years. Under the Education Guarantee Scheme (EGS), the Government announced that if there were 25 children anywhere in the State without a primary school, it would provide one within 90 days of the community making the demand for it.

While the Government provides for teachers' salaries,



## Path to progress

teacher training, books and mid-day meals for children and academic supervision, the community mobilised the demand for education, identified a local qualified person to be the school teacher or *guruji* and provided the building to house the school. Within 18 months of the EGS being announced, some 20,000 schools were set up on the demands of the community.

The gram panchayats, realising the importance of education, appointed the teacher, paid his salary on behalf of the Government and ensured that the school functioned. Under the EGS, two lakh teachers were trained. Simultaneously the State is trying to improve the quality of education in the 30,000 primary schools set up over the last four years under the Rajiv Gandhi Mission.

Obviously elated with his success in primary education, Chief Minister, Mr. Digvijay Singh, quipped, "Some of us tend to ritualise *Saraswati Vandana*, Real *Saraswati Vandana* is when we provide real learning opportunities to all our children."

In fact, primary education was just one of the seven missions of the State. The others being watershed management, control of diarrhoeal diseases, sanitation, development of fisheries, rural industries and elimination of iodine deficiency disorders.

By January 1996, universal use of iodised salt was achieved and the mission for it closed after an independent evaluation

by the International Council for Control of Iodine Deficiency Disorders.

The target of watershed management being completed in 12 lakh hectares by June last year, the Mission has enhanced its target to 33.3 lakh hectares, which is one per cent of India's land area. Under the mission for rural industries, one million jobs have been generated in the tribal districts of Surguja, Bilaspur and Raigarh in sericulture, leather, handlooms and handicrafts. The one Mission that has not really gone on stream is sanitation and therefore, the challenge for the Government continues.

But probably, the most heart-warming story of the transformation unfolding in the backwaters of Madhya Pradesh is about the Bairani Kuldri or the Women's Banks. In Jhabua district alone, 25,000 women have come together to organise thrift groups.

With savings of Rs. 3.5 crores, Bairani Kuldri, which began as an alternative to the exploitative system of rural credit in the informal sector is well on the way to becoming a movement to empower women. The Women and Thrift Groups are sponsoring 38 activities ranging from agricultural credit to small consumer loans.

It is heartening to know that as a result of these watershed developments, the forests and villages of Jhabua are turning green again. There is less migration because the land is

now able to sustain the villagers.

The Panchayati Raj has also been transforming lives. Take the case of Gayatri Bai Uike, village Kohani Dewari, Shahpura block, Mandla District who lost her husband in an accident and had a tough time bringing up her children and farming her fields. When the village decided to make her the Sarpanch, she had several inhibitions.

But once she took on the responsibility, she decided to help the girls of the village towards self-sufficiency so that they would not suffer her fate. She was fortunate to have land and other assets. She made a start in this direction by deciding to promote their education. She got Rs. 20 lakhs for an ashram school for 50 girls. But the Government would not allocate land towards the school. So Gayatri Bai donated two acres of her land to the village to ensure a secure future for the girls of the area.

Madhya Pradesh has put itself up for public scrutiny on its performance in the social sector. The Gayatri Bais of the State are chipping in with their inputs. Should not other States emulate MP by documenting changes at the grassroots? ■

Women's Feature Service  
Picture by A. Roy Chowdhury  
Above: The success of the primary education campaign in Madhya Pradesh is an example for other states to emulate.

**I** received two very interesting invitations last week. One was from Shasma, a production company that organised a special screening of *Ishq Hua! Kaise Hua!*, a very refreshing Valentine's Day episode for Zee TV's *Rishtey*. It was a story about Shweta, who has a crush on Tarun, who's in love with Pammii, who's infatuated with Akshay, who's besotted by Seema... The list goes on, and in this tale of puppy love, even the dogs go round chasing each other in the park!

The other invitation was a rather curious one from something called the Save India Society. This grandiosely named organisation had organised a seminar to discuss and debate the "social, cultural and security implications" of Direct to Home (DTH) television.

What intrigued me were both the choice of the subject and the choice of speakers. After all, there are several things you can do if you want to 'Save India' - combating communalism, poverty and corruption come immediately to mind. The panel of speakers who wanted to save India from this great menace of DTH included such worthies as Tushar Gandhi, Nirmala Prabhavalkar Samant, former mayor of Mumbai, Dr. Ram Manohar Tripathi, a former minister, and a few other so-called proponents of Indian culture, whatever that mysterious entity might be. None of them are particularly known for their expertise in DTH.

Realising that this was a great opportunity to have a blast, I went around to this seminar. I was not disappointed. Some of the gems of 'wisdom' that these worthies threw up threw me into paroxysms of laughter.

Sample these: Ms. Prabhavalkar felt that DTH television should be a subject for the Defence Ministry to consider. I have no idea what she thinks DTH is, but I presume she felt that hostile nations could beam down their troops directly to people's homes and occupy them. A kind of real life version of "Beam me up, Scotty!"

Or probably she felt that given the quality of programming on our television, the Defence Ministry might do a better job. (If this was the case, I admit there is some merit in the thought. After all, if everyone in

**TELEWATCH**  
**A**  
**thoroughly**  
**muddled**  
**discussion**  
The debate on Direct to Home (DTH) television continues with many still undecided on whether to embrace it fully or not.

the country watched the Siachen battle live, they could probably force our politicians to stop the senseless slaughter and talk to Pakistan.

Dr. Tripathi felt that DTH would drive cable operators out of business. Not that it is going to happen but even if it did, I was wondering why a politician was worried about it. Out-of-work cable operators do not constitute a vote bank, do they?

Tushar Gandhi, whose only real claim to

fame is that he is related to the Mahatma, felt that DTH would be used only to watch pornography. This was the kind of argument politicians used when they were initially trying to ban satellite television. Ten years after the advent of satellite TV, most people I know watch television for news and entertainment through soaps and other film-based serials. So I don't know where these fears come from. But then I have no idea what kind of television programmes politicians watch, do I?

But the most hilarious was a chap called Idris Nizami who was introduced as a Urdu writer, poet and singer. He went so far as to say that if DTH came in, he and all other singers in the country would go on a hunger strike. I would love it if that happened. There are thousands of old songs of Lata Mangeshkar, Rafi, Kishore Kumar and tonnes of other singers. Most singers today are so mediocre, who needs them anyway?

The only person I felt sorry for was poor old Justice S.M. Daud, former judge of the Mumbai High Court, who presided over this farce of a seminar. He made no bones of what he felt about these silly arguments. For one thing, he pointed out that technology would advance so quickly that 10 years down the line, the controls that were imposed today would be completely useless. Also, he pointed out, false patriotism would get us nowhere. Calling for a debate on the issue, he said, "Let's talk as a mature nation in a mature world".

But what was this whole farce all about? Well, you did not have to stretch your imagination to find out. The underlying tone in the entire proceeding was that DTH was okay - as many speakers sensibly pointed out, you could not stop technology - provided it was run by Indians. Now we all know that there are only two serious DTH proposals - Star and Zee - and we also know which one is Indian, don't we.

But given the pathetic quality of "discussions" in this seminar, I don't think this was a lobbying attempt by Zee, since Mr. Subash Chandra has shown himself to be a much more sophisticated operator in the past. But one wonders... ■

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### CONSUMER NOTES



## 'Mis'rules of the road

**D**riving is not merely moving a vehicle from one place to another, often at break-neck speed, weaving through traffic, overtaking at "T" junctions, corners etc. Looking at the way traffic rules are flouted, it is obvious that many drivers do not deserve to hold a licence.

Is there any way every driving licence holder can be called for a special test when his/her licence is to be renewed. I would recommend that all those who have got their licence, including those who did actually take a test, undergo special tests before being allowed to continue driving. This should also include drivers of heavy vehicles.

Our country's citizens are sadly lacking in discipline. It is reflected every minute in every walk of life. Whether the road-user is a cyclist, a two-wheeler or an autorickshaw driver - most of them drive with gay abandon and extreme selfishness. They do not believe in the principle of sharing. The animal in all of us is brought to play. Otherwise, how can one put up with the constant flouting of the rule of the road. Though most of those who take to the wheel these days have some education, from the way they behave on the road it is quite obvious that they do not know the rules.

Chennai has the distinction of being one of the highest accident-prone cities in the world. Probably this is directly linked to two decisions which were taken a few years ago. An informal order was passed on to the police not to charge-sheet public transport drivers when they break a rule. This dictate was issued by a labour advocate turned labour leader who was once the Industries Minister of Tamil Nadu. Again in an attempt to help the 'poor' cyclist it was decided to do away with the rule that the cycle need not have a light on and that riding doubles was not to be penalised. And in

the bargain, the basic rule that an oncoming light is easier to spot than no light at all has been forgotten.

The Public Transport Corporation drivers, to give the devils their due, are a law unto themselves. The law enforcing authorities look away when they overshoot the signal or overtake from the right. Other road users believe in 'equality before law' and follow the transport corporation drivers and break rules with impunity.

And if you are a law abiding driver you should know the answers to the following questions put out by the oil companies during the Fuel Conservation Week observed recently. Your answers will indicate whether you deserve to hold a driving licence or not. If you score less than 60 per cent, I would suggest that you go in for another test before getting behind the

**Are you a safe driver?  
Read on before you  
take the wheel again.**

wheel. Do not turn complacent by the fact that you have never been involved in a serious accident, your luck could soon run out.

- And now for the quiz. It is designed in a multiple choice format.
1. Tests of Indian cars prove that you can get up to ..... per cent extra mileage at 45-55 km per litre. (20 per cent, 30 per cent, 40 per cent, 50 per cent)
  2. Use of bimetallic spark plugs saves over ..... per cent of fuel and reduces exhaust emissions too. (1.5 per cent, 2 per cent, 2.5 per cent)
  3. Correct gear shifting can lead to as much as ..... per cent increase in fuel consumption. (10 per cent, 20 per cent, 30 per cent, 40 per cent)
  4. Tests show that 25 per cent decrease in

tyre pressure can cost you ..... per cent more petrol. (1 to 2 per cent, 2 to 10 per cent, 10 to 15 per cent)

5. Use of Radial Tyres increases fuel economy by ..... per cent and ensures longer tyre life and greater riding comfort. (5 per cent, 6 per cent, 7 per cent, 8 per cent)
  6. Switch off the engine at stops of over ..... minutes. (1, 2, 3, 4)
  7. Fuel consumption in a highly congested road can be ..... times the normal. (single, double, treble)
  8. A reduction of weight by 50 kms can load up to ..... per cent saving in fuel when driving in city. (1 per cent, 2 per cent, 3 per cent, 4 per cent)
  9. Over load racks increase wind resistance leading to ..... fuel consumption. (increased, decreased)
  10. Get car serviced every ..... km. (2,000, 3,000, 4,000, 5,000)
  11. The optimum speed for minimum fuel consumption is ..... km per hour. (45, 60, 80, 90)
  12. Fuel is being wasted in (a) A car with black smoke coming out. (b) A van being loaded while the engine is running. (c) A truck drives slowly and steadily.
  13. You add a thousand of kilometres to the life your tyres by keeping them properly inflated. (True or False)
  14. Do not rest your foot on the clutch plate as this causes higher fuel consumption (True or False)
  15. Use choke when it is a must - starting of cold engine in the morning. (True or False)
- Answers: 1. 40 per cent 2. 1.5 per cent 3. 20 per cent 4. 5-10 per cent 5. 5 per cent 6. 2 per cent 7. Double 8. 2 per cent 9. Increases 10. 5,000 11. 45 12. A OR B 13. True 14. True 15. True. ■

R. Desikan  
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### PRIVATE VIEW

Rakesh Sahgal



## For a child's sake



A recent UNESCO study revealed that most children admire the super heroes they watch on TV serials and a few try to emulate them, sometimes ending up with broken limbs or death. Usha Rai discusses what needs to be done to make television channels realise their commitment to society and more importantly, children.

"Television was a gentle medium, but it has taken on a frightening dimension - a Jekyll and Hyde syndrome with Hyde being the dominant character," pronounced Ms. Sai Paranjpe, the well-known film maker and chairperson of the National Centre for Children and Young People.

In doing so she is voicing the concern of thousands of middle-class parents and media pundits who watch helplessly, as young minds turn into the devil's workshop.

Clued to the television, watching for three to four hours a day their favourite serials such as *Hindustani, Shaktimaan, Aahat, Anhonee, Bhanwar, India's Most Wanted, X-Zone*, they want to be macho like their heroes on the small screen.

Others stay riveted to horror shows and crime/detective serials. Unwittingly they absorb the violence in these highly rated TV shows which permeate their lives and translate as increased teenage crimes and violence. A UNESCO study found that children admire super heroes be it Super Man, Spider Man, Tarzan or our own indigenously invented Shaktimaan.

Attracted by Shaktimaan's exploits, beamed to the smallest towns and outback of the country on Doordarshan, children have sought to imitate him and have ended up with broken limbs. Some have even lost their lives. Little girls have set themselves ablaze and committed dangerous feats, confident that Shaktimaan would come to their rescue. Though there is a warning by the star at the commencement of every episode of the serial against imitations, it has not deterred 'enthusiastic' youngsters.

Concerned citizens have even gone to court against continued airing of the serial. But more serious than the mayhem caused by Shaktimaan, is the slow insidious influence of violence watched daily on the several TV channels accessible to the children, often at prime time with

repeats the following day. Cartoon networks too are peddling violence to get higher viewership rating. Both the small and big screen are sending out the message that 'might is right'.

Though an Asian charter for children's rights on television was brought out in 1995, the pernicious programmes with their heady mix of violence, machismo and adventure continue.

