

WOODWORDS

OJT SPECIAL EDITION

LITERARY CLUB IGNFA

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About the Cover Picture and Publication

The Cover Picture was taken by Jeevan Dagade at Chidiyapur. A raw and real image, it aptly portrays the wilderness and rustic charm which many probationers of the 2019 batch were thrown into during the phase of OJT from the comfort zone of the academy.

It is thus a pictorial epitome of the many challenging times and field realities that the OJT brought forward for the batch. The intent of this publication is to document the same, a historic first for an IFS batch after many years that is worth telling to batches in the post pandemic era and the forest fraternity

WHEN WINTER CAME TO BAHRAICH

DOBARIYA CHINTAN PRABHUBHAI, BAHRAICH DIVISION, UP



The sandwich pattern of On The Job Training(OJT) was revived after almost two decades. So everyone of us was excited. In the officer's mess, classroom and corridors it became a common topic of discussion. Everyone was waiting to get their OJT order from their respective cadres. In that order we would come to know at which place we were going. And then UP (my cadre) letter came and I got a place called Bahraich.

Honestly speaking, I was hearing for the first time the word Baharaich. I didn't know anything about it. So I immediately googled it. In google, it was shown that Baharaich is one of the backward districts of Uttar Pradesh. The place to visit in the district is Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary. Except that only a photo of one clock tower was shown in google. On hearing I got Baharaich, my colleague teased me - "Don't get kidnapped there". There was thus a

feeling of excitement and confusion about my upcoming endeavour.

BAHARAICH FOREST DIVISION											
NAME OF DIVISIONAL FOREST OFFICER											
S.N.	NAME	FROM	TO	S.N.	NAME	FROM	TO	S.N.	NAME	FROM	TO
1.	SHI. EER. CHANNER	1900	1905	46.	SHI. JAWAHAR LAL	1883/78	1921/72				
2.	" E. CHANNIS	1905	1906	47.	" S. C. ZOHRI	14-12-1919	30-10-1978				
3.	" J. C. TULLACH	1906	1910	48.	" K. BHIR AHMAD	30-10-1919	10-10-1971				
4.	" R. S. GANNE	1910	1910	49.	" J. VANATI PRASAD	30-10-1919	30-10-1985				
5.	" E. S. STEVENS	1910	1911	50.	" S. K. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1981				
6.	" G. L. RAI	1911	1911	51.	" J. S. CHANUNAN	30-10-1919	30-10-1981				
7.	" S. S. SHERKAT	1911	1912	52.	" R. S. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
8.	" M. W. CLIFFORD	1912	1917	53.	" V. R. GAUR	30-10-1919	30-10-1984				
9.	" H. B. HANSHUP GIBBLA	1912	1918	54.	" H. B. HANSHUP GIBBLA	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
10.	" S. S. TAG BAHADUR	1912	1920	55.	" C. L. PRASAD	30-10-1919	30-10-1977				
11.	" W. A. BARLEY	1920	1921	56.	" L. D. PRASAD	30-10-1919	30-10-1981				
12.	" W. C. LAMBERT	1922	1923	57.	" R. S. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
13.	" D. B. PAHS	1923	1928	58.	" R. B. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
14.	" R. S. SINGH	1928	1931	59.	" D. D. BUBEY	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
15.	" R. S. SINGH	1931	1931	60.	" R. S. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
16.	" H. P. HOPKINS	1931	1934	61.	" R. K. SACHAN	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
17.	" S. W. CHAMPION	1934	1934	62.	" H. B. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
18.	" D. D. JOSHI	1934	1934	63.	" H. B. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
19.	" M. C. NAL	1934	1938	64.	" A. V. ASHWAL	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
20.	" J. S. SINGH	1938	1943	65.	" P. S. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
21.	" T. S. SINGH	1943	1946	66.	" S. S. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
22.	" H. K. SINGH	1946	1948	67.	" S. S. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
23.	" H. G. SINGH	1948	1949	68.	" A. V. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
24.	" R. S. SINGH	1949	1954	69.	" A. S. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
25.	" R. S. SINGH	1954	1956	70.	" R. S. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
26.	" R. S. SINGH	1956	1957	71.	" R. S. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
27.	" S. S. SINGH	1957	1957	72.	" V. G. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
28.	" S. S. SINGH	1957	1957	73.	" S. S. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
29.	" R. S. SINGH	1957	1957	74.	" R. S. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
30.	" S. S. SINGH	1957	1957	75.	" R. S. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				
31.	" H. S. SINGH	1957	1957	76.	" R. S. SINGH	30-10-1919	30-10-1982				

On my first day reaching the DFO office, I saw the list of DFOs posted in Baharaich starting from the 1900s evidentiary of how deep the roots of Baharaich forest department are. On scanning the list, my eyes stopped at one name - F. W. Champion. I immediately searched the name on google. He was brother of Champion in Champion and Seth, Indian forest types classification. He was equally competent and knowledgeable to his brother. With this, I got a sense of the standard of Indian Forest Service (IFS) already laid very high from British era. To match them, I will have to work very hard without which expectations and aspirations of all stakeholders won't be fulfilled.

I am coming from Surat, Gujarat. According to a study conducted by Economic Times, Surat will be the world's fastest growing city from 2019 to 2035. Note that it's not India's but World's. I was allocated Chakia Range in Mahipurva tehsil as range attachment. This range is located at the Indo-Nepal border. It has precious Tarai belt mixed sal forest. On night

reaching there, I was sitting with my staff around a bonfire. One of my experienced guards lamented in a pitiful tone- "In the world, India is backward. In India, Uttar Pradesh is backward. In Uttar Pradesh, Baharaich is backward. In Baharaich, Mahipurva tehsil is backward and in Mahipurva tehsil, villages adjoining to Chakia forest is backward and in one of those villages namely Joginia, I was supposed to stay for three months. Both places Surat and Joginia were poles apart. This actually encapsulates the kind of hardship I faced initially at my range attachment. But all these hardships galvanised me. It gave me lots of lessons about how to handle difficult times with determination and wisdom.



Book knowledge cannot substitute wisdom/ideas gained by field experience. In Chakia, I had a very competent and professional forester in Pradeep, a man with more than 8 years of experience. In initial meetings with staff, I was curious about challenges of illegal felling of trees during winter. He suggested very innovative steps like creating new temporary chokis at strategic points, doing shakti pradarshan around Diwali time same as police do to infamous villages, revival of joint patrolling

with Sashatra Seema Bal(SSB) at Indo-Nepal border and so on. Along with these ,many other suggestions were given by staff members. We compiled all these in a coherent manner and brought out an 8 point action plan called "Winter Action Plan 2020". We all implemented this plan honestly and enthusiastically. Mr. Khan of Khan timber (independent observer) told me after completing range attachment that our efforts saved at least three crore worth precious timbers of valuable species like sal, teak, shisham in last winter. Efforts never go waste.



Finally, during my OJT period, I considered the media as one of the most important stakeholders. Generally officers focus on them only after getting bad experience. We did three meetings with media persons. They gave many insights about how media houses work. They said for newspapers they have fixed space to print about forest news. Now if we feed them positive news, then the overall image of the department will be positive. They also

said there is a communication gap between the forest department and media reporters. When authentic information is not available with reporters they try to find information from other sources. This leads to printing of wrong information. So, if we provide them suo-motto correct information then such incidents can be reduced. Further, meetings with them helped us to find the pulse of the media about our department providing constructive feedback. In one line, we should treat the media like the real fourth pillar of democracy.



