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Article

Consuming the Tiger: Experiencing Neoliberal Nature

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Abstract

This is an ethnographic account of urban middle class Indian tourists' experience of seeing the tiger in the national parks (NP) in India, based on participant observation in Ranthambore National Park in Rajasthan, and Kanha and Bandhavgarh National Parks in Madhya Pradesh, India. This experience of seeing the tiger emerges as a specific form of commodity located within the process of commodification pervasive under neoliberal capitalism, circulated and sustained through a range of media, attainable through competitive exchange of economic and social capital. While the experience is prefigured, standardised and fetishised, actual embodied experience of the tiger safari in NP adds form and content to this commodity. Specific practices including the economy of tiger sighting, forms of access to NP and safari regulations reinforce wildlife experience as a scarce market commodity. The tourist gaze, mediated through global and new social media and materialised through ubiquitous photography, make the tiger simultaneously wild and familiar, cosmopolitan and parochial, universal commodity sign and specifically unique. Material experience through which the tourist 'consumes' the tiger reinforces ideas of nature as enclosed, separated and rationed space accessible through the market to those with money to spend, and the tiger as accessible through social status and economic hierarchies. This research unravels a basic contradiction between a sustainable conservation ethic, and subjectivity created by this form of competitive consumption of commoditised nature.

Keywords: nature tourism, national parks, tiger tourism, wildlife tourism, commodification of nature, neoliberal nature, competitive consumption of nature, gazing at the tiger

INTRODUCTION

Gazing at the Tiger

"It looks like National Geographic channel," exclaimed an excited safari tourist Ramya, pointing at a tiger in Ranthambore National Park (RNP), Rajasthan, India (RNP, May 2012). This was her first ever sighting of a tiger and it lived up to her expectations; expectations she explained, that were built up "over many years of watching television in New Delhi and compulsory environmental studies classes in her children's school." At the start of this safari, Ramya had been despondent, "We have come to see the tiger; I don't know what our destiny will be today. We have already spent money and returned empty. This is our last attempt." With her two teen-aged children and husband, she had arrived the previous morning at Sawai Madhopur, the main point of entry to RNP. The family had been on two safaris without sighting a tiger. "We didn't see anything," piped in her son, "we got a useless zone[1]." (Vivek, RNP, May 2012). The safari guide overhearing this conversation had reassured us that this was going to be our lucky day. And indeed it was. The almost two hour long search for sighting a tiger was a success. The jeep driver asked, "has everyone finished taking photographs?" before he dissociated the jeep from the many that had surrounded this tiger, and sped back to the gates to reach within the scheduled time for completion of this safari. As the safari ended, tourists in the jeep were happy to tip the guide and driver, as Ramya's husband congratulated them, "you finally managed to show it to us." (Babu, RNP, May 2012).

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The experience of seeing a tiger or other charismatic mega-fauna in a protected area is mediated by specific social relations embedded in both historical and contemporary practices and imaginations of nature. In India, many National Parks[2] (NP) are the only sites where majority of middle class urban citizens can view the tiger 'in its natural habitat' through an organised jeep safari. As a safari tourist in Kanha National Park (KNP) said, "This is the only place we can see a wild tiger without endangering our lives. Zoos (zoological parks) only have captive tigers. In NP, it is possible to spend money and see a wild tiger in safety." (Manohar, KNP, December 2015). This experience of seeing a tiger in NP is a commodity that an increasing number of middle-class Indians are choosing to buy. This consumption entails embodied experiences that influence popular understandings of conservation, and wider social circulation of conservation imaginations. Yet, wildlife tourists as a subject of study have attracted the attention of researchers only recently and most research has focused on perceptions and awareness of tourists regarding conservation (Chin et al. 2000; Lemelin and Weirsma 2007; Ballantyne et al. 2009; Cohen 2012; Karanth et al. 2012; Curtin and Kragh 2014).

Much of the early literature on tourism portrays tourism as a purely Western ideology forged in political economies rooted in post-colonialism (Burns and Bibbings 2009). However, non-consumptive wildlife tourism is a growing industry in non-Western contexts attracting mass tourism with diverse domestic consumers (Tapper 2006; Karanth and DeFries 2011; Curtin and Kragh 2014). Surveys have been the most popular method of data collection, and research on wildlife tourists has taken a direct 'impact on conservation' perspective, and asked how tourists perceive conservation, or what are tourists willing to pay for the experience. "Future challenges", write Curtin and Kragh (2014: 551) "will concern how best to explore the ways in which tourist experiences in these settings can influence the human psyche beyond the boundaries of the experience itself." Taking up this challenge, this study focuses attention on how the experience of tiger safaris in NP affects the tourists themselves.

Fletcher (2014), in one of the rare studies on 'experience' of eco-tourists, signals the significance of cultural resonances of rigorous outdoor activity in the social location of white upper-middle-class Westerners. Cultural resonances specific to social locations are significant in a self-chosen activity such as tourism, while embodied experiences contribute to formation of such cultures. With charismatic wildlife, global circulation of images plays an important role in creating cultural resonances. In a perceptive essay, Annu Jalais (2008: 26) distinguishes between 'real' tigers and 'cosmopolitan' tigers, where the later is "appealing because it acts simultaneously as a metaphor for a perceived globally shared knowledge of its characteristics and attributes (albeit Western and urban middle-class dominated) and as a rallying point for the conservation of wildlife." She goes on to show the power of such representations in sustaining coercive and unequal relationships and territorialisation of the Sundarbans in India (Jalais 2007, 2008, 2010). Barua (2013) similarly shows how through circulation, elephants become present in diverse global cultures, serving banal global consumption. The actual wildlife encounter is a significant moment in this circulation, bringing together the 'real' and the 'reel', contributing to delineating the commodity and expectations around it. This is the objective of this study, examining how the mass of middle-class urban Indian tourists experience the real tiger, contributing content to the circulating global tiger.

