

LOST IN THE RAINFOREST

In June 1988, I had been to the Kalakadu Wildlife Sanctuary in Tamil Nadu to trek from Netteri Dam in the Sanctuary to Muthukuzhivayal a cardamom plantation, in Upper Kothayar Reserve Forest in Kanyakumari district. There is a proposal to annex this forest with the Sanctuary. These forest areas would become part of the proposed Kalakadu-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve, the seventeenth Tiger Reserve in the country. The Government of India has issued a notification to this effect in April, 1988. When I worked in these hills during 1982-84 I never had the chance to trek along this route, which is used largely by cane-poachers, although I have covered other parts of the proposed Tiger Reserve.

While going on such a trek one has to inform the local forest officers well in advance to find a suitable guide to take you through the area. This, I did and the response of the forest department was cordial and immediate. In fact when I reached Netteri dam (altitude, 4500') after trekking through 12 kms of primordial rainforest with two of my local naturalist friends, I found the guide and two forest guards waiting for us. The guide told me that he had worked in this area 15 years ago! The guards were completely new to the area! The time was 1100 hrs and the guards were instructed by their Range Forest Officer to leave me in Muthukuzhivayal and come back to Netteri, where there is a dilapidated Forest Rest House, by the same evening. The RFO had no idea about the forest through which we had to walk!

We started walking at 1130 hrs. Till 1700 hrs, although it was drizzling incessantly, there was rapid progress through dense patches of reeds (Ochlandra travancorica) and rainforests along and across

streams and elephant trails. In several places there were gaur and mouse deer tracks. Giant squirrels and Nilgiri langurs frequently flitted through the dense canopy. Near a stream bed leopard and tiger pugmarks were also seen. In one place an elephant stood feeding amidst the reeds hardly 15 m from the path. We tiptoed past the elephant. One of my naturalist friends, Mr Albert Rajendran, who has been studying pit-vipers of this area, could even locate a short nosed vine snake (Dryophis dispar) and a green pit viper (Trimeresurus macrolepis). In one place we found a comfortable grass hut built by cane smugglers. As our attempts to burn it did not succeed, we pulled it down.

I think the guide made the mistake of selecting the wrong path around 1730 hrs. At 1830 hrs we realized that we were still far from any human habitation. The drizzle continued, leeches crawled up our feet and darkness started shrouding the forest. The guide confessed he was lost.

There was only one option left for us. To halt in the middle of the wet forest would have been suicidal as the leeches would have drained our blood to the last drop. I led the way down to a valley where we had been hearing a river rumbling. Fortunately, as visibility was just fading, we came upon a flat rock in the middle of the river, wetter and colder than the forest floor, but free from leeches. The guards and the guide tried to build up a fire using the newspaper, which we had wrapped around the two loaves of bread, and dry reeds. The wetness of the wood did not succumb to the small fire we had built.

We were not prepared for the night halt in such a place. After sharing the bread and drinking from the river we went to sleep on the wet

rock. I slept from 2000 to 2200 hrs, and thereafter the cold and the constant drizzle did not allow me to sleep. The same was the case with the others.

With the first light of dawn, we packed up our wet belongings, and went up to the place from where we had descended into the valley the previous evening. After two hours of climbing, slipping down and crawling through bushes I picked up an old trail, along which someone had passed cutting saplings, probably a year ago. Now the trek became much easier and after half an hour we entered a cardamom plantation. After talking to the people at the plantation we realized that we were several kilometers from Muthukuzhivayal, our destination and the nearest bus stop was 15 kms away. This did not bother us as the caretaker of the plantation kindly came forward to give us a place to wash and a much needed warm rice meal.

Later as we walked towards the bus stop I looked back at the magnificent forest where we had spent a sleepless night. I was happy that one day these forests would come under the umbrella of Project Tiger, which would further enhance its protection and conserve it for posterity. But a question which made me uneasy repeatedly arose in my mind. How are we going to effectively patrol areas such as the one I walked through, if we don't have proper guides to take Forest Department staff who may be completely new to such areas.

One way of ensuring an effective guide system in an area is to appoint local tribals as guides. Tribals know their area in and out. Mundanthurai has a tribe known as Kanis who are very good in junglecraft. Possibly when

Kalakadu-Mundanthurai becomes a Project Tiger area the Forest Department will be in a position to appoint Kani guides to assist Forest staff to perambulate remote areas which otherwise would remain unknown and would attract illegal activities.

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