

## TO THE TIGERLAND WITH GRANNY

---

Several incidents in December had put me off and the irritating cold I had caught in the Krishna river estuary survey was just about to leave me - for with or without medicine the cold is supposed to give company to anyone for seven days. I wanted to get rid of my blues, my wandering feet supporting the feeling with regular itches. All signs indicated I am heading for an outing somewhere. Manju, our researcher on frogs asked me - Where to this time BC ? Perhaps to Srisailam was my reply.

My last visit to Srisailam was almost a year ago. And I had several things to do this time before the Diploma trainees on wildlife management from Dehradun arrive. First was - fix up a camping place within the sanctuary - perhaps at Pecheruvu, make a timetable of their activities during their stay, plan and make arrangements for a crocodile release in Krishna river, make notes on the migratory waterfowls in to the sanctuary and have a general look at vegetation at the core and buffer area of the sanctuary, all with a view of organising some field exercises for the visiting trainees.

Manju also wanted to come if it is just an overnight trip. She could look for new species of frogs, catch up on her new bird identification skill ( and make use of the new Collin's guide to Indian birds), roam through the forest - the thicker the better and as a bonus hope to see a wild tiger. But all this if her parents allow her to go.

On 27th, she telephoned and quite excited yelled, " BC, I am coming and so also my Granny. She is pretty old. She has seen almost all temples except Srisailam. Is it OK with you ? Say yes please. I will look after Granny. And you will like her also when you meet her. Fine, I say and it is settled that we leave on the 29th morning. My attempts on the 28th to pass on my programme to the Asst. Field Director at Achampet was not quite fruitful; even with a surprising bit of help from the telephone operator on the trunk booking line.

With a little doubt on the reception I should expect on 29th at Srisailam I went to bed a little late on the 28th.

0900 hrs, 29th Dec 87, the longwheel base Land Rover on its journey to the Tiger Reserve of Andhra Pradesh had four occupants. Driver Yadgiri and me on the front ~~and~~, Granny and Manju on the middle and our overnight kits on the rear. For a vehicle of this size the load was nothing and by the time we had covered some 30km of Hyderabad road I wondered if over 80 yr old granny could take this journey. If she felt the same way I am not sure. She seemed to be quite okey- even munching some mixture and surveying the landscape through the windows.

The journey up to Achampet was uneventful except for sighting a greyfox running across the road around noontime some 4km before Dindi reservoir. I had to make a note of it as I find less and less of these clever poultry lifters in my increasing number of field trips, the reason being their expensive fur coat is very much sought after in the fashion trade.

One thing that struck me most was the recent changes of all road signs and kilometer stones from English to Telugu. When I pointed this out to Manju, instead of being sympathetic she said, "You are in Andhra Pradesh since last 12 years, by now you should be writing telugu". Well, I thought she should travel in Orissa and all boards should be in Oriya - even the names of Railway stations! We are creating many mini India by this language barriers.

My friends at Achampet were nowhere to be seen - the Asst. Field Director Mr Khan on leave and the D.F.O Achampet Mr Qureishi on official business at Hyderabad. It was almost lunchtime and my suggestion of going to Uma maheswaram the southern religious entrance to Srisailam was readily agreed on. Umamaheswaram is one of my most favourite spots. I am not much of a sincere devotee, but I like real quite stone temples amidst a cool forest, where there are no loud recorded film music, no hustle and bustle of bus loads of rushing pilgrims in a hurry to reach the next temple and last but not the least - Beggars. This beautiful cave temple at Umamaheswaram is on the southern cliffside of the Nallamallai hills. Very close to Achampet. One can take a circuitous 4km dirt track from Rangapur village and reach the temple some 100-120 feet above the plains. The journey gives a preamble to what one could feel on the way to Srisailam. On the way we gave a lift to the temple priest and that solved the problem of my being the guide. First I knew very little of the temple legend and much less of telugu and next I knew Manju was suitably filtering my english commentary to telugu for the benefit of Granny ( or herself! ). Manju seemed to be more interested in looking ~~xxx~~ at the panoramic view of the savannah like plains from the hills than narrating the history of the temple to granny. Granny and Manju guided by the priest offered their prayers and I took advantage of that time in birdwatching. Goldfronted chloropsis, whitebellied drongo, treepie, little minivet, blue verditer flycatcher, Babblers and bulbuls were all over the place - not to forget the bonnet monkeys. These monkeys were quite bold with no fear of humans. Pujariji gave us some coconut and took a lift back downhill, (how others offer their prayer god only knows) all the while talking of important festive days for the temple, the animals that one can see there and the need for making the temple well known!

