

THE LAND OF THE TIGER

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Somewhere deep in the Jungle....

Darkness enveloped the dense forest as the sun set in the distant horizon. In the undergrowth his alert eyes picked up the movement in the grass. He moved ahead stealthily, eyes locked onto his prey. Seconds passed...body temperature continuously rising. He calculated his chances from here. SLIM; he had to get closer. Ears cocked up to pick up threatening decibels. The forest floor was quiet, even the chirping crickets sensed bloodshed. Crouching, he moved closer. Minutes passed ...blood gushed through his veins. He charged. The attack was swift and successful. His canines dug deep into the throat of his prey, dragging it back into the undergrowth. Hidden from the forest eyes, he snapped every bone with ease and gorged on the flesh. After his fill, he playfully rolled over his belly and slept, unthreatened by the beasts of the night. He was the King, and this was his kingdom. Welcome to Bandavgarh, the Land of the Tiger.

Declared a tiger reserve in 1972, Bandavgarh National Park spreads across the Vindhya Hills in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. Located 180 kms northeast of Jabalpur, the protected area of 437 sq. kms boasts of about 70 tigers living majestically within its lush sal forests. In the erstwhile days, the forest was a game sanctuary of the Maharaja of Rewa, whose fortress is situated on top of an 800-meter high hill. The fortress is still accessible by foot from 'Shesh shaiyya' (reclining Vishnu on serpent), midway uphill, where images of 10th century rock sculptures of Vishnu incarnations can be found. The forest is also home to leopards, sloth bears, *dholes* (Indian wild dog), *chitals* (spotted deer), *sambhar* (blue bull), barking deer, wild boars, foxes and a host of birds including migratory species such as sarus cranes and Egyptian vultures. The *Chakradhara* grassland meadows offer splendid views of unending landscapes and camouflage the predators perfectly. At times, however, they reveal a crouching tiger simply waiting in ambush.

It was the sultry month of May when I had my first experience of the wild. We had traveled through the baking plains of central India to Bandavgarh National Park. After roughing out the ride from Jabalpur, the cool sal forests of the national park were a respite. While driving along the fringes, we enthusiastically watched for any movement, lest we missed the striped beauty. An occasional langur monkey hopped across a dry stream.

The thrill was exuberant as we prepared for our first morning ride into the forest. After the formalities of entry passes and camera checks, our gypsy glided along a pre-assigned route into the core area. Our eyes could not pick out visual signs as the sky was just turning out from its slumber. However, with the first light on the horizon, we were treated to a sight of regal authority, the Bengal tiger in its full majesty. He lay on a little spur beyond the *Chakradhara* meadow. He was spotted by a *mahout* (the elephant trainer cum rider), while still lazing in the grasslands. Walkie-talkies cackled over to inform the gate about the presence of the tiger. Soon, hordes of eager visitors arrived and went elephant riding to sight the Royal Highness, who by this time had moved for a drink to a nearby stream. Typically called a 'tiger show', these *mahouts* would scout for tigers through tell-tale signs such as pugmarks, or corner the animal, generally demure after a kill of the

night. The tiger would often stay for hours around the same spot, treating the visitors to a glorious sighting.

The tiger show is a big attraction, but to sight a tiger crossing your path is supreme exhilaration. We were scheduled to forage into the forest six times. After the success of the first morning safari, we were all looking forward to our next safaris. However, like the old jungle saying goes, 'Forests are unpredictable,' and we were disappointed by His Majesty. Our driver and guide kept our spirits high, 'Do not worry if you not see him. He sees you Salways.' a verbatim attempt of the colorful hoarding at the entrance to the park. Occasionally, there would be a *sambhar* call, a typical low bark signaling an impending danger. But these turned out to be hoaxes as good as the bomb implants on the Indian railways. And we moved on.

We were fortunate on the last of the six safaris. As the sun disappeared behind the hillock, the jeeps tried their luck once more near the *Chakradhara* meadow. A last attempt as somebody had mentioned sighting fresh tigress pugmarks in the morning. The distinct call of the *sambhar* deer put everyone on high alert and the drivers killed their engines, nearly ramming jeeps into each other. Cameras with long lenses re-appeared from the bags, and alert ears cocked to pick up low decibels. A whisper decimated the silence, pointing towards the movement. It was indeed a tigress, holding a chital by the throat and easily dragging it across the meadow. The presence of so many spectators was a trifle chaotic for her, so she decided to bolt into the dense grasslands. The ease with which she sprang left everyone gaping. Dripping blood, a lifeless glazed eye of the chital, raw power gushing through her veins. An eight feet turbo-thrill for the mere fist-sized heart.

Months later I read in the newspapers about the disaster at Sariska and Ranthambore national parks, where tiger sightings have drastically reduced. At Sariska, in Rajasthan, in the latest annual consensus not a single tiger is recorded. A failure of the Project Tiger. But for the striped king, hope still lives at Bandavgarh and Kanha national parks.

Let us pledge to protect this magnificent animal from becoming the remains of another page of history.

Tiger Facts:

ROYAL BENGAL TIGER (*panthera tigris tigris*)

Tigers remaining across the globe: 3800 to 4500 worldwide.

- ? Four species of the tigers have become extinct. Of the remaining three, the Bengal tiger is of the largest population.
- ? Tigers are hunted for their skin and whiskers, and poachers are paid heavily for the goods. An average of one tiger is poached everyday.
- ? The lifespan of a wild tiger is about 15 years, whereas they can survive upto 20 years domesticated or caged. The lifespan of a wild tiger is about 15 years, whereas they can survive upto 20 years domesticated or caged, as in a zoo the animal is well fed and kept away from brutal encounters with other tigers/animals.
- ? The night vision of the tiger is 6 times more powerful than that of a man.
- ? The Tiger is a territorial animal. The male marks its boundaries by spraying and scratching claw marks on tree trunks. Males often fight over territories, resulting in fatal injuries to the weaker fighter.

? Unlike lions, tigers are solitary hunters who rely more on stealth than speed as they have a large body bulk.