



Hunting for a Better Future: The Pardhis of Panna

Ensuring a steady future for both the nomads and the tigers in Madhya Pradesh.

CULTURE MADHYA PRADESH SEJAL MEHTA | POSTED ON: OCTOBER 8, 2015

HEY THERE!
 Want a weekly dose of travel inspiration in your inbox?

Enter Your Email Address

SIGN ME UP



The firecracker gaze of Mohini, who stayed at the Pardhi hostel. Photo: Sejal Mehta

His fingers moved around rapidly in the sand, tracing a shape we were all too familiar with. A circle, pulleys on four sides, jagged edges at the circumference.

A tiger trap.

The afternoon was quiet around us in Panna, Madhya Pradesh (MP), and the old peepal tree we were sitting under stretched leisurely overhead to shade us from the sun that always seemed particularly relentless in the plains of central India, right in the heart of tiger country.

Raju (name changed) put his palm at the centre of the shape he'd drawn and looked up at me.

"Raat ko sher aise pau rakhta, aur phas jaata. Phir subah hum jaake maar dete the."

(The tiger would be trapped when he put his foot in here during the night. Then we'd go kill it in the morning.)

I asked him why they left the animal in agony for the night. If they were going to kill it anyway, why not do it immediately.

"Ek hi thodi lagaate the, maidam ji. Bahot saare trap daalte the, toh sab jagah khatam karke vaapas aate the."

(It wasn't just the one trap. We would lay traps all over and return only after finishing all the others.)

I stayed silent at this, but he caught the slight cringe as I thought of the metal trap eating away at the animal's paws and the sheer volume of tiger numbers he was talking about.

"Ab soch ke hame bhi accha nahi lagta. Lekin yeh sach hain ki aap ke sar pe itne baal nahi hongey jitney sher hum sab ne maare hain."

(Now, even we don't like the thought of it and it's all in the past. But the truth is, there may not be enough hair on your

[EDITOR'S PICKS](#)
[MOST POPULAR](#)



[The Magic of Málaga in 48 Hours](#)

[A Top Chef's Travel Menu](#)

[Live Like It's the 17th Century in Galle](#)

head to count the number of tigers we've killed.)

Granted, this could have been a bit of an exaggeration said for effect, but in theory, the nomadic Pardhi community *has* been held responsible for plummeting tiger populations in the country for generations. Predominantly a hunting tribe found mainly in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka, Pardhis enjoyed pride of place in hunting parties for Mughals, zamindars and the British Raj due to their unparalleled tracking skills. They moved from forest to forest, hunting smaller animals, wild boars and rabbits, but as the wildlife trade cast its net far and wide in India, the pressures (and the easy money therein) of hunting big cats became their primary occupation. In 1871, the British rule passed the Criminal Tribes Act, and the Pardhis suddenly became villains, attached with the stigma of being criminals, and as a result, unemployable. In the district of Panna today, they get no benefits from government schemes as they are not uniformly recognised as a tribe. In most other districts, they fall under the "general" category. The fact that this tribe was held responsible for depletion of tiger numbers didn't help its reputation, either.



Panna's landscape is different from other parks I'd visited in the state. Flat land, inclines, ravines and gorges all exist together.
Photo: Sejal Mehta

Conservation initiatives continue to work with this community in an effort to introduce alternative livelihoods; I met Raju – who, I am delighted to report, plays for the other team now, turning from poacher to protector – while volunteering with Project Unnati, an initiative of the Last Wilderness Foundation (LWF) for the rehabilitation of Pardhi children. LWF is an organisation whose expertise lies in working with forest communities in MP for six years now. Raju was determined that his children live an educated life and LWF was a perfect fit to ensure that they weren't dependent on the forests.

Panna, known as the diamond city for the mines in the region, has seen some tough times. After losing all its tigers in 2009, these big cats were brought back to Panna Tiger Reserve under the sparkling leadership of the then Field Director, R Sreenivasa Murthy. Today, the forest is threatened once again, by the Ken-Betwa river-linking project. The Ken River runs through the national park, through a landscape that is strikingly different from the other jungles in the state. Along with the quintessential central India vegetation of sal, teakwood and bamboo, Panna gives you the chance to stand over cliffs that fall into deep ravines and gorges. It is said – though I have found no documentation to support this – that the original tigers of Panna even looked different, larger, because of the boulder-filled landscape they had to navigate. Tigers may have returned to this forest but I wasn't there for the stripes. Not this time.

