

## Who let these cats out?

Jay Mazoomdaar

Two villagers were killed recently by hand-raised leopards released in the wild by a Mysore royal and an NGO. This is a so-called 'rehabilitation experiment' gone horribly wrong.

At noontime in the Bandipur Tiger Reserve, five Jenu Kuruba tribals walked silently within earshot of one another's, scanning the branches overhead for beehives. Traditional honey-gatherers, these tribals collect wildflower honey in the early monsoon. Over generations, Kurubas have learnt that the forest is a safe place, as long as one stays away from rogue elephants and temperamental bears.

On 1 June, however, these five men from Lakkipura, a Kuruba village at the edge of the tiger reserve, were in for a cruel shock. It was Rama Kuruba who spotted the leopard. He stood still, waiting for the cat to walk away. Instead, it pounced and knocked him down. Kampa Kuruba was the first to rush to Rama's rescue. The leopard let go of Rama, who by then had given up the struggle, and turned on Kampa.

As a desperate Kampa held the cat at arm's length by the radio-collar around its neck, it started pawing his face and the head. By then, the other Kurubas were creating a ruckus and hitting the leopard with sticks. But the cat would not let go. Eventually, a powerful blow on the spine made it back away. By then, Rama had stopped breathing. The leopard was still alive, growling in pain at a distance. Unnerved, the Kurubas scampered, carrying a profusely bleeding Kampa, who would spend the next 10 days in hospital.

In Lakkipura, the initial response was of disbelief. Kurubas never considered leopards a threat because the spotted cats avoided them and never attacked except in self-defense. Now, they were faced with a leopard that seemed to have targeted human beings to kill and did not back away even from a group of men, challenging a thumb rule of survival in the wild. They did not know that the leopard that tore open Rama's throat and nearly killed Kampa was not a wild cat.

Deputy Conservator of forests (DCF) K.T. Hanumanthappa has brought down the human-elephant conflict in Bandipur by 70 percent in just two years, by digging up trenches and laying service roads for maintenance of electric fences. "We are here for conservation work," he says. "But managing conflict used to take up all our time. Now that headache is gone."



Rama (left) was killed by a leopard while collecting honey. Photo: Jay Mazoomdaar



Disfigured and shaken, Kampa at his Kerala hideout. Forget compensation, the young Kuruba is staying away from his family, fearing arrest. Photo: Jay Mazoomdaar

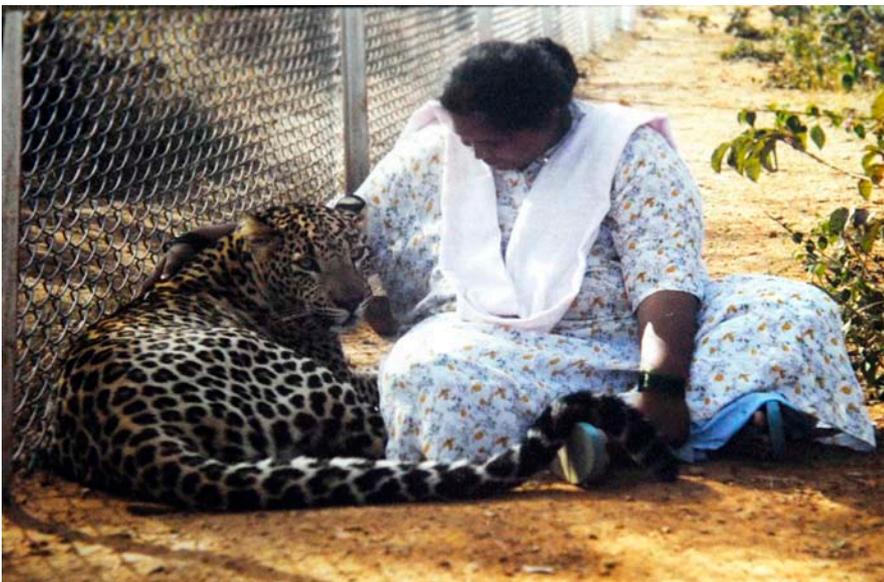
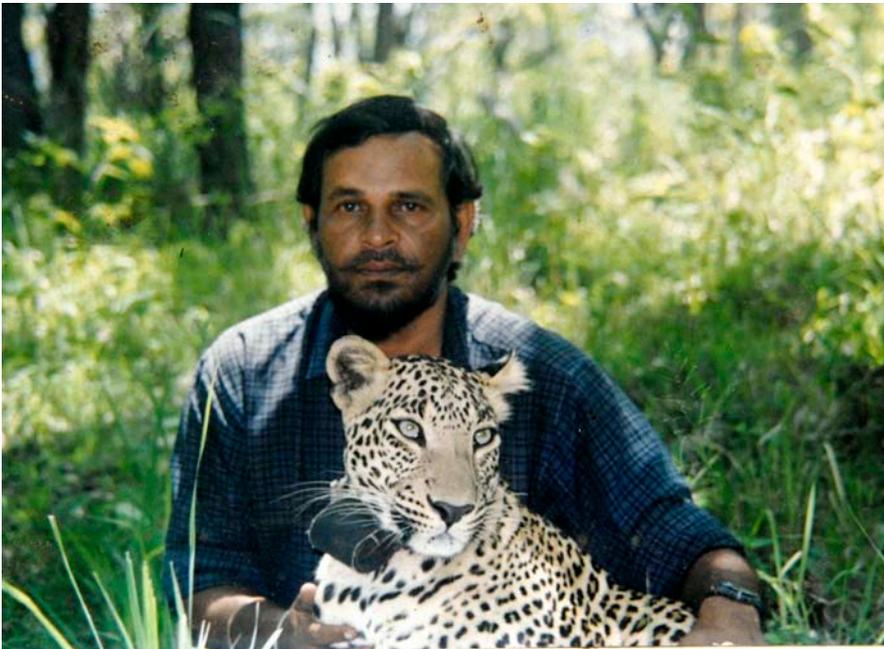


