

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a traditional Indian temple structure, possibly a ghat or a small shrine, with multiple levels of arches and domes. The architecture is made of reddish-brown stone. Two tigers are depicted: one is lying on a ledge of the upper part of the temple, looking towards the viewer, and the other is lying on a lower ledge, also looking towards the viewer. The scene is set against a backdrop of a cloudy sky and some dry, yellowish grass growing on the temple's ledges.

Hidden Treasures India's Heritage in Tiger Reserves

Volume 1

Bharat Lal & S P Yadav



HIDDEN TREASURES

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Bharat Lal & S P Yadav

2025

Hidden Treasures India's Heritage in Tiger Reserves

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Heritage is not just history, but a shared consciousness of humanity. Whenever we see any heritage anywhere in the world, our minds rise above the current geo-political factors. We have to use this potential of heritage for the betterment of the world. We have to connect hearts through our heritage.

Shri Narendra Modi
Prime Minister of India

Inauguration of the 46th Session of the
World Heritage Committee of UNESCO
New Delhi, 21 July 2024



Ruins of a temple in
Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh
Photo by Radha Datta

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This book is inspired by the vision of the Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi on nature conservation with a focus on India's rich natural heritage. Showcasing the treasures, heritage, and cultural significance of India's tiger reserves, this book, first in the series on tiger reserves of India, has been planned with the aim to document and bring in focus India's natural heritage and deep-rooted conservation ethos for a global audience.

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Our tiger reserves are nature's treasures. It was indeed humbling to see the efforts made by forest and wildlife staff in remote areas in preserving these precious sites. Equally significant are the sacrifices made by the local communities in preserving the natural heritage for our future generations.

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Photo by Shikhar Mohan





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Ravtha Mahal near
Mukundra Hills Tiger Reserve, Rajasthan
Photo by Shikhar Mohan

Preface

India's natural heritage is rich and diverse. The snow-capped Himalayas in the North, dense forests of the Western Ghats in central India, the sun-kissed beaches of coastal India and the pristine waters of the Indian Ocean — natural beauty is abundant here. Many Indian forests are biodiversity hotspots, home to a wide variety of flora and fauna, contributing greatly in maintaining the ecological balance of the region.

The rich biosphere of the 58 tiger reserves offers a safe and dynamic home to the big cat and other species. Close to 70% of the world's tigers are found in India which is a reflection of India's conservation ethos and scientific approach to tiger conservation. In April 2023, in his address to commemorate 50 years of Project Tiger in Mysuru, Karnataka, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi declared, "India is a country where protecting nature is part of the culture". He added that India does not believe in conflict "between ecology and economy" and gives due importance to the coexistence of both.

The Prime Minister also mentioned in his Mysuru address that India is the only country in the world where the Asiatic lion population has increased, from around 525 in 2015 to around 674 in 2020. India's leopard population has also grown by 60% since 2019. These are indeed remarkable achievements and demonstrate our commitment to wildlife protection and conservation.

The Prime Minister has often attributed India's conservation ethos to the tradition and culture adopted by tribal societies. This, he believes, is a wonderful legacy to celebrate and practice. India has not only saved the tiger population but provided an ecosystem where tigers can flourish. Further, India added over 2,200 sq km forest and tree cover by 2021 and the number of community reserves increased from 43 to over 100 in the last decade.

In India, a number of communities derive their cultural and historical identity from these ecologically rich tiger reserve sites. These reserves hold great cultural significance — they store myths and legends, value systems and traditions that offer both continuity and historical perspective to communities today. Several wild animals, including the tiger, are revered among many communities of India. The presence of cave paintings and carvings in some protected areas is an indication of a harmonious association between cultural and natural heritage. It also represents the close affinity humans have felt with several wild creatures.

Tiger reserves are also home to several tribal and forest-dwelling communities who, since ages, have been living symbiotically with their natural surroundings. A treasure of myths, rituals and legends, have motivated forest dwellers towards conservation of the forest and the tiger. With time such beliefs inspired various tribal communities living in and around forests to adapt a lifestyle that does not harm or exploit the forest. The conservation of wildlife, specially of species like the Bengal tiger, is intricately intertwined with the customs, rituals, and way of life of tribal communities. As a result of

this cohabitation, numerous spiritual and religious structures can also be spotted within the boundaries of the reserves. These religious sites are dedicated to the local deities and are important centres for nature worship as well, thereby highlighting the interconnectedness between humans and nature. Hence, the rediscovery of some of these sites underscores the need for preservation and documentation.

Historically, many tiger reserves were adequate habitats for wildlife and were rich in biodiversity. Some of them were protected as 'Shikaargaah', hunting blocks and game reserves by erstwhile princely states. The rulers of these states also built forts and temples in such places to facilitate their adventures. Monuments such as the Palamau Fort in Jharkhand, Narnala Fort in Maharashtra and the Ranthambore Fort in Rajasthan are not just structures of archaeological and historical importance but have also evolved as shelter spaces for the local wildlife. The sighting of tigers within the fort walls is an indication of their presence in the reserve ecosystem.

Today, fragments of palaces, forts – age-old monuments inside the reserves – offer us a better understanding of Indian history and connect us to the conservation ethos of people living in these areas. The fort in Ranthambore Tiger Reserve tells stories of valour and victories, while the Mangala Devi Temple in Periyar reserve, dedicated to goddess Durga, represents local myths and legends etched in several beliefs and religious practices of South India. These structures are now part of the protected forest areas that are home to the big cats and other species. A long time ago, they belonged to a different world. They exhibit the evolving architectural styles from intricate and ornate designs of certain palaces and forts in North India. Monolithic style temples found inside some of the reserves in South India are examples of the evolution of Dravidian architecture and rock art. The stunning carvings in some of the reserves would enchant wildlife enthusiasts and heritage tourists alike.

'Hidden Treasures: India's Heritage in Tiger Reserves' is an attempt to document these unknown gems, presenting to wildlife enthusiasts a new dimension of exploration, and to potential tourists a journey through time, revealing interesting facts and captivating fascinating narratives of kings and their subjects, heroes and their battles, local legends and their daring accounts.

This book is part of a trilogy, focusing on heritage, water bodies and waterfalls in tiger reserves of India.

For this book, 63 heritage sites have been identified within the tiger reserves that appear of value to our historical and cultural heritage. Based on extensive research, 'Hidden Treasures' is a compilation of monuments, religious structures, sacred spaces, sculpture and engravings found inside tiger reserves spread over 16 states and in 28 tiger reserves of India.

Teams from Sankala Foundation and National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) have undertaken field visits across 28 reserves to gather primary data. For secondary data, Sankala Foundation perused records of various government departments such as the Archaeological Survey of India, state tourism boards and forest departments and reviewed existing literature on art and culture of India.

'Hidden Treasures' also addresses a crucial challenge that surfaced during the COVID-19 pandemic years. A UNESCO 2021 report claimed that the pandemic resulted in close to 60% drop in visitors to the world heritage sites. This further resulted in around 52% drop in income from fees collected from these sites. Communities living in and around heritage sites were negatively impacted. Hopefully, this book will regenerate sufficient interest in our precious heritage. And, connect especially the younger generation with glorious patches of history.

This book is a wonderful collaborative effort of the Sankala Foundation and the NTCA. By documenting the historical and cultural sites located within the tiger reserves of India, they have created a repository of heritage that will endure and form part of historical memory. This book also aligns with the target of Sustainable Development Goal 11 (SDG11), that is, to make 'cities and human settlements safe, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable' by protecting and safeguarding the world's cultural and natural heritage, investing in its preservation and protection. These sites are not isolated relics but are living links to the past that have shaped the present and hold immense potential for the future.

Besides enchanting visuals and informative text, the book includes QR codes to help navigate the tiger reserves and spot the treasures like quaint shrines, ancient relics, rich Dravidian style temples, and remnants of royal residences. This collection takes a deeper look at structures that are still of value and an integral part of Indian heritage and culture.



Bharat Lal



Dr S P Yadav



Pandav Caves in Panna Tiger Reserve,
Madhya Pradesh
Photo by Shikhar Mohan

Andhra Pradesh





Kolanu Bharathi Saraswathi Temple in
Nagarjunasagar-Srisaillam Tiger Reserve, Andhra Pradesh
All photographs in this chapter are by Kritika Sriram

Andhra Pradesh

The varied geographical landscape of Andhra Pradesh, comprising the Eastern Ghats, central plateau and coastal plains, lends it immense floral and faunal diversity. The state forests can be broadly classified into tropical evergreen, deciduous, thorny scrub and mangrove forests along the coastline with species like bamboo, acacia, tamarind as well as the endangered red sandalwood trees. The faunal diversity of the state is dotted by species like tigers, elephants, jackals, a host of migratory birds like flamingos and waterfowl, as well as common reptiles like monitor lizards and snakes. The flora and fauna of the state is closely associated with its rich natural and cultural history, which together create a thriving ecosystem that reflects both ecological diversity and historical value. The state houses one of the largest tiger reserves in India, i.e., the Nagarjunasagar-Srisailem Tiger Reserve (NSTR), spread across three districts. The numerous temples built among the sacred forests of the reserve, where plants and animals are revered as representations of life and its elements, clearly indicate how spirituality and nature are intertwined.

Nagarjunasagar-Srisailem Tiger Reserve

Named after two significant dams, Nagarjuna Sagar Dam and Srisailem Dam, NSTR covers an area of approximately 5,937 sq km. It is situated in the Nallamala, an extension of the southern Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh. It was notified in 1983. The reserve features undulating terrain, a subterranean valley, and a mix of dry deciduous forests and cliffs. River Krishna forms the main drainage of NSTR; numerous small and big streams ultimately join river Krishna. Major faunal species include tigers, leopards, wolves, wild dogs, jackals, muggers, otters and turtles. Sambar, chital, chowsingha, chinkara, mouse deer, wild boar and porcupine represent the prey species. It is believed in Hindu mythology that when Goddess Parvati asked Lord Shiva about his most desired place in the universe, he chose an eternally beautiful place nestled among picturesque nature, the avatar of Sri Chakra, the holy Srisailem.

Gundla Brahmeswaraswamy Temple

Gundla Brahmeswaraswamy Temple is located in Gundla Brahmeswara range of Nandyal division in the core area of the tiger reserve. Nandyal division gets its name from the 'Nava Nandis' or nine Nandi shrines found in the region; some shrines even date back to the reign of Chalukyas. Within the temple are also enshrined, Veerabhadra Swamy, Rajarajeswari Devi and the statue of Ashwathama. The present temple is newly constructed but has traces of its past glory. The temple premises feature two water reservoirs, earlier designated for bathing and drinking purposes, and a 'dhwaja stambha' (flag pillar). The Gundla Brahmeswaraswamy Temple holds a special place in the hearts of the Chenchus (tribal community) and the Telugu-speaking community. Its doors are open to the public only on the auspicious occasion of 'Mahashivratri', the great night of Shiva and Parvati's marriage, when an estimated 5,000 worshippers are allowed to enter.



Idols placed inside Gundla Brahmeshwaraswamy Temple

Istakameswari Temple

The Istakameswari Temple is located near the route from Srisailam to Dornala. Devotees must go through a dense forest to reach the goddess they fondly call 'Amma' (mother). Adorned with four arms, she carries lotus flowers in two hands and a rosary with the other two, symbolising the essence of the 'Shiva Lingam', a representation of Lord Shiva. The 'Shiva Lingam' is a sacred symbol in Hinduism, representing the divine energy of Lord Shiva. Drawing from the descriptions in the 'Vishnu Purana' (ancient Hindu text), locals believe that Ishtakameshwari embodies the divine qualities of Goddess Parvati, depicted with 'Rudrakshamala' and 'Shiva Linga'.

The Istakameswari Temple, a testament to the unwavering devotion of past generations, stands as an medieval structure dating back to around 8th or 9th century CE. Believers hold that placing a saffron scarf on the deity's forehead and confiding in her can bring solace to life's challenges. The temple, nestled within a cave, is a sacred space where history and faith intertwine. The 'Gopuram', a monumental entrance tower in the form of a staircase, stands as a beacon of devotion. Nearby, statues of Mahishasuramardhani and Kapalika grace the surroundings. Ishtakameswari appeared at the same time when Mallikarjuna Swamy and Bhramaramba Devi appeared in Srisailam, adding to the temple's profound significance.

For those seeking solace and spiritual rejuvenation, the monsoon months, from July to September, offer an ideal time to undertake the pilgrimage to this hallowed sanctuary, where nature and devotion converge in harmonious reverence.



Seven temples of the Kolanu Bharathi Saraswathi Temple in Nagarjunasagar-Srisaillam Tiger Reserve

Kolanu Bharathi Saraswathi Temple

The Kolanu Bharathi Saraswathi Temple, a unique site in the Sivapuram Beat of Atmakur range, stands out for its ancient Saraswati temple and the surrounding 'Saptha Sivalayams' or 'Sapta Linga Kshetram' (seven temples dedicated to Lord Shiva). Built during the reign of Janamejaya in 11th century CE, the temple is a sight to behold, with Kolanu Bharathi perched on a blooming lotus. These temples, strategically placed towards the east, south, and north directions, feature an 'Eka Dhvaj' (one flag) Pillar and a 'Nandeswara' (bull mount of Lord Shiva) each. The temple premise is further enriched by the presence of the 'Kaal Bhairava' (fierce form of Lord Shiva) statue, believed to be the Sapta Linga Kshetram's protector.

The pilgrims, deeply rooted in their faith, visit the temple on auspicious occasions such as 'Aksharabhysam' (the day their children embark on their educational journey), 'Vasant Panchmi' (the arrival of spring), 'Shivratri' (the night of Shiva and Parvati's marriage), and every Monday. These visits are not mere rituals, but a way to connect with the divine and seek blessings. The visitors, out of respect for the sacredness of the place, adhere to certain rules, such as refraining from sacrificing any animal, consuming any intoxicating substance, and eating meat.

Nagalooty Veerabhadra Swamy Temple

The Nagalooty Veerabhadra Swamy Temple is located in the Venkatapuram Beat of Nagalooty range in the core region of NSTR. The temple was referred to as Longalooty during the medieval period and dates back from 13th to 15th century CE. Nagalooty Temple, built by the Reddy Kings, was the starting point of the ancient footpath to Srisaillam. On the pathway towards Srisaillam there is a seated 'Gramadevatha' (village deity) locally known as 'Kuruvalamma'.



Nagalooty Veerabhadra Swamy Temple in
Nagarjunasagar-Srisaillam Tiger Reserve

The temple complex, dedicated to Veerabhadra Swamy, stands as a stone structure comprising the 'Garbhagriha' (sanctum sanctorum), 'Mukha Mandapa' (inner porch), 'Antharalaya' (vestibule), and an additional 18-pillared 'Mandapam' (hall). Within the sanctum, on the left side, resides Goddess Bhadrakali in a small chamber, while the chamber on the right lies in ruins. Additionally, a seated Ganapati with ten hands is enshrined approximately 100 metres from the main temple. Throughout the year, the temple attracts a multitude of pilgrims, particularly during auspicious occasions such as 'Ugadi' (beginning of the year as per Hindu calendar), 'Mahashivratri' and 'Karthika Masam' symbolising the enduring spiritual significance it holds for devotees.

Sangameswaram Temple

The Sangameswaram Temple stands at a sacred confluence where the rivers Krishna, Tungabhadra, Bhavani, Veni, Bheemarathi, and Mahapharani converge. As per the locals, during their exile, the 'Pandavas' (five brothers from the epic Mahabharatha) visited Kurnool and, inspired by their pilgrimage to the Srisailem Mallikarjuna Temple, they installed a Shivalinga at this site. 'Dharmaraja' (eldest son of King Pandu, eldest amongst the Pandavas, also known as Yudhistira) tasked his brother 'Bhima' (second son of King Pandu) with bringing a 'linga' (symbol of Shiva) from 'Kashi' (Varanasi). However, a rectangular wooden (neem) log was installed instead, giving rise to Sangameswaram. The present temple was erected in 740 CE by Pulakesi II of the Chalukyan Dynasty. It was submerged following the construction of the Srisailem Dam in 1980, remaining underwater for two decades before resurfacing in 2003. Devotees are granted access to the temple for a limited period of 40-50 days each year.



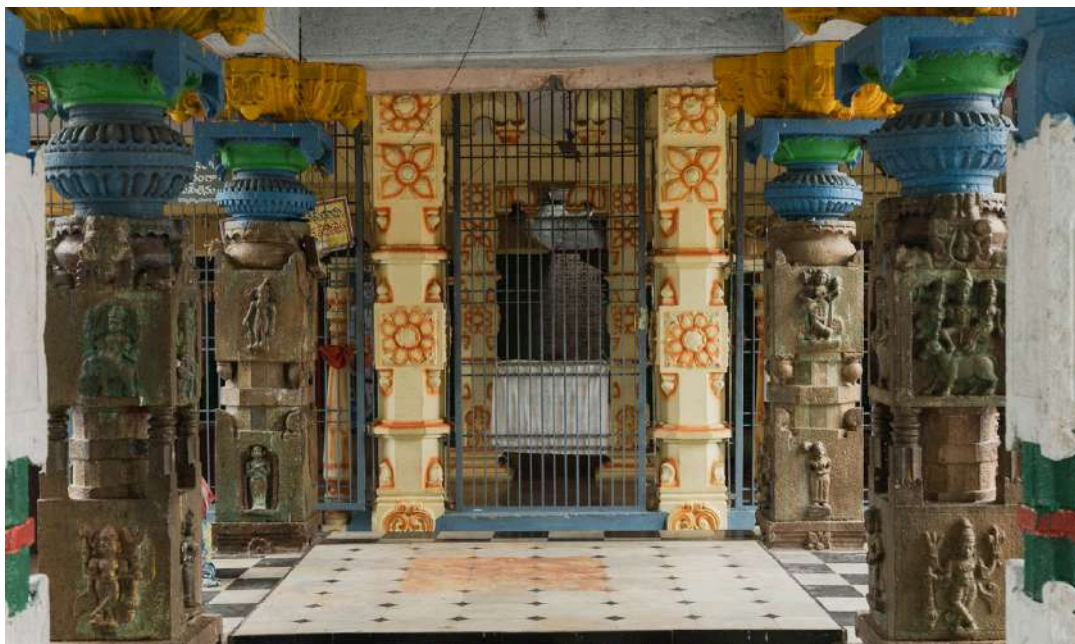
The point of convergence of rivers Krishna, Tungabhadra, Bhavani, Veni, Bheemarathi, and Mahapharani near Sangameswaram Temple

Sri Honkaram Siddeshwara Swamy Temple

The Sri Honkaram Siddeshwara Swamy Temple, a unique religious site, is nestled in the Bandi Atmakur range within the buffer area of NSTR. Surrounded by majestic mountains on three sides, the temple reflects the devotion of the Nanda clan, who played a significant role in its development.

Locals believe in a mythological tale that during the genesis of creation, a cosmic dispute between the creator Brahma and sustainer Vishnu sparked the revelation of a blazing linga, resonating with the sacred sound of 'Omkaara' (term given to the sound Om or the sound from which the universe came into existence) echoing from all directions. Brahma journeyed northward to discern the linga's essence and settle their divine dispute. At the same time, Vishnu assumed the form of 'Bhu' (earth/land), delving into the depths of the underworld in search of the linga's original boundaries. In due course, Vishnu, enlightened by the profound philosophy of Shiva, gracefully conceded defeat. However, Brahma, trapped by his vanity, falsely proclaimed to have witnessed the apex of the linga, presenting the 'Mogali' flower as evidence. Enraged by the deceit, Shiva decreed that 'Chaturmukh' (one with four faces, Brahma) would forever remain devoid of earthly temples and worship, forsaken by humanity.

According to another local belief, the Shivalinga is the word 'Omkaara' that was coined here for the first time, and hence, this place was given the name 'Honkaram'. The temple organises large celebrations during Mahashivratri (commemorating the wedding of Lord Shiva to Goddess Parvati) and 'Karthika Masam' (the new moon after Diwali).



Sri Honkaram Siddeshwara Swamy Temple in Nagarjunasagar-Srisaillam Tiger Reserve

Assam

কামালহা
শ্রী কাক গোস্বামী (মহামায়া)
দুর্গাথান, কাজিৰঙা।
গৰ্গদেউ গদাধৰ সিংহৰ ভূতি জড়িত,
থান পৰিচালনা সমিতি
কাজিৰঙা, পিন: ৭৮৫৬০৯ গোলাঘাট,
(অসম)

দানপাত্র





A temple in Kaziranga Tiger Reserve, Assam
All photographs in this chapter are courtesy NTCA



The northeastern state of Assam serves as a gateway to the seven sister states of India in the Northeast. Its topography and rich biodiversity make it one of the most ecologically significant regions in India. The state is home to numerous biodiversity hotspots and UNESCO World Heritage sites like the Manas National Park and the Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve. The wetlands and grasslands of Assam, along with the Brahmaputra floodplains, host many floral species like aquatic plants and the famous Assam tea gardens which forms an integral part of the agricultural landscape of the state. The vibrant flora and fauna of the state are intrinsically connected to the region's rich cultural legacy, creating a unique identity that represents the harmonious coexistence of nature and tradition.

Assam's verdant landscapes, which are distinguished by their tea plantations, thick woods, and the Brahmaputra River, serve as a home to a wide variety of wildlife, including the endangered tiger, the vulnerable one-horned rhinoceros and the great Indian hornbill. The Assamese culture is deeply influenced by biodiversity. Their conservation ethos not only influences their local livelihoods but also highlights the value of crops and seasonal changes through celebrations of seasonal festivals like Bihu, that honour the agricultural cycle and the abundance of nature.

Kaziranga Tiger Reserve

Situated along the Karbi Anglong hills in northeast India with the mighty Brahmaputra River flowing through it is the Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve, which has also been recognised as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO for its unique biodiversity and geographical features. Kaziranga is considered one of the best wildlife refuges globally and is home to the extremely rare golden tiger and the great Indian one-horned rhinoceros. It is also renowned for harbouring vast populations of several aquatic species, such as the Gangetic dolphin. The reserve also offers ample opportunities for birdwatchers and has been declared an Important Bird Area by Birdlife International. Kaziranga remains one of the most untouched or unmodified pieces of forests in the northeastern region.

Considering that the tributaries of the river Brahmaputra flow through the reserve, the soil of the reserve is rich in alluvial deposits, and as a result, there is considerable human habitation in the reserve that has not only adapted itself to a life in the wild but also ensured that its customs stay alive in the wild. Establishing the 'Buri Ai Than' in the reserve area is a prime example of this practice.

Buri Ai Than

Buri Ai Than, or the Burhi Mai Mandir is a temple in the Burapahar range of the Kaziranga Tiger Reserve, is dedicated to Goddess Durga. The Burapahar range is part of an old mountain known for its sharp turns, making it accident prone. The locals resolved to build a temple shrine on the hill for their safe travels. The locals believed that any driver who takes the route through the Burapahar

range will be protected from unforeseen occurrences if they offer prayers at the temple. As time passed and the condition of the roads improved, the number of accidents on the range decreased, and it was believed that the accidents were averted due to the blessings from the goddess. Hence, the number of visitors to the temple increased, and the belief in the temple grew stronger. As the word spread, vehicle drivers, irrespective of their faith, started frequenting the temple and prayed for their safe journeys. The dense forests around the temple give it a serene and picturesque view. Visitors can occasionally spot primate species such as the capped langurs, Assamese macaques, and Hoolock gibbons on the temple premises.



Buri Ai Than (Burhi Mai Mandir) in Kaziranga Tiger Reserve

The best time to visit Kaziranga Tiger Reserve is between November to April, due to the pleasant weather conditions. The park remains closed from May to October due to heavy rainfall during the monsoon season.

Bihar





Sofa Temple in Valmiki Tiger Reserve, Bihar
All photographs in this chapter are courtesy NTCA



A vast variety of species, including the endangered Gangetic dolphin and numerous migratory birds, are supported by the diverse ecosystems of Bihar, which include the lush woods of the Terai region and the Gangetic plains. Festivals such as Chhath Puja honour the Sun and the river and highlight how the natural occurrences are embraced in religious observances and in daily life. The state is home to the Valmiki Tiger Reserve, named after the famous poet Valmiki who is considered to have written the epic Ramayana. The reserve is situated in West Champaran district, which derives its name from the two Hindi words, Champa and Aranya, meaning a Forest of Champa trees, thereby reflecting a bond between the natural and cultural heritage of the state.

