



# The Misadventures of a Forester

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## Foreword

The “*Misadventures of a Forester*” written by Shri Animesh Goverdhan, State Forest Service Officer Trainee (SFS) of 2020-2022 batch from Chhattisgarh is based on his initial posting in his state for 1 ½ years and experiences shared by his subordinates. Hailing from a family of Forest officer he had a privilege of visiting the pristine forest areas of Chhattisgarh and had plenty of experience with wilderness. His elucidation of sharing his experiences in the form of stories is very interesting to read and will create much interest to the readers to explore further. The literary skills are commendable and I wish him to document his experiences throughout his future career for the benefit of forestry community.

Best Wishes.



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## PREFACE

Forests are treasure house of stories. A bargad tree standing majestically tall in jungle has seen more seasons, endured harsh times and has been a witness to human settlements come and go. But it has stood tall. It has persevered perhaps more than any of us mere mortals. A sea of such trees constitutes forest. Forest is not just our heritage but a dynamic living organism who can speak, who can communicate to those who truly want to listen, to those who truly want to discover themselves, their inner soul....

I have just made an attempt to touch the tip of this iceberg by writing some of the intriguing, eerie, mysterious stories on forest in my state Chhattisgarh. There are so many other fascinating stories waiting to be told from unexplored, uncharted and unfathomed lands of Chhattisgarh. I shall try to touch upon them in my next endeavour.

I hope my readers enjoy the stories and get stirred to take a walk in the woods, to take a peaceful sojourn in the idyllic beauty of Chhattisgarh.



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## **Bhoramdeo- The hunt for Charger**

It was the most memorable day of my life. I was going to be awarded the prestigious Vruksh Mitra Award for exceptional service in forestry. The stage was set. All dignitaries and guests of honour had arrived. The Chief Guest, the Minister of Forest had taken his place on the podium. I was sitting in the front row with my parents by my side. My name was then called and before heading to receive the honour I touched their feet for blessings and then moved towards the dais. As the minister was just about to hand me the award, he said, "Wake up fool!" Suddenly I got up from my sleep from the high pitched ringtone of my phone. I realised I was just dreaming. With a heavy head I picked up the call.

"Get your lazy ass up. There's been an incident. Talk to Vatsal immediately. He will fill you in." That was my boss on the phone.

"Sir." That's all I said.

"And Animesh, don't botch this up." After this he hung up.

I looked at the watch. It was four in the morning. I then called Vatsal who was a guard posted at Bhoramdeo range.

"What happened?"

“Sir, you need to come here with haste. There has been a poaching incident.”

“A what?”

“A tiger has been hunted down. The criminals are on the run.”

I now understood the gravity of the situation.

I instructed Vatsal to come pick me up at my house as soon as possible and when he reached after twenty minutes, we both drove straight for village named Jamunpani. Vatsal had an informer named Bhoi who revealed that the poachers may be hiding there someplace.

We managed to reach Jamunpani by quarter to six in the morning. It was a small village.

I asked Vatsal to stop the bike and call his informant. Bhoi did answer and told that he would reach in fifteen minutes. We kept waiting. Every passing minute felt like a long hour.

Bhoi arrived, but only after ninety long minutes.

“Where have you been? We have been waiting for so long?” Vatsal questioned.

“Well, I got preoccupied some place.” Bhoi’s behaviour seemed rather odd. It was as if he was trying to ignore us and undermine our authority.

“Anyway, I came to tell you that there has been no hunting here. I was mistaken. Sorry to have wasted your time.” Bhoi continued after a pause.

“What do you mean?”

“Well I said it all, didn’t I? Should I repeat it in some other language?”

Before he could act in any more condescending manner, Vatsal hit him in the face. And just as he was about to land another blow I stopped him by grabbing his hand. I then reached my pocket and flashed a five hundred rupee note in front of Bhoi.

“Oh! You think my respect is so cheap.”

I then added another five hundred to it. He took it from my hands and smiled.

“I heard rumours that a Pardhi family is involved in this.” Bhoi whispered in my ears.

“And where do they live?”

“In the outskirts of this village.”

Pardhis are notorious for hunting down apex predators. It’s their kind of twisted game, a tradition that has been going on since generations. Some of them are even engaged in wildlife trafficking and smuggling. But now

hunting has been completely outlawed. And to kill a Schedule I wild animal like tiger is a grave offence punishable under Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

With my thousand rupees in his pocket Bhoi now seemed extremely enthusiastic. He told us that two villagers witnessed Banu and his brother commit crime in action. He guided us to their home. When we knocked on the door, a boy probably of fourteen years answered. Behind him stood two young ladies.

“We are from Forest Department. There are allegations of illicit hunting on Banu and his brother. Bring them out. We need to talk.” I addressed to one of the ladies.

“But they are not here. They have gone to the city.” She stammered a little as she spoke.

Somehow I could feel it in my gut that she was lying. Her eyes were telling a different story.

“Move aside! We need to search this house.” As I was about to enter Vatsal held my hand and whispered in my ears that we needed a warrant to conduct the search. I took my step back and turned to Bhoi.

“You are sure?”

“Yup! I bet on my thousand rupees.” Bhoi chuckled.

The fact remained that there was no time to do all the paperwork and execute everything exactly by the book. The perpetrators of the crime had in all probability already escaped. We were on the verge of losing this battle. This house was our last hope, our shore in the eye of the storm.

I burst inside the house and ordered Vatsal to search everywhere. We went through every room, every cupboard, every shelf, every nook and corner. But we found absolutely nothing. Vatsal had given up and pleaded me to let this go. But I still felt strongly in my bones that something was wrong. The house seemed to be way too perfect. It was as if they were expecting us. I realised that while we were searching, the other lady was just standing still in the kitchen. She didn't move one bit. Though we had already searched the place, I decided to give it one more try. I scavenged through every cabinet and every corner in kitchen. But nothing. Frustrated I banged my hand on the platform. The gas stove moved slightly due to vibration. I removed it with my hands and there lay a hidden case below. I broke it open. What I saw then shocked me. It made me sick in my stomach. And that vision still haunts me to this very day. It was a fresh tiger skin. But on top of that there were skins of cubs, extremely young ones four or five weeks old. The extent of horrors that man can commit is probably unimaginable. And here it lay right before my eyes.

