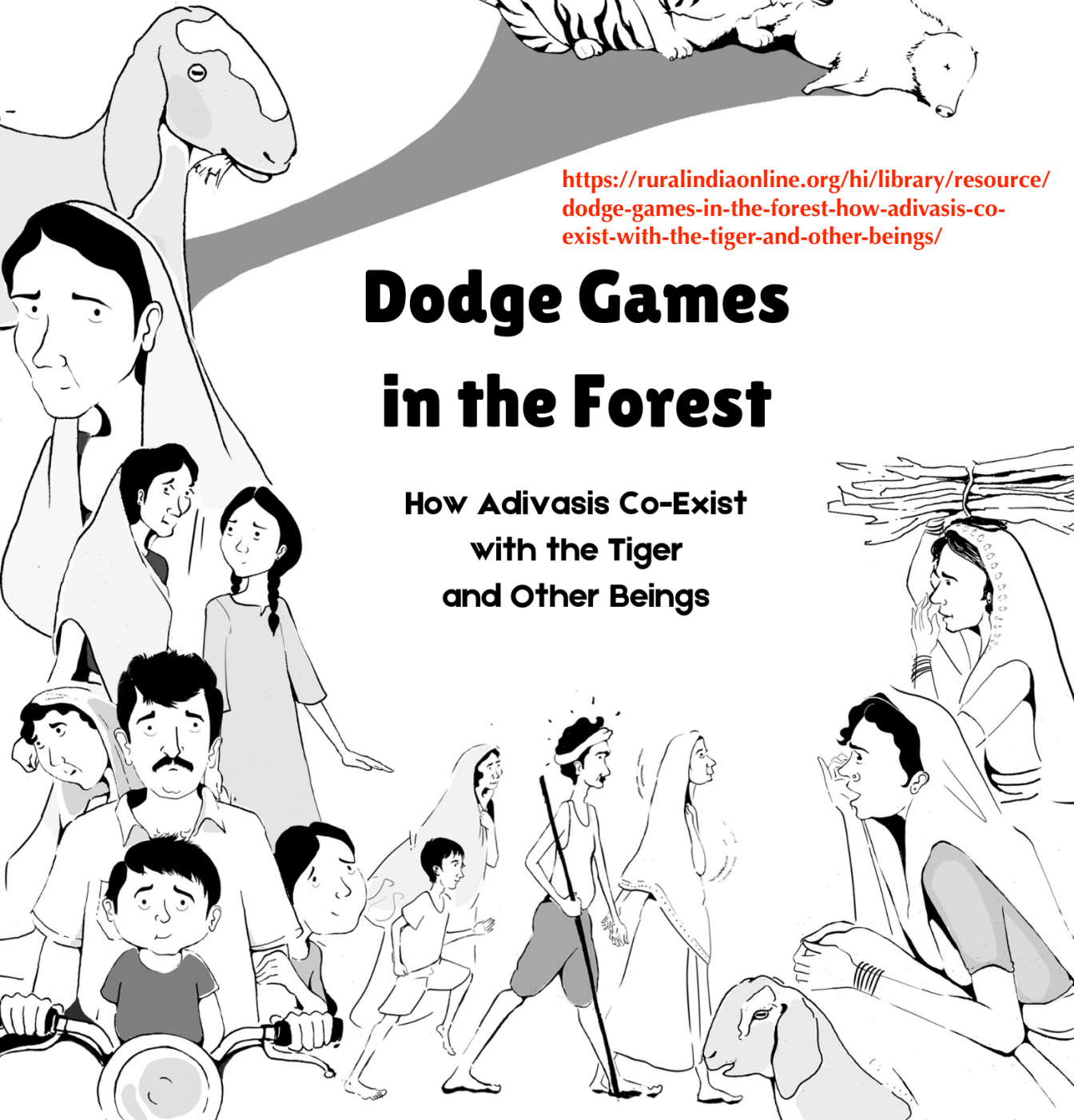




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# Dodge Games in the Forest

How Advivasis Co-Exist  
with the Tiger  
and Other Beings



**Stories collected by:** Goni Bai, Ajay Gond, Janka Bai Gond, Kapoor Singh Gond, Sushila Gond, Pyari Gond

**Compilation:** Arpitha Bai Naik

**Illustrations by:** Kevin Viji

**Edited by:** Diviya Makhija

***Book dedicated to all the Adivasi Women and Children in Panna  
(and to the tigers and all creatures big and small)***

**Published by:**

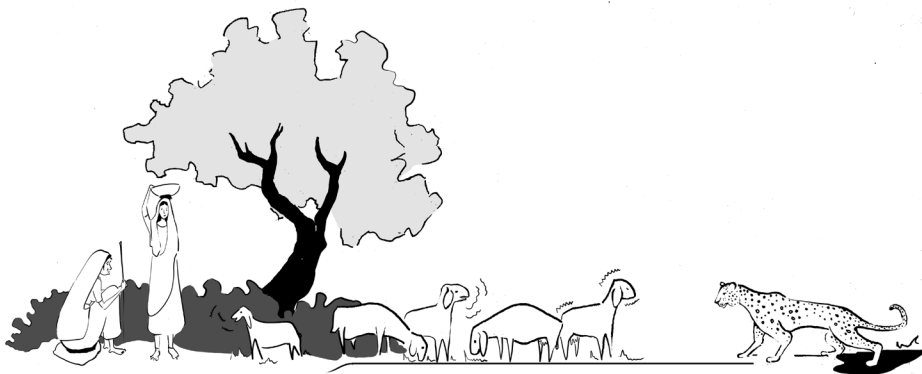


**DHAATRI**

Dhaatri - A Resource Centre for Women and Children,  
Plot No 10, Lotus Pond Colony, M.D.Farm Road,  
Tirumalgiri, Secunderabad, Telangana, India

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**Dodge Games in the Forest**  
**How Adivasis Co-Exist with the Tiger and Other Beings**



**Dhaatri**

A Resource Centre for Women and Children

## **Dodge Games in the Forest**

### **How Adivasis Co-Exist with the Tiger and Other Beings**

#### ***Introduction – Why this book***

A common query from all our visitors who come to meet our Adivasi/tribal friends in the forest of Panna is the same: Did you see a tiger? Does the tiger come to your village? What do you do when you see a tiger? All exciting questions for a curious traveler caught in the glamour of the wildcats. For the local Adivasis, the forest is a daily dodge game of negotiating with the tigers and all other creatures every day - sometimes exciting, but at most times challenging, stressful and unjust, as the dominant belief in conservation is to remove the community from conservation, irreverent to the capabilities of tribals and other forest beings to co-exist. In today's reality, harmonious coexistence has been made unsustainable.