Enroute Umamaheswaram to Srisaillam we stopped at Mannanur forest rest house, shared our packed lunch of Puris~~and~~ potatoes and banana with the Rhesus monkeys. These monkeys have been brought in from the plains and let loose in the forest. They were bolder than their cousins at Umamaheswaram attempting to ~~pull~~ snatch eatables from our hands. The rest house keeper kept telling us stories of how some conservators wife was robbed of ~~her~~ eatables right from her plate, whose children had to be given firstaid for monkey bite and many more such as diary, banian and towel snatching etc before we finished our thick and sweetened hotel tea and moved on in the direction of Srisaillam.

The distance of over 65km from Mannanur to Srisaillam is good forest. Only two small villages enroute give one an indication of what a settlement could do to a forest. Here one can see weeds, clearing of forests, large number of cattle and other disturbance factors that comes with civilisation. The forest looked much greener than before and the roads were smooth- perhaps the result of much less traffic since the completion of the Srisaillam dam and disturbance. We stopped on the way appreciating the series of hills with lush green cover, shadows of fleeting clouds giving a mosaic of dark and light patches, but failed to see any animals. All too soon it was Eaglepenta ( Srisaillam dam site) and we had to slow down not only to negotiate the curving ghat road but also to give way to cartloads of grass pulled by humans. As we approached the dam site I found both Manju and granny very silent. Either busy looking at the imposing view of human marvels which Pandit Nehru once said 'our new temples of modern India' or perhaps a little scared of the narrow twist and turns of the steep ghat road.

It was a relief and pleasure to be greeted by Vara Prasad the research range officer of the tiger reserve. Prasad was one of my former student being a trainee at our institute. Somehow he had this regard for a friendly teacher that one ~~finds~~ seldom finds these days. His happy wide grin followed by some very refreshing homemade tea curtesy his wife gave us ample time to decide our programme .

Manju never agrees with anything the firsttime. But her quite and quick nodding of head in approval to the proposal of first settling down at the rest house at temple site, visiting the temple, taking a short tour of sanctuary to look for animals before calling it a day was quite a surprise to me. Perhaps newfaces ~~in the reserve and the~~ around her and the fear of an unknown alien place made her a little silent. But I was waiting to see her reactions the next day once she got her bearings. Our plan for the next morning was to leave early to Pecheruvu through forest road, survey the camp site, look for animals and birds at waterholes and return via Rollapenta and Dornal which will give a general view of the southern fringe of the reserve.

As the sun was dipping behind the western hills, granny was leading all of us forced devotees to the abode of Mallikarjunaswamy and his consort Brahmarambadevi. All men are equal but some are more equal than others- the Khaki uniform of the forest department has its own advantage, even to the extent of letting us in through a side gate and allowing a privileged darshan. Some six coconuts and perhaps an equal amount in rupees in the temple hundi was our total offering. I do not know what everyone asked the lord, but I asked Him to give me the ability to enjoy whatever I do. We were blessed by the priests by keeping the lords silver headgear on our heads and with offers of coconut water and coconut prasad. Granny helped me mark my forehead with a vermilion mark - much to the delight of all. Prasad made us walk throughout the temple premises, made us sit on a platform and repeated stories of the temple. I realised much to the surprise of every one that out of the 12 famous Sivalinga locations in India I have already seen 8. So much for someone who does not quite believe in going to temples. Perhaps I was a big sinner and am cleaning myself of all sins without my knowledge! Well, One thing I like best and always look forward is the mouth-watering Laddus at Srisailam. People eat small chunks of it as Prasadam. For me nothing less than two would do. In fact during most of my field trips in Srisailam I keep a few of these 'energy packs' in my backpack. It is not just a source of instant energy, in case you are stuck in the forest in an unknown place you can use them for goodwill and your wayout. The cool breeze and the well conducted tour of the temple lasted for two hours, but no one looked at the watch. Once outside Manju and granny spent sometime buying souvenirs for relatives and me looked for hot cup of tea. When we reached back the guest house it was already late for a night animal watching trip - much to the delight of Granny and regret of Manju.

