

LEOPARDS WERE ALWAYS HERE. THE SUGARCANE CROP IS A GOOD BREEDING AND HIDING GROUND FOR THE BIG CATS

How did the leopards get TO AKOLE

Pankaj Sekhsaria

There is one big question that seems to lie at the very root of this entire issue. How did the leopard get into a primarily agricultural landscape with a big human population like Akole. The answer is as unexpected as the question is obvious. The leopards were always there, the only change being that their numbers may have increased over the years.

Several related factors can explain the rather sharp rise of leopard numbers in these parts of western Maharashtra and the many cases of conflict. The most important dimension, perhaps is the change in land use across this belt. Leopards were always found here, though records indicate that the dominant predator here was the wolf, an animal that essentially dominates scrub forest and open grassland regions.

DNA
exclusive
part III

Increase in area under agriculture has pushed the wolf to the margins and the spread of sugarcane created an ideal situation for the leopard to establish itself and spread its presence. The height of the sugarcane and the fact that it is a long duration crop (11 months) allows these fields to become good breeding and hiding grounds for big cats like the leopard and even the tiger. There have been reports in recent times, for instance, of tigresses giving birth in sugarcane fields adjoining forests in the Terai regions of Uttar Pradesh.

With no competition and easy prey available in the form of stray dogs, cattle, pigs and chicken among others it is not surprising that the leopard spread and established itself strongly across large parts of Akole taluka. In the initial years however, locals point out, that the numbers were never large and sightings were very occasional, even rare.

A large number of locals come across as extremely tolerant towards the animals. While they are worried about their security, they are not demanding it at the cost of the leopard

According to Ashok Ghule, a local farmer and employee of the forest department, the situation



Personnel from the forest department noting the details of a leopard attack on a goat in Malizhap village (PHOTOS BY PANKAJ SEKHSARIA).

changed noticeably around 2003. This is when attacks on dogs and other domestic animals experienced an increase and locals also started reporting leopards regularly and in a manner that had never happened in the past. The leopard had clearly established itself and if anything Athreya's camera trapping project has provided irrefutable proof of what was a well-known reality.

There is another crucial element that Athreya brings into the discussion. "It is important to note," she points out, "that India is the only country in the world where high densities of people (more than 300 per sq. km on the average) and the highest livestock density in the world share their spaces with carnivores. We have still retained all (58 species in all, 14 species more than 10 kg and which can potentially be danger-

ous to humans) except the cheetah. Total elimination was never part of our culture."

A large number of locals come across as extremely tolerant towards the animal. While they worry and want their security, they are not demanding it at the cost of the leopard. "The tribal communities in the area are the most tolerant. The leopards, they say, are like the wind in the forest. Let them be. They also need food. Let them have it," said Ghule.

It is this ethic that needs to be exam-

ined more carefully and might have a partial explanation for the relatively successful co-existence that one sees in Akole. The comparison, even contradiction this is bound to immediately throw up, however, is the situation in neighbouring Junnar.

The conflict that peaked here in 2003 hit national headlines. Close to 50 people were attacked or killed by leopards in two years, and more than 100 leopards were captured for permanent incarceration from a landscape that was very similar to

an Akole today

If this happened in Junnar just a few years ago, why can it not happen in Akole in the near future. The answer is a difficult one to give, but one step might be to reverse the question. If nothing unsavoury has happened in Akole for so many years, why did Junnar suffer so badly just a few years ago. There must be more than that which meets the eye.

TOMORROW: Why is Junnar a conflict zone?

The changing landscape of Akole taluka

The last two-three decades has seen significant change in cropping patterns, thanks mainly to the availability of more water. A dry and arid landscape that supported only marginal and rainfed agriculture has changed drastically with the digging of more borewells, installation of pump sets and commissioning of lift irrigation schemes.

A region that could only grow less water intensive crops like bajra, gram and wheat now has a huge output of water guzzling crops like vegetables, flowers and importantly sugarcane. Availability of electricity and diesel to lift water has been an important contributor. "Take the example of Takli itself," says Ashok Ghule, a resident of Takli village. He is a farmer and a forest department employee.

