The New Enemy

From Bodoland to Bombay, the ‘illegal’ immigrant—shorthand for Bangladeshi Muslim—becomes easy meat for politicians sharpening their rhetoric ahead of crucial polls.
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What they said to us

DR ROMMELL TICKOO, on rising malaria in India

“People visit doctors with fever, get treated for malaria without a blood test. So, we cannot say how much resistance there is.”

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**POLSCAPE**

“I do not believe in this court. There is no court. It is an illusion.”—Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, member of the Russian band Pussy Riot, who got two years jail for their ‘punk chorus’ in a cathedral calling on the Virgin Mary to drive out Putin.

**Weighed Down**

Now that Gopal Kanda is in the doghouse after the Geetika Sharma suicide, one-time friend and mentor Om Prakash Chautala is going out of his way to distance himself. It seems the 2005 assembly poll campaign—when Kanda had ‘weighed’ Chautala in coins (the weight had walked off with the money)—is a distant memory. It took a bitter Govind Kanda (Gopal’s brother) to remind Chautala of the “crores of rupees” he had trotted off with. The provocation was a remark by the ex-CM where he reportedly said he had met Gopal Kanda for the first time in the assembly! Those in the know say the real reason for Kanda’s fury is the hand of the Chautalas in putting out every salacious detail about Geetika-Kanda to newspaper hacks and the police.

**Wanna Ride?**

Beset by allegations that it was propping up rogue party members, the TMC government in Bengal is on a PR drive to prove otherwise. Auto drivers in Calcutta, who so far had enjoyed a hell-for-leather run of the streets by virtue of belonging to the TMC union, are being reined in. Things had come to a head last week after a child fell from the lap of her mother in a speeding auto. The driver refused to stop until the mother grabbed him by the collar and nearly choked him. For two days no arrest was made, with the cops pleading helplessness. Finally, a ‘magnanimous’ transport minister Madan Mitra grandly announced that the culprit would be arrested and the rogue driver was picked up!

**True Blue Followers**

It’s apparently never too late to become a twit, oops Twitterer. Last week, the 88-year-old DMK chief M. Karunanidhi began his cyber life by tweeting to the world. And expectedly, within a few hours of debuting on August 14, jeers and cheers greeted him. While actress and party spokesperson Khushboo greeted him with a “Warm welcome Thalaivare”, another follower was downright insulting, “Welcome to one of TN’s greatest Machiavellis”! The octogenarian’s first tweet, incidentally, was about the TESO (Tamil Eelam Supporters Organisation) meet he had organised but if he thought he’s making waves, here’s some ‘enthusiastic’ responses: “Yaarai vidadhu...indha twitter! (No one’ll be spared...by this Twitter)”, followed by “Now that you’re on Twitter...if you promise a TV I promise to follow you...” Looks like the DMK chief has a leftover freebie legacy to live up to.

**Mubarak Ho!**

At the PM-hosted iftar last week, there was some easy banter on between Biharis Laloo Prasad Yadav and the BJP’s Shahnawaz Hussain. To Laloo’s query on Narendra Modi as the BJP’s PM candidate, Shahnawaz just smiled, reminded him there was another iftar party at his house the next day!
The media splash—exemplified by a hyper-ventilating Guardian report following the Supreme Court’s July 2012 interim order suspending tourism in some tiger reserves—has convinced the public that all wildlife tourism activity in India stands permanently abolished. Following the August 22 ruling on a review petition by the SC, in which it extended its ban on tourism in the ‘core areas’ of tiger reserves, people might think such a shutdown portends a disastrous collapse of public support to tiger conservation. These are exaggerations arising out of a flawed reading.

Wildlife tourism has been temporarily halted only in tiger reserves, that too only in states that have not notified ‘buffer zones’ mandated by law. Tourism is going on unhindered at all other wildlife reserves, including tiger reserves where buffer zones have been notified. The intent of the court’s order appears to be to compel remaining states to create buffers around already notified core areas or ‘critical tiger habitats’, with the suspension of tourism as a threat. The issue, as it has been framed by the court, will hopefully renew focus on the flawed boundaries of some of these critical tiger habitats, for both scientific and practical reasons.

Broadly, there are two kinds of wildlife tourism being practised in the country. The first is ‘budget tourism’, affordable to the non-affluent. My career as a naturalist was nurtured decades ago as one such tourist who paid 16 rupees for a van ride to watch wildlife rebound from the brink in Nagarahole, Karnataka. Budget wildlife tourism emerged in 1970s, when wildlife began to recover after a pioneer generation of foresters implemented Indira Gandhi’s tough new laws.