This practical engagement of the mass of tourists visiting NP is significant to how they relate to wildlife, nature, and conservation. Ingold (2000: 186) in delineating the dwelling perspective avers that "the forms people build, whether in the imagination or on the ground, arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings." This perspective has been extended to articulate transitory experiences such as tourism in terms of involvement rather than location or detachment (Obrador-Pons 2003), allowing 'dwelling' to register the fleeting as well as the enduring, the mobile as well as fixed, the global as well as the local (Obrador-Pons 1995).

Through ethnography of domestic tourists at NP, this paper examines how urban middle class Indians experience the tiger protected in NP. Experience of seeing the tiger emerges in this neoliberal economy as a specific form of tourist commodity, circulated and sustained through a range of media, attainable in the market only through expending economic and social capital. It is prefigured and fetishized through aspects beyond the immediate experience, but the actual embodied experience adds form and content to this commodity. The experience of the middle class urban Indian tourist viewing the tiger at a NP emerges in this study as one of the many sites of the everyday (re)production of the 'cosmopolitan' tiger through the tourist gaze. This reflects on the larger impact of NPs, beyond immediate impacts on local residents, both human and non-human, to the spatially and temporally distant subjectivities influenced by commodification of wildlife viewing.

Tiger tourism in NP: selling nature to save it

While NP have a long history with multiple and changing objectives reflecting state and social power relations (Rangarajan 2001; Rangarajan and Shahabuddin 2006; Hughes 2015), they are one of the most important categories of legally recognised protected areas in India along with Wildlife Sanctuaries, Conservation Reserves and Community Reserves. In April 1973, Government of India launched Project Tiger, world's largest conservation project of its time with a budget of 40 million rupees to 'protect the tiger' (Rangarajan 1996), and some existing NP and sanctuaries were categorized as tiger reserves. Starting with nine tiger reserves in 1973, there are currently 50 tiger reserves protecting 2,226 tigers (NTCA 2017). Tiger reserves follow a core/buffer strategy, where the core areas have the legal status of a NP or a sanctuary, whereas the buffer areas are managed as multiple use areas. "Project Tiger aims to foster an exclusive tiger agenda in the core areas of tiger reserves, with an inclusive people oriented agenda in the buffer" (NTCA 2017: 1).

NP represent a specific model of conservation, where considerable human labour goes into the creation of nature that is perceptibly wild. While the International Union for Conversation of Nature (IUCN) declares that the creation of protected areas should not adversely affect local communities, in densely populated regions such as South Asia, most protected areas are embedded in landscapes that have been inhabited by humans for millennia (Gadgil and Guha 1992; Saberwal et al. 2001; Mahanty 2003; Saikia 2009). Also described as 'fortress conservation' (Brockington 2002; Igoe 2004), NP represent an approach to conservation that seeks to protect nature through enclosure, and exclusion of some sections of society. Exclusionary conservation practices have alienated people resulting in loss of support for conservation, and conservation at gun-point, which is expensive, undemocratic, inequitable and unsustainable in the long-term (see TTF 2005). Several NPs in India have been, and continue to be, sites of violent confrontations, both between humans and wildlife and between so-called encroachers and enforcers. There is now a significant body of literature that points out both the un-sustainability and inequity of such a model of conservation and offers alternatives (Gadgil and Guha 1992; Saberwal et al. 2001; Arjunan et al. 2006; Rangarajan and Shahabuddin 2006; Shahabuddin and Rangarajan 2007; Sharma and Kabra 2007; Agrawal and Redford 2009; Kabra 2009; Jalais 2010; Bijoy 2011).

At least partly in response to this, tourism in NPs has emerged as the panacea that would sustainably provide incomes to displaced communities, while meeting the objective of conserving habitats and wildlife (Tisdell and Wilson 2002; Walpole and Leader-Williams 2002; Pennisi et al. 2004; Ghosh and Uddhammar 2013). In addition, it is expected that such tourism also provides non-financial benefits such as education and monitoring (Budowski 1976; Orams 1995; Higginbottom et al. 2001), and experiences that generate broader support for conservation (Chin et al. 2000; Ballantyne et al. 2009). Research has focused on the impact of tourism on conservation, on the health and survival of wildlife population, on the local economy and livelihoods of displaced and affected local peoples. The more recent framing of these debates has allowed emergence of the market as a solution to seemingly intractable challenges of balancing global conservation and local livelihoods. In this model of conservation, experience of nature/ wilderness is sold to generate economic returns, producing nature as a specific kind of commodity, Nature™ Inc. (Busher et al. 2014). Packaged wilderness experience is an important commodity as neoliberal economy expands to areas earlier considered beyond the market (Castree 2003, 2008a; Igoe and Brokington 2007). Increasing private involvement has also been encouraged since the 1990s, with the emergence of ecotourism as an industry (Brandon 1996; Ross and Wall 1999; Weaver 2001; Shoo and Songorwa 2013; Ghosh and Ghosh 2018). In critiquing the earlier model of NP, Ingold (2005: 507) points out "the protection of nature and the protection of place are incompatible because the former entails enclosure, and enclosure destroys place….places are not static nodes but are constituted in movement, through the comings and goings of people and animals." Tourism within NPs suggests a new model where there are considerable comings of goings of people, except the social profile of people moving in and out of NP is distinct from the people dependent on NP for their livelihood who may remain excluded. Entry and intervention of this new category of people in NP is welcomed and regulated by the tourist industry emerging around NP. The recent expansion of a thriving market for wildlife viewing in NP is the context within which this study is located, and it examines how this commodity is consumed by an expanding consumer class and some of the potential impacts of such consumption.

The focus is on the new urban middle class[3], a product of neoliberal economic transformation in India, who are often visiting NP for the first time. One of the changes that the transforming economy in India has brought is increase in mobility of people. Larger sections of the bourgeoning middle class are now able to and choose to travel for leisure. The place of NP in middle class Indian imagination has changed significantly in the last two decades. Karanth and DeFries (2010), in an assessment of NP visitation in India, report an average annual growth rate in visitors of 14.9% between the years 2002 and 2008. Much of this demand is driven by domestic tourism and India's increasing middle class. Only 20% of tourists to NP in India are international; 80% are domestic tourists, mostly urban elites (Uddhammar 2006). Eighty per cent of NP visitors in India's 10 most visited tiger reserves are domestic tourists who account for 50% of park revenues (Karanth and DeFries 2010). These domestic tourists are the subject of this study.