Today there are 60 million households owning a television and over 250 million watch the programmes. There are over 50 channels beaming into this country and many of them are 24-hour channels. So a child has access to about 50 cartoons in a week and any number of entertaining serials.

Even the news channels depict violence. The unruly scenes in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly last year with *chappals* being hurled, microphones grabbed and heads broken was neither good for the image of the country nor was it something that children should have watched. Even the Gulf War shown on TV closely resembled computer games - with laser beams dancing across the screen blowing up tanks and aircraft in mid-air. Some 3,500 studies have been conducted in the US on violence and TV violence. These studies show that a third of the children interviewed believe that the world is an evil place.

Traditionally it is only the younger generation that has gazed at the world ahead bright-eyed and full of enthusiasm. Now thanks to television, young people step into the arena of life thinking that they inhabit an 'evil place'. Dr H.S. Dhavale, Head of Psychiatry, Nair Hospital, Mumbai, who studied the impact of television violence on children has horrifying stories to tell.

Last March a 12-year-old, who clung to his mother and refused to go to school, was admitted in the hospital. It is only when he recovered that he told his mother the cause of his worry - horror films and violence on

TV. In April, many more children came to the special centre of the hospital with complaints of lack of bladder control on the night a horror movie was aired.

They were just too scared to get off the bed and go to the bathroom. The Nair Hospital study showed that only 30 per cent did not watch the fights and other forms of violence.

Children from the lower economic class, in the eight to 12 age group, watched fights, rape sequences, eve teasing and 'forced love' on television. In fact 23 per cent of the children said they enjoyed the violence. Thirty nine per cent felt sad because the violence on the small screen was so similar to the violence happening all around them.

Close to 57 per cent of the kids dream of violence and this is probably what is responsible for bouts of bed wetting. Most of them watched *Aahat* and other horror serials. Only nine per cent of the children were angry that they were subjected to such programmes. Middle-class parents object to their children watching adult movies and the World Wrestling Federation fights.

But they are probably not aware of the impact of other crime and horror serials. In any case even if parents tell them not to watch certain programmes, 18 to 20 per cent of the children snoop to the neighbour's house to watch what adults in the family advise them not to.

Mr. Rati Kant Basu, CEO, Star TV, feels that pre-censorship of television programmes is not feasible. Even the censorship of films has its limitations. Some of the top producers of these 'disturbing' TV serials, teachers and even a psychiatrist were brought together for a public hearing on 'Television violence and its impact on children' organised by UNESCO, UNICEF, UN Information Centre and the India International Centre.

Some of the producers were on the defensive. Mr. B.P. Singh, producer of *Aahat* and *CID* maintained that his

two serials entertained and there was no violence in them. Mr. Singh said he had his own set of rules which he followed. Smoking and drinking is not permitted in the serials he produces and great care was taken not to glamourise crime. He was willing to abide by the guidelines drafted by the channel beaming his programme rather than follow rules imposed from the outside such as guidelines by the Censor Board.

However media-watchers feel there is a need for guidelines even for docu-dramas. The producers of the serial *India's Most Wanted* justify the violence in their programmes on the plea that they are just reporting. In fact they claim to be vigilantes. There are even serials where children are made to participate in the crime. In the name of mythology and patriotism, violence is being condoned. What is worse, various brands of cola, chocolate, tooth paste and biscuits are waging commercial battles to air these programmes for children.

For starters, Ms. Sai Paranjpe has suggested that promos, many of which focus on violence to attract a bigger audience, should be cleared by a panel before being broadcast. While there should be a 'watch dog' for television programmes, society per se will have to reject unsavoury films and serials.

If children could be in the forefront of the movement to ban plastic bags in Delhi there is no reason why they should not campaign equally forcefully for a ban on violent films and serials.

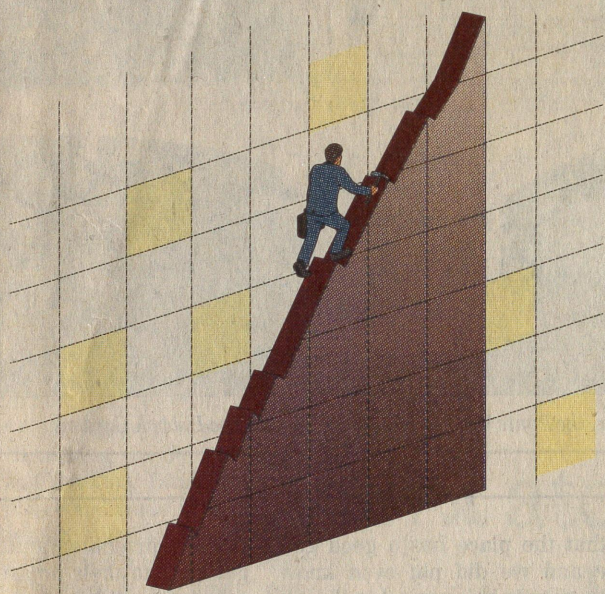
More child-specific programmes need to be produced and promoted by the big commercial firms. But the big question is - Who will enforce this golden rule? Who will bell the cat!

Picture by Bijoy Ghosh

Left: Mukesh Khanna who plays Shaktimaan, being mobbed by enthusiastic youngsters.

### CONSUMER NOTES

## Choking the consumer



About a decade ago, the Indian Finance Minister began pre-budget announcements of price increases from each Ministry. This year has been no exception.

Take some examples from day-to-day life. An increase in postal rates has been already announced. The Telecommunications Department have indicated their desire to raise tariffs. The Indian Railways have been talking about increasing passenger fares. "Petrol prices will have to increase," says a responsible official. Our airlines also seem to increase their fares every six months. Perhaps it will not be unrealistic to imagine a day in the future when it would be cheaper to travel to Delhi via Singapore or London and via Dubai to Mumbai!

So high are the prices for certain products that goods manufactured overseas are sometimes found to be far cheaper than locally produced goods. This even with prohibitive exchange rates making a dollar

worth Rs. 43! Our corporations, both public and private, are full of loud protests when these foreign goods enter the Indian market. Yet, local companies which have sole manufacturing rights in India, demand anti-dumping duties when the same products are freely available in the international market at much lower prices. While depending on imports because of their cost effectiveness is not a viable solution, something must be done to make our products competitive with world standards.

Take another example. A few days ago, I came across a headline: 'Imported pump-sets throttle domestic manufacturers'. On a closer perusal, it appeared that the price of Indian pump-sets had gone up because of low import duty. Therefore, Indian manufacturers wanted a higher duty to be charged for imported pump-sets.

Similar examples of double standards can

be found elsewhere too. On the one hand, policy makers talk of liberalisation of the economy through WTO agreements, World Bank advice and reducing import duties so that the Indian consumer can buy world-class goods at competitive prices; on the other hand, they accede to lobbying by rich farmers and push up the minimum support price of sugarcane, wheat, rice, etc. The cane crushing and sugar manufacturing units also lobby for raising the duty on imported sugar which the Government makes a pretence of resisting, but eventually agrees to.

Incidentally, world sugar production is so high that Brazil has lowered its prices but the Indian consumer does not get the benefit of that price nor does he force Indian manufacturers to compete in the open market so that prices are undercut due to competition.

Any average person knows how the cost of living in India has risen steeply over the years. Cannot the Indian Finance Minister benefit the Indian consumer by revising prices to more acceptable standards? If that were to be achieved, the following becomes possible.

- People will have large disposable income as the prices go down and more goods will be sold.
- The saving power of individuals will increase and thus, investments also will rise.

Free enterprise when exercised properly is a good thing: Unbridled freedom merely lends itself to exploitation of the consumer. That is why even in countries such as the US where individual freedom is worshipped, regulatory agencies check the growing power of the individual.

How do we improve the domestic scenario? Instead of makeshift budgets, let our Prime Minister and the Finance Minister decide reasonable prices in consultation with the relevant departments.

Or else, one may find the common man reduced to begging through doles of various kinds, euphemistically referred to as subsidies. And even these subsidised goods are not available to every one who needs it. I am sure our people would rather get all they want at reasonable prices than poor quality and insufficient supplies. ■

R. Desikan

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### TELEWATCH

## Real life dramas

There's a new serial from TV-18 which comes highly recommended and a TVI's documentary series that is much awaited. Thank God for some intelligent television in this age of hardsell gimmicks.



egg parathas for Valentine's Day (courtesy Zee), classical love songs spoofed in English on Sony...it's been a week since the big event but excuse me while I take a little time to recover.

There's just so much my jaded heart can take, especially when I come across verses like, "One me and one you/met only like this/things happening in body and mind/make me Mr. from Mrs!" (My own favourite definition of life is slightly more realistic. "It begins when you sink in his arms. It ends with your arms in his sink!")

But you have to hand it to these channels when it comes to reaching out to viewers. If it's the lowest-common-denominator equation that works, as Zee TV's Mr. Vijay Jindal once said, then they have certainly perfected the art.

Zee TV, for instance, has just launched yet another show that is bound to be hugely popular, called *Bakeman's Mama Mia* (Tuesdays, 7.30 p.m.) which follows a day in the life of various celebrities and asks fascinating questions like, "What would you do if one of your ears was bigger than the other?"

You will also see baby photographs and learn earth-shaking trivia about the person (eg: The day I got my first tooth). Of such stuff is great television made. (Though I would really like to meet people who actually sit down to watch such things!)

Sony too has its pulse on the audiences with shows that range from the inane (*Boogie Woogie*) to the intelligent (*Bhanwar*).

According to Review '98, Sony's recently published reckoner with information about the channel, advertisers and ad agencies, the channel reaches 13 million households throughout the country.

This figure does not tally with the figures put out by their CEO, Mr. Kunal Dasgupta in his message on their Web site (he mentions a penetration of 16 million house-

holds in the three years that Sony has been around) but never mind.

Review '98 also has a number of graphs, showing prime time trends in viewership between 1996-1998 in Mumbai and Delhi (SET gained 121 per cent in this period, it says).

The reach delivery of a prime time buy on Sony's plan has also increased by 61 per cent in the last three years. There are several other figures, quoting the TAM Peplometer which indicate that Sony is way ahead of rivals Zee and Star. Zee, no doubt, will have something to say about this but there's no denying that Sony has been giving Zee a bit of a hard time, with programmes like *Aahat, CID, Movers and Shakers*, and *Bhanwar* proving very popular - not to mention blockbuster films like *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*, which apparently was watched by 5.435 million individuals.

Incidentally, a tele-serial based on true-life court cases, bagged the Special Jury award for the best investigative programme on television at the 5th Screen-Videocon Awards last month. This serial, directed by Sanjay Ray Chaudhari and produced by TV-18 (Thursdays, 9.30 p.m.), is based on true court cases - a child bride sold by her parents to a Saudi sheikh and rescued by an air hostess; a pregnant woman set on fire for dowry; a 10-year-old boy paralysed thanks to a wrong injection by a careless nurse...

The serial has completed 52 episodes and mercifully, the director is conscious of the need to not sensationalise private lives. On television, it's very easy to cheapen real-life stories for the sake of a little visual drama.

If there is one channel that does not resort to cheap sensationalism, it is TVI. TVI has always had a commitment to social issues, even if they don't necessarily rake in the advertisers (though God knows, the channel could do with some funds).

The channel recently announced a documentary series, *Showcase on Literacy*,

which formed communication tools used during the campaigns, or are post-campaign documentations.

The telecast dates hadn't been finalised when I spoke to a TVI representative recently - it was meant to begin in January and conclude in March and has been deferred, hopefully so they can get a sponsor - but the series should be worth waiting for.

The Literacy Film Festival consists of seven films. Bappa Ray's *Ek Thi Gunja*, winner of the National Award for the best film by a new director, is the story of a tribal girl from Orissa and her struggle to study and improve the lot of her community, and who ends up committing suicide. Then there's *The Little Teacher of Thondamuthur*, directed by Aruna Hariprasad, about a physically handicapped master trainer and a school girl who inspires thousands to join the literacy movement.

Other films include *Across Baitarani - An Experience*, an experimental film by a young film maker and anchor, Ramesh Venkataraman, which uses the metaphor of a river to look at the movement of the poor and destitute from rural Keonjhar to the grime of the city, and looks at literacy as an important ecological issue. One of the other films that one should particularly watch out for is Suhasini Mulya's *Kagaz ki Lekhi* with screenplay by Tapan Bose and Om Puri in the lead.

Thank heaven for some intelligent television. I wish the advertisers would realise how important it is to support these things, instead of backing great marketing gimmicks like Valentine's Day! ■

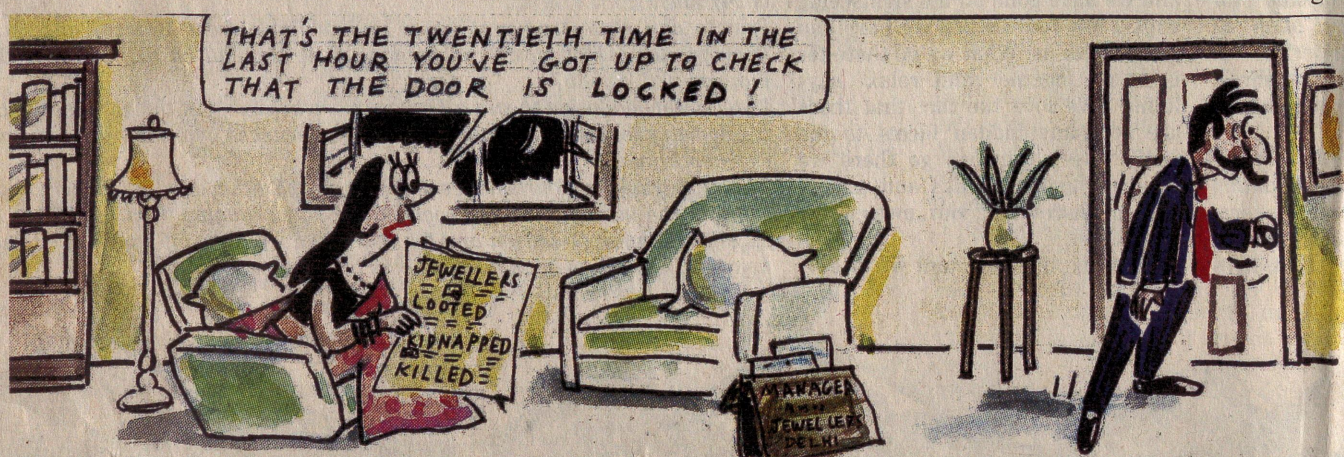
Menka Shivdasani

She can be contacted at menka\_shivdasani@hotmail.com.

