

eye



POINT OF VIEW, PAGE 2

A Life Worth Living

What are the small ways you might want to opt out of the highway of life?

ARTS etc, PAGE 3

A House for Mr Doshi

Unpacking late architect BV Doshi's design philosophy through Kamala House, the home he built and lived in for over six decades



Once Hazaribagh in the Chota Nagpur plateau had been home to a healthy population and diversity of predators, including one of the largest tigers ever found in India. Over the years, poaching and unmitigated industrialisation have laid its forests to waste

THE BACHELOR'S PAD



Raza Kazmi

THREE MILES from our winter home, and in the heart of the forest, there is an open glade...It was in this glade...that I first saw the tiger who was known throughout the United Provinces as 'The Bachelor of Powalgarh', who from 1920 to 1930 was the most sought-after big-game trophy in the province," wrote Jim Corbett in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1944). The Bachelor, described by hunters to be "as big as a Shetland pony" was arguably one of the biggest tigers to have ever lived. He met his end at the hands of Corbett in the spring of 1930.

Thirty-three years later, and seven years before tiger hunting would be banned in India, in another spring, in another land, more than a thousand kilometres away from the cool greens of the Shivaliks, a hunter was hot on the heels of a massive tiger that had been leaving "tracks almost the size of soup plates". Like the Bachelor, this giant, too, was no man-eater, though much like the Bachelor he, too, liked a few buffaloes every now and then. When the hunter, a maverick man named Syed Askari Hadi Ali Augustine Imam, finally saw the tiger for the first time, he described him as the size of "a polo pony". This tiger too met his end, almost in the exact manner as the Bachelor — a bullet to his head that went through his skull.



SAHAA Imam, or "Tootoo" Imam, as he was popularly known, was a spiry wrinkled nonagenarian in the twilight of his life by the time I first met him in 2012. He had arguably been, for a better part of the century, the most flamboyant character in the otherwise quiet and quaint town of Hazaribagh in Jharkhand. Son of Justice Syed Hasan Imam, president of the Indian National Congress in 1918, and India's representative at the League of Nations in 1923, this former racer, hunter, sports-car aficionado, and equestrian had been christened "Tootoo" by virtue of the fact that, as a child, he had travelled with his family to the Valley of the Kings in Egypt to see the tomb and the sarcophagus of King Tutankhamun. An Anglophile, Tootoo, for a lot of townsmen, was the last "gora sahib" the British forgot to take back when leaving India.

This had to be the largest tiger I had ever seen with a head of absolutely unreal proportions

As I waited for him in the drawing room of his sprawling bungalow, I was immediately drawn to a moulded, fading black-and-white image of a dead tiger with some people huddled behind it, kept atop the fireplace mantle. As I peered at it in the dimly-lit room, I was stunned. This had to be the largest tiger I had ever seen, with a head of unreal proportions. I had seen the famous photo of the Bachelor of Powalgarh, lying prostrate at Corbett's feet, many times. I had no doubt that the behemoth I was looking at outmatched him. I christened him 'The Bachelor of Hazaribagh'.

Imam had shot our Bachelor, in the spring of 1963, in the forests of the northern escarpment of Hazaribagh plateau, not too far from his home. "When we examined him I could scarce believe my eyes. I have seen no tiger before or since with a head of the size he had. The rifle shown along the beast's body is my .470 and will give scale to the picture. He had a mane on the top of his neck. In the picture, this looks like an enormous bulge of muscle on the neck. He had tremendous "mutton chop" whiskers", Imam recounted in his book *Brown Hunter* (1979). "I believe this to be the biggest Indian tiger ever shot considering body length only (which was 7 ft 5 inches) and excluding the tail.", wrote Imam while noting that this tiger had a curiously short tail.

"I am quite deaf, could you speak louder?" said Tootoo uncle in his very British accent as I shot a barrage of queries about the photograph and the tiger at him. "That tiger, could you tell me more about him?" I repeated. His sunken eyes suddenly widened, accentuating the wrinkles on his face and he extended his shrivelled hands to draw his walking stick. He gingerly got up. "Come with me," he said and slowly walked me to a wall where hung a wired skull, evidently of a big cat. "This is him," he rasped. He went quiet momentarily, almost as if to muster all his strength. Then, he began

speaking animatedly, recalling the story of our Bachelor, with generous gesticulations of the hand. Of the hundreds of wild tigers he had seen all over India — from Assam to Kumaon, the Western Ghats to the Eastern Ghats — and even Nepal during his decades of hunting, no tiger came even remotely close to being as immense as the Bachelor of Hazaribagh, he asserted. With a twinkle in his eyes, he recounted his life as a young man, and the days and nights spent tramping in the wildlife haven that Hazaribagh's forests were, with his Santhal hunter friends. "It's all gone now, all



