



PINKESH TANNA

THE Gir INHERITANCE

With each passing day, the crucial role forests play in fighting global climate change and safeguarding India's water and food security is becoming more evident. Younger generations are urging adults to stop and reflect on the long-term consequences of damaging the ecosystems on which future life on Earth depends. *Bittu Sahgal* poignantly reminds us that we are not the owners but the caretakers of the Gir legacy passed down to us, which we must build on, and pass on to generations that follow.

The striped hyaena materialised in front of our vehicle from the underbrush, loping ahead without so much as giving us a second glance. "Bittu, you are lucky! It is easy to see lions, even leopards, but we have barely entered the forest, and you are being given a guided tour by an animal that even we, who patrol the forest for days on end, seldom see in broad daylight!" That was Dr. Sanat Chavan, speaking decades ago. We were in the Gir National Park and he, a young, tough forest officer and close friend, had been entrusted to protect Gir, which he eventually did for much

of his life. In the event, the hyaena veered off the road, possibly in search of a quiet place to rest until darkness fell, while we headed towards the Kamleshwar Dam, where Sanat said we might well see marsh crocodiles basking on the banks of the reservoir.

Along the way, driving through the last home of the Asiatic lion, we passed dry deciduous teak forests, interspersed by golden dun coloured grasslands and scrub that define lion country. Occasionally, we stopped to listen for alarm calls, or glanced down at pugmarks left by the great cats on dusty tracks, trying to figure out how many lions

had traversed the path the night before. We would occasionally park near a fruiting ber *Ziziphus mauritiana* or banyan tree, and wait for birds to arrive. With no agenda, and no hurry, we found ourselves luxuriating in the indolence of Gir, which can be intoxicating for those who seek isolation, without haring helter-skelter in search of 'wildlife action.' We did indeed see crocs and turtles, and buffaloes grazing on the grass growing along the green fringes of the reservoir, but more prominent than that was the silence and serenity. For a good 10 minutes, neither of us uttered a word – until the lions turned up! *Aagaye!* (they've come), said Sanat softly. It was a female with three cubs, some distance from where we were. They stayed by the water for a while before returning to wherever lions retreat at midday.

The vastness and silence of the many forests I have loved and protected bring to mind a nugget, coined by philosopher Anthony de Mello, "Silence is not the absence of sound, but the absence of self." It's easy to forget yourself in the quiet of a wilderness like Gir, where birdsong, the sound of falling leaves, the rhythmic, high pitched buzzing of cicadas... even the distant roar of lions actually define the comforting, elusive silence so absent in urban life.

After spending most of my life travelling from wilderness to wilderness, I have come to love quiet moments in the lap of nature, where, by osmosis, daydreaming becomes part of the magic. I still savour times spent across so many of Gujarat's diverse wildernesses with my friend Sanat, who went on to become Gujarat's Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, rising to occupy Gujarat's highest wildlife post before passing away after retirement on April 11, 2016, in Vadodara.

A FOREST SURVIVES

I have been a Gir aficionado for well over five decades now, and have followed its rise, fall, and rise again through tales told by the doyens of old, and books read and re-read. I especially recall the day on November 8, 1982, when a cyclone struck Gir. The timber lobby almost immediately began asking for permission to remove the lakhs of fallen trees from a forest where the lions were barely holding on to existence. A meeting of the Executive Committee (EC) of the Bombay Natural History Society was called by our President, the venerable bird man of India, Sálím Ali. He requested us to weigh in with an opinion that could be sent to Madhav Singh Solanki, the Chief Minister of Gujarat, and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. As the meeting began, it became clear that Humayun Abdulali and J.C. Daniel, both wildlife conservationists extraordinaire, wanted the trees to stay where they were to feed the next crop of trees that would inevitably appear over time. A few EC Members felt that the fallen trees presented a grave risk of fire. Sálím Ali, rarely if ever, spoke out strongly until he had heard

BELOW An aerial view of a lioness watchfully contemplating a fog-draped blanket over the hill ranges of her Gir home.

FACING PAGE An Asiatic lioness and her five cubs stare directly into the frame, a testament to the resilience of this species in Gir.



MOHAN RAM

RIGHT Lord and Lady Curzon on a tiger hunt, likely in India. Both tigers and lions were hunted to the brink of extinction in their historic, though separate, ranges at the hands of relentless shikar. When made aware of the Asiatic lion's precipitous decline, Lord Curzon refused the Nawab of Junagadh's offer of shooting one in the year 1900.

FACING PAGE ABOVE RIGHT Among the scavenging wild mammals of India are striped hyenas *Hyaena hyaena*. Their presence is often shadowed by the more celebrated lions and leopards of Gir.

FACING PAGE BOTTOM A male Asiatic lion tenderly bows his head before a playful cub.

BELOW Artists and sculptors across India have created renditions of lions, despite likely never having seen one, as there is no evidence of its nationwide distribution. Nevertheless, the lion's imprint on art is more widespread than its actual range. This vivid painting depicts Mughal Emperor Jahangir's legendary lion hunt. Such hunts were organised for the British masters too; these were meticulously planned, leaving the majestic creatures with little or no chance of escape.