Panna in Madhya Pradesh, India, is a district populated by the Gond Adivasis. For centuries, it was known as the Gondwana region, the kingdom of the Gond Rajahs. But today, the Tiger has become the Rajah with the Panna National Park and Tiger Reserve that became a contestable statecraft in its attempt at undoing the plunder of the forests and the destruction of the tigers caused by colonial and feudal machismo valour. As tiger trophies left the forest bereft of these wildcats, tribals were forced to either allow themselves to be thrown out of the forest or to live in a constant fear of trying to cope with the new tigers that were introduced. While the country celebrates the success of Panna's tiger resurrection, several challenges have emerged posing a threat to the tiger and to the tribals and to the many creatures. Their co-existence is endangered by several other externalities - mining in the core area, fenced plantations in the name of Nature based Solutions that obstruct their mobility, tourism all around the forest and the proposed submergence of the tiger reserve and its corridors.

For us living in the cities, wildlife conservation is a symbol of national pride and an exciting opportunity to go on holiday safaris for our leisure trips of escape from the mundane. Tiger trails and jeep rides have been created for our wildlife adventures. Highways, resorts and restaurants have mushroomed in the name of eco-tourism, occupying more of the forest and the tiger space today. Yet, tigers and tribals face the unfair ironies of our notions of conserva-

tion. Tribals are repeatedly told that their presence threatens the life of tigers. And they are brutally pushed out, often blamed for poaching, scattered and forgotten while the relentless flow of zeeps and trucks zoom into the forest each day, no matter that they are fast depleting the forests and shrinking the spaces for movement of the tigers and all other creatures.

Yet, there are many fireside jokes and stories shared every day when Adivasis return home from their routine life in the forest. For, humour is often the best antidote for fear and tragedy, that tribal life and philosophy revolves around. Through chuckles and guffaws, elders advise their children how to behave and stay alert when walking to school or while bathing in the pond or gathering firewood or wildfood. They silently teach their children how to still laugh and go about life after losing their favourite goat or cow to the claws of the wildcats, even when that goat was all that they had for their survival.

These small encounters are but a glimpse into how forest dwelling communities' coexistence practices help cope with and somehow survive the wildlife prowling around their habitats. They exchange the language of uncertainty while gazing into the eyes of the tiger because life is getting very hard both for the tiger and for the tribal as their landscape gets more and more disturbed by urban demands. Yet, their struggle for co-existence continues with humour, resilience and the acceptance of loss. For, how else can one cope when confronted not by the dangers of the tiger, but by the real dangers that lie in the climate solutions driven from the global north. Many unarticulated questions lurk in the minds of the tribals, which they believe lurks in the mind of the tiger as well, perplexed by the global logic of conservation and the unsustainable approaches to climate change crisis.

***Ssshhhh – here comes the tiger...***

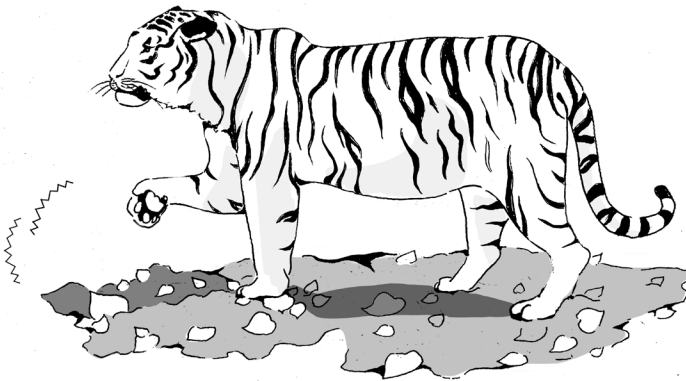
## *The Crunch Crunch Games with the Tiger*



Rohini and Rahul of Umraavan gaon take the familiar three-kilometre walk from the village to the road where Rohini takes the bus to school. Rahul is tasked with dropping her to the bus stop outside the village so that Rohini is not left to walk through the forest alone.



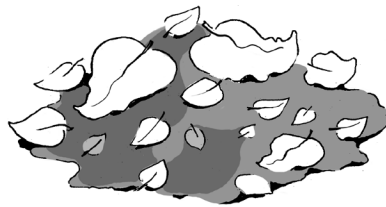
Sometimes, they choose the path that has the most dry leaves to crunch under their feet as they stomp their way out. Crunch, crunch, crunch under the feet sounds fun. But this satisfying act of leaf-stomping wasn't always theirs. Sometimes, it belonged to another joyful participant – a tiger lurking in the vicinity.



Perhaps the tiger wanted to participate in their joy of crunching the leaves. It is a nice sound after all. Once, the tiger passed by a few steps ahead of them, and they slowly followed its trail to see what it was up to. Now they know how to differentiate a tiger who is on a hunting mission from a tiger who is on a leisurely stroll- from just its crunching tread.



Once, the crunching leaves warned them of a tiger that was behind them. Now they can tell, more or less, how much bigger or smaller the tiger is, from the ones they heard before. This is a new game of guessing. When they see no tiger, but find its footsteps, they inform the villagers that the tiger is walking towards the village. Now the crunching sound is a tool for their investigation; and for the children, it's another tiger trail to follow on the way to school.



## *Cycling in a Daze*



Cycling alone around Umrahan just before noon one day, Rahul remembers seeing a tiger for the first time. About two metres away from him, the tiger lay resting in a pond.



“What did you do then?” people ask him about his fateful encounter, in anticipation of a fearful tale.

“*Bas cycle tez kiya aur nikal gaye, aur kya?* [I simply increased my speed and left, that’s it.]”

Unlike this first chance encounter with a tiger, the next few times, Rahul was met with the stories of the tiger before meeting the tiger itself.