Valmiki Tiger Reserve

Located in the foothills of the Himalayas, the Valmiki Tiger Reserve spreads across the northwest corner of Bihar. In the pre-independence period, the forests were owned by two erstwhile Zamindari estates—Bettahalasur Raj and Ramnagar Raj. The state government took over the forest management from Ramnagar Raj in 1950 and from the abetting Raj in 1953-1954 under the Bihar Private Protected Forest Act of 1947. From 1974 onwards, these forests were managed by Bihar State Forest Development Corporation. They managed it with clear commercial intentions. The area was subjected to large-scale afforestation with teak, semal, shisham, and bamboo. Thereafter, in 1994, the forests were removed from the corporation, and Valmiki Tiger Reserve was considered India's 18th tiger reserve of Project Tiger of the Government of India.

There are approximately 20-25 temples in Valmiki Tiger Reserve. The Jatashankar temple, Kauleshwar temple, Nardevi temple, and Sofa temple are the prominent ones. Revered and esteemed, these temples assume a profound role as custodians of the land, serving as vigilant sentinels and protectors of its inhabitants. Their presence enriches the spiritual landscape and serves as a source of solace and guidance for all who dwell within their protective embrace.

Jatashankar Temple

In proximity to Kauleshwar Temple in Valmikinagar range of Jatashankar Beat in Valmiki Tiger Reserve lies Jatashankar Temple. The temple is situated on the path of Valmiki Ashram, a place where Valmiki is believed to have lived. The ashram is also associated with the inception of the epic Ramayana. Locals believe that due to proximity to the ashram, Maharishi Valmiki, Rama's wife Sita, and their two boys Luv and Kush used to come to worship at Jatashankar temple during Treta Yug (second of the four world ages or Yugas). On the occasion of Makar Sankranti, a fair is organised on the banks of the Gandak river near the temple. In the monsoon months, between July and August, saffron-clad pilgrims form a long human chain.

In the courtyard of this Treta Yug Temple, a water tank was constructed, and a stone brought from Ram Setu (Rameshwaram) was placed for devotees. The floating stone in the water is a centre of attraction for the devotees.

Kauleshwar Temple

Nestled along the banks of the Gandak River, the Kauleshwar Temple stands as a revered site within the Valmiki Tiger Reserve, renowned for its rich cultural and religious significance. The Gandak river, marking the reserve's western boundary, enters through Valmiki Nagar, joined by the Sonha and Pachnad rivulets, forming a sacred confluence known as 'Triveni'. Here, the legendary thousand-year battle between Gaj (elephant) and Grah (crocodile), described in the Shrimad Bhagwat Geeta, is said to have commenced.

Each year, on the eve of Makar Sankranti, a vibrant fair graces the grounds of Triveni. Devotees flock to the confluence to partake in ceremonial baths in the holy waters and pay homage to the temple. This annual celebration is a testament to the site's enduring spiritual significance and deep-rooted connection to Hindu traditions.

Nardevi Temple

The Nardevi Temple rests within the buffer zone of the tiger reserve in the Valmikinagar range. Its origins trace to antiquity, attributed to Alha and Udal, the warrior sons of King Jasar of Bundelkhand, who served King Parmal of Mahoba, Chandela Dynasty. According to local lore, these two princes established the temple deep within the jungle to worship the mother goddess. Their ritual included the remarkable act of self-sacrifice, offering their heads to the deity, only to find themselves miraculously reunited with their bodies by the grace of the mother. Thus, due to human sacrifice, the temple garnered its name, Nardevi Temple.

In the past, tigers were said to circle the temple, partaking in a sacred circumambulation without harming any devotee. The temple prepares for the Sharad and Chaitra Navratri festivals, highlighting its significance during these auspicious occasions.

Within the temple premises lies a well-known 'Amrit Kuan' or the Well of Nectar. The water from this well is still clear and pure. Consuming it is believed to cure many incurable diseases. Devotees who visit the temple never miss the opportunity to drink water from the Amrit Kuan. This water is also considered the divine blessing of the goddess.



Kauleshwar Temple in
Valmiki Tiger Reserve



Nardevi Temple in Valmiki Tiger Reserve

Sofa Temple

The Sofa Temple, also known as 'Raja Hetu Kunwar Gadh', is situated on the banks of river Pandai in the Manguraha range of Valmiki Tiger Reserve. Locals believe that Lord Shiva blesses them. Until 1973, there was a pond where artefacts from Treta Yug were found. It is believed that Lord Vishwakarma (lord of creation in Hindu mythology) himself constructed this temple. The temple was built in the 6th century BCE. The temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva and is very important for the people of the Tharu tribe, who perform the 'Jhamta' dance while praying to their deity. On occasions like Magh Amavasya in January-February and during festivals like Shivratri, Ramnavmi, Dussehra, Navratri, etc., the temple gets a massive inflow of devotees. The temple's picturesque landscape offers great recreational and spiritual tourism opportunities.

Valmiki Tiger Reserve remains open to the public from November to June. The winter months (November to February) are preferred for visits to the reserve.

Chhattisgarh





Remains of Zamindar Palace in
Indravati Tiger Reserve, Chhattisgarh
All photographs in this chapter are courtesy NTCA

Chhattisgarh

Chhattisgarh is known for its rich biodiversity, comprising a variety of flora and fauna due to its diverse ecosystems, including forests, grasslands, and rivers. The state houses three tiger reserves, namely, Achanakmar, Indravati and Udanti-Sitanadi which shelter multiple species of plants and animals. The reserves are a mix of forest types, from the tropical deciduous forests to the lush bamboo, teak and sal forests, that not only safeguard the Bengal tiger but also nurture other species like leopards, wild elephants and the Indian gaur or bison. The state's luscious forests are a source of inspiration and resources for nearby villages. The local festival Hareli, a harvest celebration, emphasises the value of nature in the cultural traditions of the state. Additionally, traditional art forms, such as colourful tribal paintings and handicrafts, frequently feature natural elements, signifying the ancient regard for the environment. The reserves serve as a window to the hidden heritage of the state. The interiors of the reserves evidence the interconnectedness of spiritual and natural beliefs. The unearthing of idols, forgotten palaces of the ruling clans and abodes of saints, all indicate the reverence for nature during ancient times.

Indravati Tiger Reserve

Indravati Tiger Reserve, located in the Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh, derives its name from Indravati river that traverses through it and defines the reserve's northern boundary with the state of Maharashtra. The reserve was officially notified in 2009 and is presently one of the most scenic places in Chhattisgarh. Indravati is home to a wide variety of animals and plants, particularly the rare endangered wild buffalo, leopard, tiger, hyaena, thistle and wood apple. The reserve is connected to the other tiger reserves in the vicinity, such as Kawal in Telangana, Tadoba-Andhari in Maharashtra, and Kanha in Madhya Pradesh, assuming immense ecological significance by providing a safe corridor for the animals to pass through. One can find various sites of heritage and cultural significance in the reserve, such as a statue from the Nagvanshi era belonging to the 18th century CE, as well as a palace belonging to the Kutru Zamindar Shah family.

Idol of Kodai Mata

In Chhattisgarh, the Kodai Mata is not just a local deity but a symbol of deep-rooted faith. The annual fair in Jaitaloor village near Bijapur is a testament to this devotion. Large groups of devotees gather, offering prayers to the Kodai Mata. The presence of an idol in the Indravati Tiger Reserve further underscores the faith of the communities in the goddess.

Nestled atop Bailadila ranges in Dantewada district, at an elevation of 3,000 feet, sits the revered Dholkal Ganesh. This statue, sculpted around 1,100 years ago during the Nagvanshi Era, stands at a modest three feet in height. This stone idol embodies Lord Ganesha, taking the form of a Dholak (drum) thus earning its name 'Dholkal Ganesh'.



Idol of Kodai Mata in
Indravati Tiger Reserve

Statues from the Nagvanshi Era and Zamindar Palace

The Nagvanshi dynasty ruled the Chota Nagpur region for many decades. According to the Nagvansabali, a family chronicle of the Nagvanshi kings, the dynasty was founded by Phani Mukut Rai and succeeded by his son, Mukut Rai. The kingdom was named Nagpur Des, and due to the Nagvanshi settlement, the region became known as Nagpur. Sculptures of the Nagvanshi period date to the 17th century CE and can be spotted in the Indravati reserve. There are idols of Lord Ganesha and Nag, which point to the sculptural style of the Nagvanshis. These sculptures are said to have been left behind by the Kutru Zamindar Shah family, whose palace, although now in ruins, is also inside the reserve.



Idol of Lord Ganesha from the Nagvanshi era found in Indravati Tiger Reserve

Udanti-Sitanadi Tiger Reserve

Udanti-Sitanadi Tiger Reserve, situated in the heart of Chhattisgarh, is a sanctuary for diverse flora and fauna and a repository of cultural heritage that unfolds stories of ancient civilisations. Most of the faunal species of central India are found in the core areas of Udanti Sitanadi Tiger Reserve. Asiatic wild buffalo is a critically endangered species found in the core area. Other endangered and rare species besides the tiger are the Indian wolf, leopard, sloth bear and mouse deer. The valleys and plains are a mix of different forest types and terrains along with granite gneiss area carrying strips and patches of sal forest. The sedimentary rock in several parts carries mixed forest with varying proportions of teak. As one journeys through the reserve, hidden gems in the form of heritage sites that speak of the region's rich history are discovered. The Udanti-Sitanadi Tiger Reserve includes total area of Udanti and Sitanadi Wildlife Sanctuaries, some parts of Tourenga, Mainpur, Indagaon and Kulhadighat ranges of Udanti Forest Division, Gariyaband District, parts of Dhawalpur range of East Raipur and parts of Sankara range of Dhamatari Forest Division, Dhamtari District.

Choksil Hill

Choksil Hill is situated near Bamnijhola village of the South Udanti range. It is surrounded by dense forests on all sides. The hill is entirely made of stone rocks, and tourists can easily climb it due to its slope. Aside from being a tourist destination, Choksil Hill is also a sacred site. According to locals, 'choksil' means a quad-junction where gods meet. For a decade now, people in the region have been organising 'Madai-Mela' on Dussehra. The local communities of the area enact cultural programmes in their traditional costumes. Along with the tourists from the Gariaband district, tourists from Kondagaon, Kanker, and other districts and Odisha congregate in large numbers to enjoy the festivities.

Choksil Hill is divided into two elevations. At the top lies Devgarh Dham, Parvatiya Temple of Choksil, while the lower elevation is utilised for organising fairs and celebrations during Sharad Purnima and Dussehra.

Gautum Rishi Ashram

Nestled within the serene landscapes of the Udanti Tiger Reserve in Chhattisgarh, lies the Gautam Rishi Ashram, an ancient abode that whispers tales of spirituality and tranquillity. Named after Gautam Rishi, a revered sage in Hindu epics known for his wisdom and ascetic practices, the ashram is believed to have been a retreat for meditation and contemplation. It stands as a testament to the timeless connection between spirituality and nature. As visitors traverse the lush wilderness of Udanti, they stumble upon this sacred haven, offering a unique blend of natural beauty and cultural heritage.

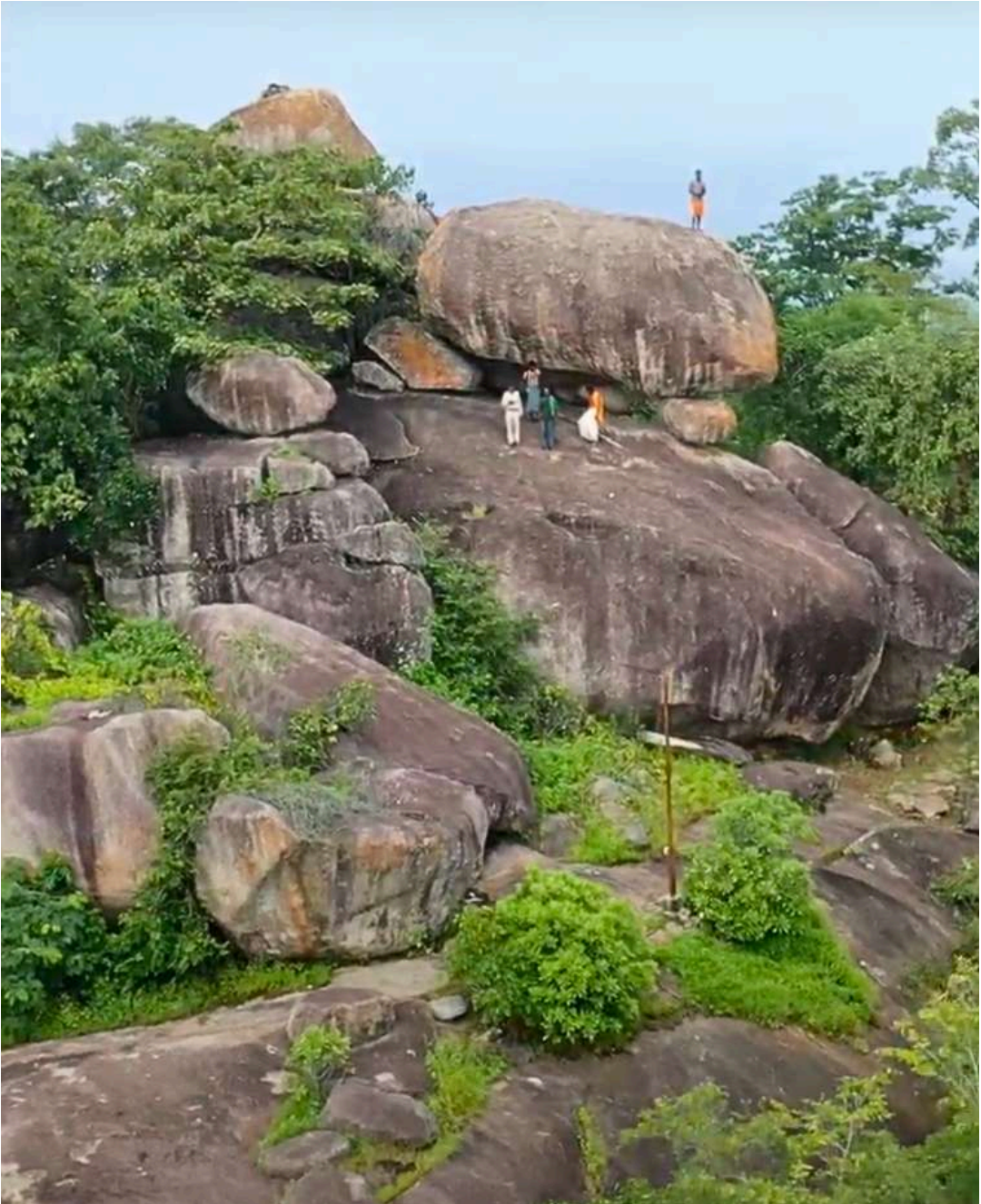
While the ashram predominantly embraces the simplicity of traditional ashram architecture, it has structures such as meditation halls, prayer spaces, and living quarters for those seeking a temporary retreat. The design often aligns with principles of harmony with nature, emphasising a balance between the constructed and the natural. The Gautam Rishi Ashram holds a venerable history steeped in the traditions of ancient sages and revered spiritual figures.

The ashram, considered a retreat for meditation, remains open for the visitors throughout the week from 6 am to 6 pm.



Gautam Rishi Ashram inside the Udanti-Sitanadi Tiger Reserve

Vedic deity Indra, as per Hindu mythology, assumed the guise of sage Gautam and lured the latter's wife Ahalya. She was later cursed by her husband and turned into stone. It is believed that Lord Rama later liberated Ahalya from this curse during his visit to the site. The stone rock formations here are a wonder in itself.



Front view of the Gautam Rishi Ashram

Jharkhand





Entrance gateway of the Palamau Fort in
Palamau Tiger Reserve, Jharkhand

All photographs in this chapter are courtesy NTCA



Blessed with an abundance of natural resources, Jharkhand is known as 'the land of forests'. Jharkhand's flora and fauna are key components of its natural heritage, demonstrating the state's different ecosystems and ecological significance. Rich forests, undulating hills, and rivers adorn the area, providing habitat to an array of fauna that includes the magnificent elephant, the elusive tiger, and several bird species including the great hornbill and Indian roller. In addition to supporting multiple species, these habitats are essential for preserving ecological balance. Unique tree species like mahua and sal are found in the deep forests and are important both ecologically and culturally. Rivers like the Subarnarekha and the Damodar provide habitat for aquatic species and are important to the ecosystem's general health. The state's natural heritage has heavily influenced the state's cultural heritage. The Palamau fort situated within the Palamau reserve stands at an intersection of historical and ecological significance, supporting local wildlife and plant life as well as livelihoods for the local communities among a hub for conservation.

Palamau Tiger Reserve

Located in the Latehar district, as part of the Chhota Nagpur plateau in Jharkhand, is the Palamau Tiger Reserve, once called the 'tiger country'. The reserve is within the picturesque valley of the North Koel, Auranga, and Burha rivers. Palamau Tiger Reserve is proud to have been one of India's nine original tiger reserves, designated in 1973 during the inception of Project Tiger. The reserve extends into the Sanjay-Dubri Reserve and the Bandhavgarh Reserve, thus providing a haven for the national animal to survive and thrive. The varying elevation of the reserve ensures that it also serves as a den for species found at a higher altitude, such as the sloth bear, as well as the species found at a plateau level, such as the tiger and hyaena. Other predators in the reserve are leopards, wolves, wild dogs, jungle cats, etc. The population of elephants in Palamau has significantly increased in the past 50 years, a testament to the successful conservation efforts. The habitat is dominated by northern tropical deciduous sal forest, smaller patches of northern tropical moist deciduous forest with a total of 970 plant species that have been identified in the reserve area.

Palamau Fort

The Palamau fort, nestled in the Betla range in the Qila beat of the Palamau Tiger Reserve, is not just an ecologically significant site. It stands as a testament to the resilience of the lost kingdom of Cheros, as evidenced by the 'Naya Qila' and 'Purana Qila' of the Palamau Fort. The Cheros ruled the Palamau region for about 200 years, and Medni Rai, according to legend, crowned himself Lord Paramount over most of Sarguja (lying in present-day Chhattisgarh), Hazaribagh in Jharkhand, and the southern part of Gaya in Bihar. His son, Pratap Rai, constructed the fort at Palamau in addition to the one his father, Medni Rai, had already built. These two forts became known as the 'Naya Qila' and 'Purana Qila' respectively, and the entire premises is jointly known as the Palamau Fort. The fort has withstood the test of time, surviving the reign of the Cheros, the Mughal attacks in the first half

of the 16th century CE, the East India Company's invasion in the early 1700s and even the country's freedom movement from 1857 to 1947. The Mughals ruled the Palamau region of Bihar and Jharkhand till the early 17th century CE when the Cheros drove them out. This unique historical transition is reflected in the fort's architecture, which bears the imprint of both the Chero dynasty and the Mughal rule.

The fort's elaborate arabesque decorations and lofty towers are a testament to the Chero King's former grandeur. The ancient fort, or the 'Purana Qila', has walls that are roughly seven feet thick and rise to a height of 25 feet. A gateway in the western part still has some stones with 'Meenakari' (the process of colouring the surface of metals/tiles through enamelling) work on them. Inside is a lengthy hallway with a few tiny, covered alcoves. It was utilised as a 'Nahabat Khana', where the king's announcements were made. The upper tunnel opens through the gate to reveal an open courtyard. This courtyard has ventilator-equipped staircases on both sides. The stairs are, however, now in poor condition. This courtyard leads to many high-walled gates to the fort. Beside the remnants of a brick mosque with three domes and octagonal towers is a deep well.



Palamau Fort in Palamau Tiger Reserve



Courtyard inside the Palamau Fort

The name of the fort, Palamau, is subject to various interpretations. One school of thought suggests its origin from the Dravidian term 'pall-aam-u,' meaning 'tooth of water'. This may refer to the nearby Auranga River, whose flooded rocky surface resembles uneven teeth.

According to the 16th century poet and historian Abdullah Tarikh-i-Daudia, Daud Khan, the Mughal administrator of Bihar allegedly constructed the mosque to honour the Mughal victory at Palamau. Just beyond the fort's western entrance are the remnants of another mosque. The king's palace ruins are visible within, along with a tunnel at the base of the wall that may have served as a covert escape route in the event of an invasion.

Even from a distance, the 'Naya Qila', perched on a hill, appears magnificent. There were numerous vaulted chambers within the fort's unbroken 17 feet thick walls. On the southern wall are two enormous circular bastions covered with domes with four light-letting windows. A dry well on the floor of the bastions has been utilised for ammunition storage. Although in ruins, the Nagpuri Gate, the fort's principal entry, has retained the intricate Arabesque designs demonstrating the distinguishing characteristics of Mughal architecture under the reign of Jahangir. The names of the Chero monarchs are listed in 'Devanagari' (script used to write Sanskrit, Hindi, Prakrit, Nepali and Marathi languages) on the gate's side; though the Persian (also known as Farsi, originating in Iran) inscriptions have long since vanished.

When the British assumed control of Palamau in 1858 following the 1857 revolt, they demolished the fortifications to prevent its use as a site for siege and to establish their unchallenged authority. However, the fort, even in its diminished state, stands as a poignant reminder of Jharkhand's past, a testament to the resilience and endurance of Indian heritage.



Arabesque designs on the fort walls

The fort remains open throughout the year from 7 am to 6 pm. The ideal time to visit the fort is during the months of October and November.

Karnataka





**Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple in
Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple Tiger Reserve, Karnataka**
All photographs in this chapter are courtesy NTCA



Karnataka's biodiversity is intimately woven into its natural and cultural legacy, creating a complex tapestry that represents both the ecological and historical value of the region. From the lush forests of the Western Ghats extending to the Deccan Plateau, the state is home to wood trees like the towering sandalwood tree, mahogany and rosewood as well as a range of medicinal plants and orchid species. Similarly, the wildlife of Karnataka, which includes well-known animals like the Indian leopard, tiger, sloth bears and the Asiatic elephant, is integral to the region's customs and folklore, frequently serving as a symbol of respect and strength in cultural narratives. The protected landscape of the region is dotted with different tiger reserves, wildlife sanctuaries and national parks such as Bandipur, Nagarahole, Bhadra, Kali and Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple (BRT) Tiger Reserves, that exist at the confluence of the state's cultural and natural heritage. Bandipur and BRT reserves house some impressive structures that are locally revered and serve as sources of information about the bygone eras.

Bandipur Tiger Reserve

Located at the foothills of the Nilgiri hills, Bandipur was once the exclusive hunting ground of the Maharajas. Bandipur was one of the first nine tiger reserves declared under Project Tiger in 1973. Other than the Royal Bengal tiger, Bandipur is also one of the remaining strongholds of the endangered Asiatic wild elephant. It forms the largest biosphere reserve in India, along with the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala, the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary in Tamil Nadu, and the Nagarhole National Park in Karnataka, known as the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. Bandipur is also renowned as an 'ecological confluence', where the Eastern and Western Ghats meet. In addition to the ecological significance of the reserve, it is a trove of culture due to the number of tribal communities within it and the presence of the Himavad Gopalswamy Temple, which lends spiritual relevance to it. Devotees throng the reserve in huge numbers, especially on the day of 'Janmashtami' (a Hindu festival that celebrates the birth of Lord Krishna, the eighth avatar of Lord Vishnu).

Himavad Gopalswamy Betta Temple

On top of the hills in Bandipur Reserve lies an old fort constructed in the 13th century CE. This old fort houses the Himavad Gopalswamy Betta Temple. The temple is situated in the Gundlupet range of the Bandipur Tiger Reserve and is dedicated to Lord Krishna (Gopalswamy). Its location among the picturesque Western Ghats implies that the hill on which the temple is perched is shrouded in mist for most of the year. Hence, the mountain is called Himavad, or covered in mist. In contrast, the third part of the name, Betta, is because the temple is situated on a hill; Betta in Kannada means a mountain.

The shrine, a testament to the Hoysala era, was built in 1315 CE by King Ballala III. It stands as a tribute to the creative and architectural genius of artisans from a bygone era. The temple, a stunning example of Dravidian architecture, is a sight to behold.

A single-tiered 'gopuram' (monumental entrance tower) is supported by the compound wall of the enclosure. The inner porch, or the 'mukha mandapa', includes a sacrificial altar known as the 'bali-peatam' and a flag pillar or the 'dhwaja stambha'. A sculpture of 'Dashavatara', the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, is located on the parapet wall of the 'mukha mandapa' facade. The central portion of the sculpture is that of Krishnavatara, Lord Vishnu's avatar in which he appeared as Krishna.

