

The Kalibhit Man-Eater

In the Harda Sub-division of Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh lies the reserve forest of Kalibhit. This is an extensive tract of jungle which extends into the Khandwa district on the east and Betul in the south. During the old days it was a famous shooting reserve, abundant in all kinds of game, especially tigers. Post-independence the government introduced a ban on shooting to protect the wildlife; thus the forest was still quite well-stocked with game when, during the seventies, I became the sub-divisional magistrate of Harda. Deep inside the forest is the Rest House of Mangthar, constructed during the days of the British Raj. This building stands on a little knoll in the middle of a glade and thus commands a good view of the surrounding forest. An open veranda runs around three sides of the building and visitors can lounge in the easy chairs on the veranda while sipping their evening tea and hear the cry of wild animals. Herds of cheetal feed on the grass which covers the meadow during the rains and lasts until the end of winter. This little Rest House, tucked away in the forest far from anywhere, was my favourite hideaway whenever I wanted to get away from the cares of office and the drudgery of official routine. The Rest House was looked after by a caretaker called Kishan who also doubled up as the cook. He was a good cook and a good caretaker and I still remember the delightful curries that he used to serve up. The caretaker had a daughter called Rupa, who was a pretty little girl. Rupa was a curious soul and often came up to my room to look at the rifle and binoculars that I carried with me.

It was my practice during these visits, to have a pow-wow with the headmen of neighbouring villages. As the area was not often visited by government functionaries, this provided me with information which otherwise would not have reached me. Those of you who are familiar with the workings of the administration would know that information is not easy to come by and when one does actually come across something, it is often inaccurate if not downright untruthful. It was during one of these meetings that I learnt about the tiger who later came to be known as the tiger of Kalibhit from the headman of Borpani.

It was old Nepal Singh who told me about the tiger. He was the headman of Borpani, a village that has the old temple of Antara within its territory. With his big walrus moustache, his gruff voice and his thick staff, Nepal Singh was a sturdy old village chieftain of the type that is not so

commonly seen these days. He had seen many senior officers come and go and was accustomed to speaking his mind before government functionaries, unlike most of his fellow Sarpanchas. He would squat on the floor before me, turning down all attempts to offer him a seat, light up one of his strongly smelling beedis and hold forth on whatever seemed to move him at the moment. "There is a tiger in these parts Sahib, who is only a cattle-lifter now. But if I know anything about tigers, this beast is all set to become a man-eater within a few days. Do you know the tiger I am talking about?" Nepal Singh as usual was not mincing words.

"Are you talking about the big tiger that Kishan told me often frequents the area around this Rest House. He did not say anything about man-eating."

"Neither did I. What I did say was that this tiger will turn a man-eater before the year is out. Only the other day he picked up one of my cows. The best cow that I had actually. And he growled at my herdsman when he brandished his laathi at him. I have seen him myself, prowling about the temple and I can tell you this tiger is different. He does not fear human beings as most tigers do. He stands his ground and growls at people. It is only a matter of time before he charges one of the herdsmen and kills someone."

Nepal Singh's prophecy turned out to be accurate. Exactly as he had foreseen, a herdsman was attacked and killed by the tiger while he was out grazing his cows in the jungle. The incident took place in the territory of village Borpani near the Parvati river. The tiger had brought down the herder and killed him with one blow to his head but otherwise his body was untouched. The tiger had killed a man, but not eaten him. He could not be classed as a man-eater. Not yet anyway. Compensation was paid to the herder's family in accordance with the law. The villagers were advised to be cautious. Beyond this nothing else could be done. So there the matter rested.