Tigers have historically been a cultural icon and status marker in India (Rangarajan 2001; Hughes 2013) with strong resonances permeating everyday life in many local cultural contexts in contemporary India (Jalais 2010; Das 2011; Mathur 2015). With global interest in 'saving the big cats' (TTF 2005; Jhala et al. 2011), tigers have become a conservation flagship species (Ranganathan et al. 2008; Seidensticker et al. 1999). They are one of the main charismatic species that draw many wildlife tourists to visit NP. There is considerable research and literature on the benefits and/or costs of tiger tourism to conservation of the tiger and its habitat (Hannam 2005; TTF 2005; Uddammar 2006; Karanth and Karanth 2012; Karanth et al. 2012). Some conservationists have attempted to ban tiger tourism in core areas of tiger reserves, showing how tourist vehicles drive too fast, tourists behave badly at sightings, and tiger habitat and corridors are taken over by tourist accommodation (Karanth and Karanth 2012). The debate on whether wildlife tourism benefits or harms wildlife conservation is an ongoing one. There is also considerable work on conflicts between conservation objectives and local use in NP in India and elsewhere and ways to overcome these (see for instance Kothari et al. 1996; Saberwal and Rangarajan 2005; Shahabuddin and Rangarajan 2007). The conflicts specifically around tiger conservation in India garnered considerable attention that is summarised in the Tiger Task Force Report published in 2005 (TTF 2005). My concern in this paper is with the impact on a different category of participants

in this process—the tourist who enters these protected spaces for an experience of viewing wildlife. This study focuses on the consumers of the tourism that has opened up in NP as a solution to providing alternative livelihoods to local inhabitants, and attempts to understand the nature of the experience of tourists who seek to see the tiger in the NP.

METHODOLOGY: ETHNOGRAPHY OF WILDLIFE TOURISTS

This paper is based on ethnography of domestic tourists who visited RNP in May-June 2012. It is supplemented by case studies of domestic tourists who visited KNP and Bandhavgarh National Park (BNP) in December 2015. Ethnography's central distinction is its emphasis on sharing the experiences of the subjects studied for an interpretive understanding. Participant observation is the primary means of collecting data, and involves the careful recording of direct observations, collective discussions, individual interviews, informal conversations etc., that allows for interpretive understanding.

Participant observation of tourists during jeep and canter safaris, at park entrances and ticket counters, at resorts primarily catering to Indian tourists, and interviews with tourists, tour operators, and park employees provided the data for this paper. Eschewing the major expensive resorts, the focus is on the numerically larger small safari resorts occupied predominantly by first generation Indian wildlife tourists. Participant observation involved following the tourist from the moment they arrive at the resort, observing and discussing the decisions made regarding the choice of safaris into the NP, observing inter-group discussion on this matter, while joining tourist groups on different safaris. Observation and interviews at the park gates, in ticket queues, and during safaris provided additional insights. The research design is intensive study of a small representative population, which is clearly not intended to be a general comment on tourism in NPs. Instead it allows us to ask—how is the tiger consumed by middle class urban tourists in the NPs?

Methodologically, studies on relationship between conservation and tourism have relied on the survey method almost exclusively, since this allows for large sample sizes and produces reliable quantitative data. However, this disproportionately emphasises the self-perception of tourists regarding their own role in conservation that is particularly self-conscious about normative values. Where conservation is a public moral value valorised in popular media and school curricula, especially among the Indian middle class, conditioned responses to researcher interventions cannot be taken uncritically at face value. Participant observation of their behaviour instead turns the focus on their experiences and practices involved in accessing services. It allows us to shift the focus beyond the discourses produced within the interview context. It allows for contradictory tendencies (such as wanting to protect wilderness or high willingness to pay for wilderness to exist along with the desire and actions to have that 'wilderness' easily or exclusively accessible to oneself on demand) existing in complex social reality to become visible.

Research sites

Ranthambore National Park (RNP) in Rajasthan, established as the Sawai Madhopur Game Sanctuary in 1955 by the Government of India, became a NP in 1980, and was declared a Project Tiger Reserve in 1973 (TTF 2005: 14). The undulating terrain of the park has dry deciduous forests and open grassy meadows. It is recognised as one of the best places to view the tiger, with 61 tigers reported in 2014 (TOI 2014). Like many other conservation areas, it was once a princely game reserve. Its boundaries include a tenth century fort and temples built in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that are still in active use. The official website of Government of Rajasthan writes, "Ranthambhor(e) is plagued by the typical problems encountered by all game reserves in India—people living in and around the parks and grazing by livestock! Between 1976 and 1979, 12 villages within RNP were resettled outside the designated park area with only a few people now residing in scattered hamlets within the park." (GoR 2016: 1). Also worth noting is that "The tiger is not the only attraction at Ranthambore; although it is the one park resident people come to see." (Ibid.)

It is estimated that RNP generates revenue of around INR 4 crore every year through tourism (Narayanan 2016). While this is one of the largest NPs with an area of 1,400 sq. km, only about 400 sq. km is open for tourism, allowing 1,200 visitors to enter the park at a time in registered vehicles. The tourism area of the park is divided into 10 zones with tourist vehicles distributed across the zones to prevent overcrowding. The park is open for six hours a day—three hours in the morning just after dawn, and three hours in the evening before dusk—from October to June. May and November are the best months for tiger sighting; among these, November is peak tourist season with resorts charging higher prices and larger numbers of foreign tourists taking advantage of the cooler temperatures. May is scorching hot and tourists are almost entirely domestic, taking advantage of the off-season lower prices at resorts.

KNP and BNP were chosen as supplementary sites since they are among the most popular among domestic tourists. Most NPs with the highest numbers of tigers and tourists are in the state of Madhya Pradesh. In 2010–2011, the state's 35 parks received USD 17.1 million from government sources. Five NPs that are tiger reserves generated most of the USD 2.8 million obtained from tourism. In 2011–2012, BNP received USD 1.2 million in tourist revenue and almost the same amount from government sources. Tourism therefore yields 25–50% of tiger conservation funds in Madhya Pradesh, safeguarding up to 130 tigers. (Buckley and Pabla 2012: 33). KNP and BNP receive Indian tourists even during the winter months. Case studies of tourists in these parks are used to avoid the exceptionalism of RNP. They supplement and corroborate the ethnographic data from RNP.