Above: The episode featured above relates the story of a child bride sold by her parents to a Saudi sheikh - it is part of an award-winning tele-serial, *Bhanwar*.

### PRIVATE VIEW

Rakesh Sahgal



CALCUTTA SUNDAY 28 MARCH 1999

# With a little help from my friends

In five years the violent and militant villagers of Andhra's Srisaillam Tiger Reserve districts have learnt to respect their habitat. **Usha Rai** tells the story of their transformation

**D**ressed in the colourful clothes of her Lambada tribe, Susheela dances and sings with abandon — her lilting lyrics tell of the importance of forests. A few years ago she was a hardcore PWG militant in the heart of the Eastern Ghats, 210 km from Hyderabad. Behind the conversion — of not just Susheela — but the entire region covering the Nagarjunsagar-Srisaillam Tiger Reserve — is forest ranger K. Thulasi Rao.

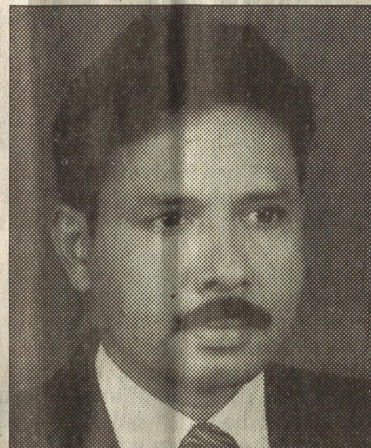
The 3,568 sq km of the Nagarjunsagar-Srisaillam reserve covering five districts, had a population of only 43 tigers when the area was declared a sanctuary in 1978. Determined efforts by the forest department which included elevating it to the status of a tiger reserve, saw an increase in population to 94 in 1989. But the forest department attention invited the anger of local people who believed that Project Tiger was infringing on their basic rights. With the help of militants, the locals began poisoning tigers and by 1994 the population dropped to just 35.

When Thulasi Rao first came to Srisaillam in 1994 the mood was hostile. His appointment followed the killing of range officer Ramiah by militants in his office at Barluti. At that time there was widespread mayhem and timber was being plundered regularly from the forests. If and when forest officials picked up courage to investigate timber smuggling, they would be confronted by angry villagers led by women who would fling chilli powder into their eyes. Foresters were frequently assaulted and behind all their hooliganism, the villagers would have the tacit support of the militants. In fact many of them were being absorbed in the Naxalite cadres. After Ramiah, who attempted to police the forests efficiently, was killed by a dozen militants (all villagers now turned conservationists) at point-blank range, pamphlets were distributed banning the entry of forest officers into forests.

Thulasi Rao is extremely soft-spoken and at 44 he looks like the average office *babu*. Unlike 'celebrity' environmentalists Medha Patkar and Sunderlal Bahuguna, a self-effacing Rao's strongest quality is his ability to merge into his background of Chenchu tribals and humble villagers. With his appointment at Atmapur in 1994, Rao brought in his classical concept of eco-development: "Reducing the pressure of local people on a habitat, whether it is that of a tiger or any other animal or bird." Part of Rao's strategy was to move cautiously and gradually win the confidence of the villagers, who were pre-

dictably hostile. Backed by a World Bank Rs 10 crore eco-development package, he embarked on his virtually impossible task.

In August 1994 he led his field staff to the Pecheruvu forest area. Hearing the sound of trees being cut a hesitant forester, bolstered by Rao's enthusiasm, caught the man even as he was swinging his axe. The man whistled and was immediately surrounded by a menacing group of villagers armed with axes. Thulasi Rao instructed the forester to leave the man he had apprehended. "I know you are cutting trees because you have no means of livelihood and need to fill your belly." The soft voice and the understanding glint in Rao's eyes led to



Forest officials move freely. Conservation of forests is high on their agenda. What more could I ask for?

instant rapport with the villagers. The unusually sympathetic tone was enough for them to break down. Behind their violent ways the villagers were actually simple-minded people. As Rao says, "Even the militants are no strange creatures from space. They are local village people who have left the mainstream and turned violent because they were frustrated with the existing system of governance." The villagers told Rao they were unhappy with the stigma of being looked upon as "looters, smugglers and villains" and they were ready to change their lives if someone would guide them. The helping hand of Rao and the eco-

development project was

accepted by the villagers who responded by handing over a lorry-load of timber they had extracted. The next day two foresters were sent in to talk to the villagers. They were offered cups of tea and chairs to sit on instead of the thrashing they were normally subjected to. Soon after this Thulasi Rao went abroad for training in eco-development to Australia, Nepal and other countries. The district forest officer appointed at Siddapuram, Adi Narain, was equally sensitive to the needs of the people and he adopted the village. With the villagers finding partners for their development in the foresters, the militants softened. In October when Rao returned as field officer for eco-development in the reserve, the villagers were even more receptive to his ideas.

Fifty training camps on eco-development were held across the villages of the reserve. Micro plans were drawn for 115 villages. Moreover, ten NGOs came in to work with the villagers on the eco-development project.

In an almost fairytale-like way, over a brief span of time the tiger reserve villages were transformed. From fear-ridden, violent tracts of no-man's-land these villages became bustling centres of activity where a growing eco-awareness was being honed by the NGOs. Using slides and projectors they helped the villagers conserve water, soil and forests while providing them livelihoods.

In 1995 Dokkuthanda village in Mehboobnagar district did not figure on any development map or panchayat scheme. Rao visited Dokkuthanda at the time and asked the people — whose only source of sustenance was the forests — what their most urgent need was. The Lambadi women replied in unison "water". The women also suggested that check dams on streams going through their village would be the best way of obtaining the water. Fifteen check dams have been constructed since then. The barren lands of Dokkuthanda are now harvesting three crops of groundnut, rice and tomatoes a year.

The entire experience has left the villagers highly motivated. They have stopped using wood for house construction, they catch and confiscate all carts stealthily taking away forest wood and now sport identity cards declaring their new status as members of the eco-protection force. The once impoverished Dokkuthanda now has its own grocery stores, 22 *pucca* houses and even a primary school. "We dreamed of water, electricity and *pucca* houses," says Susheela and "now these dreams are coming true."

The Dokkuthanda story is being repeated in village after village of the tiger reserve. Like the villagers who repaired the 15 km canal from Farhabad to Mannaur as part of eco-developmental work, or the regeneration of bamboo project in the Mannaur area.

There have been setbacks but Rao and his team of NGOs are undeterred. The small aparies, smokeless *chullahs* and solar lamps reflect the new thinking of the forest villages. Again not all solar lamps are functioning because the villagers have still to learn how to maintain these facilities.

The five-year eco-development project in the tiger reserve ends next year and Rao may be moved elsewhere. But he is not worried about the future of the work that he has begun; confident that the villagers will continue what he quietly but determinedly initiated five years ago.

A reticent Rao, however, will not be drawn into a self-praise session regarding his conversion of the militants. "My job is to reduce conflict, not to tomtom that militants sat in for lessons. Why provoke people by saying I have tamed them. They are now cooperating on eco-development; they are not cutting trees and stopping others from doing so. Forest officials are moving freely. Conservation of forests is high on their agenda. What more could I ask for?" asks Rao with a gentle smile.

UNDERSTANDING THE WILD: As part of the tiger reserve eco-development project villagers are trained to understand their environment better



## Strange bedfellows

Om Prakash Kejariwal's selection as director of the Nehru Memorial Museum has surprised the academic world, says **Bishakha De Sarkar**

**O**m Prakash Kejariwal's comprehensive curriculum vitae is laden with gold medals. He won one in his M.A. and another on graduation. And Kejariwal lets it be known that when he was 16 years old, he won a gold medal in an inter-Jesuit school English essay contest in Bihar.

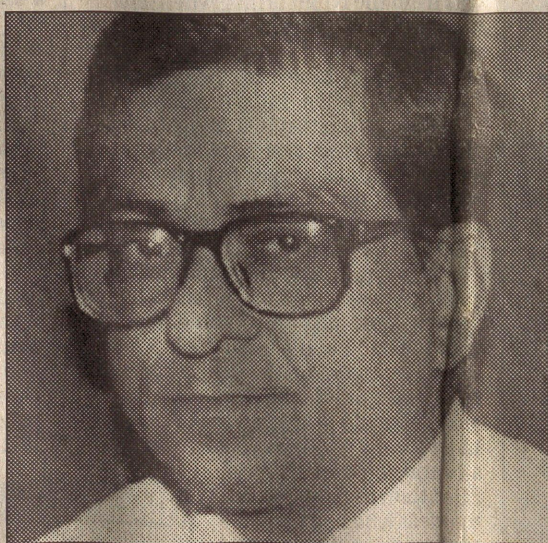
Kejariwal's seven-page bio-data is his not-so-pithy answer to all those who have been writing him off as an academic apprentice. He was, he states, a special invitee to a symposium on William Jones organised by the New York University in 1994, awarded the Nehru Fellowship in 1990 and a fellowship by the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) in 1980. "In fact, it can be said with some certainty that no Fellow of the ICHR has produced such a high grade work in such a short time," says Kejariwal of his project.

That Kejariwal has to underline his considerable feats is understandable, for few in and outside academic circles know him. He has kept a low profile as a bureaucrat in his 33 years in the information service. Not many knew him outside his ministry till he took over as the acting chief executive officer of the Prasar Bharati in August last year. Now that the 55-year-old bureaucrat is going to be the new director of one of India's most prestigious scholarly institutes, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), the bio-data will come in handy.

The appointment has been cleared by the human resource development ministry, but has to be ratified by the Cabinet's appointments committee. HRD sources hold that the ratification is a mere formality as the committee seldom disagrees with a ministry recommendation. So Kejariwal will, sometime in the near future, take over as the institute's third director. "That is, of course, if the government protects my salary and lets me retain my official house," he says.

Kejariwal's name has come as a surprise to the academic world which is still trying to figure out how a bureaucrat has managed to get a post that the country's leading scholars have been vying for. "There are other, more deserving scholars who have been bypassed, obviously because of political pressures," says a former Fellow.

The director's post has been vacant since the historian, Ravinder Kumar, retired in 1997. An advertisement for the post was placed in the papers last year, and the Teen Murti's governing body, comprising such stalwarts as H.Y. Sharada Prasad, A.K.D.



and Abid Hussain, zeroed in on a shortlist of three. The historian, Mushir-ul-Hasan, headed the list and was the panel's first choice. Next came the Jawaharlal Nehru University Russian Studies don, Madhavan Palat. Third on the list was O.P. Kejariwal, who has specialised in the Asiatic Society of Bengal and taught history in Shillong between 1986 and 1990. Much to the

amazement of all those who have been following the developments at Teen Murti, the HRD ministry picked Kejariwal.

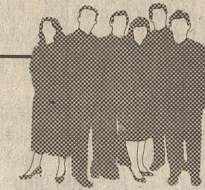
Kejariwal had applied for the director's post just days before he replaced S.S. Gill as the Prasar Bharati CEO. "The post asked for a modern Indian historian with administrative experience. I fitted in on both counts," says Kejariwal. "And as an academic, I rank with the best," he says. Not many scholars agree with that. Most, in fact, are concerned over what they see as government efforts at controlling the NMML. Kejariwal, they hold, does not match up with either B.R. Nanda, its first director, or Ravinder Kumar who held the post for 17 years. "The Nehru memorial library has been a liberal institute which has never been partisan," says the former Fellow. "And this has been so despite the fact that its board of trustees is chaired by Sonia Gandhi."

That the HRD ministry selected Kejariwal indicates that political pressures have been at work. Ministry sources stress that HRD minister Murlu Manohar Joshi was personally in favour of Palat, who is related to

General Candeth, a senior BJP member. The Prime Minister's office, however, pushed for Kejariwal. Pressure also came from members of the RSS, especially one of its prominent academics, Devendra Swaroop. "Kejariwal has a loose connection with the Sangh, and has been in touch with the Deendayal Research Institute ever since the days of the Ramjanamboomi movement," says an academic close to the Sangh.

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### AWARD OF THE WEEK

To cricketer Laxmi Ratan Shukla who played his first match for India last week.



CALCUTTA SUNDAY 28 MARCH 1999

# With a little help from my friends

In five years the violent and militant villagers of Andhra's Srisaillam Tiger Reserve districts have learnt to respect their habitat. Usha Rai tells the story of their transformation

Dressed in the colourful clothes of her Lambada tribe, Susheela dances and sings with abandon — her lilting lyrics tell of the importance of forests. A few years ago she was a hardcore PWG militant in the heart of the Eastern Ghats, 210 km from Hyderabad. Behind the conversion — of not just Susheela — but the entire region covering the Nagarjunsagar-Srisaillam Tiger Reserve — is forest ranger K. Thulasi Rao.