Inside the 'garbha griha' (sanctum sanctorum), an idol of Lord Krishna, playing the flute beneath a tree, can be found. The idol is six feet tall and expertly crafted and portrays the deity in a dancing stance. The 'prabhavali' or the panel behind the idol, is elegant yet simple, with carvings of a tree, the lord's companions and his consorts Satyabhama and Rukmini (consorts of Lord Krishna), cows, and cowherds, among many other figures and icons from Krishna's avatar. The right side of the panel features cows with cowherds. Overlooking the garbha griha or the sanctum sanctorum, is the 'shikhara' (tower above the sanctum sanctorum).



Single-tiered gopuram or entrance tower of the Himavad Gopalswamy Betta Temple. The temple is open once a year for pilgrims on the day of 'Chaitra Purnima', which usually falls in April or May. On this day, devotees and priests from both states, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, offer prayers at the temple

Biligiri Ranganatha Temple Tiger Reserve

Biligiri Ranganatha (BR) Temple Tiger Reserve takes its name from the ancient Ranganathaswamy Temple. The name of the hill, Biligiri or Swetadri, is attributed to the white fog that covers the entire rocky cliff on which Lord Vishnu's Temple is situated. It is located in Chamaraajanagar district of Karnataka. Biligiri Ranganatha Temple Wildlife Sanctuary was declared a tiger reserve in 2011. It is considered the corridor that connects the Eastern Ghats to the Western Ghats, facilitating gene flow between the population of animals inhabiting the mountain ranges.

The central floral compositions of the reserve are scrub, dry deciduous, moist deciduous, shola forests and montane grasslands. Nestled amidst the lush greenery of Karnataka, the Biligiri Ranganatha Temple Wildlife Sanctuary stands as a testament to the confluence of natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. While renowned for its diverse flora and fauna, this sanctuary is also home to several historical sites that offer a glimpse into the region's storied past.

Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple

Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple is situated in the BR Hills within the core area of the tiger reserve. The present-day Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple was built in the 17th century CE by the then Paleyagar Sree Mudduraju of Hadinadu. The temple houses the idols of Nammalvar (fifth among the 12 Alvar poet-saints), Ramanujacharya (Vedic philosopher and a social reformer) and Venkatacharya, the Vaisnava disciples. According to the legend, sage Vasishta (one of the Saptrishis and is considered to be the principal author of Mandala VII of Rig Veda) did penance here on these hills and consecrated the idol of the deity.

Many other folktales associated with the temple deity are popular in the region. As per one such folklore, a massive pair of sandals are kept inside the temple's garba gudi (sanctum sanctorum), which the lord is believed to wear and roam in the forest daily at night. Villagers replace the sandals once they are found to be worn out. The Soliga community (tribal community) considers Lord Ranganatha as their brother-in-law. As is believed in their 'janapada' (kingdom) history, once the lord was wandering and met a Soliga tribal girl named Kusumabale. It is believed that the lord married the girl, and under the pretext of hunting, they both used to meet in the forest at night. The temple finds its reference in the 'Brahmanda Purana'. The puranas (sacred texts of Hinduism) call this place 'Champakaranya' and 'Gajaranya'.

The temple, built in Dravidian architecture, offers spiritual tranquillity to the people. A compound wall encompasses the temple. The front wall of the temple serves as an entrance gateway known as 'gopuram' (monumental entrance tower). The shape of the central temple tower looks like a stepped pyramid, known as 'vimana', that rises geometrically.



Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple in BRT Tiger Reserve. The temple premises is open to all the visitors from 7 am to 8.30 pm, throughout the year. June to early March is ideal for devotees to visit the temple. Temple visit during Rathotsava is considered to be auspicious

The nine-day Brahma Rathotsava takes place in 'Vaishakha' (April-May) at the temple. During this festival, a century-old chariot called Dodda Theru is drawn, where farmers offer a portion of their produce and married people throw fruits and greens for a happy life. On the day after Sankranti, on the occasion of Chikka Jatire, the Soliga community, and Dasas draw Chikka Theru and pray for good crops and rainfall.

Dodda Sampige Tree

The Dodda Sampige is a large Champaka tree and is situated near Keredimba Podu in the core area of Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple Tiger Reserve. The tree is worshipped by the Soliga community (tribal community), which lives in and around the reserve area. The local belief is that Mahadeshwara Swamy planted a sapling at the spot of the tree and left. After returning, he noticed that the sapling had struck roots at the spot where the tree stands. The tree is believed to be over 1,000 years old, with a height of 34 metres and a width of 20 metres.

Alongside flows a tiny stream that overflows in the rainy season, known as 'Sampige Halla'. According to Puranic legends, the stream is the Bhargavi River, a tributary of the Cauvery River, which joins it after first reaching the Gundyal reservoir. Parasurama (axe-wielding warrior) is said to have washed his axe in this river after slaying the Kshatriya rulers who had deviated from the path of dharma. Another legend that adds to the tree's aura is that sage Agastya planted the tree around 3,000 years ago. There are 101 'lingams' (symbols of Shiva) underneath the tree. A smaller Sampige tree near the big one is known as Chikka Sampige. The locals here believe that the god sleeps when the tree bears flowers. Every year, people from the Soliga community gather for 'Rotti Habba' (an agricultural ritual celebrated once a year after harvest), where they make fresh bread with ragi, which they share amongst themselves in the summer season. They also celebrate nature by singing and dancing after the harvest following the monsoons.

Scattered throughout the sanctuary are remnants of ancient trails and pathways that once served as lifelines for trade and communication. Traversing through dense forests and rolling hills, these historical routes bear witness to the footsteps of countless travellers, traders, and pilgrims who journeyed through these lands in centuries past.



Visitors can enter Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple Tiger Reserve only between 6 am and 6 pm. The best time to visit BR Hills is from October to March

Nagarahole Tiger Reserve

The Nagarahole Tiger Reserve was declared a reserve in 1999 and is named after the stream Nagarahole (meaning a serpent stream), which meanders through the protected area and is located in the Kodagu and Mysore districts of Karnataka. The reserve is next to the Kabini River and is a sanctuary for several wildlife species in Karnataka.

On its southern end, the Bandipur Tiger Reserve of Karnataka and the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary of Kerala flanked the reserve. The protected area supports large assemblages of carnivores and herbivores: tiger, leopard, Asiatic wild dog and sloth bear, Asiatic elephant, gaur, sambar, chital, muntjac, four-horned antelope, wild pig, mouse deer and South-western langur. The tall rosewood and teak trees dominate the jungle and other trees like sandalwood and silver oak.

The reserve also has several tribal communities, such as the Jenu Kurubas, Bettakuruba, Paniya and Soligas. These communities dwell inside the forests, so several temples dedicated to the local deities can be found within the reserve's boundaries. The Masthigudi, Netkal Basaveshwara Temple, Mavukalleshwara Temple and the Muthurayaswamy Temple are located in the core and buffer regions of the reserve.

Masthigudi

Located in the DB Kuppe wildlife range in the core region of Nagarahole Tiger Reserve is a temple dedicated to the Goddess Mastamma, Masthigudi. 'Masthi' refers to the Goddess Mastamma (a combination of the words Maha, Sati and Amma), meaning 'the great wife', another name used for Goddess Parvati, while 'Gudi' refers to a temple. As the temple is situated next to the Kabini River and the Kabini Dam, it remains submerged for most of the year. When the water is released from the reservoir for irrigation, the temple and the idols rise above the water. An idol of Lord Ganesha, placed alongside Goddess Mastamma, can be found here. The idols have been carved out of big rocks and appear stunning despite their dilapidated condition. The idols are the only things that remain in the temple.

The local communities dwelling in the reserve believe in the Goddess Mastamma's spiritual abilities. As a result, pilgrims travelling through the forests offer prayers to the goddess for their safe travel, a testament to the profound faith in her protection. This belief is so deeply ingrained that irrespective of their religious inclinations, all naturalists, safari drivers and the personnel of the Forest Department in the Kabini Wildlife Sanctuary perform a special puja every year. This is a ritual and a heartfelt expression of their respect and gratitude for a prosperous and incident-free safari season.

It is believed that Goddess Mastamma watches over the forests and their dwellers and protects them from any unusual occurrences, a belief that resonates with this place's spiritual and cultural significance.



Masthigudi in Nagarahole Tiger Reserve

Mavukalleshwara Temple

A historical temple dedicated to Lord Shiva, known as Mavukalleshwara Temple, is situated in the Hunsur range of the buffer region of the reserve. The inhabitants of the fringe areas access the temple and offer prayers at the temple, and the pond near the temple called Seethe Kola, with the belief that the pond will never dry up, even in the worst of droughts. The temple sees enormous crowds during Shivaratri when devotees flock to the temple hoping for a good rainy season and, therefore, a good harvest.



Mavukalleshwara Temple in Nagarahole Tiger Reserve

Muthurayaswamy Temple

The Hunsur Wildlife range, part of the buffer zone of the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, is home to the Muthurayaswamy Temple. This medieval temple is on the outskirts of the village, where the local communities offer prayers every Tuesday and Friday. They believe the idol to be naturally occurring and place great faith in the idol and the temple.

Netkal Basaveshwara Temple

The Netkal Basaveshwara Temple is located in the core region of the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve in the Metikuppe range. The temple is situated in the middle of the natural forest, and several streams flow in the vicinity of the temple. The temple is dedicated to the Basaveshwara or Nandi, the bull vahana (vehicle) of Lord Shiva and is also believed to be the protector of forests. The local communities depend on the forest and its resources for their livelihoods. Therefore, they revere the Basaveshwara for preserving their forests and ensuring their well-being.



Netkal Basaveshwara Temple in Nagarhole Tiger Reserve

Kerala





Mangala Devi Temple in Periyar Tiger Reserve, Kerala
All photographs in this chapter are courtesy NTCA



Kerala's environment is home to a diverse range of plant and animal species, many of which are endemic. The evergreen rainforests of the Western Ghats to its tranquil backwaters, the state is brimming with diversity. Promoted as God's Own Country, Kerala is a nature lover's paradise where one can easily spot faunal species like Nilgiri tahr, Bengal tiger, Indian porcupine as well as the endangered lion-tailed macaque. Wild cardamom, bamboo, black pepper and the evergreen rattan palm grow in abundance here. The rich variety of plants found here forms the basis for traditional practices like Ayurveda, and the complex inter-relationships among species emphasise the significance of conservation. The state's vast network of national parks, tiger reserves and wildlife sanctuaries, like Periyar, Silent Valley and Parambikulam, in addition to their ecological significance also represent the cultural and spiritual values of the surrounding populations. The famous Sabarimala temple, frequented by thousands of devotees on a daily basis lies at the heart of the Periyar Tiger Reserve and is a noteworthy illustration of the delicate balance between humans and the nature surrounding them.

Periyar Tiger Reserve

The Periyar Tiger Reserve is located in the southern part of the Western Ghats, spanning 777 sq km of forest territory, which supports an abundant array of diverse plant and animal species. The river Periyar, which rises deep within the reserve, gives name to this fantastic flora stretch. In 1978, Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary was designated as the tenth tiger reserve in the country and placed under the purview of Project Tiger. The reserve is easily accessible by road and is well-connected to major cities. Travellers also have access to various ecotourism programmes offered by the reserve.

Thekkady's Periyar Tiger Reserve is home to the nation's most stunning flora and fauna, drawing large crowds of nature enthusiasts. Renowned for its natural and rejuvenating atmosphere and a birds-eye view of many organisms, it has become one of the top tourist attractions in God's Own Country. The Indian elephant, Bengal tiger, sambar, gaur, leopard, Indian wild dog, barking deer, mouse deer, monitor lizard, and several bird and reptile species are among the diverse array of fauna. Nestled away in Kerala's Western Ghats, the Periyar Tiger Reserve safeguards wildlife and the region's rich cultural and historical legacy. There is a tapestry of historical monuments, temples, and archaeological sites that whisper secrets of an ancient past beyond the thick forests and sparkling rivers.

Mangala Devi Temple

Believed to have been constructed in the 14th century CE, the Mangala Devi Temple is revered in the hearts of devotees and locals. Dedicated to Goddess Mangala Devi, an incarnation of Goddess Durga, the temple is steeped in myth and legend. Folklore holds that the Pandyan kings of Tamil Nadu built it to honour the goddess and seek her blessings for prosperity and protection.

Visitors walk through the path to the temple, they are greeted by its majestic entrance gate adorned with intricate carvings and sculptures. The temple's architecture blends Dravidian and Kerala styles with distinctive 'gopurams' (towering gateways) and ornate pillars that testify to the craftsmanship of ancient artisans.

Ilango Adikal, a poet, a Jain monk and a Chera prince, is known for writing one of Tamil literature's five great epics, 'Silappatikaram' which immortalised the story of an ordinary couple—Kanaki and her husband Kovalan—in whose remembrance Mangala Devi Shrine has been erected.

In order to safeguard the ecosystem, the forest department has taken various measures and thus it is advisable to obtain permission in advance from the wildlife warden in Thekkady before visiting the temple.



Mangala Devi Temple in Periyar Tiger Reserve

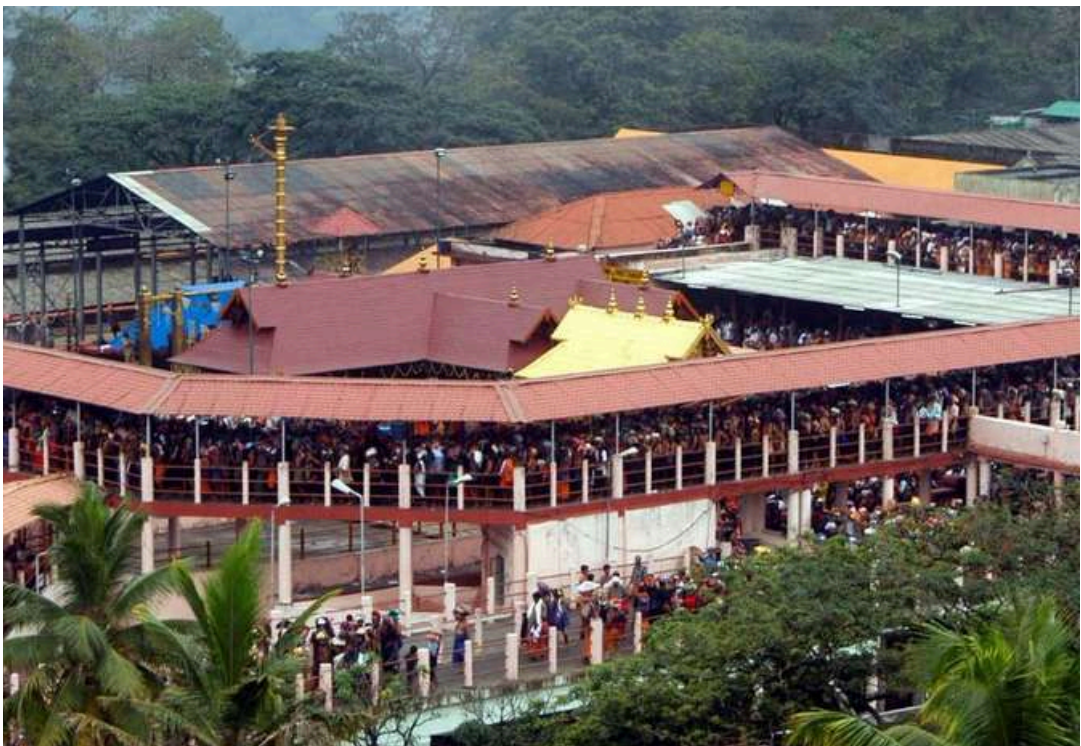
Sabarimala Sree Dharma Sastha Temple

The Sabarimala Dharma Sastha Temple or Sabarimala Temple is located in the Pamba range in the buffer region of Periyar Tiger Reserve and is surrounded by 18 hills. The temple is named Sabarimala because, according to folklore, 'Shabari' (an elderly woman and a devotee of Lord Rama from the epic Ramayana) used to live amongst 18 hills, which is where the temple is located today. Sabarimala is a prominent Hindu temple on a hilltop in Kerala's Pathanamthitta district. The temple is dedicated to –

Ayyappa, also known as Dharma Shasta, the God of growth. It is believed that on the advice of 'Saint Agastya', King Rajasekara of Pandalam dynasty laid the foundations of the temple at Sabarimala. King Rajasekara is credited with the completion of the construction of the shrine and the sacred 18 stairs leading to the temple complex.

The 18 steps that lead to Lord Ayyappa are considered highly sacred and have a symbolic representation. The first five steps indicate five senses (sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste). The following eight indicate eight states (love, laughter, grief, anger, competitiveness, fear, disgust and amazement), and the next three represent 'tribunals' (sattva, rajas, tamas). The last two symbolise 'vidya' and 'avidya'.

It is believed that whoever climbs these steps detaches themselves from all worldly desires. According to locals, pilgrims have to observe celibacy for 41 days before going to Sabarimala. Festivities during Mandala pooja, Makaravilakku, Vishu and the first day of every Malayalam month are celebrated here enthusiastically. The temple attracts pilgrims from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and various parts of the country and the world.



Sabarimala Sree Dharma Sastha Temple in Periyar Tiger Reserve



Scenic view of Periyar Tiger Reserve, Kerala
Photo by Shikhar Mohan

Madhya Pradesh





Tiger spotting at Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh

Photo by Radha Datta

Madhya Pradesh

Madhya Pradesh, with its expansive grasslands to dense forests, is home to a vast array of wildlife, including the recognisable Indian bison, tigers as well as bird species like Malabar pied hornbill and sal, teak and bamboo trees among the floral species. In addition to being essential for maintaining ecological equilibrium, biodiversity has a significant impact on local communities' cultural customs and practices. A great affinity for the land and its fauna exists among many of Madhya Pradesh's tribal communities, including the Gond and Baiga, who frequently incorporate natural themes into their artwork, mythology, and ceremonies. In addition to serving as important conservation sites, the state's many national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and tiger reserves, such as Kanha and Bandhavgarh, draw tourists who come to witness the fusion of environment and culture. Structures such as the Bandhavgarh Fort and Shesh Shaiya lying within the state's tiger reserves are living testaments to the region's ecological and cultural richness, emphasising the need for sustainable practices to preserve this unique heritage for future generations.

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

The Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve is named after the Bandhavgarh hill in the centre of the reserve. The Vindhyan and Satpura ranges meet near Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve, and as a result, the region is dotted with geographical features such as broad meadows, undulating forests, and steep mountains. The reserve, located in the Umaria and Katni districts of Madhya Pradesh, is known for its tiger population. The dense forests of Bandhavgarh, interspersed with grasslands and the perennial rivers passing through the reserve, provide an optimum habitat for the big cat. Once the hunting preserve for the Maharajas of Rewa, it was later notified as a tiger reserve in 2007. The reserve area is now a well-known nesting place for white tigers and is also believed to be the ancestral site for the world's white tiger population.

Several ancient structures are also found in the reserve that indicate the cultural relevance of the area. The history of Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve gained prominence through the writings of a British officer, who identifies himself as JM, in the Indian Forester, Volume IX, 1883. From the magnificent Bandhavgarh fort to the rock inscriptions and carvings that date back to almost 129 to 168 CE to the monolithic statues of Lord Vishnu, all structures narrate a tale of Bandhavgarh's past. Ancient texts such as the 'Narada Pancharatra' and the 'Shiva Purana' reference Bandhavgarh, suggesting that the site has existed since the age of Ramayana, an ancient Indian epic.

Bandhavgarh Fort

The Bandhavgarh Fort dates back to the 'Treta Yuga' and is a masterpiece in architectural work. Significant dynasties of the Sengars, Baghels, Solankis, Vakataka, Kuruvanshis, and Kalachuris ruled over the fort during its heydays. If the local tales are to be believed, the Bandhavgarh fort was built by Lord Rama after his victory over Lanka and gifted to his brother Laxman for his unconditional support

during the exile and in the war against Ravana. The fort, thus, came to be known as Bandhavgarh, with 'bandhav' referring to brother and 'Garh' referring to the fort or the focal point. It is also said that Hanuman and the Vaanar Sena, or monkey army, had raised the fort's walls to a great height to make it impenetrable. The ancient texts, Puranas, also include references to this fort.

Many archaeologists believe that the settlement in Bandhavgarh dates back to the pre-Christian era, as shown by the inscriptions and the rock paintings inside the fort. However, the earliest mention of the fort can be found in the Bhimseni Sanwat of 300 CE (a form of the Indian calendar based on the era to which it relates) when the fort was under the hold of the Vakataka dynasty. The Vakatakas were overthrown by the Sengar dynasty, who ruled till the 5th century CE, after which the Baghels took over. The Kuruvanshis ruled the fort from 1495 until 1535 CE, but in 1535 CE, the Baghels again took control of it. The fort served as the capital of the Baghel dynasty upto 1617, and it later relocated to Rewa since it became difficult to manage the region from the outskirts of Bandhavgarh.

The fort can be seen from any point in the core and buffer zones of the Tala range, surrounded by the majestic highlands of the reserve. Standing tall, the fort appears to rule over the reserve's forests and the wild animals. There are numerous temples in the vicinity of Bandhavgarh Fort, most of which include idols of Lord Vishnu in his many incarnations. An idol of Lord Ganesha is also found in one of these temples, which dates back to the 10th century CE. Three other temples showcasing 12th century CE architecture can be found near the fort. Immensely green and serene grasslands surround the Bandhavgarh Fort, and numerous lakes dot the fort.



Bandhavgarh Fort in Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Photo by Radha Datta

Saint Kabir Das, a mystic poet whose writings influenced both Hinduism and Sikhism, lived in the Bandhavgarh hills in the 14th century CE. A temple atop Bandhavgarh Fort Hill commemorates his experiences and teachings. This temple opens to the public once a year in the third week of December.

Bari Gufa

Traversing through Bandhavgarh, one can spot several ancient artificial caves, with Bari or Badi Gufa, which translates to the 'Giant Cave', the most prominent and the largest. The Maharajas of Bandhavgarh used these caves, cut out of the mountains, as barracks for their soldiers. The cave can be viewed from the inside and is habitually used by tigers, sloth bears, and horseshoe bats. The largest cave in the area is divided into smaller chambers supported by broad stone pillars and is believed to date back to the 10th century CE.