DISCUSSION AND ARGUMENTS

Economy of tiger sighting

"If you pay a bit more you can be sure of seeing the tiger," Vaibhav Sharma, a fellow tourist advised us at KNP (KNP, December 2015). He advised us to pay the resort manager the money to hire someone to stand in the overnight queue to purchase an entry ticket to a good zone for the next mornings' safari. As we returned from the evening safari without a tiger sighting, there were already a dozen people forming a queue at the closed ticket counter at the park gates waiting for it to open the next morning. Vaibhav who was staying with his family at our resort was third in the line. We enquired if he planned to stand in line the whole night. "No", he responded, "just for another couple of hours." During this conversation, two forest officials arrived and authoritatively scolded a young man standing in the line: "What are you doing here? This line is only for tourists. You come every day." The man quietly moved away. The officials announced loudly, "This line is only for tourists" and left after a few minutes. Vaibhav explained that he only had to stand for another hour or so, till park officials did their rounds. After that, he had hired someone to hold his position in the queue. "You are late", he admonished us, "Now, even if you pay, you will not get a good spot (in the queue)." Other tourists in this line added further advise: "Why don't you try for the evening safari tomorrow? Even if you pay now, you may end up spending money and getting a bad zone." While getting a spot in this queue was competitive, we received much sympathy for our plight of having been on a safari without seeing a tiger and many suggestions on how to make our visit successful. Don't waste your money on the buffer zone, we were advised by several tourists.

The competitive demand for onsite tickets to premium safari zones has generated a local informal economy around KNP and BNP. At both the sites, in the peak season in December, tourists queue up the previous night at the ticket counters near the park main gate, to purchase tickets for the morning safari[4]. The queue never ends, as the line for the evening safari already starts forming as the morning safari tickets are sold out. Resort owners and local youth are able to profit from specialised services they provide, by standing in the queues in place of tourists. A worker could earn up to INR 1,500 for standing in the ticket queue for one night at the gates of KNP or BNP in December 2015. The wage earned depended on zone allocated when the ticket was purchased in the morning, with the highest amount being paid only if premium zones were allotted. While NP authorities state that allocation of zones is random, very few tourists interviewed believed this claim. "That is what they say. But tourists in expensive resorts always get good zones. How is that random?" (VS, KNP, December 2015). This was a sentiment reiterated by other tourists, but could not be verified for factual accuracy. The amount tourists paid to the local youth for waiting overnight in the ticket line varied with the zones, for which the youth were able to procure tickets the next day. Hence a person who had a spot at the head of the queue was paid a premium since he could procure tickets for the zone of choice.

Resorts also arrange safari tickets at a price because their business is directly dependent on the safari. Tickets to premium safari zones sell at twice the listed price, with elaborate systems developed to exploit the loopholes in the ticket booking rules. Resort owners book online safari tickets in the names of various employees and relatives and are able to add on tourists to their jeep at the last minute for a profit. This facility to add tourists to the safari booked in one name is a perfectly legal loophole adopted by resort managers in KNP, although this increases price per tourist since they also share the cost of the person whose name is used to buy the ticket. Resort owners were clear that they were not attempting to profit from the safari tickets per se. However, their primary resort business was dependent on their ability to provide safari tickets, and resorts that have a reputation for arranging safari tickets could expect better occupancy at their resorts. "We do it as a service to the tourist. After coming so far, they should not go back empty," Sethi, manager of a resort near KNP explained (December 2015). This informal economy around safari tickets was common in KNP and BNP in December 2015. It was not observed in RNP where the fieldwork was conducted in the non-peak season in May 2012. However, at all sites, tourists were anxious and willing to pay more that the legal price to access premium zones, and resort managers were concerned that the tourists should have a successful visit.

"Those who see the tiger on the first safari are fortunate, they don't have to spend so much," sighed Mukul on a canter safari in RNP in summer 2012. Canters are large vehicles carrying up to 30 tourists and the cheapest safari option. They are noisier than the jeeps and stay on fixed routes on broader paths within NP. Mukul and his college friends on the canter were planning to book a jeep safari for the next day only if they did not see a tiger on this safari. Rathod family, also on the same canter, had been on a jeep safari earlier without seeing a tiger, and had decided to try the canter. Both groups confessed that they chose the canter only because it was cheaper. Tourists mix canter safaris with jeep safaris to reduce the overall cost of the visit. Canter drivers and guides are aware that cost plays a huge role for the tourists opting for canters. "We also try our best to show them the tiger. Why should only the rich people get better tiger sighting?" (Canter driver, RNP, June 2012).

Seeing the tiger in a NP is a premium commodity for an Indian middle class tourist. Apart from travel and accommodation, the safari cost adds substantially to the budget. Each entry into the NP can cost anywhere from INR 400 to more than INR 6,000 per person, depending on a variety of factors—specific national park, specific zone, time of booking, nature of booking, tourist season, and the type of vehicle. While zoning in the protected areas as core and periphery is based on health of the ecosystem and priority for conservation, zoning is read by tourists as probability of sighting a tiger during a safari. NPs with tiger tourism have also imbibed this market logic and reiterate it by instituting higher entry fees for zones designated as 'premium.'