“Arrest them all.” I shouted with all my strength.

The small boy started crying. His mother rushed to console him.

But Vatsal lay still.

“Are you deaf?”

And then he came running towards me.

“Sir, we can’t arrest these women without the presence of a woman officer or a lady guard. We document everything and come back later.”

Vatsal kept saying many things to me in hushed voice. But I couldn’t hear anything anymore. It was as if time had slowed down. The images of those cubs kept haunting me again and again. I realised we had lost. Even if we did document everything but without arresting those responsible for this horrific crime we wouldn’t have a strong case and the perpetrators would run scot free. I felt devastated. There was only one way left now.

Before anyone could realise anything the boy fell on the ground with a loud thud.

I had slapped him hard. The mother in a fraction of second burst into tears.

“Where are they?” I asked her but she lay silent tending to her child.

I picked the boy again and grabbed him by his hair.

“Look at me.”

But the mother kept crying.

“I said look at me.”

She then raised her eyes in all anger.

“I will book him as juvenile delinquent. I will link him to this crime. I will do all I can within my means to ensure it. I will ruin his life, his career in everything before it even begins unless you give me the men responsible.”

“I don’t know.” She kept sobbing.

“Your men deskinning small innocent cubs. I will bring down heaven and hell to make sure they pay for their crimes. You either give me what I want or I am taking your son with me to a lockup.”

“They are in the jungle. They are out there to hunt Badka. That’s all I know. Please let my son go.” She broke down.

Badka was the king of the forest and the pride of the land. A majestic, royal tiger, he was popularly referred to as Charger among upper echelons of forest bureaucracy for his ferocious, aggressive and savage nature. There were

stories singing praise in his name, a famous one being ‘the Gajnashak’ depicting how he had brought down an entire elephant with just one blow.

It was now a race against time for us. To search for Banu and his brother in an entire forest before they could hunt Charger was as difficult as finding a needle in a haystack. I was confused as to what our next move should be.

“Sir, we must not let anything happen to Badka.” Vatsal sounded worried when he approached me after documenting and collecting all the evidence from the house.

Then it struck my head that if we could track Charger then there was a strong chance that we might be able to apprehend Banu and his brother too who in all likelihood could be lurking there for their hunt.

Now, to track a tiger is a formidable challenge in itself. Fortunately, Vatsal had some experience in this. I asked him to coordinate with guards on watch towers to determine tiger’s last known location. A number of watch towers are built at strategic points in the jungle such as on top of a hill or in sensitive areas that are vulnerable to poaching or forest fire. We came to know that Charger was last seen near tower 9. He was spotted beside a water hole close to it. Now to track a tiger in the core area of jungle, a bike could be of no use for us on account of both difficult

terrain and the risks involved. We desperately needed something else for this task.

Enter Samaru- a mahavat, who had some expertise in training elephants. To track a ferocious tiger and hold him in place we needed trained mammoths, a group of at least four to surround him from four different directions. That way it could be ensured that he did not attack us for his breakfast. Samaru brought with him five elephants along with his aides. Then we began the long journey to track Charger.

It took us around an hour to reach the site where Badka was previously spotted. Vatsal now began analysing his pug marks and scat. We followed his lead from there for some time. At one point my elephant got restless. He even rose his trunk and gave a loud trumpet blast. It was a sign that the tiger was close. We waited for some time there but Badka could not be spotted. So we continued to move forward.

“It’s strange. The tracks are gone.” Vatsal stopped and looked back towards me.

“What do you mean?”

As we were conversing, my elephant made a dash, I lost balance and fell down. The next thing I heard was the deafening roar of the tiger. The earth trembled as he

leaped forth from the bushes and banged his Herculean feet straight into the ground. My eyes just froze on this majestic five hundred pound force of nature built to crush, destroy and annihilate anything that would dare stand in his way. His one roar was enough to terrorize my heart and soul. The elephant is a mighty beast that can uproot trees taller than even buildings. But one growl from the tiger was enough to cause not one but five of them to retreat. The king had asserted his authority and everyone now bowed before the lord of the jungle. The charger staying true to his name now plunged towards me. Every part of my body screamed at me to run but I just stood there scared stiff. As the tiger was an inch away, the mahavat with his elephant blocked his charge.

“Hold my hand quickly!” Samaru yelled.

With his help I jumped back on the elephant and we took a few steps back immediately. One by one the mahavat and his aides started guiding the herd to form a circle around the tiger. But he still kept growling. The elephants were restless but the mahavat and his friends knew their job well. A few moments later the tiger charged towards one of the elephants but this time the rest of the herd following orders from their trainers began to close in on Badka. That way he felt threatened and stopped. This continued for some time but eventually the charger gave in and sat on the ground.

I was relieved that Badka was absolutely fine and safe for now. But the job was not finished. I decided to take one of the extra elephants with Samaru and undertake reconnaissance of the area. It was quite possible that the hunters could be nearby. Even if they spotted us and were on the run, I still firmly believed that they couldn't have gone much farther.

After walking for few minutes Samaru found a trail left by two men. I was sure it was from the hunters. We hurried our steps. After covering some distance, we caught them running. I tapped twice on Samaru's shoulder signalling him to strike first. The elephant hurled and smashed Banu and his brother like a canon. I jumped from the carriage and kicked one of them into the head. Samaru tackled the other one. The elephant coiled his trunk around the man, rose him high into the sky and threw him right into the mud. He lay unconscious there. As I grabbed the other one by the collar, he took out a knife from his ankle sheath and was about to stab me. I barely managed to block it with both my hands. He struck me with a head-butt instead and I tripped over a rock. As he lunged at me to impale the dagger, the elephant grabbed his leg and tossed him off. He fell on the ground with a loud thud. We finally tied both of them with rope. That marked the end of their days as hunters.

I went back to the spot where Charger was kept confined and recalled the rest of the elephants. He looked at me one last time as if to say goodbye and then he vanished back into the jungle....