I love hot food, but the dinner bought from the hotel could make anyone an expert in belly dance. Several glass of water and a few banana later we still wanted hot cups of tea to wash down the hot sensation from the tongue. Prasad had left to his waiting kids and wife making a plan for us to meet him at 5.30AM the next morning. Now back again to a known face Manju was her usual self - gossiping of this and that till 10 P.M. It wasn't the moquito that kept me awake. It was something Manju reminded me - some resolution of mine a year ago which I had not kept. I kept trying to remember What it was but failed - never realising resolutions are made only to be broken!

The guesthouse keeper woke me up at 4AM. ~~Max~~ I could hear Manju and Granny talking in their room. At 5.15 the driver brought a flaskful of hot tea. Manju came out in a maroon salwar kameez- not a dress recommended for a day in the forest, but she will learn in the years to come if she wants to work with nature.

I didn't want to torture granny in the bumpy forest road and she too wanted to spend a little more time in the temple. We left her under the care of a willing guesthouse keeper and started on to Prasad's place. Prasad loaded the Landrover with breakfast and we had company of two other young ladies and their husbands. They were visitors from Delhi who thought they can see the tiger reserve in a Maruti car. No point blaming them, you can virtually do that in Corbett or Kanha. Prasad's request and the empty seats in Land Rover made it possible for them to join us.

"It is the early bird that gets the worm" they say, but isn't it the early worm that gets caught. So we caught a few early rising pairs of Jungle fowl, spurfowl and peafowls who plummeted their feathers for our benefit. A few herds of spotted deers craned their necks and raised their ears to look for us the invaders in their territory. The first ~~group~~ was a herd of stags - all with hard antlers. The second was a mixed group of some 12-12 animals, couple of males with antlers in velvet and the last group was a large one with couple of young ones as well. It was quite a sight. For in my earlier trips I had never seen so many cheetals in two hours. The road to Pecheruvu was really bad and a test for the driver and the vehicle. On this bumpy track we looked at tiger and panther pug-marks, did some birdwatching and Manju even managed to catch a Sitana lizard.

The shimmering silver amidst the green forest was Pecheruvu tank dotted with waterlilies and flocks of whistling teals, Naktas, Wigeons, coots, pintails, shovllers, cormorants and Dabchicks. Waterhens and Jacanas danced on the lillie leafs and Lapwings started making their typical noise of "did you do it". We stopped at the new watchtower circling the tank and settled for a well deserved breakfast of sandwiches with honey, boiled eggs, bananas and hot cups of tea. The associated litter invited a few Jungle crows, <sup>(JC)</sup> much to the delight of Manju who could now make out a JC from a common-crow(CC). What a way to learn the difference of JC from CC in the company of BC!

Breakfast over, I was talking to the visiting young ladies from north about problems of wildlife sanctuary management and Prasad was talking to his local staff. Manju took advantage of this situation to adopt her vanishing trick. Using my binoculars I spotted her some 200mts away along the shoreline. She came back some 20minutes later and babbled "BC, there are so many frogs in this tank, I think we should consider this place as one of our study area". She was right, walking along ~~the shoreline~~ We counted almost 20 frogs in every five meter of shoreline. None, however, allowed us to come anywhere nearer than five meters. There definitely were two species - possibly three. Males of one species with enlarged vocal sacs - perhaps still breeding. We planned to carry out a collection in future.

