

Tyger, Tyger, Burning Bright

The Message From St. Petersburg

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TYGER, *Tyger, Burning Bright*/ In the forests of the night wrote William Blake, looking deep into the secret world to discern the mysterious spirit within. He saw a potent symbol, a preternatural emblem to startle and astound the human gazer. But today, the forest is sparse, the great beast is harried and hunted, its majesty disdained, its stature diminished. Where once it reigned and strode in regal splendour it now must skulk and hide. Its numbers are ever diminishing, its range ever decreasing. Where it comes up against humans, as it must, for humans are ever increasing in numbers and range, it excites fear and alarm, and attracts lethal hostility. It was a "gentleman" to Jim Corbett, who knew the tiger's habits as well as anyone, a terror to some, and a populist cause for others who banded against it.

The tiger did not originate in India, having been driven south from its original homeland in Siberia during the Ice Age, but is more closely identified with this country than anywhere else. And in India, where it has spread widely, its predominant dwelling place lies in Bengal ~ indeed, "Bengal" and "Tiger" can become virtual synonyms, as with the US football team Bengals of Cincinnati. But for all the awe and respect it can command, the tiger has long been on the slippery slope towards extinction. It has already disappeared from many places where once it roamed, and its tenure in most locations where it still exists is increasingly precarious.

All the more reason, then, to welcome the Russian initiative to convene a "tiger summit" at St. Petersburg, where the host was Prime Minister Putin and world leaders including the Chinese Premier and the

President of the World Bank, and leaders of the conservationist movement, were among those who attended. Also present were several celebrities from the world of the arts and fashion, for the tiger may be losing out on the ground but its cause is gaining a following across the globe. This was the first concerted international effort on its behalf, to dramatize the need for action and to stimulate international support and commitment. The fund raising part of the meeting in St. Petersburg seemed to have gone satisfactorily in that a substantial amount has been earmarked for tiger preservation, though some felt that more should have been done, and they point to the failure to agree on a multilateral funding mechanism to support conservation activities in the field. But even so, the call for habitat protection, expansion of tiger reserves, and more effective anti-poaching measures are steps to be welcomed. The presence of China's Premier could be especially significant, for the greatest demand for tiger parts has tradi-

tionally come from that country, and it would be salutary if Mr. Wen Jiabao's decision to take part in the conference means that his country will now be more active in trying to stamp out the trade.

Protecting the tiger has many important implications, and there is an extensive literature on the subject written by a number of experts and specialists. Conservation cannot be a matter of creating tiny pockets here and there where the animal

been almost impossible to attain. What is now to be looked for is a different methodology of development, for which great strategic adjustments will be necessary. At one stage in India, the "temples of new India" were the mega structures like the Bhakra Dam which tried to harness natural resources for developmental purposes. But no more: such large structures have lost favour and alternatives have to be sought. Thus big and complicated issues are brought into focus through schemes for wildlife protection like that for tiger conservation.

India decided that it needed no high representation at St. Petersburg and was content to send a relatively low level delegation. As already noted, the Prime Minister of the country that is by far the largest market for illegal tiger trade, China, was present, and this gave a positive message. India is probably the source of the greater part of the contraband, for though seriously depleted, it still harbours more tigers than anywhere else. More prominent representation by India would have strengthened the message the conference was trying to convey. Sadly, India's reticence here seems symptomatic of the slackening of the drive for tiger conservation within the country. It is not to be forgotten that the first effort in this direction was India's, where Project Tiger took shape some four decades ago under the leadership of Indira Gandhi. Her enlightened support made it possible for this major conservation project to be instituted, with the necessary resources and personnel. She was the only foreign Head of Government to attend the path breaking Stockholm conference on environment in 1972, long before the subject became fashionable. In India, the right of wildlife to exist undisturbed was affirmed, even where there was a clash with



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can survive while habitat degradation takes place all around: meaningful conservation requires protection of the surrounding habitat, so protection of the animal has a number of beneficial concomitants. For instance, as was reaffirmed at the St. Petersburg meeting, there is need to bring to an end the cutting of forests where the tiger has its range. This reflects present day concerns to ensure that development activity must be environmentally responsible and sustainable. The presence of the World Bank hierarchy at the meeting suggests that international funding for development may be changing its orientation, with the result that support for projects that were once regarded as normal may now be difficult to obtain. Big dams, for instance, with their unpredictable ecological impact, are already under criticism, and proposals for new ones attract vociferous opposition. Thus trying to protect the tiger is not a simple matter of providing the animal with areas where it can live without undue disturbance ~ and that in itself has

human demands. The pioneers of the country's conservation effort, strong, masterful figures dedicated to a cause that trampled on a strongly entrenched establishment, found to their delight that their voice was heard at the top and much could be achieved with even the very limited resources of the government. None of Mrs Gandhi's successors has given similar unwavering support to the conservation of nature within the country, beginning with the protection of the tiger. On paper, the system has grown and more activity is taking place, but the backsliding is palpable.

The international interest evinced at the conference in Russia should be an incentive for India's national effort on behalf of the tiger, and for conservation in general, to be greatly strengthened. Consistent support from the highest quarter is irreplaceable, and proponents of environmental protection must continue to push for it.

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