One morning, word spread in the village that a tiger had found its prey in one of their grazing cows. Some people rushed to the scene and some proceeded to inform the others.



Upon receiving this information, Rahul did not miss the chance to meet a tiger again. He took more pleasure in this meeting than the last one because this time he was full of anticipation.

However, as he approached the scene, Rahul's excitement gave way to disappointment. The tiger simply carried the cow away from the crowd of people, choosing solitude over the company of others. Maybe it had only reserved a single table for that meal.



## *Flashlight of Fear*

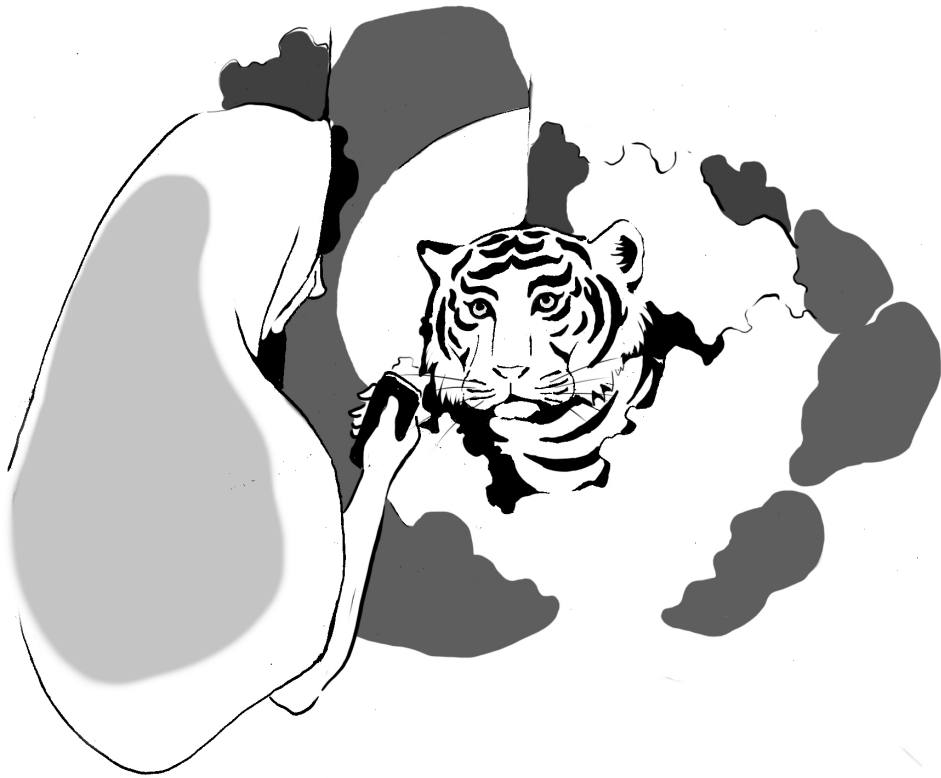


Goni Bai was on her way home from Panna, walking with Janka Bai and Chhotu one dark evening. The three had spent their day accompanying a TB patient for a routine check-up.

The evening kept getting darker as they walked. Goni Bai shone the flashlight of her phone to illuminate their path. Little did they know, this simple light cast upon their usual path would shine on a scene that would find its way in many stories they were about to share.

In the soft glow, shone over a silhouette of the trees, revealing a pair of gleaming eyes. Janaka Bai called out to her son, "Chhotu, tiger!"

"Where??"



She flashed the light in the direction of a tiger sitting two-three steps away from them. Chhotu realised there really was a tiger there, and in the same breath, a command resonated from his lips, "Run!"

Goni bai stood firm, calmly explaining to Chhotu that fleeing might provoke the tiger into an attack. At that moment, Chhotu was holding things greater than fear inside him. Taking another look at the tiger, he expressed how beautiful it looked, and how he had a strong desire to sit on it and revel in play.



Goni Bai and Janka Bai suppressed a laugh, and quietly steered Chhotu away from the tiger. And so, under the cloak of night, they walked on with the tale of the tiger's unexpected cameo that evening becoming one of the many such tales that the people of Umrahan share.

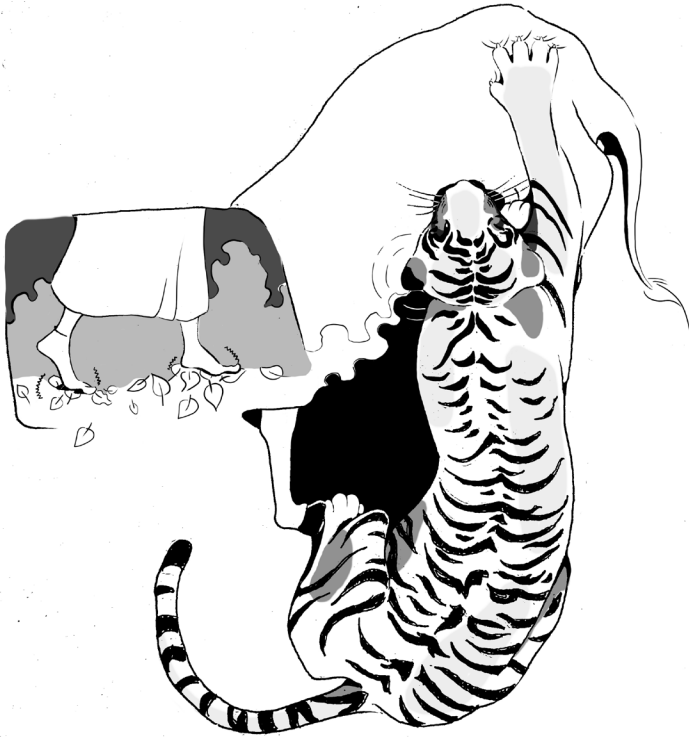
*He is a Danger to Us like We are a Danger to Him*



Fagunia bai of Bador gaon has had two encounters with tigers in her life. The first time a tiger appeared beside the route she was walking. The tiger had taken an ox as its prey, and she didn't know if he was looking for more.



Caught in a moment of fear, Fagunia Bai grappled with uncertainty. The solitary route she tread everyday was now shared with a tiger. She did not know where to go, for there was only that one route she could take.



