

Master Veer & Chotta Matka

The arrival lounge at the airport is small. And the toilet is even smaller. This proved to be an issue as it happens every time one lands at an airport- everyone wants to use the toilet immediately after entering the arrival lounge. While waiting for my turn in the toilet, I noticed a large red coloured suitcase next to the door. Except this was not a suitcase- it is a dustbin shaped like a Samsonite suitcase, complete with a handle and faux locks!

Babasaheb Ambedkar International airport at Nagpur seems quite small for an international airport as well as for a city as important (and central, if I may) as Nagpur. For some strange reason the airport doesn't have too many flights. This seems odd given Nagpur's importance as a city of political and administrative importance. And it is a mystery which no one I spoke with during my stay could resolve.

It was raining as we got out of the terminal. It had been raining all day in Delhi when we had left and the rain here was not a good sign for our trip to the jungle. The hotel/resort we are to stay in Tadoba had sent a car to take us there. The drive from the airport is through the outskirts of the city. It was around 7.30 pm when we started but the city already seemed to be almost deserted. The shops and the Malls and the Metro were all open but the usual hustle-bustle of a large city was missing. In fact, the city had an air of a *moffussil* town which sort of shuts down early.

There seemed to be one thing which people in Nagpur seemed to be very fond of. They seemed to have either a lot of marriages or parties or both since the road from the airport to the highway was lined with Marriage and Party Halls on one side. The other side of the road though had small shacks- cigarette shops, small *dhabas* and neighbourhood *kirana* stores.

The highway that we take goes to Gadchiroli. Excellent road, well lit, very readable and helpful signage- in short, something unusual. Maybe it has to do with the fact that the Minister for Road transport, Nitin Gadkari is the local MP! However that would not explain the fact that almost all the roads that we travelled on were of very good quality. These included MDRs or Major District Roads which connect various towns or connect towns with major highways. This cannot simply be because of dry weather since it does

rain quite a bit in these areas (Nagpur gets about 1000 mm of rain in a year, which is almost twice that of Delhi). And yet, I did not see a single road which had potholes of the kind which magically emerge after every monsoon in our parts.

There is a lot of movement of big dumpers on the road. The driver informs us that these are carrying coal from the coalfields run by Western Coalfields. There are several mines in the area and as a result a large service sector has come up to service them. One could see several small towns on the way close to the coalmines. The roadside is not the usual brown colored dust but instead is greyish-black, the kind that one used to see in railway stations.

At some point, the driver takes the road through various villages because the main road is being repaired and the diversion provided is not very good. It is now around 9 pm and the villages are quite. The small village lanes all seem to be well lit and unusually clean. This is something I noticed throughout my trip- the villages were clean and there are no signs of the usual garbage and filth which we see in villages around North India. It reminded me of the villages in the tribal areas of Jharkhand which though obviously very poor, were still exceptionally clean. The other thing which strikes me is that every single village we crossed has a Bar which has a big well-illuminated sign board.

The resort we are staying at is just outside a village with a strange name, Masal Bk. No one seemed to know what the Bk stood for but that is what its official name is. Possibly because there is another village called Masal Kh in the same sub-division as I found out from the district website. The nearest town is the sub-divisional headquarters at Chimur, about 15 km away. The district headquarters are at Chandrapur which is about 100 km. Chandrapur incidentally was the largest district in India till it was broken up and new districts created.

The sky was clear in the morning and so it seemed all is not lost. I took a walk around the village. It is small but has 2 schools, a community/panchayat building and a health center with an ambulance. What is most interesting is that the village road has cat's eyes on the sides, something which is missing on most highways in our part of the country. The people are mostly Adivasis and Dalits as I subsequently found out. There are cotton fields everywhere though I also saw some fields with *channa*, wheat and mustard growing after the paddy harvest. The paddy stubble is still in the fields and is not burnt here.

We have an afternoon safari booked for the Tadoba National Park which is part of the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve. The park is the largest in Maharashtra though small in size compared to other parks. It has an area of around 115 square kilometers comprising of a core forest and a buffer area. The buffer area is where villages are located. The topography is somewhat hilly with several water bodies.

Our safari is for the Kolara gate core area. The park has about 6 gates for the Core zone and 16 for the Buffer zone. We assemble at the gate where about 12 other open Gypsies are waiting. Each gate is located near a village and the vehicles as well as the guides are from the village itself. This is useful because the local population then has an interest in the wild life tourism business. There are of course also a fair number of resorts and hotels in the area and many more that I saw being built. Although the direct employment for the locals in these places might be limited, there are definite trickle down effects on the local economy.

The reservations for the safaris need to be done much in advance since the number of vehicles allowed at each gate is very limited. Fortunately, we had been told this and so booked them 2 months in advance and got the last available ones. I wondered why, if this place was so popular, the number of vehicles can't be allowed to increase. Maybe the Forest department wants to restrict the number of visitors to protect the forest. This is strange since the jungle is fairly large and in other places like Corbett or Bandhavgarh, I had seen many more vehicles.