But this did not turn out to be an isolated incident. It was soon followed by a second attack. And this time it was the tiger which stalked and killed a woman who had gone out to cut some grass. From the pug marks, clearly imprinted in the soft soil around the spot, it became obvious that the killer was a large male, no doubt the same tiger that had been seen by Nepal Singh. The woman had gone out alone and by the time her absence was noticed and a search party could be got together it was already late in the evening and the villagers decided to wait for daylight. This may appear callous to some but please remember that the search could not be conducted properly in the night, given the limited resources at the disposal of a small rural community. People

who live in such remote places often become fatalists and take things as they come. A search party did finally set out to look for the remains of the woman at daybreak and they duly found them in the dry bed of a nullah. Not much was left of the unfortunate victim and the pitiful remains were cremated where they were found by the relatives.

Thus started the man-eating career of the tiger of Kalibhit and he had already killed a number of victims when I decided to try my hand at shooting him. Man-eater hunting is a dangerous sport. There is always the prospect of sudden and painful death at the hands of a wily tiger. Being wounded is worse, for not only are these wounds painful but they often turn gangrenous due to the scraps of decomposing flesh always to be found under the claws of a tiger. If not treated immediately one faces the possibility of a very painful death. If after all this people still choose to go after man-eater tigers, and some people indeed do, you can put it down to the triumph of hope over experience. You need the gung-ho optimism of youth to take up this sport and I was young indeed in those far off days.

I had been looking for the tiger without much success for a month, going over the forest of Kalibhit and sitting over likely places in the vain hope of getting a shot at the tiger. My fruitless exertions continued for almost a month without any success when I was joined in my search for the tiger by old Deep Chand who was DFO at Hoshangabad. Deep Chand was a forest officer of the old school. He always put on khaki when he entered the forest, wore a sola topee and kept a walrus moustache. He was an old Shikari, knowledgeable about wild animals and the jungle and could be relied upon to shoot straight and keep his mouth shut. Deep Chand and I decided to divide forces at the outset. I put him in charge of the area to the north and east of the village of Borpani.. The jungle to the south and west of the village fell in my beat. As the tiger was supposed to have his lair some where on the hill to the north of the large village of Borda which lay to the north-east of Borpani, this suggestion was readily accepted.

I must tell you something about the terrain in which the man-eater was operating. Imagine a rectangular piece of jungle, some thirty miles in length and ten miles in width. All this area was clothed with dense teak forest, the famous reserve of Kalibhit. Diagonally across this rectangle, from the north western corner to its exit at the south-east, ran the Parvati river, a seasonal stream which carried a good volume of water in the rains, but in summer became a broad and sandy nullah with occasional deep pools of water in

rocky stretches. This vast stretch of forest was nearly devoid of habitation, but for three forest villages. The village of Borda which I have already mentioned stood exactly at the centre of the northern side of the rectangle. To the west of this village, about a mile away, was a hill strewn with rocks and with several large caves near the summit, in one of which the tiger was reported to have his lair.

To the east was the village of Borpani already mentioned before. The villagers of Borpani kept a large number of cattle which were let out to graze in the forest every morning. The jungle provided abundant grazing and the Parvati river had deep pools of water even at the height of the summer. This village was noted for the temple of Antara which was a Shakti temple famous for its statue of Kali and well-known to all those who worship power. The temple priest was Pandit Ramkishan Dube a kannojiya Brahmin whose ancestors had come down here during the reign of the Holkars at Indore. The priest was a learned man, well versed in Sanskrit and could cast a horoscope as well as any pundit. He also kept himself well briefed about local happenings and was a good source of information. It was from him that I learned that the tiger often appeared around the temple.

Before I go further I must describe another peculiar feature of the area which deserves mention. These were the ruins of Kalibhit, the ancient capital of the historical kingdom of Kalibhit which lay a few kilometers to the east of Borpani.. This was a Gond kingdom but the Gonds were exterminated during the 14th century by Afghan invaders who established a kingdom at Mandu. The Gond capital after being ransacked was abandoned and the forest soon took over; smothering everything in its green embrace. Over the centuries most of the ruins had crumbled to a heap of rubble, but here and there the odd structure still stood mute witness to a glory that had passed away. As normally happens with such places, there were many legends connected with this ruined capital of Kalibhit and it was widely reported to be haunted. No one ever went there, and the Harsud road, which passed a few kilometers to the south of this place was used only during the day. Even during the day, people took care to cross the road in small parties, no one daring to pass that way alone.

