

A Report on the Annual Jatre at Dabaguli
Urigam Range, Hosur Forest Division

Submitted to

The Divisional Forest Officer

Hosur Forest Division
Tamil Nadu

by



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1. Dabaguli

1.1 Location

Dabaguli is a little known stretch of riverine forest along Cauvery, deep in the forests of the Urigam Range of Hosur Forest Division in Tamil Nadu. An Anti-Poaching Camp of Tamil Nadu Forest Department and a small shack housing a fisherman family are the only human presence for most part of the year.



Image 1.1 Cauvery at Dabaguli

Dabaguli can only be accessed by mud and gravel roads. One of these is via Belpatti and Kestur and the other one is via Urigam.

1.2 Ecological Importance

The ecological significance of the forests which include Dabaguli is huge. This unique riparian zone is particularly important for many endemic and endangered species. Also, these forests form a vital link in the elephant corridors of South India, connecting the Bannerghatta National Park and the River Cauvery.

The density of the Four-Horned Antelope (*Tetracerus quadricornis*) is higher here than many other sites in India, where these species occur.



Image 1.2 Four Horned Antelope (photo by Dr. Ravi Rajasingh)

It is also home to the rare and endemic Grizzled Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa macroura*) which is restricted to a few localities in southern India.



Image 1.3 Grizzled Giant Squirrel (photo by Kalyan Varma)

The Cauvery river bed here is one of the last regions remaining in India where the highly endangered Smooth-coated Otter (*Lutra perspicillata*) breed and feed in secure environments.

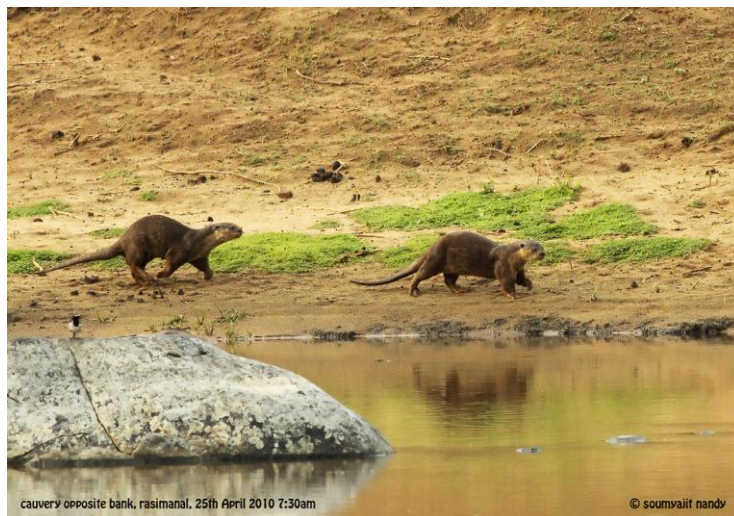


Image 1.4 Smooth-coated Otters (photo by Soumyajit Nandy)

The other schedule species found here include predators such as Leopard, Dhole, Sloth Bear, Marsh Crocodile, Jackal and prey species such as Chital, Gaur, Sambar Deer, Barking Deer, Elephant, etc. The area is also home to the last few remaining Common Langurs in the Hosur Forest Division.

1.3 The Temple

There is a small temple dedicated to Basavanna in Dabaguli. The history of the temple dates back to Tipu's era. Basava is worshipped here due to the historical incident when two buffaloes got into a fight which lasted for seven days at the end of which it both fell into a pit that was filled with ash. The buffaloes could not come out and it died there. Subsequently, the place came to be known as Dabguzhi meaning 'where the bull is buried' in loose translation.

A trickle of devotees visit the temple around the year mainly from the surrounding villages in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. People of the nearby villages revere Dabaguli a lot. Prior to harvest or when they buy a new calf, they come to Dabaguli and pray. The broken idols are apparently brought to Dabaguli to be submerged in the Cauvery. Once a year, around the time of Shivaratri, a Jatre or fair is organised here and a swarm of 15-20 thousand people descend on this peaceful place for two days.

2. The Jatre

2.1 Initial Years

The Jatre was initiated in 2007 by people from surrounding villages with the active support of religious heads. They formed a committee with representation from various villages like Kotiyur, Hunsanahalli, Manjugondahalli, Belpatti etc. and all villagers contribute money, their produce and ration for the success of the Jatre.

2.2 The Present Scenario

This year (2011), the 5th Jatre was held on the 5th and 6th of February. As many as 10,000 to 15,000 people participated in the event. All means of transport from motor bikes to buses were used to get to Dabaguli from the nearby villages.



Image 2.1 People arriving at Dabaguli

Food for all the people was arranged by the Jatre Committee. Food was supplied three times; once in the evening, night and the next morning. This food was prepared on the banks on the river itself. Other than this, there were many food stalls and tea-shops set up by the local people.



Image 2.2 Food being prepared for the devotees

A puja was done at the temple in the evening, which was followed by sermons by the swamis for the people. Late in the night, a drama was also planned. People stayed overnight at Dabaguli and left only on the next day by noon.

2.3 Environmental Issues

Such a big gathering of people inside the forest poses many threats to the subtle eco-system of Dabaguli.

Large number of plastic coated plates, cups and covers are used for food and these are littered carelessly in the forest. These are not just an eyesore but, the profuse littering will cause disturbance to the natural growth of the forests and its inhabitants, and pollute the river water.