There are two hostels in Panna that are attempting a rather uphill battle: a boy's hostel at Narangibaug and a girl's hostel at Kunjvan. Built around 2007 by the Panna Forest Reserve, WWF India and the Education Department (Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan), they play educational homes for Pardhi children. The strategy is simple and smart. It is fairly tough for the older generation to find livelihood outside the forests, but it's not too late for their children. The hostels provide food, shelter and an education and in return, the children promise to dream of a different life. So far, so good. But when the children finished school at the eighth standard, or even left for the summer, the nomadic tribe often left Panna, bringing down the chances of a continuing education or a career.



Rasni tries her hand at photography on a nature trail. Photo: Sejal Mehta



Bhavna Menon from the LWF team shares photos of the kids' progress with the families. Photo: Sejal Mehta

Cue LWF. Project Unnati is a two-month programme that runs through the children's summer vacations in May and June. "With Project Unnati, we are attempting to provide them with basic skillsets which could someday earn them livelihood without being dependent on forest produce," said Vidya Venkatesh, CAO at LWF. Students pick a vocation for their field of expertise; boys chose electrical work and the girls picked sewing. Other activities include yoga, kabbadi, nature trails (to inculcate a love for the wildlife they otherwise saw as income), and, in case there was time, a spirited game of blind man's bluff, where we got creamed – daily – by the kids. They were conditioned to forests, to dark nights, to tracking; we never stood a chance.

Volunteering on this project held many firsts for me, in that I'd never met children who knew so much about how things are killed, or how much different meats or animal skins cost. They displayed an intricate knowledge of forests from the

years they'd lived and hunted with their parents. They were passionate, aggressive even, and spoke freely and innocently about killing, displaying a conditioning that would take years to break. Even their habits reflected a wilder nature; there were painfully long lectures from the value of wearing clothes to brushing their teeth, and in the beginning, bath time turned into chase sequences I've only seen dogs make to escape water. The tribe has a reputation of being hot-blooded, and proud; I'd heard stories of revenge, and in some cases, fights to the death. In the time I was there, even among the kids, fights broke out regularly and with gusto. There were no grey areas, they loved and fought without holding back.

The transition isn't smooth for either party, but neither is giving up. "All it comes down to is acceptance," Bhavna Menon, Project Coordinator, LWF said. "They have been living a certain way their whole lives. For me to come from the city to tell them, 'Don't kill this, don't eat that, don't make money selling this,' – it's outlandish. It's not like I have a sustainable alternative livelihood for them yet, so why will they listen? This sort of work will take time and a whole lot of patience. They're smart kids, talented and intensely affectionate, and if you show them love and are honest with them, they'll be yours forever."



The LWF team was no match for the agile children. Photo: Sejal Mehta

She was right. Even in the short time that I stayed, the children drew me into their inner circle, allowing me to teach them sketching, to tell them stories, even to carry around their little siblings on nature walks, where they deliberately talked about the price of the meat of the birds I was pointing out only to laugh at the horror on my face. They were more generous with their love than I deserved, and the adults more accepting than I'd anticipated. But it had nothing to do with me, really. It was the work that the teams working here had put in, be it the extremely popular Indrabhan Singh Bundela from WWF India or Vidya from LWF. Bhavna had spent two months in Panna working with children from a community that is fiercely proud and private, and reacts to outsiders with the same suspicion they've been met with forever. So it's no small feat that by the time I joined the group that was only one month in, they didn't remember a time that the LWF team was not in their lives.

Unfortunately, love doesn't always translate into easy. This was an uphill climb right from the start. The parents of the children lived close by at Gandhigram, a temporary Pardhi settlement in Panna, and the kids ran away from the hostel if they were even slightly dissatisfied. The team would then have to rush over and coax them into returning. There was constant firefighting to keep them happy and motivated with games, incentives, music and even the occasional dance party. And it wasn't just the children that needed validation. "The fact that parents preferred that the children stayed with them for the summer to earn a living was a larger problem," said Vidya. "Usually, children contributed ₹20,000–₹30,000 to their parent's earnings during the vacations. We're trying to help a bunch of students to take up jobs or settle in their own businesses. This would create role models for this community and will build trust amongst the younger students." Towards the end of the programme, there was a shift – albeit small – in the children's attitude. The team visited Gandhigram regularly, and shared photographs of the progress the children were making, and slowly, more parents wanted their kids to attend, and fewer children ran away.