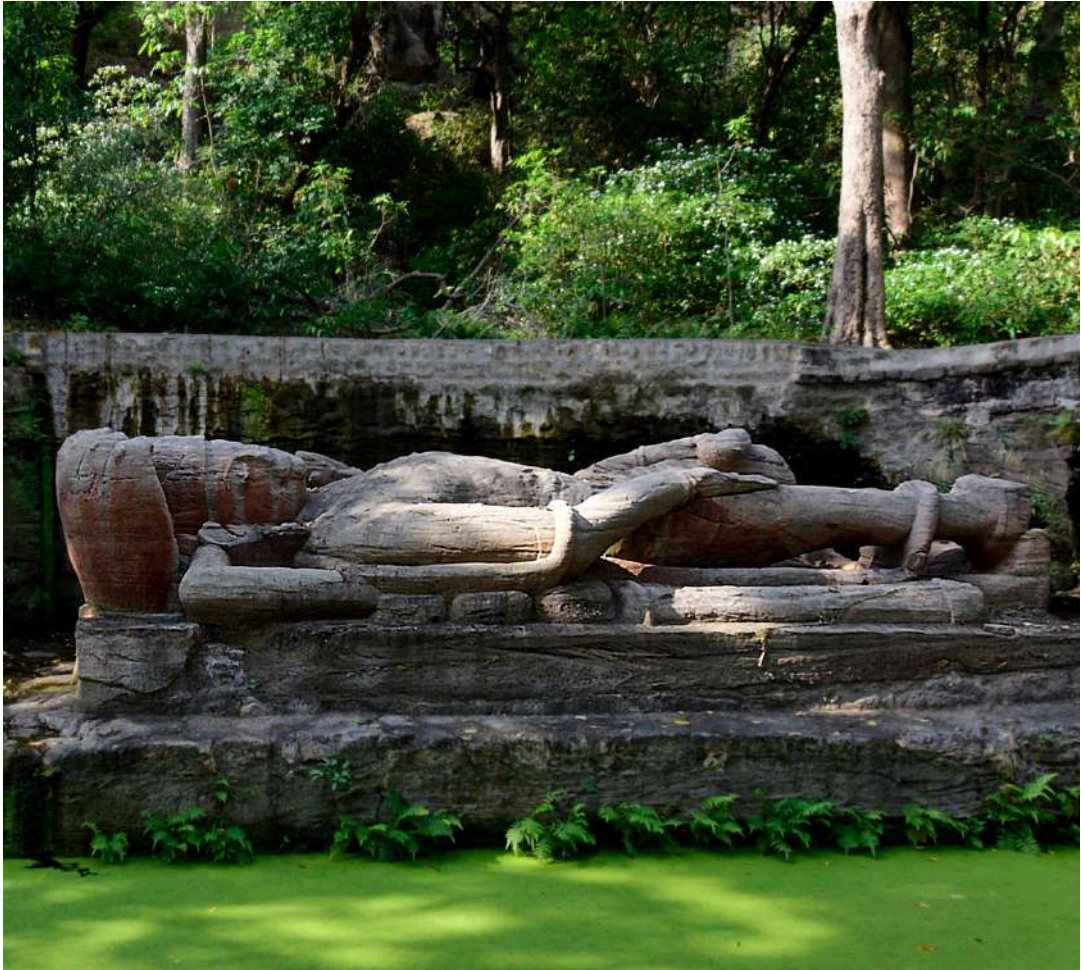


Bari Gufa or giant cave in Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

Photo by Radha Datta

Shesh Shaiya

The amalgamation of nature and history is highlighted by the 11-metre-long Lord Vishnu statue, Shesh Shaiya, in the tiger reserve. Shesh Shaiya is located at the foundation of the river, Charan Ganga, which sustains the reserve and its various meadows. The statue depicts Lord Vishnu in a reclining position with an umbrella of 'Shesh Naag' or the seven-headed serpent over his head as well as a 'Shivalinga' and idol of Lord Brahma next to it. The statue is situated near the main entrance to the path that leads to the Bandhavgarh Fort. The river Charan Ganga also gets its name as it is said that its origin lies at the feet of the statue, which is thought to date back to the 10th century CE.



Shesh Shaiya depicting Lord Vishnu in a reclining state is situated in Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve. The statue lies at the entrance of the Bandhavgarh Fort. Photo by Radha Datta

Kanha Tiger Reserve

Kanha Tiger Reserve is within the Maikal ranges of Satpura. It was declared a forest in 1879 and revalued as a wildlife sanctuary in 1933. The National Park was notified in 1955 and falls under two Mandla and Balaghat revenue districts. The reserve combines the Dadars (flat hilltops), grassy expanses, dense forests, and riverine forests. Apart from the tiger, the reserve is known for its conservation efforts for the endangered hard-ground barasingha. The tiger reserve offers an ideal habitat for avifauna, reptiles, and insects. The Kanha Tiger Reserve is renowned for its lush landscapes, diverse wildlife, and a rich tapestry of cultural heritage that enhances the allure of this natural haven. Beyond the dense forests and thriving biodiversity, the region harbours several heritage sites that speak volumes about its historical significance. Every year, tourists and wildlife enthusiasts visit the reserve to explore the cultural gems, explore the intersection of nature and history, and understand the unique heritage sites near the Kanha Tiger Reserve.

Mandla Fort

Approximately 70 km from Kanha Tiger Reserve, Mandla Fort is a formidable structure that echoes the tales of bygone eras. Positioned on the banks of the Narmada River, this historic fort has withstood the tests of time, offering tourists a chance to immerse themselves in the architectural grandeur and strategic significance that defines the cultural landscape of Mandla. After Ramnagar was declared the capital in 1667, the main palace was commissioned by Gond king Hriday Shah. The three-storey building of Moti Mahal carefully articulates the Gondwana Kingdom, which historians ignored for an extended period. The palace is unique in itself as it tells us about the period in which Gonds ruled the Central Province. Moti Mahal was built on the banks of the Narmada River so that the river could defend the palace from three sides. It is a protected monument under the State Archaeology Department of Government of Madhya Pradesh. The influence of Mughal architecture in the construction of Moti Mahal is evident through features like arches, domes, and a rectangular courtyard with ponds in the middle.

Apart from Moti Mahal, there are a few other structures that have been built or commissioned by King Hriday Shah, such as Kothi of Rai Bhagat, which served as the residence of a minister in the king's court; Sun Temple of Mandla, built by Babujee Ojha and has a beautiful statue of about 200 years old, sun seated on seven chariots; Vishnu Mandir which is believed to have been constructed by queen Sundari Devi in 1667 and showcases features of Gond architecture through its domes; and Narendra Shah Burz which is a 400 years old tower and forms the remains of a monument constructed by Narendra Shah.

More than just a military stronghold, Mandla Fort is a beacon of cultural significance for the local community. The temples within its walls, dedicated to various deities, infuse the fort with a spiritual aura. The annual fair, a vibrant celebration of community and tradition, held at Mandla Fort draws pilgrims and tourists, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity that has stood the test of time. Mandla Fort, a timeless citadel on the banks of the Narmada, extends an open invitation to travellers to step into the annals of history.



Arched hallway of the Mandla Fort

Photo by Radha Datta



Courtyard of the Mandla Fort with a pond in the centre
Photo by Radha Datta



The carved pillars of Ajaigarh Fort
in Panna Tiger Reserve
Image courtesy: NTCA

Panna Tiger Reserve

The reserve was notified in 2007 and lies in the Panna, Damoh and Chhatarpur districts in the northern part of Madhya Pradesh among the Vindhya ranges. Two plateaus run parallel to each other from the southwest to the northeast direction, where Ken River enters the reserve from the south direction. Panna Tiger Reserve, the only reserve in the Bundelkhand region, is celebrated for its thriving biodiversity and captivating landscapes. It is the most important protected area in the north-central highlands, as it links the wildlife populations of the western and eastern states through the Vindhyan ranges running from Northeast to Southwest direction. Extensive plateaus and gorges are the significant features of the reserve.

The vegetation type of the reserve comprises dry deciduous forest and bamboo breaks. Important fauna include tiger, sloth bear, jackal, wild cat, rusty spotted cat, wolf, leopard, and hyena. The tiger reserve boasts the presence of Vatsala, probably the oldest living elephant on earth. The elephant is 105 years old and was transferred here from Hoshangabad in 1993.

Amidst the dense forests and pristine wilderness, the reserve is also home to several heritage sites that glimpse the region's rich history. As one embarks on a journey to uncover these heritage gems, it can be seen that Panna is not just a sanctuary for wildlife but a cradle of historical narratives.

Ajaigarh Fort

Ajaigarh Fort was built by King Guman Singh in 1765 and is about 35 km from Panna Tiger Reserve. Situated atop the Vindhyan hill, the fort is a formidable regional stronghold. Designed as a self-sufficient forest hill fort, it was constructed to endure prolonged sieges. Reflecting the grandeur of the Chandela dynasty, the Ajaigarh fort boasts a rich historical narrative and remarkable architectural elegance. The fort's architecture is a blend of military prowess and artistic finesse. With imposing walls, sturdy bastions, and intricate carvings, Ajaigarh Fort reflects the architectural style of its era.

The complex includes various structures such as temples, water tanks, and residential quarters, providing a glimpse into the life and culture of its ancient inhabitants. Its extensive fortification, adorned with numerous bastions, once boasted five entrances, now reduced to two, one to the north and the other, Tharuni gate, in the southeast. Adjacent to the northern gate lie two rock-cut tanks named Ganga and Yamuna. Within the fort, two temples stand alongside various ruins, indicating the presence of additional temples. Notable among these is the Chandela temple near the north gate, credited to Raja Parmadi Deva, along with three Jain temple ruins constructed in the Nagara architectural style. These remnants, situated near Ajay Palka Talav, illustrate the defining characteristics of the Ajaigarh fort, embellished with intricate geometric patterns.

Situated strategically atop a hill, Ajaigarh Fort offers panoramic views of the surrounding landscape, including the lush greenery of the Panna Tiger Reserve. The fort's elevated position served defence and administrative purposes, emphasising its importance in the historical and strategic context of the region.

Beyond its military significance, Ajaigarh Fort holds cultural importance for the local communities. Temples within the fort complex, dedicated to Hindu deities, add a spiritual dimension to this historical marvel. The artistic and religious practices associated with the fort continue to thrive, connecting the present to the rich tapestry of the past.

The fort is open for visitors throughout the week from 7 am to 5 pm and requires no entry fee from the visitors. The best time to visit the place will be in the cooler months.

Rock Paintings (Khoon Ki Putariya)

There are several sites in Panna Tiger Reserve where one can find painted rocks in the caves depicting the lifestyle of the Gond tribal community during prehistoric times. These timeless masterpieces, etched onto the rocky canvases, offer a unique window into the lives, traditions, and cultural heritage of the early inhabitants of this biodiverse region. Depictions of wildlife, human figures engaged in various activities, and symbolic motifs create a vivid tableau, illustrating the deep connection between early inhabitants and their natural surroundings. At some sites, relatively new drawings can be found besides those that are ancient. The sandstone hillocks were declared as a monument of national importance in 1990.

According to the local belief system, these drawings on the mesolithic rocks are images drawn in blood and, hence, the name 'Khoon ki Putariya' or 'Khoon se bane Chitra'. They believe that witches drew these images by using the blood of infants, and therefore, people are not advised to go near them. Some other forest dwellers associate these images with animistic spirits. They believe that an image appears on the rocks if a spirit wants to communicate with someone. These spirits inhabit the natural world and have the power to ensure their well-being and inflict harm; therefore, they revere and worship them. One such spirit is that of their ancestral Gond King Sabbal Shah, who is attended by his invincible army on horseback and foot.

The region's relative isolation and inaccessibility have preserved the rock art. Scholars and archaeologists continue to study these artworks, unravelling the mysteries of ancient life and contributing to a broader understanding of our shared human history. Panna's rock paintings enrich our knowledge of prehistoric cultures and underscore the importance of preserving our collective heritage, ensuring that the echoes of antiquity resonate for generations.

Visitors require prior permission from the forest administration to access the caves as they are situated in the core area of the tiger reserve and therefore are not open to tourists.



The rock paintings found in Panna Tiger Reserve
Image courtesy: NTCA

Sanjay-Dubri Tiger Reserve

The Sanjay-Dubri Tiger Reserve is among the most stunning places in central India for observing wildlife for various reasons. It is located in the Sidhi district of Madhya Pradesh, and its verdant area is home to vast gorges, valleys, hills, and towering cliffs. From the birthplace of the extremely rare white tiger to the dense sal forests and the bamboo vegetation, the tiger reserve draws several nature enthusiasts who love it for its variety of plants and animals. Ecologically, the reserve holds immense importance as the sal forests serve as a wildlife corridor between the Bandhavgarh National Park in Madhya Pradesh and the Palamau Tiger Reserve in Jharkhand. The reserve is just as special for being the birthplace of the well-known white tiger, Mohan, who was discovered and saved in 1951 by Raja Martand Singh, the former Maharaja of Rewa.

Shikaargaah Machaan

The Sanjay-Dubri Tiger Reserve houses the Shikaargaah Machaan used by the royals of Rewa during their hunting trips in the majestic forests of the reserve. The Shikargaah Machaan, situated in the Khaira beat of the Dubri range of the reserve, was used as a hideout spot by the then-royal family of Rewa, Madhya Pradesh, while the kings were hunting. Translated to 'hunting lodge', Shikaargaah Machaan derives its name from historical times when such elevated structures were used for wildlife observation and hunting by the royals. However, in the contemporary context, the machaan symbolises wildlife conservation, offering a non-intrusive vantage point for visitors to observe and appreciate the diverse flora and fauna in the tiger reserve. Maharaja Vyankat Raman Singh of Rewa commissioned the tower-like structure during his reign from 1910 to 1920.

The kings of Rewa were fond of killing only male tigers, and it is said that almost 100 tigers were killed by the kings perched on this machaan. Perched high above the ground, Shikaargaah Machaan provides an unparalleled opportunity to witness the incredible biodiversity of the reserve. Visitors can enjoy panoramic views of the dense forests, grasslands, and water bodies, catching glimpses of elusive species such as tigers, leopards, deer, and a myriad of bird species. The machaan facilitates responsible ecotourism, allowing guests to connect with nature without disturbing the natural behaviours of the inhabitants. Within the reserve, there are several religious sites that hold a deep spiritual significance. The Vijayghat Bagmanda Temple, for instance, hosts the Basant Panchami fair, attracting 3,000 – 4,000 people annually. The Siddha Baba Shrine in the Mohan range, though not frequented by many tourists, is a sacred space significant for the habitat of tigers and other species. Another temple, Banas Dham, located on the border of the Beohari range, is a place of pilgrimage that sees a steady stream of visitors.



Shikaargaah Machaan in Sanjay-Dubri Tiger Reserve

Photo by Radha Datta

Satpura Tiger Reserve

Satpura, meaning 'Seven Folds' or 'Seven Hills' in Sanskrit, is a triangular watershed that separates the Narmada and Tapti rivers. Satpura Tiger Reserve (STR) is an excellent example of the Central Indian Highlands ecosystem, and with an area of 2,133 sq km, it is one of the significant geographical plateaus in India. One of India's oldest reserve forests is the Satpura Jungle. This vast, serene area is essentially free of human interference and is located in the Satpura Mountain range in central India. This unique region, part of Madhya Pradesh's first Biosphere Reserve, has some of central India's highest biodiversity, including abundant flora, fauna, and cultural features. Tiger, panther, gaur, sambar, chital, barking deer, chowsingha, chinkara, bluebell, wild boar, sloth bear, and hyena are seen frequently. The forest of STR may be termed a moist mixed deciduous forest, with the predominance of both sal and teak in different areas. The fact that certain species present here are uncommon to Madhya Pradesh is also noteworthy. From the perspective of archaeology and the study of human evolution history as well, Satpura is a crucial reserve. Its unique geographical formations, dense forests, waterfalls, distinguished flora and fauna, rock shelters depicting ancient cultural heritage, pilgrim sites, colonial buildings, and tribal culture make it one of the most unique wildlife destinations in Madhya Pradesh.

The tribal communities in and around the Satpura Tiger Reserves contribute significantly to the region's cultural heritage. Villages like Churna and Madai are bastions of traditional practices, folklore, and art forms passed down through generations. Visitors engage with these communities to gain insights into their unique way of life, strengthening the bond between humans and the environment.

Jhinhini Mahal

This hidden gem and architectural marvel, shrouded in myth and embraced by nature's splendour, stands as a testament to the historical richness that saturates the Satpura tiger reserve region. As you uncover the secrets of Jhin Jhini Mahal, you are transported back in time to an era of opulence and cultural grandeur. According to locals, it was built in King Bhabhut Singh's era. The unique structure has been crafted from massive rocks stacked one above another, a feat achieved without the use of any concrete. Intricate carvings, delicate arches, and detailed friezes grace the palace walls, narrating stories of the bygone era. The structure is believed to have served as a summer retreat for royalty, a tranquil haven amidst the lush greenery of the Satpura Tiger Reserve. The exact origin of Jhin Jhini Mahal is unknown, a mystery that intrigues many historians.

Many 'Veergals' or memorial stones lying around Jhinhini Mahal depict battle scenes involving horses and elephants and hand-to-hand combat. These stones have been placed in the memory of those who died in battle. One of the stones here depict a female warrior as well.



Remains of Jhinhini Mahal

Image courtesy: NTCA

Raja Bhabut Singh Kila Gate

Satpuras are more than mere forests; they also hold thousands of years, traditional tales, and heard stories. One of these is the tale of Raja Bhabhut Singh, the Satpura hero and king, who fought for these forests against the British in the first Indian War of Independence in 1857 and lost his life fighting it. Following this, the British forced the tribal people from their mountainous territories and established the first reserve forest in India, the Bori Sanctuary, in the name of conservation. However, they quickly began utilising these forests as a supply zone. Following this, the British drove the tribal people from their mountainous lands and established the first reserve forest in India, the Bori Sanctuary, in the name of conservation. However, these forests were soon being used as a source of teak wood for the colonial establishment.

The Pachmarhi plateau, which was home to a sizable community at the time, was taken over and turned into a cantonment. They also credited Captain James Forsyth from the British army with finding Pachmarhi. However, even this could not erase the memory of the revolt, and the truth endured through the ages to become a modern-day legend of bravery and selflessness. In these forest areas to the present day, hundreds of rock art, cave temples, and other monuments bear evidence of the prosperous periods of tribal rule.

More than 100 rock shelters with exquisite murals ranging in age from 3,000 to 10,000 years make this location crucial for archaeological and anthropological research on the evolution of humankind.

These paintings, some of India's best examples of rock paintings, teach us a lot. They show fights, rituals, processions, hunting, group dances, fishing, gathering honey, and other everyday activities. In addition to delineating the reserve's boundaries, this medieval gate serves as a moving reminder of the rich cultural legacy that coexists with the astounding biodiversity of the Satpura region.

The gate was formerly the kingdom's gateway, and its inclusion in the Satpura Tiger Reserve gives the area's conservation scene a deeper historical dimension. In addition to being aesthetically pleasing, the Raja Bhabhut Singh Kila Gate is significant to the local people's culture. It is a source of pride for people who live in the Satpura region and a monument to the legacy of the royal dynasty. The historical resonance of the gate links the rich past and present together as it reverberates across time.



Raja Bhabhut Singh Kila Gate in Satpura Tiger Reserve

Image courtesy: NTCA

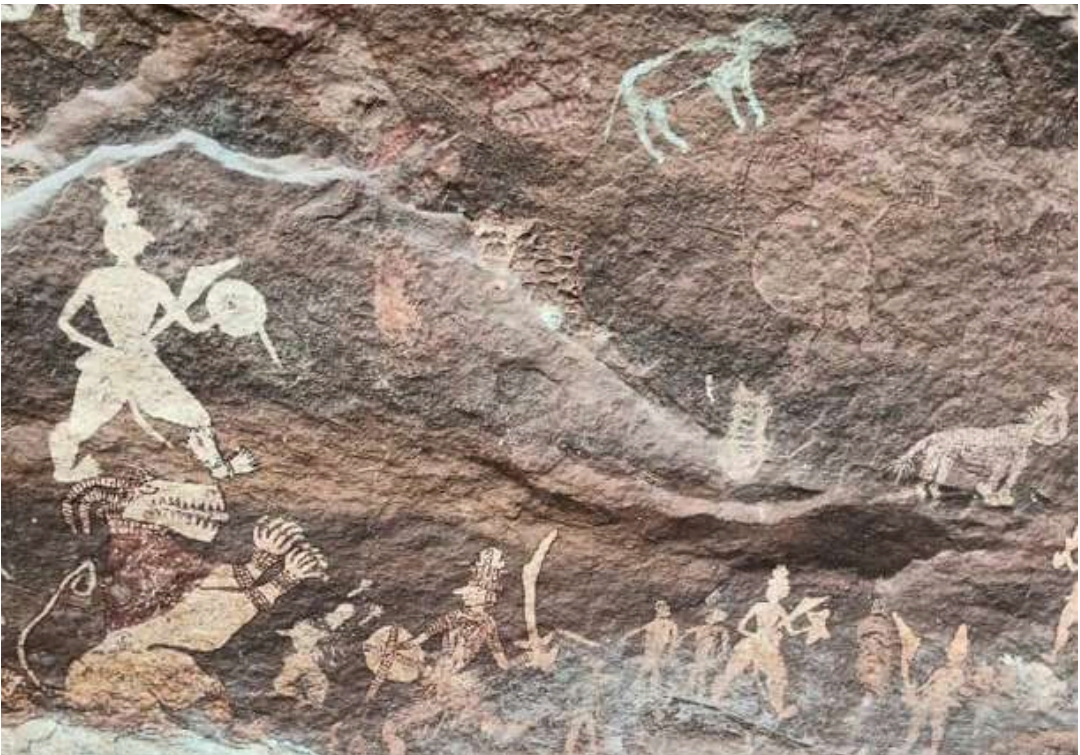
Best time to visit the reserve area is in the months of October to February, because of the weather conditions and increased chances of sighting of animals in the protected area. Officially, the reserve is open for tourism from 15th October to 30th June.

Rock Paintings

The continued existence sees the rich cultural and historical heritage of more than 50 rock shelters within the Satpura Tiger Reserve, each decorated with rock paintings depicting animals like deer, tigers, elephants, and porcupines. These murals, believed to be between 1,500 and 10,000 years old, are essential for understanding the history of human evolution in the region and offer exciting details about the prehistoric human civilisations that formerly lived there. By providing insight into the lifestyles, ideologies, and artistic expressions of the prehistoric communities that once flourished in the Satpura region, the rock paintings connect to past periods.

In addition to the rock shelters, the central area of the tiger reserves contains a few unidentified heritage sites that may be related to various dynasties that formerly controlled the area. Following the prehistoric era, this country was dominated by several groups of people, including the Kalchuris, Scindias, Marathas, Mughals, and Gonds.

In December 2023, the forest department of Satpura Tiger Reserve made a significant archaeological discovery when they found a 10,000-year-old rock painting near Narmadapuram, Madhya Pradesh. The rock painting in Churna was uncovered by the forest guards during the counting. The picture depicts the people of that era. A group of ape-like people with weapons may be seen in the image. In addition, several rock drawings feature a giraffe-like image alongside other wild animals.



Rock paintings from the prehistoric period can be found in Satpura Tiger Reserve

Image courtesy: NTCA



These paintings depict animal figures and human life in the prehistoric era
Image courtesy: NTCA

Maharashtra





**Bahamani gateways of Narnala Fort in
Melghat Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra**
All photographs in this chapter are courtesy NTCA

Maharashtra

Numerous animal species, such as Indian leopard, endangered Nilgiri tahr, and various bird species, including the Malabar crested lark, comprise the rich biodiversity of the state of Maharashtra. The natural landscape of the state, which ranges from mountainous to coastal marshes, not only supports these species but also provides the backdrop for folklore, festivals, and cultural expressions that honour the natural world. Maharashtra's agricultural techniques, handicrafts, and conservation activities all demonstrate the relationship with the environment. The state houses several tiger reserves such as Tadoba-Andhari, Bor, Melghat, Pench, Nawegaon-Nagzira and Sahyadri, which not only conserve the tiger but also encompass rich cultural and historical heritage. The presence of forts like Narnala and Gawilgarh within the reserve area is a reflection of the intertwining of the natural and man-made elements, thereby highlighting the necessity of conserving both natural and cultural heritage.

Melghat Tiger Reserve

Melghat Tiger Reserve, located in the forests of Amravati, Akola, and Buldhana districts of Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, is one of the nine tiger reserves declared initially when Project Tiger was launched in 1973. The reserve is appropriately named Melghat, meaning 'meeting of the ghats', considering its position amidst an infinite series of hills and slopes. Melghat is a storehouse of biodiversity and tribal culture. The reserve connects the forests and the protected areas of the states of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, thereby maintaining the contiguity of the woods of the Satpura hills. It is also home to the Korku, Gaoli, and Nihal tribal communities, who can coexist peacefully with their natural surroundings owing to their traditional ethnobotanical knowledge.

The reserve harbours a viable population of endangered animals, such as the tigers and gaur (Indian bison), who usually hide in the crevices of the forts and valleys of the reserves. The Narnala Fort and Gawilgarh Fort, recognised as Centrally Protected Monuments by the Archaeological Survey of India, are situated in the Melghat Tiger Reserve, rendering the reserve both culturally and ecologically significant.

Gawilgarh Fort

Abul Fazal describes Gawilgarh as an impenetrable fortress in Ain-i-Akbari as the fort is situated north of the Deccan Plateau in the reserve and would have been difficult for any army to reach and conquer. It was once a stronghold of the Maratha Empire. The fort is estimated to be about 900 years old. It derives its name from the Gawlis, who constructed the fort and ruled the shepherd community in the 12th and 13th centuries CE until the fort was taken over by the Gond kings, who remained in charge till the Mughal invasion in the early 15th century CE. Marathas later conquered the fort till they were overthrown by the British in 1803 in the Second Anglo-Maratha War. The ten cannons placed inside the fort, made of iron, copper, and brass, are a reminder of the glorious past of Gawilgarh. The fort is said to be made out of mud, and one can find exquisitely carved idols from the era of Nizams,

when their capital was located at Elichpur, inside the fort. The fort's walls have been adorned with carvings of elephants, bulls, tigers and lions, along with Hindi, Urdu, and Arabic inscriptions. Idols of Lord Hanuman and Lord Shankar can also be spotted inside the fort.