She weighed her options out, "If I run, it will run faster. If it hears the sound of my footsteps as I run, it will attack."



Amidst the tension, Fagunia Bai started walking at her usual pace and took a small roundabout that distanced her enough from the tiger, creating a buffer of safety. When she left, the tiger, indifferent to her departure, remained seated, its gaze fixed on the remnants of its recent hunt.



Years later, one day in the month of Chait [spring], Fagunia Bai was on her way to the forest for work when she saw a tiger again. Perhaps five years in age, as she recalls, the tiger was sitting relaxed near the site where she was collecting firewood. In recounting this incident, she forgets fear. Remembering that 'He is a danger to us, like we are a danger to him,' she kept walking away, and the tiger, once again, continued to sit there unfazed.

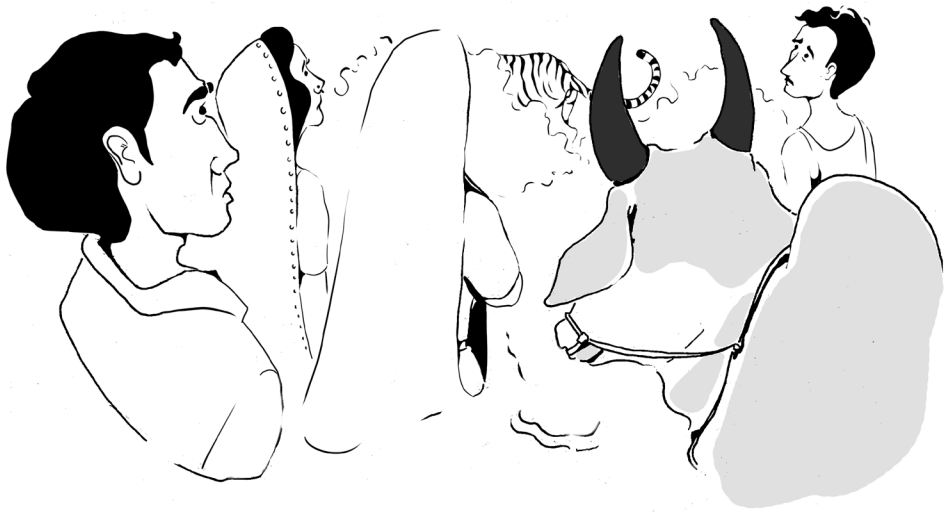
## *Ripples of Kindness*



The distinctive sounds of Monkey, Nilgai, Sambar, *bail* (ox) are good indicators of a tiger's presence. Even the shrill screams of hares play a role in warning the villagers of an approaching tiger, as Goni Bai of Umraivan gaon had once taught us.



One morning, as Munni Bai rolled mahua leaves, she became acutely aware of this combination of sounds.



She alerted everyone working nearby, of a tiger's coming, and they all gathered around only to witness the tiger silently retreating into the shadows.



Another morning, when Munki bai was at the pond with her daughter, her daughter spotted a tiger in the water. Whether prompted or unprompted by the child's startled scream, the tiger gracefully departed without quenching its thirst, leaving behind ripples of water that reached Munki bai and her daughter. They made sure these ripples traveled to the villagers too through their stories of this encounter, leaving the pond only after leisurely completing their washing.



## *Haaaauuu – I Missed the Prize!*



*"Haaaauuu,"* Kamala Bai's voice echoes, as she imitates the distant roar of the tiger she had encountered one day after returning from the day's work. She remembers seeing a figure in the distance, and instinctively realised it must be a tiger.



When the people around her confirmed it to be a tiger, she remembers her heart skipping a beat. Asarani and Asaram were walking back the same path on their way back from work. Kamala Bai stood in the middle of the trail warning them of the tiger lurking in the distance, having dragged a wild boar for its meal.



“Where? Where? Can we go see? Let’s go!”

was their immediate response. Kamala Bai, though still fearful, found some comfort in their company.





Then she joked to her friends, 'today's meal is in front of us - let's go about collecting our firewood, and when the tiger leaves, why don't we pick up the boar and cook it for everyone.' Once they finished gathering their bundles, they walked to see if the tiger was still there.



When they returned to the spot, the tiger was, indeed, still there, and they ventured to see it from closer. Kamala Bai did not find herself shocked to see the full form of the tiger in front of her for the first time. But she speaks excitedly of the experience as if it was larger than the tiger itself. Then she says, 'upon returning home, Sahab<sup>1</sup> visited us to ask if we really spotted a tiger, to which I said, "Hau!"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Forest Guard

<sup>2</sup> Yes!



It was then that the *Sahab* revealed, a bit belatedly, that if she had reported the tiger sighting promptly, she could have earned three lakhs. Years later, Kamala Bai laughs at this recollection, joking that this information was more surprising than seeing the tiger itself!

## ***Smells of Death – Today I Met an Animal – a Tiger***

What does a tiger smell like?

'Death,' some say; some say, 'danger.'

But Janka Bai of Umraavan smelled none of these in her first encounter with a tiger on her way to the forest to collect firewood. There was a greater smell of danger for her in the prospect of not being able to collect her firewood that day and the struggle she would have in cooking the day's meal.



Around 2 p.m. in the afternoon, Janka Bai set for her routine walk to the forest three kilometres from her house. A rotten smell greeted her on her way, and she sensed the presence of an animal nearby. Under a giant tree, she saw a tiger sitting claws out. She exchanged looks with the tiger, and, walking slowly and silently, continued to collect her firewood. When she was done, she stood fixing her gaze at the tiger for a few minutes. Absorbing its presence in her memory, she tied her firewood together and proceeded to walk back home. On her way, she pondered about the age of the tiger and which animal it could have been preying on to exude the rotten smell.



Her closest estimation told her that it must be around the age a child reaches puberty. The villagers not only heard of the tiger from her (*Today I met an animal. A tiger!*) but also heard from the tiger itself later at night. They reported to her the next morning that they heard sounds of the tiger talking at night; he had something to say.

An undisturbed look at the tiger for those few minutes had already nurtured a familiarity between them both. She had begun to know him. She wondered what more she would have known if they spoke the same language. Would he tell her about his family? Would he ask her to leave him alone?