BUUSHAN PANDYA



everyone's view, then in his soft voice commented: "I wonder how the Gir forest survived cyclones before we humans arrived?" That settled our position. In the event, the government of the day in Gujarat did order the removal of the trees, but they were probably overwhelmed by the sheer number to be cleared and were compelled to leave most where they were. Predictably, before long, the forest regained its vibrancy, putting to rest my stated fear that stripping Gir of all the fallen trees would amount to inflicting a second catastrophe on the ecosystem and possibly write the epitaph of the beleaguered Asiatic lion.

Despite the many stories of yore that speak of mass hunting, bounties for the killing of lions, and more, the big cat, in the very nick of time, found friends down the years who understood the value of the Gir 'Inheritance', a word used here to describe a common heritage from nature, passed down through the ages. Over a century ago, one such friend was Lord Curzon, who (probably on the urging of Lady Curzon,

who also came to the rescue of the beleaguered rhinos of Kaziranga in 1904) had come to Gir to bag a lion or two in the year 1900, but refused the hospitality of the Nawab when he learned that the large cats were teetering on the brink of extinction.

"The causes of diminution of wild fauna in India are the steady increase of population, the winding area of cultivation and the improvement in the means of communication – all of them the sequel of what is popularly termed progress of civilisation. There are some persons who doubt or dispute the progressive diminution of wildlife in India. I think that they are wrong. The facts seem to me to point entirely in the opposite direction. Up to the time of the mutiny, lions were shot in central India. They are now confined into an ever-narrowing patch of forest in Kathiawar. I was on the verge of contributing to their still further reduction a year ago (1900) myself but fortunately I found our mistake in time, and was able to adopt a restraint, which I hope that others will follow."



MOHAN RAM

Over two decades earlier, Nawab Mahabat Khanji the 2nd urged both the Indian royalty and the all-powerful British hunters to desist from pushing the lion to extinction through an 1879 agency notification stating:

“At the request of His Highness the Nawab of Junagadh, it is notified for public information that an interdict has been issued by His Highness against the destruction of lions in the Gir forest. As this order has emanated from a request preferred by His Excellency the Governor of Bombay, who fears that the race may forever become extinct in nature, unless means are taken for their preservation, it is hoped by the undersigned that it will be respected by European sportsmen.”

On the other side of the world, over two centuries ago, Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, is quoted to have said that, “The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.” The same is surely true for the price each one of us pay for the self-assumed mission

of protecting the natural heritage passed down from generation to generation. I have lived most of my life imbibing the values that drive me to protect the biosphere, drawn from diverse individuals such as Sálím Ali and Humayun Abdulali (BNHS); R.E. Hawkins (Jim Corbett’s Editor), Kailash Sankhala (the First Director of Project Tiger) and Fateh Singh Rathore (Ranthambhore’s first Field Director); M.A. Rashid, Lavkumar Khachar (ornithologist and conservationist), M.K. Ranjitsinh, who drafted India’s *Wildlife Protection Act*, 1972; Edward Goldsmith (*Ecologist Magazine*); and Sundarlal Bahuguna, conscience keeper for the people of the Himalaya.

AN ECOLOGICAL CUL-DE-SAC

Where the lions of Gir are concerned, those opining, documenting, or challenging the distilled history of the great cats, their Saurashtra home, and their chequered lives must take a deep dive into the lifetime

FACING PAGE *As the monsoon sweeps over Gir, seasonal waterfalls spring to life, cascading down the rocky cliffs and rugged terrain. When the rain subsides, the flow fades, and these waterfalls disappear – only to reemerge when the clouds gather once again, showering life-giving waters on the parched land.*

BELOW *A distinct white iris makes the White-eyed Buzzard Butastur teesa one of the easiest raptors to identify in the field.*



DR. ANISH ANDHERIA



TAPAN SETH



MOHAN RAM

ABOVE LEFT *An Asiatic lion strides across a railway track cutting through its forested territory. Such human infrastructure, including roads abutting or cutting through known lion habitats outside Gir, take a significant toll on wildlife, particularly as shrinking wild habitats outside Protected Areas are increasingly becoming concretised.*

ABOVE RIGHT *Two forest officers, patrolling Gir on motor bikes, are among the guardians of the living heritage that is Gir.*

RIGHT *Beyond the crucial task of protecting the Gir forest, we recognise the need to educate and win public opinion in favour of wildlife conservation. Catching them while they are young is a prime strategy for embedding awareness of environmental stewardship in those destined to be tomorrow's leaders.*



MOHAN RAM

of study and meticulous research undertaken by my friend, philosopher and guide, Divyabhanusinh Chavda. His book *The Story of Asia's Lions*, published by Marg Publications, is a well-researched, succinctly written narrative of the roller-coaster existence of one of the world's most celebrated symbols of nobility. In his words:

"There was a time when the lion roamed Asia from Palestine in the west to Palamau in eastern India. It was the most visible of the large cats and it struck awe in its human observers as no other animal did.