Exquisite carvings can be seen on Shardul Darwaja of the Gawilgarh Fort

Photo by Shikhar Mohan

The fort is open to visitors throughout the year from 9 am to 5 pm. An entry fee of ₹25 per person for Indian nationals and ₹300 per person for foreign nationals is charged from the tourists.

Narnala Fort

The Narnala Fort is perched on a hill in the Melghat reserve named after the Rajput ruler, Narnal Singh. According to local history, the fort was constructed by the Gond Kings in the 10th century CE. According to legend, the fort was built by Sultan Mahmud Gazhnavi, who was a devout follower of the Muslim saint, Bagh Swar Ali Hazrat Burhanuddin, and the piece of land where the fort stands today used to be the saint's holding place along with his several white tigers. The Mughals occupied the fort in the 15th century CE and rebuilt it, after which it came to be known as the Shahanur fort. Narnala was among the 13 sarkars of the province of the Mughal dynasty, Berar Subah, and is also renowned for being the birthplace of the great-grandson of the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb. One can spot the influences of Mughal architecture all around the fort, which is owed to its history of

continuous change of ownership. The architecture of Narnala Fort bears the permanent impression of every emperor. Classic Bahamani gateways, lofty Mughal arches, gardens, leisure towers in the Maratha style, and numerous other buildings may be found here. The philosopher's stone is rumoured to have been found in the lake at the complex's centre and thought to have healing capabilities, but the stone was nowhere to be seen when the lake dried up during the drought and Indian famine of 1899–1900.

The Narnala Fort, a masterpiece of architectural design, is made up of three small forts – Narnala in the centre, Jaffrabad (or Zafarabad) on the east and Teliagarh on the west. The fort's 21 small gates, 360 watchtowers and six large gates, including the elaborate Shahnur gate, are all part of its grandeur. The Shahnur gate, the innermost of the three gateways, is a prime example of Sultanate architecture. It is very elaborate and made of white sandstone, with Arabic inscriptions, a beautiful cornice, and traditional patterns featuring lotus flowers. Prominent balconies with panels of stone lattice work that exhibit a wide range of designs are on either side of it. The gate was constructed by Fataullah Imad-ul-Mulk in 1486 during the reign of Shahab-ud-din Mahmud Shah (Bahmani), according to an inscription. A short verse from the Quran has also been inscribed on the gate, adding to its cultural significance.

The eight-petalled 'Ashtakamal' Lotus, a representation of Narnal Singh's dynasty, is still visible on the fortress. Mosques and numerous other structures in the fort display these lotuses. Therefore, it is evident that Narnal Singh's initial architectural designs were modified by Islamic rulers, who also gave it a Mughal appearance, as given the fort's location, it would have been infeasible for any monarch to reconstruct the fort in its entirety. In the fort, next to Shakkar Talao, there is a shrine devoted to dogs that is said to heal rat, jackal, and dog bites. On several nights, locals have regularly spotted a tiger roaming within the Jaffrabad fort, thereby highlighting the fort's importance in the forest ecosystem.

The period between October and January is the best time to visit the fort. Winter is also a good time for bird watching here. The fort is open to visitors from 6 am to 6 pm.

Pench Tiger Reserve

Spanning across the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, the Pench Tiger Reserve is in central India. It is one of India's premier tiger reserves and the first to spread across Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. It covers a total area of approximately 1,015 sq km. Ecologically, Pench is categorised as a tropical, moist, deciduous tiger habitat. This reserve is renowned for its diverse flora and fauna, including the majestic Bengal tiger. There are records of 168 species of resident and migratory birds. Birds like the Malabar pied hornbill, Indian pia, osprey, grey headed fishing eagle, white eyed buzzard, etc. are recorded in the Pench Tiger Reserve.



Narnala Fort in Melghat Tiger Reserve

Vultures are also seen in many parts of the forest. The high habitat heterogeneity favours the excellent population of chital and sambar. However, beyond its natural beauty lies a tapestry of history waiting to be uncovered. Since time immemorial, the tiger reserve has remained under forest cover and a favourite place for the rulers of the land. The area has historical, ethnic, and administrative importance. The Gond dynasty, who established Nagpur city, ruled over this region historically. The Bakht Buland Shah and his successors ruled the area before the Bhoslas of Nagpur and the British. The place attracts tourists to the well-maintained Durga Temple and the tomb of Baba Alla Hazrat Ali Baux Lal Diwan Shah. The fort belongs to the 'Vandurga' or Forest Fort category and is one of the smallest forts in Nagpur district—this and several other historic places viz. in the Pench Tiger Reserve, Ghugusgarh, Nagpahadi, etc. have testified to the area's history. Besides these, mines for manganese ore and other minerals mines are also found in the Tiger Reserve, that has also become a hotspot for birds due to the accumulation of season's water. The place also has several areas of ethnic importance, such as 'Mathatek', 'Mamma Bhanjaa', 'Nagdeo Pahadi' etc. as well as Shiva Temple, Hanuman Mandir, Sai Mandir and Dargah near Dongartal.

Ghugusgarh Fort

Hidden amidst the dense forests of Pench Tiger Reserve lies a timeless relic of India's storied past, the Ghugusgarh Fort. Perched majestically atop a rugged hill, this ancient stronghold whispers tales of courage, conquest, and cultural grandeur. As visitors venture into the heart of this wilderness sanctuary, they are beckoned to unravel the mysteries of this historical gem. Ghugusgarh Fort, believed to have been constructed during the 15th century CE, stands as a testament to the architectural ingenuity of its creators. Built atop a natural precipice, the fort's strategic location provided unparalleled vantage points, offering a commanding view of the surrounding landscape. Its sturdy walls, bastions, and intricate design reflect the bygone era's military prowess and engineering understanding. Ghugusgarh Fort bore witness to numerous historical events and dynastic changes throughout its centuries-long existence. From the reign of the Gonds to the Marathas and beyond, this fort played a pivotal role in shaping the region's socio-political landscape. Crumbling ramparts, dilapidated structures, and weather-worn sculptures stand as silent sentinels, guarding the secrets of the past centuries past. Each step taken within the fort's precincts offers a glimpse into the lives of those who once called this formidable fortress home. Ghugusgarh Fort stands as a testament to the resilience of India's cultural heritage and the enduring legacy of its forebears. Tourists visit here to uncover its mysteries and are transported back to an era of chivalry, conquest, and architectural marvels. Amidst the wilderness of Pench Tiger Reserve, this ancient stronghold remains a beacon of history, inviting all who dare to unravel its enigmatic past.

Sanskrit poet and playwright Kalidas captured the mesmerising beauty of this region in his masterpiece 'Meghadootam'.



Remnants of Ghughusgarh Fort in Pench Tiger Reserve

Odisha





A glimpse of Similipal Tiger Reserve in Odisha
All photos in this chapter are courtesy NTCA



Odisha, the land of temples and dense forest cover, is known for being home to the rare melanistic tiger. Its forests harbour birds like the Malabar whistling thrush as well as the resident flamingo along with animals like elephants, spotted deer and sambar deer. The wildlife is supported by various habitats in the state, which span from the intricate mangroves of Bhitarkanika National Park to the dense forests of mahua and sal in Similipal Tiger Reserve.

Many of these species are highly valued in the local folklore and traditions as well, thus contributing to the cultural identity of the state. The location of forts, palaces and religious monuments around the Similipal Tiger Reserve highlights its cultural and historical importance, which calls for a preservative study of these structures and an exploration of the bond between natural beauty and cultural heritage of a region.

Similipal Tiger Reserve

Once the hunting ground of the King of Mayurbhanj, Similipal Tiger Reserve was formally declared a reserve forest in 1959 by the state government after the merger of erstwhile Mayurbhanj State with the Union of India. It is part of the Eastern Ghats and central Indian landscape. Similipal derives its name from the abundance of red silk cotton trees or simul that grow in the forest. The vast terrain of Similipal, with a lot of altitudinal variations along with topographic and climatic variation, is cut by large perennial streams like Budhabalang, Baitarani, and Subarnarekha. The forests harbour a unique blend of Western Ghats, Eastern Ghats, and Sub-Himalayan plant species and form the most significant watershed of northern Odisha. Because of the mosaic of ecological systems, Similipal came under the Global Network of Biospheres in the year 2009. Along with the highest tiger population in Odisha, spotted deer, elephants, hornbill, bison, leopard, fishing cat, and others make up its faunal composition.

The reserve is also famous for Saroj Raj Chowdhury, a Padma Shri awardee who was the first field director of the protected area and the tigress 'Khairi', adopted by him. The cultural significance of Similipal can be characterised by the stories and paintings that date back to the 4-5 century CE at the time of Puranas. Many of the stories also mention local sites linked with specific mythological stories. For example, the sacred grove Shami Vrikhya is believed to be the secret hiding place of Arjuna's bow and arrow from the Mahabharata. Athara Deula and Chahala Bungalow are two sites inside the tiger reserve that offer more cultural significance.

Athara Deula Temple

The Deuris have installed their worshipping deity on the foot of the Similipal Tiger Reserve. Badam, the presiding deity of Bathudi tribal community, is believed to be formless and residing in his abode – Athara Deula. The temple is located at the heart of Similipal in the Kuanribil Beat of Khejuri Section

under the Gurguria range. According to the Bathudis, a human did not build this temple, but it was created by their god. Manab Deula is the only temple built by a human; the rest are natural caves. Athara Deula is built of laterite stone without cement and lime and is the most ancient temple in Odisha. It consists of 18 temples, inside and around Similipal hills.

The chief priest of the temple, known as Devaraja or Thakuraja, sends a message on the 10th day of Chaitra month to the devotees to visit Athara Deula. The devotees are only supposed to wear traditional clothing: a white cloth wrapped around the legs, a white ganji (vest) and a gamcha (coarse piece of cloth) for males, and a white saree with a red border for females. For this tribe, life remains meaningless without visiting Athara Deula once. The temple is now degenerating and requires preservation efforts to recall the history and culture of the Bathudi tribe.

Devotees need to take permission from the Field Director of Similipal Tiger Reserve to enter the park with vehicles.



Athara Deula Temple in Similipal Tiger Reserve

Chahala Bungalow

Chahala Bungalow, situated on the border of the core area of the tiger reserve, is renowned for offering one of the finest opportunities to observe wildlife up close. The historic bungalow rests within the Chahala Beat of the Chahala wildlife range, nestled in the Similipal North Wildlife Division. Erected a century ago during the British colonial period, this bungalow holds significant historical value. Located within the core area of the Similipal Tiger Reserve, the bungalow is off-limits to regular visitors. Its strategic location has made it a prime target, notably during the turbulent times of left-wing extremism. The scars of a Maoist attack in 2009 still linger when the forest rest house and surrounding structures suffered damage, leaving an indelible mark on the memories of tourists. Despite its tumultuous history, there have been recent significant events. In May 2023, Hon'ble President of India, Smt Droupadi Murmu chose the Chahala for her stay during her visit to the Similipal Tiger Reserve, signifying a notable moment in its ongoing narrative.



Chahala Bungalow in Similipal Tiger Reserve



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Maha Brukhya Sal tree in
Similipal Tiger Reserve, Odisha

Rajasthan





**A panoramic view of Sariska Tiger Reserve
encircled by the Aravallis in Rajasthan**
Photo by Radha Datta

Rajasthan

The state of Rajasthan, characterised by its forts and palaces, offers an interesting mix of history and biodiversity. A wide variety of plant species may be found in the arid terrain of Rajasthan, which is defined by the Thar Desert and some semi-arid areas. Hardy desert flora, such as the cactus, acacias, and the well-known khejri tree, are essential to the survival of the local ecological systems. This arid yet stunning habitat supports a variety of wildlife species, including the spectacular Great Indian Bustard, the desert fox, and the endangered Indian gazelle (chinkara). The state's culture, which frequently draws inspiration from nature for its customs, crafts, and folklore, highly values the ecosystem that surrounds them. The tiger reserves of the state such as Sariska, Mukundra Hills and Ranthambore are repositories of historical information and cultural significance. With the Ranthambore Fort serving as a hideout for the tiger to the Garadia Mahadev in Mukundra Hills exemplifying the tradition of nature worship, the state is rooted in such tales where the natural environment and cultural traditions coincide.

Mukundra Hills Tiger Reserve

In the southeastern reaches of Rajasthan, the Mukundra Hills Tiger Reserve unfolds a different chapter in the royal state's heritage. Named after the two continuous flat-topped parallel hills, Mukundra Tiger Reserve is the third tiger reserve in Rajasthan. It is spread across four state districts: Bundi, Kota, Jhalawar and Chittorgarh. Surrounded by the quaint town of Kota, the reserve is a harmonious blend of wildlife conservation and architectural splendour. Among the significant fauna are the leopard, sloth bear, nilgai, chinkara, spotted deer, langur, Indian pangolin, jackal, hyena, small Indian civet, etc. Kala dhok, khair, ber, kakan, raunj, bel, salar, uum, shisham, etc. are the predominant flora species in the tiger reserve. The Kota Barrage, an engineering marvel that controls the flow of the Chambal River, showcases the convergence of nature and human innovation. In the past, the hills served as the royal hunting ground for the Maharaja of Kota and were notified as a tiger reserve in 2013. It encompasses the area of Mukundra National Park, Dara Sanctuary, Jawahar Sagar Sanctuary and part of Chambal Sanctuary. As the winds of time continue to sweep across the royal state, the tiger reserves of Rajasthan stand as guardians of both magnificent tigers and the echoes of a regal past. Each heritage site within these reserves is a time capsule, inviting travellers to unravel the tales of conquests, devotion, and architectural brilliance. In the heart of the wild, where the roars of tigers resonate with the whispers of history, Rajasthan's tiger reserves and heritage sites unveil an enchanting story that transcends the boundaries of time, inviting all who wish to explore and embark on a journey through the pages of a living, breathing chronicle.

Abli Meeni Mahal

Maharaja Mukundarav of Kota commissioned the Abli Meeni Mahal in 1614. According to the locals, the king met Abli Meeni on one of his hunting journeys in the Dara forests, which are located between modern-day Kota and Jhalawar. The king, enthralled with her beauty and courage, declared his love –

for her. Abli Meeni then responded by stating that she would only marry him if she could see a lit lamp in her village of Khairabad. The king ordered the building of Abli Meeni ka Mahal, a fort, to win her over.



Abli Meeni Mahal is open to visitors five days during the week from Monday to Friday, from 9 am to 5 pm. One can plan visits in the winter months. Photo by Shikhar Mohan

Badoli Temples

The Badoli or Baroli temples, a collection of historic temples, are not just architectural wonders but also sacred spaces with deep religious significance. Set in the Aravalli Hills of Badoli village, on the eastern bank of the river Chambal, also known as the ancient Chamnavati, these temples have been a place of worship and spiritual solace for centuries.

According to the Archaeological Survey of India records, the temple site is on a trade route linking the Hadoti and Mewar regions with the Malwa region. As one of Rajasthan's most magnificent and ancient temple complexes, Badoli is made up of 73 temples in total that date back to the 10th and 11th century CE. Out of the nine surviving temple complexes, most of the temples are devoted to Lord Shiva, also referred to as Ghateshwara Mahadeva. In contrast, the remaining temples are dedicated to Lord Vishnu, Ganesha, Mahisasuramardini, and Mataji.

The temples were built in the Chalukyan style of architecture, and elaborate sculptures and delicate carvings adorned the temples, which reflect the artistic brilliance and spiritual beliefs of that time.

The temple complex reflects the architectural style of Pratihara with the sanctum sanctorum of all the major temples in the Pancharatha style. This style of architecture is known for its sculptures, carved panels and open pavilion-style temples. The use of sandstone for carving idols with various shades of red, due to the presence of iron oxide, is common. During the restoration of the temples, two inscriptions mention the restoration of Siddheshwar temple by Vikhuja in 11th century CE. Additional historical records show the construction of the Shambhu temple by Vidhaaj during the same period. The inscriptions on the temple also indicate that Jhareshwar is the presiding deity of the temple, which is presently known as the Ghateshwar temple.



Badoli temples is a group of temples in Mukundra Hills Tiger Reserve

Photo by Radha Datta

Badoli temples remain open throughout the year from 9 am to 6 am and require no entry fee from the visitors.

Gagron Fort

A 'Jaladurga' or a water fort in its true sense, Gagron Fort is a testament to resilience. Situated at the meeting point of rivers Ahu and Kali Sindh, the fort is surrounded by water from three sides and a moat on the fourth side. It has no foundation; instead, it is supported by the sturdy hill rocks of the Mukundra Hills of the Vindhya range, making it a unique structure. The fort, a fine example of Rajput and Islamic architecture, was built in the 12th century CE by King Bijaldev Singh Dod of the Dod Dynasty to serve as a line of defence for the invading troops. Having withstood 14 battles, the Khichi Chauhans occupied Gagron Fort in the later 12th century CE. They later remained under the auspices of Hoshang Shah, Bhimkaran, Mahmud Khilji, Rana Khumba, Sultan Bahadur Shah and Emperor Akbar. A painting by Madhav Kalan, illustrated in Akbarnama, showing the victory of Mughal emperor Akbar over the fort of Gagron, is a testament to its historical importance.

Gagron Fort blends Rajput and Islamic architectural styles and showcases the region's rich cultural heritage. The Rajput influence is depicted in the fort's barracks, palaces, stables and the four gigantic entrances: Ganesh Pol, Bhairavi Pol, Suraj Pol and Kishan Pol. Unlike most forts with two ramparts, there are three ramparts in the Gagron fort, which makes the fort impregnable. Arrow holes also dot the walls of the fort. The fort has solid walls, imposing gateways, watchtowers, and bastions—Ramburj and Dvaburj—all reflecting its defensive nature. The fortification is further enhanced by the rivers and the dense forests surrounding it, creating a formidable stronghold. Within the fort premises, there are several other palaces, namely, Janaana Mahal and Rang Mahal and temples such as Madhusudan Mandir, Hanuman Mandir and other spaces like Diwan-i-Khas, Diwan-i-Aam, Nakkarkhana, Selekhana that add to the architectural brilliance of the fort. One can find the Sufi saint Mitthe Shah shrine outside the fort, which also serves an annual treat of colourful fair during the month of Muharram.

The shrine of Saint Pipaji is also located near the fort; Saint Pipa, known as Raja Pratap Rao before he renounced his kingdom in 1368, contributed significantly to the Bhakti Movement and was a contemporary of Kabir. There is also a Jauhar Kund inside the fort, and it is believed that the fort had witnessed Jauhar's practice twice. The fort was also renowned for being the preferred retreat for Jhala Zalim Singh, Dewan of Kota. The fort is also famous for the Alexandrine Parakeet, also known as 'Gagrani Parakeet', a species of parrot that derives its name from the fort. The fort is also mentioned in a Persian text called 'Tabaqat-i-Akbari', an authoritative account by Khwajah Nizamuddin Ahmed. The fort is referred to as 'kaakroon' in the text, which describes the early Muslim invasion of India. Because of this great historical and architectural significance, in 2013, Gagron Fort was recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site under 'Hill Forts of Rajasthan'.



Gagron Fort in Mukundra Hills Tiger Reserve

Photo by Shikhar Mohan

The fort remains open throughout the week from 9 am to 5 pm and requires an entry fee of ₹50 for Indians and ₹100 for foreign nationals. A walk around the fort may take upto four hours, therefore, the best time to visit would be during the winter months, from September to March.

Garadia Mahadev

Located in isolation on the banks of the Chambal River, Garadia Mahadev is a well-known temple of Kota. Along with spirituality, one can enjoy the mesmerising view where the Chambal River takes a complete U-turn. The shrine can be reached by climbing a few steps to pray to Lord Shiva. Situated at a height of 500 m from the sea level, the gorges, plains, and still-blue water of the Chambal River offer the most spectacular view from the temple site. The site falls under the category of both a natural heritage site and an artificial heritage site.

Ghateswara Temple

The 58-feet-high, built-in sandstone Ghateswara Temple is adorned with figures of deities and apsaras. With its face in the east direction, the temple consists of 'trianga garbhagriha' (womb room), 'antarala'

(small antechamber between garbhagriha and mandapa) and 'mukhamandapa' (small porch in front of the doorway of the temple). The temple has a 'Kalash' on its top and a finely carved flag bearer. It is raised over the 'pitha' (small platform), consisting of a 'vedibandha' (foundation block) and a plain 'jangha' (walled section) surmounted by a curvilinear shikhara (spire above sanctum). The images of Chamunda, Natesa, and Andhakantaka, a form of Lord Shiva, are enshrined in the niches of jangha (walled section) in the north, west, and south directions. The river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna are shown on the lower part of Garbhagriha's door with their attendants. The 'mukhamandapa' (small porch in front of the temple doorway) is entered through a beautifully carved 'makara-torana'. The roof of the temple is adorned with 'rathikas' depicting spiritual themes. The temple is a testimony to the region's rich cultural and spiritual heritage. With the intricate architectural details and ancient sculptures, one can gain insights into that era's artistic skills and religious practices.

A four feet stone statue of Natraja or Natesha in Chatura pose with Jatamakuta and Trinetra was stolen from Ghateswara Temple in February 1998 and was smuggled out to the United Kingdom. This rare depiction of Lord Shiva built in the Pratihara style was brought back to India in the year 2020.

Ranthambore Tiger Reserve

In a state like Rajasthan, renowned for its vibrant, rich culture and regal history, several tiger reserves also lie. These tiger reserves guard the big cats and are a treasure trove of heritage sites that narrate the tales of bygone eras. One such fascinating destination is the Ranthambore Tiger Reserve, located at the confluence of the Vindhyan and the Aravalli ranges. It is located about 13.5 km from the city of Sawai Madhopur and covers an area of approximately 400 sq km. Ranthambore National Park in 1955 was initially called the Sawai Madhopur Game Sanctuary. In 1973, it was declared one of the nine reserves under Project Tiger in India. The forest is tropical, dry, and deciduous, with tropical thorns and other prime trees such as banyan, peepal, and neem. These trees have religious and medicinal values.

The core area of Ranthambore Tiger Reserve is home to the Royal Bengal tiger, leopard, caracal, desert cat, etc. Ranthambore Tiger Reserve is a place for wildlife enthusiasts and history buffs who want to experience the coexistence of the majestic tigers and the annals of history. One can find many ruins and heritage sites scattered all over the reserve, out of which the Ranthambore Fort and the medieval temples are most noteworthy and give the reserve a unique and mixed flavour of nature, history and wildlife.

Khandar Fort

The fort is located at the Ranthambore National Park and Tiger Reserve border in the Sawai Madhopur district of Rajasthan. The fort's strategic construction in the mountainous area gave it an advantage over the invaders. The Sisodia monarchs of Mewar ruled the fort for a considerable time. The Mughals briefly controlled the fort before the Maharajas of Jaipur gained direct control of it in –

the 18th century. The local tiger population also inhabits the area around the fort. Seven temples make up the fort, one of which is a Jain temple housing the idols of the Jain Tirthankars carved out of rock. A single stone idol of Lord Hanuman with a demon beneath its feet can be found in a Hanuman temple nearby. The Chaturbhuja Temple, Gobind Devji Temple, Jagatpalji Temple, and Jayanti Mata Temple are the other temples located within the Khandar Fort. The magnificent statue of the four-armed God is kept in the Chaturbhuja Temple. The Jayanti Mata Temple hosts a fair each year. Additionally, the incredible Rani Temple of the Khandar Fort is situated on its highest platform and is probably the highlight of the structure.

The fort remains open throughout the week, from 9 am to 5 pm. No entry fee is needed to visit the Khandar fort.



The Khandar Fort was strategically built over a mountain to avoid invaders

Photo by Radha Datta

Ranthambore Fort

The Ranthambore Tiger Reserve encompasses the Ranthambore Fort, a UNESCO World Heritage Site under the heading 'Hill Forts of Rajasthan'. With its historical walls displaying the stories of bravery and glory that once echoed throughout the area, the fort stands vigil over the reserve. The fort is located in a region the former Jaipur rulers used as their primary hunting estates. Perched on a 700-foot hill, the fort serves as one of the most visited sites in the area and has played an integral part in the history of the state of Rajasthan. Because of safety precautions, it is thought to have been built by the Chauhans in the 10th century CE. The advantageous position of this renowned fort provided an ideal location to keep the invaders distant.

