

The black and yellow Innova parked on the other side of the highway looks pretty stylish- UP police seems to have had a makeover with the Yuva netaji! Thinking that we had missed the turn from the highway to the road to Pilibhit, we take a U-turn and ask them for directions which they tell us surprisingly politely. I have never come across a bunch of cops in uniform who were actually polite and helpful!

We are on our way to the Pilibhit Tiger Reserve for a short holiday. The road from the highway to Pilibhit is very bad- or so it feels since the highway from Delhi to Bareilly has been absolutely first rate. And given that it is a cold and misty winter morning, devoid of much traffic. It has taken us about 4 hours to travel 280 kilometres though the 55 kilometre stretch to Pilibhit takes us more than 90 minutes. The countryside is fertile with wheat, mustard and sugarcane fields. We pass through several hamlets and villages on the way. The scene is almost stereotypical- people huddled around fires to combat the morning chill, children playing cricket in any empty space that they can find, farmers loading sugarcane onto their bullock carts, the sun shining weakly through the morning mist over the fields- except for large banners and posters everywhere. This is election time in UP and everybody wants to wish us a very Happy New Year and Makar Sankranti and Ganga Snan. The wishes though are not very prominent among the huge pictures of the hopeful candidates, the party chief and assorted local small time leaders!

Situated in the densely forested Terai region, Pilibhit is the district headquarters of the district of the same name. We need to go to the Forest Office to find out about our reservations in the forest rest house in the Tiger Reserve. Driving through the city, one gets the impression of a completely neglected place. Mofussil squalor, if one may call it, is not uncommon in most small towns in North India. However, this place seems particularly dirty with narrow, dusty potholed roads and garbage at street corners. Even the Civil Lines, that peculiarly British legacy in every District Headquarters which is usually the best maintained in any mofussil, is unkempt. The District Magistrate's and the SSP's bungalow that we pass look as if they haven't seen any maintenance since the British left.

Even commerce seems to not have entered in a significant way to this town. There are few big shops that one could see though there are three lines of business which, like almost everywhere in India, are booming- private nursing homes, English medium schools and coaching classes. There are innumerable boards advertising these with the ones of the nursing homes having pictures of their doctors and their degrees. In short, somehow, this place seems as if time has stopped. Or, as the forester who was with us in the tiger reserve commented ruefully, "this place is dead- there is not even a Big Bazar or a Mall here". This from a man from Badayun, not a place known for its shopping Malls!

The Forest Office is a single storeyed structure which again seems to have seen better days. The open space outside has several employees sitting in the sun. The garden or what might pass for a garden is overgrowing with weeds and there is a general atmosphere of neglect in

the place. The Forest officer gives us the details of our rest house which is at a place called Mala and sends a forester with us to guide us. The forester, Mr. S will be with us through our sojourn in the jungle.

The rest house, in the middle of a reserve forest is fascinating. Built in the middle of a 2 hectare plot, which also functions as the tree nursery for the forest department, it is fantastically well maintained. The structure, build in 1921, displays typical late British period architectural characteristics. 10 feet deep verandas at the front and the back, two bedrooms with a dining room/lounge in the centre and 20 foot high ceilings and fireplaces in all rooms. It does get cold here as we are about to find out! The toilets have dressing areas attached to them. There is a backdoor for entry to the toilets presumably for the sweepers who obviously would not be allowed to go through the sahib's room to clean the toilet. Solar panels power the place since there is no regular electricity connection- this was disconnected because of a huge unpaid electricity bill!

Like every other rest house, this place too has a chowkidar cum cook cum caretaker cum gardener; Mr. D. Mr. D is exactly a year from retirement and has been at this rest house for the last 20 years. Although his village is only about a kilometre away, he says he only goes to visit his family once every few months since there is so much to do here. We partake a fabulous lunch prepared by Mr. D and then are off to the jungle with our friend, the forester.

The Pilibhit Tiger Reserve is relatively new- it was declared as such only a couple of years ago. Covering an area of over 80,000 hectares, it is almost half the size of Delhi. We drive on surprisingly well maintained dirt roads through very dense forest. The vegetation is mostly *sal* trees with occasional *sagwan* and other trees. The forest roads have watch towers and machaans built at frequent intervals. The forester points out several motion sensor cameras installed by WWF to estimate the animal population in the Reserve.