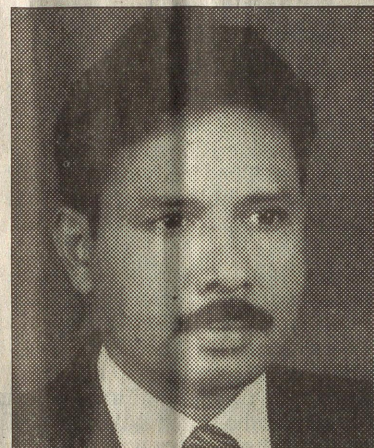
The 3,568 sq km of the Nagarjunsagar-Srisaillam reserve covering five districts, had a population of only 43 tigers when the area was declared a sanctuary in 1978. Determined efforts by the forest department which included elevating it to the status of a tiger reserve, saw an increase in population to 94 in 1989. But the forest department attention invited the anger of local people who believed that Project Tiger was infringing on their basic rights. With the help of militants, the locals began poisoning tigers and by 1994 the population dropped to just 35.

When Thulasi Rao first came to Srisaillam in 1994 the mood was hostile. His appointment followed the killing of range officer Ramiah by militants in his office at Barluti. At that time there was widespread mayhem and timber was being plundered regularly from the forests. If and when forest officials picked up courage to investigate timber smuggling, they would be confronted by angry villagers led by women who would fling chilli powder into their eyes. Foresters were frequently assaulted and behind all their hooliganism, the villagers would have the tacit support of the militants. In fact many of them were being absorbed in the Naxalite cadres. After Ramiah, who attempted to police the forests efficiently, was killed by a dozen militants (all villagers now turned conservationists) at point-blank range, pamphlets were distributed banning the entry of forest officers into forests.

Thulasi Rao is extremely soft-spoken and at 44 he looks like the average office *babu*. Unlike 'celebrity' environmentalists Medha Patkar and Sunderlal Bahuguna, a self-effacing Rao's strongest quality is his ability to merge into his background of Chenchu tribals and humble villagers. With his appointment at Atmapur in 1994, Rao brought in his classical concept of eco-development: "Reducing the pressure of local people on a habitat, whether it is that of a tiger or any other animal or bird." Part of Rao's strategy was to move cautiously and gradually win the confidence of the villagers, who were pre-

dictably hostile. Backed by a World Bank Rs 10 crore eco-development package, he embarked on his virtually impossible task.

In August 1994 he led his field staff to the Pecheruvu forest area. Hearing the sound of trees being cut a hesitant forester, bolstered by Rao's enthusiasm, caught the man even as he was swinging his axe. The man whistled and was immediately surrounded by a menacing group of villagers armed with axes. Thulasi Rao instructed the forester to leave the man he had apprehended. "I know you are cutting trees because you have no means of livelihood and need to fill your belly." The soft voice and the understanding glint in Rao's eyes led to



Forest officials move freely. Conservation of forests is high on their agenda. What more could I ask for?

instant rapport with the villagers. The unusually sympathetic tone was enough for them to break down. Behind their violent ways the villagers were actually simple-minded people. As Rao says, "Even the militants are no strange creatures from space. They are local village people who have left the mainstream and turned violent because they were frustrated with the existing system of governance." The villagers told Rao they were unhappy with the stigma of being looked upon as "looters, smugglers and villains" and they were ready to change their lives if someone would guide them. The helping hand of Rao and the eco-

development project was

accepted by the villagers who responded by handing over a lorry-load of timber they had extracted. The next day two foresters were sent in to talk to the villagers. They were offered cups of tea and chairs to sit on instead of the thrashing they were normally subjected to. Soon after this Thulasi Rao went abroad for training in eco-development to Australia, Nepal and other countries. The district forest officer appointed at Siddapuram, Adi Narain, was equally sensitive to the needs of the people and he adopted the village. With the villagers finding partners for their development in the foresters, the militants softened. In October when Rao returned as field officer for eco-development in the reserve, the villagers were even more receptive to his ideas.

Fifty training camps on eco-development were held across the villages of the reserve. Micro plans were drawn for 115 villages. Moreover, ten NGOs came in to work with the villagers on the eco-development project.

In an almost fairytale-like way, over a brief span of time the tiger reserve villages were transformed. From fear-ridden, violent tracts of no-man's-land these villages became bustling centres of activity where a growing eco-awareness was being honed by the NGOs. Using slides and projectors they helped the villagers conserve water, soil and forests while providing them livelihoods.

In 1995 Dokkuthanda village in Mehboobnagar district did not figure on any development map or panchayat scheme. Rao visited Dokkuthanda at the time and asked the people — whose only source of sustenance was the forests — what their most urgent need was. The Lambadi women replied in unison "water". The women also suggested that check dams on streams going through their village would be the best way of obtaining the water. Fifteen check dams have been constructed since then. The barren lands of Dokkuthanda are now harvesting three crops of groundnut, rice and tomatoes a year.

The entire experience has left the villagers highly motivated. They have stopped using wood for house construction, they catch and confiscate all carts stealthily taking away forest wood and now sport identity cards declaring their new status as members of the eco-protection force. The once impoverished Dokkuthanda now has its own grocery stores, 22 pucca houses and even a primary school. "We dreamed of water, electricity and pucca houses," says Susheela and "now these dreams are coming true."

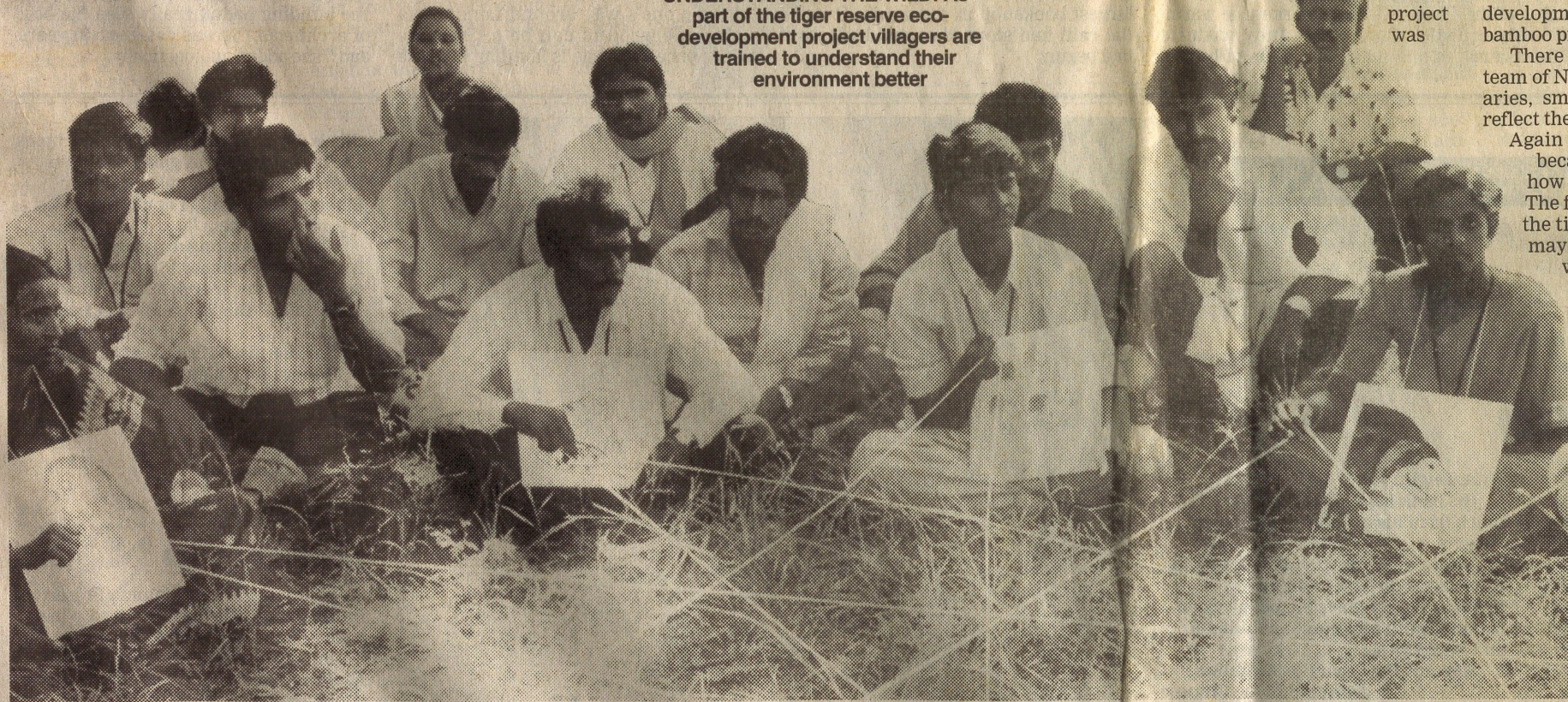
The Dokkuthanda story is being repeated in village after village of the tiger reserve. Like the villagers who repaired the 15 km canal from Farhabad to Mannaur as part of eco-developmental work, or the regeneration of bamboo project in the Mannaur area.

There have been setbacks but Rao and his team of NGOs are undeterred. The small aparies, smokeless *chullahs* and solar lamps reflect the new thinking of the forest villages. Again not all solar lamps are functioning because the villagers have still to learn how to maintain these facilities.

The five-year eco-development project in the tiger reserve ends next year and Rao may be moved elsewhere. But he is not worried about the future of the work that he has begun; confident that the villagers will continue what he quietly but determinedly initiated five years ago.

A reticent Rao, however, will not be drawn into a self-praise session regarding his conversion of the militants. "My job is to reduce conflict, not to tomtom that militants sat in for lessons. Why provoke people by saying I have tamed them. They are now cooperating on eco-development; they are not cutting trees and stopping others from doing so. Forest officials are moving freely. Conservation of forests is high on their agenda. What more could I ask for?" asks Rao with a gentle smile.

UNDERSTANDING THE WILD: As part of the tiger reserve eco-development project villagers are trained to understand their environment better



## Strange bedfellows

Om Prakash Kejariwal's selection as director of the Nehru Memorial Museum has surprised the academic world, says Bishakha De Sarkar

Om Prakash Kejariwal's comprehensive curriculum vitae is laden with gold medals. He won one in his M.A. and another on graduation. And Kejariwal lets it be known that when he was 16 years old, he won a gold medal in an inter-Jesuit school English essay contest in Bihar.

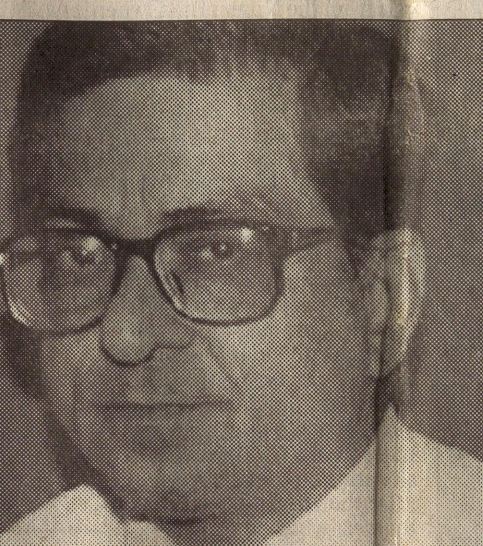
Kejariwal's seven-page bio-data is his not-so-pithy answer to all those who have been writing him off as an academic apprentice. He was, he states, a special invitee to a symposium on William Jones organised by the New York University in 1994, awarded the Nehru Fellowship in 1990 and a fellowship by the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) in 1980. "In fact, it can be said with some certainty that no Fellow of the ICHR has produced such a high grade work in such a short time," says Kejariwal of his project.

That Kejariwal has to underline his considerable feats is understandable, for few in and outside academic circles know him. He has kept a low profile as a bureaucrat in his 33 years in the information service. Not many knew him outside his ministry till he took over as the acting chief executive officer of the Prasar Bharati in August last year. Now that the 55-year-old bureaucrat is going to be the new director of one of India's most prestigious scholarly institutes, the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), the bio-data will come in handy.

The appointment has been cleared by the human resource development ministry, but has to be ratified by the Cabinet's appointments committee. HRD sources hold that the ratification is a mere formality as the committee seldom disagrees with a ministry recommendation. So Kejariwal will, sometime in the near future, take over as the institute's third director. "That is, of course, if the government protects my salary and lets me retain my official house," he says.

Kejariwal's name has come as a surprise to the academic world which is still trying to figure out how a bureaucrat has managed to get a post that the country's leading scholars have been vying for. "There are other, more deserving scholars who have been bypassed, obviously because of political pressures," says a former Fellow.

The director's post has been vacant since the historian, Ravinder Kumar, retired in 1997. An advertisement for the post was placed in the papers last year, and the Teen Murti governing body, comprising such stalwarts as H.Y. Sharada Prasad, A.K. D.



and Abid Hussain, zeroed in on a short-list of three. The historian, Mushir-ul-Hasan, headed the list and was the panel's first choice. Next came the Jawaharlal Nehru University Russian Studies don, Madhavan Palat. Third on the list was O.P. Kejariwal, who has specialised in the Asiatic Society of Bengal and taught history in Shillong between 1986 and 1990. Much to the

amazement of all those who have been following the developments at Teen Murti, the HRD ministry picked Kejariwal. Kejariwal had applied for the director's post just days before he replaced S.S. Gill as the Prasar Bharati CEO. "The post asked for a modern Indian historian with administrative experience. I fitted in on both counts," says Kejariwal. "And as an academic, I rank with the best," he says. Not many scholars agree with that. Most, in fact, are concerned over what they see as government efforts at controlling the NMML. Kejariwal, they hold, does not match up with either B.R. Nanda, its first director, or Ravinder Kumar who held the post for 17 years. "The Nehru memorial library has been a liberal institute which has never been partisan," says the former Fellow. "And this has been so despite the fact that its board of trustees is chaired by Sonia Gandhi."