The fort ultimately was taken over by the Delhi Sultanate, a late medieval state that ruled over the Indian subcontinent, in the 13th century CE. Numerous sieges and battles have occurred at Ranthambore Fort since it was built in 944 CE. Perhaps the most well-known of these is Rao Hamir's battle against Alauddin Khilji, the Sultan of Delhi, in 1301 CE. Rao Hamir was the final Chauhan dynasty monarch. Many powerful kings have attacked the fort at various times throughout history. Qutub-ud-din Aibak (1209 CE), Allaudin Khilji (1301 CE), Feroz Tughlaq (1328 CE), and Bahadur Shah of Gujarat (1530 CE) were notable figures among them. The Mughals ultimately gained control of the fort, having previously utilised it as a place for their troops and subsequently as a stronghold for prisoners. The Maharaja of Jaipur received the fort in the 19th century CE, and they held it until 1947 when India attained freedom.

The fort stands as a testament to Rajput architecture, with its grand gates, domes, stone walkways, towering walls, water tanks, and temples. The seven gates, each with its own unique name—Ganesh Pol, Andheri Pol, Navlakha Pol, Hath Pol, Sat Pol, Suraj Pol, and Delhi Pol—welcome visitors into the fort. The fort also houses other attractions such as Sameton Ki Haveli, Toran Dwar, and Mahadeo Chhatri, all of which add to its historical charm. Among devotees, the on-site Ganesha Temple is well-known and attracts sizable audiences.

Every year, a fair is held on the occasion of Bhadrapad Sudi Chaturthi. One intriguing feature of the temple, according to local Bhola Ram, is that the mailman delivers mail weighing 10 kg or more to the Pujari, the temple's head priest, every day. These letters can include wedding invitations, complaints, grievances, etc. Every letter is recited aloud to Lord Ganesha by the priest. Additionally, the letters grow by up to 30 kg daily during Ganesh Chaturthi and the mela.

Ranthambore is named after the two hills, Rann and Thambore, which are adjacent. The top of the mountain is located in the centre of the park, and the fort is situated on a single Thambore hill, with Rann bordering the mountain and providing some incredible panoramas.



Ranthambore Fort in Ranthambore Tiger Reserve
Photo by Radha Datta

Sariska Tiger Reserve

Nestled among the Aravalli Hills in the Alwar district of Rajasthan lies the Sariska Tiger Reserve. The forests that were once heavily guarded as part of the erstwhile princely state of Rajasthan and served as the hunting ground for the state's royalty now harbour a wide variety of flora and fauna such as the Royal Bengal tiger, the swift leopard, the native dhok tree as well as the evergreen bamboo trees. After recognition as a separate state, the forests of Rajasthan were leased out to private contractors who it to meet the demand for charcoal and firewood. Post-independence, stringent regulations and curbs on felling the native trees ensured that Sariska was returned to its green status. Sariska is known for its resilient ecosystem despite the frequent temperature variations as well as for successfully reintroducing the national animal, tiger after it was declared locally extinct in 2004-2005.

Sariska is home to some of the most important historical, religious, and archaeological treasures of Rajasthan, offering a glimpse into the past. From the Bala Qila, perched on a hill overlooking the majestic forests of Sariska, to the Kankwari Fort with greenery bordering it from all ends and the mysterious Bhangarh Fort, Sariska is a treasure trove of Rajasthan's cultural heritage.

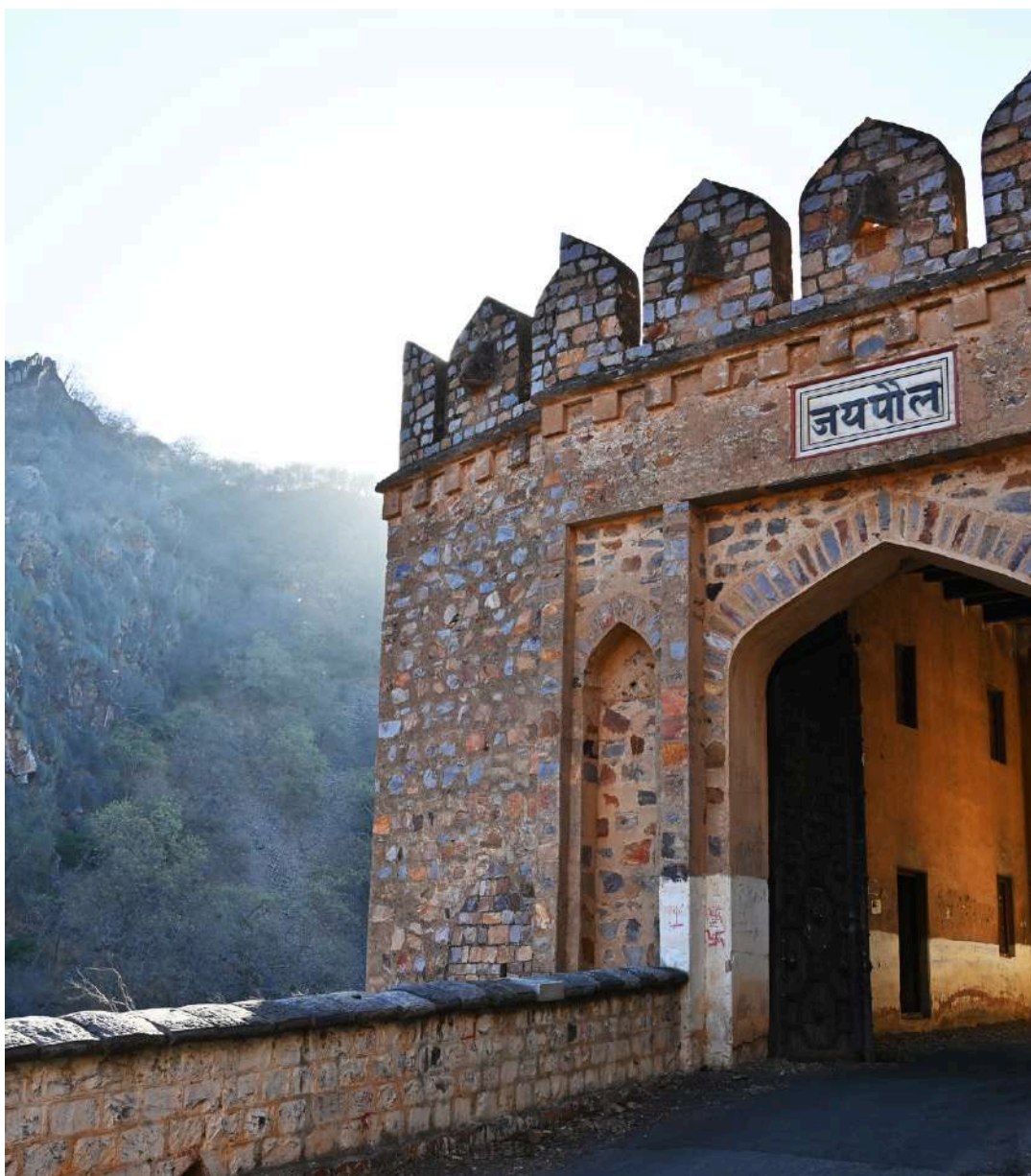
Bala Quila

The Bala Quila or Bala Fort (young fort) stands tall on a highly elevated platform atop a hill in the Pratapbandh Beat of the Alwar range, within the buffer zone of the Sariska Tiger Reserve. During its golden days, the fort was the centre for powerful dynasties that ruled the princely state of Rajasthan at different points of time in the past such as the Yadavas, the Marathas as well as the Kachhwaha Rajputs. The Kachhwahas are credited with establishing the city of Alwar in 1775 after they successfully conquered the Bala Quila, thus indicating the important role that the fort played. It is also said that the Mughal emperors, Babur and Akbar had stayed at Bala Quila during their reign, adding to its historical significance.

There are several intriguing tales associated with the construction of the Bala Quila. While some argue that the Shilp Community of Rajasthan built the fort on the foundation of a mud fort of the 10th century CE, a few others recall the fort being built by the Nikkumbh Kshatriya community. The most widely accepted and known legend is that it was built as a guardian building for the city of Mewat by Hasan Khan Mewati from the Rajput dynasty.

The structure of the fort, influenced by the Indo-Persian style of architecture, is a fascinating blend of plaster, stone, and marble. Its intense fortifications, made up of pillars and latticed balconies, all carved out of marble, were designed to protect the city from any attack. There are six entrances or pols to the fort, namely, Jai Pol, Suraj Pol, Laxman Pol, Chand Pol, Krishan Pol, and Andheri Gate, each said to have been named after a ruler of the princely state. The main entry to the fort is through

the Chand Pol, built during the reign of Raja Chand. The gate to the east, Suraj Pol, is said to have been named after Raja Sural Mal of Bharatpur, while the Jai Pol or Jey Pol is said to have been named after Maharaja Jey Singh, during whose rule the gate was constructed. The fifth gate, Kishan Pol, leads to the water reservoir known as Kishan Kund from the fort, while the sixth gate, known as Andheri Gate, is towards the north of the fort, situated among several large rocks, due to which the rays of the sun do not reach the north end of the fort, keeping it dark and thus, lending the name 'Andheri' to this gate.



One of the six entrances to Bala Quila – Jai Pol
Photo by Radha Datta



Bala Quila in Sariska Tiger Reserve
Photo by Radha Datta

Bhangarh Fort

Imposingly situated in the Bhangarh beat of the Ajabgarh range, within the buffer zone of the Sariska Tiger Reserve, stands the ancient township of Bhangarh. The Bhangarh Fort, a testament to the grandeur of the past, was constructed in the 17th century CE by Raja Madho Singh, the younger sibling of the Mughal General, Raja Man Singh of Amber. This fort, which once housed the entire city, was later declared as the capital of Raja Madho Singh, a testament to its historical significance.

Although the township of Bhangarh is now in ruins, it used to house up to 9,000 houses. The fort was made up of several structures such as the grand havelis, the most prominent being the Narkatiyon ki Haveli or the house of the dancing girls, temples built in the Nagara style of architecture and a marketplace or bazaar indicating the prosperity of the fort and the city of Bhangarh in the past. The fort and the town were well protected by three successive fortifications known as the Brahma Wall and its five massive gates: the Lahori Gate, Ajmeri Gate, Phulbari Gate, Hanuman Gate and Delhi Gate. There are several Hindu temples at the main entrance of the fort. Gopinath, Someshwar, Keshav Rai, Mangala Devi, and Ganesh Temple are well-known temples. These temples are magnificent representations of 17th century CE craftsmanship and construction.



Bhangarh Fort is open for all from 6 am to 6 pm. However, entry is prohibited before sunrise and after sunset. The best time to visit the fort is when the weather is pleasant, that is, between the months of August and February. Photo by Radha Datta



The abandoned township of Bhangarh in Sariska Tiger Reserve

Photo by Radha Datta

There is also the Gopinath Temple, which has beautiful stone sculptures constructed above a plinth 14 feet high. The Purohitji Ki Haveli, the chief priest's dwelling, is in the temple complex. The royal palace inside the fort or the Shahi Mahal was a seven-storeyed structure and, hence, known as Satamahala; however, at present, only four storeys remain.

Bhangarh fort draws several tourists, for it is infamous for the curse of Bhangarh. The fort is considered a haunted place, and several legends are associated with it. While some claim that the city of Bhangarh was reduced to ruins after a Hindu godman, Baba Balau Nath, cursed the fort while it was being constructed as it cast a shadow over his house and disturbed his meditation, a few others claim that a wizard who fell in love with Princess Ratnavati of Bhangarh cursed the city before his death as the princess rejected his advances and proposal. The town of Bhangarh was ultimately invaded by the Mughal army, who wreaked havoc and killed the inhabitants of the fort along with the princess. The fort is closed off for tourists post sunset and before sunrise. Despite its troubled past, the fort of Bhangarh has retained its serene aura and majestic appearance, which perfectly complements its green surroundings in the Sariska Tiger Reserve.

The curse of Bhangarh has severely affected the lives of the people living in the area. For instance, anybody visiting the fort will notice that all houses in the fort premises and in the surrounding areas are roofless and it is said that whenever a house is constructed in the area, the roof of the house falls after a few days.

Kankwari Fort

The Kankwari Fort lies in the middle of the Sariska Tiger Reserve in the Kankwari Beat, which is part of the reserve's core zone. The fort is known to have been constructed by Raja Jai Singh Mann of Amber in the 16th century CE, who started the construction of the fort to provide employment to the nearby villages' residents when the region was struck by drought. The villagers were engaged in the royal court during the day but employed as construction labourers in the evening. The forests of Sariska provide a natural camouflage to the fort, and hence, the fort was used to keep political prisoners in custody. It is also said that the Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, held his brother Dara Sikoh captive in this fort during the battle for the royal crown. To prevent Dara Sikoh's supporters from the Mughal army from rescuing him from the fort, it is believed that Aurangzeb built a massive rampart around the fort and stationed armed troops to watch it from all directions.

Raja Jai Singh Mann, who ordered the construction of the fort, was the ruler of Amber and a senior commander in the Mughal Empire. Thus, several influences from Mughal architecture can be spotted within the fort. The splendid carvings on the walls of the fort, as well as the colourful foliage paintings, are all indicative of Mughal style. Further, the large, open spaces such as balconies, gardens, and galleries within the fort also characterise this style. Within the reserve, the ancient ruins of Kankwari Fort whisper tales of Mughal intrigue and Rajput resilience, adding layers to the historical tapestry.



View of the Aravallis from the terrace of Kankwari Fort in Sariska Tiger Reserve

Photo by Radha Datta



As the Kankwari Fort is situated in the core zone of the reserve, it is closed off for general tourist activity. However, the same can be accessed if one is booking a safari in the tiger reserve

Photo by Radha Datta

Tamil Nadu





Idols of Venkatachalpathy and Srinivasa Perumal in
Yelumalaiyan Temple in Anamalai Tiger Reserve, Tamil Nadu
All photographs in this chapter are courtesy NTCA

Tamil Nadu

The Western Ghats and the wetlands of the Coromandel Coast in Tamil Nadu support a multitude of plant and animal species. In addition to being essential for maintaining local livelihoods, biodiversity is also important for maintaining customs and cultural expressions. Tamil folklore, art, and festivals honour the abundant wildlife, which includes tigers, elephants, and a variety of birds such as the Malabar grey hornbill. These animals frequently represent themes of perseverance and beauty of nature. The strong link between spiritual beliefs of Tamil culture and the natural world is further demonstrated by sacred gardens and old temples that honour the local flora and fauna. Examples of this are the various temples and historical sites in protected areas, particularly in the tiger reserves of the state such as Anamalai and Srivilliputhur-Megamalai Tiger Reserves that are home to the much revered Mangala Devi shrine and the Thirumoorthy Temple amongst the majestic Thirumoorthy falls.

Anamalai Tiger Reserve

Anamalai Tiger Reserve, located in the South-Western Ghats in Tamil Nadu, is bordered by the Eravikulam National Park, Chinnar Wildlife Sanctuary, and the Parambikulam Tiger Reserve. The reserve is a part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve in the southern part of the Anamalai Hills and derives its name from the hills. The reserve has immense diversity in terms of flora and fauna. The reserve houses a variety of flora and fauna, such as the leopard, tiger, balsam, Ceylon cinnamon, Indian bison or 'gaur', pepper, and turmeric. In 2007, a part of the Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary and Indira Gandhi National Park was recognised as a Critical Tiger Habitat, and Anamalai Tiger Reserve was notified.

The reserve is primarily designated as an 'Anthropological Reserve' as it is home to six prominent tribal communities of Tamil Nadu, namely, Malasar, Malai Malasar, Kadar, Eravallar, Pulayar, and Muduvar. Since the reserve houses many tribal communities, one can find several spiritual sites within the reserve, such as the Kodanthur Kattalai Mariamman Temple, the Thirumoorthy Temple, and the Yelumalaiyan Temple. The megalithic structures in the form of dolmens are scattered around the reserve as well, indicating the historical relevance of the area.

Dolmens in Chinnar

The megalithic structures, like dolmens, are situated in the Kombu West Beat of Udumalpet range of the Anamalai Tiger Reserve. The structures are located in the core region of the reserve and date back from almost 2,500 to 400 BCE. Dolmens refer to the burial chambers or storage chambers used by the people of the Megalithic era.

They were also used to dispose of their dead or store their valuables, such as cooking vessels or ornaments. Dolmens are made of large, erect stone slabs with an enormous flat or slightly dome-shaped stone slab placed over them as a roof. These structures offer an insight into the lifestyle and culture of the people of the Stone Age.



Dolmens or burial chambers in Anamalai Tiger Reserve

The mixed deciduous forests here are ideal for trekking. Trekking amidst such beautiful landscapes not only satisfies one's soul but also provide a livelihood to the Hill Pulaya and Muthuvan tribal communities.

Kodanthur Kattalai Mariamman Temple

The Kodanthur Kattalai Mariamman Temple is located in the Kombu West Beat of Udumalpet range in the core region of the reserve. The temple is next to the bank of the river Chinnar at the border of the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The temple, almost 70 years old, is dedicated to the Goddess Mariamman, a village deity, considered the goddess of rain. The site is frequented by the tribal communities which reside in and around the Anamalai Tiger Reserve. The locals throng to the temple on the night of the new moon and pray every Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday for good health and abundant rainfall.

Thirumoorthy Temple

The Thirumoorthy temple, a sacred haven dedicated to the three Hindu gods, Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Brahma, is situated in the Tirumoorthimalai Beat of Udumalpet range, within the core region of the Anamalai Tiger Reserve. This temple, a testament to a naturalist's dream, is located next to the Panchalinga Falls or the Thirumoorthy Falls, at the foot of the Thirumoorthy Hills. It provides an ideal landscape for deep meditation and worship. The temple also has the idols of Lord–

Murugan, Nandi, and Lord Vinayagar. The site is a place of pilgrimage for many, drawn by the Panchalingam or the five Shivalingas, which are placed in close proximity to the Panchalinga Falls, offering a picturesque view amidst the majestic forests of the reserve.

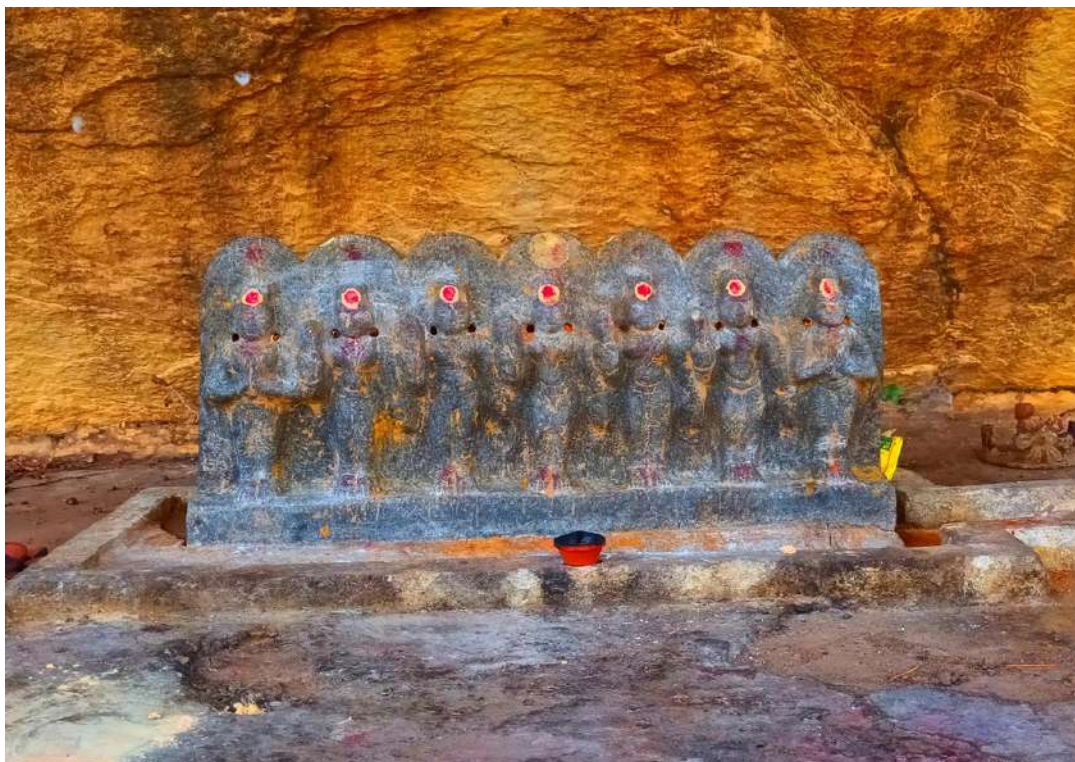
The temple is known as the Thirumoorthy temple, derived from the term 'Thirumoorthigal', which refers to the three gods. If the locals are to be believed, Maharishi Athari (a sage) and his wife, Anusuya Devi, used to reside on the land where the temple now stands, and upon learning of their devotion to Lord Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, the three gods, disguised as ordinary people, visited the couple to test their faith. The couple offered them refuge and food. However, the Thirumoorthigal declined and instead placed a condition that Anusuya Devi make the offering in an undressed state. The three gods asked for food by saying 'Bhavati Bhiksham Dehi', which translates to 'Oh Mother, give us food'. Upon hearing this, Anusuya Devi considered them her children and the gods transformed them into infants who were then breastfed. The three gods, pleased by the couple's devotion towards them, granted them a boon that they would have three children who would be reincarnations of the three gods. Thus, the area became known as Thirumoorthy Hills, and a temple was constructed where the couple resided.



Thirumoorthy Temple in Anamalai Tiger Reserve

Yelumalaiyan Temple

Situated in the Esalthittu East Beat of Udumalpet range in the core area of the Anamalai reserve is the Yelumalaiyan Temple, also known as Elumalaiyan Temple, which is deeply revered by the local communities. The belief of these communities is vital to the extent that about 20 acres of land in the reserve was denotified and reserved exclusively for use by the pilgrims in 1919. The temple is dedicated to Lord Venkatachalpathy and Srinivasa Perumal, both forms of Lord Vishnu and considered the gods of forests. An idol of Venugopalaswamy, a form of Lord Krishna, is also placed within the temple complex.



Idols placed inside Yelumalaiyan Temple

Srivilliputhur-Megamalai Tiger Reserve

The Srivilliputhur-Megamalai Tiger Reserve (SMTR) is located in the Theni district of Tamil Nadu, across the sprawling Megamalai hills. It was formed in the year 2021 after combining the Grizzled Squirrel Wildlife Sanctuary and the Megamalai Wildlife Sanctuary to connect the isolated forests and wildlife refuges of Thenmala, Periyar, Srivilliputhur, Anamalai and Kalakkad Mundanthurai. This network of forests acts as a haven for large animal species like tigers and leopards to thrive and multiply. The reserve houses some of the most critical species in India, such as the Royal Bengal tiger, Asiatic elephant, Indian bison, and the chital deer.

Additionally, the reserve protects the Vagai River, which originates in the forests of Megamalai, against land encroachments and allows it to resume its permanent flow. Notifying the reserve was to convert the river from a non-perennial one to a perennial one. Megamalai is known as 'Paccha Kumachi', which translates to 'green peak'. During British rule, this was known as High Wavy Mountain. The peak is referred to as Megamalai by the locals since clouds always cover it. The reserve houses multiple historically and culturally relevant structures, thus providing vital information about the glorious past of the Dravidian land.

Mangala Devi Kannagi Temple

Approximately 7 km from Pazhiyankudi in the Theni district of Tamil Nadu and 15 km from Thekkady in the Idukki district of Kerala, an ancient temple known as the Mangala Devi Kannagi temple is situated. The temple can be found in the core region of the SMTR, within the Gudalur range. The lush hills of Megamalai surround the temple and add to its scenic beauty. The temple is inaccessible, as it is situated in the reserve's core area, but it remains open for devotees on the day of Chaitra Purnima.

Dedicated to Kannagi from the Tamil epic Silapattikaram, the temple recounts the tragic love story of Kannaki or Kannagi and her husband, Kovalan. Legend has it that after learning that the royal court had slain her husband Kovalan having falsely accused him of stealing, Kannagi cursed the town of Madurai, reducing it to ashes. It is also said that after burning Madurai, Kannagi made her way to the jungles of Periyar. The Chera dynasty ruled the region then, and the temple was built by the king of the ancient Tamilakam, a Chera king, Cherkuttuvan, around 2,000 years ago, in memory of Kannagi. The temple symbolises the moral strength that dwells within a woman, encouraging her to stand up against monarchy because her cause is noble and just. The temple was then called 'Kannagi Kottam'.