All of my experiences during the OJT like interacting with village people in meetings to foot patrolling in the jungle where the wild beast tiger was roaming to renovating my place of resting to handling issues of lower staff to representing the forest department at district level and so on, were unique and challenging. All these situations put me in different roles. It enlightened me that I needed lots of new skills and competencies to perform these roles successfully. Obviously, footprints of Chakia won't be erased from me for my lifetime.

THE ANNUAL ELEPHANT CROSSOVER AT BARIPADA

PRASHANT PATEL, BARIPADA DIVISION, ODISHA



Mass migration of elephants is an important annual management challenge in the Baripada Division of Mayurbhanj District in Odisha. It is the annual migration of elephants in 3 to 4 herds of 30-40 elephants each. During my OJT at Baripada division, I got direct exposure to some aspects of this management challenge. I was directly involved in the intensive monitoring duty of this migration during my attachment there.

The elephants start from Jharkhand and moving through West Bengal they enter Odisha in Mayubhanj

district. They complete their migration by again returning to Jharkhand by more or less traversing the same route they took while entering Odisha.

The main challenge here is not to stop the migration per se but to facilitate this natural migration of elephants. Many challenges are encountered in the migration paths of elephants. The job of Forest administration here is to ease those hurdles.

Various hurdles include presence of villages in their path of migration;

Paddy harvesting season (around October-December); standing paddy crop and harvested crop destruction by elephants; Human killings due to unexpected encounters; Elephant poaching due to vested interests; & Presence of electrical transmission lines and national highways en-route among others. Forest administration tries to minimise all the possible conflicts enroute elephant's migration path.

The various important elements of the management includes coordination with other departments; Awareness and sensitization meetings through the VSS (Van Surakhya Samiti) and Signage boards, placed at all the villages coming in the migration route of elephants; Working with Villagers so as to use their knowledge (intelligence gathering); Training forest department team from all over the division; Making sure the equipment and vehicles for elephant monitoring duty are in working condition, especially in the migration season; daily full night monitoring duty by forest administration there for 3-4 months.

During my OJT, I got a chance to learn some of these aspects more closely. Among my many learning experiences, the important one was the elephant monitoring duty at a national highway. Further, it gave me a chance to understand the elephant behaviour in their mass migration.



Meeting for planning the mass migration

During their migration, elephants cross an NH which comes in their path of migration, and now it is the responsibility of forest administration to ensure that the passage through the highway is smooth and with minimum disturbance to the public. Here my target was to ensure that elephants cross the NH without any obstruction. After reaching the spot we had to stop the movement of vehicles over a kilometre stretch on both the sides. We also had to manage the crowd that had emerged after seeing the forest department personnel there. Some of them were helping our team of over 35 personnel in enforcing the stoppage of vehicles, some were waiting for the mystic scenario of over 40 elephants crossing the NH and some were just criticising. Amidst all this, I had to maintain the calmness of the team and focus on our job.

Another group of our team was facilitating the movement of elephants through the reserve forest area near to the highway, and another team was inspecting the other side of the NH that was also a reserve forest area where the

elephant herd was supposed to enter after crossing the NH.

After some time, we could hear the trumpet of an elephant herd approaching the NH. Now the forest staff members ensured that flashlights, Angithis near the roads etc are switched/ put off so as not to divert the attention of the majestic creature. Further, the people from inside their vehicles also started coming out and surrounded the check Nakas placed to stop the vehicles. The curiosity of the travellers led to a huge gathering near the nakas to watch the elephant crossing.

Suddenly in between all this, I saw the entry of the first elephant from the herd on the NH and then after some time another and thus it started. All the members of one herd started crossing slowly and the silhouette formed of these crossing elephants under the moonlight gave a surreal touch to the event. The

herd consisted of elephants of different age groups with tuskers leading and also tailing the herd ensuring the herd's protection.

It was the first time that I could observe such large herds of wild elephants moving freely using their own sense of wisdom to avoid the conflicts and enjoy their migration. The herd finally crossed the NH. After they went some safe distance the Check Nakas were removed and traffic was slowly restored to normal. Villagers stood with us till the elephants were in the line of sight after crossing the NH.

With the satisfaction of accomplishment of this target and with this picturesque scene of Herd's crossing NH in my mind, I moved to a different area to monitor another herd's movement.

OJT CLICKS: MANAS SINGH



IT COUNTS!

N JEYKUMARAN, CHANDRAPUR DIVISION, MAHARASHTRA



"Top predator"
 "Nation's pride"
 And that ecological triangle
 Every one draws
 To say tiger is cool-
 Conserving tigers
 Should have been romantic,
 At the least.
 It was not.

An armchair forester
 Landing in the middle of
 A tiger capture operation
 In Madhya Chanda
 I was an observer;
 I couldn't pretend anything more.
 My tryst with conservation
 Was akin to
 A Shakespeare and Henry V-

Firing glory words
On empty papers;
Describing war,
Without knowing
What it means.
The operation at hand was
Simple and straight-
Zero visibility,
No technology,
Covid fear,
Capture the tiger.

Naivety in me
Wanted to fantasize a world-
Equipped personnel
Jumping from
All terrain vehicles,
Tracking the tiger
And tranquilizing it in a whiff.

But all that we got was
Hopeless waits
In the middle of jungle,
Seeing our lives passing by;
Smelling cat urine to
Speculate tiger's presence;
And
Sleepless nights
Counting sounds of grass
And rustle of tics,

Wishing it was the tiger.
For seekers of silver linings,
Yes there was one-
While the police
Trace
Animals in human coat,
We atleast had
To trace
Only an animal
In an animal coat.

It's hard to fathom
A women's heart, they say.
I wish someone
Tried their luck
With
A tiger's heart.

Tiger was never a population;
It was an individual
Like you and me,
With all its idiosyncrasies,
And capturing it meant
Trying to think
What it thinks.

It should be boring
By now;
So yes,
For all your patience

The tiger was caught.
But
Looking back
I do ask myself
If it was all worth it?
What about the veterinarian
Who could have spent,
His whole year
Doing the things he loved?
What about our
Forest guards,
Who drenched in rains
Caring less for food,
Waiting for days and nights
For a tiger
That never came?
What about the village child
Who doesn't understand
Why she lost her father
To a tiger,
But still had to be patient
Because the law said so?

Conservation
Isn't academic,
When one lives near it.
There are no explanations.
There are no answers.

But in the middle of this crossfire,
In one of those
Hopeless days
Of waiting for this tiger,
I listened to these words
Which still rings inside me,
As I touch
And make sense of my memory-

"It is simple
To kill a tiger-
It hardly breaks any sweat.
But
The point is to prove
That
Conservation is an ideal
Worth fighting for;

To show
That a species
Can go against its wiring,
To save another species"
And
Looking back
I do feel,
If anything
That make us human,
This counts for something!

The Vanishing White

N Ravisankar Sarma, Solan Division, Himachal Pradesh



That December night, like always,
Beads of white from sky above,
Gleaming in the moonlight as it falls,
Forgotten water, as white as a dove.