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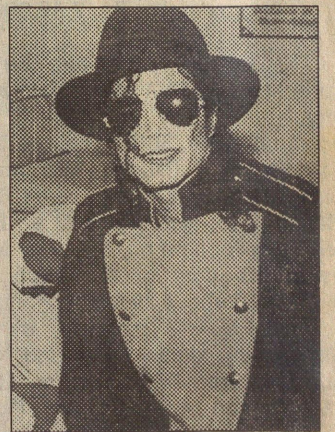
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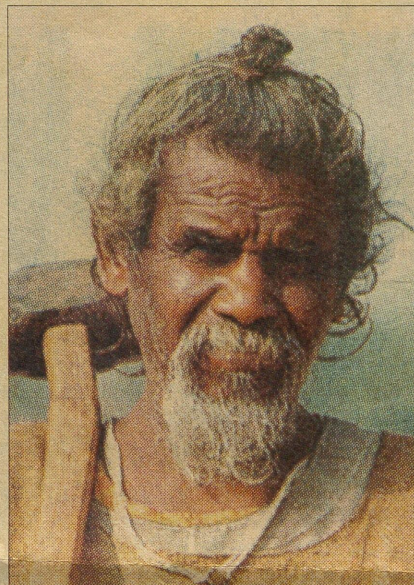
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## The road to success

Some of the entries in the Limca Book of Records make for fabulous reading. Such as the story of Dasarath Manjhi, a woodcutter, who toiled alone for twenty years to build a much-needed road for his community, writes Usha Rai.

Of the five people that Limca Book of Records (LBR) has selected for its People of the Year Award for 1999, two of them are poles apart. The first, Chandrababu Naidu, Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, is a man of the 21st century who uses the latest technology to steer his state ahead. The second, Dasarath Manjhi, a 62-year-old Harijan woodcutter of a Bihar village, has used the traditional tools of hammer and chisel to cut a path through the Rajgir mountain.

Unlike Chandrababu Naidu, Dasarath Manjhi had no State machinery to assist him. But he had strength in his arms and faith in his ability to cut a 350-ft-long, 16-ft-wide and 12-ft-high opening through the mountain. He wanted to build this pathway for the women of the area to help them collect water from the other side of the mountain. It took him 20 years to fulfil his dream.

Dasarath's inspiration was his wife, Faguni, whom he loved deeply and who often came to him with tears in her eyes because her earthen water pot had been broken by a jutting rock in the one-and-a-half-ft wide opening in the mountain through

which she had to pass with the pot precariously perched on her head.

That night, he dreamt that the mountain was mocking at him, threatening to break his wife's pot every day. This was the challenge Dasarath needed. In 1959, he began working on his life's mission: Hewing through the mountain with a hammer and chisel.

Everyone laughed at him and even his father rebuked him for building castles in the air. But Dasarath Manjhi remained undeterred. He would work on the mountain for two hours in the morning from 4 a.m. and again for two hours after work in the evening. His Sundays and other holidays were spent with hammer and chisel.

Twenty years later, the mission was accomplished and the village, Gehlore in Gaya district, was singing his praises. But his wife had died and was not there to share in his rejoicing. Now people compare Dasarath, with his unkempt hair and long flowing kurta, to Moses who parted the Red Sea to take God's chosen people to piety.

Next year, LBR plans to bring Manjhi to Delhi to share the stage

with the other four people selected for this year's awards - Koneru Humpy, the young chess player who has already picked up a bagful of medals and awards, Suhaib Ilyasi, the producer of the TV serial, 'India's Most Wanted', actor, Nirmal Pandey and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister, Chandrababu Naidu.

In fact, LBR's forte is its ability to pick up wonderful people doing remarkable work in remote areas of the country. Most of them go unsung but they make a differ-

ence to the community they live in and, in many ways, reflect the spirit of India.

The story of Durlava Naik, the blind villager of Gunduparasi village of Orissa, who single-handedly dug a tank for 25 years so that his village could have a water source, is as heartwarming as that of Dasarath Manjhi. He features in the 1999 Book of Records though he has not won an award.

People of his village had to trudge long distances to fetch



water and Durlava realised the need for the tank. But he also knew that nobody would listen to him if he suggested that they dig one. So he decided to do it all by himself and present it to the village.

The tenth anniversary edition of LBR with over 10,000 facts, figures and achievements is a bumper issue. LBR flew the 1997 and 1998 People of the Year Award winners down to Delhi to receive their awards. Autographs were sought from some of the more well-known such as comedian, Jaspal Bhatti, weightlifter, Kunjurani Devi, eco-legal M.C. Mehta and the common cause champion, H.D. Shourie. But it was inspiring to meet the 70-plus Dr. B.K. Sheth of Sidhpur, Gujarat, who has made it his life's mission to give vision to the blind through his clinic, Dipak Chakshu Kutir which was set up on the banks of the river Saraswati, some 15 years ago. He has extracted over 3,000 pairs of corneas from dead bodies. Though he has not been doing this for the last two years now, he has inspired others to carry on with this work.

It was after losing his son, who was keen to donate his eyes, in an accident, that Dr. Sheth began his drive for corneas. The first pair that he extracted were those of his son. The Red Cross in Sidhpur bore the Rs. 70 a day expenses incurred by Dr. Sheth in sending the corneas to Ahmedabad. This self-effacing, soft-spoken man came to Delhi for the first time to receive the award.

Though LBR has some 60 sections on issues as varied as sports, transport, agriculture, adventure, business and communication, the most popular section is the 'human story'. Many of the large number of entries for this section make for fabulous reading.

Take the case of Mr. Satnam Singh Hitkari, who won the People of India Award in 1993. Now in his late 70s, Mr. Hitkari, a Delhi citizen, has collected over

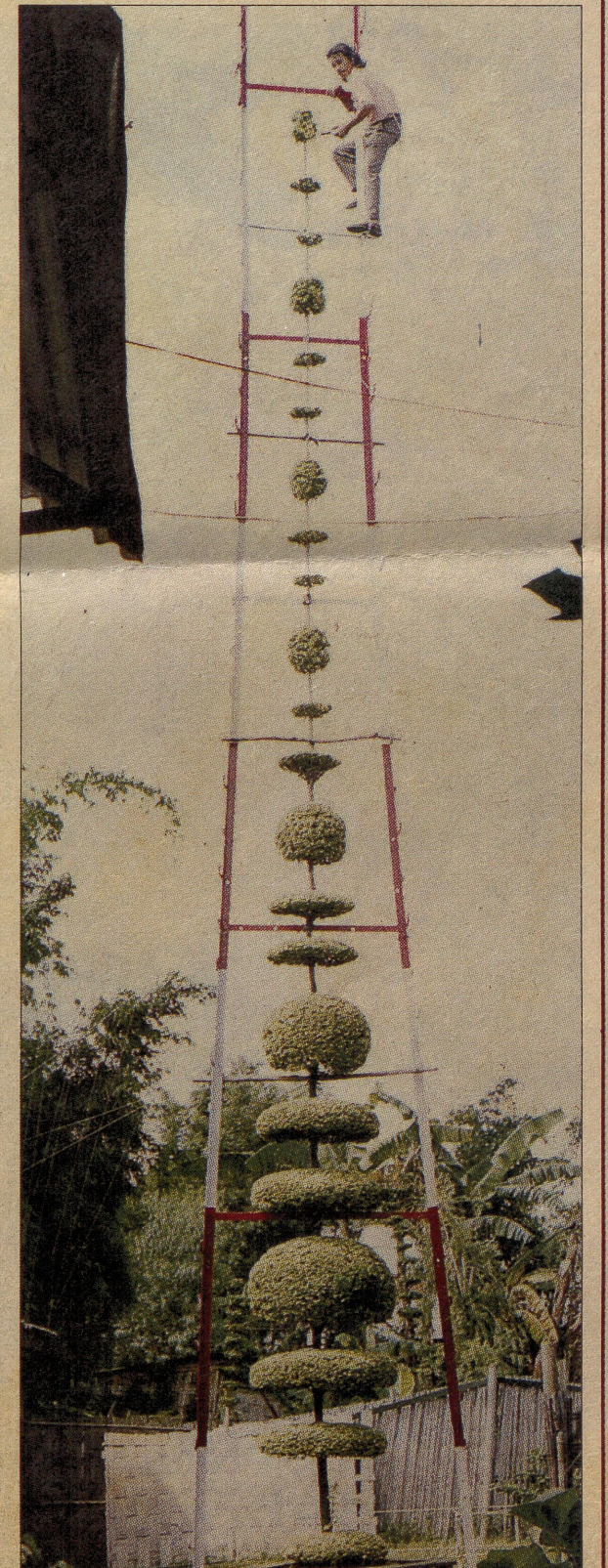
3,700 autographs of well-known people over the last 55 years. Some of the more eminent names include Arthur Conan Doyle, Einstein, Walt Disney, Martin Luther King, Florence Nightingale, Nelson Mandela, Lala Lajpat Rai, Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Mahatma Gandhi, Satyajit Ray and Uday Shankar.

His prized possession is a replica of the pages in which the signatories to the Indian Constitution have signed their names in English and their mother tongue. Though most of the signatories to the Constitution were happy to sign Hitkari's book, one person refused to oblige. So Hitkari sent him a blank letter by registered post whose acknowledgement came back to him duly signed.

Hitkari also has a collection of some 500 small paintings and sketches by Nandalal Bose, Jamini Roy, Bendre, Husain and Anjali Ela Menon. He also has a collection of original manuscripts written or typed by authors. These include works by Tagore, Premchand, Ghalib, Faiz, Firaq and Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (Malayalam.)

Another entry that deserves mention is that of Moirangthem Okendra of Imphal, Manipur who has perfected the art of topiary by cutting plants and hedges to a desired shape in the Hedges to Heaven garden. Okendra put the ordinary hedge plant, duranta, in a pot in 1983 and trimmed it to the shape of an umbrella. Similar umbrella-shaped duranta hedges were mounted one on top of another and acquired a height of 35 ft over three years. In the last three years, a few more feet have probably been added on. Okendra is able to tend to the entire plant, thanks to a colourful iron ladder which he has constructed. ■

*Clockwise: Dasarath Manjhi, one of the awardees for 1999; Moirangthem Okendra tending to his umbrella-shaped plant; Dr. B.K. Sheth who works tirelessly for the blind*  
Pictures from the author.



# "Provoking people has become part of my character"

Some time last year, I received a postcard from Khushwant Singh holidaying in Kasauli. One of its two paragraphs was this: "Trying to struggle with a new novel. Struggle because of a mental block. Will persist till the scotch runs out. There is still enough to last me a month." The scotch must have lasted longer because his new book, *The Company of Women*, has just exploded on India's fairly moribund literary horizon. I recall having told him that the book was capable of giving a hard-on to any healthy man. He laughed and said it could be a good substitute for Viagra.

When we met for this interview, he was sitting at his Sujana Singh Park residence on the same shabby genteel sofa where he has been sitting for years, his legs playing with the same modah that seems to have been a lifelong companion of the sofa.

For all his cultivated image of a debauch, I know with long association that I am meeting a disciplined workaholic. For a book I am editing on New Delhi, his 4,000-word chapter came in a first, and dot on the deadline. He's a stickler for time and amazingly prolific as a writer even at the age of 85.

As we talk, he takes generous amount of *pan masala*. It is still too early for a drink. His hair is open, but when the photographer comes, he is quick to tie his trademark *kesariya* turban.

◆ **Khushwant, how difficult has it been for you to maintain this image that you have acquired?**

Well, it is not really hard, because this is a country which has so many sanctimonious humbugs that if you write or speak openly about drinks or about women, they think you are a drunkard or a womaniser. And I have never been secretive about the fact

that I enjoy my drink, that I enjoy the company of attractive women. And that's enough for them to mention me in these derogatory terms. They must know that a man of my age with so much output in writing doesn't have time. He can't afford to get drunk. He can't afford to waste time on women. I work from 4.30 in the morning till 7 p.m.

◆ **By the same token, how difficult is it to camouflage the serious Khushwant Singh?**

It is very difficult. Nobody takes me seriously. What sells most are my joke books which I find gives me more royalty than all the other books put together. So the image of the joker has overshadowed that of the historian, or the man who has written for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, or translated Urdu poetry.

◆ **Do you feel a sense of resentment?**

Well, I feel a sense of contempt for people who describe me in those terms and therefore my attitude is that I don't give a damn for what they think about me.

◆ **Do you also occasionally feel you have fallen in love with this image?**

Well, I try often to live up to the image by saying shocking things so that people get shocked and say, "I told you so, *yeh aisa hi aadmi hai*." Provoking people has become part of my character.

◆ **But when did you discover that whatever people may say, they greatly enjoy what you write.**

Well, I get so much mail. It's nearly 50-60 letters a day and I know they are all not flattering, but some of them are. I get a lot of hate mail, too, but it is largely because of my political views. I keep some of the letters with me.

◆ **Was it when you became the Editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of***

## WRITERS IN DIALOGUE

PAVAN K. VARMA unpeels the mask and gets to the real KHUSHWANT SINGH



India or earlier that you found that irrespective of the purple pomposities people made about you in the evening, they read your books during the day?

That's probably true. The breaking point really came with the *Weekly* because it had a very large circulation. The column I started writing first invited a lot of anger and resentment — "this is no longer a family paper, I

can't let my children read it," and all that. I remember one that caused the greatest offence. I wrote a long piece on why some monkeys have red bottoms. I did a lot of research on it and we published a picture of a baboon with a wide red bottom. And they were scandalised. And yet they were curious to know why it happened.

◆ **There is also a very disciplined Khushwant Singh. I know a little**

of your daily routine. You must have to do a lot to camouflage that from people.