The temple is made of massive granite slabs in the Pandyan architectural style. Idols other than that of Mangala Devi are also found in the temple complex, which comprises four stone temples adorned with sculptures carved on the walls. Upon entering, the idol of Karuppa Swamy can be seen, with a dilapidated idol of Lord Shiva on the left.

The temple has also established a sanctorum for Lord Ganesha or Ganapathy. Locals claim that an underground passage also existed in the temple, which directly connected the temple town of Madurai to the Kannagi temple. A few natives also believe that this passage led to the famous Meenakshi Amman temple, while a few others think it led to the palace of the Pandyas.

According to the local tribal communities, the king brought stones from the Himalayas to construct the temple for Kannagi. The King of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Kayavagu, also attended the temple's consecration.



Mangala Devi Kannagi Temple in
Srivilliputhur-Megamalai Tiger Reserve

Telangana





**Umamaheshwaram Temple in
Amrabad Tiger Reserve, Telangana**

All photographs in this chapter are by Kritika Sriram

Telangana

Telangana's landscape extends from the Eastern Ghats to fertile plains and rocky peaks. The state is home to a variety of habitats that sustain a wide range of plant species, including teak, bamboo, and medicinal plants like tulsi and ashwagandha. The local populations, who have long depended on the land for agriculture, crafts, and traditional medicine, are able to maintain their livelihoods because of this rich biodiversity. This ecosystem supports a variety of wildlife species, including the painted stork, spotted deer, and Indian leopard. These creatures are frequently featured in nature-themed festivals and folklore. The state is home to two tiger reserves, namely, Kawal and Amrabad. Ancient temples and caves in Amrabad highlight the traditional beliefs and respect for the natural world.

Amrabad Tiger Reserve

The rugged Nallamala Hills, with vast valleys, perennial rivers, and densely forested areas are home to the Amrabad Tiger Reserve. The reserve was declared a sanctuary in 1983 and became the Amrabad Tiger Reserve after the state division in 2014. The tiger reserve is inhabited by the Chenchu tribe. The Krishna River's catchment is formed by the steep terrain, deep valleys, and gorges in this tiger reserve. Southern tropical dry deciduous mixed forest characterises the Amrabad Tiger Reserve. The reserve is part of the diverse Nallamala Forest Track, inhabited by various unique plant and animal species, including the native peepal tree, tiger, leopard, four-horned antelope, and Ceylon satinwood.

The reserve is significant not just for its natural beauty but also for housing several historic temples such as Srisailam, Uma Maheshwaram, Maddimadugu, the Akkamahadevi caves, Kadilivanam, and Mallelatheertham. This region is home to several sacred forests and historic rock formations. The tiger reserve with its lush forests and rocky interior, is a tribute to the beauty of nature and the historical diversity of Telangana. In addition to its remarkable big cats and rich wildlife, the reserve is well-known for its historical sites that offer a glimpse into the past.

Akkamahadevi Caves

The Akkamahadevi Caves are located in the core zone of Amrabad Tiger Reserve, in the Domalapenta range. The caves are a naturally occurring structure that dates back over a million years. Scattered throughout vast regions of Telangana are the Eastern Ghats, where the caves are situated. The natural arch at the entrance is devoid of any support which gives the caves a scary impression to visitors. The caves are not only an adventurer's dwelling but also the major attraction is the deep-lying Shivalinga inside the vast network of passageways.

The lingam is a well-known holy site that has drawn pilgrims and visitors since ages. The hills of the Nallamala range across the ghat section offers serene and picturesque views of the vista en route to the Akkamahadevi Caves.

The best time to visit Akkamahadevi Caves is from November to March. The site remains open throughout the week (except on Wednesdays) from 10 am to 5 pm.



Idol placed inside Akkamahadevi Caves

Maddimadugu Anjaneya Swamy Temple

The Maddimadugu Anjaneya Swamy Temple is devoted to Lord Hanuman (a Hindu god renowned for his undying devotion and unmatched strength). According to the local population, when pursuing the Sanjeevani herb, Lord Hanuman stopped at this holy location and blessed the region and its people. Thus, the temple functions as a sacred shrine which is rich with local traditional knowledge. The Maddimadugu Anjaneya Swamy Temple's architectural design is a tribute to the outstanding craftsmanship and creative skills of its architects. Built in the classical South Indian architectural style, the temple's sanctum sanctorum is embellished with colourful frescoes, elaborate carvings and pillars. The grandeur and tranquilly of the temple complex inspire awe and reverence in devotees who come from all over the world to seek divine blessings.



Maddimadugu Anjaneya Swamy Temple has been built in the Dravida style

Mallaiah Loddi

The Mallaiah Loddi, also known as the Mallana Loddi Temple, is surrounded by the Nallamalla forests and is located in the Mannanur range, within the Amrabad Tiger Reserve. There is a Shivalinga at the entrance which borders the area. In July, on the eve of Tholi Ekadashi (which falls on the 11th day of the Hindu month of Ashadha) hundreds of thousands of devotees assemble. As per the local population, the Mallaiah Lodi is an ancient settlement which has existed since the Middle Ages. The temple does not only have a rich historical background but also reflects the region's diverse cultural heritage.

Umamaheshwaram Temple

The local people believe that monks used to perform penance in this temple in the past. This specific region is described in the 'Panditaradhya Charitra' of the Kakatiya period. According to a few inscriptions, the stairs leading up the hill were built in the 14th century CE by one of the local kings. To get to this sacred site, the visitors have to ascend 600 steps. This temple worships the Hindu sun god Surya. The temple is filled with architectural wonders and fine craftsmanship from a bygone era. Pilgrims often visit this hallowed location in order to get blessings and to admire its timeless beauty, which offers a glimpse into the region's spiritual past.

The temple is open to devotees throughout the week from 7 am to 7 pm. There is an entry fee of ₹50 for adults and ₹20 for children.



The stairs to the Umamaheshwaram temple were built in 14th century CE

Uttar Pradesh





**Frog Temple near
Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, Uttar Pradesh**
All photographs in this chapter are courtesy NTCA

Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh, with its lush Terai region, houses important flora including medicinal plants that are essential to customary medicinal methods, as well as sacred trees of spiritual significance in Hindu culture, such as peepal and banyan. The state is home to famous fauna, such as gharials in the Ghaghara River, tigers in the Dudhwa National Park, and an abundance of migrating birds that swarm the marshes of Bharatpur. The presence of the Frog Temple in Dudhwa also indicates the reverence for life such as toads. The legend behind the temple celebrates the intricate bond between humans and natural elements. The diverse ecosystems of Uttar Pradesh not only demonstrate the biological richness of the state, but also the significance of conservation efforts aimed at safeguarding its distinct natural heritage, which is intricately linked to the customs and beliefs of its populace.

Dudhwa Tiger Reserve

Once the playground of the famous 'shikars' (hunters), Dudhwa today is the last of the pristine Terai-eco systems left. After independence, the forests of Dudhwa faced tremendous encroachment. So much so that it turned into agricultural land. The area also became a core area for hunting and poaching due to its closeness to the Nepal border. Therefore, with the primary objective of protecting swamp deer, an area of 63 sq km was declared as the Sonaripur Sanctuary in 1958, followed by being declared as the Dudhwa Sanctuary in 1968. It was only because of the efforts of the Late Billy Arjan Singh, the famous hunter turned conservationist, that Dudhwa was declared a National Park in 1977 and, later in 1988, was established as a tiger reserve.

The tiger reserve is a treasure trove of biodiversity, with fine-quality woodland, marshes, and grasslands extending from the banks of river Yamuna in the west to the Valmiki Tiger Reserve in the east. The woodlands are dominated by Sal and Teak trees, which form a lush canopy along with gular, banyan, shisham, simul, etc. The forests of Dudhwa are teeming with life, with tall grasses and lush vegetation enhancing the thrill of wildlife sightings. Among the notable inhabitants are five species of deer — chital, hog deer, barking deer, swamp deer, and sambar. Beyond the deer, the reserve hosts a diverse array of wildlife, including tigers, one-horned rhinoceros, wild boar, leopards, jungle cats, fishing cats, leopards, porcupines, civets, jackals, and elephants. Notably, Dudhwa is home to the Hispid Hare, an exceptionally rare mammal. The introduction of tribal tourism in Dudhwa Tiger Reserve will provide a unique opportunity for visitors to immerse themselves in the rich culture and life of the Tharus, adding a new dimension to their exploration.

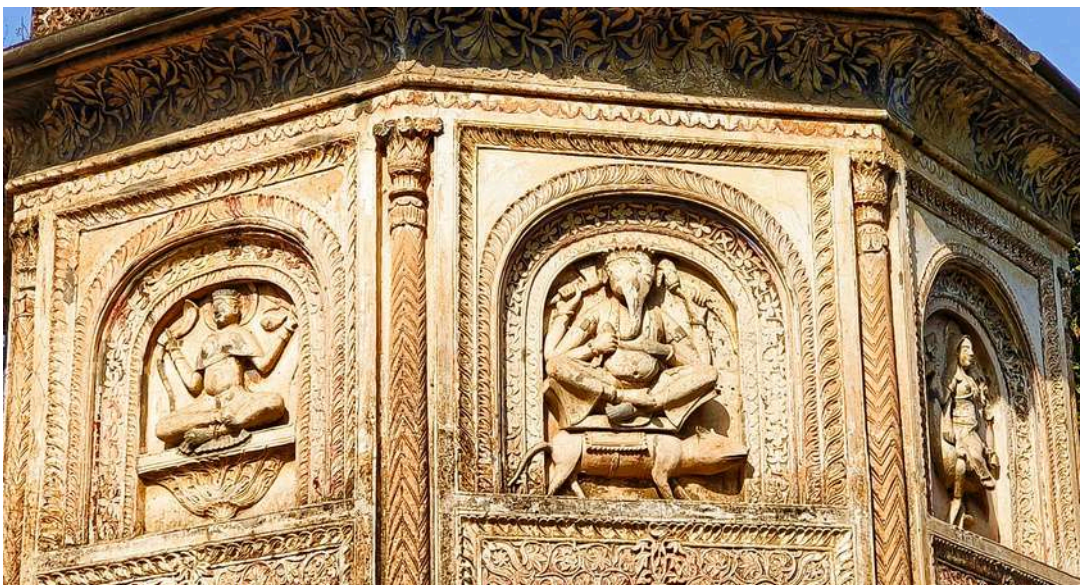
Frog Temple

Within the Lakhimpur Kheri district of Uttar Pradesh, there is a remarkable Frog Temple, where devotees gather to worship a toad deity, particularly during Diwali and other auspicious occasions. According to locals of this area, this amphibian deity once bestowed blessings upon a Rajput noble

named Bakhat Singh, leading to his prosperity and the subsequent flourishing of his lineage. Thus, a temple was erected to honour this divine frog as a mark of reverence. This unique Frog Temple, steeped in a history spanning over two centuries, stands proudly in Oel. Interestingly, although the temple was constructed in the 1860s by the rulers of Oel, the presiding deity is Lord Shiva, not the frog. The temple's architecture is intricately linked with Tantra Vidya, boasting a distinctive design featuring a giant frog supporting a 'Shivalinga' sourced from the Banasur Prati Narmadeshwar Narmada Kund. The entire structure rests between an octahedral lotus and is crafted according to Mandook Tantra, attributed to the expertise of Kapil Tantrik from Meghalaya. Inside the sanctum sanctorum, a vast Shivalinga adorns the space, flanked by intricately painted scriptures on inner and outer walls.

The temple's history is intertwined with the life of Raja Baksh Singh, the ruler of the kingdom, who was facing a severe drought. In his desperate times, he turned to Lord Shiva, and his devotion led him to a significant discovery. While meditating by the Narmada River, he found a 'Shivalinga', believed to have been originally worshipped by Badasur. Through tantric rituals, he established this Shivalinga, bringing prosperity to the region through abundant sugarcane and rice cultivation. Despite its historical significance, the temple is in dire need of renovation due to its age, urging immediate attention to preserve its cultural and architectural heritage.

The best time to visit Dudhwa Tiger Reserve and the frog temple is from November to February. The months of winter are a great time to see the magical migratory birds. Also, animals can be spotted easily as they make their way out of camouflage in misty cold air.



Carvings on the walls of Frog Temple

Uttarakhand





Graffiti of the English band Beatles in Chaurasi Kutiya,
Rajaji Tiger Reserve, Uttarakhand
Chaurasi Kutiya is popularly known as Beatles Ashram
as the band stayed here during their visit in 1968
All photographs in this chapter are courtesy NTCA

Uttarakhand

Uttarakhand, part of the Himalayan range, hosts a vast variety of animals, including iconic species like the snow leopard, musk deer, and the elusive Himalayan black bear. These species may be found in the various ecosystems of the state, which range from dense forests of oak, rhododendron, and pine to the alpine meadows. Numerous plants and animals have spiritual importance, which is frequently celebrated in local art and religious ceremonies. Sacred rivers like Yamuna and Ganges not only provide water for the land but also operate as hubs for the region's cultural customs, with a plethora of temples and pilgrimage destinations located along their banks. Corbett and Rajaji Tiger Reserves are situated within the state and are important centres of ecological and cultural significance. Rajaji is home to the Chaurasi Kutiya, popularly known as the Beatles Ashram, signifying the intersection of the spiritual and ecological beliefs of the people.

Rajaji Tiger Reserve

Named after freedom fighter and last Governor-General of India C Rajagopalachari, who was popularly known as Rajaji, Rajaji Tiger Reserve is nestled amidst the landscapes of the Himalayan foothills of the Shivalik ranges. The reserve area was formed after merging three wildlife sanctuaries of Uttarakhand – Motichur, Chilla and Rajaji. Rajaji National Park was established in 1983 to maintain a viable population of Asian elephants. The park was declared as a tiger reserve in 2015, making it the 48th tiger reserve in the country. The reserve area has diverse forests ranging from semi-evergreen to deciduous and terai grassland. It has been classified as an Indus-Ganges monsoon forest type. The tiger reserve's location provides a transition between temperate western Himalayas and central Himalayas, which enhances the chances of species diversity in the tiger reserve. It is home to various animals like tigers, Asian elephants, Himalayan black bears, sloth bears, striped hyenas, goral, etc. Some popular floras in this tiger reserve include amaltas, rohini, shisham, sal etc.

With its scenic beauty and unique biodiversity, the tiger reserve is a vantage point for environmentalists and nature lovers. Rajaji Tiger Reserve holds a profound cultural significance rooted in its historical, ecological and spiritual dimensions. The spiritual allure of Rajaji extends beyond its physical boundaries, with all of the sacred sites and ashrams, such as Chaurasi Kutiya, dotting its landscape. For seekers and pilgrims, the serene surroundings offer solace and the chance for introspection amidst the harmonious coexistence of nature and humanity.

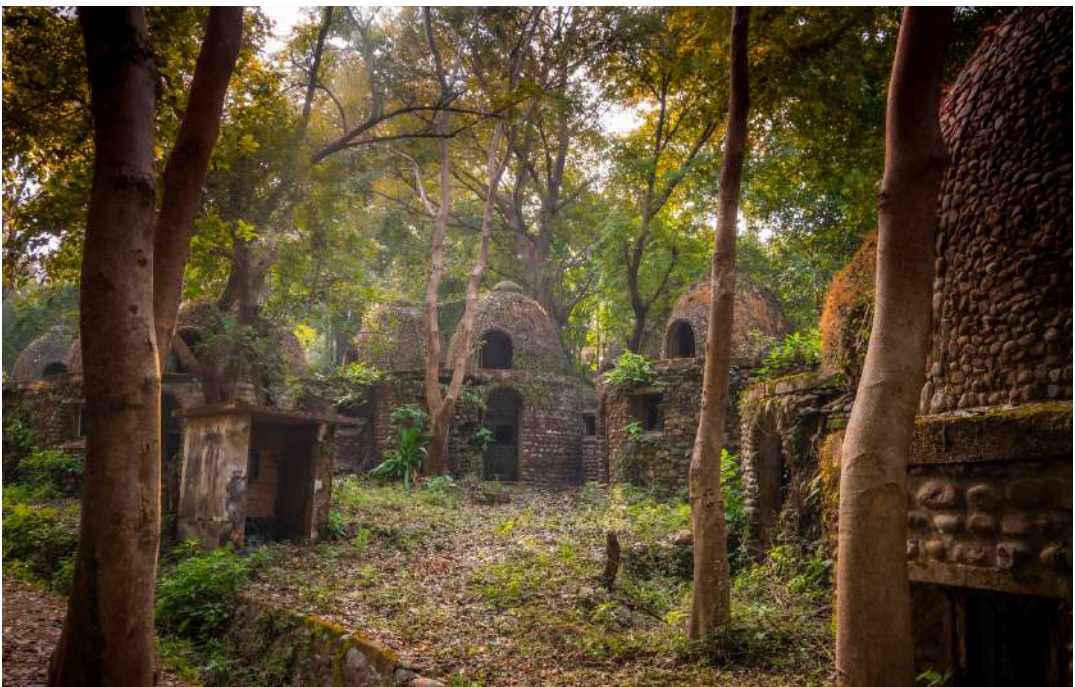
Chaurasi Kutiya

In 1961, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi leased 7.5 hectares of land from the Department of Forests, Government of Uttar Pradesh. He transformed it into the International Academy of Meditation, known as Shankaracharya Nagar. During this period, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi oversaw the construction of 140 dome cottages and 84 small meditation yoga cottages. Globally renowned for his transcendental meditation techniques like 'Yogic Flying', a practice where the meditator experiences a state of 'levit-

ation' during deep meditation, and 'From Meditation to Levitation', a process that involves transitioning from a state of deep meditation to a state of physical levitation, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi attracted seekers from all over the world to his ashram. However, Yogi departed for Holland in 1989, and after the lease expired, the Forest Department reacquired the land in 2000.

The term 'Chaurasi Kutiya' translates to 84 huts. The number 84 symbolises the base numeral of the Hindu mythological belief that there are 84,00,000 species on Earth. This concept is intricately woven into the design of the ashram, offering 84 individual spaces for spiritual meditation seekers to explore their inner paths. Situated on the eastern bank of the Ganga River, until 2015, the ashram lay in despair, reclaimed by nature. However, in 2015, the ashram was reopened to visitors after a comprehensive renovation and restoration project. The project included repairing the cottages, creating new meditation spaces, and enhancing the overall infrastructure. Today, the ashram is a testament to the transformative power of spirituality and creativity. Visitors can immerse themselves in the graffiti-adorned cottages, meditate by the Ganges, and absorb an atmosphere steeped in peace and inspiration.

The ashram was reopened in 2015 for the visitors. It remains open throughout the week from 9 am to 4 pm. Visitors are required to pay an entry fee of ₹150 for Indians and ₹600 for the foreign nationals.



Huts in Chaurasi Kutiya, Rajaji Tiger Reserve
Photo by Shikhar Mohan

West Bengal





Buxa Fort in Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal
All photographs in this chapter are courtesy NTCA

West Bengal

West Bengal, a hub for art and culture in India, is also known for its diverse ecosystems. Its distinctive geographic features, which include the Gangetic alluvial plains, the Himalayan foothills, and the Sundarbans mangroves, have given rise to the region's rich and varied flora and fauna. The state is home to Buxa and Sundarbans Tiger Reserves which blend the rich culture of Bengal with its biodiversity. A remarkable variety of plant and animal life can be found here. The iconic Bengal tiger and many other species can be found in Sundarbans, a UNESCO World Heritage site that represents the region's ecological richness and traditional respect for the natural world. This variety is frequently honoured in regional customs and festivals, where flora and fauna play important roles in religious rituals, literature, and folk art. Monuments from the British era and locally significant structures which derive their relevance from local folklore and signify the coming together of ecology, culture and history also exist within the reserves.

Buxa Tiger Reserve

The northeastern region of West Bengal, which borders Assam and Bhutan, is home to the Buxa Tiger Reserve. The land was heavily utilised for dolomite mining in the North Bengal region prior to being designated as a national park in 1983. The 745 sq km tiger reserve is a well-known tourist destination. Travellers are drawn to the Buxa Tiger Reserve by its breathtaking natural beauty and rich wildlife, which lies hidden away in the Eastern Himalayas. Elephants, Indian bison, leopards, several deer species, smaller mammals, and countless bird and reptile species are all found in more significant numbers than any other location in the park. Buxa boasts a substantial variety of rare orchids and medicinal plants and is rich in biodiversity. Certain areas of the Buxa Hills in the Sinchula range, which is located along the northern border of the tiger reserve, still require exploration due to inaccessible terrain. But underneath its outer charm is a treasure mine of historical sites that tells an intriguing tale about the rich and varied heritage of the area. Travellers explore this pristine environment and go back in time to solve the secrets of millennia past.

Buxa Fort

At the heart of Buxa Tiger Reserve stand the remains of the majestic Buxa Fort, a relic of the region's tumultuous history. The Buxa Fort is located in the Buxa Duars range in the core area of the Buxa Tiger Reserve. It is one of the earliest known forts in Eastern India and has rich historical significance. The British captured the area and constructed the fort in 1865. As a part of the Treaty of Sinchula, the fort was handed over to the British. The fort was then used as a high-security prison to detain the freedom fighters. Devoid of any facilities, this inhospitable prison fort is inaccessible from all sides. It is surrounded by high hills and dense forest filled with wildlife. Many freedom fighters were detained in the fort by the British rulers. Post-independence, the fort served as a refugee camp for Tibetan refugees. On Republic Day and Independence Day, hundreds of visitors reach the fort to pay homage to the freedom fighters in the Independence struggle for India.

Perched atop a towering hill, this ancient fortress dates back to the 7th century CE, bearing witness to the rise and decline of empires and the ebb and flow of civilisations. According to historians, it was initially built by the Bhutanese rulers as a strategic stronghold; the fort later served as a prison during British colonial rule, earning it the moniker 'the mini-Cellular Jail'. Today, its weather-beaten walls and crumbling ramparts stand as silent sentinels, guarding the secrets of bygone eras. The trail through the fort is one of the popular birding trails in the Buxa Bird Festival, which is organised annually for visitors and bird-watching enthusiasts by the Buxa Tiger Reserve.

October to April is considered to be the best time to visit Buxa Fort. The forests of Duars (floodplains) remain closed from 15th June to 15th September and therefore these months are not recommended for the visit.

Sundarbans Tiger Reserve

Recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987, the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve extends all the way to the River Baleswar in Bangladesh from the River Hooghly in West Bengal. It is the largest mangrove forest in the world and a component of the largest delta in the world. There is a diversity of plants and animals living in its brackish waterways, mudflats, and trees. These, combined with the flora, are what give this place its unique character; it is a mystery that is revealed with each visit. Rivers, islands, and human settlements can be found inside the huge Sundarbans.

The name Sundarbans translates to 'beautiful forests' in the native language of Bengali. The Sundari trees or mangrove trees, which are found in this ecosystem, are another reason that lends this name to the reserve. A distinctive feature of the mangrove trees is their upward-shooting roots that help them in respiration, especially in times of waterlogging during the monsoon season. Sundarbans is not only known for its ecological significance but cultural roots as well. The history of Sundarbans dates back to the 200 - 300 CE. It is believed that during the Mughal era, the people living nearby had leased the jungles of the Sundarbans, and they constructed settlements there. However, the Portuguese and salt smugglers in the 17th century CE struck down these settlements in the ensuing years. Their ruins are all that is left now, and most of them may be found in a location known as Netidhopani.

Netidhopani Temple and Watch Tower

Netidhopani, in the local language, means a 'Place of Justice' and is a seamless combination of serene water bodies, dense mangrove forests, and a variety of fauna. Offering a perfect view of this native ecosystem is a watch tower in Netidhopani, popularly known as the Netidhopani Watch Tower, which is believed to be connected to the medieval epic of Mansamangal featuring Behula and Lakhindar. Legend has it that Behula, accompanying her deceased husband Lakhindar on his final

journey on a boat, passed the bank or Ghat of what is now known as Netidhopani and noticed something peculiar. A toddler kept interrupting his mother, named Neti, who was washing clothes, and frustrated, she doused the boy in water, who then lost consciousness. The mother again poured water on her son while chanting some mantras to revive him. Behula noticed this and wondered if the woman could also help revive Lakhindar. The woman agreed to help Behula and Lakhindar, who were brought back to life. It is also said that Behula ascended to heaven at this Ghat with the same woman's help; hence, the region is named after her. The watch tower offers a close view of the animals in the reserve, and most of the tiger sightings in the Sundarbans are caught from the tower.

