

A BRUSH WITH NIRVANA - AN ENCOUNTER WITH A WILD TUSKER

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I found out that the first advise my well meaning staff of Nagarahole gave me was the most difficult one to follow. All my officers appealed to me to ensure that I do not walk in an elephant country. Nagarahole has the highest recorded density for the Asian Elephant (there being about 1500 elephants in 643 sq. km.) and if I do not trek the forests, what else should I be doing, as a Director of the park? One gentleman gave some concessions. He stated that I should always carry my weapon and keep atleast two forest personnel as my companions, wherever I go.

I soon discovered that almost all my subordinate staff are adept at sneaking through the deciduous forests of Nagarahole, and many of them, with years of experience in wildlife could read the mood of an elephant like a book. Whatever could be my self assessment, my staff had decided that I am a novice and hence I needed this kindly advice.

On the very day of my assuming charge of the Park, at 11 in the night, I had seen my first tusker of the Park. He had unusually long, but slender tusks. He was identified to be the aggressor who had crushed

a forest-
ester to
death a couple of
months ago. I was told
that Mr. Rehman, now positioned
at the Murkal gate, had got
one of his arms amputated - he was
lucky. An elephant wanted to gore him
against a wall, but this Mahout found himself
between the two tusks and managed to escape
but for his one arm that got pierced. In those few
days I had gathered enough information on many
unfortunate incidents to treat an elephant with
respect, may it be wild or domestic.

However, circumstances forced me to confront a wild tusker standing on my two legs, much sooner than later. The Ranger from Nagarahole Mr. Durge Gowda brought me the news that there was a previously wounded tusker in his range and we should do something about it. However, on learning from him that this tusker was wounded during his fight with a rival male,

I soon
dismissed
the matter as a non
issue. It is but natu-
ral that two male el-
ephants fight over a cow el-
ephant, and there is always a
chance that a fierce fight may
lead to the death of any one of
them. Nagarahole is a mega
fauna National Park and not a
zoo, to interfere in the day to day
affairs of the denizens of the for-
ests.

"We hope that this particular tusker
recovers", I said with aplomb, "if not,
let us follow the Government of
India's directions. Let us carry out
the Postmortem, recover the tusks;
and do away with the carcass".
As an after thought I added,
"given the choice, I would have
allowed the wild boars and the vul-
tures to take care of the carcass. How-
ever, the threat of trafficking of wildlife parts
and products forces us to take to such mea-
sures". How knowledgeable of me.

My Ranger did not appear impressed. "The
tusker is ranging in the periphery of the Park", he
said, "if he dies in some obscure village and if some-
one lifts the tusks, it would be too bad". I could not
easily dismiss this possibility.

We decided to tranquilise the elephant and treat him. Dr.
Chettiappa, the Veterinary Surgeon of the Park, who has suc-
cessfully tranquilised more than 100 wild elephants needed
no prodding and he was ready for the operation by the next
morning. Four kumki elephants including Abhimanyu, the
tusker who has participated in great many elephant capture
operations, were moved to the operation site from the Kalhalla
elephant camp.

Early in the morning, about 45 minutes journey from Hunsur
(my Head Quarters) brought me to Karmad, a small hamlet in
Kodagu district, where my people were waiting for me. About
ten minutes brisk walk brought us to the Park boundary, that
is clearly demarcated by the elephant proof trench.

Without a word, we set off towards the wounded elephant. A
local tribal, who had tracked the elephant for the past couple
of days led the way. Fifteen of us and the four elephants
moved stealthily inside the forest. I was escorted by two armed
Forest Guards, and by the expression on their face I was
certain that in case of exigencies they would lay down their
lives for my sake without second thoughts.

About half an hour's trek brought us to an abandoned paddy
field. There we all abruptly stopped. At the far end of the open

grassy patch we could sight the wounded tusker, or rather his backside, as he was facing the opposite direction. We left the kumki elephant there, and proceeded further towards the elephant.

It had rained heavily the previous night and the forest floor had become slippery. Nevertheless it had offered us the advantage of walking noiselessly. At the edge of the forest we halted, keeping a respectable distance from the bull elephant. Through binoculars I could clearly see the ghastly wounds on his rump.

We kept watching the tusker for a long while. But for the alarm calls of a barking deer that rippled through the dense forests from a great distance, there was hardly any sound. The elephant was standing in a puddle. Once in a while he would throw wet earth on his body. Occasionally he would indulge in a gentle swaying of his body. Of course, now and then he would also lift his pendent trunk to test the air. We sat on the wet forest floor for so long that if one of my companions were to produce a pack of playing cards, I would have hardly been surprised.