Morning came, laid in white carpet,
Rays of sun, gushing through the Deodars,
A portrait by the finest artist,
That paints a child's smile in everyone's
eyes.

So much joy, that people came from afar,
From the hotbeds and seaside,
Riding a bike or their car,
Queuing up by the hill roadside.

Soon, the narrow road gave way,
The Axe left its mark on a wider path,
More and more cars, came this way,
In pursuit of the elusive white myth.

When 2 became 4, it was not just lanes,
But people, maggi, plastic and carbon,
That doubled, as more eyes,
Met the hill side white and moved on.

The Gandhi in paper kept moving,
The Roads wider and wider, in full flow,
Yet that moment came one morning ,
And suddenly, there was no snow.

OJT: A TRAILER OF THE INDIAN FOREST SERVICE

VIKAS YADAV, CHITRAKOOT DIVISION, UP

An evening with such nice weather, no other time would have been better to travel than on those narrow up-down hilly forest roads in the midst of Ranipur Wildlife Sanctuary. I was travelling in Thar with 2 forest guards and Ranger Sahab and one more Thar was following us.

Ranger Sahab was telling his life journey in forests of Uttar Pradesh, how he faced dacoits in Chitrakoot forest and how he chased away timber thieves by firing 2 bullets in the air. And I was thinking about my journey as IFS, "till now It is so smooth, in academy, attending the online classes...playing...enjoying with batchmates..., Would it be like that only? No?"



Suddenly we felt like hills start rolling down to one side slowly and slowly, "What is happening?" a forest guard shouted on the driver. Very next moment we realized that it was not hills but it was our Thar which was going to turn upside down very soon. "Stop it, Stop it, Stop it...." We all shouted at once. The driver could not do anything but fortunately the rear part of our Thar got stuck to a small Bhel tree saving all of us.

I got my answer.

OJT is a trailer of an IFS officer journey. All kinds of experiences: good/bad, political/social, personal/professional, emotional/practical, we have in our OJT, lets have some glances:

Working with people, for people, by leading people



For this Satisfaction and Smile



Public interaction is the most essential and inseparable part of our service and doing justice to it is an art in itself. Positive public interaction gives us satisfaction, admiration and career growth on the other hand negative interaction can put us in many problems.

Here is one incident of positive interaction:

I was made in-charge of a committee for investigation of fake MGNREGA Job Cards in a village. After proper investigation of all the facts and hearing all the parties, we figured out many faults in work allocation. One was that a poor widow lady was not getting any work but a rich influential person was getting work under MGNREGA because of fake job cards. We listed all the culprits and ensured that the only right person/needy would get the work under MGNREGA. I still remember the blessings of that lady given to our team

Law Enforcement with Empathy, even in Extreme Conditions



When a very old aged lady comes to you walking barefoot, on an empty stomach, from 12 kms afar, to pray not to register a case against her husband because he did that crime unaware of the law and they are not in the capacity to pay even the minimum penalty. What will you do? Of course, not knowing a law is not an excuse to commit a crime, on the other hand they even cannot pay a minimum penalty. This kind of dilemma we have to face every day in the service.

Administrator? Manager? Or Organizer?

On Saturday evening, I just finished regular office work and was planning to spend the weekend leisurely with my Family, then I got a call from my DFO sir that honourable CM of Uttar Pradesh is coming to our district next Monday morning to visit a place in our forest area. The forest department had to do all the arrangements for his visit and we had only 36 hours. At first it seemed impossible but we could do a wonderful arrangement for his visit which was appreciated by all. I could feel the power of government machinery and efficiency of staff and people who delivered even in urgent conditions under the noble guidance of an officer.



This incident makes me realize we have to be All!

Cherish best moments in wild and have an unparalleled opportunity to travel



We experience the unwitnessed beauty of nature, unnoticed calls of animals and birds, enjoy the fresh air and water, purify our souls in the calmness of the jungle and have a great opportunity to travel to different places. All these things we do while working only, no need to find extra time or a free weekend!

THE WILD GRASSLANDS OF JHILMIL JHEEL

CLICKS BY JEEVAN DAGADE, HARIDWAR DIVISION, UTTARAKHAND



SIGHTS FROM BHALUKPONG

ANKIT KUMAR, ARUNACHAL PRADESH





Right of Way

Ankit Kumar

A memoir on measures taken to mitigate the Human-Elephant conflict in Bhalukpong Range of Khellong Forest Division, Arunachal Pradesh.

The National Heritage Animal of India, the magnanimous Asian Elephant is known for its exemplary memory and sense of smell due to which the herd or the bull tends to follow a similar migratory path year after year. It is said that the pachyderm never forgets its route of migration and passes on the knowledge to its future generations.

However, the development of linear infrastructures, agricultural plantations and expansion of human settlements on these ancient migratory routes have forced the wildlife to enter the human dominated landscape in search of food and mate. Sometimes the interface between humans and wildlife takes negative turns and leads to what is called the *Human-Wildlife Conflict*. One such negative interface came across during my brief stint at Bhalukpong.

The Issue

For last 4 years no wild Elephant has entered the Bhalukpong Range from the Assam's side (Bhalukpong is the entry point to Arunachal Pradesh and situated at the border of Assam) but this time a male wild Elephant in his *Musth* condition

has found a safe refuge in this border town.

A *Musth* is a period among the adult male Elephants in which they tend to become aggressive and sexually active. In this condition, their temporal gland becomes swollen from where a strong smelling fluid, rich in testosterone, runs down on their cheeks.

It is difficult to tackle an Elephant in his *Musth* condition when he enters the human habitations as the urge to find food and mate makes him restless and sometimes aggressive. The best way to deal with this situation is to give the wildlife its right of way while ensuring the protection of human life and property.

In Bhalukpong Range of Khellong Forest Division, the male wild Elephant had identified a path across the Railway station from the contiguous Reserve Forest area situated in Assam. The problem lied in the fact that across the railway tracks there was a dense human settlement dominated by the Aka tribes.

The Pachyderm had also found the source of his favourite food in these settlements – wheat, banana plantations and locally made liquor *Apong*. His strong sense of smell allowed him to locate these delicacies in these settlements and raid the houses, mostly at the mid-night,

leading to serious threats to life and property.



An adult male wild Elephant raiding the Banana Plantations in Bhalukpong.

Another issue was the threat posed to the social infrastructure such as schools and hospitals along with the government offices and buildings like godowns of Food Corporation of India by the frequent movement of wild Elephant in this region. The Pachyderm had explored this godown in one of its strolls and his huge size gave him an advantage to just step over the 8 feet long walls to enter inside and raid the food stock. This had some national security implications as this godown used to store food grains for 3 districts in Arunachal Pradesh.

The main reasons which led to cropping up of these issues in this region was the shrinkage and fragmentation of the habitat led by blocking of the migratory corridors through concrete walls, barbed wires and make-shift market areas.



An adult male wild Elephant in FCI godown at midnight.

Measures Taken

As said earlier, the best strategy at this point in time was to give free passage to the Elephant while ensuring the safety of both human's life and property. For the smooth operation of this strategy, the foremost step that was taken was the constitution of a multi-member night patrolling team.

Night Patrolling Team



The night patrolling team constituted the 8 volunteers from the village, frontline staff of Khellong forest department and the SOS team from the wildlife division of Pakke Tiger Reserve. The SOS team ensured quick response in case of any eventuality while volunteers ensured active vigil throughout the night on all the entry points of Elephant in the Bhalukpong area.

