

GETTING LOST IN A FOREST

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It was December 1948. I was undergoing training in forestry at the Indian Forest College at Dehra Dun. We (the class) were camping at Lachhiwala for the Working Plan exercise. We had been told to complete the fieldwork before Christmas, when we were to shift to our hostel at New Forest for the final write-up.

For recording detailed compartment descriptions we were required to traverse each compartment along linear transects and record the description of the crop at regular intervals. However, even with the convenience of well-laid out inspection paths, it was seldom possible to inspect and describe two forest compartments in a single day. It had been arranged amongst House-members that we could divide the work amongst ourselves. However as per habit (to rely only on my own work) I had decided to personally inspect all the forests for which I was to write a working scheme. That would help me to have a comprehensive grasp of the conditions of the forests, before deciding management techniques, which would then be based on my personal observations regarding the local silvicultural needs of the forests.

I think it was 22nd of December 1948 and our house (No. 9 section B) decided to go round some of the compartments out of 12a, 12b, 13a, and 13b of Dudhlu Block. All of us reached a point where boundaries of Compartments 12, 16, 17 and 18 of

Lachhiwala Block converge. We had reached there via the Sample plot road between Lachhiwala compartments 15 and 18.

The day was sunny and bright, but I must have been very busy with my own pre-occupations about the immediate job, as I am unable to recollect any particular details of that morning's walks and work. Anyway it was not exceptionally cold, though cold enough for December and Lachhiwala, which is known to be a frost hole. Inside the forest there is usually no wind. After a day's inspection of forests, it was nearly sunset when all of us returned to the spot, where we had parked our bicycles in the morning. There we met two men waiting for us, with some instructions concerning the change in the schedule for leaving for New Forest, and the need for speedy completion of the fieldwork.

Compartment 11 Lachhiwala Block has a very broken up terrain, and at least then, the condition of its very open crop was rather unhappy. Different groups had inspected this compartment in parts only the previous day, but I was far from happy about the job done. I had felt that I could see the northern part of the compartment, if I could walk back along the compartment line to the South of compartment No. 15. This compartment line also looked to be a short cut to the main road. Unfortunately I did not consult the map in detail, before proceeding along this compartment line,

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which happens to be cut up by a number of deep ravines with almost vertical banks.

While my colleagues left for camp by the main road, I ventured along the compartment line, and was followed by the two men who had come there with the message. (The authorities had sent two men to keep each other company. It is not wise to go into such forests alone.) They too were on bicycles. However soon I found that the ravines across the compartment line had to be crossed with the bicycles on our shoulders. There was not much time or opportunity for detailed inspection either, though in between those ravines I was able to see some parts of the compartment. It soon started getting dark. I do not remember as to how many times I had to perform this self-imposed exercise, but soon I felt fed up, as I was already sufficiently tired after a whole day's work. Going back to the starting point was as absurd, as it was to continue the exercise along the compartment line. I decided to change direction North to cut across the forest (compartment 15) to the main road by staying in between the two adjacent ravines. The two orderlies and I had lost touch with each other. Probably I was rather impatiently fast, or I had waited at some side point to survey the forest crop, and my companions had passed by. (I was to learn later that they had reached the main road soon thereafter. They must have felt that I had reached the camp earlier, because they did not inform anyone in the camp about my disappearance in the forest.) For me, however, there was no early end to that short journey. I must have been unconsciously changing direction, most probably to the left, because soon when it started getting rather dark, I fell into a small ravine, with my cycle following on top of me - it being on my right side. (Except when the Sun is in the sky, it is very difficult

to have a sense of direction in a forest, and I was carrying no compass). It was dark enough already, as I remember having already switched on the cycle light, but I had not noticed the ravine. (The ravines do not have sloping banks). I climbed up the bank, pulling up the cycle alongwith. This happened again soon, the fall being worse, as the ravine was deeper, and its bank was near vertical. I had no strength left to climb up again along with my cycle. I knew that I had lost my way. Leaving the bicycle there itself, I started going down the bed of the ravine. Soon I was in an open dry Nala. (Before departing from my Raleigh bicycle, I had collected my bag with my papers etc. and the cycle pump, in case it was needed for some emergency). I stopped there for a few moments to take stock of the situation, particularly thinking about the cycle lying there in the side ravine, and the desirability or possibility of recovering it the followed day. Instead of going back and bringing the cycle to the mainstream (a physically impossible task for my tired body and sufficiently shaken up mind) I removed my turban from my head, and put it in the middle of the stream bed, so as to mark the point indicating the proximity of the bicycle. Having done that I started walking along the bed of the dry Nala. Only a few moments later I found myself walking into a small pool of water - it being dark all round I could not have noticed it. As I stopped there in the pool, the immediate reaction was to drink some water. I gulped a few handfuls. Soon, the intake of water having somewhat refreshed my body and mind both, I thought of getting away from that water-hole in the stream bed as that was then time when the forest fauna would be visiting that place. Immediately I made towards one side, and climbed up the steep bank, exploring the way up with my hands. I started moving away from the stream, not at all knowing or

bothering whether I was going East or West or in some other direction. Twice again I fell over the bank, (and most probably into the same dry stream), and each time I climbed up the opposite bank, thinking that I was crossing the streams on my way back to the road. (I very well remembered Mr. S. Ramaswamy telling us that when one gets lost in a forest, somehow, one continues coming back to the same spot again and again. Perhaps one moves in loops.) When I went down the fourth time, I found myself totally exhausted. I needed all my strength of mind and body to climb up the opposite slope. This time, after climbing up, I had no more strength to continue my wandering or walking in that pitch-dark forest. I sat down near an almost dry and crooked Sal tree to rest and think about what to do next. The grim prospect of my having to spend the night there was staring me in the face. I had to collect enough breath, and see if I could climb up that tree to find a perch to spend the cold night there, or again make an effort to make to the camp.

