

“Tigress was killed by Reserve vehicle”

Two tourists say they were harassed by officials to put the blame on their own driver *ST/WS/cum-13*

Priscilla Jebaraj

NEW DELHI: Who killed the Bandhavgarh tigress? While wildlife officials blamed tourist vehicles, tourists and locals are now pointing the finger at the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve's officials themselves.

Locals and tourists say it was an official vehicle of the Reserve that originally hit the eight-year-old lactating tigress as she was attempting to cross the road and reach her three cubs early on the morning of May 19.

Tourist vehicles spotted the injured tigress and informed the Reserve officials. They say it finally died when she charged a vehicle of the Reserve that was sent out to investigate. Two tourists say they were harassed by officials to put the blame on their own driver.

On May 25, three Reserve officials, including an assistant director and two rangers, were suspended, according to National Tiger Conservation Authority director Rajesh Gopal. He refused to comment on who was responsible for the death, saying an enquiry was on.

Collision with vehicle

Earlier reports from Wildlife Department officials and the Reserve authorities suggested several contradictory reasons for the death, including a territorial fight and a wire snare. Finally, after a post-mortem showed internal injuries caused by the impact of a hard, blunt object, the Reserve's field director

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said he suspected collision with a tourist vehicle. Rumours also suggested that a relative of a Madhya Pradesh Minister was involved.

Jainandni Rathore and her husband Vikramaditya Singh of Jaipur were among the first tourists at the scene, accompanied by their experienced driver and a guide. When they arrived at the water hole at 6.10 a.m., they found two other tourist vehicles already present. Together, they watched the tigress drooping near the water.

“She looked very angry and distressed...she seemed aggressive and was acting abnormally. So our driver suggested that we back off. Within seconds, she suddenly took off and came charging at us...we rushed away. I was really shook up and just wanted to get out of there, but the driver said we should stop and inform officials at the central point,” she says.

The driver also warned off other tourist vehicles heading towards the site and then informed forest rangers, who closed the route.

With permission, Ms. Rathore and her husband then left the park and returned to their hotel. “Less than an hour after we reached the room, we were told two forest officials came to meet us. We thought they may want to pacify us, but they were very aggressive.”

The two officials were assistant director R.P. Pandey

and range officer J.N. Shukla — both of whom were suspended — who had come to get a statement.

“They tried to pressure us to say it was our driver's mistake. Why should I tell a lie when he is innocent? In fact, I am only alive because of my driver's quick thinking,” Ms. Rathore says.

“They even threatened my husband and asked if he was driving the jeep. If we had been at fault, why would we take the trouble to come and report the tigress' condition to the authorities?”

Ms. Rathore says the officials repeatedly harassed them and came for their statement three or four times. However, when they went to complain to the director, they found their statement conveniently missing. In fact, a statement copy was only delivered to them the night before they left Bandhavgarh on May 24.

‘Animal was already hit’

Dhruv Singh — a Bandhavgarh resident representing a community organisation called Jan Sabha who was present at the post-mortem and witnessed parts of the investigation — says the tourists' information was only taken into account after a senior Mumbai police officer in one of the other vehicles submitted his statement.

Since the tigress was hit before the tourist vehicles arrived, and since only Reserve vehicles are allowed into the park before 6 a.m., investigations are now focussed around Reserve officials.