

# ELEPHANTS RE-COLONISE BANDHAVGARH TIGER RESERVE, HELPED BY THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

An elephant herd in Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve, MP | Photo Credit: Sudhir Mishra

“There were no elephants in these forests for over 100 years,” says Anshuman Shah, Head naturalist at Samode Safari Lodge in Bandhavgarh Tiger Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh. The first herd — around 15 to 20— was spotted in the tiger landscape, in 2018. “Initially it looked like a part of elephant movement along the tiger corridor, but the herd is back and is living here now,” says Shah.

Head of the Elephant Corridor Project at WTI (Wildlife Trust of India), Upasana Ganguly says, “Though herds move through elephant corridors, they have started exploring new routes like this Chhattisgarh-to-Bandhavgarh one. We have started an initiative, *Haathi Mitra Dal*, with Madhya Pradesh Forest Department and the local community to train members, local responders and frontline forest workers to give safe passage to the new entrants to this area as well as ensure the community’s safety.”

In April 2022, a wild elephant strayed into Rusa Mal village in Dindori, a part of the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve and destroyed some of the huts. The area, inhabited by the Baiga tribes, has jackfruit trees. The river Son flows through and the tribals make *Mahua* (local liquor), all these attract the elephant,” says Pushpendra Dwivedi, a journalist-turned-wildlife field expert who uses “chilli balls and *rassi* (rope) bombs” to steer the pachyderm out.

Pushpendra , who has innovated the *rassi* bomb explains, “the smoke from chilli balls and the vibrations of the *rassi* bomb confuse the elephants. We then used *mashal* or fire torch to guide them back to the forest. Pushpendra got involved with the Forest Department and joined them unofficially in 2009, while covering an incidence of man-animal conflict in which two tiger cubs had killed and devoured three villagers in the area. An advocate and an honorary Wildlife Warden, his study subject is ‘Conflict Mitigation.’

As part of WTI, he is now readying the *Haathi Mitra Dals* or Friends of Elephants groups in 15 villages in the Bandhavgarh Sanctuary. “The groups will consist of five able-bodied young men from each village, who will be trained to minimize any negative interactions and foster co-existence,” he says.

The MP Forest department has been proactive in this regard and organized a workshop, inviting experts from other elephant ranges to share their ideas on this new challenge. Sudhir Misha, Assistant Director, Bandhavgarh Tiger Sanctuary, says that they see this new phenomenon as part of the ecosystem, “Our response has been quick. Each range has its team; our patrolling vehicle alerts us on any elephant movement near a village and a team reaches out. We also have information sharing groups.”

Traditionally known for its population of Royal Bengal Tigers, the sanctuary is a biodiverse park that includes species such as leopards and deer. It has four tiger corridors, a core area (700 plus square kilometre) with dense forests and the buffer area (822 square kilometres) with a mix of human habitation. The biggest challenge being faced by the changed scenario is the local community’s unfamiliarity with elephants.

“There are new elephant movements in another places too. In Gadchiroli, Maharashtra and moving from Orissa into Andhra Pradesh, but here the elephants have chosen to stay,” says Upasana adding that this recolonization prompts them to investigate several issues like the reason behind the movement, coexistence of the animals and requires thoughtful planning so the situation does not get out of hand.

“Chhattisgarh was known to have elephants several centuries ago with Surguja and Korba having a history of elephant capture for the Mughal army. The area did not have elephants for a long period, until they started arriving from Jharkhand around 1988. It is imperative that the local community is empowered, starting with basic knowledge like the ecology of elephants and the do’s and don’ts before more animal man conflict happens,” she says.

“The elephants entered Bandhavgarh Tiger Sanctuary from Chhattisgarh. Now there are about 50 staying,” says Pushpendra adding that though the herd is mostly confined to the core area, by evening, they go to the nearby village for the grains stored by the villagers in their huts. “Sometimes they just get lost and stray into human habitation,” he says. The villagers, who have been trained to tackle wild pigs, have started learning how to co-exist with their new neighbours since last year.

Shah talks about the delight tourists take in spotting a tiger and an elephant in the same frame. Though not common, he recalls seeing Chota Bheem, a young male tiger, playing with a young bull, elephant calf in Khitauli. “You can find them together near a watering hole. In Budhwar and Corbett parks this interaction happens quite often.”

Though Mishra has not seen the two animals together, he has seen many elephant calves and says that the population is growing. “Their breeding has started,” he says. One of the long-term plans of the Forest Department, says Mishra will be to develop large water bodies for the jumbos. They are also looking at radio collars, a GPS device on the neck of the elephant that will enable real time monitoring of elephant movement.

Mishra feels that this movement is all about the pachyderms regaining their old habitat, and that the last records of elephants in MP are from Amarkantak in 1905. “The lifespan of an elephant is up to 80, so a generation before these, the elephants were here,” he says. “Now, they have returned.”

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