"In the early 70s, Takli did not have more than 10 pumps to pull up water. Now this village alone has at least 500. There has been a three times increase in agricultural land in Akole taluka in the last twenty years. Sugarcane too has increased significantly," he said.

An important catalyst for this was the setting up of the Agasti co-operative sugar factory in Akole town in 1991. The demand for sugarcane increased and area under this low maintenance and high returns crop also increased over time.



The project research team visits a site in Ambad village where a goat had reportedly been picked up by a leopard the earlier day.



Goats form an important part of the diets of leopards here and locals have now started taking special care to protect their animals.

Leopard attacks

Eight cases in Chalisgaon in Jalgaon district (from September to December 2004);

More than fifty cases in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Mumbai (from May to August 2004)

The killing of a girl in Chinchkhed in Nashik district in August 2004

The death of another child in Radhanagari wildlife sanctuary in Kolhapur district in February 2004

The six attacks in Yawal wildlife sanctuary and the nearly 50 cases that occurred in the Junnar forest division between 2001 and 2003.

Litterateur Kharat memorial will come up at Atpadi

State govt allots land to the trust for his work

DNA Correspondent

Decks have been cleared for the construction of the Sahityaratna Shankarrao Kharat Smarak at Atpadi in Sangli. The state government has allocated 775 sq mt of land to the trust.

Kharat's wife Shakuntala, who is also the trust's president, said, "We have received a letter from the state government informing us about the allocation of the land on February 6."

"We want to construct a memorial in his memory at his birthplace at Atpadi in Sangli district. We are thankful to the government for giving us the land," she said.

The memorial will not have a statue. It will be a platform for budding writers for discussions, debates on literature. It will also have a

library.

"We want to implement many social and educational projects for the uplift of the downtrodden," said vice-president Ravindra Kharat. He said, "The letter from the government informed us about the piece of land at survey number no 1 in Atpadi village."

Kharat, who was also the president of the All-India Marathi literary meet, died in 2001. The trust formed after his death works for social causes.

"Medical facilities in the villages around Atpadi are very poor. We will conduct medical camps," said Kharat, a medical doctor.

The trust will train women to become independent, she said. Plans are to bring out Kharat's unpublished work. University of Pune vice-chancellor Narendra Jadhav has said he will begin a course on the literature of Kharat for the students, she said.



ESIC hospital's OPD will benefit 40,000 employees

The facility in Kolhapur started functioning from Sunday

Mohsin Mulla. KOLHAPUR

There is a breather for 40,000 employees of the district with the Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) starting the out patient department (OPD) in its hospital.

Karveer MLA Satej Patil and Kolhapur MLA Malojiraje Chhatrapati, from the Congress, inaugurated the OPD on Sunday. The 100-bedded hospital on 10 acres of land was constructed in Kolhapur at a cost of Rs8 crore. The hospital has been lying unutilised since its construction in 1996. Now that the ESIC has started the OPD, it will benefit 40,000 ESIC cardholders in the district.

"There are three OPDs of the ESIC at different locations in Kolhapur. All the 40 staff of these three OPDs will be shifted to the new OPD," Satej told reporters.

Since 1996, there have been



The ESIC hospital in Kolhapur.

many public protests and legal battle for commencing the hospital. The local workers, in 2000, had approached the Bombay High Court seeking its intervention.

Then, the ESIC's board of directors had expressed its willingness to start the hospital through privatisation. Although the privatisation proposal was made and tender was called in May 2001 nothing happened till January 2007.

On January 5, 2007 the ESIC's joint director turned

down the privatisation proposal saying that there was no provision for privatisation of ESIC-run hospitals.

Kolhapur's NCP MP Sadashivrao Mandlik had raised the issue in parliament. "There is a requirement of 138 staff for starting the hospital in full-fledged condition. The ESIC board's high-powered committee will conduct a meeting in March to discuss the issue. We will press for starting the hospital as early as possible," Satej said.