Yet, today this magnificent animal has become extinct in Asia, but for a small population hanging on by a thread in a corner of India. To most Asians, the lion survives only in vague memory or in fairy tales. Few of them outside Gujarat are aware of its existence on the continent... let us briefly look at the lion's last home in Asia and how lions here differ from those of Africa, and recount some of the close relationships humans have had with the lion, which remains an active presence in the culture of Gujarat.

The remote region in which Asia's lions survive is the isolated Saurashtra peninsula. It is bound by the Gulf of Kutchh in the north, the Arabian Sea in the south and west, and to the east by the Gulf of Cambay (Khambhat). To the northeast of Saurashtra lie the Little Rann of Kutchh and the flat sedimentary lowlands of Nal and the Bhal. Here is a peninsula with a difference, physically almost cut off even on the fourth side from the mainland of the Indian subcontinent. Both human and animal populations have been isolated over the millennia, and among the former, though the language they speak is a distinct dialect of Gujarati, the dress, folklore, and the way of life is noticeably different from the rest of Gujarat even today.

The surface of the peninsula is a sheet of Deccan lava interspersed by trap dykes, which are the peculiarities of the region. While most of Saurashtra is low-lying, there are two prominent hill masses. One occupies an area east of Rajkot and much of the middle of the peninsula, with Chotila being its highest peak at 357 m. The other one is a higher and bolder mass centring on the Gir range with Sarkala the highest peak, at 641 m. Its eastern offshoot is the Mitiyala hill, which is 471 m. high, and further east the 498-m.-high Shetrunjay.

The Gir forest, the last home of the Asiatic lion (the term commonly used for Asia's last surviving lion), surrounds the Gir hill system with an area of approximately 1,800 sq. km., of which a little over 1,400 sq. km. from the Gir National Park and Sanctuary. Mitiyala forest to the east is cut off from Gir as are the Girmar mountains to the northwest, which are weathered volcanic remains with the highest peak of Goraknath standing at 1,117 m. The forest is a haven for a variety of flora with hundreds of flowering plants and tree species being recorded here."

In more ways than one, Gir is an ecological cul-de-sac, cut off from much of the Indian subcontinent to the south by the sea, by its geology as described above, and walled in everywhere else by a sea of humanity. For centuries, *Panthera leo leo* has somehow escaped extinction, because, 'in the nick of time', it found friends. If the Gir Inheritance is to be passed on to generations to come, it needs new friends. That's us! The time is now! ***The Gir Inheritance***, a coffee table book (see box below), focuses on how and why we can and must rise to the challenge of keeping the Gir Inheritance alive! 🐾

THE GIR INHERITANCE

India is known as the land of the tiger... yet it is the lion that has always enthralled the world, occupying a larger-than-life role in our culture and history. Lions were well distributed from Asia Minor and Arabia through Persia to India, but hunting, habitat degradation and human-wildlife conflict eradicated the species from much of its traditional range, leaving as few as 12 wild lions alive by the 1880s. Intervention by the sixth Nawab of Junagadh Mahabat Khan, the post-Independence ban on hunting, science-based conservation measures by the Gujarat Forest Department and local community support, helped return *Panthera leo leo* back from the brink. Today, the Gir Protected Area (Gir PA) of 1,468.16 sq. km. that constitutes the Gir National Park, and Gir, Paniya and Mitiyala Wildlife Sanctuaries, is the most secure home of the Asiatic lion. However, a steady rise in the Asiatic lion population to 674 has led the majestic cats to colonise vast swathes of land across Saurashtra, measuring roughly 30,000 sq. km., beyond their core home. The Gir PA is also home to carnivores such as leopards, hyenas, wolves, jackals, foxes, ratels, and a diversity of herbivores including sambar, chital, nilgai, four-horned antelope, blackbuck and chinkara. The rivers and waterbodies support a variety of aquatic life including marsh crocodiles and a host of resident and migratory birds that have given Gir a reputation for being one of India's finest birding destinations. Sanctuary believes that this dry deciduous haven will continue to draw large numbers of visitors from India and overseas. Our task now is to ensure that ecotourism is so managed as to turn it into a powerful conservation tool, capable of offering livelihoods and opportunities to surrounding communities, while serving as a vital wilderness, carbon bank, and climate moderator for future generations. The biodiversity-rich forest depicted between the covers of the Sanctuary Nature Foundation's latest coffee-table offering '*The Gir Inheritance*' has a value that far exceeds superficial aesthetics. It is our hope that the next few decades will be devoted to restoring and rewilding more lands for the benefit of the proud people of Saurashtra, with help from visionary leaders who understand the umbilicus between biodiversity protection, climate change, and the quality of human life. Dive into this treasure trove of natural history that offers a glimpse into Gir's rich natural heritage, which underscores the value of this unique wilderness and the need to secure this irreplaceable inheritance for generations unborn.



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