The personnel from the forest department were given the responsibility to comb the market area, riverfront and the nearby human settlements to check the presence of Elephant in these regions while ensuring the active response in case an Elephant is spotted. The team also used to alert the vehicle plying interstate across the Forest Check Post.

In addition to the constitution of the night patrolling team, an active information network was formed to get the regular updates on the movement of the wildlife in the area. In this network, the key role was played by the Range and Beat office of Chariduar Range in Sonitpur district of Assam. The officers concerned used to comb the Reserve Forest area in their jurisdiction and send the updates to the head of the night patrolling team of Khellong Forest Division for timely response.

People's Participation

People living in the villages are direct stakeholders in the mitigation efforts. The participation of people is required for two main reasons, first, this strengthens the efforts taken by the department and bridges the trust deficit with the people; second, it makes people more conscious about the social and emotional behaviour of the wildlife and they resort less to retaliatory killings in case of negative interface with the wildlife.

In this context several measures were taken such as – public awareness was spread through loudspeakers to not stock the wheat and *Apong* in the houses, legal

implications of hurting the wildlife and the steps to be taken in case of encounter with the wild Elephant. Sensitisation campaign was also conducted by the volunteers and the frontline staff with their respective communities.

Volunteers were given adequate resources to deal with the human-wildlife conflict in their village. For instance, high power torches were given to conduct vigil at night and low intensity-high sound firecrackers were given to divert the movement of Elephant (care was taken to not hurt the Elephant) from human settlement. Regular interactions with the villagers further boosted the confidence of the people towards the efforts taken by the forest department.



Volunteers keeping an active vigil across the railway tracks in the Bhalukpong region.

The management of FCI-Bhalukpong was asked to increase the vigil in the godown during the night time by increasing the number of security guards. The guards were also provided with Torches and the Firecrackers.

Long Term Measures

As Bhalukpong is a Reserve Forest area contiguous with the Chariduar Range of Assam Forest Department, the priority

has been the re-development and protection of Elephant Corridors in this region. Several meetings were held with the district authorities in this regard to relocate the weekly markets which were being held at the middle of one such corridor. Encroachments have been identified and due notices were also issued.



MoEF&CC @moefcc · 1h

With dedicated efforts, the State Forest Department has now garnered local community participation to revive the once degraded Dadzeeling elephant corridor of Bhalukpong range where the regular movement of elephants now occur without loss of crops and life of humans.



Prakash Javadekar and 3 others



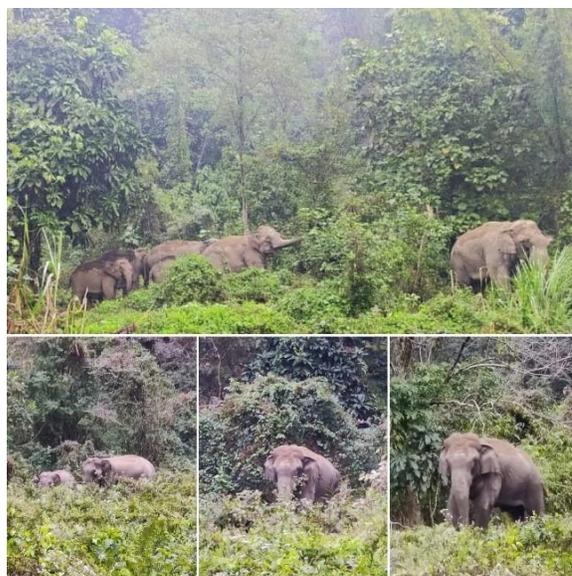
Cooperation from the Assam Forest Department was sought to relocate the ongoing construction on the Elephant Corridor where the concrete walls have been erected leading to the obstruction in the movement of the wildlife across the road.

Conclusion

The fact which became quite evident during this period was that the Human-Elephant Conflict or the Human-Wildlife Negative Interface that we call now in the Bhalukpong region has

mainly been led by the anthropogenic factors. The rapid construction of residential buildings and linear infrastructure together with the expansion of agriculture has fragmented the habitat of all forms of wildlife.

The need of the hour is the identification of ancient migratory routes of these Elephants and removal of all illegal constructions within these corridors. This will require the availability of both human and financial resources in addition to the cooperation from the district authorities and the police department.



Dadzeeling Elephant Corridor in Kameng Elephant Reserve, Bhalukpong Range

Adequate and timely compensation in case of loss of human's life and property need to be ensured to boost confidence among the people at large and make them more conscious towards the conservation of wildlife.

FROM GROUND ZIRO

HARSHRAJ WATHORE, ZIRO FOREST DIVISION, ARUNACHAL





THE DECCAN LANDSCAPE

NISHA KUMARI, KADAPPA FOREST DIVISION, ANDHRA PRADESH



Sunset at Nagar Van in Kadapa



Uppalapadu: A Bird Heaven

Ecotourism in Barabar, By, Of and For the People

Ramsundar M, Gaya Division, Bihar



How many of us know that Barabar Hills, the oldest surviving rock cut caves in India situated in the protected area? Massive granitic boulders appear seated one above other across the entire hill system. It is clothed with forest cover over.

Two natural wetlands are encased within these hills. Owing to proficient aquatic vegetation, each Wetland looks

like a hidden gem in the Barabar ecosystem. Both are fed by annual

monsoonal flow from hill slopes. The quality of water appears the most clear shorn of any pollution impact.

The ancient caves are located at two locations. The most visited caves are found to be about 200 meter above the main entrance and are located along the walking trail. They are hewn out of a

massive granite rock which appears like a huge Crocodile lying flat, east-west. The Lomas Rishi Cave is the earliest surviving piece of the "Chaitra arch" style that was to be an important feature of Indian rock-cut architecture and sculptural decoration for centuries.

Yet Barabar Caves have hardly received appropriate Tourism-centric mention in most Government or non-Government descriptions to convey to the outside world the immense potential they possess-- as one-more-destination around the already established places like Bodh Gaya, Rajgir, Vaishali, Nalanda, etc. Now the Gaya Forest division comes to the rescue of this iconic landscape by promoting it into the 'Cave tourism' with the participation of the Eco-development committee and local forest fringe villagers.

Here's how it is planned to be restored:

1. Lake Restoration, Beautification of Lake side and Starting Boating activities



Based on the advice of hydro-geological experts, leakage/seepage at the

dam-side is to be plugged with appropriate hydro-engineering mechanism. Masonry-structure to be rebuilt or repaired or re-created where so needed to ensure future safety of the dam. There is a need to remove invasive vegetation all around the Lake (*Prosopis juliflora*, and other wild species are of negative value.

There are plans for redesigning boats to avoid paddle boats as used earlier. Boats to be pushed by a boat-man with help of a long bamboo to offer new job opportunities to local villagers and provide guided company to visitors; the boat-men to serve as guide as well. They will wear a set green uniform bearing the logo of Barabar Ecotourism over their chest and use a green cap which also should bear the same logo.