For now, they communicated enough to mind their own business – for Janka Bai to get going with collecting her firewood with an alluring distraction, and for the tiger to peacefully digest its meal – each witnessing the other’s need for survival and co-existence.

## *Goni Bai's Tragedy*



Around 3-4 years ago, Goni bai had her close encounter with a leopard while grazing her goat about 2 kilometers away from her house.

The leopard was on a hunt for prey, and had its eyes on her goat.



As it rushed to take the goat away, Goni bai and the others unleashed a volley of screams, disrupting the leopard's plans.

Startled and disoriented by the sudden burst of noise, the leopard was forced to let go of its grip on the goat.

The commotion had served its purpose – Goni bai along with the others had successfully thwarted the leopard's hunt. With the immediate danger averted, Goni bai wasted no time. She hastily gathered her flock and rushed home, a mixture of relief and tension hanging in the air.

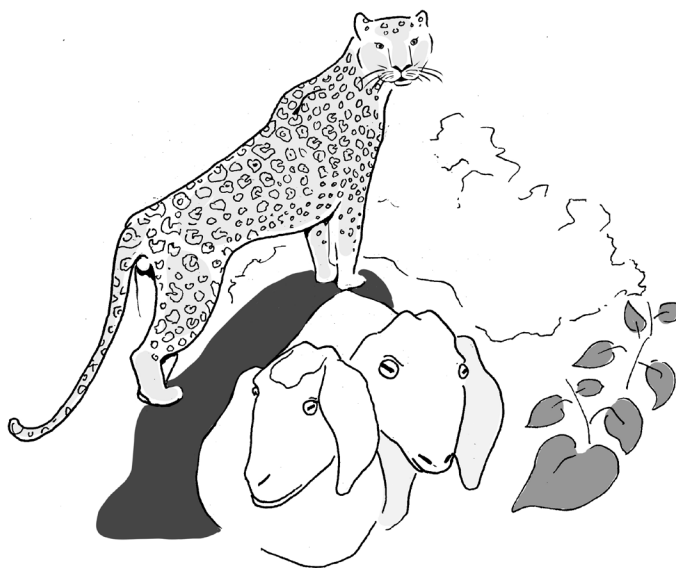


Throttled by the attack of the leopard the goat was badly injured while Goni bai tried hard to nurse it back to health. To her sorrow, the poor goat passed away a few days later.



Here are some losses that Goni Bai's neighbours and friends have lost during Covid - with little or no compensation for their loss:

Village	Cattle Deaths	Village	Cattle Deaths
Kaimasan	Cows -13 (3 Tiger, 10 Leopard); Goats -10 (Leopard); Ox -1 (Leopard)	Bador	Cows -17 (7 Tiger, 10 Leopard); Goats - 14 (Leopard); Buffalo - 2 (Tiger)
Umrahan	Cows - 6 (2 Tiger, 4 Leopard); Goats - 3 (Leopard); Buffalo - 1 (Tiger)	Darera	Cows - 8 (3 Tiger, 5 Leopard); Goats - 13 (Leopard); Buffalo - 1 (Tiger)
Madaiyan	Cows - 3 (2 Tiger, 1 Leopard); Goats - 12 (Leopard)	Manor	



## *Meeting the Tiger Among the Mahua*



Working hours for the people of Umrahan begin at six during summer mornings. Not a single day could be missed – it was the season to collect *achaar mahua*<sup>1</sup> and the maximum collection has to be done before the weather turns against them. Sometimes, the weather changes so suddenly and unfavorably that it becomes difficult to pluck even one kilo of mahua flowers.

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<sup>1</sup> (NTFPs: Non timber forest produce)

This morning, things were in their favour and our people set out to the forest for their daily collection. At the pond in the forest where they rest, wash up and drink water, lay a tiger, eyes wide open, with a playful gaze and the potential to disrupt their routine. Janka Bai usually spent the way back from the morning collection to plan her work for the evening collection, thinking about the weather, calculating how much more mahua needs to be collected for the day, and how many more hours they would get for that day. Interrupting her planning, her brother-in-law pointed with urgency towards something. When her gaze followed the direction of his hand, she saw the end of the pond, where the tiger lazily sat. The tiger sensed their gaze, and, when their eyes met, he quietly got up and found a new spot to sit under a tree. *Because the tiger also knows we need the mahua and perhaps, it wanted some company that day.*



Janka Bai and her brother-in-law continued walking the path back home– the same one that they were going to tread back in the evening, only stopping to warn the others coming back from the forest of the tiger’s presence around the pond. The weather was in their favour, and so was the tiger, and that is all they needed. Janka Bai continued her planning for the day while the tiger continued with his own.

## *Now Breathe... A Grandmother Teaches*

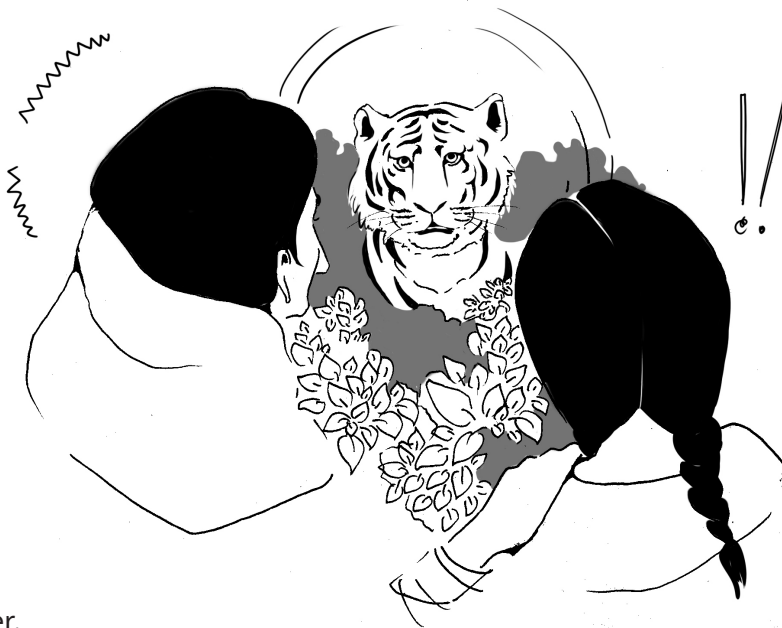
As the season for collecting mahua continued through the summer, the entire Madaiya village got busy in the labour of collecting, preserving and selling its flowers. Some of the collection is used for a variety of domestic and medicinal purposes, while the rest is taken to Panna and sold to the *thekedaar* (contractor). Suraj Bai (age 75) goes to the forest with her granddaughter (age 17-18) every morning. Suraj Bai, endearingly called Dilgu bahu by those around her, is a widow who earns her own livelihood in multiple ways, some of which rely on the collection of aachaar mahua from the forest.