Our guide for the safari is a very thin and wiry fellow called Bhagwan. As soon as we get on, Bhagwan tells us to hand over our phones. When I asked what the reason for this was, I was told that some time ago, one enthusiastic visitor stood up in the jeep to take a selfie with the tiger in the background and fallen on the path. I can only imagine that the poor soul would never ever take a selfie in his life again! In any case, the phones are locked up in a small box with a lock. Bhagwan locks it with all the phones, including his own and the driver's. However he does have a phone in his hand. This apparently is the GPS tracker so that the Forest department is sure that the vehicle stays on the path and does not go into the jungle. Appropriate technology if there was one.

The open Gypsy is fairly uncomfortable but the excitement of going into the core jungle overrides all the discomfort. Bhagwan was very energetic and talkative. The only problem was that he spoke so fast that it was difficult to follow what he was saying.

The flora in this jungle is very different from what I had imagined or seen before. There were large trees primarily sal(teak), mahua and kendu. But most of the jungle was bamboo and grass. The bamboo is mostly dried and dead it seemed. When I asked Bhagwan why all the bamboo had died, he said that their life is around 30 years and then they die and new ones come out. I found it odd that all of them would die at the same time since there is no reason to assume that all of them had the same age. I presumed it was some kind of infestation which had led to this genocide.

The dried grass is fairly dense but has been cut in many places to prevent forest fires. There are many fire breaks and many more were being made by teams of workers cutting the grass and removing the dead bamboo.

There are several natural and artificial water bodies in the jungle which serve as watering holes for the animals and birds. Most of them have a borewell which is operated by solar energy since one invariably saw solar panels near the water bodies.

We saw several animals and birds- spotted deer, sambar, neelgai, jungle fowl, various kinds of ibis, egrets, eagles etc. The only unusual animal we saw was the Indian gaur- a huge ruminant with white shaggy legs. Apparently this herbivore can give a good fight to tigers and leopards.

But the guide was insistent that we should see the main attraction- the tiger. It had been spotted in the area in the morning and so it should be around. And so off we went in various directions, sometimes following the other vehicles while at other times all by ourselves. But there was no sign of the beast. In every Tiger reserve, there is a theorem which I think applies- the other safaris would see the tiger and you would not! And you can easily spot the visitors who have been lucky- they usually have a smug smile on their face when you meet them. Thus for instance, the other guests at the resort who had gone for the safari in the morning came back beaming- one tiger and one leopard which is even rarer than a tiger to spot (pun intended!).

And so after about 4 hours, we returned to the resort and settled in for a nice evening with good liquid and solid comestibles.

The next day was going to be easy- nothing planned for the whole day. I went for a long walk in the morning, spent some time with the resort owner who turned out to be a very interesting person. After spending decades in a corporate job, he quit everything,

bought some 4 acres of land here and started building the resort. Although the resort is very luxurious, he himself lives a very Spartan life with his dog Muffin. A building at one end of the resort which houses a dormitory for the staff has his residence on the first floor. Residence in this case means a 40 foot shipping container refurbished into a bedroom, kitchen, bathroom and a small sitting room!

In the afternoon, the owner suggested that we take a trip to a reservoir at Nalleshwar, about an hour away. This reservoir on the Andhari river is very scenic with the Tadoba range on the West. On one side of the reservoir is forested though there is a small road through it to the reservoir. The forest seems to be used by the locals as a place for having parties since in one clearing near the reservoir we found empty whisky bottles and a hearth used for cooking. Interestingly, the tree near the hearth had a danger sign with a not-so-benign tiger staring down. But then, since when did such things stop us from having a party!

As the sun set behind the Tadoba range, we watch the birds swooping down to catch fish in the reservoir. The resident naturalist at the resort is with us and he identifies the birds. A lone fishing boat is also trying its luck as the day is ending. We have a picnic in these sylvan surroundings and get back to the resort.

The next day, we have a morning safari in the Madnapur buffer zone. The buffer zone is the place where habitation and farming is allowed. There are several villages in the zone and we saw fields with precariously made platforms in the fields to keep watch over them. I am reminded of the famous Premchand story I read in school- "Poos ki raat" where the farmer Halku spends a cold winter night with his dog Jabra on one such platform. We have been told that the people living in the buffer zone routinely have their cattle injured or killed by tigers. This is because the core area is too small for the number of tigers and so they frequently move into the buffer zone to find their prey. The villagers are paid for any cattle lost or injured, though with injury, it is only to the extent of the treatment provided. One of the workers at the resort told us how in Madnapur village one of the tigers had injured a cow before the villagers scared him off. The cow was treated by the forest veterinary doctor and so no payment was made. The cow still cannot move its neck and so has to be fed.

Our guide today shall remain unnamed for reasons which will soon become clear, but let us call him Ram. The way he was interacting with the other guides, it seemed as if he

was their boss. And this turned out to be true. He did not take our phones but instead asked us to put them on silent.

The area we were to go to is the territory of Junabai, a tigress with 4 cubs. The tigers are named by the guides- their official designations are with numbers and letters, like T-3 etc. Junabai had been, as expected from the theorem mentioned earlier, sighted the day before and Ram was fairly confident that we would be able to see it. And so off we went on various tracks all over the buffer zone. There are about 10 other jeeps moving around with us, all looking for Junabai and her cubs. Ram was constantly in touch with all the other jeeps over his mobile and once someone tells him about spotting some pug marks, he instructs the driver to go in that direction. This goes on for about 2 hours and we keep moving in circles it seems. All the time, Ram surveys the land with his binoculars hoping to catch sight of some movement.