2. Islands amidst Lakes



Common Teals in Barabar Lake

Some earthen mounds are to be created within beds of the Lakes on which indigenous species of trees are planted. It will facilitate resident bird species to nest on those tree branches. Being amidst water, the birds will feel safe from mammals as predators and

will be better placed to dive in water to catch fish for their own feed and to feed chicks. Such islands are in vogue at the Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur, a UNESCO Heritage site and a Ramsar Site. Cattle Egret, Grey Heron, Indian Cormorant, White-throated Kingfisher, Greater Coucal, Coppersmith Barbet, Eurasian Collared Dove, Spotted Dove, Laughing Dove, Jungle Babbler, Red-vented Bulbul, Indian Roller, Rose-ringed Parakeet, Brown-headed Barbet, Red-wattled lapwing, Common Hawk Cuckoo (Papeeha) are some of the bird species spotted there.

3. Cave Tourism

A new brand name of "Barabar cave tourism" would be promoted. A new website, multi-coloured maps, wayboards are added to make it more accessible and attractive to national and international tourists. Special efforts would be taken to include aspects about Cave Tourism in other buddhist tourism sites in different languages for visitors thronging at Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Nalanda etc. Local Buddhist Spiritual leaders would be involved to include Cave Tourism as a new addition to their daily practised vocabulary for respective clients, domestic and overseas; it shall appeal to them as Buddhism is their core value.

4. Empowering EDC committees



Shri Abhishek Kumar IFS, DFO Gaya addressing the EDC members on '2 days ecotourism training workshop' organised in association with PRERNA NGO and USAID

'Eco-tourism' training program for the Eco Development Committee members and locals of Barabar hill area was conducted with the help of PRERNA NGO. Awareness was given to local women particularly from "Jeevika Groups" about moringa value addition, wild achar value addition, cultivation and value addition of safai grass for their sustainable livelihood. Meeting with Shiv Shakti Jeevika Samuh was organized at Chanandih village located near Barabar. Discussions were held on Moringa Value chain strengthening, their role and responsibility in promoting it and potential benefits to them. These products developed by the forest fringe villagers will be marketed through cafeterias, eateries established around the ecotourism areas.

5. Study of flora-fauna



Ramsundar IFS, Probationer, Gaya with Floral expert Dr. Harshavardhan accessing the floral biodiversity in the area.

A study of floral and faunal characteristics of the Barabar Hills and adjoining areas would be done so as to quantify its ecology and try to assess ecological services being rendered through these to the village population. No details are available to this effect so far. Experts are invited to identify the aquatic plants, other flora and faunal biodiversity at the lakes and barabar hills area. There are plans to create a booklet of flora and fauna for the public and to organise 'Nature camps' for school children.

As per *State of the World's Forests 2020* report, "Of the people living in extreme poverty, over 90 percent are dependent on forests for at least part of their livelihoods." The report further elaborated that non-consumptive uses of forest biodiversity, such as recreation and tourism, are also a growing part of rural cash economies. Each year an estimated 8 billion visits are made to protected areas, many of which are forest covered.

Barabar is a Protected Forest area administered by the Department of Forest, Government of Bihar. Its flora, fauna, medicinal vegetation, endemism can be well documented and can enable use of natural resources sustainably by local communities. Through various activities of ecotourism livelihood of locals and forest fringe villagers can also be improved in the long run thereby their dependence on forest and exploitation of it can be brought down. All this will create a brand of **#BarabarCaveTourism** and eco-cultural tourism would be promoted



EDC members appreciating the bird biodiversity in the area through binoculars as a part of Ecotourism training

COMPENSATION AS A POLICY TOOL FOR MITIGATING HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICT (HWC)

Anurag Tiwari, Katni Forest Division, Madhya Pradesh

Human-wildlife conflict (HWC) around Protected Areas (PAs) has magnified social conflict over conservation and development priorities. The conflict is particularly acute in India, given that at least 65% of the country's PAs contain human settlements or are located adjacent to them. HWC takes many forms including crop or property damage, livestock predation, and animal attacks on people. Numerous studies have shown that when residents of nearby areas are forced to absorb the costs of living with wildlife, local support for conservation may be seriously undermined. One way to engender local support for conservation objectives has been to directly compensate members of communities for economic losses caused by protected wildlife.

Compensation schemes, when implemented in a timely, transparent and equitable manner, can go a long way in developing positive people-forest relationships. However, several obstacles prevent the successful implementation of compensation programmes including lack of awareness of such schemes, problems related to the evaluation of the claims of damage, determination of fair value of losses, delays in payment of claims, issues of fraud and corruption and maintenance of adequate sources of funding.

It was observed that despite having a well-established compensation policy in Madhya Pradesh, there is a significant delay in the disbursement of the claims into beneficiary accounts, which led to frequent complaints being lodged on the CM's helpline. The delays happened in spite of such claims being covered under M.P. Public Service Guarantee Act 2010, which mandates such claims to be disbursed within 30 days.

The primary objective of the field project was to identify the bottleneck stage in the compensation filing, approval and disbursement process by retrospective file tracking and data analysis. It also intended to help standardize certain processes such as verification by veterinary doctor and fixing the amount of final claim passed as well as seek practical solutions to tackle the issue of delay in compensation disbursement.

The survey area chosen for the study comprised of villages in Badwara range in Katni forest division, which were a part of the buffer zone of the Bandhavgarh National Park. During the study, I looked into the field level data of the incidents of human injuries and livestock depredation by protected animals (particularly tigers and leopards) as well the compensation claims in each of such incidents, to understand the limitations and potential of existing measures. I also conducted

questionnaire interviews with members of around 25 households to discuss their experiences with economic compensation of livestock and human losses

It was observed that while the response of the department at the range level was very prompt, most of the delay happened in the submission of a technical report by a veterinary doctor. Additionally, it was seen that there is absence of a systemic mechanism to ensure communication between division and range office. Thus, the beat guard, who is the first point of contact with the petitioner, is often unaware in what stage the application is and thus cannot communicate the status to the petitioner. Sometimes, even when the money is credited into the bank account of the petitioner, he doesn't check his bank account and thus doesn't know about it. Also, it was observed that since the financing of the scheme is done under the 'global budget' without any division wise distribution, there is variation across divisions in processing of the claims and less proactive divisions face fund crunch towards the end of the financial year. Additionally, the study also found lack of awareness amongst the public about the compensation scheme (not all livestock loss cases are reported), its applicability (several applications demanding compensation for injuries due to reptiles which is in fact dealt by revenue department) etc.

Based on the key observations, it was proposed that:

1. There is a need to create an institutional mechanism for better information flow from division offices to the field level staff, which in most of the cases, is the first responder as well as the person deemed to be accountable by the public in general. A simple in-house mobile application can help achieve the same.
2. A clarification on the policy must be issued whether an explicit attestation of a veterinary doctor is required or not.
3. Proactive awareness campaigns must be carried out and incentives to field level forest officials for helping cattle owners through the process should be given.
4. Since the total amount paid in compensation for injured cattle is found to be particularly less, field level staff must be made aware that such cases are to be dealt liberally and at least 50% of the amount (paid in case of livestock depredation) be paid.
5. Each division must create an estimate of monthly and yearly requirements of funds for compensatory payments based on running averages of previous years.
6. Public must be suitably informed that venomous species (snakes, monitor lizards etc) are excluded

from the purview of the scheme and the revenue department deals with compensation cases in case of injury by such animals.