A Sal forest, with its dark and dense foliage and a lot of shrub growth, is quite a disconcerting place, particularly for one who is tired and hungry and knows that he has lost his way, and that too at night, when one has no sense of direction by sight or sound. One does not see much of the sky, and all sounds (distant ones) seem to come from no particular direction at all - probably from over above only. Sitting there I heard the trains steam by, and would also occasionally hear vehicles going along the Dehra Dun-Hardwar Road, but I could not in the least make out the direction from which the sounds came. Otherwise it was disquietingly quiet, and under that small inverted cup of sky, the stillness was rather frightening - and I knew that I could not run away from it.

Sitting there near that Sal tree I contemplated, whether I could at all climb that tree to a sufficient height, and spend the cold December night there. I was not very well clothed, and after some rest I had already started feeling the chill creeping into me. Could I stand that exposure during the long winter night! I was hungry too, and I could not contemplate resorting to body exercises to keep myself warm. So far my walking about had kept me reasonably warm. Even otherwise the feeling and fright of having been lost in the forest had not allowed me any time to think and worry about the cold. But now my feet had started reminding me that they were uncomfortably cold, being in wet shoes. Maybe I thought of many other silly things, but I was all the time also thinking about what to do next, and was not going over the course of follies that I had committed.

As I sat there recouping my breath, and thinking the thoughts about various propositions, I heard the sudden barking of a Kakkar at some distance. I realised quite soon that the Kakkar was running as if in panic, and the variation in the pitch of its barking indicated that it was coming towards me. Because of its nervous and rapid barking and its movement in a uniform direction, it was obvious that a tiger was following it. It was quite a situation, but without any way out. The only weapon with me was the cycle pump, and visibility, faint though it was, was about fifteen feet. I could do nothing, except stay absolutely still - even hold my breath. My khaki clothes and black hair would not betray my presence there. My turban, which was of a little lighter colour was happily down somewhere in the stream-bed. Soon the Kakkar was not even fifty yards away, but it was running away at a good speed. A little while later, which felt like ages, I could guess that it had

crossed the stream, as the pitch of its barking continued becoming less sharp. Much later its barking became a bit irregular and mild, before completely dying out.

By this time I felt a little rested and refreshed. The fact that a tiger had been in my vicinity did not seem to have affected my nerves. Perhaps being face to face with danger makes one indifferent to it. After resting a little longer I decided to make another effort to search my way back to Camp. When I was on my feet again, I realised to my own amazement as to how still I had been all that while. I had gone somewhat stiff.

I started moving away from the stream. This time, trying to keep to one direction I did not mind going across thorny Acacia climbers. My arms and hands collected bruises without grumbling, and my legs and feet were firm once again. I must have been going like that for about five or so minutes, when I felt that my feet were on some beaten track. As visibility was now practically nil, I had to sit down to verify with my hands the information transmitted by my feet. Yes my feet had made no mistake. I was on a pedestrian path, which was flanked by cartwheel traces on its either side. I felt a little relieved and thrilled too. I seemed to have found my way again. Reaching the camp now seemed to be a possibility. I had walked along that track only for a short while, when all of a sudden I felt that my feet were on a floor of wooden billets. I went down on my knees to explore with my hands, if my track was cutting across another track. The billets were parallel to my footpath and across another road. An opening towards my left prompted me to take to the new path that I had discovered. I think I had gone along no more than about two hundred yards, when

in that darkness I suddenly came on to the Dehra Dun-Hardwar road. I saw a truck at some distance coming towards me. I wanted it to stop by me to help me find my whereabouts. To make sure that the truck stopped, I went and stood right in the middle of the road. The vehicle stopped. the driver must have felt a shock to see me like what I was - disheveled hair, no turban, a rod like thing in my hand, and a small bag slung from my shoulder. Going round to his window I enquired, "Where is the Lachhiwala camp site?" "About a hundred and fifty yards down the road." He replied. I did not need any lift. I was feeling so fresh once again. I literally ran the short distance to the camp. As I approached the Railway Bridge near the campsite, I met M.A. Rashid, S.Das and some others coming out of the camp on cycles to search for me in the forest. The news had just gone round that Chahal had not returned from the excursion, and obviously had lost his way in the forest. They were all very much relieved to see me there.

The story of my that night's adventures continued to be talked about till late that night, and the thrill of having made my way back to the camp, in spite of the odds, kept the cold of the evening away from me. The camp, which, till a short while ago, was only a cherished memory was again a very pleasant reality. What we have, we know only when we lose it or miss it.

The following day was again sunny and bright, but it seemed to be a New World altogether. After breakfast, accompanied by a servant, I was able to recover my Raleigh, the turban contributing its assigned assistance.

Not much later we returned to New Forest. A couple of days later at lunch in the

Mess we received a message from the Principal, warning us not to go to Lachhiwala forest without prior intimation to D.F.O., Dehra Dun, as there was a man-eater operating in that area. As the message was being read out, all of my colleagues looked in my direction, expressing their relief that

I was still with them.

Encounters with happy endings seem so interesting! I still re-live it sometimes, though the thrill inside does not work up to that pitch again. It is like watching a recorded play, the end of which is known.

SUMMARY

This is an interesting and adventurous account of the author's disappearance in the forest of Lachhiwala, Dehra Dun during Working Plan exercise and the thrill of having made his way back to the Camp.

वन में भटक जाने पर

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सारांश

लच्छीवाला, देहरादून के वनों में कार्य योजना अभ्यास के दौरान मेरे भटक जाने तथा फिर पड़ाव का मार्ग खोज वापस लौट जाने के रोमान्च का यह रोचक दुस्साहसी वृत्तान्त है।
