

# BLink

A BUTTERFLY BREEZE FROM MP

## Illusion and reality

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Some glad tidings: At Panna, the introduced tiger population has grown to over 20 in five years. - Photo: R.Sreenivasa Murthy

It's a time for reflection and projection, to take stock of the good and the bad in the fields of travel and environment

It is the end of the year — a time for reflection and projection. We, on the other hand, are midway through our season: this runs from the end of the monsoon to the beginning of summer. But it is also an appropriate time for such deliberations. Since the year end is traditionally a time of good cheer, it would be nice to record the positive thoughts and happenings in 2014. But I have to admit I struggle to find cheerful topics in the field of travel or environment.

Tourism in India has dropped over the last two years. ASI records are a good indication, and the major ASI monuments showed a large percentage drop in visitors last year, and this year, even more. The number of people visiting monuments in Delhi is down by 30 per cent, and even the Taj Mahal has registered a 20 per cent drop. Informally, Khajuraho tour operators and hotels talk of up to a 50 per cent drop. Unfortunately, the media prefer bad news to good, so worldwide news of India is particularly negative at present. Security for women has been an issue in the international press for over a year. This seemed a major concern for potential travellers, according to the European agents we met last summer. Of course, the amount of detail required and the cost of visas are also an oft-cited complaint; and the PM's publicity-seeking blitz for toilets and against drugs do not help. Who wants to pay so much to come to a country of drug-addicted, open-defecating rapists?

The facts, however, tell a somewhat different story. America and many of the European and Scandinavian countries have much worse rape statistics than India, both in occurrence and conviction rates. As a Brit, I was horrified to learn that on average approximately 85,000 women in the UK are raped every year. This is over 230 every day (one every six minutes), and conviction rates appear to be only one per cent. It is said that in India one woman is raped every 20 minutes — even allowing for the large number that go unreported, this is well below the UK figure and the conviction rate, although

dropping, is presently 24 per cent. Sweden, France, Germany, Canada and the US also join India as the top 10 worst countries in this regard. I am not implying that we should be complacent here — not at all. This is rather to show up the irrational reaction of those from these countries rejecting India as a holiday destination on such grounds. It is all in the image.

We are in an age of facades, a PR century — where image supersedes facts, chimeras prevail over reality. Few care to look beyond — this is as true in the field of environment as it is of travel. Our PM uses fine words at the climate talks in Lima, Peru, but along with the other countries fails to come to any meaningful agreement. Meanwhile, back home his government continues along its path of weakening the wildlife, forest and environmental legal safeguards — as if development is possible without ecological security. They push ahead with crazy ecosystem-ruining schemes like the river-linking project (IRL), hiding behind claims of proper impact assessments and project appraisals. Where available, these are continuously shown to be shoddy documents with manipulated figures. But do we care? Mention development, jobs, prosperity in the same breath as river-linking, people will connect the two and clamour for it. Politicians looking for votes will support the “demand” — few will look beyond the smoke and mirrors and see the disaster lurking beyond. The illusions turn into reality. Our interests become more and more short-term.

One positive I might have written about is the small increase in the number of tigers in the country. Our neighbouring Panna Tiger Reserve has bounced back after losing all its natural population; over the last five years the introduced population has grown to over 20 animals. However, all this time, cost and effort is about to be drowned by the Ken-Betwa river link project, slated to be the first under IRL. Small enough already, the planned dam will flood 100sqkm of the National Park and cut off another 100sqkm of forest — a deathknell for the tigers, as the remaining area will not be large enough to support a viable population. Yet the Water Resources Minister claims there will be “no loss to the environment due to these projects”. I wonder to which or what environment she is referring to? Or do politicians start believing their own rhetoric as well?

But there are, happily, little joys that do give inspiration and hope for better times. They come from individuals and communities, and I believe that the worse everything gets, the more they will spring up. One of my favourites is the story of Jadab Payeng, who has single-handedly been planting a forest to reduce erosion on Majuli island in the Brahmaputra since the '70s. Then there are the tea estates documented in a recent Greenpeace report that provide organically grown tea and prove that we do not need to drink contaminated beverages, and the induction of the fearless Durga Shakti women rangers into the Special Tiger Protection Force at Pench and Tadoba. There are many more. These are people with vision, who swim against the tide to improve our world.

My New Year wish? That one day, soon, they will outnumber both those who create the false illusions and those who believe them.

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