The last village was Junipani which was also a village inhabited by a population that was predominantly Gond. Junipani was situated at the extreme south-eastern corner of the rectangle, a few miles to the east of the

river and its natives had more intercourse with the outsiders than the other villages in our story.

It was Deep Chand who had the first encounter with the tiger and I would like you to hear the story in his own words. “ It was on the Borda-Borpani road that I first saw the man-eater. I was sitting up for him and I had chosen the site for my machaan with care. It was a few miles south of the village of Borda at a point where a track coming from the west and going to the Parvati river, which is only two furlongs to the east, crosses the road. This track is much frequented by wild animals and I often saw the pugmarks of a large tiger on this track to the east. It appeared that he often went towards the river to drink water. As the Borda road is stony at this place it did not show any pug marks. My guess is that the tiger came down from the hill to the north of Borda where he was supposed to have his lair and turned towards the river at this point. So I chose a large mango tree which grew at this spot for my machaan. This tree offered many suitable places for tying up my machaan and my workers put up a well-camouflaged and comfortable machaan for me in which to wait for the tiger. Perhaps it was a mistake to have such a comfortable seat, because at some point of time I must have dozed off. I know I am getting on in years now. In my young days, such a thing could not have happened. As it happens it was a moonless night. But my jungle instincts are not yet all dead. For some such instinct must have brought me awake. When I opened my eyes it was pitch dark, but I knew instinctively that the tiger had arrived. I switched on the torch fixed to the barrel of my Westley Richards .318 and saw the tiger walking off into the jungle towards the river. There was only enough time to take a hurried shot before he disappeared into the forest and I must have missed him completely, for no blood trail was found in the morning when we searched for him. Nor was there any sign of a wound. A complete miss, rather unfortunate, but there it was. When you are after a man-eater you have to be persistent. I hope I would be able to shoot better next time.”

Thus ended our first encounter with the man-eater of Kalibhit. There is one thing that I would like you to note from this abortive episode, and that is the fact that the tiger was seen on the track which came from the west. True, he could have come down from the north and turned to the east to go towards the river. But it is equally possible that he was all along following the track which came from the west. At any rate no pug marks were found either on the track coming from the west or on the road coming down from Borda

village because the ground was too rocky at this spot. This led us to conclude that the tiger lived on the hill to the north, a mistake as we discovered later, and a mistake that cost a human life.

The obvious thing to do next was to make a through reconnaissance of the hill to the north and this was done by Deep Chand. All the caves on the hill were approached cautiously and stoned in the usual fashion without eliciting any response. Had the tiger been in residence in any of the caves he would have charged out. Even if he was temporarily out he would have left some evidence of his residence in the cave, old bones for one thing, but nothing was found. The tiger obviously did not live on the hill, or if he did he certainly did not leave any traces of his habitation there.

At this juncture I had to return to Harda to attend to work which had piled up in my absence. More than a week passed before I could return, a week which proved sufficient for the man-eater to secure another kill. The kill was witnessed by Rupa the caretaker's brave little daughter, and I would like you to hear the story in her own words.

"You know Ramu, Sahib. (Ramu was a shepherd boy about 12 years of age) He was my only friend and we often played together. That day I was playing near the temple (of Antara). After playing for an hour we decided to rest in the shade of a large mango tree. Ramu said he did not want to rest and went to pick jungle jalebi in the forest. (The doughnut like fruit has a thin layer of flesh over the seeds and becomes sweet on ripening). I could see Ramu collecting the fruit as I lay with my head pillowed on my arm when all of a sudden a tiger appeared. He was a huge beast Sahib, as big as a cow and he made no sound at all. He just sprang on Ramu and after striking him down with his paw he put him in his jaws and just walked off into the forest."

