

BY MIHIR VATSA

Hazaribagh Wildlife Sanctuary was already past its prime when I was born. Once a prized national park, the forest was demoted to the status of a sanctuary in 1976. Nonetheless, even in its quiet autumnal presence, this forest, spread across 186 sq. km, found mention in my geography textbook. I don't remember the class, but I do remember the pride I felt that millions of children were reading about it.

This forest was a circuit which joined us with the others, beyond administrative borders, beyond nomenclature of states and cities, and it was the shared experience of reading these three words, 'Hazaribagh Wildlife Sanctuary', that was our circuit's only, and also the most critical, spark.

Sometime in 2002, a signboard appeared on NH 33, the highway which cuts through the sanctuary and runs north-south from Hazaribagh. Traveling from Hazaribagh, you saw this signboard on your right, just before the forest ended in the royal town of Padma. The signboard announced Lotwa Dam, and if you followed the direction of the arrow, only then you saw, behind the trees, a quick glimpse of water. My earlier encounters with the forest were limited gazing through the window of a bus, usually Badal or Suman Lok, destined for Patna, where my maternal family lived. As such, the water of Lotwa Dam was almost always a matter of flash. If you missed it, you missed it.

Feels just right

The forest that falls on the right of NH 33 is called Salparni. A small stream, originating in the hamlet of Ichak, enters Salparni from the south and it is here that the forest waters it, shapes it, and tests it. Before leaving the trees, this insignificant stream transforms into a rivulet and makes a picturesque waterfall in the woods, its charm increasing exponentially during the monsoon. Out of the forest, this infant river takes the name of Deta and joins another rivulet, Kewta, in the reservoir of Lotwa Dam.

Built in 1975-76 to provide water for irrigation, the Lotwa Dam reservoir feels just right to the eyes. It's a landscape of control, which, unlike the reservoir of its elder sister Tilaiya Dam 20 km ahead, satiates the senses but never overwhelms. The road to the reservoir shoots so swiftly from the highway that travellers assume it is either inconsequential or abandoned, leaving the place to its solitude.

In summer, when the water shrinks, the red earth with its complex colonies of rocks is exposed to the feet that manoeuvre here. The sky remains a clear stretch of blue with just a light splattering of clouds, and the strong evening sunlight turns the water ethereal. Dimensions deceive photography and the photos forget to distinguish between the red, hard surface of the shore and the blue, fluid stillness of the water. This trick of light gives the place an extraordinary appearance of being afloat on a thin carpet of air.

The Asian Waterbird Census of 2016 recorded 19 species of birds at Lotwa



Dam in spring, and its reservoir, along with the entire wildlife sanctuary forest, has been declared an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area. In the sky, white and noisy egrets fly from one end to the other, and it's their presence which makes you form your own. Needless to say, the landscape created by Lotwa Dam, hidden slyly about 17 km from Hazaribagh, is a favourite.

The old man of Hazaribagh

"Every small town has this one old man, a prophetic grandfather, who knows everything about everything." This observation was made by my senior, landscape photographer Siddharth Pandey, when we met last year in Delhi. Over the years of our acquaintance, we have, through the geographies of our towns, grown a friendship between the Himalayan mountains of Shimla and the Chotanagpur plateau of Hazaribagh.

Siddharth's statement had stuck with me because my very age-inappropriate yet best friend in Hazaribagh is one such man, a prophetic grandfather who always knows everything about

Tiger Fall, the waterfall that wasn't

The place appears to float: photos forget to distinguish between the red, hard surface of the shore and the blue, fluid stillness of the water



Landscape of control During the monsoon, the Kewta river falls into the mine, creating a pool. (Bottom) Two old sketches; the one on the right shows the wilderness that once surrounded the fall. The spot where the car is parked has been swallowed by the mine. The other is a view of Tiger Fall before the mining began. The tiger, like the fall, has now disappeared. MIHIR VATSA

everything: Bulu Imam, 74, hunter-turned-environmentalist, anti-mining activist, and convener of INTACH's Hazaribagh chapter.

It was in his place that on an old Coal India map I found Tiger Fall. I had heard about it before and had read about it years ago in one of those thin supplements that arrived at New Year's with *Hindustan* and *Dainik Jagran*. According to the map, the waterfall was located near the sanctuary, and for a moment I wondered whether it was the same waterfall which the Deta makes in Salparni forest. I studied the map, and involuntarily mumbled, "Tiger Fall, huh?"

"It's no longer there. We knew it as Tiger Pool," Imam replied. "It's a stone mine now. I don't go there any more." He paused a moment, then, almost like a warning, said, "And it would be better if you also didn't."

"But where is it?" I persisted.

"Do you know Lotwa Dam?"

"Yes, what about it?"