One afternoon when it was time to return from the forest, her granddaughter sensed a need for caution. What if an ox comes and eats up their *aachaar mahua*? Their entire day's labour will be wasted. What will her amma sell if she loses this?

She immediately advised her amma to bundle the mahua flowers together before an ox spots them. In the midst of averting this potential danger, they occupied themselves in preserving all that they had collected. Suddenly, both grandmother and child were interrupted by a strong presence.

They turned.



A tiger.

Glances exchanged.

With each other. With the tiger.

All three stood startled. Out of breath. Anticipating each other's next move.

There were many people in the forest that day. Maybe Suraj Bai could call for help.

*No, don't move. Don't scream.*

All the lessons from stories she had heard before came back to her. She kept repeating them in her head.

*You should not lose eye contact with the tiger. He will suspect something is wrong.*

Difficult as it was, she kept looking into his eyes. Her granddaughter followed suit.

*Retreat slowly.*



The slight movement of her leg indicated the course of action to her granddaughter; and they took one small, slow step back.

Before they could decide their next move, the tiger looked away, allowing them to finally look away from his eyes too. The girl first took one full look at the tiger – seeing his scales and skin and fur, all moving as he breathed. Then she looked at her amma with eyes that were brimming with fear and doubt. They had to prepare for the worst.

But the tiger had other plans.

Once he had looked away, he never looked back.

Slowly, he moved forward, and before they knew, he was on his way.



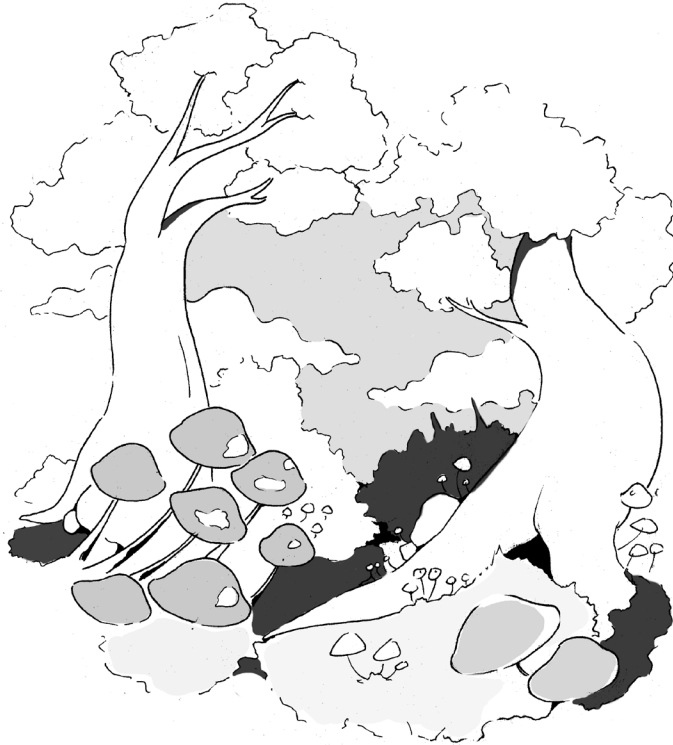
*Now breathe.*

Before completing her breath, the girl thought, “But what about the *aachaar mahua?*”

To her respite, their collection for the day was still intact. But now she knew, any and every second could bring danger – danger that was perhaps worse than their anticipation.

She picked up the remaining mahua flowers, and Suraj Bai resumed putting them in her basket. They had to finish it and be back in time for their evening collection.

## ***Monsoons and Mushrooms – Tigers Love Them Too***

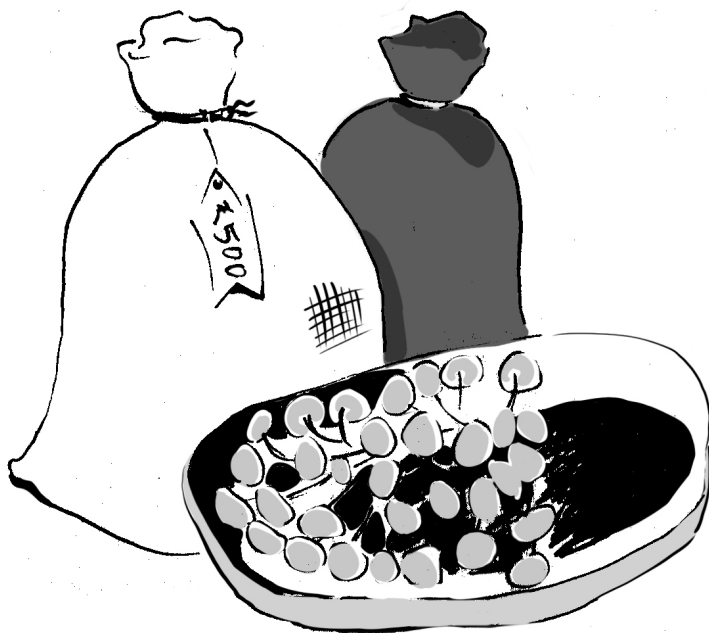


*“Jab thodi zyaada baarish hoti hai, lapakte garajte hai baadal...”* [When it rains a lot and the thunder clouds begin to thud...]

The monsoon rains, the sounds of thunder and the earthy smell that follows, all serve as a reminder to the women of Umravan of the mushrooms that would sprout and the excitement of collecting them from the forest. Janka Bai tells us that these mushrooms are found a little deep inside the forest – at least six to seven kilometres away. One such rainy day around these known spots in the forest where women collect mushrooms, Janka Bai found herself in the company of a family enjoying the rain.



