

# THIRD EYE EDITION

---

## Beastly tales

I am a diehard fan of Guwahati. Even wrote a long poem about it once. And I never tire of saying that the city is like a fictional character – familiar, yet elusive, full of brightness and chatter on the surface, yet carrying a subterranean, lingering sadness. Ever willing to extol its many charms, I would, however, draw the line at saying Guwahati is an exciting city to live in. In spite of its malls and restaurants, it moves at a pretty staid pace. Except for an amusement park on the fringes, there is little to pump up the adrenaline. All that changed dramatically a few days ago – when a member of the big cat species blundered into a man's house and wiped the smugness off our faces, at least for a while.

Why the leopard should amble into our territory defies any satisfactory explanation, since the animal of our interest does not speak our lingo and hence, cannot enlighten us on the matter. For a change, the government did not hint at any terrorist conspiracy, though terror was the first reaction of us bipeds. Even we hacks, so blasé about scam exposes and accident fatalities, stared bug-eyed at the television screen as the beast roamed inside a kitchen, trapped. A wag suggested that something really heavenly must have been cooking at that hearth to lure the cat, though the cook had wisely fled without welcoming the appreciative guest. The leopard was good for the mediaperson's morale, because the papers splashed pictures of a photo-journalist doing his camera gig barely a couple of feet away from the roaring beast.

It is said you need a dog to adore you and a tiger to bring you back to reality. I think we Guwahatians needed that big cat for a reality check. And the reality is that we are not as modern as we pretend to be. Oh, we do have our high-rise towers and sleek cars, our neon-lit billboards and branded stores. But scratch the surface and you discover provincial outlooks, narrow prejudices, supernatural mumbo-jumbo which are laughably at odds with the nonchalant "coolness" we try so hard to project. And on top of that, we now have a cat visit that has made us take a collective gulp. In one fell swoop this brash, brightly-lit city has become the small, timid town of our forefathers, when tigers made off with hapless folks right from places where today there are bustling streets and shopping complexes. And mind you, these predatory attacks were carried out in broad daylight. Things haven't changed all that much, because the cat that came a few days ago, too, did not wait till nightfall to slink in. This visit completely changed the face of this city, at least in the vicinity. Like in the folk tales of yore, people were barricading themselves at night, waiting for the telltale grunt, the rap of paws against wood that would hint at the presence of the beast they had come to erase from their collective memory. Over the ages, we have slowly lost the cunning and resources we once had to outwit our four-tagged adversaries. The city dweller lives in an insular, individualistic world. Sometimes there is minimal contact even between people living within the same four walls. And yet, for as long as we can remember, man has kept the beasts at bay by joining hands, forming groups. Today, how many of us know how to hold a flaming torch, or a spear, and can we read pug marks, or sniff the wind to figure out an approaching cat? These are skills that have died out in our relentless evolutionary

# THIRD EYE EDITION

---

transformation, and it looks like we, the denizens of Guwahati, may have to retrieve those lost skills and stay one step ahead of the long legged beast.

Though the poor cat ended up in a cage, its unforeseen his arrival unlocked many memories. Everybody it seemed had a tiger tale to share. A picnicker to Kuruwa near Guwahati remembered how a cheetah had crouched on a sandbank and gazed unblinkingly at the stunned group for an agonising five minutes before slouching off. A friend remembered how she had hysterics when the big cat roared at the ringmaster at the circus. A cousin recalled how his first tiger-sighting at the zoo was marred by the dank, nauseating stench that rose from the cage. I remembered my favourite Assamese folk tale about a doughty old lady getting into a cane basket and rolling along the countryside to visit her married daughter, thus escaping the wily tiger's eye. This is one senior citizen who is after my own heart.

The tiger has always appealed to man's imagination and has had a solid presence in literature. Both Rudyard Kipling in *The Jungle Book* and William Blake in his *Songs of Experience* depict the tiger as a ferocious animal of great power and mystery. In *The Jungle Book*, Shere Khan is the dreaded antagonist of Mowgli and threatens his very existence. In *Calvin & Hobbes*, the Bill Watterson comic strip, the tiger often strays from his cuddly avatar. In A.A Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* stories, Tigger is always happy and perfectly docile. The tiger is the most popular mascot for sports teams, no doubt because it symbolises strength, speed and nobility. Yann Martel has also put the tigers' mystique to good use. His 2002 Booker prize winning *Life of Pi* chronicles the adventures of an Indian boy castaway and his Royal Bengal Tiger chum in the Indian Ocean.

I have my own pool of tiger tales. One of them concerns a lesson from Jim Corbett's, *Man-eaters of Rudraprayag*. Try teaching about how to shoot a man-eating tiger to a group of adolescents. The girls don't care a hoot about the big cat. They don't like stories where the only prince is an ageing hunter. The girls aren't excited by guns and burst into silly giggles when the goat bleats below the *machan*, live bait for the beast. The elaborate description of the site – the trees and ridge, the boulders, the angle of the sun, the direction of the wind, is about as illuminating as Egyptian hieroglyphes in a pharaoh's tomb. There was so much waiting for us outside – Ramu *Chacha's papdi chaat*, Kamrup Bakery patties, fiery potato chips – what did it matter if a tiger lived or died? But it all changed for me when our new English teacher took over. As she read that familiar lesson, her voice rose and fell, capturing the most minute cadences of the prose. Her eyes flashed, or grew dark and brooding. She made us feel the loneliness of the hunter as he kept vigil through the night, waiting for his kill, the terror of villages awake in their flimsy huts. Every blade of grass and sun-warmed stone, every gust of wind and cry of the *keekar* were elements of some grand drama unfolding before us. The class fell silent as she read and it was as if, for a while, we did not hear the bustle of traffic outside or sense the ordinariness of everyday life. All that mattered was that elemental game of wits, that magical jungle and the pathos that lay in between the moments of a gunshot and the last roar. Before long, I was an avid fan of this wonderful English teacher. I even remember trailing behind her, hugging a huge pile of exercise books that I insisted on delivering to her home. As I, panting and perspiring, put

# THIRD EYE EDITION

---

down my load on her centre table in often sitting room, she often coaxed me to stay for a snack. But I would be tongue-tied and clumsily take my leave. My English teacher was the one who brought home to me the power of words and their ability to create an entire universe. The man-eater may have been shot, the hunter may have been joyfully carried by the villagers as a homecoming hero, but what remained for me was an awareness that magic could flow from the pen as amazingly as a rabbit could be pulled out of a hat.