Satej Patil

Congress MLA, Karveer

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Eyes going dry? Check your computer usage

Seven out of 10 Mumbai professionals complain of dryness in the eyes

Deepa Suryanarayan. MUMBAI

Pratibha Krishnan, 26, employee in a private bank, works 12 hours a day and spends most of that time in the confines of her plush air-conditioned office, working on her computer.

At the end of every working day, Krishnan suffers from burning sensation and redness in the eyes. "I feel an irritation in the eye, and am unable to look directly at bright light," she says.

Krishnan is not alone. Dry eye syndrome, the complaint that she suffers from, is not at all uncommon. In fact, according to ophthalmologists in the city, seven in ten pro-

fessionals suffer from complaints such as burning, redness, tiredness and irritation in the eyes.

"Tears play an important role in moistening, protecting, and cleansing the eye. In dry eye syndrome, the eye's ability to produce tears gets affected," explained ophthalmologist Dr Devaki Pandit.

"Unfortunately, most people approach an ophthalmologist only when the discomfort is unbearable. Despite this, I see at least three patients per day," she said.

"My patients are mostly officer-goers, in the 20-40 age group, who spend many hours in front of the computer. They complain of irritation or simply not being able to look at bright light directly," said Dr Sonia Nankani, eye surgeon, Bombay Hospital, who too sees three to four such patients every day.

"Excessive dryness can lead to eye infec-



PICTURE FOR REPRESENTATION PURPOSE

tion, damage eye tissue, scar the cornea and in extreme cases impair eye sight," warned corneal surgeon Dr SK Pawar.

According to ophthalmologists, there are various factors that affect the eyes. "The risk of dry eyes increases with age. Apart

from this, pollution, diet, air-condition, staring at the computer for long hours etc, can result in dry eyes," said Dr Nankani, who advises warm water compress and using artificial tear drops, but only on the advice of the ophthalmologist.

How Cathedral did away with honking

Mumbai school began the Model School Bus Service

DNA Correspondent. MUMBAI

Tired of endless honking and long queues that often resulted in the delay of school-going students and people in the vicinity, Meera Issac, principal of Cathedral and John Connon School, along with a parent, Indrani Malkani, came out with 'Model School Bus Service' for the area to get rid of private cars coming to drop or pickup the students.

The idea germinated in the Little Gibbs Road lane where both Issac and Malkani reside.

The bus service was implemented in John Connon Infant School (Little Gibbs Road, Malabar Hill), Cathedral and John Connon Junior School, Cathedral and John Connon Middle School, Cathedral and John Connon Senior School on June 6, 2002.

"The background work began in mid-January 2002 and the plan was implemented by June," said Malkani.

To begin with, a software engineer was appointed for a basic plan to get the data collect-



FOR A CAUSE: Indrani Malkani came out with 'Model School Bus Service' for the area to get rid of private cars coming to drop children.

ed for the route the 51 buses would take. "We then moved to a complicated software for the implementation of the programme with the then DCP Himanshu Roy," said Malkani.

The parents were informed and they were extremely enthusiastic about it, which is why it worked for six years, she added.

As per the plan, not even taxis are allowed near the school gate. "Only public transport like the BEST buses and rail services can be used," said Malkani.

Shree Mahalakshmi temple turns 25

DNA Correspondent

Shree Mahalakshmi Temple opposite Sarasbaug is celebrating its silver jubilee festival from Tuesday till February 25. Trustee Pratap Pardeshi and Rajkumar Agarwal said, "The festivities will begin with a huge procession of the temple deity on Tuesday."

There would be *Dynan Bhagwat Katha Yadnya Saptah*, *Katha Nirupan* live decorations, *Mahalakshmi Navkundanmak Yadnya* and *Vaikuntotsav* throughout the week. The yadnya and other programmes would take place at Sanas ground from 3 pm to 7 pm, said Agarwal.

He also said that Shree Zalriya Mathadeeshwar, Shree Swami Ghanshyam and Bhudevacharya Maharaj from Rajasthan would come for the *Bhagwat Nirupan*. For *Vaikuntotsav* 20 Brahmins from southern India would participate. It will be held from 9 am to 12.30 pm. The temple is owned by Bansilal Ramnath Agarwal Dharmik Va Sanskrutik Trust.