A tiger lay under a tree with his two children running and playing around. Janka Bai and the others saw them with delight and wonder, and also with caution - hiding and peeping with the support of trees, they took a good look at the family indulging in the rain and then proceeded to find and collect mushrooms. The forest had welcomed Janka Bai's and the others' families to share the monsoon joy they had just experienced with the tiger family. Despite leaving the tiger's territory undisrupted, they were still able to collect sacks full of huge mushrooms, pack them neatly and sell them for Rs. 500 per sack in Panna town.



## *How to Startle a Leopard*



Once, Janka Bai went to the forest to collect firewood with some other women. Suddenly, a leopard appeared, emerging silently from the trees.

“He saw us, we saw him, and we got scared,” Janka Bai recounted. The women froze for a moment, their hearts pounding. The leopard’s eyes glinted as he watched them.

Instinctively, the women started screaming, intentionally making as much noise as they could. The sudden commotion startled the leopard. His ears twitched, and he looked around, unsure of the threat.

Afraid, he backed away slowly, then turned and walked off into the forest, disappearing as quietly as he had come.

The women waited, holding their breath, until they were sure he was gone. Then, they hurriedly gathered their firewood and made their way back to the village, sharing the story of their encounter with every step.



Another time Janka Bai went to the forest to graze her goat. When she saw a leopard approaching them and before she could do anything, he pounced on the goat. He took the goat and ran away.



Later in the evening when she shared this with people upon returning, they sympathised and said there is nothing that can be done now. Earlier, at least there was compensation given if an animal took your goat away. Now that has stopped. Loss and mourning are increasing as wildlife attacks are increasing. Forest is getting thinner and construction is getting busier as tourists come to visit the tiger and leopard. But for the tigers, leopards, goats and tribals, life gets tougher.



Weeks later, Janka Bai found herself in the forest once more, this time with her beloved goat. She often took her goat to graze in the lush meadows, where the grass was fresh and plentiful. The day was peaceful, the air filled with the gentle bleats of goats and the rustling of leaves.

As the goat grazed contentedly, Janka Bai kept a watchful eye, her senses attuned to the forest's rhythms. Suddenly, a rustle in the bushes caught her attention. She turned, her breath catching in her throat. A leopard, larger than the one before, emerged from the foliage. Its eyes were fixed on her goat.



Panic surged through Janka Bai. Before she could react, the leopard lunged, its powerful body propelling it towards the unsuspecting goat. The goat let out a terrified bleat as the predator's claws sank into her. With a swift, brutal motion, the leopard grabbed the goat and disappeared into the forest. Gone was Janka Bai's dear little goat which cost Janakabai dearly from all the savings she had made from her daily wage.



Janka Bai stood rooted to the spot, her heart shattered. Tears welled up in her eyes as she made her way back to the village, the weight of her loss heavy on her shoulders. That evening, she shared her sorrow with the villagers. They gathered around her, sharing her loss.

"There was a time when we received compensation for such losses," an elder remarked again, shaking his head. "But those days are gone. Now, we must bear these hardships alone."

## ***Bear Encounters – Barely Fun***

*“Ek din subah hum jungle jaa rahe the fresh hone...”* (one morning we were going into the jungle for our toilet...)

Janka Bai, along with a group of women, set out into the forest one early morning, as part of their daily routine of going to the toilet and bringing back firewood while returning. The forest, though familiar, always held a sense of unpredictability.



As they stepped into the forest, a sudden rustling sound caught Janka Bai's attention. She paused, her heart skipping a beat. Through the trees, she spotted a large bear, its fur a dark, shaggy coat that seemed to blend into the shadows. The bear was engrossed in its own activity, using its powerful claws to dig into an anthill, searching for a meal of ants.

Janka Bai's pulse quickened. Bears were known to be unpredictable, and she had always harboured a deep fear of them. She gestured to the other women, pointing silently towards the bear. They exchanged worried glances but understood the need for caution.



Without a word, the group changed direction, moving further into the forest to steer clear of the bear's path. The forest was dense and the underbrush thick, but they pressed on, determined to avoid any potential danger. The sound of the bear's rummaging was still audible, a constant reminder of its presence, but it remained occupied, seemingly unaware of the women nearby.

The women continued their task, keeping a careful ear out for any changes in the bear's behavior. They quickly found a suitable spot and, after taking care of their needs, began collecting firewood. The rhythmic sound of branches snapping under their hands and the occasional whispered conversation filled the air.



Though their initial encounter had been tense, the bear seemed content in its own world, focused solely on its hunt for ants. It moved with a slow, deliberate grace, completely absorbed in its activity. The women, too, found a rhythm, their nervousness easing as the bear showed no signs of aggression.

With their bundles of firewood gathered, the group began their journey back to the village. The bear's presence lingered in their minds, a reminder of the forest's ever-present risks. Yet, there was a sense of relief as well. They had managed to navigate the encounter without incident, each step bringing them closer to the safety of their homes.

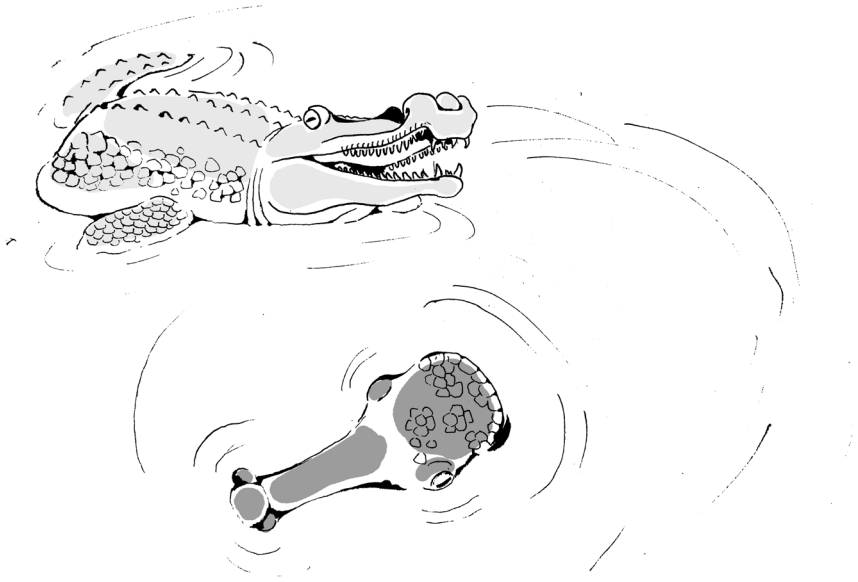
As they walked, Janka Bai felt a mix of emotions. The fear that had gripped her heart was slowly replaced by a sense of calm. The forest, with all its dangers and unpredictability, was still a place of routine and necessity.

