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CULTURE & SOCIETY

Sariska: Version II

Panna's was one of the best recoveries of a tiger population ever documented and it proves the resilience of the species, given some peace and protection

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IN 1994, THE PANNA NATIONAL PARK was designated a Tiger Reserve. Close to Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh (MP), this beautiful, dry forest area of 540 square kilometre was home to a variety of the central Indian dryland species but also hosted a diverse collection of biotic disturbances, from diamond mining to cattle camps and summer forest fires. Had the park not been declared a tiger reserve, it probably would have suffered the kind of decline that is the fate so many of our protected areas today. Instead, Panna entered a golden phase; a new Park Director was posted to the area who was dedicated, caring and effective.

PK Chaudhury set about making the park an "inviolate" area: inviolate does not necessarily mean a no-go area, as sometimes interpreted, but rather an area that is treated with respect, not destroyed nor harmed and where rules are not disregarded. At that time there were 15 villages within the Reserve boundaries and wildlife protection had to work alongside this reality. Chaudhury succeeded in this endeavour, forest fires were greatly reduced, protection was improved and the herbivores began to increase, giving the predators another chance.

At the end of 1995, conservation biologist Raghu Chundawat began a study on the ecology of the tiger in Panna. This was the first tiger study to be conducted in a dry forest habitat and was particularly significant as this kind of forest is the largest habitat for tigers in India and also the one where they are most vulnerable. To design an effective conservation strategy for such areas, it is first essential to understand why the tiger there is so susceptible to extinction. At the time, many believed that it was on its way out in Panna. Indeed it was rare to see a pug mark and even rarer to see a tiger. The density was as low as one or two tigers per 100 square kilometre.

But within five to six years, tiger density rose to 6-7 tigers/100 sq km; it was one of the best recoveries of a tiger population ever documented and it proves the resilience of the species, given a little peace and protection. There was almost 100 percent cub survival rate during this period. The park became a shining example of what was possible with good management and dedicated research.

The good times were short-lived. In 2001, the Reserve's management passed to new hands. The hard work and wonderful results were undone almost overnight. Poaching of prey species and of the tiger became common; snares could be found on many paths within core areas of the park and an unprecedented number of wild boar, sambhar and nilgai were spotted with wire nooses around their necks.

The park's management paid little heed to warnings. Evidence of the impending disaster were presented to every level of the Forest Department and Project Tiger hierarchy. Sometimes there was shock and concern, but nothing translated into remedial action. The violations were presented before the Supreme Court's Central Empowered Committee (CEC); in 2004 and 2005 the CEC made site visits and submitted strong reports to the MP government. Their conclusion at that time: "Panna is showing signs of Sariska. This note is like an early warning signal."

Was the signal heeded? Sadly not! In spite of intense media coverage, cases in the Supreme Court, the detailed research, in spite of scientific and photographic evidence, Project Tiger (now the National Tiger Conservation Authority) and the MP Forest Department continued — and unbelievably still continue — to contend that there are still 20-30 tigers in the Panna. The sad fact is that there may be no tigers left — or effectively none. There has been no evidence of any tigresses in the best areas of the park since last winter. Evidence of any tiger has been getting more and more infrequent. No cubs have survived to adulthood since 2002. Panna is on the verge of becoming the next Sariska.

YET ANOTHER system failure! How many such disasters will it take before the authorities learn? Clearly our system of wildlife management and protection is failing. If it can't or won't accept and see the writing on the wall, it has outlived its utility and we need a new service. What we need is a professional and responsive wildlife service to stem the desperate downward slide our wildlife and natural areas are facing to the detriment of us all.

Our present wildlife protection system operates with 19th century values and resists change. Condemning the system is not to criticise many of the members within it; there are many unsung heroes and key individuals who have done incredible work and to whom we owe so much; the system itself can be credited with the fact that we still do — just — have forest areas still relatively intact. But times change; now we need open and accountable professionals who work with and not fight other stakeholders and concerned experts. With the changes that the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act, 2006 is bringing, this must be the moment to launch a wildlife administration appropriate for the 21st century.

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