Pecheruvu was once a small village .The centre of all activity , however, was the forest colony. Now the village have been shifted out ( following the declaration of the area as the core area of the project tiger reserve), even the forest colony is deserted. All that remains are a few uncared houses. A testimony to a march to modernity is a non-functional solar powered street light. Prasad and myself looked at these quarters where it was suggested to keep the visiting trainees. Presently some tribals ( Chenchus) had occupied them - at least temporarily as we were told. The whole place did not look much of a camp site and logistically , I felt the time and energy spent to organise a camp would be more than the benefits. Nonetheless, it was a lovely place to bring the trainees to see waterfowls, animals and some core and buffer area management practices. So, I made my decision and we proceeded on our way a little deeper into the forest. Prasad guided us to a lovely little pond close to which was a dilapidated temple. Manju made a little research on archaeology but backed out the moment she heard Prasad telling the place is a favourite haunt of tigers. The forest here were much thicker with thick Bauhinia creepers. We were given an instant lecture by Prasad on minor forest produce exploitation by tribals in different season. I felt the MFP is a wrong term. In some areas the minor forest produce (MFP) is perhaps the major forest produce as it was near Pecheruvu. Resin, Honey, grass, Soapnut, Tamarind, Plateleaf, barks for rope were only a few things the Chenchus exploited from this area. A little wiser on forest we drove through still better forest. By the time we reached Dornal we were hungry again. Before the tea was ordered and delivered most of us have feasted on boiled groundnuts, bananas and even ziziphus fruits. Anyway it was almost lunchtime. The return journey on the state highway had its own charm. Prasad altered his commentry accordingly. Now it ranged from Chenchu weddings to highway robberies. On the highway I kept looking for snakes. I was rewarded with sighting of a fast moving rat snake and a dead cat snake ( Boiga genus) which I collected for preservation and detail identification.

It was almost 3PM and granny was already worried of her granddaughter. She heaved a sigh of relief on seeing her and my hunger vanished the moment I saw the same hot food on the table once again. A quick shower and lunch followed by my arrangement with the forest staff about the reservation of temple cottages for the visiting trainees was all that I did before we reached back at the Tiger Reserve office. Prasad gave us once again some nice farewell tea and several pages of write-up for xerox. Manju enlightened herself with the intricacies of horns and antlers (velvet and hard) that separates the deer from an antelope. The few Spotted deer, Nilgai, Chowsinga and Sambar at the complex provided her a living ~~tax~~ open air lab.

An hour before sunset we crossed Krishna river~~and~~ and the dam and once more entered the forest. This time even I had craned my neck out with the hope of seeing some running hoofs. Either we had no luck or the lush green forest after good rains had spread out the ~~like~~ animals all over~~we~~ we could not see any. When it was getting dark and a little cold and the soft moonlit made the forest look much thicker, Manju started closing the glass windows of the Land Rover. Now with no hope of seeing anything else Manju started her non-stop chattering of things mundane and not so mundane. Granny seemed to be engrossed in her own thoughts - perhaps a little drowsy and annoyed over this chatters.

The sudden brake ~~and~~, reversal of gear and moving back the vehicle by Yadgiri made us sit uptight. And on to the left of the road, just 10mt away from the vehicle was a TIGER. Sniffing at something and moving very very slowly. The light made it impossible to make out wether it was a male or a female. To get a clear view Yadgiri backed the vehicle still further and tried to focus the headlight on the tiger but the foliage blocked the view. We kept looking at it for about 10 minute and left it to do its own business. Manju had started cursing me for not having a spotlight ( I had to explain her that use of spotlights are banned in a wildlife sanctuary), but not keeping a small torchlight in the jeep during night journeys was certainly a major fault of mine. Manju kept repeating her complaints- perhaps rightly so for she could not see properly ~~her~~ first wild tiger. For me it was the seventh in Srisailam and the 22nd in the wild. The location was 146~~th~~-147th Km stone towards Hyderabad and the time 6.40 to 7.10PM.

From there we stopped at Mannanur for another cup of hot tea at Vasant Mohan's place. He was the new range officer there having been transferred from the Hyderabad zoo. The journey in the plains after Mannanur was calm. Manju and granny comfortably cushioning themselves to on and off slumbers and me thinking of things I have to do on my repeat trip to Srisailam.

It was almost 12.30 midnight when I dropped Granny and Manju. But before I bade farewell the grateful parents of Manju had forced me to down several gulab-jamuns - a sweet end to a memorable trip. The new year was just 20 hours away before I went to bed, hoping for many more such trips in the year 1988.

-----