A sizeable proportion of safari tickets in all three NPs are sold online, and according to advice on these booking sites, online tickets to the premium zones are sold out very quickly. Apart from prior planning required to get online tickets to premium zones, demand for onsite tickets was substantial also because of how tourists decided on the number of times they would enter the NP. It depends, as Mukul and his friends in RNP explained, "on whether we are able to see the tiger on one safari or not". To deal with this uncertainty, tourists book one or two safaris online and try getting onsite tickets if they want to or need to (depending on whether they have seen the tiger or not) go on more safaris. "We have already seen it," replied Meghna, who was spending the afternoon in the resort pool with her family, on being asked if they were going on the evening safari (BNP, December 2015). The premium a tourist is willing to pay for a safari inside the park is related to the sighting of the tiger in the previous safari. The tourist who has already gone on a safari with no tiger sighting is desperate to secure entry to a premium zone with higher probability of tiger sighting. Few tourists paid to enter the buffer zones more than once. And, almost all the tourists who were willing to pay extra (more than the legal price) for safari tickets were those who had not yet sighted the tiger. Scarcity and controlled access make viewing the tiger in the NP a premium commodity with high exchange value. It encourages competitive and conspicuous consumption, with tourists desiring purchase of the experience even at greater costs (to themselves and the tiger), even at the risk of making this commodity scarcer. Nature, after all, was a static enclosed space whose access was available for consumption based on purchasing power. Tourist experience of competitive tiger sighting embodied the territorial logics of power, producing nature experience as an achievement closely linked to socio-economic hierarchies.

Ways of seeing[5]: consumption as social achievement

From the moment one arrives in the small sleepy town of Sawai Madhopur, gateway to RNP, almost every person one meets from the taxi driver to the gardener, to the hotel manager, to the waiter welcomes one with a question—have you seen it (the tiger)? If you have just arrived, the fact that you have not seen it evokes assurances that soon you will see it, and of tales of how the last guest sighted several of them, and assurances and good wishes that you will see the tiger. Between guests and the hosts there is the shared knowledge that sighting the tiger is the singular objective of any visit to Sawai Madhopur. This continues through the stay and travel here, with pressure continuously mounting on both visitors and hosts as the hours wear on. Every passing hour brings numerous suggestions on how to achieve the primary objective. Tales of particular travel agents and guides who have the knack to show you the tiger abound; the destiny of the visitor to meet the tiger is predicted and every person in the tourist sector feels the intense anxiety to assure the guest that there will be a tiger sighting. This is also the overwhelming topic of conversations among tourists at resorts or during the safari. Every safari in each of the three NPs included conversations with the driver and guide about their previous sightings of the tiger. In every case, the driver/guide mentioned how often and how close to the tiger they had been in the past.

Safari jeeps begin to line up at the gates in all three NPs before the gates open, and there is a general rush to quickly enter the park. After entry, jeeps disperse to their assigned zones. Guides point out major fauna and flora along the way, with generally only very brief stops to take photographs. There is a sense of urgency in the jeep to move on to see the tiger. Jeeps take different paths within the allotted zone. Jeeps in adjacent zones and within a zone often cross paths. Jeep crossings were always moments of expectation, both curiosity on the fate of other tourists as well as eagerness for information. "By seeing their faces, you can guess if they have seen the tiger or not," advised Hameez, one of the experienced guides in RNP (May 2012), and this proved itself correct repeatedly. Tourists who had seen a tiger were eager to share stories of their success. Tourists vied with each other to claim they had a better view, a closer view, a better angle, a better photograph, of the tiger. A silent jeep meant that the tiger had not been sighted. On some safaris, when there was no tiger sighting, tourists and trackers consoled themselves and each other by noting the failure of others: "It's okay; Nobody (none of the other jeeps in that zone) saw a tiger today. It feels worse when tourists in other jeeps have seen the tiger and you haven't; then it is really only our bad luck." (Pankaj, RNP, May 2012).

The competition between jeeps to be the one that has seen the tiger is intense. Each jeep driver and guide in RNP assured us that he was the person most likely to show us the tiger. Resort owners recommended guides saying that their success rate was high, and narratives of close tiger sightings were ubiquitous. The jeeps themselves race to find the tiger, often passing by lovely grasslands filled with grazing deer, and water-bodies with a variety of birds. Midway through one safari in RNP in May 2012, seeing another jeep with tourists holding large photography equipment stopped on the roadside to photograph birds, a tourist in our jeep suggested that maybe we should stop for birds now since the tiger seemed elusive. Our guide Vinod (RNP, June 2012) immediately advised us not to give up hope. There was still time to search for the tiger. "We can stop for birds if you want," he said, "but don't complain later that we didn't see the tiger." Missing a tiger sighting proved too much of a sacrifice to see the birds, and we moved on. The competitiveness between jeeps was highlighted by this incident towards the end of a safari in KNP in December 2015: at one of the places where two jeeps crossed each other, the other guide asked the guide in our jeep if we had seen the tiger. Our guide responded that we heard the tiger roaring for a while but did not see it. His response brought laughter all around: "oh, you didn't see it either. Then it's okay," sighed the guide in relief.

There is a sheer sense of relief during a safari once the tiger has been sighted. Most safaris end early when the tiger has been sighted, while the jeeps lag till the last minute of the designated time when there is no sighting. Everyone who works in the park is conscious that his success is clearly evaluated by the

visitor on his ability to show the tiger. Therefore, after a safari visit that was rich in terms of wildlife sighting but missed sighting a tiger, the guide who accompanied us was profusely apologetic. He took great pains to explain that this does not happen often with him as a guide. "It is sheer bad luck today. We were so close," Ravi (RNP, June 2012) lamented, "but we missed seeing it." He was keen to point out that this was a rare occasion. He was generally very successful in sighting the tiger. The guests on the jeep were clearly unhappy, some even disgruntled. After all, they spent so much just to see the tiger.

Apart from talk of luck in sighting the tiger, is a strong discourse on how social position is important for tiger sighting. As a student who could not afford to take too many jeep safaris into the NP stated angrily, "When VIPs (very important persons) come, they always see the tiger. That is how it always is. Those who have money and connections get to see the tiger. For people like us it is always a chance factor. Even nature is biased towards the rich." (Ravish, KNP, December 2015) He was certain that his shallow pockets were the reason he had not seen the tiger.

On another safari, there was animated discussion over news of the visit of a Chief Minister's family to the park later that week. No one on the safari doubted that the Chief Ministers' family would sight a tiger. "When big people visit they always see the tiger; you see on the TV, when the prime minister or the president visits a national park, they are always shown many tigers and lions." (Neeraj, KNP, December 2015). A discussion followed on how this was possible, where many theories were proposed: the tigers are rounded up, or advance parties locate the tigers and take the VIP there, or park authorities use satellite trackers to locate the tigers. Similar sentiments were echoed in RNP as well, "When Discovery-wale (photographers from TV channels) come, they are always shown the tiger. They always get photographs from close to the tiger. When we come, they quote rules and say it is a matter of chance." (Sunita, a college student, RNP, May 2012). The ability to see a tiger was seen as amenable to social hierarchies rather than simply dictated by the vagaries of nature.

