





7
Selfishness and
philanthropy
(Vikram and Vetala)

12
A Mountain
Stream
(Ruskin Bond)

16
Chanakya
Learns a Lesson
(A page from Indian
history)

18
Astrologer
for a day
(A folk tale from
Uttar Pradesh)

55
Star Trouble
(Humorous Story)

22
Glimpses of Devi
Bhagavatam
(Mythology)

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CONTENTS

★ India Post Now 150 years	...11
★ Pray Preach Not! (A Jataka tale)	...14
★ Ask away	...21
★ In the Land of the Invisible Tiger	...24
★ Children in the News	...26
★ A Different View	...27
★ Champan's Storyland	...28
★ To Eat Without TV	...30
★ The Treasurer's Post	...32
★ Dream or Reality?	...34
★ How Mittu Became a Hero	...36
★ Mystery on the Mountain	...38
★ The Magical Van	...40
★ Lesson from a Dream	...42
★ Arya (Comics)	... 43
★ Laugh Till You Drop (Humour)	... 47
★ Puzzle Dazzle	...48
★ The Seventh Day (Legends from other lands)	...49
★ Lal Bahadur Shastri	...52
★ Read and React (Competition in Creative Writing)	...54
★ Science Fair	...58
★ Verse and wit (From the Arabian Nights)	...60
★ Treaty of Versailles	...62
★ Mail-bag	...64
★ Photo Caption Contest	...66

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In the Land of the Invisible Tiger...

It would have been nice to see a tiger. We did not. But it did not really matter, for, what we were seeing and experiencing was as exciting as encountering the striped cat. We were in the Periyar Tiger Reserve, in Kerala, and we were taking part in some very creative eco-tourism activities.

Periyar is known for its elephants, gaur, tigers and of course, the Periyar lake on which boating is a definite part of a tourist's itinerary. Thousands of tourists come every year for these attractions. Unfortunately, most of them take a boat ride, demand to see elephants and tigers, and go back disappointed if they don't succeed. Some even blame the Park managers, the Forest Department, for not having elephants and tigers on call... as if these lords of the jungle can be summoned at will! Such tourists do not even walk into the forest, zooming in with their cars to the hotels, and walking up the tourist path to the boat jetty and back. Many even demand urban comforts like air-conditioning and concrete pathways, like bringing the city to the forest!

But if you want a different kind of visit to Periyar, the local tribal groups are ready to give it to you. We were fortunate that our friends in the Forest Department, knowing our interest in such activities, had put us in touch with these groups. There were groups with curious names,

such as the Ex-Wayana Bark Collectors' Eco-development Committee! We found that this group had members who had once been poachers, who were always on the run from Forest officials and police because they made their money by hunting animals and stealing valuable wood or bark. With help from Forest officials, they had taken to earning money in a legal and more dignified way, by guiding tourists through the Periyar forests. A number of other such groups have been set up by the Department and local people.

And so we went with tribal members of these groups on a hike through the peripheral forests of Periyar, to an island in the middle of the Periyar lake, and on a walk through an adivasi village. We were even taken on a night patrol, through forests and grasslands, our eyes and ears on high alert to detect any animal that may be hiding in the dark. Each of these activities was highly enjoyable, and also educational. Our tribal guides were excellent, detecting the slightest of movements that would turn out to be a spotted deer, or a barking deer, or during the night walk, a porcupine! They would point to plants, mentioning their local name, and telling us of the various uses that local people make of them... for medicines, as food, for making ropes, for converting into roofs or walls of houses, and for hundreds of other purposes. They showed us the traditional crops they grew (everywhere I was plucking green pepper and popping it into my mouth!). They also took us to a museum they have made, which shows the traditional medicinal practices, handicrafts, tools, and various other aspects of adivasi life.

The local officials told us that there were several

programmes of this kind, being managed by the adivasis. These included:

- A “dawn to dusk” hiking and rafting programme takes visitors through biodiversity-rich, scenic parts of Periyar, first on rafts made of bamboo, then a walk through the forest. This is one of the most popular of the eco-tourism activities;

- A full day “border hike”, which doubles as a sort of patrol on the edges of the tiger reserve, and covers some fascinating terrain from 900 to 1,300 metres above sea level.

- A “tiger trail”, the longest of the activities, which consists of trekking and outdoor camping for one night and two days or two nights and three days. Daily treks can cover 20 to 35 km, so this is clearly for the tough, committed visitors! This activity comes with very interesting stories of the earlier days of the guides, who were poachers in their earlier *avatar*!

- A “jungle inn”, where one can simply relax for the night, go for short walks in the day, and enjoy local cuisine.

- A “tribal heritage” walk, through a settlement of the Mannan adivasis. This includes a visit to the tribal museum mentioned above.

All these activities, are adventurous and enjoyable. But they also help to make tourists aware of conservation and of local people. Wildlife protection is being carried out along with meeting the needs of the local people, and involving such people in conservation.

At one point during our walks, we came across six women in a green uniform, who were walking purposefully



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What you can do

If you are visiting a national park or wildlife sanctuary, or any forest area, remember:

1. Try to find a place to stay which helps the local people, rather than big tourism operators.

2. Try to talk to local forest guards, and local villagers, to get from them information and stories about the area. Were people thrown out when the park or sanctuary was set up, or were they involved in receiving benefits and managing the area?

3. Behave like a true guest; don't litter the forest, don't destroy plants or animals, and speak softly!

Try to find out if there are activities like what is described for Periyar above, in your own area or State.

through the forest. We were told that these women belonged to the “Vasant Sena”, a group of over 100 women who have on their own been patrolling the forest! This was started by a few women a year ago, and quickly spread to many villages. When the Forest Department asked them why they are doing this, the women simply replied that forests are their future, and if they do not protect the forests, who else will?

Imagine, if we had gone in an air-conditioned car straight to our air-conditioned rooms in a hotel, and climbed into a boat to visit the Periyar reserve, would we have learnt any of this? Would we have seen so many plants and animals and been able to hear local adivasi stories about these? And would we have had the opportunity to pay our tourism money to the local people who desperately need the money, instead of to hotel owners who are already rich? We would not have been able to do any of this...but the eco-tourism programme of Periyar allowed us to do this!

- Ashish Kothari
Kalpavriksh Environmental Group