

## TO ERR IS LEOPARD

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It is essential that proper and adequate set-ups be established to exclusively deal with situations arising out of man-wildlife. <sup>It</sup> will not be far when wildlife consultancy groups will emerge in the private sector to take charge of such situations against higher payments from the public exchequer.

Among all wildlife, leopards tend to miss the jungle track most often, and stray into all sorts of bewildering situations and 'inhumane human-troubles'. There have been ample of such cases in the last four to five years.

Some years back, around 1987, in the outskirts of Bhubaneswar adjoining Chandaka Elephant Reserve, a leopard had got into a village where long rows of houses stood on either sides of a narrow road and then the leopard moved from one house to the other. A similar incident had happened during 1982 in Astia Village near Baripada in the outskirts of Similipal Tiger Reserve. In March 1990 a leopard had come near Udala adjoining Similipal.

In October 1992 one was detected in a cow shed in village Hadgarh near Hadgarh Sanctuary. In 1993, one had entered Kupari Village near Balasore. In 1995 a similar incident occurred in Koraput district. On 18<sup>th</sup> January, 1996 a leopard entered village Shukla near Sakhigopal in Puri district. Earlier in the month one had entered Kadopani village of Patanagarh Forest Range in Bolangir district. Again, on 24<sup>th</sup> January, 1996 another leopard came on the road, 5km away from Bolangir town and got killed by some vehicle. During 1998 there have been at least three cases in and around Soro and the periphery of Kuldiha Sanctuary.

Sometime in 1991-92 a leopard had managed to sneak into a half-open toilet in Cuttack city, expectedly after a sojourn out of Chandaka Elephant Reserve. In April 1995 at 10 A.M. another was walking on the street in Baripada town after coming out from its previ

ous night's retreat in a Hosiery Factory to finally enter the house of a Wildlife Officer and hide underneath the staircase.

Leopards stray out of the jungles because of an irritating fire or while following the scent of dogs used by people who enter into forests. Sometimes they may walk along a drying-up water stream and come well out of the limits of high forests. They may also follow the track of goats and calves returning to the village after grazing in the forest. A young leopard or tiger could reach human habitations when it is displaced out of the shrinking forest habitats because of competition faced from peers and seniors in the process of establishing its own territory after separating from the mother.

Whatever may be the reason, the fate of such leopards stranded within or close to human habitations is usually not with a happy ending. Even though the people are becoming aware of the presence of a wild-life wing and the running of a zoological park somewhere in the state, they often decide the fate of the leopard themselves. Understandably, such decisions are out of instantaneous outbursts of human emotions. Like most others, the Kadopani leopard was killed by the villagers. The leopard of Shukla was also killed and taken in a procession not without slogans suggesting victory of villagers and failure by the "Government"! In a democratic set-up Government seems to be the cause for everything that happens or doesn't happen! Nonetheless, people had also decided the fate of a leopard in the periphery of Kuldiha.

On the other hand, whenever some elited individual calls people from the Forest Department some officials with over-used capabilities reach the place of incident and try to devise and implement a workable solution to the problem. Sometimes, the crowd is removed and the leopard returns to the forest in the night. At other times, a live trap is used to capture the animal. Rarely, the leopard is applied a dose of immobilising drugs from special 'darting' equipments and captured.

Similar misadventures of leopards and outbursts of human psyche must be there in other parts of the country as well, but the lucky ones to survive may be only a few. In November 1981 in Andhra Pradesh, information had come to the erstwhile Central Crocodile Breeding and Management Training Institute, Hyderabad about a leopard which had

fallen into a dry abandoned well near Kondapalli reserved forest, 40km away from Vijayawada. It had to be chemically captured and rescued.

Another such report came around 1985. This time, when a ladder was dropped in, the animal used it in the silent hours of the night and returned back to the forest. In about the same period a leopard entered a house in the area of a Range Officer, an aluminee of the Institute, who sustained severe injuries but captured it by overpowering.