Before Tiger Fall surfaced in the New

Dam was built at least six years before *Perspectives in Geomorphology* appeared in 1981. If there indeed was a waterfall at these coordinates, it would have disappeared long before the writing of the chapter. There was no way Prasad and Naseemuddin saw it without noticing the reservoir, of which there was no mention in their paper. The coordinates were wrong. The waterfall which they had mentioned had to be Roy Choudhury's Tiger Pool.

So I tried locating it. I knew it was a stone mine now and found the mine a kilometre downstream from Lotwa Dam. A satellite view of the region made it apparent that Roy Choudhury's river was Kewta, 20 years before it was blocked by Lotwa Dam. Sure enough the Kewta, now substantially impoverished, flowed right to the mine and from there it went on to Padma. I looked at the terrain around the mine, but it appeared rather flat. No hills, no undulations. I was surprised, also confused, because I have always thought of waterfalls as the children of hills.

Fall in a mine

My first visit to the mine was in May. I took the first right from the highway and two defunct gateposts welcomed me. As I drove ahead, I crossed two more gateposts and on my right appeared an abandoned bungalow, its foundation covered with wild grass and bushes. Hollow frames of what were previously windows and doors gawked in all directions. It looked like a forest department construction. A few weeks ago, and at another waterfall, I had found a similar ruin. Tiger Fall, or whatever was left of it, had to be close.

I parked the car near the bungalow. The road before me had descended into the dry bed of Kewta, emerging again on the opposite side as if nothing had happened, as if the river was an undeniable feature of it, and as if I was an idiot to have expected a bridge. As I stepped out, I saw to my left a steep depression of about a hundred feet, a sharp trough

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created by the mine, and as I peeped into it, bulldozers and dumpers appeared at the bottom, hard at work.

Consider your current posture as mine standing on the road: your face looks to the east, your left hand is the north. Consider the gap between you and this text as the riverbed over which the temperamental road goes. The skinny Kewta flows from your right to your left, and just as it reaches the left-most edge of your body, it falls into the huge, dusty pit. Or so it should, if it ever returns water.

This was my Tiger Fall. Dry, obsolete, ugly. Previously a landscape of beauty, now a site of greed. Roy Choudhury's "wild setting" was nowhere to be seen, nor were the tumbling rapids. The mine had hollowed the entire thing out.

How to kill a flow

I followed the river upstream. Right before it could fall off the edge, the water was deliberately blocked by a mound of earth that stretched across the width of the stream. This resulted in a stagnant pool. Some consolation, I mused. Fur-

ther ahead, the flow was blocked by a small check dam. I stopped here, realising that if I walked more, I would simply reach Lotwa Dam. I turned and, on the way back to the car, realised that the Kewta had been systematically deprived of its water right up to the edge of the cliff – the fall itself – so there was nothing left to spill into the mine below. Neat. I realised that as the water swelled up against Lotwa Dam to create the reservoir, the seasonal Kewta only grew thinner. Finally, I realised that the satisfying landscape of Lotwa Dam was created at the cost of Tiger Fall's disappearance into a stone quarry.

A report published in *The Telegraph* in October 2014 had put the number of such mines at more than 1,500, stressing on the fact that these mines also enjoyed the patronage "of at least one minister and a well-known politician".

I had always thought of landscape as a stationary, geographical feature, dominated by the physical appearance of things. But where I stood, midway of Tiger Fall and Lotwa Dam, the idea of landscape turned fluid, subject to economy, politics, and public policy. Landscape was no longer innocent. I returned home shortly afterwards.

Return of the waters

Monsoon arrived in Hazaribagh in June and so did Vinayak, a student of English literature at Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi. We had previously gone waterfall-hunting in Keredari and had planned to find another in Pokharia forest in the sanctuary. Before the day of the trip, however, I spent a sleepless night and it left me with little spirit to walk in the woods. We settled on finding a different waterfall, which was located in Jihu village on the outskirts of the sanctuary, and which I knew was easier to approach. We decided to leave the car and take Vinayak's motorcycle instead.

In order to reach Jihu, we needed to turn left after leaving the sanctuary, but I asked Vinayak if we could check on Tiger Fall, in case the monsoon flow had managed to wade through the mound.

We soon arrived at the abandoned bungalow. The Kewta had swollen substantially and had managed to cleave a small channel through the mound, from where it now escaped and dropped steep into the mine. I was thrilled.

For a better view, we walked around the edge in a semi-circle and were soon standing opposite the fall. The visual of the mine darted at us. From the right-most edge, the Kewta fell into the pit, which had now taken the shape of a pool. Due to sediments, the water below was completely yellow. On the left-most edge was another fall, created by the flow of water from Lotwa Dam's canal into the paddy fields and consequently into the mine.