And then we come across some of the jeeps waiting near a clearing with a water body. Apparently, a tiger had been sighted going into the grassland which borders the trees. This one is Veer, who is a juvenile. He is the son of Xylo and his mother is Veera. Veer is trying to establish his territory but his father wouldn't let him.

We wait near the clearing like all the other jeeps. We keep shifting our position around the clearing since Ram thinks that we might get a view of Veer. I want to use the toilet but Ram says that the rest area is some distance away and if we go, we will miss the tiger. But, he also adds helpfully, that if it is an emergency, he can take us to a remote spot and I can relieve myself. I take up his offer and we drive about 300 meters into the forest where the job is done.

By the time we come back, all except one vehicle have left, presumably because the guests have become impatient. Ram however is convinced that the tiger is still there in the grass. The problem is that the track where we are allowed to drive does not have a clear line of sight. And so Ram insists that we wait.

After a while, the other vehicle also leaves and now Ram gets into form. He tells the driver to move our vehicle near a tree. He then jumps down from the vehicle, quickly puts his GPS phone under the tree and hides it with a stone and some leaves. This is so that the forest department thinks that we are still waiting here. He then tells the driver to take the vehicle into a small clearing in the grass. This is of course totally against all regulations.

We are now going towards the grass where Veer is supposed to be hiding. And then suddenly, about 5 feet away from me, he comes out chasing a hare! The hare has been startled by the sound of the jeep and has scurried out and Veer thinks this would be a good mid-morning snack. But Veer stops cold in his track on seeing the jeep and the hare runs away. And so here we are, about 5 feet away from Veer who is trying to make sense of our intrusion.

Veer is not very big as tigers go. After all he is only 2 years old and still growing. But looking at him at such close quarters is extremely scary. All kinds of thoughts go through my mind- what if he is annoyed at our intrusion and decides to jump at us. The five of us would then be more than a snack for him.

We are too stunned to do anything but Ram asks us to quickly take out our mobiles and take pictures. We manage to fumble but then Ram takes the phone and quickly takes a video and asks the driver to rush back to the track. Here he retrieves his GPS phone as if nothing had happened!

Even though we still have some time before the end of our safari, Ram insists that we head back now that we have seen the tiger. Near the exit, he tells us explicitly not to put the pictures or video on social media since he would then lose his job for having done what he had done to ensure that we see the beast.

After having disproved the theorem on Tiger spotting, we head back to the resort. Since we have the afternoon free, the resort owner suggests we take a trip to Ramdeghi temple. This is an ancient Shiv temple inside the buffer zone of the park. The hour long drive takes us through the sub-division town of Chimur. Like all small towns catering to a rural hinterland, this too is bustling with activity. The market through which we drive has the usual shops supplying daily goods, agricultural implements, shops to repair motorcycles and tractors, and of course mobile repair shops.

Plus there is the National Park with all the resorts around it. Chimur supplies most of the stuff to them though the more exotic stuff is got from Nagpur or from Amazon! Yes, e-commerce delivers to the various villages around as I witnessed an Amazon delivery at the resort where we are staying.

On the way, we pass a fancy looking resort. This one is where Sachin Tendulkar stays when he visits Tadoba, thrice a year. And apparently, for him, there is no safari booking

or restrictions as to which gate he goes through or where he goes in the park. Fame has its perks I guess.

We enter the buffer zone through Nimdela gate where we need to register. Because of the temple, there are no restrictions on entry though one can only go to the temple unless one takes a safari. The setting of the temple is quite scenic with a huge cliff on one side and the jungle on the other side. There are many visitors (this being a Monday) who are having food in the large enclosure. The temple itself is an ASI protected monument and is fairly plain looking. On one side, a path leads to a natural *kund* which is off limits because someone, once again, was trying to take a selfie and fell into the pool.

Since this temple is in the middle of a thick jungle (though in the buffer zone), I asked about the presence of tigers. This is the territory of Chotta Matka, a moniker given to him because his father was Matka. I am told that the tiger routinely visits the temple and there is even a video of his standing in front of it with the priest standing nearby.

We leave Tadoba early in the morning to catch our flight back to Delhi. Driving during the day I realize how important the coal fields and cotton are to this area. Interestingly, despite being famous for its oranges, I do not spot any orange groves. But coal is everywhere- coal dumpers, cranes and earth-movers parked everywhere.

Nagpur in the early morning is as quiet as it was when we had landed there. Checking in for our flight, we spot a Haldiram outlet at the airport. The chain started in Nagpur in the 1930s and then spread all across north India. In fact, when we had stopped for buying some water at a small shack on our way to Tadoba, I had seen that even the bread being sold there was Haldirams. The airport outlet has the usual sweetmeats and savory snacks. But one thing stood out- orange barfi! In that sense Haldiram continues to be true to its roots in orange country!

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