7. Viability & efficacy of ex-post compensation schemes should be compared, be it assistance schemes such as advance payments in the form of grants or loans for technical support and materials.

ACCEPTANCE OF PROPOSAL

कार्यालय प्रधान मुख्य वन संरक्षक (वन्यप्राणी), मध्य प्रदेश
प्रगति भवन, भोपाल विकास प्राधिकरण, पृथ्वी तल, पृथ्वी नगर, भोपाल
दूरभाष - 0755-2674318, 2674332, फ़ैक्स - 0755-2766316
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क्रमांक/तक-2/202/3233. भोपाल, दिनांक 09/04/2021

प्रति,
1. समस्त क्षेत्र संभालक, लाहौर रिजर्व, मध्यप्रदेश।
2. समस्त संभालक राष्ट्रीय उद्यान, मध्यप्रदेश।
3. वनमंडलाधिकारी (वन्यप्राणी) वनमंडल, कृत्वा पालपुर/नीरदेही, सागर।

विषय :- जनहानि, जनघायल, पशुहानि, पशु घायल प्रकरणों में क्षतिपूर्ति।

प्रतिशु भारतीय वन सेवा अधिकारी श्री अनुराग तिवारी द्वारा कटनी वनमंडल के अंतर्गत दर्ज वन्यप्राणियों द्वारा की गई जनहानि, जनघायल, पशु हानि, पशुघायल प्रकरणों का अध्ययन प्रतियेदन प्रस्तुत किया है। वन्यप्राणियों से जनहानि, जनघायल, पशुहानि के प्रकरणों के निरकरण एवं क्षतिपूर्ति राशि के भुगतान हेतु श्री तिवारी के द्वारा दिये गये सुझावों के आधार पर निम्नानुसार निर्देश दिये जाते हैं:-

- संरक्षित क्षेत्र एवं क्षेत्रीय वनों के आसपास स्थित ग्रामों में वन्यप्राणियों से जनहानि, जनघायल, पशुहानि, पशुघायल के प्रकरणों में वन विभाग द्वारा क्षतिपूर्ति राशि विधे जाने के नियमों, प्रावधानों हेतु जागरूकता अभियान चलते हुए ग्रामीणों को क्षतिपूर्ति के समस्त प्रावधानों यथा-प्रक्रिया, पशुहानि, पशुघायल (बैल गैर, गाय, बकरी, ऊट आदि) के प्रकरणों में राजस्व पुस्तक परिपत्र में निर्धारित क्षतिपूर्ति की दर, दावों के निपटान की सम्य-सौमा आदि से अवगत कराया जाना सुनिश्चित किया जाए।
- अध्ययन के दौरान एवं कतिपय अन्य अवसरों पर भी यह संज्ञान में आया है कि कई अवसरों पर पशु हानि होने उपरान्त भी जानकारी के अभाव में पशु मालिकों द्वारा आवेदन नहीं किया जाता है। अतः ग्रामीणों को प्रेरित करते हुए शत-प्रतिशत पशुहानि प्रकरणों में आवेदन प्राप्त करना सुनिश्चित किया जाए। साथ ही यह भी सुनिश्चित किया जाए कि यदि किसी भी वनकर्मचारी के संज्ञान में पशुहानि की घटना आए तो वह पशु मालिक को आवेदन हेतु प्रेरित करे एवं आवेदन की प्रक्रिया पूर्ण करने में सहयोग दे।
- अध्ययन में यह भी संज्ञान में आया कि पशुघायल के प्रकरणों में क्षतिपूर्ति के संबंध में वनकर्मियों को भी कम जानकारी है। समस्त को अवगत कराए कि पशु घायल प्रकरणों हेतु राजस्व पुस्तक परिपत्र में पशुहानि हेतु निर्धारित दर का 50 प्रतिशत भुगतान किये जाने का प्रावधान है।
- जनहानि, जनघायल, पशुहानि/घायल प्रकरण लोकसेवा गारंटी अभिनियम के अंतर्गत शामिल है एवं वन्यप्राणियों से जनहानि, जनघायल, पशुहानि, पशुघायल के प्रकरणों में निर्धारित सम्य सौमा क्रमशः 03, 07 एवं 30 कार्य दिवस निर्धारित है। उक्त सम्य-सौमा के

संबंध में सभी वनकर्मियों को अवगत कराते हुए प्रकरणों का निपटान सम्य-सौमा पर पूर्ण किया जाना सुनिश्चित किया जाए।

5. सामान्यतः जनहानि, पशुहानि, आदि प्रकरणों हेतु बजट पर्याप्त उपलब्ध होता है। किन्तु बजट उपलब्ध न होने की स्थिति में तत्काल वरिष्ठ कार्यालय को सूचित करते हुए बजट आवेदन प्राप्त किया जाना सुनिश्चित किया जाए। उचित होगा कि आपके क्षेत्र में धिगत वर्षों में हुए प्रकरणों के औसत के आधार पर मासिक एवं वार्षिक आवश्यक्तताओं का आकलन करतै हुए यदि आवेदन कम प्रतीत होता हो तो तदनुसार वरिष्ठ को लेख करतै हुए आवेदन प्राप्त करने की कार्यवाही सुनिश्चित की जाए।

6. यदि किसी अवसर में वनकर्मों के संज्ञान में जहरीले साधों के काटने से जनहानि की घटनाएं आती हैं तो मृतक के परिवार को अवगत कराए कि ऐसे प्रकरणों में राजस्व विभाग द्वारा क्षतिपूर्ति राशि दिये जाने का प्रावधान है। राजस्व विभाग के सम्य आवेदन करने में मृतक के परिवार को मदद करना मानवीयता की दृष्टि से एवं ग्रामीणों के साथ बेहतर समन्वय की दृष्टि से भी समस्त वनकर्मियों से अपेक्षित है।

(आलोक कुमार)
मुख्य वन्यप्राणी अनिरक्षक एवं
प्रधान मुख्य वन संरक्षक, (वन्यप्राणी), म.प्र.

भोपाल, दिनांक 09/04/2021

पृ.क्रमांक/तक-2/202/3233

प्रतिशु :- अपर प्रधान मुख्य वन संरक्षक (सतकला एवं शिकायात), सतपुड़ा भवन, भोपाल की ओर सूचनार्थ प्रेषित।

मुख्य वन्यप्राणी अनिरक्षक एवं
प्रधान मुख्य वन संरक्षक, (वन्यप्राणी), म.प्र.

37. दिव्य

वेक्टर
14/4/21

It was heartening to note that these proposed suggestions were taken up by the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department post the OJT period through an order from the office of the PCCF dated 09/04/2021. The implementation of these proposed suggestions in the compensation scheme would hopefully galvanize greater public support in MP for conservation and provide immediate relief for local communities that need it.

FROM THE NORTH-EASTERN MOST PROBATIONER OF THE BATCH

KASTURI SULE, DIGBOI FOREST DIVISION, ASSAM



The story began in Dec 2018 when I first visited the Dehing Patkai National Park (then WLS) and the Namdapha National Park as a wildlife enthusiast and was overwhelmed by the beauty of the place. I was selected in the IFS but was not allocated my cadre. But the urge to work for the place was triggered at that very moment. I was allocated the Assam-Meghalaya cadre and I thought it was probably the blessing of this very place that was taking me there.