The high-end version of tiger tourism, kicking up so much dust now, came later when wildlife got habituated to tourists and could be easily watched. It typically features luxury accommodation and fine food (often with swimming pools, saunas, therapeutic massage thrown in). The ‘boutique tourism’ we see at reserves like Bandhavgarh, Kanha and Ranthambhore can be enjoyed only by the well-off.

The rise of boutique tourism is a consequence of India’s economic growth, which generated large disposable incomes that could be tapped. Its concern is profit, not conservation education. This is not a crime, as some appear to believe—but nor is it a great virtue. Although high-end tourism generates some local jobs and benefits, unlike in Africa these are not at all significant when scaled to the size of local economies, let alone state or national ones. Wildlife reserves cannot be India’s ‘engines of economic growth’. Their primary value is for educating the public about our threatened wildlife, generating support and enabling conservation action.

High-end tourism necessarily targets spectacular animals like tigers, lions, rhinos and elephants that attract top dollars. It has spread rapidly across the country, with even the public sector joining in. As a result, in most good wildlife reserves, the prices charged for entry, vehicle rides and accommodation have all skyrocketed beyond the reach of average citizens. However, because the size of these reserves or their carrying capacity has not expanded, richer tourists are steadily squeezing out budget tourists.

This sad consequence of spreading high-end tourism has gone unnoticed in the present debate. Exclusion of the budget tourists can hit support for conservation
ered Animal
viewing land, with shared profits

The arguments that the tourism industry’s watchful eyes are necessary to protect wildlife and its ‘ban’ will lead to collapse of wildlife protection are also facetious. The high-end tourism boom, in fact, followed years after wildlife populations had rebounded: to claim that it recovered wildlife is to mistake the effect for the cause. What is particularly muddying this logical stream in the present debate is the fact that a handful of genuine conservationists are loudly pleading the industry’s case. However, in my view, they do not represent a reasonable sample of general industry behaviour or practices by any stretch of imagination.

On the other hand, it would also be wrong to portray ‘tiger tourism’ as the most important threat to wild tigers. It is not. Direct killing by criminal gangs, poaching of prey animals, livestock grazing, the collection of forest produce by locals, development of infrastructure such as mines and dams in ecologically sensitive areas, as well as the misapplication of the Forest Rights Act, pose much bigger threats. Ill-conceived and over-funded ‘habitat improvement’ practised by reserve managers is also emerging as a potent threat.

However, it cannot also be denied that increasing tourism pressure, ‘more of vehicles, riding elephants, fuel-wood consumption and water diversion, as well as broader scale habitat fragmentation’ are of increasing concern. This is particularly true because much of the high-end tourism pressure is targeted at a few major reserves that cover less than 1/1000th of our land.

The success of the ‘wildlife habitat expansion model’ I propose will depend on the underlying economics being robust. It will not depend merely on pious conservation concerns but on pursuit of economic self-interest by both industry and farmers. It may not meet the gold standards of North Korean socialism, but I believe it can offer a pragmatic long-term solution framed within the overall model of development followed by every elected government for the past two decades.

What then of the ordinary budget tourists? It’s imperative that publicly owned wildlife reserves be accessible to them at reasonable costs, even as commercial tourism expands outwards in ever widening circles. What I have proposed is indeed closer to the South African model of wildlife tourism, which industry advocates now demand in India. That model includes well-run, properly zoned national parks like Kruger that benefit large numbers of less-affluent tourists. These are surrounded and buffered by an expanding network of private reserves catering to visitors with deeper pockets. In the process hundreds of square kilometres of marginal farmland, cattle ranches and Bilong (game meat) ranches have turned into additional well-managed wildlife tourism reserves. This case comes as a warning bell for India’s wildlife tourism industry; if it does not confront the economic issue of its own dwindling natural capital, soon it will have no place to go.

(Karanth is director for Science-Asia, Wildlife Conservation Society)
No End to the Art of Losing?

The shocking secret of masterworks that have gone missing

by Anuradha Raman

For a nation that never tires of proclaiming its valued heritage, it’s a matter of great worry—and deep shame—that the works of master artists have gone missing. It’s even more shameful that they have gone missing over the years from the Lalit Kala Akademi, a body meant to foster and promote the fine arts. What is known is that the works of M.F. Husain, J. Swaminathan and Jamini Roy are among those missing from the Akademi. Where have they gone? What are the names of the works? No one knows. In fact, there isn’t even an inventory of the original works that have been acquired by the Akademi since 1954.

