

A bureaucrat and his tiger 'game'

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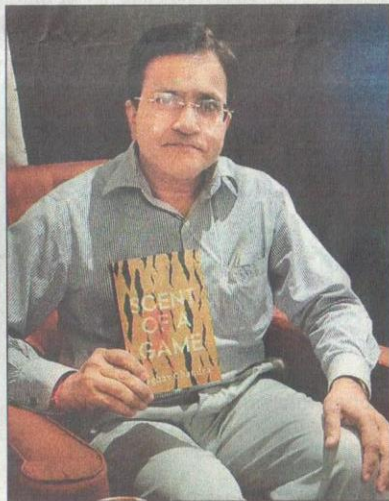
Kolkata: The year was 1985. Raghav Chandra, then a junior IAS officer, was posted as sub-divisional magistrate in Sihora near Bandhavgarh National Park in Madhya Pradesh. One evening in April, a forester approached him with information that poachers were on the prowl. The two set off to check if that was indeed true.

What should have been a routine patrol turned out to be an extra-ordinary night. Around 10.30pm, the duo spotted a tigress in the wild at Kaun village, 10km from Sihora. "She stopped 2-metre away from our Jeep before disappearing into the forest. We then climbed atop a hillock and spotted lights moving about. They were obviously headlights of vehicles used by poachers. The game was on. We laid a trap and managed to nab a poacher," he recounted.

The poacher, however, went scot-free after Chandra was promoted and transferred and the case wasn't pursued. But the imprint of that eventful night stayed on in Chandra's mind. Years later, when he did sit down to pen his first novel, it found a way into the story as did many other incidents from his life.

Now additional secretary and financial advisor at the Union ministry of agriculture and cooperation, animal husbandry, dairy, fisheries and culture, and author of 'Scent of a Game', Chandra says the fictional characters in the novel resonate with traits that he has come across in real life.

The tigress, Burree Maada, the pride of the tiger gene-pool that goes mysteriously missing from the Kanha Tiger



Raghav Chandra with his book

Reserve, is similar to Ranthambore's famous tigress Machhli that had disappeared for 26 days earlier this year. When forest officer Ganga goes looking for the missing tigress and discovers evidence of poaching, he is unceremoniously transferred. Sherry, an investigative journalist, is attacked repeatedly by the wildlife mafia when she doggedly pursues the poaching trail. And then there is a Maharaja and his royal guests who plan to recreate old-time tiger-shikar.

"Scent of a Game is a chronicle of tiger-poaching, big-game hunting and the international trade in endangered species worth billions of dollars. I have used the tiger as a motif to define and describe how humans overcome difficulties and survive odds. The tiger story is

very similar to a human one," Chandra said.

Though the story is essentially an imaginary one, Chandra says there are ingredients that are influenced by real life people or incidents. The anguish that Ganga feels when he was transferred is a pain that many bureaucrats will identify with. Many journalists will share Sherry's frustrations.

The idea of the book germinated around 2006, a time when tiger deaths were being frequently reported. Chandra was in Madhya Pradesh at the time and observed that there was a tiger death reported in a wildlife sanctuary or a tiger reserve every day. Tiger reserves Sariska and Panna were suddenly devoid of the big cat.

"It (the vanishing tigers) haunted me. It wasn't just about the tiger; it was also about human predicament. As a plot began to form, I set pen to paper and wrote much of it in 2009-10. Then it lay under wraps for two years before I had a relook in 2012. That helped me restructure it from a reader's viewpoint. I then approached a publisher who liked the plot and pace but wanted 70,000 words shaved off. That took time but made the story crisper. It took 10 months for the book to be published," Chandra recounted.

A fast-paced thriller, the book touches upon myriad issues—tiger conservation, forestry management, taxidermy and hunting in the colonial days. "The East India Company did not come to India for spices. It came with a court of blood-thirsty hunters, looking for a free shikar. It was the scent of a game that brought them here," he added.