Little did I know, that my connection with this place was going to be deeper than being allocated to the Assam Cadre.

September 2020. When the OJTs were announced for our batch at a very short notice, I was initially taken aback to find my first place of posting as "Incharge of the Range Forest Office, Lekhapani , Digboi Division" . But soon I realised that the willpower to work for Dehing Patkai

National Park sparked back in 2018 had somewhere acted to shape my destiny.

Understanding the rainforest-wali life..



T.C Ranjith Ram (IFS, 2015), the DFO was my mentor for the three months of training in Digboi. Sir being a complete field person, since day one he urged me to explore the forests and to be on field as much as possible.

I must admit that my very first week of Divisional attachment in Digboi would not be forgotten ever in my life. Destiny has its cards laid well, to my fortune the work of upgrading the Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary to the status of National Park was in full swing. One day, we set out to collect certain GPS points for the boundary demarcation purpose and it was my first experience of walking inside such a thick rainforest. It initially started with sticky mud. As we penetrated deeper, the road almost vanished. Our forest guards cut the undergrowths and lianas to make way for us as we were creating the required GPS track. The mud was wetter and softer and now my feet sunk calf deep into the mud. Even 100m of walk took us 10-12 mins through it. I was totally confused. Completely new to this type of an experience, but being the one heading the team (at least hierarchically) I could not even show my fear. As I garnered the courage and prepared myself that "yes this is doable", the murky road turned into a stream. It was a temporary relief to walk in the shallow water, but soon the water got deeper with a lot of aquatic growth. The water eventually became waist deep and we continued to push ourselves through it for more than three continuous hours. The forest around was virgin, pristine and full of tall trees of Hollong, Hollock, Nahar and others. I could hear a lot of birds and numerous butterflies flying around. In that paradise, I felt like a soul scared to the core, pulling out leeches while walking in water in vain and assuring myself that leeches were better than snakes or other reptiles or encountering elephants in the middle of that river. I was totally out of my comfort zone but the experienced

staff with me were my only relief and I had full faith that they would take me home safely. After we came back to the town, I never believed what I had done in the past few hours. Not in my wildest of dreams had I ever imagined myself doing it or believed that I could ever do it. But I had, and it was like self discovery and built self confidence in me like never before.

The background work of creating the National Park came with a lot of technical and non-technical learning. It was a whole package from fieldwork to paper work and technology use like the GIS and maps. I was satisfied that I could give my little miniscule share in making Dehing Patkai a national park which will ensure its better protection.

It took me quite a week to get familiar with the rainforests and its way of life. More than its beauty and serenity, I was humbled by the challenges involved in managing such a diverse and dense forest. I remember carrying out a tree enumeration exercise in one of the ranges. The theory was well stated - lay plots and measure the tree DBH, etc. But this in a rainforest? Clearing the growth for laying the plot itself was a huge challenge. Measuring tree diameters meant that the staff had to somehow climb over the buttresses or clear a lot of undergrowth. It really made me proud of the staff and increased my respect for them.

The Curious Case of Lekhapani

While in IGNFA, after getting the name of my posting the first thing, like every other batchmate, I opened Google and typed "Lekhapani, Assam". Google sprang into action and promptly displayed "Landmines recovered from Lekhapani bridge" , "Timber mafias active in destroying the reserve forests of Lekhapani" , "Illegal coal mining in Lekhapani sees NGO protests". ... I kept a brave face and convinced myself that I was going to be in one of the richly forested divisions of Assam with such wide exposure to forest protection challenges, so I would get to learn a lot.

After reaching Lekhapani and taking up charge, I slowly started to explore the area, learn the files, talk to the staff and understand how things were done. Day after day, I started to realise that the challenges of this place were real and genuinely very deep.

Lekhapani was the only range in Assam having a big history of coal extraction. It was the last leg of the Eastern Railway and the beginning of the Still Well Road (Ledo Road) constructed by the British from India to Myanmar during the world wars. Coal extraction was still going on with the town of "Marghareita - the Coal Queen of India" being a part of my range. The open mines of Tikok, Tirap, the court cases around them, the FCA issues around them gave me a good exposure about the subject. The notorious rat hole mining was also observed and prohibiting that was a huge challenge for the range staff.



Rat Hole Mining

The steep hills of Lekhapani were composed of rich rainforests dominated by the Hollong (*Dipterocarpus macrocarpus*) , hollock, Nahar (*Mesua ferea*), Mekai (*Shorea assamica*) with several other rare and endemic species of trees, shrubs, climbers and herbs. They had numerous orchids and fern including the tree fern which was a good indicator of healthy rainforests. The variety of grasses such as bamboo, cane etc were also there. Daily patrolling of 8-10 km in these steep hills and pristine forests started to make me fall in love with the place. But not just as a nature lover, the feeling of responsibility and urge to protect them grew stronger.

Patrolling here was tough, given the steep hills, dense forests and faint paths. But the place was also infamous for incidences of illicit felling so patrolling was a must. Developing an intelligence network, chasing and nabbing illegal transporters, offence booking and paperwork were all new to me and gave a lot of insights about the nitty gritty involved in the processes.

The Lekhapani range had border disputes with the neighbouring state of Arunachal Pradesh. Interstate disputes took their own toll on forest management. The question of jurisdiction, issues with giving clearances for diversions, creation of public assets inside forests are all at stake. Here in Lekhapani it was alleged that Arunachal Pradesh had encroached into the reserve forests of Assam. Now without any joint state survey it was very difficult to identify the borders inside forests and this situation was conveniently exploited by the timber and coal mafias to trick the administrations on either side of the borders.

The other challenge as I mentioned above was that of extremism. On meeting seniors and DFO Sir, everyone warned me, " Don't follow any routine, don't disclose your patrolling or tour intentions to anyone, never wear clothes similar to that of the army, avoid going out in the night, don't go to the market also without your battalion". My staff would often be hesitant in going to remote forests, villages or going to forests in the night due to the fear of extremists. The place had incidents like kidnapping of government servants, corporates or army personnel , extortion of money and even

murders. I was asked to be extremely careful while on field and even at home or at public places. Though my staff and battalion was always supportive and alert, it was a strange experience for me. The kid grown up on the liberal and free streets of Mumbai, where the possibilities to act as per will were just as numerous as the lights glittering in the sea waters at Marine Drive, where nights were just another time of the day... for her from such a secure setup to a place where not even one minute she could lose her guard was a tough transition. Going out for night patrols and checking, I would often put up masks and hoods to hide my identity. This reinstated into me the need and importance of freedom, security, liberty and how basic they are to the well being of a human mind.

Moments that will be etched in my memory forever ..

The four months had a lot of ups and downs. Dozens of new learnings, unlearning of old conceptions, new realisations, broader horizons and tons of experiences that enriched me. However, some of the memories will remain with me throughout my life.

It was only a week or more after assuming charge. While sitting in office I noticed a few women peeping through the window. Initially I didn't pay much attention but after a while, asked my staff to call them inside. "Do you want to talk to me? Any query or complaint ?" I asked them. "Baideo (Assamese word for elder sister) we heard that a young girl was sitting in this chair. So we had come to see if that was actually true. We have

never seen a girl sit on this chair or hold a post like this. We feel so proud of you.” They said this, took a picture with me and left. I was so touched by this gesture and realised that in this remote corner of the country, it was still considered huge for a young girl to occupy the seat of a Range Forest Officer. It also dawned upon me that my role here was not going to be limited to that of a Range officer, but also to motivate and lead a lot of young aspiring girls by making them dream and help them achieve it. I was the only woman in the entire Digboi division at the time.