Artists have for some time been aware of the morass into which the institution has sunk. About 20 years ago, they even protested against its mismanagement. But they have fallen silent as the state is slowly withdrawing from patronising culture, leaving artists to swim in the market currents, which convey a select few to riches but pull down many talents to oblivion. Perhaps it’s the fear of losing out on what little patronage remains that leaves them whispering about the “secret” that many know.

But Balan Nambiar, a painter, sculptor and photographer who was acting chairman of the Akademi till July this year, has taken decisive action by writing to Union culture minister Kumari Selja, mentioning the big names whose paintings have gone missing from the Akademi’s gallery. “I had a limited and fixed tenure, but I decided I had the right to seek answers to questions about the malfunctioning of the Akademi,” says Nambiar. By making the “secret” official, he hopes to wake up the government and MPs: in response to a parliamentary question, the present secretary of the Akademi, Sudhakar Sharma, had said only one painting was missing, a work by artist Ram Kumar.

Many in the art community say that mismanagement at the Akademi has been wilfully allowed over the years to facilitate the stealing of masters’ works for private collections. “Repeated requests to the Akademi to furnish a list of my father’s (J. Swaminathan’s) paintings have gone unheeded,” says S. Kalyan…. It’s shocking that there is no inventory, nor a register of works of art acquired by the Akademi since 1954.
das, an art critic. “I believe there are as many as 20 paintings of my father that remain unaccounted for.”

Nambiar has also talked about the woeful conditions in which the work of eminent artists are maintained at the Akademi. Three years ago, he had shot off a letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, in his capacity as a nominated member of the Central Advisory Board on Culture (CABC) of the Union culture ministry. In that letter, a copy of which is with Outlook, Nambiar sought a law to protect works of art in public spaces. At that time, the ministry was under the charge of the prime minister himself. Nothing much came of it: in fact, Nambiar bemoans that the CABC, set up through a government gazette notification, was to meet at least once in three months, but met just thrice during its three-year tenure.

Though Nambiar’s tenure as acting chairman lasted all of six months, he says he has carried his concern with him and wants to pursue his questions: dipping into a report submitted by a committee set up in 2004 to examine the workings of the Akademi, Nambiar is trying to create a list of missing works. Among the main issues that have been flagged by Nambiar in his letter to the culture minister are the following:

● The Akademi hasn’t maintained proper inventories of works: there isn’t even a register of works bought from national exhibitions since 1954.

● Many of the 400 paintings from the permanent collection of the Akademi that were dispatched for an exhibition two years ago were damaged in transit. Thirty were damaged beyond repair. This was because the paintings were stacked atop each other and transported by truck to far-flung places.

● The Akademi’s secretary, who as administrator has more powers than the chairman, is responsible for the mess.

● There are some favourites of the secretary, who has been awarded lucrative contracts to curate exhibitions.

● A camp office of the Akademi in Shimla (which Nambiar alleges is in the name of the father-in-law of the current secretary) has displayed some artworks by purporting to be a regional centre, which it is formally not.

● Mismanagement and misappropriation of funds is rampant in the departments in charge of scholarships and grants for art institutions.

Nambiar met the culture minister on August 9 and updated her on the issues facing the akademi. “The contents of my letter are 100 per cent verifiable,” he says. According to sources, he also handed over some documents to senior officials who took part in the discussion.

The callous attitude of the Akademi towards artists and their works does not come as a shock to many. Says Ram Rahman, whose father was instrumental in designing the Akademi building, “I am not at all surprised that paintings are untraceable. Even the building has been callously redesigned by the administration.”

Ram Rahman
Photographer

“I’m not surprised that paintings are missing. Even the Akademi building has been callously redesigned by the administration.”

Vivan Sundaram
Artist

“The electoral college, which elects members to the Akademi, has destroyed it. It has gone to seed in the last 20 years.”

Vivan Sundaram
Artist

Cleaning up Balan Nambiar at his studio-cum-residence in Bangalore

Sundaram had deposed before the parliamentary subcommittee on culture, chaired by Sitaram Yechury, two months ago. The committee’s report is awaited in a week or so, but its recommendations are to be purely advisory, for the state, after all, is withdrawing from art and culture. The solution perhaps lies in asking artists themselves to oversee our heritage, instead of giving the job to bureaucrats who don’t seem to care. For the record, Outlook e-mailed Sudhakar Sharma for his comments, but it went unanswered, though he had insisted that his version be incorporated in this report.