

Nirmala Lakshman
Joint Editor



THE HINDU

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Fax No.011 4698072

1st November 1999

Ms.Usha Rai
D-1947 Palam Vihar
Gurgaon 122017

Dear Usha Rai,

Thank you for your kind note of the 27th and I am sorry I could not reply until now. I am delighted that you feel that you can begin the column for us. I think a free wheeling column focussing largely on environmental issues including as you said, the occasional straight interview would be better than one on women. As you must be aware, both Kalpana Sharma's fortnightly column and C S Lakshmi's monthly column "Different Registers" largely deals only with women.

It would be privilege for us to have you on board with us. Your pioneering perspectives and writing on development and environmental issues has inspired so many of us over the years. I will be travelling from the 10th of November onwards until the end of the month so I am afraid I will miss being with you all on the 9th. Could you perhaps send one (or if you can two) pieces in early November preferably before the 10th so that I can get it set up before I leave. In my absence please feel free to get in touch with Shalini Arun or Nandakumar who are Deputy Editors with the Sunday magazine.

I think 800-1000 words with whatever visual support you can send will be good. Please give us some options on the column title and also let me know what kind of honorarium would suit you.

I look forward to hearing from you and thanks for getting in touch.

With warm regards,

TOTAL P. 01

Alt: Nirmala Lakshman

D 1948 Palam Vihar,
Gurgaon 122017
Haryana
November 3 '99

Dear Nirmala,

Many thanks for your faxed letter of November 1. I will send you two pieces for the column in the next four/five days.

I have two suggestions for the column title --- **Green Talk** or **Nature Watch**. I leave the final choice to you.

I will be leaving WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) in January and would be jobless till I pick up something. So money is important. I hope Rs 3000 for a column will be within your budget. If I get pixs and send them to illustrate an article, I hope you will pay the photographer.

Hope you have a good trip and see you next when you are in Delhi. I can't tell you what a difference there is between the culture of Chennai and North India. Your telephone operators, PA, everyone was so polite and helpful. Here in Delhi very often you can't even get through the PAs to reach editors/ bureaucrats etc.

Many thanks again for your quick response.

With warm regards

Usha Rai

(Usha Rai)

044-8548874

10/10/11

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AH: Nirmala Sen

D 1947 Palam Vihar,
Gurgaon 122017
October 27 '99

Dear Nirmala Laxman,

I have taken so long to get back to you that you must be thinking I have lost interest in doing a column for you. On the contrary, I am extremely eager to get started.

I could do a fortnightly column on environment or on women's issues. I would prefer to do a column on environment but if you would prefer one on women I could write that too.

It would basically be a free wheeling column, where I would write on issues of topical interest. So I could write on wildlife --- the new action plan that is on the anvil--- or on forests (forest fires, the sal borer menace, the diminishing forest cover)-- it could be on pollution or even a straight interview with someone making environment news.

I could send you the first piece in a week's time so that the column begins appearing in November.

I need to know the number of words per column -- would it 800, 1000 or 1200. Would you need illustrations/ photographs?

I am faxing this letter to you and will call later this evening or early tomorrow.

I am currently with WWF Tiger Conservation Programme. You can call/fax me on 4698072. This is a busy number. You could also call 4616532, 4697224, 4627586 and ask for me. I am in this office from 10 a.m. to about 3 p.m. Most days I am here till 5 p.m.

Hoping to hear from you at the earliest so that I can get cracking with the column.

Will you be here on November 9 when the NFI media fellowships will be given.?

With warm regards

Usha Rai

(Usha Rai)

044-8548874.

Attention Nirmala Lakshman. From Usha Rai Delhi. This is for the column

Green Talk

A Park at the Mercy of God and the Militants

By Usha Rai

The Central government as well as the officials running the prestigious Project Tiger in Palamau, Bihar, may very well have to write off the 1026 sq kms 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, Nagarjunsagar 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 WWF's 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 ofcourse 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.

But the Park's biggest problem is starvation 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

(More)

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 summers and preventive measures like drawing fire lines etc 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 para-military) 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 don't 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 park, 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 Prabhu, 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 and Palamau is once again an orphaned park..

Ends

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