

CERD Green Chronicles

EMERALD IN THE SMOG (A TRIBUTE TO SANJAY GANDHI NATIONAL PARK)

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“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.” (Robert Frost)

Standing on the hard gravel crossroad that leads into the mysterious wilderness, one could only imagine the wonders that lay beyond.

Looking over my shoulder, I see a layer of smog rising above the tall skyscrapers of the metropolitan concrete jungle that is Mumbai. And on the other hand, dense foliage and thick, evergreen vegetation rose on both sides of the dirt track, leading deeper and deeper into the cloud forest. Any guesses for which option I took?

Spread over 103 square kilometers, the amazing wilderness of Sanjay Gandhi National Park lies wedged between the suburbs of Borivali and Thane. This makes one wonder: How is such a huge wilderness even able to exist between one of the most populated cities in the world? How can there be big cats like leopards roaming in the middle of a mega-habitation? This is where the vast expanse of the national park plays a double role. In addition to being one of the great natural wonders to be found in the subcontinent, the park fulfills the role of giving back to the city, in more ways than one.

As I enter into the deeper end of the national park, I slowly lose track of the honking vehicles, the smoke-filled air, the nauseous dirt and garbage on the streets and am welcomed by the soft humming of the whistling thrush, the call of the monkeys and the chirp of the cricket. This is my escape from the throes of the maximum city. The lush greenery helps me forget my asthma and opens my lungs to some fresh oxygen- a rarity just 2 kms away from this paradise.

Have you ever wondered how the 18.4 million people in Mumbai are able to get 50 litres of water and 550 litres of oxygen per head, per day? It would have been difficult if not for these small havens hidden inside the city expanse. Places like the SGNP, supply oxygen for 2 crore Mumbaïtes and Thaneites and house 3 lakes which serve as the water reservoirs for the ever growing population of this metro. Its hard to tell, if the national park should be termed the 'lung' or the 'heart' of Mumbai.

Yes, there is danger for the city dwellers to have a forest reserve within its boundaries- There have been times when the leopards have escaped the forest and killed people in the city, snakes have crawled out of their burrows and entered the building complexes nearby but even without these far and few cases, isn't there enough animalistic crime happening in every street almost all the time? Can the attacks of these creatures looking for food be compared to the atrocities intentionally committed by the people for their thirst for power and money?

I love Mumbai, its cosmopolitan culture and the ever -smiling people who despite facing hardships and struggles every day do not let their spirits dampen. The city houses people from all over the country and the world, but it is still no match to the biodiversity of this forest reserve. Not only are there thousands of species in this jungle, but they have also to live harmoniously and in the most symbiotic manner - a lesson that every Mumbaïkar has to learn from this small natural colony located in the city's suburb.

Apart from the extremely diverse pool of flora and fauna, which includes one of the highest leopard densities, many types of deer, palm civets and a plethora of birds making it a paradise for nature lovers, there is also a treasure hidden inside for the History enthusiasts. The Kanheri caves is a reminder of the Buddhist and ancient Hindu tradition that celebrated plants and animals as an important part of human existence. The Buddhist inscriptions and the Jataka tales against the background of the tall trees and dense vegetation provides us with a moral lesson that no human should forget in this fast-growing and developing world. The lesson that if we do not take care of our environment, then the wrath of nature will engulf this planet leaving us with nothing but our machines, our solitude and no place for a quick getaway from the mundaneness and dreary mechanical life of this giant urban metropolis.



Image sources

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