## ***Dharmendra, The Tourist Guide, Tells Safari Tales***

Dharmendra has been taking people out for safari around Panna Tiger Reserve for six years now. He tells us that this safari goes on for nine months in a year and gets tourists from all over the country and the world. Some come to see tigers, some for birds, some just to see the forest. Based on the selective experience that tourists want from the forest, he crafts his tour – showing what have now become the main points for sightseeing in the tiger reserve.



There is a vulture point, a crocodile point and then there is Peepatola gaav, which used to be a settlement before the tribals were driven away for the national park, and has now become a mere point in the tourist map.



Some people come only to see tigers, so all these points of tribal existence become irrelevant to them. Unlike the vulture and the crocodile, it is not easy to tell where and when the tiger can be spotted. But Dharmendra has found his ways.



## *Sushila Didi*



It was a crisp winter evening when Sushila didi, her brother, and her two children set off from her in-laws' place in Umrahan to Kaimasan in a two-wheeler over the rugged, unmetalled road that wound through the forest.

The road was familiar but held an edge of unpredictability. Tales of wildlife encounters were common, and each shadow seemed to hold a secret. As they approached a bend in the road, the sound of an approaching vehicle caught their attention. It was a jeep, belonging to the jungle safari team, returning from their day's work.

The safari jeep came to a halt beside them, and the occupants gestured urgently. "Don't go any further," one of the men called out. "There's a tiger nearby. It's not safe to continue in an open vehicle."

The warning sent a ripple of anxiety through Sushila didi. Her brother exchanged a worried glance with her, and the children, sensing the tension, clung closer. The men pointed towards the direction they had just come from, and there, not too far away, was the tiger.



They could see the tiger in its powerful frame, easily five feet long, moving with a graceful ease.

The children, fascinated by the sight, wanted to follow the jeep. Sushila didi, however, knew better than to take any chances. They remained where they were, watching the tiger from a safe distance.

The tiger continued its leisurely pace, following the road that led back to Umrahan. [This was the same road where Rahul, Goni Bai, and Janka Bai had once spotted the tiger with a flashlight, an area known for such encounters.]

For a while, they waited, hearts pounding with a mix of fear and awe. The forest grew quieter, as if holding its breath in reverence of the magnificent beast passing through. The tiger eventually disappeared into the dense foliage, the sounds of the forest slowly returning to normal.



With the immediate danger passed, Sushila didi and her family resumed their journey. The bike's engine roared back to life, and they cautiously continued down the road, the children now more subdued, their excitement tempered by the close encounter.

As they rode back to the village, the evening air felt colder, and the forest seemed darker. 'The tourists must have reached their hotels by now,' Sushila didi thought. And they had – after a successful trip for those who came just to see a tiger, frightening for those who didn't – with a tale to tell either way. The same road would see Sushila didi returning to the forest the next day to collect firewood, for Gonibai to sell her vegetables, for Janakabai the ASHA<sup>1</sup> worker, on her way to Panna for the next appointment at the PHC<sup>2</sup> for the TB<sup>3</sup> patients, for the children walking to school and for all other tribals who have to go into town for their daily wages.

*Because, we cannot just abandon the road and our daily routine for fear of the tiger.*

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1 ASHA – Accredited Social Health Activist

2 PHC – Primary Health Centre

3 TB – Tuberculosis which is a rampant health problem in these villages

## ***Conclusion***

Adivasi communities believe that life in the forest is a dialogue of co-existence. Their traditional life in their habitat is full of wisdom and learning from creatures small and big. Development from the outside has brutally trampled over this wisdom and treats them as 'encroachers' in their own landscapes, making their practices appear destructive. Forests are being handed over to private entities under the global decarbonisation politics while community conservation and co-existence practices are criminalized, bringing more forests under Protected Areas and declaring many more tiger reserves and other wildlife sanctuaries without any consultation with local communities. Tribals are forced to risk their lives and that of their children and cattle each day for what they see as unsustainable ways of conservation. Or better still, they are told, *just leave the forest 'voluntarily'*.

*The tribals ask, how many more tigers are going to be added in our forests? Is increasing tiger reserves and tiger corridors the only measure of conservation? We can no longer fish in our ponds or forage. What about our wild boars and small and big birds, insects and worms who do not have entry into the plantations that house no trees worth perching or pecking on? What happens to the tigers and to the people and to our crops when all our spaces are getting disturbed? The tiger negotiates with us and we negotiate with the tiger but nobody negotiates with us or with the tiger.*

Can we find solutions by driving out the very people who practise conservation and take care of their ecosystems.



*And there are many more questions and stories by the fireside, while the tiger listens and whispers in the shadows and tells the tribal through its majestic gaze - I feel cheated too. It's time for us to speak our language of conservation.*

***Crunch, crunch, roar, roar, hear us come.***



**DHAATRI**



[www.dhaatri.org](http://www.dhaatri.org)

**A Resource Centre for Women and Children**

Plot no. 10, Lotus Pond Colony  
Military Diary Farm Road,  
Ward No. 7 Secunderabad, Ved Vihar,  
Trimulgherry, Secunderabad, Telangana 50015

**Contact us**

[dhaatri@gmail.com](mailto:dhaatri@gmail.com) | +91 40 29552404

**Social**

Instagram: [@dhaatriRC](https://www.instagram.com/dhaatriRC)

X: [@DhaatriC](https://www.x.com/DhaatriC)

Facebook: [fb.com/Dhaatricentre](https://www.facebook.com/Dhaatricentre)