Abruptly, the Veterinary Doctor moved. With a gesture that seemed to seek my permission (and without waiting for my response) he started crawling towards the elephant, holding the gun aloft in one arm. The doctor stopped very close to the elephant and aimed the gun at the majestic animal. We held our breath and awaited the booming sound of the gun.

However, we heard no sound. It appeared that the doctor had forgotten as to why he was there. As for the rest of us, in only one sense the monotony was broken. Instead of watching only the backside of the elephant, we could now also see as well, the head and the back of the doctor. I broke the silence with a whisper. "Does the tusker know that we are here?"

"He does" said the Ranger. He took out a small piece of paper and threw it in the air. The wind carried the piece of paper towards the elephant. Though not gifted with a developed sense of sight, an elephant has an acute sense of smell and hearing, more so than in most animals. The gently blowing wind had carried our presence to the elephant much earlier.

After another spell of silence I enquired "why doesn't the doctor shoot?"

My ACF, Mr. Balachandra, who bubbles with energy must have equally experienced the burden of silence and inaction. He whispered back immediately, with a glint in his eyes that betrayed mischief. "Sir", he said, "with a couple of drinks down his throat, the doctor could go and tickle the belly of a wild elephant. Unfortunately the doctor has recently married and he is off drinks". I was wondering which one was an unfortunate happening/ eventuality in the mind of my most trusted colleague when some one else stirred into action. "I do not know why the doctor is sitting there like a lame duck", murmured my Ranger and moved towards the elephant.

However, nothing important happened in the next ten minutes, the Ranger and the Vet had indulged in gesticulation for long. We were given the impression that they were facing a dilemma- either to climb up a near by tree and dart on the back of the elephant or to shoot him, standing where they were. The combined inaction of my trusted aides put me also

in a dilemma. If there is indecision, it is my responsibility to decide a course of action. Should I intervene or should I not? Ultimately throwing caution to the winds, I crawled upto the doctor.

By then I was so close to the tusker that I could see the details of the pachyderm. The circular wounds were huge and puss had dripped down the pillar-like limbs. I got convinced that the tusker cannot lift his legs and would fall dead any time. Any self respecting tusker would have turned around with cocked ears and would have charged, long ago. If not, at the earliest signs of our presence, he would have disappeared amidst the bamboo clumps. Despite such speculations I felt no different to my ancestors in the stone age, standing so close to the biggest of all the land animals.

I gesticulated, with a stern face that I should be given the gun. My adrenalin glands were active. The doctor appeared puzzled. The Ranger, though not known for politeness, pleaded "No, please" in barely audible whisper. "Why?" I gesticulated. He threw a glance at the tusker and shook his heads.

At that moment I saw the huge body heave and turn. It was quite a brisk movement, considering the hugeness of the body. I could see the furious eye ball turn to the corner to behold the intruders. Instinctively, I turned and bolted.

I heard an ear-shattering trumpet. Then I heard the elephant chasing me ...thud...thud...thud... I was running at my best speed and not a thought in my mind. My mind had blanked out, NIRVANA. When a thought did appear, it was a command "DO NOT LOOK BACK". I ran on, towards my people.

At last I heard a gun shot. I reached the tree line and then ran on amidst the tall trees, thick bamboo and the tangled undergrowth. Not a soul around. Where were my armed Guards? I exhausted all my energy, and I stood there catching my breath. Where was the elephant? The thought that the wounded animal may attack me, approaching from any which direction unnerved me. Mercifully, soon I heard a whisper from a Kuruba, beckoning me to safety.

As we all assembled again we heard a gun shot. After having successfully run for his life, the doctor had climbed on to a kumki elephant and had persued the tusker. This time he had no hesitation in darting the animal.

Myself and Mr. Laxman, the Ranger from Thithimathi soon reached the spot where the tusker lay unconscious. Dr. Chettiappa was busy washing the maggot ridden wounds of the elephant. This prime-aged tusker was undoubtedly a "Kumeriah" -the perfectly shaped one. Within ten minutes the cardiac stimulant administered by the doctor had its effect the elephant regained his consciousness It was yet another successful operation for Dr.Chettiappa.

On the eventful day I had made up my mind never again in to walk in an elephant country, but could not help reconsidering my decisions days I found myself on the line transects cut by Dr. Ullas Karanth, sneaking through the forests, unarmed, counting wild elephants. I had read that if an elephant gives you a chase, you should run downhill, or climb a tree as soon as possible. If worse comes to worse stand where you are and shout. I hoped that I would remember atleast one of those prescriptions on being chased by an elephant the next time.