Well, I don't have to camouflage. After all, at the age of 84, I have over 80 titles to my credit. That's an enormous amount of output. And people who know me closely know how risky it is to be unpunctual with me, whether at my home or in their homes. That is one thing I can't take.

I lose my temper very quickly when it comes to unpunctuality.

◆ **But seriously, why do you think that in a country like ours, with our Khajuraho, with our image of Krishna, the playful divine, we have such a high degree of moral hypocrisy?**

There's a lot of ambivalence in our character. We have the same kind of middle-class Victorianism you find in England, you find in the States, anywhere else. But with us, it is much more sharply etched. You go to any bookstore, you will get illustrated editions of the *Kamasutra* or the *Koka Shastra* with as many details as any book of hardcore pornography. Yet they become immediately censorious if anything appears now. They think they are reading pornography and you ask them about *Kamasutra* and the other books, and they say, "Oh, they are historic!" Our main deity in India is Lord Krishna, and we openly boast about his lying and cheating right from childhood, his voyeurism, his servicing thousands of *gopis*. Nothing. That's all forgiven and forgotten. That is *maya* or something. But you try and reproduce that character today and you are in for serious trouble.

◆ **You have said more than once that men are inherently polygamous in the mind and, given an opportunity, in deed as well. What about women, Indian women?**

Exactly the same. I don't think there is the slightest difference between men and women on that score. Women are polyandrous. We may not use the word polyandry because they are as adulterous as the men. But they get fewer opportunities to express their desire because they are home-bound, they have to look after their nest and their children. Men are in their offices and if they have quickies during lunchtime, nobody is the wiser. But the woman, given a chance,

is no different from the man. ◆ **If you were given your youth back, would you do anything differently?**

I would not have wasted so many years in legal practice. I detested the law. I wasted four or five years studying it, seven years practising it. I could have started writing much earlier and written something better.

◆ **What about your autobiography. I know it is subjudice, but has it caused you a lot of bitterness?**

No, it hasn't. I was a little disappointed that a judge should give an injunction on a book that amounts to a virtual ban because the appeal hasn't been heard for the last three years. How different is it from banning a book? She (Maneka Gandhi) could have taken me to court for damages or whatever after the book had been published, but no, she manages to get a stay order.

◆ **You knew from the beginning, didn't you, that *The Company of Women* would be a best-seller?**

No, I wasn't sure. People tend to buy things even before they are published. This novel had already got orders for over 10,000 copies before the first book appeared in print and I think it is probably going on, and if it comes out in paperback, it will be even more. The *Delhi* novel had the same response. Three editions they had to print before they were able to supply the bookstores. But that's the advantage of notoriety.

◆ **It is a clichéd way to end an interaction, but it is something which I think is important. Are you now, Khushwant, at peace with yourself?**

That is something I never missed, you know. I am completely, and always have been, at peace with myself. I have achieved the goal that Gita sets for you — total detachment from the world, mentally.

By G. Rajaraman

## Khushwant, Spare Us Your Fantasies

I should have known I was in for trouble last week when the man who edited *The Company of Women* at me, his smile almost challenging. And I should have known that Khushwant Singh was dead serious in holding out an early warning that the book was the result of senile fantasies (rather than a labour of love).

Mohan Kumar — the protagonist with an unsatiated drive for sex without the bonds of love — is a child of Khushwant Singh's imagination. It is fashionable in the society we live in to look at a newborn and exclaim aloud that the infant bears an uncanny resemblance to its parent. There is hope, however, that Mohan Kumar bears no resemblance to the man who thought him up.

The flap jacket — designed by Oron Das around a striking photograph by Prabuddha Das Gupta — advertises the book as an uninhibited, erotic and endlessly entertaining celebration of love, sex and passion. Indeed, it is uninhibited and erotic, but not an entertaining celebration of love. Far from it. It is what Khushwant Singh claims it is: the

sculpture of a woman's form are the result of a journalist's whim.

Even in describing the act of making love, Khushwant Singh exudes a certain indescribable crudity. It is this failing that leads to the overall disappointment of your daily routine. You must have to do a lot to camouflage that from people.

There does not seem to be any room for joy, except the temporary sort that the protagonist Mohan Kumar experiences with a variety of women — from his wife to the maid, from the Kashmiri-Pakistani to the Goan masseuse, from the Tamil Christian to the seductive Sinhalese diplomat, from the African-American co-ed to the demure professor from Rewari. Sadly, there is no joy even when he is with his children.

America-returned Mohan Kumar's hunger for sex with a variety of partners, you cannot find it in the book. The escape route that Mohan Kumar chooses is not what any sane person would suggest. It is a dreadful thought that as he grows in his professional life, he is unable to bring the same discipline to his sexual life and lets his personal life go to a shambles.

There is a question sports writers ask every now and then when they are confronted by the sight of an ageing champion struggle to fight the passage of time: Why doesn't he hang up his boots and seek comfort in retirement? Why does the champion, ageing body and creaking limbs, insist on leaving the fans with sad memories rather than more vibrant ones?

If anything, *The Company of Women* reflects Georges Simenon's line of thinking that writing is not a profession, but a vocation of unhappiness. It is an entirely grim book, making for sad reading.

There does not seem to be any room for joy, except the temporary sort that the protagonist Mohan Kumar experiences with a variety of women — from his wife to the maid, from the Kashmiri-Pakistani to the Goan masseuse, from the Tamil Christian to the seductive Sinhalese diplomat, from the African-American co-ed to the demure professor from Rewari. Sadly, there is no joy even when he is with his children.

After *The Company of Women*, it is hard not to ask: Why does Khushwant Singh not put his pen away in the remotest corner of his cupboard? Clearly, his best work — the two-volume history of the Sikhs — is behind him and has drained him of much of his creativity. In the twilight of his life — or is it the second flush of youth? — the grand old Sardar may be better off writing his weekly columns than trying his hand at puerile fiction.

Many moons ago, Andre Maurois had warned us: "In literature, as in love, we

are astonished at what is chosen by the other." Indeed, Khushwant Singh has astonished us with his choice. In the twilight of his career as a writer, he would still have done without making his fantasies public. More significantly, it is doubtful if the publisher would have accepted such a manuscript if the author did not answer to the call of Khushwant Singh or boast of a rich legacy.

So why has Khushwant Singh scripted the amorous tale of Mohan Kumar? Let us not ask the man himself. Instead, let us look to George Orwell to provide us some clues. "All writers are vain, selfish and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives lies a mystery. Writing a book is a long, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand."

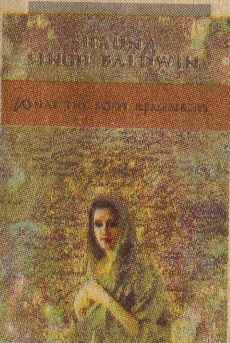
It is easier to understand this Orwellian philosophy than Khushwant Singh's urge to share his fantasies.

— For another view of *The Company of Women*, see this page next Sunday

### TOP 10

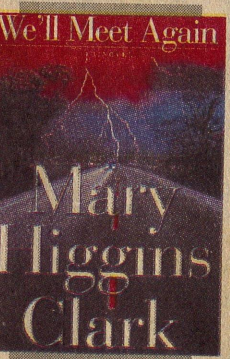
#### NON-FICTION

1. *The Company of Women*  
Khushwant Singh, Rs 395



2. *What The Body Remembers*  
Shauna Singh Baldwin, Rs 395

3. *A Widow For One Year*  
John Irving, £ 3.25



4. *We'll Meet Again*  
Mary Higgins Clark, \$ 21.00

5. *Hearts in Atlantis*  
Stephen King, \$ 17.50

6. *36, The Collected Short Stories*  
Jeffrey Archer, £ 2.50

7. *Every Dead Thing*  
John Connelly, £ 3.00

8. *The Whitest Flower*  
Brenda Graham, £ 4.20

9. *The Surgeon's Daughter*  
Campbell Armstrong, \$ 5.99

10. *In Pursuit Of The Proper Sinner*  
Elizabeth George, £ 10

(Courtesy: Bahri Sons, Khan Market, New Delhi)

By Usha Rai

*Khairi, The Beloved Tigress*, undoubtedly, is one of the most moving wildlife books I have read in a long time. It is not so much a story of the jungles and the forests as of love, attachment and total dedication of two individuals to a tiger cub that was just 6.2 kilos and 88 cm when she came into their lives. Woven into this passionate story of love is some wonderful research on the tigress — her social behaviour as well as eating and stalking habits.

For six years, the author and Nihar Nalini, his cousin and colleague at the Simlipal Tiger Reserve, brought up Khairi as if she was their child. She came to them as a two-month-old. She was hand-fed the choicest meats she craved for. She shared their bed, the warmth of their love, and communicated with them in the most eloquent manner. They were her 'Ma' and 'Pa' and even when she was a fully mature tigress weighing close to 200 kilos, she would cuddle up to them and listen to their every command. The story of Khairi, in fact, is like that of the celebrated Elsa, the lioness raised by Joy Adamson in the wilds of Africa.

When Khairi died of rabies in March 1981, the author was heart-broken. He died a year later. In the preface to the book, which was written in September 1977, when Khairi was three years old, he wrote: "She evidently feels and knows that she is an important family member of equal status to her foster siblings, my sons and daughters. She appears to be aware of the intra-family order of precedence. And she is certainly conscious of whom to give respect to and from whom to demand it. She is proving abundantly that genuine love is the

supreme influence that ultimately overrides other conflicting urges, whether natural or induced."

Khairi, like Elsa, was a star. In the late '70s, newspapers in India and abroad carried her photographs and the amazing story of the tigress being hand-reared at Simlipal's Jashipur forest rest house. After Khairi's death there has been a long silence. The reams and reams of scientific information, and the wonderful story of abiding love between a man and a 'wild' beast were lost to the world. Now, 18 years after her death, the story has been re-told. But it is an incomplete story. The chronological story of Khairi's upbringing covers the first three years of her life. For some reason, the publishers and Suklambari Choudhury, the author's wife, have omitted the last three years of her life, though there's a chapter on Khairi's last days and her death from rabies. But that shouldn't deter wildlife enthusiasts from reading this wonderful book.

The story of Khairi has been woven together with that of the other orphaned wild animals and two pet dogs the author and his cousin raised in Jashipur. There was Jambo, the bear cub; Bhaina, the blind hyena; Manika, the four-horned antelope; Pukul, the jungle cat; Jhuna, the mongoose; Beda, the wild boar; Ti, the small Indian civet;

Chumki, the leopard cat; and Bajra, the pangolin. There was even a python, Chhabi, from whom the other animals kept a respectful distance. Following the age-old dictum of "spare the rod and spoil the child," the author would thrash these young animals to discipline them. Khairi, in fact, got thrashed several times, the rod breaking on her at least twice. She would roll on her back and submit to the beating.

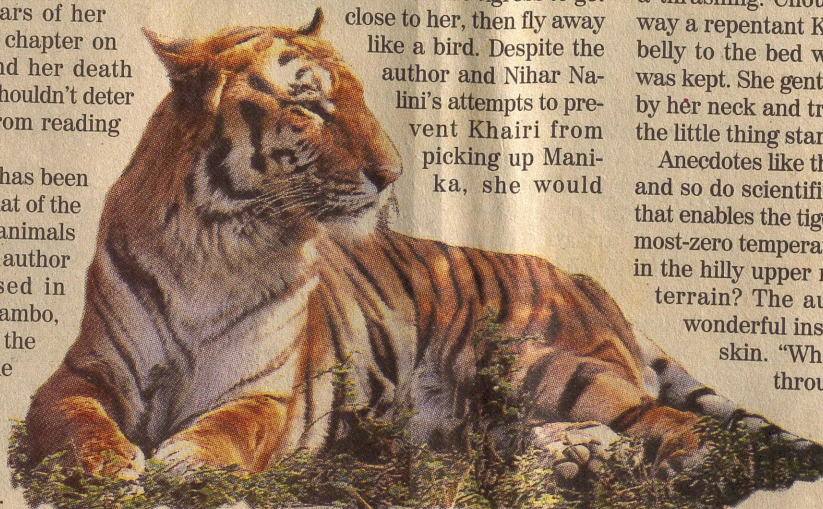
The animals had their own equations. But they were all part of the composite family being raised at Jashipur. There's a wonderful story of Khairi's friendship with Manika, the antelope. Khairi at 16 months was all of 123 kilos, but she loved chasing the little fawn, who would allow the tigress to get close to her, then fly away like a bird. Despite the author and Nihar Nalini's attempts to prevent Khairi from picking up Manika, she would

quietly catch hold of the fawn by the neck and gently put her down on the

lawn, urging her to play with her. One day, while running away with Manika in her mouth, she unwittingly hit her head against a door. Manika died. Khairi got a thrashing. Choudhury describes the way a repentant Khairi crawled on her belly to the bed where the dead fawn was kept. She gently picked up the fawn by her neck and tried her best to make the little thing stand on her feet.

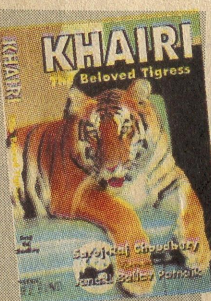
Anecdotes like these keep popping up and so do scientific insights. What is it that enables the tiger to cope with the almost-zero temperature of a winter night in the hilly upper reaches of the forest terrain? The author describes the wonderful insulation of the tiger's skin. "When I ran my fingers through her thick winter fur, I felt her skin warm and dry," she writes. "She certainly has a far more efficient face

lawn, urging her to play with her. One day, while running away with Manika in her mouth, she unwittingly hit her head against a door. Manika died. Khairi got a thrashing. Choudhury describes the way a repentant Khairi crawled on her belly to the bed where the dead fawn was kept. She gently picked up the fawn by her neck and tried her best to make the little thing stand on her feet.