The guides and jeep drivers narrate the sheer happiness that tourists express when they see a tiger on a safari, which also translates sometimes into large tips for them. "For one minute, everyone goes speechless," is how Hameez (RNP, May 2012) describes the safari tourists' reaction on seeing the tiger for the first time, "then they can't stop chattering." Generous tips from tourists after a successful safari can be substantial[6]. More than monetary gain, however, the reputation for 'success' in each safari trip is important in establishing their stature. Therefore, resorts advertise safari guides with high success rates. Park authorities are also aware of this pressure on tour operators to deliver. "Tour operators want to show their customers the best thing. So they go off the road and come at the tiger from the other end. All this puts a lot of pressure [on the tiger] and almost destroys the habitat in the area." (Chief Wildlife Warden G Vishvanath Reddy quoted in Narayanan 2016).

It is important to note that there are hoardings everywhere and pamphlets that proclaim that the tiger is only one part of enjoying nature in each of these NPs. Many of the guides and some drivers discussed in these paragraphs are very knowledgeable about the diversity of fauna and flora in their work environment. Almost all had received training and were adept at sighting and identifying a wide variety of birds, animals and trees. Some had local/traditional knowledge of edible and medicinal properties of plants and behaviour of several animals. And resort owners, guides, and jeep drivers also mention this every now and then. But it is indeed hard to find anyone among the tourism providers or the tourists who extol the enjoyment of nature in any of these NPs without mentioning the tiger. When questioned on this, guides and drivers often repeated variations of what Hameez (RNP, May 2012) said: "but Indian tourists come to see the tiger. They come only once to the park; they cannot come again and again as these wildlife people do. So they must see the tiger. What will they say when they go back?" Another guide Ravi (RNP, June 2012) felt, "everyone says these things (that tiger is not the only important thing in RNP), but even ranger *saab* (=sir) wants to know if you saw the tiger." Many tourists said that the whole experience of the safari was important, but incomplete, if the tiger was not sighted. As Mehta (RNP, May 2012), a tourist said, "once you go home and tell people you went to RNP, they will not say, did you see the deer? They will ask if you saw the tiger." His school-going son added helpfully, "Ranthambore is famous for its tigers."

Fetishisation of tiger sighting in NPs negates the idea of conserving rich and complex habitats, challenging their status as ambassadors of conservation. Tiger sighting is experienced by tourists as personal achievement, indicating economic and social status of the viewer rather than dependent on habitat conservation. The link to the later is tenuous, if at all it is recognised. Earlier encounters with wildlife, particularly royal and colonial hunting have been seen as processes of self-making; the *shikar* (=game hunting) as expressing masculinity, racial difference and imperial power (MacKenzie 1997; Rangarajan and Sivaramakrishnan 2012). In the era of the tiger safari, it becomes an indicator of economic and social capital, displaying one's social status and success as a consumer.

Nature in the tourist gaze: taking back the trophy

Seeing a tiger in the NPs emerges as a particular form of consumption that brings together the real and cosmopolitan tiger, through the tourist gaze (Urry 1992, 2002). The tourist gaze is an organising principle which structures encounters among tourists, and people and places they visit, at multiple levels, closely related to the emergence of mass tourism, consumerism and commodification of places and practices (Vida 2011: 1466). This gaze constructs peoples, places, landscapes, and in this case the tiger, in specific ways through the intersection of images, narratives, and performative practices through which tourist experiences are embodied. This assemblage generates a network of institutions and professionals who ensure the production of particular tourist experiences. This, in turn, creates anticipation in tourists

about what they will encounter and fuels desire to experience particular imaginaries.

What is consumed in the safari in the NPs extends both, temporally and spatially beyond the visit to the park. "It looks like what they show on TV, like National Geographic (channel)," exclaimed a young tourist (Mukul, RNP, May 2012), the second person to specifically refer the National Geographic documentaries. Many other tourists also referenced documentaries shown in schools, specific wildlife photographs/photographers, television documentaries and films when describing the experience of seeing the tiger in the NPs. Satisfaction here derived from a nature that mimicked the virtual. Other studies have shown that wildlife media plays a significant role in shaping wildlife value orientations (Champ 2002); it also shapes the actual experience of viewing wildlife. All tourists had seen the tiger before—in books, magazines, documentaries, films, websites, television, social media, etc.—and references to these peppered conversations during the safaris.

Several tigers in these NPs were familiar by name to the tourists who were visiting for the first time. Each NP with high tourist footfalls also has its famous resident tiger, whose movements, sightings, habits, etc., are closely tracked by online enthusiasts. It is possible to virtually follow some of these specific tigers, as one follows celebrities in human society. For RNP it was Machli[7] who died in 2016. Machli, considered one of the most photographed tigers in the world, has a world-wide online following and a dedicated Wikipedia page[8]. All safari guides and drivers and many tourists told stories about Machli, her many offspring and her many monikers: Queen Mother of Tigers, Tigress Queen of Ranthambore, Lady of the Lakes, and Crocodile Killer. In 2009, she was honoured for lifetime achievement by Travel Operators for Tigers (TOFT), a campaign set up by tour operators specialising in wildlife tourism. Machli's death in 2016 was covered by major national and international newspapers, and merited significant mention on social media.[9] Doubleday (2017) describes the relational empathy that many people displayed towards Machli, reflecting on complex scalar entanglements with individual animal celebrity and species conservation. This was a tiger, with a liminal status between 'wild' and 'captive' (Ibid.), whose life was prolonged by feeding by park authorities, when she could no longer hunt on her own (Mazoomdar 2016a). Her death was marked by Hindu cultural ceremonies that were widely covered in popular media. The tiger was taken in a traditional Hindu funeral procession, her corpse covered in a white shroud decked with the many ceremonial marigold garlands, carried on the shoulders of forest officials in uniform.[10]