When I look back, I still cannot comprehend the extent to which man would go and commit crimes just to earn few bucks. Though we apprehended the pardhis, but it was just a small victory. The real perpetrators remain hidden in a deep cobweb of organised crime network somewhere in Delhi, in Mumbai, in even foreign country. Criminals like pardhis are just pawns. Moreover, there are other lacunae too like forest department is not allotted fire arms in our state while criminals carry all weaponry. But we must move forward. We must not stop and we must not falter. Wildlife cannot speak for itself, so we must and by God we will by all our means.....

## **Patewa- An Unforgettable Experience**

I was on an official visit to Patewa as my boss had ordered me to inspect the health of plantations there. Patewa, a quiet village surrounded by hills is located in Mahasamund district of Chhattisgarh, around 75 km from Raipur. Everything about the place was beautiful whether it be the farms, the streams, the lakes, the mud houses or the village folk. There was only one problem, my deputy who had accompanied me for this visit. His name was unique- Mr Podda and like his name he had an exceptional personality. He was just about five feet tall but his belly stretched far and wide. In my whole life I had never seen a man whose tummy was bigger than his height. But here lay Mr Podda, a football in the form of a man. Now I don't hold anything against fat people. In fact I find them cute and friendly too. But Mr Podda was an exception. In my whole two hours journey from Raipur to Patewa, Mr Podda kept filling the air in my car with such obnoxious and horrendous smell coming from his behind that it could knock out an entire crowd in a football stadium. But I had to bear with him as he was my boss's favourite. But the moment I reached Patewa, I ordered him to get out of my car and head out to inspect nurseries. But he needed a vehicle for conveyance. And then Bittu came to my rescue. He was a forest guard posted in Patewa who was present there to assist me. I told him to take Mr Podda on his bike. Poor Bittu. I still can't forget the look on his face. He didn't

utter a word but his eyes spoke it all. It was as if he was pleading me not to do such grave injustice to him. But I had suffered for two long hours. That in fact felt like a life time of torment. So with a heavy heart I told Bittu, “Come on! Off you go. We don’t have all day.”

After finishing all my work, I decided to stay at forest rest house for the night. If you observe you will find that most of the guest houses under forest department in India are usually very old and some of them in fact are a living heritage that have been in existence since British times. One of their odd features is that they have been built in secluded and isolated regions mostly away from common folk of villages or towns like on top of a hillock or deep inside a forest.

The guest house at Patewa too was a relic. In fact, I could spot some ruins a few metres away from the rest house. An hour later Mr Podda and Bittu too arrived. After taking progress report, I bid them adieu and called it a night.

Tired, I wanted to desperately sleep so I began to head towards my room. As I was a few steps away, I could spot something hanging from my door hinge. It looked like a slender branch of a tree. As I went closer it vanished with a puff. I thought it must be nothing. But then just as I entered the room, something very slimy fell on me. I immediately shrugged it off with force. When I turned back

I saw it was a black snake. It lay there still. I too stood there still out of fear. But within a fraction of second it slithered straight towards me and was almost an inch away. I jumped straight onto the bed. I watched it crawl into the bathroom. I immediately held the bedsheet and the blanket and got out of the room and shut the door tight. I thought it would be wise to sleep in the other room. This time I scanned it clean to ensure it was fully safe. I prepared my bed and was about to lie down when suddenly the wind started blowing outside with great speed. It slammed open the windows and came inside raging, hooting and howling through its way. The temperature dropped abruptly. It got freezing cold. Shivering I went ahead to close the windows one by one. As I was about to close the last one, lights went out. It was complete darkness. I reached my pocket for my mobile but it was empty. I realised I had forgot it in the previous room. I reckoned going to the kitchen was my best bet as I could find a candle or at least a matchbox there. It was utter darkness. I was taking each step with great caution. The only thought in my mind that kept running like a loop was what would happen if I step myself on a snake or Scorpio or God knows what. I knew one thing for sure that the kitchen was behind my room and to reach there I had to go through the veranda. With baby steps as I moved ahead I heard a slight giggling sound coming from behind me. I tried to downplay it. I believed it must be the wind.

Touching the walls and surroundings I somehow managed to reach the kitchen. I knew I was in the right place since I could feel the gas stove with my hand. I started looking for the cupboard. One by one I kept opening them, running my fingers through their contents. Something snapped and I felt a very sharp tinge in my middle finger. It was as if something bit me. It sent shivers down my spine. What if it was that snake? I began to speculate that it might have escaped from that room. But in the next moment I heard a lady giggle loud. And it was definitely not the wind.

“Who’s there?” I shouted. But no response.

My blood ran cold and my heart was hammering inside. “What on earth is going on?” That was all that I could keep thinking. I mustered courage and again continued to search the cupboard. But then something fell on my left with a thump. I got terrified. My hair rose on the back of my neck. Hesitantly I put my hand forward. On touching, it felt like a small cube. I realised it was a matchbox. In that moment my joy knew no bounds. I immediately took out a stick and lit it up. I held it in front of me so that I could first get a hold of my surroundings. But the wind blew it off. I lit another match and as I put it forward something zoomed past me. I thought it must be some animal. I moved the burning matchstick ahead to get a closer look when suddenly a lady in white dress walked right past the door of kitchen. And then my match petered out. I began

shaking like a leaf. I wanted to shout and scream but my mouth ran dry. I wanted to run but my muscles were immobilized. It was freezing cold out there but I began sweating. I wanted to breathe but I was just huffing and puffing. My pulse was now the only thing I could hear. Fear had now completely gripped me. As I stood there petrified I could see from the window a faint light as small as a dot. Slowly it continued to grow bigger. I thought it was a motorcycle heading this way.

“Help! Help!” I wanted to yell. I opened my mouth but couldn’t utter a word. It felt as if someone had put an ice in my throat.

As it drew closer I realised it was a lantern that was held by an old, frail man in his hand.

“Is there something wrong my child?” The man asked as he came towards me.

I remained silent. When he saw I was shivering, he wrapped a blanket around my shoulders and put his hand on my back.

“Come on! Let’s make some fire. You are freezing to death here.”

He guided me towards the front of the rest house and then gathered some branches and twigs fallen on the ground

and lit a bon fire. He sat on the ground and I followed his lead.