### KHAIRI: THE BELOVED TIGRESS

Saraj Raj Choudhury  
Natraj Publishers  
17, Rajpur Road  
Dehra Dun - 248001  
Rs 350



# Park at the mercy of militants

*The Palamau Tiger Reserve, Bihar, is in dire straits, starved of funds allotted to it. The damage caused by incompetent administration is compounded by militants. Villagers, cattle grazers and poachers are all over the park, says USHA RAI. Beginning an occasional column.*

THE Central Government as well as the officials running the prestigious Project Tiger in Palamau, Bihar, may very well have to write off the 1,026 sq km Palamau Tiger Reserve which, starved of funds allotted to it, is in dire straits. Water holes have dried up, frequent fires have caused untold damage and smugglers, poachers and traders continue to plunder the Reserve's commercially valuable *khair* or *acacia catechu* from which *katha* used in *paan* is extracted.

To add to the sorrows of Palamau, it is one of the five tiger reserves of the country which has been commandeered by militants. The others being Manas in Assam, Indravati in Madhya Pradesh, Nagarjunasagar in Andhra Pradesh and Valmiki also in Bihar. The damage caused by the

incompetent administration is compounded by the militants. Brig Ranjit Talwar who works with World Wide Fund for Nature's (WWF-N) Tiger Conservation Programme and has just returned from Palamau maintains "the park is at the mercy of God and militants".

While it is true that the park does not have the stature of Corbett, Kanha or Ranthambhore, it is vital to protect this exquisite area that was one of the first nine parks of the country to be brought under "Project Tiger" in 1974. Known as the land of the *Palas* and the *mahua*, Palamau Tiger Reserve is on the western part of Chotanagpur Plateau and has been home to varied wildlife ranging from cheetal to the gaur, wild dog, a host of beautiful birds and of course leopards and tigers. In fact the 1997 census put the number of tigers at 44 but there are serious doubts

about so many tigers in this reserve.

Talwar who went to assess the state of Palamau on behalf of the Environment and Forest Ministry in 1997 and again now says "the forests are getting thinner and hardly any wildlife is visible".

The impact of militancy on wildlife is not as severe as on the forests. Militants encourage the local people and are themselves involved in the removal of *katha*. Some amount of poaching too takes place. Villagers, poachers and cattle grazers are all over the park. Militants support their easy access to the protected area as well as movement within. In the last few months seven elephants have been electrocuted and two or three elephants are limping around with gun shot wounds.

## GREEN TALK

But the park's biggest problem is lack of funds. On paper, however, funds are provided. The total annual budget for the park is about Rs. 80 lakhs. In the whole year barely Rs. 5 lakhs are released. Funds released under "Project Elephant" in this area also suffer the same fate. The money goes from the Centre into the State exchequer and the State just does not disburse the funds. It takes five months or more to get the funds revalidated and released. This has been happening for the last two years. In 1997 not a paise of the Rs. 80 lakhs budget had been released till March 23. In a week's time the budget would have lapsed. In any case it is not easy to use such a large amount in a week or 10 days time.

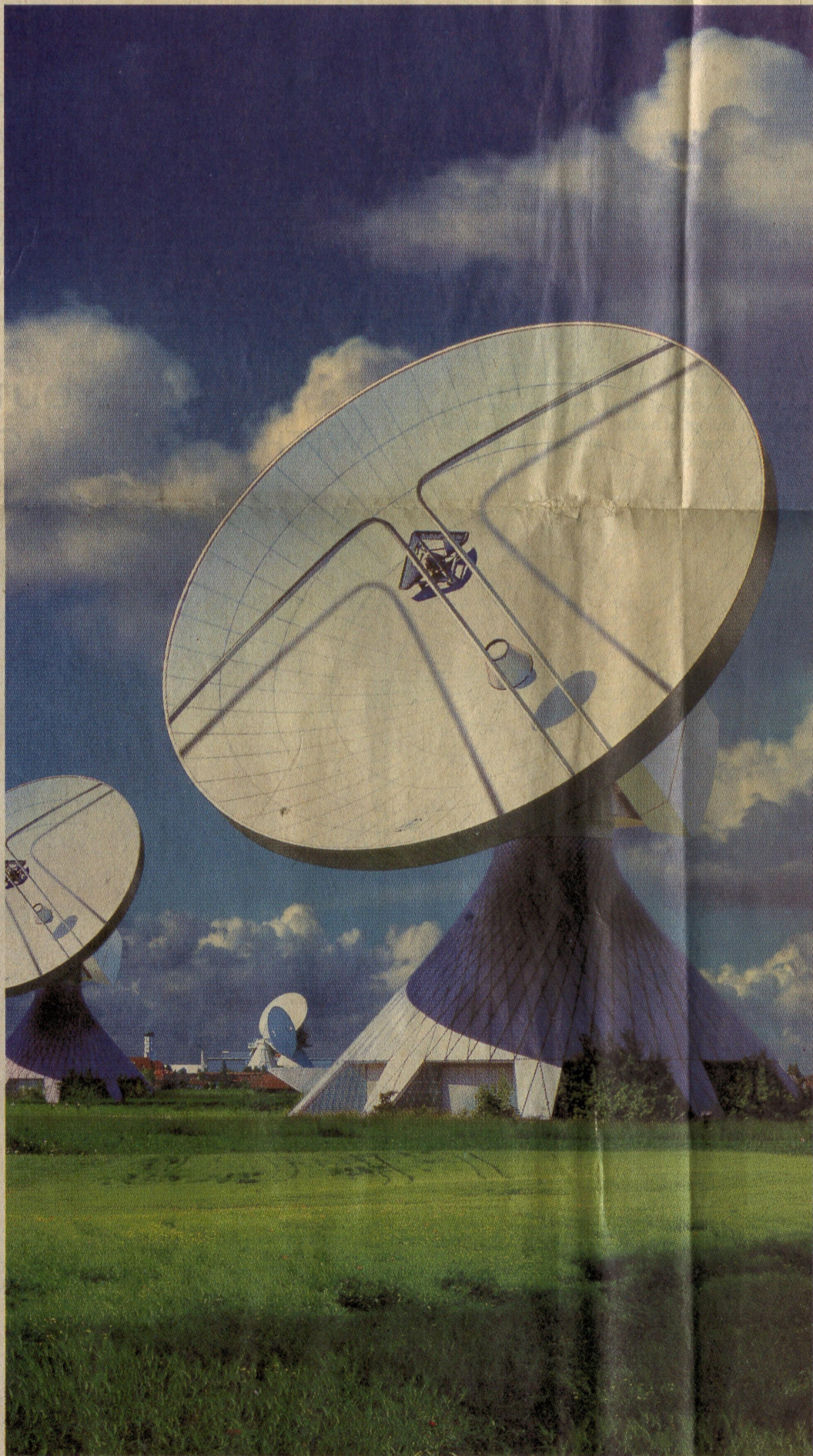
In Bihar, as in most States, the fire season starts with the onset of summer and preventive measures have to begin in February/March. But without funds this work cannot be started. Last year, 90 per cent of Palamau suffered damage from fire. The situation is no better today.



Palamau is a drought prone area, as it falls within the receding zone of the south-west monsoons. The 300 odd waterholes, most of them created artificially, have to be kept alive for wildlife. But because of poor maintenance, waterholes have got silted. Wallowing buffaloes tend to flatten out holes allowing flow-out of water. Buffaloes are today a common sight in the park and the problem of water scarcity often becomes acute. The problem of militancy has been persisting since the mid-Nineties and it is beyond the capability of the forest department to tackle it. The forest guards are neither trained nor equipped to tackle militancy. Due to the presence of insurgents, police personnel even advised forest staff not to enter the park without police escort. In 1997, it was recommended that a dedicated armed force (police or paramilitary) be placed under the command of the field director to regain control of the area and save it from further depredation. In fact the government sanctioned the appointment of a commander of the Bihar Military Police and 89 others to guard the forests last year. But not a single person has been appointed so far.

In fact 98 or a third of the 292 sanctioned posts of forest personnel are still lying vacant. Most of vacant posts are of forest guards. The average age of the existing forest guard is also on the high side. Apart from shortage of field personnel there is a major shortage of equipment - vehicles, tranquilizer guns, binoculars and radio sets for communication. Those working in the park never know when or where death awaits them. In February last year two daily wage workers, Aziz and Sukhdeo, were killed when the jeep in which they were travelling was blown up. Since they were not on Government rolls, their families were not entitled to pension or any compensation. NGOs got together and raised money to assist the bereaved families. Sometimes the field staff of the tiger reserve work for six to eight months without salary. Telephones to the reserve very often do not work because bills have not been paid.

Because of the shortage of regular forest staff, daily wagers are employed to carry out various activities of the park. WWF Tiger Conservation Programme, which has been providing direct support to this beleaguered reserve, has worked out a group insurance scheme for the daily wagers so that in case of injury or death while on duty, immediate financial help is available for families. Mr. Suresh Prabh, the former Environment and Forest Minister, was seriously considering sending the money directly to the park authorities. The issue was taken up with the Planning Commission. But unfortunately he has been moved to another Ministry. ■



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IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE

## On the rampage...

*Continued from page 11*

been planted often after pawning jewellery or taking high interest loans. Recently, the Supreme Court ruled that the issue had to be settled locally, case by case. The forest department, custodian of Section 17 land, has to show the existence of the vacant land. Of course, very little land is vacant, since, for the decade, the large estates have blatantly violated the law with the connivance of local officials. Now in a burst of energy, the forest department has descended on the poor and vent its fury.

At the time of Independence, Nehru had recognised the need to protect adivasis. He had experienced, first hand, the innocence and lack of artifice in adivasi society which made them prone to exploitation by unscrupulous outside profiteers. He introduced a number of safeguards in the Constitution to safeguard adivasi homelands. This guideline, known as Nehru's Tribal Panchsheel, in which he advocated protection of adivasi land and culture, became the guiding principle in tribal development. Nehru specified that the development of adivasis should be along the lines of their own genius, that their traditional art and culture should be encouraged and integration should take place in stages, and that they should be prepared and trained for the administration and development of their own areas.

These guiding principles were treated as a comprehensive framework for the socio-economic development of tribal areas. They were enshrined in Article 46 of the Constitution and the objectives translated into a tribal sub-plan strategy during the Fourth Plan period (1970-1975). But as Dr. B. D. Sharma, former Commissioner of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, wrote in disgust shortly before resigning in protest at the futility of his post, these have been ignored.

At an international level, precedents have been set. The Mabo judgment in Australia giving primacy and importance to aboriginal people's land right claims, created legal history sending shock waves throughout the world. For the first time, aboriginal people's right had received legal recognition. For a few decades now, more recognition has been accorded, in sorrow and shame, by decent, civilised people who have stopped to think about the issue. The British when they colonised Australia, treated the aboriginal inhabitants as part of the flora and fauna. Their homelands were regarded as *terra nullis*, or empty wasteland, ignoring the very existence of the native people. The Mabo judgment declared for the first time that "Native title preceded Crown title", and that the *terra nullis* concept was a ridiculous denial of an entire race's human rights. It acknowledged the fact that the colonisation and destruction of the aboriginal people and their homelands was one of history's terrible injustices.

At the local level, returning to this particular travesty of justice in Tamil Nadu, the adivasis of Gudalur have had support at various levels. A survey of alienated tribal lands conducted by ACCORD, a local Adivasi non-government organisation, (*Frontline* magazine, January 7-20) had been accepted by the Special Commissioner for Scheduled Tribes, New Delhi, after an on-the-spot investigation. A.D.O. letter (No. 26778/TDL-1/90-1 dated June 6, 1990) was sent to the Special Commissioner and Commissioner for Land Administration, Chennai with a copy of the land alienation statistics requesting the deputation of a senior officer to take action. Along with this was a note from R. C. Kapila, Special Commissioner for Scheduled Tribes, that his office had collected statistics "which confirm my worst fears". "I need hardly emphasise that it is circumvention of your law which alone is responsible for the most part for the permanent impoverishment of the tribals".

In Chembakolli forest, an old adivasi asked, "This was where my great grandfather, my grandfather and I were born. All our ancestors are buried here. Suddenly, they told us this is reserve forest land and we had to move. How can this be just? Where can we move?"

In the early Sixties, realising that tribals were being exploited and pushed out of their ancestral lands, the Government set aside land Reserved for Hill Tribes (RHT). Hardly any of this land went to tribals. Instead, non-tribals and the forest department have encroached on these lands declaring them reserve forests. Having ascertained the facts of the case, then Collector G. A. Rajkumar ordered the eviction of all encroachers on RHT land.

At the Gudalur adivasi *sammelan* in 1990, a senior official I spoke to on the Government's response to the adivasi and land problem said: "The tribals' demand for land is perfectly valid and justifiable. The Adivasis were there before the maharajas, the British, the tea estates or the Government. This is an absolute truth."

In 1989, a group of AMS adivasis met the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi who assured them of support. The Prime Minister's Office then forwarded the demands to the Tamil Nadu Chief Secretary. In Chennai, the adivasis met the Minister for Adi-Dravida Welfare who visited the area and promised to settle the land issue.

Since Independence, the adivasis have been promised the earth. All they ask for is a little piece of land. Will any government do the decent thing and bring justice to a forgotten people? ■

## Wildlife Ambassadors Of the Subcontinent

By USHA RAI

**I**F the Lahore summit signalling a new era of friendships between India and Pakistan and easy access to international borders was historic, so was the transborder meeting between India and Nepal a few days later. While the first will enable movement of people across borders, the second will facilitate movement of a shared resource, wildlife, between India and Nepal.