THEN THERE WERE NONE

(Above) Hazaribagh was once famed as the land of a thousand tigers; the black-and-white photo of the Bachelor of Hazaribagh shot by SAHAA Imam



COURTESY: RAZA KAZMI

— a term used by the British for the Adivasi trackers and hunters whose jungle-craft was the key to any hunt — waving his hand towards the forests at a distance as he warmed his feet over the dying embers of a fire. It was in these forests around his village Jarwadhi that the Bachelor of Hazaribagh was shot at a place called Chunakhan. Lambu, a Santhal Adivasi, was a permanent member of Tootoo's team of trackers and had been instrumental in bringing Bachelor to the gun. But that was then. In the decades that followed, the wildernesses of Hazaribagh and Powalgarh that birthed the two Bachelors would traverse two vastly differing trajectories.

The forests of Powalgarh, now an eponymously named conservation reserve, continue to reverberate with the roars of the tiger. Abutting the famous Corbett tiger reserve, they still harbour one of the highest densities of wild tigers in the entire world. Moreover, Powalgarh's forests are an integral part of Uttarakhand's massive tiger landscape that spans across the Shivaliks of Dehradun district in the west to Nainital in the east, beyond which it merges seamlessly into the Terai tiger landscape of Nepal and Uttar Pradesh.

The home of Hazaribagh's Bachelor, however, withered away long ago. It has been decades since the tigers' roar fell silent not just across the forests of Hazaribagh, but the entire length and breadth of the Chota Nagpur plateau, of which Hazaribagh was an integral part. Tigers were practically wiped out across Hazaribagh's forests by the late 1980s, and the last resident tiger of the forests of Hazaribagh Wildlife Sanctuary disappeared in 1994. Poaching was the primary reason. The destruction of wildlife, however, didn't stop at tigers.

Hazaribagh was once famed across Chota Nagpur not only as the land of thousand tigers, but also as the stronghold of the sambar deer, the primary prey of the big cat. The abundance of prey-species in Hazaribagh allowed it to harbour a very healthy population and diversity of predators — leopards, large packs of wild dogs as well as wolves. However, within a decade of the tiger's disappearance, these forests had been emptied of all its sambar deer, and the cheetal deer were reduced to a few dozen animals. With them disappeared the predators. With the forest department turning a blind eye, rampant bushmeat hunting

Today, Hazaribagh Wildlife Sanctuary is a classic example of the 'empty forest syndrome'

wiped out nearly all medium and large mammalian fauna across Hazaribagh. It was a complete collapse of the food chain. Today, the 186.25 sq km Hazaribagh Wildlife Sanctuary, once the beating heart of Hazaribagh's larger wilderness that spanned more than 3,000 sq km, is a classic example of the "empty forest syndrome" that afflicts nearly all of Jharkhand. Apart from wild boars, a rare barking deer, a few captive deer and nilgai in an enclosure at Rajderwa — named so after the hunting lodge of the Raja of Ramgarh who once owned these forests — is all that the sanctuary has to show for its ungulate fauna. A few of these captive-bred cheetal were released into the sanctuary in recent years but it hasn't made any difference to the steady ecological decline of the forest.

However, while the roars of the tiger and sawing of the leopards might no longer echo through the forests of Hazaribagh, these forests have not been quiet. One can hear the massive crushers from the many stone quarries that persistently chip away at the edge of the forest right outside the sanctuary, leaving behind ugly barren craters in their wake. One can also pick up the drone of vehicles as they whiz through the newly-constructed four-lane expressway that cuts through the heart of the sanctuary. Elsewhere, in many of the district's forests, one can hear the distant blasts emanating from lands that were once cloaked with forests but are now hollowed out for the "black gold" in their belly. Thousands of large Hyva trucks tar hinterland forest roads black with coal dust. The patch of forest which once pulsed with the call of the Bachelor of Hazaribagh in the early 1960s now trembles with the ceaseless tremors of convoys of coal-laden Hyvas passing through it during the day and into the night.



I re-read the words of FB Bradley-Birt, a British bureaucrat, who had described Hazaribagh thus more than a century ago — "This is the garden of Chota Nagpore, and that the motto over the old gateway of the Emperors at Delhi might well be written of Hazaribagh: 'If there is a paradise on earth, it is here, it is here.' No sooner had I read it that a little voice suddenly whispered the words of late Tootoo uncle into my ears — "It's all gone now, all gone."

"The Kul (tiger) has been gone for many years now. *Pathiya* (leopards) are also no longer heard of. All the large wild animals that we once had in plenty disappeared over the years," says Lambu, one of the last of "native *shikaris*"

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