But this is a very small step in a process that needs a much larger conversation, and LWF is only one among several organisations working with Pardhis in MP alone. Raju revealed that he knows of friends who have left Panna, but still hunt illegally in other forests. "They laugh at us for working this hard at the hostel for a small stipend. They invite us back into that world where money is easy and life is laidback." Raju was motivated to stay put for his children, but he wished more could be done for the elders of the community, and for the thousands who didn't have jobs like him. Vidya pointed out that the Panna model is currently working on a very small section of the community; it would have to be rolled out through all of MP and Maharashtra so as to be able to cover most of the Pardhi population, and later at a national level, and be supported by the government. "Also, if all the NGOs working with these communities across India, under different domains – education, medicine, livelihood – could join hands and chalk out a plan together, that would be a big step forward," she said.



Last Wilderness Foundation roaring for the cause. Photo: Sejal Mehta

"The good news is that Pardhis (in fact, all hunting communities) don't like hunting but the alternatives we give them are not working," said Dr HS Pabla, who retired as Chief Wildlife Warden, MP, after 35 years in the Indian Forest Service. He said that while the rehabilitation of hunting communities needs to be funded by the government and run by NGOs, the forest departments should step in if help is not forthcoming. "This will not only wean away some Pardhis at least from a life of crime, it will also help foresters keep tabs on those who continue to indulge in wildlife crime," he explained.

I visited Gandhigram on my last day there, and walked around the campsite. Conversations revealed that many kids had dropped out of the hostel, some had begun jobs but left them, and others had just gone back to hunting, which was upsetting after all that effort. These NGOs are filling an important niche, no doubt and the model to educate the children is perfect, but what happens after they're back home? What about the lack of opportunities? What about

acceptance from mainstream society? I remembered an afternoon I spent with the kids designing a wallpaper family tree. We cut out a leaf from chart paper, wrote our names and decorated it, and stuck it on the tree. The children were delighted, not just for an afternoon of fun, but because of a feeling of belonging. All of us – teachers, students, volunteers – on that tree, together. I heard later that the low turn-out of Pardhi children at the hostel had led the education department to start enrolling children from nearby villages. While on the one hand, it could be a step toward integration, but it could be problematic. So far, the hostel had been only for Pardhis, something that was theirs alone. I hoped this move toward integration wouldn't threaten this hard-won sense of being part of a wider community.

As we turned to leave, under the harsh sun beating down over the temporary camps at Gandhigram, I saw that some families had started to build solid structures for homes. Cement and mud, instead of cloth and tarp. Were these signs of permanency in the interest of their children's education? Only time would tell, but it was a good enough reason to hope.

If you want to help out, the kids love volunteers who teach them skills, play music or a sport or even just read stories to them. Contact Last Wilderness Foundation at thelastwilderness.org or write to them at contactus@thelastwilderness.org.



Sejal Mehta is an editor, writer, and the former Web Editor of Nat GeoTraveller India. An old travel hack with a bias towards big cats, Sejal has also worked for Lonely Planet and Saevus Wildlife. She tweets as @Snaggletooth_00.

Tags: [ASIA](#), [CONSERVATION](#), [CULTURE](#), [INDIA](#), [MADHYA PRADESH](#)

Hey there! Like what you see (or not)? Tell us what you think at web.editor@natgeotraveller.in.



Psst. Want a weekly dose of travel inspiration in your inbox?

[SIGN ME UP](#)

YOU MAY ALSO LIKE



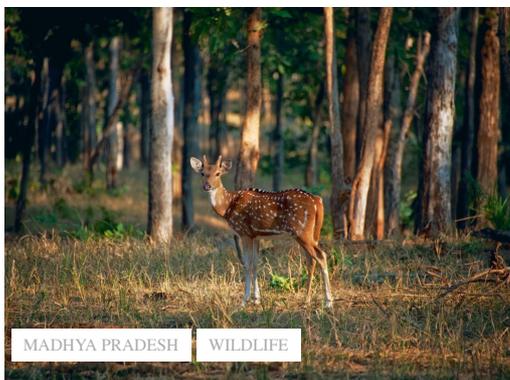
[CULTURE](#) [PHOTO STORIES](#) [WEST BENGAL](#)

[In Photos | Celebrating Spring In Santiniketan](#)



[CULTURE](#) [SEYCHELLES](#)

[Seychelles Soul Curry](#)



[MADHYA PRADESH](#) [WILDLIFE](#)

[Folktales From The Forest In Madhya Pradesh](#)



[CULTURE](#) [MADHYA PRADESH](#)

[Exploring The Gateway To The Deccan](#)

