

Bandipur Beckons

ILLUSTRATED MONTHLY NEWSPAPER



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BANDIPUR BECKONS



ANNOUNCEMENT

We are happy to successfully complete six months of a wonderful journey named Bandipur Beckons. We would like to thank you for your support and encouragement in every steps we had taken. You have gracefully accepted our myriads of mistakes, and patted on our backs to provide to courage to go on!

With that courage, we are glad to inform you that we will, from our next issue onwards, bring to you news for other wild areas of India than Bandipur alone. Our friends working in different fields of conservation and wildlife biology have agreed to share their experiences from the nooks and corners of the wild India.

We hope we will have you all along with us as we embark on this new journey!

ALARM CALL

March was a cruel month, probably as always, in Bandipur. Especially this year after a devastating fire, Bandipur was waiting for a drop of rain, like she has never waited for anything else. The first rain in the beginning of April came more like the magical touch of a long lost lover, turning everything burnt and grey into lush green. The deer came back, the birds were busy collecting food for their fledglings, and the land was vibrant with the essence of life, once again.

This was merely a pre-monsoon shower, which disappeared as soon as it had arrived, and life around Bandipur began revolving around the aspiration of few more late-evening showers. There were pujas held in the villages to satisfy the rain-gods and usher in wealth and prosperity. Small-talks with strangers and neighbours started and ended with their respective premonitions regarding the day's rainfall prospects. Everywhere, they began tilling and sowing lands, hoping this year will turn out to be a good rain-year. Otherwise, they hardly have an option of alternate irrigation.

Like many things this land has taught me, I have learnt a few tricks that potentially predict rainfall. Although a novice at this game, I am getting much better. I can hardly call this a 'game' though, as people strictly believe that the swallows bring rain (the local name for swallows is Malay-akki, literally translating into the Rain-bird). It is hardly a joke, as I have noticed a correlation between swallows hovering over and rains, almost every time. The singing bush lark and the pied cuckoo herald the advent of rain in this part of the world, and the brain fever bird sings after showers, only if they are satisfied with the preceding rainfall. If there is too much wind along with dark clouds, it is almost definite that the neighbouring state is going to steal the rain for the day. One of the advantages of a land being located to near a political boundary is that, someone 'else' can always be blamed for rain-theft!

These are hardly superstitions: some are pretty stories behind which lie some dry scientific explanations, while others are myths and folklore which exist to keep the hopes of a green valley alive in the hearts of those for whom a drop of rain literally translates into bringing bread to the table.

Happy monsoon to you all!

SHREEJATA GUPTA



After the first shower of this season in Bandipur. Photo: Shreejata Gupta

NEERU: The Romance of rain and Bandipur

Shivappa is a small farmer with a six-member household; he farms on about 6 ½ acres of land in Jakkahalli, a village located near the eastern tip of Bandipur Tiger Reserve. Shivappa's land is also falls under the rain-shadow area of the western-ghats. He practices rain-fed agriculture, entirely depending on rainwater for irrigation for crops, which is the primary occupation of the majority of population, in and around Bandipur.

Shivappa cultivates his fields twice a year, once between June and August and again between September to November. During this time he grows Ragi (finger-millet), Cowpeas, groundnuts, jowar (white millet) and onions. With the exception of Ragi, that is kept for consumption by the family, most other crops are sold to make a living. On years that the rains fail only one crop is cultivated, although Shivappa had seen worse years, much like the last few years, when it was even impossible to raise a single crop-cycle. The government ration tides them over in such hungry times. An Oxfam study recently concluded that 80% of people who go hungry are involved in food production and that there is a positive correlation between increasing poverty, hunger, water stress and therefore on the prevalence of malnutrition. Thought provoking, indeed!

Coupled with the scarcity of water is the constant peril of having his crops raided by wild animals. In January this year, Shivappa lost most of the onion and groundnut yield from his land to the elephants. While he has put in an application with the forest department for compensation, he is yet to hear from them. Compensations are a long and arduous process that holds little hope for most villagers.



While the land is tilled and sown before the monsoons arrive. Photo: Shreejata Gupta

Coexisting with the villages in this area are several high-end resorts that bring city-dwellers to the forest for a weekend getaway. With enticing advertisements inviting visitors to float in the swimming pool and reconnect with nature (!) and luxuriate in the exclusive spa alongside the jungle, it would seem that this is another world from Shivappa's. But look a little closer at where the water to fill the many pools in the resorts around these villages is coming from and you will be forced to introspect. A 20x30 ft Swimming pool (tiny by most pool standards) holds about 76,000 liters of water. Several deep tube wells have been dug to fill these many swimming pools, thus making the already low water tables lower. Unsustainable tourism can put a lot of pressure on water resources as it increases consumption in resource scarce areas.

This is definitely one of the various reasons contributing to the dwindling water-table in Bandipur, and many other such Eco-sensitive Eco-tourism zones, nevertheless a crucial one. Thus, the next time you head for your jungle holiday, you would probably be inspired to ask yourself how your holiday might impact the life and livelihood of all Shivappas and their families, and decide for a prudent option.

NITHILA BHASKARAN

Nithila is a Bandipurian at heart, living in Bangalore, who also runs an NGO called the Vanam Foundation. The Vanam Foundation works in the villages of Bandipur towards education and nature-awareness among school-children. A version of her article was published in the recent PAU.