The other memory very close to my heart was that of Honjuwada. Honjuwada is a small village situated at the top of a hill inside the Tirap PRF. IT was along the Tirap river and close to the border of Arunachal Pradesh. I was often told by my staff that the village was very hostile with a lot of connections with the extremists. It was alleged that the villagers were involved in extensive jhum cultivation, illicit felling, illegal coal mining and had turned so hostile that they had stopped participating in state elections from the past 10 odd years. When I proposed to visit the place, my staff promptly resisted. “Mam, we are not allowed to go there. They will hurt us. They are very hostile people”, they would keep saying. Once we encountered a few bikes coming from the

hill road, so I enquired about them. The boys were pretty reluctant to talk but only said that they were coming from Honjuwada. After a few days , again we came across a few women coming down the road. Again I tried to strike a conversation but even they were not very friendly. This time I tried taking a step ahead by saying “Please approach me if you have any issues without fear”. Just two days later a man came to my office and claimed to be the village headman of Honjuwada. I was stunned to hear that but I did not show my surprise. He asked for some petty permissions from the Forest department. I asked him that if people of Honju don’t let the staff enter the village , why should the department help the villagers? He immediately said “Mam nobody will stop you from going to the village. I will take you there myself”. I was taken aback but disposed of thinking he might just be blabbering. Two days later he came again and said “Mam, the whole village is waiting for you , when will you come to our village?”. Now I thought this was serious. I discussed with DFO Sir who was supportive of the idea but worried at the same time. Would it be safe for a young IFS trainee to go to the allegedly notorious village? Should the police or army be taken with me? We had many discussions but finally we agreed to trust the villagers and go without the company of police or army. We called for an additional battalion from other ranges and a team of 28-30 of us started for the village. It was a terrific climb of around 7-8km through the beautiful forests. As we reached the village I was stunned to see chairs arranged for us. We were welcomed with utmost warmth. The women presented me a handmade

traditional dress. We had a village meeting and we discussed a lot of issues with them. All the people were courteous and warm. They served us sumptuous ethnic food which was simply beyond our expectation. I befriended a few girls who showed me around the village. My staff played volleyball with the village boys. It was such a pleasant surprise. After returning, my staff was literally in tears. They couldn't believe how the village which had once shunned the forest department staff from entering the village had so respectfully treated them. I was so satisfied that inclusion, participation, confidence building - these words are often taught to us in training, being able to break the deadlock and building trust with villagers on ground was such a different task. Kind words, empathy and a smiling face were surely the key ingredients. It was also learnt that almost 5 months after this incidence when the Assam state elections took place in April 2021, the village took part in the elections after almost 10 years. I didn't realise then that small gestures and extending a hand of friendship could create such a huge impact.



With the villagers at Honjuwada

Rainforester signing off...

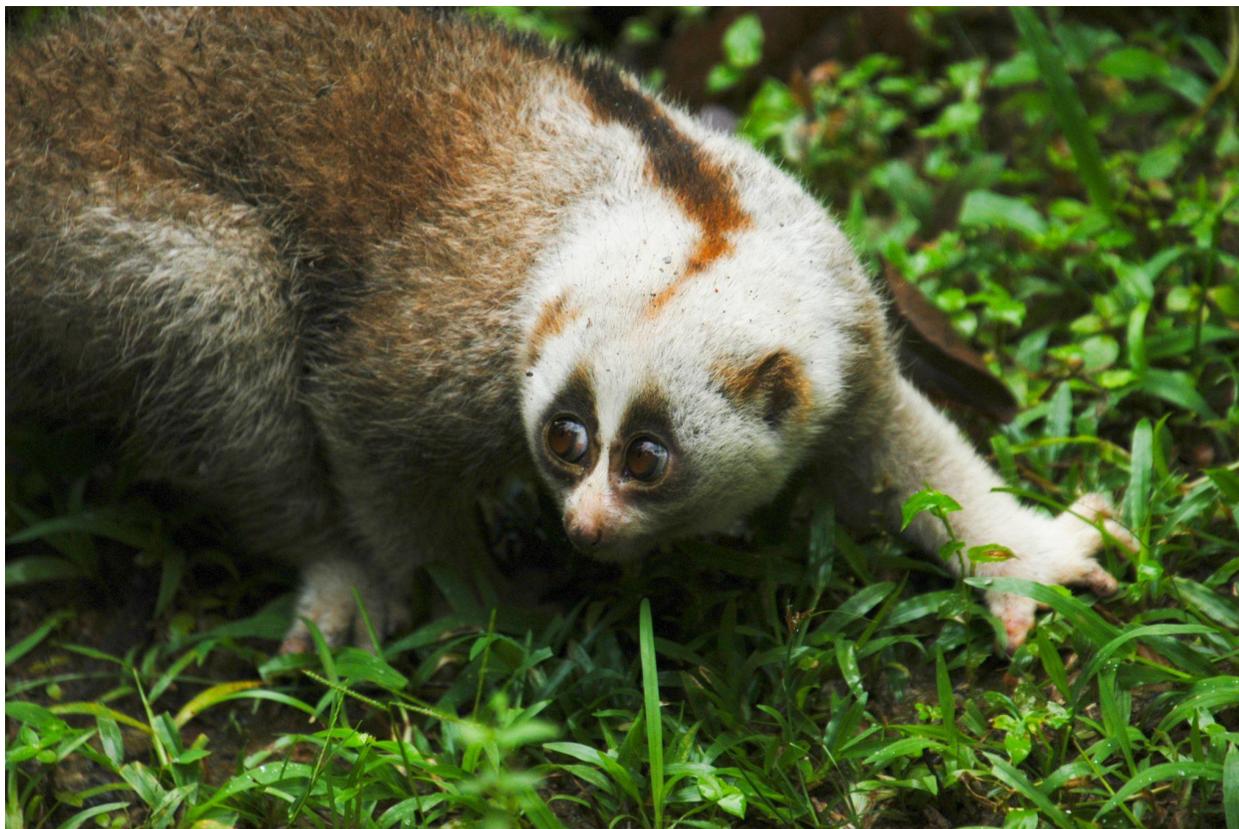
When, after returning to the academy Senthil Sir asked me "Kasturi, are you still the same person after these 4 months?" ... I promptly replied "No. I am a changed person". Indeed, these four months taught me so much that it has changed a lot of my perspectives towards life and values. More than forestry and work, it gave me an opportunity to look at life afresh. To understand the details of where the work in society should be focused upon and how it should be directed. Some parts of the country needed very basic constructive work from the side of administration -like trust building, freedom, education and rights. All the big talks and numbers melt down before these basic needs and motivates me to push myself into realising the root and crux of social needs. These four months have also made me realise the value of my family, friends, teachers and well wishers anew. The lush green impenetrable rainforests have also rekindled my love and immense respect for the forests. And after a roller coaster ride of four months, finally I signed off ..
#rainforester #willrememberforever

THE RAINFORESTS OF ASSAM

KASTURI SULE



THE WILD EAST





LITERARY CLUB TEAM

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