Natural vs. industrial

The mine had done two things to the fall: it had unwittingly increased its height, and it had turned the entire place into a conflict zone, where the neat demarcation between natural and industrial landscapes was reduced to irrelevance. In summer, in the absence of water, the natural created the industrial. In the monsoon, in the presence of water, the industrial created the natural. What this antithetical synergy birthed was an orphan waterfall, devoid of hills. The road where we had parked the motorcycle had itself become the cliff through which the water fell. The bulldozers continued to move about the area below and the dumpers grunted their way in and out of the mine.

From where I stood, the idea of landscape had turned fluid, subject to economy, politics, and public policy

Though no one, not even the workers, knows for sure when the mine was set up, it is believed to be either in 1991-92 or in 2004-05. The wildlife census of Hazaribagh Wildlife Sanctuary in 1991 recorded 14 tigers in the forest. Soon, all of them disappeared. Then, in 2005, pugmarks of a lone tiger were found and the news made it to the papers. What happened to the tiger after that is not known.

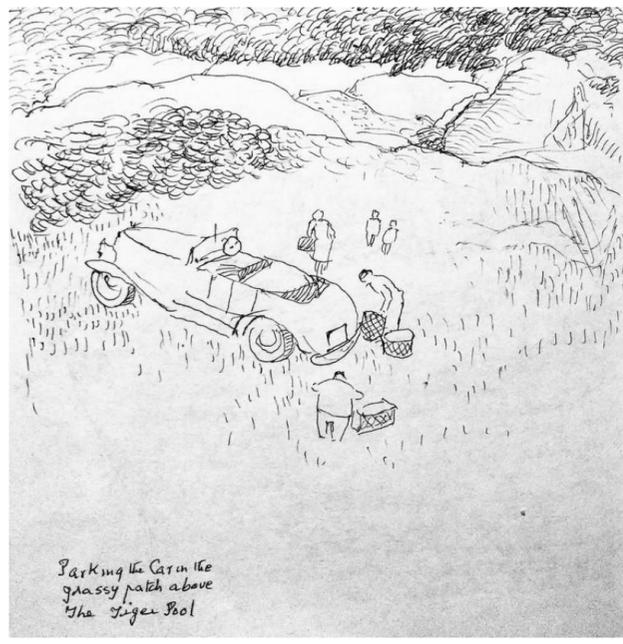
What's in a name?

Earlier, in April, walking on the dry Deta in Salparni Forest with an old school friend, I had spoken of Tiger Fall. I told him it was somewhere on the sanctuary's fringes but the fall itself was no more. "Quite like the tigers," he had said. The precise humour in his statement made us laugh.

So a change in nomenclature is in order: Perhaps from the misleading Tiger Fall to an opulent Tiger Mine? Sometimes I wonder if I should remove it from the list of waterfalls that I have found so far travelling in the hills and forests of Hazaribagh.

After all, it is a mine, spread across at least 10 acres, leased out by the administration in full knowledge of the site being a waterfall with a substantial recorded history. They had decided that instead of conservation it needed to be wiped out. If god works in strange ways, then the ways of Indian administration are stranger.

But is there a possibility of return? Any idea how Tiger Fall looked like? Were there hills around, what about the "wild setting"? Imam remembers something and goes into his office for a key. He opens an almirah and pulls out a diary. With a red cover, it is the most distinctive of all the diaries inside. He flips through the pages looking for something, finds it, and puts it in front of me.



It's a sketch. Two sketches, actually.

The first one is a picnic scene. There is a car parked in the foreground. The adults are taking care of the food while the kids wander towards the hills in the background. These hills aren't high, but they do make nice folds. Beyond the hills starts a thick forest, and from one of the crevices a stream falls. The caption below the sketch reads: "Parking the car in the grassy patch above the Tiger Pool".

The second sketch completely reveals the fall. It's a full moon sky and the escarpment of two hills form the background. The river falls from the right cliff to make a pool. A tiger approaches it for water. The water then falls into another pool before finally coursing ahead. In the foreground on the extreme right is a steep slice of rock which carries an inscription. The sketch is captioned: "Tiger drinking at The Tiger Pool by a full moon".

As I read the note accompanying the sketches, I find this line: "On one of the ledges, I had my name inscribed, 'Bulu', and I was very proud of it."

The coda

In 2006, the Supreme Court instructed every State and Union Territory to declare Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs) around their protected forest areas, which can range up to 10 km from the core. The purpose of ESZs is to have a buffer where, among other things, industrial activities will be either prohibited or regulated.

The draft proposal for an ESZ around Hazaribagh Sanctuary was published on August 18, 2015, by the Environment Ministry. If cleared, the Tiger Fall mine, along with hundreds of other stone quarries, will come under the immediate sensitive zone of the sanctuary and will risk closure.

As of May 31, 2016, the State of Jharkhand has requested the Ministry that the proposals for Hazaribagh Wildlife Sanctuary ESZ and Palamau Tiger Reserve ESZ be deferred.

The Hufflepuff wizard is the author of *Painting That Red Circle White*, his first poetry collection for muggles. He lives near a lake with lotuses and noisy cormorants.