Rama's aunt Basama and Kampa's father Kullaiah at Lakkipura village. One has lost her only support. The other fears for his son's safety. Pic: Jay Mazoomdaar

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**Five cubs were brought up by former Bhadra DFO SS Lingaraja and NGO Vanamitra in a squalid, stuffy garage at Bhadrawati**



**Vishalakshi Devi and Gajendra Singh with their pet leopards.**  
Photo courtesy: Bangalore Mirror

He got a fresh headache on 5 June 2010, in a letter from his top boss, Karnataka's Chief Wildlife Warden (CWLW) B. K. Singh, permitting him "to rehabilitate the leopard cubs in Ojimunti of Bandipur National Park with the assistance of Smt Vishalakshi Devi, Bangalore".

In fact, it was Vishalakshi Devi who sought permission on 8 May 2010 for "rehabilitation of leopard cubs". The CWLW could not have legally authorised a person without any scientific credential to carry out such an exercise. Instead, he granted the DCF a permission he never sought, possibly because he could not refuse a princess.

Maharajkumari Vishalakshi Devi is the scion of the Mysore royal family. Her father, the late maharaja Jayachamaraja Wodeyar, was the first chairman of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL). Vishalakshi and her husband Gajendra Singh own a resort-cum-residence in Bandipur and are avid "animal-lovers".

In her letter to CWLW Singh, Vishalakshi claimed that she had "successfully rehabilitated a leopard in Bandipur National Park". That story goes back 13 years when she and her husband received two "abandoned leopard cubs" from the forest staff and brought them up at their Bandipur property. Bully and Baby were released in the forest when they were about two years old. While the male, Bully, was gored to death by a sambar stag within days of the release, Baby survived and produced a few litters. No scientific monitoring was conducted to substantiate this claim.

Fast forward to 2009 when 12 so-called abandoned cubs were at different forest department facilities. Two one-year-old cubs, later named Shadow and Light, were sent to Vishalakshi's Bandipur resort in April 2010 from the care of Vasudeva Murthy, range officer of Mettikuppe in Nagarhole Tiger Reserve. Incidentally, this transfer of cubs from one wildlife division to another also required the CWLW's approval. Soon after, Vishalakshi got another one-year-old cub, later named Colour, from Bandipur Range Officer A.A. Khan who had been raising it in a small cage.

This February, eight months after the DCF was "granted permission" to entertain the princess' request, the three leopards were shifted to an electric-fenced enclosure in Bandipur's Gopal Swami Betta range. In March, the power supply to the fences was switched off but the leopards continued

to hang around the spot where the royals visited them daily with food.

Wary forest staff stopped patrolling the area on foot. But keen to avoid any scrutiny, neither the royals nor the forest department cautioned the villagers living on the reserve boundary. Sometime in April, say field sources, Vishalakshi decided to cut down on the hand feed, hoping the cats would finally start hunting. On 1 June, the experiment backfired.

Two deaths were not enough for the royals or the forest department to come clean. The Kurubas were warned that they would face charges of trespassing and killing a leopard if they claimed compensation. The gullible tribals did not realise that booking them would have also revealed Bandipur's dirty secret. Soon enough, the dead leopard was declared the victim of a tiger attack and the administration pretended that no leopard ever touched Rama and Kampa.

But the medical records at the Gundlupet government hospital do not lie. Chief Medical Officer Dr R Srinivas confirms from his files that Kampa (in-patient number 1360) was admitted during 1-10 June with 12 injuries on his neck and face "sustained due to attack by a panther". After 22-year old Kampa was discharged and had agreed to talk, he was inconsolable. "My father Kullaiah was a forest guard at Bandipur and yet the forest department is treating me like this," he says. "The leopard would have killed me had I not held it by its collar. And now I am on the run."