The Indo-Nepal meeting, though significant and attended by the top brass dealing with wildlife on both sides of the border, was low key and did not have the hype of the Indo-Pak meet. Yet, the meeting was important and will be followed up with similar meetings between India and Bhutan and India and Bangladesh on wildlife that cross borders blissfully ignorant about visas and passports. All that they seek, without being able to voice it, is security and safety on their migratory routes.

While Nepal has five protected areas — Royal Chitwan National Park, Parsa Wildlife Reserve, Royal Bardia National Park, Royal Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve and Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve on its border with India, India has along its border with Nepal, Dudhwa National Park, Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary, Sohelwa Sanctuary, Sobabarwa Wildlife Sanctuary, UP, Valmiki Tiger Reserve, Bihar, and Singhalila National Park, West Bengal. Unfortunately, these are not all all back to back. Wildlife know no barriers so elephants, rhinos, tigers, leopards, the endangered barasingha, the main prey base of the tiger, and a variety of aquatic life move between the two countries, marking their own route across land and water.

### Dolphins' Acrobatics

In 1995, 45 elephants crossed from Dudhwa to Royal Bardia. A rhino from India moved into Suklaphanta. In 1996, six tigers migrated from Nepal's Royal Bardia to Sohelwa. In fact there is a season of migration. For the Nepal rhino, it is the monsoons so that they can feast on the rich Indian rice crop. The deer species migrate in the hottest months of summer to cooler climes and water. Elephants, tiger and leopards, however, migrate round the year.

In the serene, protected waters of Katarniaghat, dolphins can be seen doing acrobatics within a couple of feet of the few boats that glide through the sanctuary. Often dams and barrages obstruct the free movement of fish. The transborder

meeting therefore resolved to construct fish ladders or alternate pass ways for free movement of aquatic fauna in transborder rivers.

With similar bilateral cooperation, it was also agreed to control illegal trade in fauna and flora. Funds will be provided to protected area managers on both sides of the border to obtain intelligence to counter poaching and illegal trade. It was also decided to harmonise the Indo-Nepal Trade Treaty of 1996 with the requirements of CITES. Currently a lot of wildlife goods are being smuggled across as those permitted under the Indo-Nepal trade treaty.

To improve communication between park managers on both sides of the Indo-Nepal border it was decided to acquire wireless sets with a common frequency. Quarterly meetings between field-level forest and wildlife guardians and annual meetings of ministry-level officials are on the cards.

### Cattle Compensation

Wildlife enumeration between the two countries is to be synchronised so that there is a better estimation of species in the transborder areas. Linkages are to be developed between the protected areas of Royal Bardia and Katarniaghat, Chitwan National Park, Parsa and Valmiki Tiger Reserve so that they become eco-zones of protection for the tiger. The Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve is to be extended to the Koshi Barrage.

The WWF Tiger Conservation Programme's cattle compensation scheme, which has been able to arrest poisoning of tigers wherever it is in operation, is to be extended to identified protected areas on both sides of the border. WWF-Nepal has been asked to provide compensation for cattle killed by tigers on the Nepal side of the border. These details have still to be fine tuned.

Broken corridors between India and Nepal are to be repaired to ensure genetic continuity across the border. Within a radius of five kms of the Nepal forests, no saw mill can come up. But that does not stop them being very close to Indian forests. The Indo-Nepal transborder meeting resolved not to allow saw mills to come adjacent to forests on both sides of the border.

In Nepal half the money earned from tourism by parks goes to communities living in the buffer of the park as part of the buffer management effort. This is an idea worthy of emulation by India which needs to resolve man/conflict on park peripheries.

# Freehand

USHA RAI

## SORRY, TIGERS AREN'T FOR SALE

**S**OME ERSTWHILE hunters seeking to make quick money from India's diminishing wildlife have been quietly propagating consumptive use and commercialisation of the tiger and other endangered species. They argue that if you put an economic value to an animal, even one in the wild, there are greater chances of its survival. The argument, however, is specious.

The indiscriminate *shikars* of the maharajas of yesteryear is the reason why the population of tigers is today down to barely around 4000. Have we already forgotten the gruesome sight of hundreds of majestic wild tigers strung up like goats at the butcher's shop after the hunting expeditions of the rich and powerful? In fact, the tiger population is still to recover from the decimation it suffered in the first 70 years of this century.

It was in 1970, after close to 80 tigers had been shot by trigger-happy hunters in UP and over 200 in the entire country, that then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi banned hunting of tigers. The Wildlife Protection Act came into existence in 1972 — it sought to provide a measure of protection to other endangered wildlife of the country. National parks, wildlife sanctuaries and tiger reserves multiplied as conservationists sought to provide space for birds and beasts, and also helped save some of our finest forests.

Look at the experience of countries that have allowed hunting of wildlife. In Zimbabwe, under a "campfire programme" in 1990-1991, the village community was allowed to issue hunting licences for a huge fee, to get rid of, say, a rogue elephant. The money earned by the village was to be invested in community development. According to the Environment and Forest Ministry, the Campfire programme hasn't worked well and the



If foreigners are allowed to hunt for commercial reasons, can we stop Indians too from picking up the gun?

population of elephants, rhinos and even the rare black rhinos is consistently decreasing. But for South Africa, the elephant population has diminished all over Africa.

In Thailand the ranching of crocodiles has led to a drop in their population. Even in Europe, where enforcement of rules is ensured, ranching has led to wildlife extinction. Remember the fox hunts and duck shoots of the British elite.

In India, the elephant population has increased but for Nagaland, where elephant meat is consumed and it has dropped to about a 100.

Consumptive use of wildlife has virtually wiped out wildlife in Mizoram too.

Consumptive use of the tiger in certain countries has proved disastrous. In Southeast Asia there are hardly any tigers left. The Javan, Bali, and South China tigers are extinct; the Indo-Chinese and Sumatran tiger populations are nearing extinction. Only in India, with its deep-rooted conservation psyche, has the tiger population been stable.

If foreigners are allowed to hunt for commercial reasons, can we stop Indians too from picking up the gun? Filmstar Salman Khan's black buck and chinkara hunting, and the Andhra Pradesh controversy of a politician providing wildlife 'delicacies' in a marriage feast, has shown India to be extremely weak in enforcing rules and regulations. There is no way you can ensure that the game hunter shoots only the 'aberrant' tiger, elephant or neelgai he is licenced to kill. If hunting is allowed in this country, and however small its scale, it would wipe out our already endangered wildlife.

The argument that for each licensed kill, the park can earn upto \$ 50,000 does not hold, for in India money earned through park activities go to the national exchequer. So, where's the benefit?

There is a world of difference between the wildlife conservation ethos of India and the consumptive wildlife development of Africa. It is the white man who conceived the hunting safaris of Africa; consumption of meat is part of their culture. India, in contrast, has earned a place for itself in the comity of nations for its *ahimsa*. Our Constitution propagates compassion for all animals, and the tiger and the elephant have been deified in our mythology.

Can then we treat our wildlife like vermin? Yes, where wildlife is destroying crops, we should adopt scientific management of wildlife. You could, for instance, translocate the animal or even allow destruction to the bare minimum — but killing for commercial reasons should never be permitted.

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9.5.99

# THESE FIRES COST MONEY

**A**LMOST ONCE every four years (1987, 1991, 1995 and 1999), massive fires in the fast thinning green cover of the country send wildlife scurrying for safety and deplete crores worth of forest wealth. The Garhwal and Kumaon hills were ravaged by forest fires last month.

This year, over 800 sq km of forested area, half of it civil and panchayat forests, in UP, 250 sq km in Himachal and 120 sq km in Jammu and Kashmir were affected. The damage, however, is said to be much less than in 1995, when the RP Khosla Committee estimated the loss at Rs.17.50 crore in UP and Himachal alone.

In the Nagerhole National Park, Karnataka, about 200 to 300 fires were counted. Many of these, forest officials say, were deliberately started by vested interests. An NGO resisting the relocation of tribals living in the park, is said to be behind these "deliberate" fires, a senior forest official of Karnataka has reported to the Centre.

Many feel that greater involvement of people in forest protection could help check periodic fires. For instance, in Madhya Pradesh, forests are deliberately set on fire four times a year to facilitate collection of minor forest produce like tendu leaves, mahua, sal seeds and honey. These fires, at times, go out of control. No wonder, the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, banned removal of any vegetation or starting of fires without permission. Yet, politicians ensure permission is granted, because it enables them to build their votebanks.

This year, fires were also reported from the agricultural fringes of forests. The proximity of civil and panchayat forests to villages,



Forest officials become complacent about forest fires because they see these as mere ground fires that do not affect the timber stock. NGOs and the media, however, are forcing forest officials to put an economic value to the loss in terms of the annual increment of wood stock

about forest fires because they see these as mere ground fires that do not affect the timber stock. NGOs and the media, however, are forcing forest officials to put an economic value to the loss in terms of the annual increment of wood stock, loss in fertility of soil and soil erosion, and drying up of water sources.

Though in UP the amount of money available for firefighting will go up from Re 1.25 per hectare in 1994 to Rs 26 per hectare this year, what is urgently needed is a sturdy vehicle which can rush 15 to 20 people to the site of fire, watchtowers to sound alarm and an excellent network of communication facilities. In the Kumaon and Garhwal hills, the forest department was allowed to hire vehicles only after the fires went out of control.

In the mid-eighties, the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) was given a helicopter that could carry 250 litres of water. The helicopter occasionally could not navigate through the heavy smoke of a fire, but it did prove useful. The chopper is now gathering dust and is unserviceable. The aircraft that was given for aerial survey of forests for fires crashed when Kamal Nath was environment minister.

The best way of protecting forests is to make people who live in and around them realise that they have a stake in the enormous forest wealth.

and the absence of any organised agency for their protection, have damaged these forests severely. Villagers set fire to their fields and pastures for clearing them of dry material and regenerating grass.

The pine-growing areas of UP and Himachal become highly inflammable in summer months. Sunderlal Bahuguna, in fact, has been pleading for replacement of pine trees with broad-leaved trees, preferred both by animals and birds. Some panchayat forests have opted for broad-leaved plantations, but chir is still preferred in the rugged terrain.

The Supreme Court's ban on felling of trees often becomes a convenient pretext for not building fire lines. The matter is compounded, as pointed out by the RP Khosla Committee, when competing resin contractors start fires to settle scores.

Forest officials also become complacent

The Hindustan Times

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# Keeping track of tigers

**F**OR almost a decade, arguments about the number of tigers in India has been the cause of much acrimony. Field directors of National Parks and Tiger Reserves have been accused of providing inflated figures because it would not be in their interest to show a decline in the tiger population of an area under their care. Some conservation

groups, both foreign and domestic, even suggested that a tiger was being killed every day, though this was hotly denied by the reserve authorities.

Anyone witnessing the heat and fury of the controversy might have been forgiven for thinking that the countrywide tiger count, carried out every four years, had been reduced to a farce.

One of the problems is that in a country as vast as India, with the tiger population scattered throughout its length and breadth, achieving an accurate count is not easy. The field directors of the 23 tiger reserves support the pug mark method - in which tiger prints are noted and measured - as the most reliable and cost effective way of counting. However, the pug mark technique has not been standardised.

"Though identification of tigers through the pug mark has been in operation for ages, there is lack of uniformity in application and even in the understanding of the process and procedure," says Dr. M. K. Ranjitsinh, director of the WWF Tiger Conservation Programme, "Owing to lack of training among the field staff, sometimes the left footprint and sometimes the right, sometimes the front and sometimes the hind foot mark, are measured. The techniques of measurement are not well known either."

Another counting method is photo-trapping, pioneered by Dr. Ullas Karanth, one of India's leading wildlife scientists. This means literally taking photographs of tigers over 45-60 days in a given area. The stripes on a tiger are as distinctive as the features on a human face, so photo-trapping is a means of identifying individual animals.

Dr. Karanth has used this method to count tigers in several National Parks, but when it was tried over an area of 80 sq. km. in Namdapha, Arunachal Pradesh, not a single tiger was captured on film - and, worse still, seven of his expensive cameras were stolen.

*As arguments rage over the  
state of the tiger population,  
new guidelines for trackers and  
a sophisticated checking  
method could produce a true  
picture and put an end  
to the controversy,  
reports USHA RAI.*

It appears then, that the pug mark is still the best guide if used properly. Photo-trapping can be useful for carrying out a selective census of tigers in a given area, particularly where there is a good population, and the method offers a means of cross-checking results obtained through pug marks. The real need is to improve the accuracy of the pug mark method

in the first place.

The WWF Tiger Conservation Programme has now produced draft guidelines for pug mark estimates of tiger populations. Under the title of Tracking Tigers, the guidelines have been prepared by Dr. L. A. K. Singh, research officer of the Simlipal Tiger Reserve, with the cooperation of the Wildlife Institute of India. Simplified and translated into regional languages, the document could be used by trackers and field staff to obtain much more realistic census results.

Of course, no counting method can be 100 per cent accurate, but what it can do is establish a clear trend among tiger populations - are they going up or down? In the old days, trackers and forest guards knew almost every tiger in their parks. They had a name for each animal and even knew its moods and mannerisms. They knew when the tigress was on heat, when she had a litter and sometimes even the state of the litter. Part of the aim of Tracking Tigers is to recreate elements of this vital field knowledge.

Dr. Singh's guide points out that in habitats where the ground is grassy, or rocky, or composed of hard soil and it is not easy to see pug marks, artificial impression pads can be used. These could be as simple as loose soil spread over a small area on the known route of a tiger. There is also information on how to distinguish between leopard and tiger pug marks and the different marks of male and female tigers.

If the vast amount of information in Tracking Tigers can be simplified and, wherever possible reduced to graphics so that it can be used even by an illiterate tracker, there is every chance that a fairly accurate estimate of India's tiger population can be achieved - and a little can be drawn under the bitter rows. ■