Rupa was affected by the memory, because two silent tears welled up in her eyes in remembrance of her friend. "So what did you do, my dear child?" I asked Rupa.

"I ran after the tiger." (This was a brave but foolish thing to do) "But he had disappeared into the jungle with my friend. After a while I ran back and told Punditji. He organized a search party, but they found nothing".

"Now Rupa, think carefully before you answer me. Can you tell me in which direction the tiger was heading when you lost sight of him"

Rupa answered immediately, "he was going towards Kalibhit"

“Kalibhit,” I was surprised, “but that is far away. Why do you think the tiger was heading towards Kalibhit. Surely you meant that he was going towards the west?”

“Perhaps I did.” Rupa seemed to hesitate here, “yet I have seen him once at Kalibhit.”

“My dear child, what are you saying. Surely you have not been to Kalibhit. Why no one goes there even during the day.”

“Well I went there once with Ramu. He said ghosts do not exist and we had nothing to fear from them. So we went there once. It was an eerie place all the same. It was all very quiet. And then we saw the tiger. He was sitting in front of an old ruin. We ran as soon as we saw him and kept running as long as we could.”

“How long ago was this Rupa?”

“Six months ago. Just before the tiger killed Nepal Dada's cow.”

“I see. And did you tell anyone about this incident?”

“No I did not.”

So that was where the tiger lived. I thought for a while. The facts seemed to support the theory. Remember that Deep Chand had seen the tiger coming from the west. It was more than likely that he lived in the ruins of Kalibhit. They offered him the ideal shelter, because the local populace gave a wide berth to the place and no one ever went near it for fear of ghosts. He could live there unmolested and die of old age. No local would ever set foot within the vicinity of Kalibhit to look for him. But a plan was forming in my head. and for the plan to succeed I needed the support of Rupa.”

“Would you go to Kalibhit with me to look for the tiger Rupa?”

“I would do anything to avenge the death of my friend Sahib.”

“So we would go there tomorrow. But remember Rupa, not a word of this to anyone. Not even to your father.”

“Of course Sahib, if you say so.”

I remember I had to set aside my moral scruples in putting at risk the life of a little girl. I knew that if we did not get the tiger he would kill again. So any plan, however wild it seemed at first was worth trying out. No matter what the risk. And moral dilemmas had to be set aside.

My plan was simple. I would go to Kalibhit and lay a trap for the tiger. As he never accepted animal baits I would have to use Rupa as a decoy. This was the risky part. But I told myself that I would put the little girl where she would not be at risk. It was a stupid plan, borne out of the arrogance of youth

and the heady self confidence of a young officer. A desperate man can convince himself of anything. And I was pretty desperate and in retrospect stupid and cocky.

The next day I was up early waiting for Rupa in my room in the rest house at Mangathar. She turned up at the appointed hour, only there was a little problem. She had told her father about our plans and Kishan also turned up with her. He demanded that I take him instead of Rupa, but this would have upset my plans completely so I reasoned with him. "There is absolutely no reason for you to worry about Rupa. I will take care of her. We will just snoop about the ruins and come back in the afternoon, well before dark."

But Kishan was not to be persuaded so easily. "She is my only child, sir. After her mother died she is all I have. I know you are going after the tiger Sahib. It will be far too dangerous to take a small child on an expedition like this. Take me instead. I shall do whatever you desire."