“Thank god! You came, something weird was going on here.” I started the conversation when I felt a little warm.

“It’s the night and loneliness here that can make your mind wander to unwanted places.”

I looked at him and smiled and then asked him his name, where he lived and what was he doing here this late at night.

“Oh! I am Bodhram and I live nearby. I felt you needed my help and so I appeared.” He replied.

We talked for a while and then I asked him if he knew about the ruins that I had seen earlier near the guest house.

“Back in the old days a British forest officer was posted here. That time this place used to be his official residence. He had a beautiful wife. But he didn’t treat her right. He neglected her and shirked his duties as a husband. The wife however found some comfort and solace in the company of a help who used to work here. Gradually she fell in love with the servant. One day the officer found out about this affair. Driven mad by rage, he murdered his wife, the servant and then hung himself. Those ruins are the place where the wife was buried.”

I felt sad after listening to the story. But then it struck my mind what if the woman that I had seen was the spirit of this lady that Bodhram was talking about. I shared with him my thoughts and fears.

“Every forest has a story to tell if you are willing to listen. But it is your choice to believe them or not.”

By this time the lights had come back and I felt greatly relieved.

“Anyway you should sleep now. It’s too late. And don’t worry about a thing. I will be around if you need me.” He comforted me and then bid me adieu.

I went to the kitchen, grabbed two candles in case I needed them back, and then went to sleep in my room.

In early morning Bittu came. He had my breakfast prepared. After having my belly full I asked Bittu to give the blanket back to Bodhram in the village.

A while later Bittu came running back.

“Sir, there is no one by the name of Bodhram in village. I enquired everywhere.” He mumbled catching his breath.

“You can’t even do a simple job. I don’t want to hear a no for an answer. Just go to the Village head and enquire. He would know about him.” After a bit of reprimanding, I sent him back.

An hour later he returned with the Sarpanch who also told me that presently there is no one by the name of Bodhram in this village. But, he checked the register of citizens and found that a man named Bodhram did live here.

“So, where is he now?” I asked.

“Sir, he is dead. Long way back. He was a servant who used to work in this rest house.” The village head replied.

Every forest has a story to tell if you are willing to listen. But it is your choice to believe them or not.....

## **The Mysterious Kodar**

It was an ordinary day as always. I was sitting in my office chamber sulking at the heap of file work pending before me and bearing the after effects of the hammering and ear crushing music of my boss. Feeling utterly bored, I looked down from my window and I could faintly see a truck passing by with an advertisement board of a travel agency on its cargo bed that read “Wander, Explore, Discover”. I strongly felt that these three words were a sign from God commanding me to get up from my chair and take a break from my mundane routine. The next thing that I did was to immediately draft my leave application and zoom back home to pack my bag for a new journey. I recalled that a colleague of mine in some of his scary stories used to talk about certain unusual and eerie incidents happening in Kodar. So, I decided to go there for an adventure and uncover the truth myself.

Kodar is a peaceful and tranquil place that is adorned with a scenic water reservoir and surrounded by mysterious forest on its sides. It lies in the Mahasamund district of Chhattisgarh, around 70 km from Raipur.

With my mountain bike set on the roof rails of the car and backpack filled with snacks, some fruits, a small plate and a foldable tent, I drove straight to the spot. Upon reaching there, I unfastened my bike and started riding along the

edge of the lake. For a few miles the land remained mostly rugged.

An hour later through my journey an old, tall, dark man blocked my path ahead. I stepped out of my cycle and approached him.

“What are you doing in the middle of nowhere?” The man asked with a bit of suspicion.

“It’s dangerous to be out here alone.” He warned me.

I don’t know why but I got annoyed that he was unnecessarily jabbering without any prior introductions.

“Well, I am a forest official and I am here to make a report on illegal activities going on in this forest.” I bragged with a bit of an authority.

“What are you....” Before I could finish, a sharp crackling sound from snapping of branches caught my attention. I felt as if someone was standing behind me. I looked back but there was nothing. As I turned again to continue my conversation, the man just disappeared. I searched for him frantically but he was nowhere to be found. What was more perplexing was that there was not even a single trace that I could track. The man just vanished into thin air.

I was terrified. I am a man of science and to be honest I used to boast about it. But when such an eerie incident

happens the first thing you do is to dump this science jargon into recycle bin of your mind. And so what immediately popped into my mind was what if the man was a spirit or worse a malevolent ghost like the one I had encountered in Patewa. But before I could think any further I heard a faint thumping sound coming from the ground. I put my ear on the surface to listen more closely. A couple of seconds later the intensity of the sound began to rise. As I began lifting my head I could see a long trail of dust ahead. I then realised it was not just a thump but a large herd of boars heading straight towards me. With no time to waste I hurried back to my cycle and started paddling with a speed that would probably put to shame even a racing sports bike. As I looked back they were getting closer and closer. Then suddenly few of those boars run past me within a fraction of second. In the next wave one of them hit my cycle hard and I fell down. The second one while charging towards me just missed by a hair. The third banged straight into my shoulder and I got thrown off. Disoriented, I could faintly see the fourth one was closing in. However I managed to hold my backpack in front of me and used it as a shield. It bashed me hard but I got saved by the bag. That was the last of them. My shoulder hurt as if someone had hammered nails into it. Bruised, confused and in utter shock and pain I laid back for a moment. It now became clear that the tall, dark man was somehow behind this. He disappeared right before the

moment this heard came thumping down. But all this was secondary now. First I needed to tend to my wounds but unfortunately I did not have any first aid kit. I decided to go back towards the lake. The area was largely open and felt a little safe. So I set up the tent there. I felt too exhausted and the ordeal of my near death encounter with the wild boars kept flashing in my head again and again. After a while I dozed off.