We are told that there are more than 40 tigers in the reserve apart from spotted deer, bear, neelgai, wild boar, langoors and several other species. We drive for more than hour without spotting any animal apart from several birds. This makes the forester very nervous who constantly tells us that he hopes we can see a tiger. No amount of my telling him that the point of coming to the jungle is to experience the forest and see everything there is and if we see a tiger, it would be only a bonus, convinces him. Since we are here courtesy a friend in the forest department, he is keen to impress us by showing us a tiger.

Alas, no tiger is spotted, though we do see almost all the other animals. And like other forest guides I have come across, the forester keeps telling us that the elusive tiger had been spotted a day before right at this very spot! The forester shows us several pug marks of a leopard, a tiger and a bear. The bear's pug marks looks almost exactly like a human being's I notice.

The evening at the rest house is an experience- situated in the middle of the jungle, the extreme silence, the tranquillity, the dark ambience, and thus the multitude of stars in the firmament all seemed otherworldly. Mr. D. had lit a fire in all the three fire places and thus the rooms were nice and cosy. The solar panels had charged the inverter and so there was electricity too. The fact that the rest house was in the middle of a jungle meant that various animals would stray into the compound though we only saw a flock of spotted deer the next morning happily grazing (or whatever deer do) in the compound the next morning. However, Mr. D told us that a leopard comes frequently to prey on the stray dogs or the monkeys on the mango tree. This was not terribly comforting though Mr. D. assured us that with the cooking fire burning outside, there was no fear tonight!

The next morning we are taken to a picnic spot called Bifurcation. This, as the name suggests is the place where the Sharda Main canal bifurcates into two branches. The Sharda canal system is one of the oldest and largest canal systems in UP. Constructed by the British in the mid-1920's it taps the mighty Kali river flowing from Nepal (which is called Sharda in India) to provide irrigation to the Ganga-Ghagra doab area. The place is very scenic with the forest on all sides. And right at the bifurcation is an old canal rest house of the Irrigation Dept. The bifurcation has a system of gates which control the flow of water into the various branches. I notice that the mechanism to lower and raise the massive gates is made in Scotland and dated to 1924. One can only imagine the journey of this massive piece of steel machinery from the industrial heartland of Scotland to the dense forests of the Terai. Globalisation is obviously not a recent phenomenon.

It is New Year's eve and the day is bright and sunny. There is a crowd of school children from Pilibhit together with their Principal and a Senior teacher enjoying a picnic next to the canal. The youngsters are all prancing around a path next to the canal, busy doing what youngsters nowadays always seem to be doing- taking selfies with selfie sticks or otherwise. The teachers are trying to shout at them to be careful and come back etc. Funnily, the youngsters are all speaking Hindi while the teacher's insist on shouting their commands and entreaties in ungrammatical English!

I ask the forester about this school. His reply is instructive- this school is the best in Pilibhit. And the reason- only English is spoken in the school! He knows he says because he went there to get his daughter admitted and couldn't follow what the teachers' were saying! Knowledge of English is something which obviously our forester is desperate to acquire. Sometime later, when my son receives a phone call and talks in English for a few minutes on the phone, he asks me casually if my son has taken coaching classes in English speaking since his English is so *forward*!

The hamlet of Mala is close to the rest house where we are staying and so in the evening we go there. The place has a railway station and some distance away, a cluster of houses. This is the Bengali colony. When I enquire about how there could be so many Bengalis in these

parts, I am given various explanations- they were each given 2 acres of land by Vinoba Bhave during the late 1950s Bhoodan movement; they were settled here by Indira Gandhi after the Bangladesh war and even that they were brought here by the British. I still don't know the actual history but it is clear that there are several Bengali colonies in this and the neighbouring villages. The houses are very well kept and the streets surprisingly clean. It is also clear that these internal immigrants continue to retain their identity. Temples built in typical Bengali style, hawkers selling *jhaal-moori* (the canonical snack in Eastern India) are all present. I also spot a two room private school which proudly advertised itself as English, Hindi and Bengali medium school!

On the way back from Pilibhit, we are going to Haldwani. At Haldwani, there is a massive traffic jam. This is now New Year 's Day and a Sunday. Everyone and their uncle is either going or coming back from the famous Seetla temple or from Nainital. When I spot a couple of cars belonging to tourists from Delhi, who, because of force of habit, break the queue to go to the lane coming from the other side, I complain to a woman police person standing there to control these hooligans. She takes one look at me, decides that I too am of the same ilk, and gives me a piece of her mind about not having any road discipline. Clearly the cops in Uttarakhand need to take lessons in "public dealing" from their UP counterparts!

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