



July 2012

TIGHT-FISTED WITH THE TIGER?

When it is time to write the tiger's epitaph, it may very well be this: 'The tiger had many friends but little money in its coffers.' It is revered as India's national animal and worshipped as a god in many cultures. Paeans have been written about its beauty and power while its forests are venerated as the subcontinent's last great green places. It has even won the obligatory popularity contest as 'the world's favourite animal' and also has a day dedicated to it. Power, beauty, fear, compassion-the tiger has managed to evoke all this in the general populace. Unfortunately, *generosity* doesn't figure on that list.

In India, since tiger conservation is believed to be a matter of national importance, the Central government allots certain sums of money to the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), which utilizes these funds for various activities that it undertakes. Project Tiger is one such scheme and is administered by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA). For the fiscal year 2012-13, as per the MoEF outcome budget, Project Tiger has been allotted a sum of INR 167.70 crores, which will be distributed among 40 Tiger Reserves for conservation-related activities.

One of these necessitates relocation of people that live within core/critical habitats of tiger reserves. Now consider this: each 'family' that opts for relocation is eligible for a compensation package of INR 10,00,000. Multiply that into 48,549 –the number of families that are to be relocated from 32 tiger reserves, as per figures released by the MoEF. Here's another telling figure: the average cost for the monthly ration for a forest guard, which consists of bare necessities amounts to about INR 2500. As per various estimates, there are about 3000 such forest guards all across the country's TRs. To carry out these and other conservation-related activities over an area that spans approximately 32,500 sq. km, will the budget assigned be enough?

Every year it's the same story-demands are made for an increase in funds for wildlife and rightfully so! After all, the environment is serious business. But these increments seldom come. The question now is, whether they can? More than half of our population falls below the global poverty line. That same percentage of people does not have access to a closed toilet! Statistics tell us that 170 million people in India do not have access to potable water while about 7000 Indians die of hunger everyday. According to a UNDP Human Development Report released in 2010, there are more poor people in eight Indian states than in 26 of the poorest African countries. Incidentally, all of them are 'tiger states'. But then again, there is the myth of the proverbial pot of gold at the end of every spectrum. In this case, that pot of gold may very well be in the hands of many of those Indian citizens who claim allegiance to the national animal. As per a study on private charitable contributions in India by Bain & Co, India's High Net Worth Population was the fastest growing among developing countries. These High Net Worth Individuals (HNWIs) consisted of people with assets of USD one million and more. Their research indicated that 5% of India's "wealthiest households" control 40% of its wealth. Yet, private contributions to charity form only about 0.4 % of our GDP.

Concurring with these findings, Ujwal Thakar, former CEO of GiveIndia, a donation platform where people can network with and contribute to NGOs said, "On a scale of one to ten, Indians rank at one when it comes to giving. We are far behind our western counterparts." Thakar's statements are reflected in the results of the aforementioned survey that states that while private

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contributions to charity in the USA amounted to 9% of the annual income of HNWI's; the figure lies between 1.5- 3 % among Indians. He attributes this to our "perception of ourselves as a poor nation", which probably prohibits us from giving to charity. We also cannot deny that we are a nation of exhibitionists and believe in putting our money where it can be seen or admired or even envied by others. While this may not be true for all Indians, there is also the fact that in India, aspirations have been rising with incomes and thus charity is categorized as the domain of those who have too much money and don't know what to do with it.

Meanwhile, those that do have the wherewithal *and* the will to contribute point out to impediments in the form of lack of professional NGOs as well as unfriendly tax laws. NGOs and donors alike are yet to wend their way through the incipient market for charity. As per section 80G of the Income Tax Act, 1961, donations are entitled to exemptions of up to 50 % of amount donated or 10 % of the taxable income, whichever is lesser. These benefits are not applicable to the donation of material goods. Organisations that wish to accept funds from foreign contributors require a separate set of clearances, which are obtained through a time-consuming process. Even though many NGOs in India have the required set of clearances, they lack the human as well as monetary skills and resources to be able to fully utilize the potential of the donations that have been accorded to them.

Nevertheless, in the recent past, there has been a significant change in the attitudes of Indians. Be it through CSR-related activities or private donations by individuals, philanthropy in India is on the rise with nearly half of all contributions directed towards education and women's causes. However, this new-found largesse does not seem to be the tiger's lot. Explains Thakar, "Until now, wildlife-related concerns have been viewed as anti-poverty and elitist. There is also the belief among people that causes related to children and women give them the biggest bang for their buck." While this can be partly attributed to a lack of awareness about the dangers facing the environment, we cannot deny that the tiger's most truculent torchbearers themselves cannot be relied on to put their money where their mouth is. A look at some simple facts and figures may help substantiate this claim: as per the official website of the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department, the MP Save the Tiger Foundation, received donations in cash and kind that amounted to INR 4.3 crores up to March 2010. Even the recent much celebrated campaign to save the tiger collected INR 5 crores, half of which was donated by a single person. However, this same sect of tiger-supporters will not shy away from spending a minimum of INR 40,000 on a family holiday to see the cash-strapped tiger. Says Dr. HS Pabla, former Chief Wildlife Warden and Principal Chief Conservator of Forests of MP, "In India, very few care to give to wildlife. For example, the MP Forest Department itself receives contributions from merely 4-5 individuals. While these are not very significant amounts, they do address critical needs which cannot be covered by government funding." Adds Thakar, "In wildlife, there are a number of people that can make significant contributions but don't. Their passion is only lip service. Having said that, there is also a set of dedicated, people who are willing to give."

The fact thus remains that today's generation is increasingly predisposed to the concept of philanthropy. Donors seem to express greater conviction in those that they have pledged their resources too. This confidence stems not just from the sheer goodwill or sentimentality but more so from the fact that today, charity has assumed the mantle of a serious business based on the bedrock of professionalism, efficiency and accountability. To ensure that wildlife too benefits from these altruistic leanings, Thakar advises the creation of a database of such donors as well as the causes to which they have contributed. Records such as these will enable fund-raisers to keep track of donations and also project fund-raisers and prospective donors as examples to emulate. These donors may also be called upon to participate in awareness building activities. It

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is also important to dispel notions of wildlife as not deserving enough. Therefore, NGOs and other people who are lobbying for funds for wildlife must first build a sound knowledge base-not only will this create awareness about the problem but will also enable people to contribute to creating a solution. As far as possible, donors must be made aware of the manner in which their contributions have been used. Often, it is seen that in wildlife, the recipient(s) also consist of government agencies such as the Forest Department, which have not been able to gather the required resources for reasons mentioned above. It is therefore paramount that people recognize them as being worthy of their time and money. This will require a greater level of interaction between the Forest Department and interested donors. Elaborates Dr. Pabla, "Government agencies are not very good at interacting and receiving donations. It is imperative that they reach out to prospective donors with an open mind." Creative strategies need to be drawn out in order to raise and utilize funds in a manner that is beneficial and satisfactory to both the donor and recipient. For example, it may be a good idea to persuade corporate houses whose CSR activities are based in rural areas to work for the welfare of villages in the fringes of PAs. This will draw attention to the plight of villagers as well as wildlife in these areas. This is just one among many other ways to translate goodwill into action. However it must be reiterated that these strategies will work only if we are able to shake off our tightfistedness in favour of generosity.

For the bottom line is this- no one can live on love and fresh air. Not even the tiger.

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