Suddenly a loud thud caught me unawares. With my eyes still weary from the slumber, I tried to make sense of it. I looked from inside my tent and could see that my bicycle had fallen down. I thought the wind must have done that and thus made the sound. It was already dark. I could see stars twinkling in the sky and I could hear the hooting of owls from distance. I realised I had slept for quite a long time. But then suddenly a sharp creaking noise came from behind my tent. As I turned back I could see a shadow move past swiftly. I immediately zipped close my tent and took out the knife from my bag. Whatever it was, it started growling. I thought it must be the wild boar again. Its shadow was now getting bigger and bigger. It opened its jaw and the saliva started dripping down from its mouth and I could see its massive pointed fangs ready to tear its prey into pieces. I trembled with fear that it was not boar but something else. All I could do was to keep pointing my knife towards the shadow from inside my tent. I realised a beast of this size could rip it open with a single blow and

its sharp, crooked teeth could snap my hand into two in a matter of seconds. I thought running for the mountain bike was my only chance. So, I swung my backpack on one of the shoulders, dashed out of the tent, grabbed my cycle and started making a run in whichever direction I could just to get away from the creature. As I looked back I saw two massive bears behind me. I drove quite fast and they couldn't catch up. When I became confident that I had lost their trail, I paused for a moment to catch my breath. I could vaguely see a structure probably made of rocks some distance away from me. I reckoned it could be a house and decided to check it. When I got there, I found it was a temple and not a house. But it was all vacant. Since it was a temple I felt safe that I was under the protection of the Almighty himself. Moreover I believed the bears would never risk of coming to this place where large number of people assemble daily. I decided to wait as in all likelihood someone was bound to visit and then I could ask for help. I waited on and on but not a single soul arrived. But from god knows where the same two bears appeared right before my eyes. Now they slowly started walking towards me. I quietly put my right hand on the knife that I had unsheathed in my back pocket. I was getting ready for an imminent brawl. I knew I had no chance but I felt if I had to go down I wouldn't do it so easily not at least without a fight. But then someone whistled and they stopped. Now came the tall, dark man from the jungle. I just stood there

still, petrified. And all that I could think about was one thing- how? The man then approached me and said, “This is Geeta and her son Shyam” pointing towards the bears. I wanted to say something but my throat was too dry and I instead mumbled. The man understood my agony and offered some water. I hesitantly moved my right hand away from the knife to hold the glass of water. I gulped it down as fast as I could. After taking a deep breath, I complained that his friends had almost mauled me down. But he instead smiled.

“Geeta and Shyam have never hurt anyone before. They were just hungry and wanted some of your food. Every year there is a tradition where large number of devotees throng to this temple to seek blessings from mother goddess and offer prasada or some food to the bears that come here. The animals are friendly even to small children. You see men have encroached upon this pristine forest, cut down trees recklessly and destroyed their habitats. They have nowhere else to go now. Most of the bears have already died of starvation. This tradition offers them some respite.” He explained.

I lay silent. It was difficult to fathom it all. I felt immensely sad and angry with myself that the bears only wanted my help and I considered them to be my nemesis. I had panicked and didn’t handle the situation aptly. However, the next thing I did was to feed some bananas, apples and

snacks that I had brought with myself to the bears with my own hands. I never felt so satisfied. No amount of money or fame or prestige can replace the feeling, the joy, the happiness that I got upon feeding those innocent, needy and hungry living souls. I offered them water too and patted on their forehead. I then turned to the man and apologised for my rude behaviour back in the jungle. I conceded that I should have heeded to his warning back in the forest but now I had learnt it the hard way. I then asked him who he really was. He told me he was the priest of this wonderful “Chachan Mata” temple. He was kind enough to offer me directions back to the city.

As I smiled at him and nodded my head to bid him adieu, I thought of asking him how he had vanished right in the middle of jungle but then I felt that some questions are best left unanswered. Here was a man of God and I guess that was all there to know....



## **PANTHER COMES TO MY HOUSE**

I still vividly remember the time when I was posted in kanker. I had an official residence, the house was ridiculously enormous. Three elephants could roam inside freely and it would still look empty. It was ancient and looked like the last maintenance was done eons back.

My one half of the day used to get spent at the office bearing my boss and the other half used to get eaten up by Bhola, an electrician who was also a part time plumber, mason and a technician. One time Bhola just kept staring at my house for hours. I did ask him what was wrong.

“It’s no less than a miracle that you are still alive. I wonder how this house has not crumbled under its own weight yet....” He replied with a devilish grin.

By being all alone in the house away from my parents, away from civilisation, from malls, shopping complexes and from friends, it was bound to feel quite lonely. But I had with me Tipu, my younger brother. He was a mixed Labrador of nine years. In my hometown Raipur, every morning my father fed stray dogs in the colony. One of the puppies roughly about six weeks old always used to follow him to our home. No matter how many times we took him back to his pack, he always found a way back to us. I never had any brother or sister and so we adopted this small, chubby creation of God. My inseparable bond with him

made me realise that if there is anyone in this world who can love you as unconditionally as your parents, it's your dog. When I moved to Kanker, I took him with me. It didn't matter where I lived as long as I could feel his soft touch and hear him growl, I felt at home, I felt at peace.

One fine morning when I was doing my routine office work, I got a call from my boss that a panther had been spotted in a nearby village Tultuli. He ordered me to make an enquiry. With no time to waste I steered straight to the place accompanied by Hemlal, who was a forest guard posted in kanker sub division. It was hardly an hour's drive from my home.

The village looked desolate, grim and dark like it was violated by a catastrophe. The houses had all their doors shut tight unwelcoming to any guests and vagrants alike. Small totems strung by a black thread kept swinging like a pendulum in their porch. When I looked closer, they were made from teeth. It was hard to figure out whether they were from animals or men. The walls had markings etched in brick red colour that appeared like rosette spots of leopard. In many of their courtyards, goats slaughtered in half were lying like abandoned corpses in a pool of blood. An uneasy feeling crept up on my spine that I just couldn't get rid of.

Somehow I managed to calm my nerves and began to walk towards the Sarpanch's house to ask him what transpired here. A girl probably in her late teens was standing in the middle of the road and waved her hand towards me.

"You guys are from forest department, right?" She enquired in a scintillating tone as I approached her. She was wearing a simple floral blue skirt. It looked old but was spick and clean. She had two green bangles on her wrists but no ornaments. A pair of black tattered sandals barely covered her graceful feet. She was slender and delicate but she commanded dignity. It was difficult to get eyes off her. She was like an enticing flower that blossomed in this rugged, barren and ugly place.

