

A heritage to conserve

Kabini Forest



A sub-adult tiger cub takes shelter in bushes, from rains, in forests near Kabini, under Nagarahole National Park, on Wednesday. Photo courtesy A S Anil

The Japanese have long propagated the joys of Shinrin-Yoku, or ‘forest bathing’, as a meditative practice, especially for urbanites. I was very lucky to spend a few days in the Kabini forest, just before the parks closed. Though partially work-related, it was my most healing experience since the pandemic emerged.

The forest was lush green, and the dreaded lantana weed was flowering profusely, adding a blaze of joyous colour through the occasional shafts of sunlight that pierced the rain-drenched canopy. The lantana’s beauty let us forget, for the moment, just how much it has invaded territory and crowded out other species of flora.

We were incredibly lucky with sightings, especially because we saw five bears in a high-decibel interaction full of tree-rubbing and running! There were hunts, and kills, and wounded tigers. There was a face-off between a herd of mighty gaur and a young leopard. There were majestic elephants, some familiar, some new.

For me, Kabini is a very special place. It defies many notions of wilderness. It challenges ideologies of pristine perfection. While it is part of a continuous protected area of 2,600 sq. km., the Kabini forest is as much man-made as it is wild. For one, it is adjacent to the backwaters of the approximately 13,000 sq. ft. reservoir built in 1974. With dead tree stumps littering the waterscape, and remnants of shrines surfacing in the summer, it is a constant reminder of the true cost of the submergence. Secondly, the natural dry deciduous and moist deciduous forest is dotted with teak and eucalyptus plantations, an old practice that the Forest Department has now mercifully abandoned. Add to that the invasive species of lantana, cassia and parthenium, among others, and you might be fooled into thinking there is little biodiversity in the Kabini forest.

You would be wonderfully wrong. Kabini is thriving with flora, and especially fauna. It is a haven for big cats, elephants, gaur and, of course, the ubiquitous langurs and chital deer, along with innumerable other species. Kabini nurtures sustainable livelihoods for its forest-dwelling tribal communities, like the Jenu Kurubas, who live there despite all odds. Though less than 10% of it is open to the public, it attracts adoring tourists from around the country and the world, creating a thriving local economy. There is much work ahead to realise Kabini's exceptional potential for responsible eco-tourism, and tourists from Karnataka can lead the way.

The Kabini safari has surfaced at the top of people's bucket lists partly because it is home to the world's most famous living black panther. Because of his beautiful coat, he is simply referred to as 'kariya'. This black panther is as elusive as he is magnificent, and I belong to the humbled hordes that have not seen him despite several attempts.

Chronicling this wonderful jewel of a forest is another tribe -- that of documentary filmmakers and wildlife photographers. In Karnataka, and especially in Bengaluru, we are lucky to have several extremely talented, globally renowned lensmen, who have spent months and years patiently capturing the beauty, fragility, resilience, and danger in the Kabini forest.

Just recently, three of them have released documentaries that include many stars from Kabini. Sandesh Kadur of Felis has filmed Wildcats of India and India's Wild Leopards (Disclosure: I am part of the team). Amoghvarsha and Kalyan Varma created Wild Karnataka in partnership with the government. And then there is Shaaz Bin Jung's ode to the "The Real Black Panther."

I have missed others too numerous to name, and we should support and

celebrate them all. Some reveal the histories and predicaments of forest-dwellers, the expert stewards of the jungle. Others let the world get a peek into the rich natural treasures of our state. They exhort us to realise that even if we cannot witness these wonders ourselves, it is enough that they exist and thrive. These photos and documentaries awaken us to our intergenerational responsibilities as well – that we all have a role to play to protect and enrich our bio heritage.

Many of these intrepid photographers spend hundreds of hours in dangerous, rough conditions to capture just the right light, angle or behaviours in the jungle. The most unexpected and dangerous encounters are usually with tuskers, who can flip over a jeep with one angry swipe. And sometimes do. There are unpredictable bears, tigers, and leopards as well. One mistake could cost you your life.

These risks are ever-present for forest guards and officers. Every day, they must walk through the jungle, be it in sweltering heat or pouring rain, to keep fires and poachers at bay, among other gruelling tasks. Admittedly, they can be overzealous against locals, and there is a robust dispute about whether some fires should be allowed to regenerate the forest floor. Yet, the Forest Department has played a critical role in Karnataka topping the list of states that showed significant gain in forest cover, as per the recently released India State of Forest Report (ISFR) 2019.

That is good news for these terrible times. We cannot go at will into the forest anytime soon. But we can invite Kabini into our homes through its many documentaries. Our virtual, vicarious Shinrin-Yoku could be a rehearsal, so that we can later return, not just as tourists, but also as trustees of this remarkable forest.

(The writer is Founder-Chairperson Arghyam)