Image 2.3 Plastic Cups littered around in Dabaguli

Fire-wood for cooking is collected in large scale from the surrounding forests. Although KANS observed that mostly dry wood was being collected, about 7-8 tractor loads of these being removed from forest will have its own impact on these forests.



Image 2.4 Firewood being collected

A large number of loud speakers are used throughout the night in very high volumes. This will cause significant disturbance to wildlife in the area.



Image 2.5 Loudspeakers at the venue

New buildings were being constructed at the venue. JCBs were used to clear off vegetation to set up various stalls.



Image 2.6 A new building at Dabaguli

There were lot of people who were drinking and smoking in the forest, even after the swamiji's repeated appeals. Irresponsible actions like these could result in forest fires.



Image 2.7 Liquor bottles scattered at the venue

3. KANS Initiative

The huge pile of garbage and plastic plates left behind all around the temple, and garbage floating in the Cauvery in the aftermath of the Jatre, came to the notice of Kenneth Anderson Nature Society (KANS) in 2010. KANS decided to take up the matter with the organizing committee of the Jatre to minimize the amount of pollution and disturbance to this forest range in the succeeding year.

KANS members visited Kotiyur, Hunsanahalli and Manchugondahalli villages, met the members of the organising committee and made enquires about the details of the Jatre. Based on the inputs from them, KANS formed a team of 21 volunteers and decided to try contain the damage caused to eco-system this year.

3.1 Preventing the Use of Plastic Plates

KANS convinced the committee to use bio-degradable Areca leaf plates as against the plastic lined plates used the previous year. When the committee pleaded lack of funds, KANS offered to bear 50% of the cost and even sourced a supplier for 30,000 areca leaf plates.



Image 3.1 Areca leaf plates being gathered in the pit

3.2 Safe Disposal of Waste

On KANS instruction, the committee prepared huge pits, 4-5 that are around 4 feet deep, to collect and dispose the used plates and other garbage. Straw baskets were provided to all the stalls to collect plastic waste and to prevent litter from the stalls. The organising committee requested the people through the loud speaker system to make use of these baskets and pits.



Image 3.2 Garbage collected in the pits



Image 3.3 Baskets provided to vendors

3.3 Conservation Video

KANS screened the Kannada version of the movie "Nagarhole: Tales from an Indian Jungle" by Shekhar Dattatri, bringing home the message of conservation to the audience.



Image 3.4 Video Screening

3.4 Final Cleaning up of the Area

The following morning KANS collected all the plates, glasses, liquor bottles, cigarette packets, gutka packets and other waste which was scattered all over the forest and disposed them in the prepared pits. Considering the volume of garbage, we were unable to do any segregation and hence burnt all the plates and plastic waste gathered at the pits. The organising committee also lend their help at this point to collect the waste and dispose it in the pits.



Image 3.5 Cleaning up garbage on Day 2

Observations

KANS is seriously concerned about the impact on the forests by this Jatre. The following observations were made by KANS during the fair.

- It was observed that, the road from Kestur to Dabaguli was recently cleared and levelled. Steady traffic on this road caused larger disturbances and unsettled the loose soil.
- There are proposals to tar the roads, which if carried out will invite more traffic to the area. As per the committee the number of people participating in the fair has gone up in the last 4-5 years from few hundreds to thousands solely due to motorable roads.
- Electricity lines were drawn to provide electricity for the lights, a further proposal has been made to supply 3-phase power supply to the temple premises.
- Four diesel generators were running all through the two days causing immense noise and air pollution.
- Speakers placed all around the temple area kept a steady flow of loud music and commentaries (The sound carried until the Uganiyam APC).
- The river bank was cleared of all grass and scrub plants using JCB in order to make place for the cooking area.
- Overnight campers seen during the festival severely distresses the fauna of this area.
- Firewood is collected from areas that are home to the Grizzled Giant Squirrel and Four Horned Antelope.
- At least 15-20 small shops were seen along the way up to the temple. This further increased the amount of plastic litter in the form of ice cream and tea cups.
- There were about five Swamyjis (from various Mutts) on the stage. From their talks it transpired that they wanted this Jatre to be held every year and with more pomp and festivities.
- An appeal was made by them to the public at large to focus their energy (by means of donation) to organize a Cattle Fair at Dabaguli, which can easily bring in devastating infections to the wild fauna.
- Further they have been pooling in money in form of donation to reconstruct the older temple in grand manner.
- Money was also pooled to build bigger and better lodging facilities for the devotees. It must be noted that two rooms have already been constructed.
- Forest Department Staff cautioned the public not to venture into the forests and cautioned about the presence of elephants. A few guards were seen strolling around but the overall number of guards stationed was not sufficient.
- It seemed like the Jatre did not have official permission from the Hosur Forest Division.

Conclusion

Conducting a Jatre inside a Reserve Forest is largely unnecessary. Public events like Jatres, marriages etc. should be restricted to civilian areas where all facilities like road, electricity, water, transportation and garbage disposal system are readily available. As custodian of forests and wildlife, the Forest Department should resist initiatives of the society to modernise forest areas and 'create' locations of religious importance. If the Forest Department allows tar roads, electricity, lodging and cattle fairs to come up inside forests, where will our wildlife go?