"Sir! Sir!" Hemlal shook my hand as I just kept staring at her.

"Yes!" then I cleared my throat and continued, "We are from the Forest Department."

I greeted her with a Namaste.

"I am Vaishali, Sarpanch's daughter."

"Father isn't keeping well now a days and so he won't be coming."

"But he asked me to apprise you of the situation here."

"What happened?" I enquired.

“A panther had troubled us for quite a long time. He preyed on our cattle, poultry and pigs almost every night. The soil is barren here. Farming is almost non-existent. Meat is all we have. We were barely able to provide for all our family and on top of it this leopard was creating a lot of problems. It even attacked one of our small children but my father managed to save him somehow. Fear and panic had gripped us all. We spent many sleepless nights. Then we approached a Tantric who practised voodoo magic. The totems, the markings that you see here were given by him to keep the beast away. It worked for a brief period. In fact during that time we prospered too albeit a little. But then we stopped making payments to him. The price was too steep. We couldn't bear it anymore. Now the Panther has started attacking our livestock again. As if that was not enough, the animals have begun dying of an unknown disease. Even the little fodder and grains that we had were destroyed by hailstorms a few days back. I don't see how we are going to make ends meet this season.”

She began crying inconsolably. I was a stranger in a strange land and yet somehow I could empathise with her like there was some unknown connection between us. I could feel her pain, her misery and sorrow. Hesitantly, I put my hand on her back and comforted her. But then she raised her head and looked at me with tears flowing down her cheeks.

“You need to kill this panther at any cost. The villagers are very angry and if something is not done soon then they will take the law into their own hands.” She warned....

Back at the office, I gave a detailed report to my boss.

“Kill this beast, boy.” That was his only solution to the problem.

As a true forester and out of my deep reverence and love for the jungle and its biodiversity, I strongly opposed the idea of putting down the panther but in bureaucratic hierarchy, you can hardly do anything.

At home Tipu kept me busy. On one particular night, he woke me up by his incessant barking. I went into the backyard and could see him snarling towards the grille that faced the forest. A pair of slit shaped eyes illuminated like a spark in that cloud of darkness in the woods. Before I could realise anything, the beast roared and brought forth its massive head, I realised in all shock that it was a panther. The grille was strong enough to block the leopard from coming inside. For some time, the panther kept prowling outside but then disappeared. This episode opened my eyes to the dangers this leopard posed to the local people in the villages. But I still decided to wait before taking any desperate measure.

Few days later, I got a call from a villager that the panther has been spotted again. I immediately rushed but it was already late. There was chaos left behind by the panther. Two villagers were injured in the incident.

Back in the village, the people were in shock and utter dismay. There was a growing clamour for hunting down this predator.

After a week my boss finally arranged the permission for hunting down this leopard from CWLW. The formidable task was entrusted to me.

I began preparations in the next morning itself. Accompanied by Hemlal, Dadsena who were my forest staff and a veterinary doctor I ventured into the forest equipped with tranquilizers, live rounds, a rifle, little oil, some meat and blood to lure the predator. Strange enough, I was not afraid of being killed by the panther but by the rifle I carried. It was way too old and felt like it was last fired during the British times. I didn't care whether it could shoot or not, what I was worried about the most was its backfire that could blow my brains out.

In early morning around five, we began the arduous journey for tracing the leopard again while moving through sea of trees, crossing gushing streams and bracing for feral and rabid animals along the way. We finally somehow managed to reach the lair of the panther after four long

hours by tracking its scat and pug marks. It was over a gigantic peepal tree. On its trunk the markings from its claw could be spotted. There was a characteristic fishy smell from its urine around it used to mark its territory. As we maintained a safe distance from it by hiding in the bushes, the leopard finally arrived with a hunted rabbit in its mouth. It then climbed straight over the tree.

“This is the end for it sir.” Hemlal murmured in a little anguished voice.

Determined to take the shot, I kept my aim steady, put my finger on the trigger and was about to fire when I heard a faint purring sound. It was not from the leopard. As it was fully immersed in devouring its prey, something zoomed past it that made leaves scatter down. When I looked closely through the rifle I realised it was a cub. The panther was its mother. She then fed it a small piece. Two more cubs gently climbed on their mother. She kept caressing and feeding them one at a time.

My hand now began shaking. Before coming here I was absolutely sure to put down the leopard. But when I saw all this I was deeply moved. She was just trying to stay alive and keep her cubs safe that any mother would do. The villagers had encroached upon her home, destroyed her habitat by recklessly felling the trees due to which the herbivore population significantly dwindled and she was

left with no option but to move towards the village and salvage on pigs, chicken, cattle whatever she could find to stay alive and to feed her cubs.

But I was under a duty to kill her. Even if I spared her life the villagers would hunt her down and that would create law and order problem. So I had only one option. I raised the rifle again and fired. She fell on the ground....

But I didn't fire a live round. I just couldn't. I only shot her a tranquilizer. There was no way I could make the cubs orphans by my own hands. I decided to take her and the offspring deep in the jungle far away from the village where she could have adequate food base to support her and the young ones.

Dadsena had a brother who was a truck driver. I asked him to bring around the vehicle on the road closest to us in all secrecy. We cut down some bamboo and made a temporary stretcher to carry her and the cubs to the vehicle. It took us an hour but we made it. The doctor checked her vitals and we drove deep in the jungle far away from human settlements.

When we reached the spot, I released the shutter of the truck and she stepped down carrying the litter in her mouth and on her back. Before disappearing in the woods, she turned back and looked at me in the eyes as if to say goodbye one last time....

## **The Tuskers of Jashpur**

After my two major stints of adventure one in Boramdeo and the other in Kanker, the big boss aka the Head of Forest Force began to feel that I was running wild like a bull and so he decided to reign me in. The result I found myself dumped in the most non-happening place in Forest department- it's headquarter in Raipur. And to add salt to my wounds I was put under Mr Nandi, the greatest shirker in the history of forest bureaucracy. This man wouldn't pour a glass of water even for his own self without fetching for an orderly. Now to think that such a personality would discharge his official duties would be to stretch your imagination beyond the widest possible extent. So when he was asked by his superior to make a report on the working of Elephant Tracking System, he simply transferred that burden on my shoulders. Now I don't recall why but Mr Nandi couldn't stand the sight of me and so in the guise of this project he sent me to Sajapani, a hopelessly desolate place just like Kalapani where the freedom fighter VD Savarkar was sent to by the British for punishment.