Knowledge of these many incidents never does indicate that some sort of "overabundance" of wildlife is on the cards. Instead, the animals may be coming out so often because of degradation in the quality of habitats which should ideally give them the required shelter, food, water and disturbance-free environment. Besides, because of growing awareness in the media and among public, information about such man-leopard interactions may be coming to the notice more often.

People who recognise the existence of wildlife wings in the states, believe that the wing can handle all types of animal-problems, from monkeys to elephants.

The very fact that some people do take care to inform such incidents to the Wildlife Department, is a welcome development in awareness that has been generated among the public. Yet, a long way is to be covered before each unfortunate killing of 'erring' wildlife is prevented.

Twenty-three years back, during 1976 the Law Enforcement Division of the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission in United States spent approximately 50% of its officers' time and US\$ 250,000 per year answering to complaints in connection with 'nuisance' alligators and relocating the alligators. Over 10,000 persons called the Game and Freshwater Fish Commission during 1978 requesting to remove live alligators from their localities. As a result of various studies and the analyses Florida had finally undertaken harvest of nuisance alligators.

Harvesting any kind of wildlife is not favoured under Indian sentiments or law and rebuilding habitats to prevent wildlife misadventures is in progress but is an increasingly difficult task in the face of human population.

Actually, all State Wildlife Wings need to have specific 'Antidepredation squads', — the designated units to handle situations of man-wildlife interactions and conflicts. Constraints appear to be the lack of funds to equip the units and of administrative set-ups to attractively compensate interested individuals doing these odd and risky jobs.

Moreover, even if antidepredation squads are constituted it becomes necessary to have clear policies on what should be done with the animals rescued. After safe capture, the responsibility mounts on what to do with it.

Sometimes the animal cannot be returned to the wild because of the species' known behaviour to return back, as with crocodilians. Sometimes, the animal may be in too bad a state for immediate return to the wild. It may require several days' care and treatment. And at other times, the captive accommodations thought to be available in a zoological set-up is already filled up for their space and funds to entertain a new arrival. Rarely is there a 'shelter house' or retreat for animal 'destitutes'. And, how many individuals will look after an animal when their own sustenance is becoming a hard living day by day? Keeping the animal with feasible housing and care can still lead to "cruelty" and may attract the attention of the prevailing law and create trouble for the host. Furthermore, finding a veterinarian to give round-the-clock care and treatment to a leopard or elephant may not be easy.

In June-July 1995 the people of Bolangir agitated, — they had a bandh (closure) of the town, some went on hunger strike, some paralysed the functioning of the Divisional Forest Office and others created pandemonium in the State Assembly because of an elephant. For eighteen years, Khaarsel, the male elephant moved along a fixed route when people used to panic and sustain injuries. Some houses used to get damaged as Khaarsel attempted to feed on stored food

grains. Driving it away every year was not a workable permanent solution. On 25<sup>th</sup> July 1995 Kharsel was chemically captured.

The capture was undertaken under inhospitable conditions and with tremendous risk to lives because certain infrastructures needed to operate chemical immobilisation of an elephant were not available.. It was then wished not to repeat the act of such (improper) application of a technology.

In November Kharsel was shifted to Nandankanan Biological Park. By this time, Ms. Maneka Gandhi had written to Orissa Government and the Orissa High Court had issued directives to the Divisional Forest Officer, Bolangir to ensure improved upkeep of Kharsel while the DFO was awaiting sanction of funds to streamline the purchase of an elephant's daily ration.

Although the number of reports about erring leopards (wildlife) is increasing, 'Operation-Kharsel' suggests that a wild animal must neither be captured under poorly applied technology, nor be retained in captivity when adequate facilities are not available. This is a situation on the fore when the law requires a wildlife to be kept unhurt and human sentiments and life to be protected as well.

Anticipating to handle similar situations, 'Project Elephant' have taken care to have definite antidepredation units. These are expected to have a very clear set of guidelines for easy decision making, a set of facilities to improve working conditions, and a package of attractive remuneration and service conditions to keep high the morale and spirit of serving people. Because, if these are not available, days will not be far when wildlife consultancy groups will emerge in the private sector to take charge of such situations against higher payments from the public exchequer.

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