Anthromorphisation of the tiger, a significant way of particularising the universal, adds to the safari experience. Safari guides not only identify the tiger by its name, but also narrate its filial relationships, exploits and its 'personality'. This is appreciated by tourists, as Mehta (RNP, May 2012) said of our safari guide who described the fraternal territorial fights of a tiger we had seen, "he knows this tiger intimately." Kin relationships of human society are projected onto tigers. Often, tourists were able to fill in information on the specific tiger once it was identified by its name. Discourses of masculinity, motherhood, valour and nationalism such as 'only one tiger can remain in a jungle', 'tiger does not eat grass', 'a tiger cannot be tamed', 'king of the jungle', 'tiger is our national animal', 'our tiger', 'everybody bows to Sher Khan', 'tigress will always protect her children', was part of many safari conversations in all three NPs. Familiarity of the tiger is important, and the tiger is valued through its constructed closeness to human behaviour and kinship patterns, its physical and cultural proximity. Simultaneously, the 'wild' quality of the tiger sighting was an important value of the experience of the NP. "There are tigers in zoos too, but we came here to see the wild tiger," said Nidhi (BNP, December 2015). The importance of getting a photograph of the tiger without other humans in the frame is almost universally acknowledged by tourists. This can actually be a very difficult task given that once a tiger is sighted, many safari jeeps converge on all sides.

However, for the tourist, the desire for the tiger to be 'wild' was not in contradiction with greater certainty in seeing a tiger during a safari, or getting close to the tiger. The 'wild' had to be limited and packaged for it to function as a commodity. The early morning safari in the open jeep or canter, the endless wait for the elusive tiger to appear, all held appeal only for a short while. Initial excitement at seeing tiger tracks on the sandy path invariably lost its appeal as the safari continued without a tiger sighting. "These are wild tigers, we cannot make them appear on demand," reasoned our guide (Santosh, RNP, May 2012), but failed to fully placate disgruntled tourists after an 'empty' safari. The 'wildness' of the tiger fast loses appeal when after a couple of hours' expensive ride in an open jeep in the cold early morning when there is no tiger sighting. Tourists look for exciting moments and satisfaction that often lead to conflicts between ideas and ideals of ecotourism as perceived by different actors (Ghosh and Ghosh 2018: 18-19). For the experience to conform to the commodity form with exchange value, its scarcity has to be tempered with availability on demand for gratification. Wildness has to seamlessly blend with proximity and familiarity. When tourists discuss which is a better (managed) NP, or a better zone, the criterion is assurance of seeing a tiger during safari. Occasionally, tourists in the jeep asked the driver if he could take them closer to the tiger. Tourists in canters often complained about jeeps that were much closer to the tiger. Different sightings of the tiger are compared primarily through the distance of the tiger from the viewer. While zoom and tele lenses of cameras play a major role in creating the perception of closeness, tourist narratives also tend to bring the tiger closer. Both real and fictive closeness emerge as important indicators of quality of this experience.

The significance and pleasure of wildlife sighting often also lies in anticipated experiences after the tourist returns home. In one BNP safari, two children under ten-years of age, on the open canter at dawn, promptly fell asleep huddled in the cold morning wind. Accompanying parents vigorously attempted to wake them up at every stop. "Wake up," they shook the

children as the deer scattered and co-passengers bristled at the noise, "what will you tell your teacher and friends when you go back? You should tell them that you saw the deer in the jungle. Tell your classmates you saw the wild Nilgai in the forest." One thoroughly disinterested child was woken up and forced to see the wild animal before he went back to sleep.

Each time we stopped to watch wildlife, "Has everybody taken/finished taking photographs?" was the ubiquitous question, and the vehicle could move on once it was answered in the affirmative. Jeeps had to move back and forth each time to allow an unhindered photograph for all passengers. With the number of cameras increasing substantially with cameras on phones becoming common, wildlife viewing value is closely linked to the photograph. Having one's own personal photo of the animal/bird was often as important, or even more important, than seeing it. In one case where a rare bird pointed out by the guide was not easily visible among the foliage in RNP, everyone on the jeep handed their cameras to the guide to capture the bird for later viewing and sharing. The specific ways of seeing that form the tourist gaze, and the need to see, to quantify, and to capture have been elucidated by scholars of tourism (Crawshaw and Urry 1997). Nature in the tourist gaze is simply one more new or different product that can be purchased and consumed (Lemelin and Wiersma 2007), and the photograph is an important aspect of this consumption. It allows the intangible and fleeting nature of experience to be materialised and form a stable commodity. In turn, it becomes part of global circulation of commodities and processes of standardisation. The 'personal' photographs which circulate in social media, engage, relate and transform those from mass media that prefigured the experience of the tourist in the NPs, a relationship that befits analysis beyond the scope of this essay. The personal photograph of the wild tiger integrates and contributes to producing fetishised experience of nature, that erases the considerable human labour that goes into the making of the NP itself but even the making of the wildlife experience just elaborated.

As wildlife photography replaced sport hunting, the ways in which photography affects human relationship with nature has been the subject of debate. While some scholars see photography as enhancing the experience and allowing its sustained appreciation, others emphasize the selective view and unrealistic expectations it produces (Hvenegaard 2004). Rather than these dimensions contradicting each other, the selective and 'unrealistic' view is integral to the enhancement of the commodified experience. The 'reel' and the 'real' tiger dialectically co-produce each other in the safari experience in the NPs.

Tracking the tiger through social capital

So how is a tiger sighted in a NP? Scientific and tourism discourse talks of using ones wilderness skills, looking for tracks in the earth, listening carefully for alarm calls of monkeys, deer, and birds and, waiting patiently. Most naturalist guides in NPs mention these signs with varying degrees of enthusiasm, and tracking adds to the thrill of the safari. However, the actual experience of tiger sighting for a tourist who is inside the park for a few hours depends crucially on the social networks of the driver and guide rather than a keen relation with nature. From the moment each jeep enters the park, drivers race to places where the tiger is most likely to be seen. Often these are the main water holes, but drivers also depend crucially on information about sightings during the last safari. Each driver, guide and resort owner has his own network of contacts with others working within the park, who shared information on recent tiger kills, sightings and movements. On one safari in RNP, our newly appointed naturalist had trouble getting information from guides in other jeeps who gave vague information. However, the driver had relatives working within the park and a phone call to them guided us towards where the tiger was last seen.

