

PICS BY PANKAJ SEKHSARIA



A goatherd takes his goats along. Goats and dogs form an important part of the diet of the leopards of Akole.



Sugarcane stands tall. This provides an excellent habitat for leopards in Akole and other parts of western Maharashtra.



A typical cattle shed in the villages of Akole. In the background are the sugarcane fields that are favoured by leopards.

THE BEASTS WALK PAST THEIR HOMES TO KILL GOATS AND BRING UP CUBS IN THE FIELDS, BUT HAVE NOT ATTACKED VILLAGERS

Pankaj Sekhsaria

Leopards are present in several parts of Akole taluka. There are regular, though fleeting sightings of the cats. Goats and dogs are regularly picked up and pugmarks are easy to spot.

But beyond the obvious, there is a complete lack of knowledge, information and understanding. Nobody really knows how many leopards are actually present, their behaviour pattern, their territory and their movements.

These questions were part of an innovative field biology project to study the leopard in Akole. Supported by Kaati Trust, Pune, the Centre for Wildlife Studies and Centre for Ecological Sciences from Bangalore and the state forest department, the study has been going on for over two years.

The first key results are beginning to emerge. "The initial challenge, has been to get a definite knowhow on leopard numbers in the 300 sq km of research area," says team member Athreya. It began with rigorous surveys of the region on foot and by road to get a basic assessment of the landscape and an idea of the areas and pathways most likely to be used by the animals. Satellite imageries and Google maps were also used to fine-tune the exercise.

This was then followed by extensive collection of seats for DNA studies. The analysis at a laboratory in Bangalore will give an idea of the numbers of leopards and importantly of the composition of its prey base.

Another important part of the study has been an intensive camera trapping exercise where self-triggered cameras were deployed to get the pictures of the desired animals. Twenty pairs of cameras were installed for a period of about 15 days in an area of about 70 sq km followed by their relocation to an adjoining block for another fortnight.

The cameras were installed in carefully identified spots just before Diwali and it was around Christmas that the exercise was finally completed. A lot depended on this exercise and the research team could not have asked for a better new year's gift.

The cameras had clicked pictures of 14 different leopards - five adult males, five adult females and four cubs. While a statistical analysis is now being undertaken to get a realistic estimate, it is clear from the sheer number of animals photographed that the leopard population here is indeed large.

Taken beyond the confines of the immediate context, the Akole scenario throws up critical challenges to our notion of large carnivore biology and behaviour and the very controversial and emotional subject of man-wildlife conflict.

The leopards of Akole have lived in close proximity to the humans for at least a decade. They regularly walk past their houses, pick up goats from sheds adjoining the homes and give birth and bring up their families in fields only a few meters away.

Yet, there have been no attacks on humans and no strident calls for killing or removal of the big cats either. The information and the insights being thrown up now, could not only force us to change our understanding of leopard behaviour: In understanding what is actually happening, it may equip us better to deal with problem situations that may arise in the future. A large part of what we believe is our understanding of the leopard, the causes of conflict or the solutions that we have tried to apply, have in fact been based on perceptions and opinions. Wrong decisions often therefore get taken for right reasons and the value of and need for good science becomes all the more relevant in such a context.

TOMORROW: How did the leopards get to Akole

DNA
exclusive
part II

Akole's leopards have hardly JUMPED HUMANS

IN THEIR BACKYARDS

The leopard (below) was a female who was photographed when she came to the area to feed on a cow left by a farmer after it had died due to electrocution. The female had come with two of her cubs and a short while later, another younger female (also with two cubs) was photographed at the same spot.



Both these females were then photographed a few days later by cameras at completely different locations, roughly four km in opposite directions. In another case, half-an-hour after a female leopard had been photographed by a camera trap, another picture was taken - this time of a female who was headed in the same direction. It is an excellent example of the close proximity of the leopards and humans.

AKOLE'S IS A NATIONAL STORY

While the Akole situation seems rather unprecedented and unbelievable, the reality across large parts of the Indian subcontinent actually confirms that Akole may not be an isolated case. For long we've believed in India that wildlife (even of the big and dangerous kind) lives only in forests and that is where they should be restricted. Elephants, leopards, wolves, hyena, reptiles and avi-fauna are found outside areas designated as wildlife sanctuaries and national parks for their protection. Wildlife research, protection, conservation and management thinking in India, however, has continued to be limited

to just these pockets. The reality is far more graded and complex and this needs to be factored in.