Sajapani is a small village located near Kunkuri in Jashpur district of Chhattisgarh. It is land-locked surrounded by hills from all sides.

I began my journey by gypsy car one fine morning in the month of October from Raipur.

After a lot of efforts, I managed to reach the tiny village Sajapani. The task at hand was to make a report on ETS- a purportedly state of the art satellite based system for tracking movement of rogue elephant herd. Over the years, due to destruction of forests on account of encroachment, reckless mining and industrialization, the habitats of elephants have greatly diminished especially in Saranda forest area of Jharkhand which in the near past used to be a pristine and virgin jungle with unparalleled beauty. Because of this large herd of elephants began migrating towards adjoining forests in Surajpur, Jashpur and Sarguja districts of Chhattisgarh in search for food and a new home. But over time there have been rising incidents of man animal conflicts in these regions and to prevent such mishaps this Elephant Tracking System (ETS) was developed. But the sad fact is forest officials have a knack to give catchy phrases to doomed projects that barely deliver any results on ground. ETS was no exception and my report was just an eye wash to keep the funds rolling.

However, the first thing I wanted to do before any official work was to take a dump. But the problem was I couldn't spot even a single house in Sajapani with a pour-flush toilet. Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, it seemed had left

untouched this pristine village yet. So, I had no option but to go out into the woods behind me and heed to the nature's call there in utter peace. As I was just about to roll down my pants, I heard a whistle. I looked everywhere but there was no one. Then suddenly a voice echoed.

“Stay still.”

As I was about to put my foot forward to move towards the source of sound, a small boy abruptly appeared before me.

“Don't move even a bit.” He shouted.

Then he picked up a stone and threw it straight towards me but missed the aim and it landed behind me with a thud.

“Is this your best shot kid? Well I am not impressed.” I couldn't resist from making fun of that boy.

“My every shot is priceless. It just so happens, I saved your life. Look behind.” The boy sneered in arrogance.

As I turned back I saw a giant snake slither past me. I realised he was aiming for the snake to scare him off.

“I take my words back. You got one hell of an aim kid! I give you that. What's your name?”

“Arjun!”

“So, you want to be the next Abhinav Bindra of India, I guess?”

“No I want to be a forest officer and fix what is rotten with the system.”

“What do you mean? Is something wrong?” I enquired with a little disquiet about what he said regarding the department.

“You people shirk responsibilities and are apathetic towards our grievances. Twice elephants have created ruckus here, destroyed our farms but the forest department does nothing.”

“Well I am sorry that you feel it this way. But trust me when I say that I am not like the rest. I will get to the bottom of everything and fix the problems.” I tried to gain his confidence.

“You sound like a good person but I don’t know whether you will be able to do what’s right when the time comes.” The boy sounded sceptical and after saying that he went away.

When I got out of the woods Mr Chaube, in-charge of ETS in this village was standing before my eyes.

“Sir, namaskar! You must be tired so I brought tea.” He knew that I was here to make a report and so was trying to

cajole me into making one that would be favourable for him.

“No, it won’t be required.”

I was hesitant to take anything from Mr Chaube not even tea for the simple reason that he was notorious for being the most unscrupulous Deputy Ranger ever to have joined the forest force. I mean this guy had set a bench mark, whenever the ill-gotten wealth of a forest official used to come to light in an income tax raid, the local people used to compare it with that of Mr Chaube. Almost everyone knew the corrupt net worth of this Deputy Ranger but there was never an official inquiry for God knows why. I realised that it was precisely because of such dishonest public servants like Chaube, even boys as young as Arjun felt disillusioned with the system.

“Let’s head straight to your ETS chamber. I need to make an inquiry into its working.” The fact is I disliked Mr Chaube from the time I had learnt about his misdeeds and when I saw him, I simply felt repulsed and somehow wanted to make an example out of him. I felt it in my gut that I could turn this ETS into a graveyard for this Deputy.

As we were walking through the village to head towards the ETS chamber, my cell phone began vibrating. I picked up the call and it was my boss Mr Nandi.

“Animesh! Boy! Remember you have gone there only to make a report and nothing else. I don’t want any red flags. Is that understood?”

“Yes sir.” I concurred to his order in a hushed voice. I understood that Chaube was protected by those in the high corridors of power.

When I entered the chamber, I realised that it was the only building in the village made from bricks and concrete. But the ETS inside was in all shambles. There were two desktops all covered in dirt and engulfed with cobwebs of spiders.

“You have made a mockery out of a good project Chaube. There are substantial funds to fix every problem here. But you skim off the money.” I lost my temper and began admonishing him.

But in return he only smirked. Truth is if my boss hadn’t called, I could have crucified this corrupt forester. But my hands were tied and he knew that very well.

As I kept venting my frustration on him, a short and lean man stormed through the gate. He was drenched in sweat and appeared in a state of utter disquiet. It seemed like he wanted to warn us about the end of the world but couldn’t utter the right words as if they had been masked by the sheer terror that lurked in him.

“They are coming here.” He mumbled, unable to speak clearly as he kept panting.

“Take it easy.” I tried to calm him and offered a glass of water. He gulped it down like a wild animal spilling it all over his body.

“Sir, we need to get out of here. They will wreak havoc on the way.”

The man was barely making any sense. So, I turned to Chaube to know who he really was.

“Sir, this is Halwai. He is one of the villagers who keeps tabs on the movement of elephant herd and informs us beforehand.”

“So, Halwai what you are saying is that the mighty tuskers are coming straight for this village. Right?” I turned back to the man to confirm the impossible, at least it looked like that at the moment.

“Yes sir.” The anxiety and restlessness in him, the fear and trepidation in his voice spoke more words of what was to come than his mouth.