Sighting the tiger in the NPs did not seem to depend on the naturalist knowledge and skill of the guide. Our most successful guide in RNP, Shaqeel, was from a well-connected local family and had good relations with everyone working in the park. He relied more on the ring of his cell phone than on animal calls to track the tiger. When jeeps cross, guides and drivers seek information about locating the tiger. When they are unfamiliar with each other, or as in one case, disliked, the information shared is vague and sparse. A popular guide generates enthusiastic and specific responses from other guides and drivers, even without asking. One popular guide Naman, took us briefly into an adjacent zone from the one we were allotted, when another guide told us they has just seen the tiger. Other drivers had told us how that was greatly frowned upon and they were likely to be reported and they may even lose their license for such transgression. But Naman did not hesitate, "they will not report me" (RNP, May 2012), he claimed when asked. But this remained a brief and rare transgression.

There is a constant search for tiger tracks in the soft soil, but the majority of times we saw a tiger in RNP, human networks led us to it. Once there is some information, each jeep within the allotted zone races at breakneck speed to be the first to reach the tiger. And there is a good reason for this. For, once the news of tiger sighting spreads, all jeeps and canters in the zone rush to the same spot, and within minutes, the tiger is surrounded on whatever side possible with jeeps teeming with tourists each vying for a good position to capture photographs of the wild tiger. Both tourists and NP-workers acknowledge the importance of social capital in the actual practice of sighting the tiger. The dwelling perspective of nature emerging from this experience of tourists establishes nature as enclosed, separated and rationed space accessible through purchasing power, social status and economic hierarchies.

CONCLUSION

The NP in its conception as a fortress that protected wildlife within a bounded territory imagined a sharp divide between protected nature and human society. However, while still excluding local residents, NPs presently are sites of

considerable comings and goings of people. Only, this is a different social category of people from those living in and adjacent to parks. They are drawn from urban middle classes whose entry into NP is managed and manipulated by state policy and market forces, i.e., the tourist economy. Although drawn mainly from the relatively narrow middle class in India, these tourists belong to a culturally influential section of society. Experiences and impressions of interaction with nature that these tourists take back home are likely to have an influence on the subjectivity of larger society towards nature and conservation, its perception of threats to nature, and state policies and public action for protection of nature.

Neoliberal capitalism produces not only nature as commodity but also the very experience of nature itself as a commodity (Castree 2003, 2008a, 2008b). Tiger safaris in NPs represent one direct example of this commodification of experience of nature. International and national laws, policies, practices, coalitions, and considerable power of the state and its institutions combine to create the wild nature of NPs. Erasure of this considerable social labour and creation of abstract geographies contributes to fetishisation of tiger viewing as a commodity. Commodity relations invisibilise not only social institutional labour, of state policy, bureaucratic practices, etc., that creates a framework for market relations, but also the directly visible labour of ground level functionaries, such as guides, drivers, forest guards, etc.

This experience emerges as a specific form of commodity available for mass consumption within the process of commodification pervasive under neoliberal capitalism, including the commodity production and exchange of erstwhile commons, manipulation of commodity sign, and standardisation of products, tastes and experiences through globalised media. The specific practices through which a middle class tourist gets to see a tiger, including the forms of access to NP and safari regulations reinforce wildlife experience as a scarce market commodity accessible through intersections and transformations of economic and social capital. The tiger itself is simultaneously wild and familiar, cosmopolitan and parochial, universal commodity sign and specifically unique. Uncertainty of the actual sighting is tempered by standardisation of imaginations of the experience. Proliferation of knowledge of specific individual tigers provides brand value to individual tigers as well as NPs that host them. This brief experience, that is a nonmaterial commodity, is made tangible and stable through photography, allowing the display of this experience in other temporal and spatial contexts, and transforming the fleeting into a permanent marker of achievement. Consumerist attitudes demand a nature that is amenable to aggressive and competitive consumerism and wildlife that responds to demand. Consumer products do not demand empathy, and scarcity may well increase value. This unsettles the idea that experience of nature creates empathy towards other life forms and/or support for conservation or sustainable management of nature. The subjective experience of sighting the tiger for the majority of tourists discussed here acutely reinforces the experience of capital, power and hierarchy in society. This poses serious challenge to the possibility of nature/wildlife tourism as contributing to sustainable conservation.

NOTES

1. Referring to the zoning system at RNP explained later in this essay.
2. All three NPs included in this study also have the status of tiger reserves. NP is one legal category of protected areas in India, and tiger reserves are an overlapping legal and administrative categorisation that may include NPs, Sanctuaries and/other areas. Since domestic tourists studied refer to them as NP (rather than protected areas or tiger reserves that are both acceptable terms used in the literature for the same spaces), that is the term used in this paper. The other two terms—tiger reserves and protected areas—are used when citing literature that uses these terms.
3. Deshpande (2003) shows how middle class in India is an elastic category that is neither 'middle' of the economic spectrum in terms of income, nor class in the strict sociological sense of the term. This is, however, a significant category of self-perception and wide common sense acceptance, and an aspirational moniker used in preference to rich or poor, which are seen as extremes. The tourists studied self-identify as middle class, have enough expendable income to take a vacation, and stay at 3-star or lower ranked resorts.
4. This was not observed in RNP during the fieldwork.
5. This phrase is borrowed from and is a reference to Peter Berger's (1972) influential classic book and BBC series with this title that explained among other things why seeing is a political act and historically constructed.
6. Practice of tipping driver and guide was observed at RNP, but not at KNP or BNP.
7. Also spelled Machhli/Machali.
8. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Machali_(tigress)
9. For instance see Mazoomdar 2016b in The Indian Express, Sinha 2016 in The Wire.
10. Several videos of the final rites can be viewed on YouTube. For instance, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yrm8NLt6qXQ, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4auskfoc_w,.

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