Sub-inspector at the Gundlupet Police Station, Laxmikanth Talawar, however, says the case is closed. "A leopard killed a man, an unnatural death," he says. "The leopard was also killed and our officers found the two bodies close to each other. No case of wildlife crime has been lodged."

In Lakkipura, Rama's single-room house remains bolted. Rama was long estranged from his wife and lived alone. Basama, his aunt and neighbour, laments that her nephew took care of her and now she has no one to depend on.

While DCF Hanumanthappa refuses to go on record, Vishalakshi claims that one "can't fault the (rehabilitation) programme because the leopard did not go out of the forest to attack anyone". In any case, she says, it was the forest department's responsibility to warn the people. At Lakkipura, Karia Kuruba, who was with Rama and Kampa when they were attacked, says



**Villagers set a forest dept. vehicle on fire after a leopard attacked and killed a youth near Lakkavalli village of Chikmagalur district in Karnataka on Wed, July 6**



**(From left) Karia, who was with Rama and Kampa when they were attacked by the released leopard, and Nagraj, who works with the forest department, recall the horrors. Masthi, Rama's cousin, is still in shock. Pic: Jay Mazoomdaar**

her sister-in-law works for the royals and the princess had blasted her, saying the Kurubas killed her cat. On record, Vishalakshi maintains a tiger killed the leopard.

In his Bengaluru office, CWLW Singh says he has no sympathy for the Kurubas: "No question of compensation. What humanitarian ground? They light so many forest fires." He says tribals have no right to harvest forest honey under the Forest Rights Act (2006) inside a tiger reserve. Asked if the administration was within its rights to permit such reckless experiments, putting lives of "trespassers" at risk, Singh fumbles. Within two weeks of the Bandipur disaster, he had allowed release of another three captive leopards in Bhadra Tiger Reserve.

S.S. Lingaraja, former divisional forest officer (DFO) of Bhadra Tiger Reserve, had five "abandoned" leopard cubs in his custody at Bhadravati in 2009. He

found an ally in Bengaluru-based NGO Vanamitra that "strongly believes that cubs lifted from nature can be released back into the wild". Together, they brought up the cubs — Bheema, Shiva, Rama, Lakshmana and Parvathi — in a squalid, small garage. As DFO Lingaraja's tenure ended in Bhadra, three cats were released in the third week of June. As in Bandipur, no wildlife biologist was engaged for a risk assessment of the Bhadra experiment. Soon after their release, the leopards spread panic in the Tarikere taluk. Then, on 6 July, a young man paid with his life.

Vishwanath, a 20-year-old student at Tarikere Government College, was returning to his village near Upparabiranahalli. It was evening and he was attacked on the road that skirted the boundary of the tiger reserve. The leopard dragged Vishwanath's body some 20 yards inside the forest and pounced on Somanath when he went looking for



**Vishalakshi Devi accepted three one-year-old leopard cubs and looked after them in this enclosure at her Bandipur property till they were released this February.**

his brother. It also injured another man, Subrahmanya. This time, the forest department could not blame the villagers for trespassing inside the reserve. As an angry mob torched a forest vehicle, the victim's families were assured of compensation, and two trap cages set up. On 8 July, one of the released leopards attacked the forest staff while they were shifting a cage. They opened fire, killing the cat.

Meanwhile in Bandipur, more than a month after the Kuruba encounter, the princess' other two leopards are still in the wild. Worse, one cat moved to the adjoining forests of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu. As of 7 July, despite two young men dead for no reason, the Karnataka forest department did not deem it necessary to warn their Tamil Nadu counterpart to alert their guards who patrol on foot. On 8 July, asked who would be responsible if the leopard wreaked havoc on the other side of the state boundary, CWLW Singh said he would "immediately get in touch with the department in Tamil Nadu".

Leopards leave their cubs at safe places and go hunting. When villagers chance upon these unattended cubs, they mistake them as abandoned and hand them over to the forest department. If not returned soon enough, the cubs are not accepted back by the mother. DCF Hanumanthappa says that villagers must be made aware of the ways of cats to prevent the "rescue" of so many cubs that become liabilities for a lifetime.

Meanwhile, the key players have started passing the buck. Vishalakshi claims the forest department wanted her to release the cubs and she never sought any permission herself. While she did not furnish "the proof" she claimed she had, TEHELKA has a copy of her letter to Singh. In Bhadra, K.N. Suresh Kumar, founder trustee of Vanamitra, claimed his NGO followed "expert advice". He did not name any.

Singh admits to learning on the job. "I was misled by too many opinions," he concedes. "Now I realise that rehabilitation of hand-raised leopards is risky." But will he own up responsibility and order a ban on such experiments? "I am telling you we will never do it again. I will write an essay on this in our departmental journal soon." With four potential killers still out in the forests, and more lined up for release, it will require more than Singh's musings to put a permanent end to the deadly games the rich and powerful play.

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