I had to admit Kishan was right and eventually I had to agree with him. So after bidding farewell to Rupa we set off towards the ruins, leaving the little girl alone in her house. Before leaving her, we impressed upon her that she should remain indoors and not play outside alone. It took us more than two hours to reach the ruins of Kalibhit. As we neared the dreaded spot the forest got thicker and the silence more intense. After we reached the spot I took my stand on a little knoll which overlooked the ruined capital. I hid myself behind a boulder. I asked Kishan to sit out in the open a little to my left at a distance of about fifteen yards. In front of Kishan was the open slope and the tiger, if he wanted to get Kishan, had to come up the slope thus exposing himself and giving me the chance of an easy shot. From time to time Kishan was to stand up and make some noise to attract attention. The tiger being a man-eater would have by now lost his fear of human beings. Thus he would not hesitate to approach Kishan if he saw him as a potential victim. That was my argument. But things seldom happen according to argument when you are after a man-eater.

It was a clear summer morning. The sun shone overhead in a cloudless sky. The ruins of the ancient capital lay before me, mostly shrouded in vegetation and barely distinguishable from the all-enclosing shrubbery. But here and there a structure rose clear of the sea of vegetation and stood amid the desolation like a silent sentinel. Immediately to my right was Kishan trying to shout and generally attract attention to himself. His antics seemed somewhat ridiculous in the silence that, after each absurd performance,

seemed to return like a tide. I waited with my finger on the trigger of my .318 Westley Richards rifle. Of the tiger there was no sign.

Quite a bit of time must have passed in this fashion, but the tiger did not put in an appearance. He might have been miles away for all I knew. It must have been rather late in the afternoon when far away in the forest, I heard a faint voice shouting, 'Bapu, Bapu'. The voice was faint, almost indistinct, but there was no mistaking it, it was Rupa's voice. Here was a complication that we had not foreseen. Rupa had been told to stay indoors yet she had disobeyed instructions. It must have been something important that had caused her to flout our clear instruction. But whatever it was that had caused her to rush after us, what the little girl did not seem to realize was that she was in danger, mortal danger in fact. Because if we could hear her, so could the tiger and if he was anywhere in the vicinity he would not miss the chance of securing another human victim. So there was no time to lose. I jumped to my feet and asked Kishan to run just before me. I could not guard him if he ran behind me. He had also heard the voice and he was as anxious as I was to see his daughter.

By my reckoning Rupa was at least quarter of a mile away. We were not cross-country runners. It would take us at least 3-4 minutes to cover the distance even if we ran all the way. Anything could happen in this interim. Fortunately right before us was a small hill. If we ran up the slopes we would have a clear view of the track coming up to Kalibhit. If Rupa was running up this track I could keep her in the sights of my Westley Richards rifle. And if the tiger was running after her I would have a chance of bagging it provided I saw it first and had a clear line of fire.

Picture to yourself then the scene that was before us. The thick jungle and the silence that enveloped everything. The little girl running up the track and occasionally shouting for her father. Fortunately the track was quite wide at this point and I felt sure that the tiger could not attack her without showing himself first and giving me the chance of a shot. It would have to be a good shot I knew, to kill the tiger without harming the brave little child and I would need a hefty dose of luck. But fortune favours the brave they say and there was no doubt Rupa was an exceptionally brave little girl. I waited with my sights aligned on the track and a prayer on my lips watching Rupa come up the track and as she passed below me, it happened.

The tiger broke cover twenty yards behind Rupa and charged at her. I had a clear line of fire because I was seated on a hillock. My first bullet fired

at a downward angle struck it somewhere in the back and halted the tiger in his tracks. My second bullet must have broken his spine because he fell down where he stood and lay there snarling and pawing the ground. I ran down the hill hurriedly and soon put the tiger out of his misery by putting another bullet in the head.

When questioned later Rupa told me that she was running up to tell us that the tiger had killed another cow from Nepal Singh's herd. No one else was willing to come up with her to Kalibhit on account of local superstition. In retrospect I was rather glad that the locals were so superstitious. Without their faith in ghosts I may not have got a chance to shoot the man-eater of Kalibhit. I, later, had the privilege of recommending Rupa to a bravery medal and a scholarship, wherein after graduation she joined the Police department.

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