Reports of human-leopard conflict, for instance, are regularly received from places like Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal. A significant percentage of India's wild elephant population too exists outside the protected area network and the same would apply in large or small measure for a number of such threatened species of flora and fauna.

There is clearly a need for a more comprehensive and holistic perspective if conservation is to succeed.

I-T dept may act against defaulters

Many firms in division not depositing TDS with the department

DNA Correspondent

Income Tax Commissioner (TDS - Pune region) Pradeep Sharma said on Monday many establishments in the region are found not depositing the Tax Deduction at Source (TDS) to the government even after deducting the amount from the payments.

He issued a warning saying the department has started a drive to collect TDS and those who don't deposit the tax deducted would face penal action.

Sharma was addressing a press conference. Additional commissioner L Ramji Rao was also present.

In Pune region Rs5,227 crore were collected by way of TDS during 2007-08. But in the current financial year, only Rs5,031 crore have been gathered on this account till February 12 and the target for the year is Rs 6,300 crore, said Sharma.

He said the growth in collection of TDS in the current financial year is only 11% as compared to 30% the preceding year. As the growth is not as good as it was, the department carried out surveys of the establishments.

"It has come to the notice of the department that some assesses are deducting TDS but not depositing it with the government. They are using government money for their own purpose. Hence, the department has swung into action," he said.

BAJAJ ALLIANZ IS TOPPER

Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance is the topper in terms of payment of TDS to I-T department's Pune division. It is followed by Tata Motors, Patni Computers, Bajaj Allianz General Insurance and Idea Cellular.

In the division consisting of 22 districts, manufacturing sector (33% in 2007-08) contributes the maximum TDS and it is followed by the software (19%), automobile (14%) and insurance (13%) sectors. In the payments made till January this year, there is a 2% increase in the contribution made by the automobile sector.



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He said the problems regarding TDS include non-deduction of the tax, deduction at rate less than the prescribed, deduction but non-payment to the government and the late payment.

Those who were not paying TDS were liable for prosecution and the department has already sent notices to 15 establishments in this regard. From the database, it has been found that there are 24 likely defaulters in Pune region, who had paid over Rs50 lakh as TDS last year but have not paid anything this year till date, he said.

There are many large corporate nursing homes and hospitals, which deduct only 10% of the amount paid to doctors while the deduction should be at 30% as they are employees. The department has issued notices to 30 large hospitals for the under-recovery of TDS to the tune of Rs15 to 20 crore, said Sharma.

He said that the ambit of TDS is not properly understood. Co-operative societies particularly housing societies, trusts, educational institutions are required to deduct TDS on payments towards contracts to security agencies, lift maintenance charges, professional services, rentals, commission or interest.

Man held for rape, blackmailing

He had taken the woman's photos in a compromising position

DNA Correspondent

The Chatuhshrungi police arrested a Ratnagiri-based man for allegedly repeatedly raping a 24-year-old married woman by threatening and blackmailing her for the last two years.

The victim, who also hails from Ratnagiri district, has lodged a complaint in this regard with the police following which police arrested Eknath Parte (42) of Khed in Ratnagiri.

Police inspector Prabhakar Dhamale said the victim's husband used to work in a hotel on Baner Road while the victim used to run a mess from their Baner house two years ago.

Parte was working in the city and had joined her mess, as they were from the same geographical region. Gradually, he became a family friend.

On a day in 2007, Parte volunteered to fetch vegetables from



market. He offered her vegetables laced with sedatives.

The victim ate them and became unconscious and the suspect allegedly raped her and took her photographs in compromising posture in his cellphone, Dhamale said.

The suspect then started blackmailing her and extorted valuables worth Rs1.25 lakh and some cash in the last two years.

The victim and her family members including her seven-month-old baby moved to their home town. The suspect called and issued threats to her again on Saturday.



Lahuji Vastad samadhi razed

The 10-acre land on which the samadhi stood is being developed

DNA Correspondent

Tension gripped the Sangamwadi and Wakdevwadi areas on Monday after a city-based land developer demolished the *samadhi* of the first revolutionary -Lahuji Vastad Salve- at the Sangamwadi village.

He had fought against the British colonial rule.

A mob of 1,000 people gathered at the spot as the news of the demolition spread across the city. Officers from the Yerawada police station and the riot control van rushed to the spot in the afternoon.