Ever felt tremors before an earthquake? Well that is exactly what it feels like when the massive tuskers begin to close in on you. The ground beneath me began shaking and Chaube as he stood petrified looked into my eyes, the

horror and panic was clearly visible in them. Without saying a word he ran away immediately from the chamber. The trumpet calls of the elephants could be heard from the distance. I leaned out of the window to gauge the position of the herd. It was heading straight towards the villagers. An elephant is a colossal five ton beast and when it thumps on the ground in a herd of thirty to forty it becomes an unstoppable force that can ravage, bull-doze and demolish almost everything that dares to stand in its path. The mud houses of poor villagers stood no chance. Roofs and walls came down falling like a pack of cards. Their cattle kept moaning and ran scared in a chaotic manner in all directions to save their lives. The poor villagers were helpless who only kept scurrying around like small bees whose hive had been smoked to dust, screaming, wailing and crying all along the way. I saw one humongous elephant chase a villager mercilessly. I wanted to help but I was too scared to even move a muscle. In a matter of seconds, the tusker lashed his trunk on the poor man tossing him away in the air. I was shell shocked at the rage these wild animals were unleashing upon the people of this god forsaken village. The elephants later disappeared into the hills after leaving behind a trail of devastation and chaos.

I got out of the ETS chamber and saw that people began to frantically search for their loved ones after the elephants were gone. I saw men gathering in large groups a few steps

ahead of me. I rushed to the spot as I reckoned somebody needed help. As I cleared my way through the crowd, Halwai was standing before me with a small boy in his arms. The man lay expressionless, as if he had been struck by a tragedy too great to even evoke an emotion. But his eyes bespoke of an insurmountable pain that a father bears on losing his child. The kid was Arjun. When the elephants were marauding through the village, they attacked his house and the roof fell on him and the child died on impact.

What mistake had the boy committed to have suffered such a tragic fate or what sins his father had transgressed in the eyes of God to have his son taken away, to have his heart ripped from his soul? The sad fact was Halwai, his son Arjun and the villagers were paying the price of forest department's betrayal. If the ETS had functioned properly, if corrupt officials like Chaube were put behind bars, if we as a team had stood like a rock for the local people and discharged our duties sincerely, all this could have been averted....

Days passed and the people began rebuilding the village from scratch. But, nothing remained the same as before. There was a rising tide of frustration, anger and wrath among the people. Though on the outside everything seemed to be calm but at the heart of the village a storm

was raging filled with an unquenchable thirst for vengeance and for justice.

I chose to stay and help people in every way possible and kept working on ETS too side by side to fix the problems. Chaube went on paid leave as in spite of it all, he still enjoyed protection from the higher ups. It was his mess but I was tasked to clean it.

Tensions were already high when another calamity came knocking down on my gates.

“Sir! Get up! There is a fire raging through the forest in the hills.” I woke up frantically one night when Patel, who worked in our department lambasted those words loudly in my ears.

When I went outside I could see the fire blazing amok through the jungle. Its unfettered bloody red flames hungrily devoured through trees and shrubs. A thick cover of smoke engulfed the sky in sheer doom that made the air taste like metal. I immediately called the Ranger and the Divisional Forest Officer to send staff with haste. But the sheer nature of the terrain would have made it impossible for the help to arrive on time. I tried to do my bit with help of villagers by lighting a counter fire but it was just not enough.

The forest staff equipped to fight this menace never arrived.

But then after a while, miraculously it started raining. I believed that it was sign from the All-Mighty himself who felt so sad at what was transpiring while watching from above that there was a downpour from his eyes. When the fire got subsided by rain, the utter ruination that unfolded broke my heart. Scores of trees were destroyed, many squirrels, lizards and rabbits lay dead on the ground, birds and their nests were torched. The damage was catastrophic. For a true forester and above all an ardent nature lover, it was the saddest day of my life. I couldn't bear it and so walked away. But then my eyes happened to gaze upon two elephants lying charred on the earth. When I saw that, grief and anguish ripped my soul. Moments later Halwai approached me.

“Well! They got what they deserved, for what they did to my Arjun.” As he said those words there was a sense of calm, a sense of satisfaction over his face.

“So, you put the forest on fire to avenge your son's death, to kill as many elephants as you could.” I spoke to Halwai in sheer horror. The extent to which a man can fall to exact revenge is unimaginable. To be honest at that moment I wanted to smash his head to pulp for that grave crime he committed. But then I realised he was a father mourning

the demise of his son. Like any human being he had lost his way, didn't know how to cope up with the irreparable loss or how to deal with it, how to respond or whom to blame, he was just seeking justice in his own way no matter how twisted it was.

But I could no longer remain neutral to the wrongs being committed in this village. I submitted a report to the Divisional Forest Officer citing the criminal conduct of Halwai for which he was arrested. It was a harsh decision but felt to be right and fair. In spite of all pressure from my boss Nandi to spare Chaube, I gave a detailed account to Head of Forest Force on the corrupt and illicit activities of this Deputy Ranger who was largely responsible for the failure of ETS that caused such destruction to both this village and to the wildlife. He later got suspended and even incarcerated a few months after. As for myself, I never found closure in Sajapani. It still occupies a place locked somewhere deep in the dark corners of my heart....

When I look back there are only questions that go on in a loop in my mind. Was it Halwai who was at fault? Or did the mourning father had every natural right to seek justice for his son's death? Was it the failure of forest department as a whole to help the people in times of their need? Or was it because of few corrupt officials like Chaube on account of which the villagers had to pay such a steep price? Was it our failure as men to have encroached upon

and destroyed the habitats of wild animals in name of development and left them with no option but to migrate towards villages and even towns in search for food and shelter? Or is it the other way round where the wild are trampling upon the farms, houses and lives of poor villagers?

Man-animal conflict is not new to India, it has been in existence since long. But in the twenty-first century this is a very real and present danger. If we as a community do not join hands together to deal with this situation proactively, then the time is not far when forests and wild animals would become something of a rarity.





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#### **About the Author**



Animesh Goverdhan is a Chhattisgarh State Forest Service Officer, under induction Training at CASFOS, Coimbatore (Nov 2020 - Nov 2022) who is a graduate from University of Delhi (Delhi College of Engineering). He also penned another book on 'Oxyzone- The Magical Forest of Raipur'.



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