An excavator razed the *samadhi* under a tree during the levelling work on the 10 acre land along the Mula river.

Local residents and Dalit

organisations demanded prompt action against the land developer. However, timely intervention by a police team headed by senior police inspector Prasad Hasabnis averted any untoward incident.

City MLA and Matang Ekta Adolan state president Ramesh Bagwe said the revolutionary used to conduct his meetings under the tree and the British forces had killed him at that spot.

City corporator Avinash Bagwe said there is no written proof that he was killed at the spot but there are stories about it.

"It is a matter of faith of thousands of people and the spot must be protected," he said.

State social justice minister Chandrakant Handore had visited the spot last month and had promised to construct a memorial but the developer has already razed the *samadhi*, he said and added, "We will take the issue to the authorities."

Journalist Ahire dead

DNA Correspondent

Writer and freelance journalist Ranjit Ahire (59), who had reported extensively on western Maharashtra politics, died at Jehangir Hospital in the small hours of Sunday.

Ranjit, who waged a decade-long battle against portal hypertension, was writing on the life and times of Shree Swami Samarth Maharaj lately. He is survived by his wife Pragati, daughter Ruhi and son Shardul.

Ranjit's career as a writer and journalist spanned 22 years, during which he analysed political developments and interviewed a number of politicians from various districts of western Maharashtra.

After graduating from Ferguson College in political science, he earned his master's degree from the UoP and later studied journalism at Ranade Institute.

MINOR RAPED

In another case, an unidentified man, armed with a knife, allegedly raped a 10-year-old minor on Sunday night in Pimpri. The girl, a resident of Pimpri, lodged a complaint in this regard with the Pimpri police later in the night. She was standing near her residence when the man approached her and asked her to usher him to a scrapyard, said the police.

The girl decided to answer his request and took him towards a scrapyard in the area but the suspect threatened her at knife-point. The police have now started a manhunt for the suspect.

ing in her kitchen when the gas cylinder leaked and immediately caught fire.

Naik sustained 33% burns in the incident while Tanawade escaped with minor injuries. Naik has been admitted to the Sassoon General Hospital.

Sena to work for Cong downfall

Uddhav targets party at farmers' rally

Shailendra Paranjpe

Shiv Sena's executive president Uddhav Thackeray on Monday said that his party would work to bring a non-Congress government to power both at the centre and in the state.

He was addressing a farmers' rally at Shikrapur in Shirur taluka, 40 km from Pune. It is a bastion of the Sena MP Shiv-ajirao Adhalrao-Patil.

Thackeray has appealed to the people of Shirur to take an oath to vote against those who supported the Congress. He said that the union government had failed on all counts be it farmers' suicides or internal security.

He said that in the first 43 days of the New Year when people celebrated Valentine's Day, 103 farmers in Vidarbha alone had resort-

Watchman murdered in Kalewadi

DNA Correspondent

In a gruesome incident, a man allegedly killed a watchman during the wee hours of Monday at Kalewadi after the guard refused to provide a house address. Later, the Sangvi police arrested the man identified as Rakesh Devbahadur Sunar (20), residing at a construction site near Jagtap Dairy.

A complaint in this regard has been filed by Bahire Dansingh Karma (33) of Saidatta Club Society, Vijaynagar in Kalewadi.

According to the complaint, the deceased Rupase Nandsingh Kami (48) of Vishalnagar, near Jagtap Dairy, was on duty at a residential society. While he was sitting in the parking lot of the society, the suspect requested the deceased to give him the details of an address.

However, the deceased refused to answer his query and the suspect left the spot. At around 1.30am, the suspect returned to the place where Kami was sleeping.

ed to suicides.

Thackeray blamed the government for its failure to tackle Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, provide relief to farmers or prevent the entry of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh.

Adhalrao said that he would contest the Lok Sabha elections irrespective of who the opponent was. NCP leader Sharad Pawar is likely to contest from Shirur Lok Sabha constituency.

Support for Pawar
On whether Shiv Sena would support Sharad Pawar for the post of prime minister, Uddhav Thackeray said, "Shiv Sena supreme Balasaheb Thackeray has already made a statement on this and I am not going to say anything more."

The senior Thackeray had said in Mumbai that the Sena would not oppose the chances of a Maharashtrian becoming the prime minister.