One can also observe other animals, such as crocodiles, wild boars, and axis deer, from this spot. Birdwatchers also flock to the tower for the breathtaking views of pelicans, whimbrels, plovers, lapwings, curlews, sandpipers, white-bellied sea eagles, and seven species of kingfishers. The tower is next to a pond that serves as a watering hole for wildlife. The vast area of exposed ground beyond the pond provides an excellent opportunity for spotting wildlife. This watchtower currently offers a magnificent view of the Netidhopani Temple in the same region.

The local deity, Banbibí, is believed to have kept the forest and its people safe. Hence, a temple dedicated to the goddess and to Lord Shiva, who is considered to be the ultimate protector of the universe, was built in the region by forest dwellers. Known as Netidhopani Temple, it is now in ruins and estimated to be 400 years old, making one wonder about the lives of the people who previously worshipped here. A road built by the former emperor of Bengal, King Pratapaditya, to guard the forest area also passes by at the extreme right end of the forest. However, the same is now covered with earth. In addition to the temple, ancient fossils have been identified in the region. These fossils, also known as Netidhopani Fossils, are thought to be between 2 and 3 million years old and provide critical information about the area's geology. Numerous archaeological artefacts, mainly made of terracotta, have also been discovered in and around the Netidhopani temple and displayed as specimens for the public to see. Because of its rich mythology and history, Netidhopani attracts several people and is a popular spot among those who visit the Sundarbans Reserve.

Banshis, or forest musicians, are mythical creatures believed to dwell in the depths of the Sundarbans. It is said that their haunting melodies can enchant anyone, luring them deeper into the forest. Discovering the folklore surrounding the Banshis and the cautionary tales that warn against succumbing to their mesmerising music reminds one of the Sundarbans' powerful allure and hidden mysteries.



Top view of the Netidhopani temple and watch tower

Glossary





Bewda Talai in Mukundra Hills Tiger Reserve, Rajasthan
Photo by Shikhar Mohan

Glossary

- **Abul Fazal** - Historian, writer and grand vizier in Mughal Emperor Akbar's court during the Mughal Empire between 1579 and 1602.
- **Agastya** - A Hindu sage believed to have brought Vedic traditions and Sanskrit to South India.
- **Ain-i-Akbari** - 16th century document detailing Mughal Emperor Akbar's administration, written by court historian Abul Fazal.
- **Akbar** - Third Mughal Emperor who reigned over the Indian subcontinent from 1556 CE to 1605 CE.
- **Akbarnama** - Mughal Emperor Akbar's biography, written by court historian Abul Fazal.
- **Baghels** - Clan that ruled the Baghelkhand region in central India during 13th century CE.
- **Bathudi tribe** - The Bathudi are believed to have migrated from Bakua in the Similipal hills to their current region of settlement in Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar and Balasore in the state of Odisha.
- **Bhakti Movement** - A socio-religious movement that started in the 7th to 8th century CE in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which later on spread to northern territory of India by 15th century CE. The main principles of the movement are God is one, all are equal, abolishment of caste and rituals.
- **Brahmanda Purana** - Oldest Purana which gives insights on the universe.
- **Chaitra Purnima** - It is the first full moon of the year, falling in the Chaitra month of the Hindu calendar.
- **Chalukyan style** - It is a mixture of Dravida and Nagara styles, characterised by a Dravidian style (pyramidal) tower and a Nagara style (bulbous) spire.
- **Champaka tree** - Evergreen tree known for its fragrant flowers.
- **Champakaranya** - Forest of Champaka flowers.
- **Chikka Sampige** - Small sampige or tree.
- **Dod Dynasty** - A sublineage of the Parmara dynasty that migrated to Gujarat and took on the name of a village, Dod. Also known as the Dod-Parmaras.
- **Dravidian style** - Style of temple architecture in Southern India, characterised by a pyramidal tower over the sanctum sanctorum.
- **Gajaranya** - Place where large numbers of elephants are found
- **Gondwana Kingdom** - Belonging to the Gond tribe, they were the rulers of the Gondwana region of India (Maharashtra, parts of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Telangana).
- **Hoshang Shah** - Ruler of the state of Malwa in central India from 1406 CE to 1435 CE.
- **Hoysala Dynasty** - Rulers of present-day Karnataka during the 10th and 14th century CE.
- **Hriday Shah** - Last Gond king of the Garha-Mandla or Garha Kingdom in central India from 1634 CE to 1668 CE.

- **Islamic architecture** - This style developed with the arrival of Arab traders on Indian coast. It is characterised by the use of domes, arched doorways, minarets and intricate carvings on the walls and pillars.
- **Jauhar** - The practice of self-immolation or drowning by women of the Rajput clans in the palace stepwell, to evade rape or capture from the enemy troops.
- **Jhala Zalim Singh** - Dewan of Kota and the founder of the city of Jhalawar.
- **Kabir** - Born in the mid-15th century CE, Kabir was a mystic poet and saint. In the Dabistan of Mohsin Fani and Ain-i-Akbari of Abul Fazl, he is mentioned as a muwahid or believer in one God.
- **Kakatiya Dynasty** - Rulers of the present-day Andhra Pradesh and Telangana from 1083 to 1323 CE.
- **Khichi Chauhans** - Branch of the Chauhan clan of Rajput dynasty in Western India.
- **Khwajah Nizzamuddin Ahmed** - Historian of late medieval India.
- **Kuruvanshis** - Union of the northern Bharata and Puru clans belonging to 1200 to 900 BCE.
- **Kutru Zamindar Shahs** - Landowning clan in the Chhattisgarh division of Central Provinces of British India.
- **Lord Vishwakarma** - Hindu religion regards Lord Vishwakarma or the craftsman deity as the universe's divine architect.
- **Mada Naidu** - Belonging to the Recherla Nayaka clan, a warrior clan who fought for the Kakatiya dynasty in present Telangana in 13th century CE.
- **Madhav Kalan** - He was a Mughal court artist.
- **Magh Amavasya** - Magh Amavasya or Mauni Amavasya is an auspicious occasion celebrated on a new moon or no moon day falling in the month of Magh (January- February).
- **Magh Sankranti** - Magh or Maghe or Makar Sankranti festival is widely celebrated amongst Hindus. It is considered to be the beginning of warmer days. It is believed that from this day onwards the sun starts to move towards the northern hemisphere.
- **Mahadeshwara Swamy** - Incarnation of Lord Shiva and deity of the Soliga tribe.
- **Maharaja Mukundarav** - Erstwhile Maharaja of Kota.
- **Maharana Kumba** - Maharana Kumba also known as Kumbhakarna Singh was one of the prominent rulers of Mewar of Sisodiya Dynasty and was engaged in a continuous warfare against Gujarat and Malwa. He constructed Vijaya stambha to mark his victory against Malwa and Gujarat led by Mahmud Khalji. To secure his kingdom he constructed five forts one of which was Kumbhalgarh fort.
- **Maharishi Mahesh Yogi** - He was a Hindu spiritual leader who propagated the practice of transcendental meditation.
- **Mahisasuramardini** - Hindu warrior goddess who fought the demon Mahisasura.
- **Mahmud Khalji** - Ruler of the state of Malwa in central India from 1436 CE to 1469 CE.
- **Mandook Tantra** - A school of Tantric thought that views frogs as fertility, luck, and prosperity.
- **Maratha Empire** - The formal Maratha empire began in 1674 with the coronation of Shivaji as Chhatrapati and ended in 1818 after defeat by the English East India Company.

- **Mariamman** - Regarded as a guardian deity by the villages of Tamil Nadu. Mari means mother while Amman means rain or smallpox. Mariamman is, therefore, regarded as the goddess of weather, medicine and fertility or the one who heals and protects.
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- **Medieval Age** - Also known as the Middle Age and refers to the period in Indian history from 8th century CE to early 18th century CE.
- **Megalithic period** - A period in world history from 2500 BCE to 200 CE.
- **Mini-Cellular Jail** - Named after the famed Cellular Jail of the Andaman Islands.
- **Mughal architecture** - Indo-Islamic style of architecture that developed during the Mughal period in the 16th, 17th and 18th century CE. It is characterised by arched gateways, minarets, large domes and halls where the rulers would hold their courts.
- **Nagara style** - Style of temple architecture in Northern, Western and some parts of Eastern India characterised by a tall, curving tower over the sanctum sanctorum.
- **Nagvanshi Dynasty** - Rulers of Chota Nagpur plateau region in ancient, medieval and modern history for around 2000 years.
- **Narada Panchratra** - Meaning five nights, it is one of oldest Granthas or religious texts compiling the Vaishnava Sanskrit texts dedicated to the worship of Radha-Krishna.
- **Oel** - It is a town in the Lakhimpur Kheri district of Uttar Pradesh.
- **Pancharatha style** - A temple is known as Pancharatha when the elevations or the plans on the shikhara or the tower are five in number.
- **Panditaradhya Charitra** - A poem on the life of Saivite saint, Mallikarjuna Panditaradhya, composed by Palkuriki Somanatha in 12th century CE.
- **Pandyan kings** - The Pandyan kingdom was an ancient Tamil state in South India of unknown antiquity. Pandyas were one of the three ancient Tamil kingdoms (Chola and Chera being the other two) that ruled the Tamil country from pre-historic times until the end of the 15th century.
- **Parasurama** - Sixth avatar among the Dashavatara of Lord Vishnu.
- **Paush Purnima** - Full moon night observed in the month of Pausha according to the Hindu calendar in reverence of Goddess Shakambhari.

- **Pratihara style** - This style developed during the Gurjara-Pratihara Empire and is also known as Maru-Gurjara architecture. It is characterised by a simple and short spire over the tower on the sanctum sanctorum and a temple wall decorated with intricate sculptures.
- **Pre-Christ Era** - Refers to the period before the birth of Jesus Christ.
- **Rajput architecture** - This style gained prominence during the rule of the Rajput dynasties in Western India between 6th to 12th century CE. The style can be seen in forts, stepwells, gardens and palaces built during this period and characterised by stone and wooden sculptures of gods and goddesses, dome-shaped pavilions or chhatris and deep stepwells or baolis.
- **Rana Khumba** - Ruler of the state of Mewar in Western India from 1433 CE to 1468 CE.
- **Sampige Halla** - A stream flowing alongside the Dodda Sampige tree.
- **Sanjeevani** - Meaning life-giving. Sanjeevani, as mentioned in the Hindu epic Ramayana, is a life-giving herb found in the mountains of Himalayas.
- **Second Anglo-Maratha war** - The war started from 1803-1805 between the Maratha confederacy and the British East India Company. It resulted in major loss of territory for the Marathas, including regions around Delhi and in present-day Gujarat falling into direct Company rule.
- **Sengars** - They are a clan of Rajput rulers and inhabited the present-day states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh.
- **Shiva Purana** - An ancient text that narrates the story of Shiva, one of the Hindu gods among the trinity.
- **Shrimad Bhagwat Geeta** - A 700 verse Hindu scripture in Sanskrit, that takes the form of a dialogue between Prince Arjun and Lord Krishna from the epic of Mahabharata.
- **Stone Age** - A period in history characterised by the use of primitive stone tools.
- **Sultan Bahadur Shah** - Ruler of the state of Gujarat from 1526 CE to 1535 CE.
- **Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi** - Ruler of the Ghaznavid empire from 998 to 1030 CE.
- **Tarikh-i-Daudia** - Written by Abdullah during the reign of Jahangir. It deals with the history of the Afghan rulers from Bahlol Lodi of Delhi to Daud Khan Karrani, the last Afghan ruler of Bengal. The sequence of events is not recorded in the chronological order and the text is further interrupted by verses in Hindi and Persian.
- **Terai** - Low lying alluvial plains at the foothills of the Himalayas.
- **Tharu Tribe** - The Tharu tribe is an ethnic group of indigenous people living in the Terai plain on the Indo-Nepal border of Uttar Pradesh.
- **Treaty of Sinchula** - Signed after the Bhutan War. Under this, Bhutan ceded territories in the Assam and Bengal Duars.
- **Treta Yuga** - Second age of a world cycle as per Hinduism.
- **Vakataka Dynasty** - They ruled the Peninsular India during the 3rd and 4th century CE.
- **Virashaiva Bhakti Movement** - It is a kind of Bhakti movement that originated in Karnataka during 12th century CE. Basavanna led the movement against the caste system, emphasised rights of women, and rejected unjust religious rituals.

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Chaurasi Kutiya in Rajaji Tiger Reserve, Uttarakhand
Photo by Shikhar Mohan

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Scan codes to reach locations

Andhra Pradesh

Sri-Honkaram Siddeshwara
Swamy-Temple



Sangameswaram Temple



Kolanu Bharathi
Saraswathi Temple



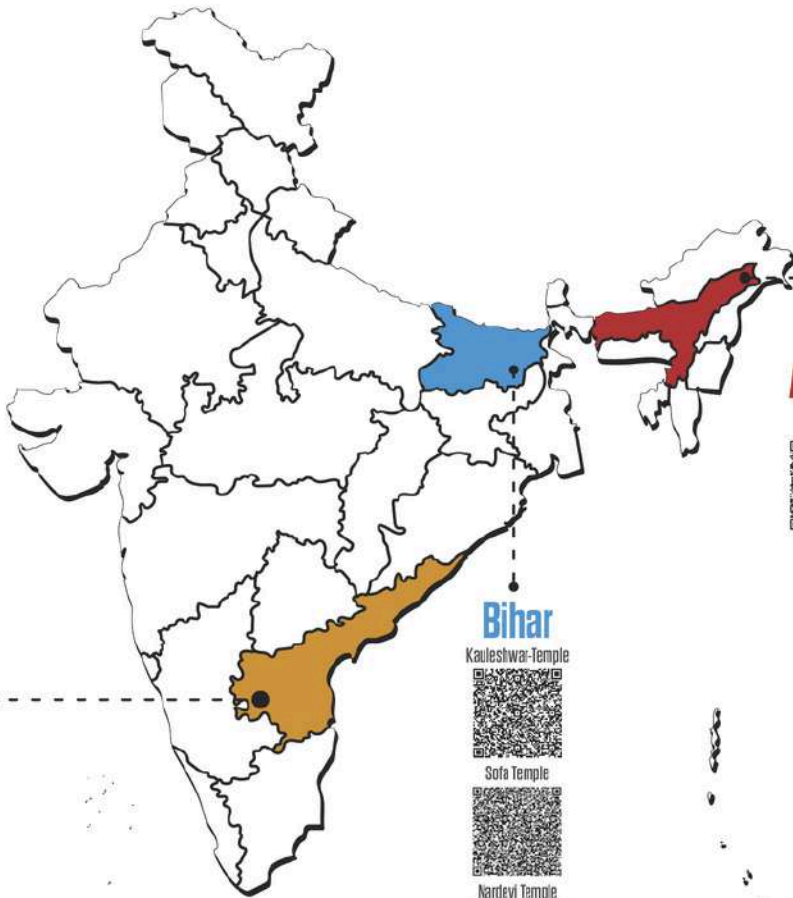
Istakameswari Temple



Gundla
Brahmeswaraswamy Temple



Nagalooty Veerabhadra
Swamy Temple



Assam

Buri Ai Than



Bihar

Kauleshwar-Temple



Sofa Temple



Nardevi Temple



Jatashankar Temple



Scan codes to reach locations

Karnataka

Himavad Gopalaswamy
Betta Temple



Biligiri Ranganathaswamy
Temple



Doddda Sampige Tree



Masthigudi



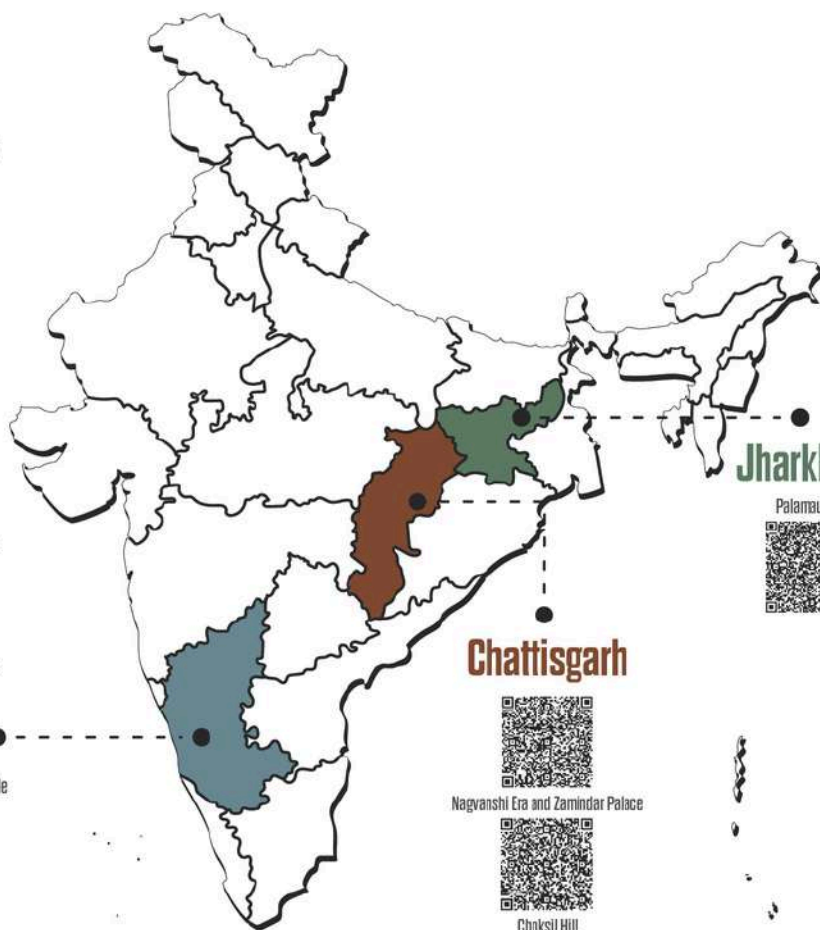
Mavukalleshwara Temple



Muthurayaswamy Temple



Netkal Basaveshwara Temple



Jharkhand

Palamou-Fort



Chattisgarh



Nagvanshi Era and Zamindar Palace



Choksli Hill



Gautum Rishi Ashram

Scan codes to reach locations

Madhya Pradesh

Bandhavgarh Fort



Bari Gufa



Shesh Shalya



Mandla Fort



Ajajgarh Fort



Rock Paintings
(Khoon Ki Putariya)



Shikargah Machaan



Jhijhini Mahal

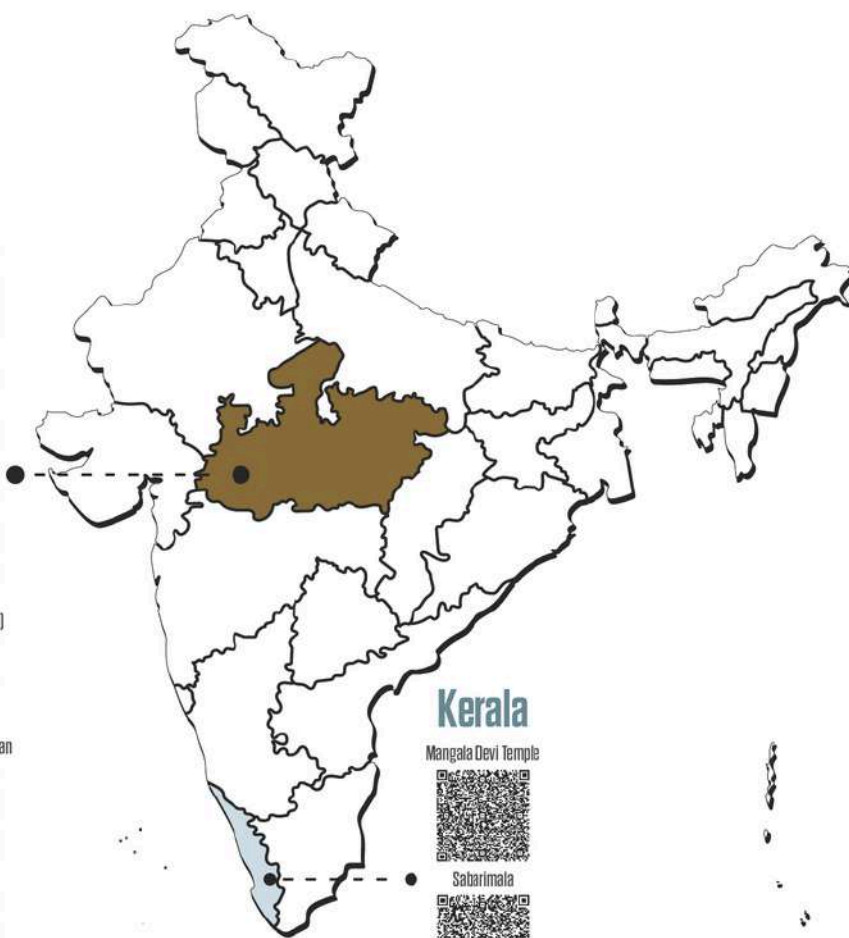


Raja Dhabut Singh

Kila Gate



Rock Paintings



Kerala

Mangala Devi Temple



Sabarimala



Scan codes to reach locations

Rajasthan

Abil Meeni Mahal



Badoli Temples



Gagron Fort



Chateswara Temple



Khandar Fort



Ranthambore Fort



Garadia Mahadev



Maharashtra

Ghugusgarh Fort



Namala Fort



Gawilgarh Fort

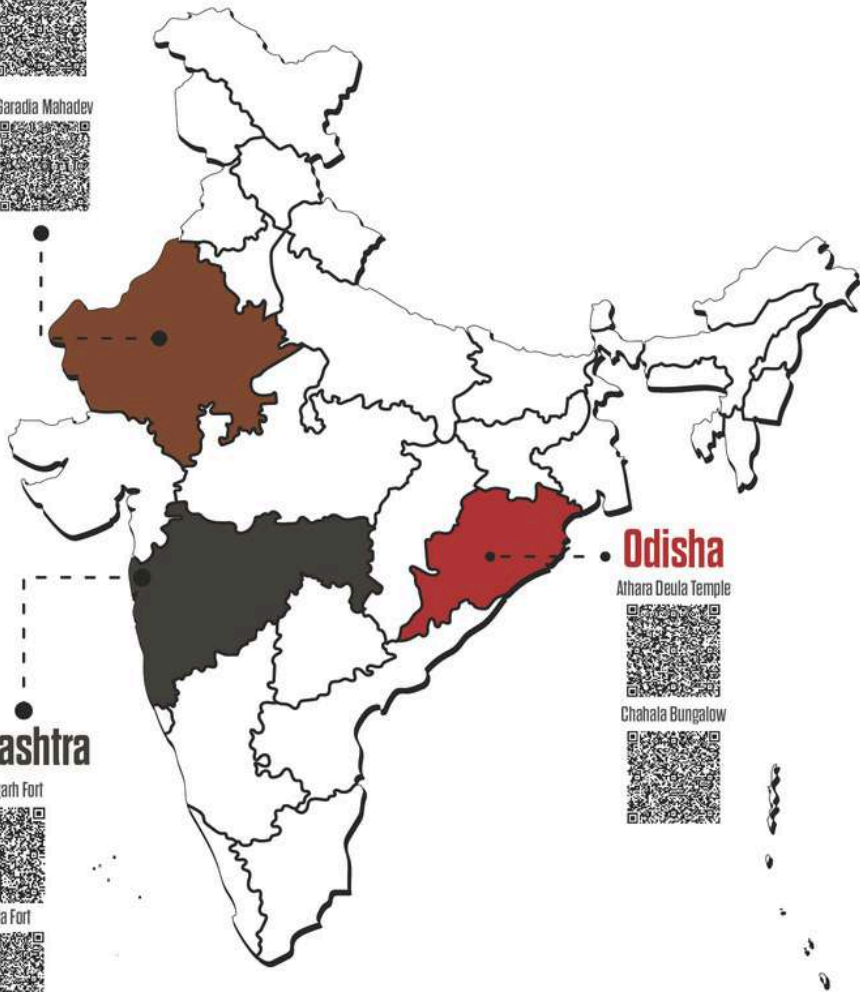


Odisha

Athara Deula Temple



Chahala Bungalow



Scan codes to reach locations

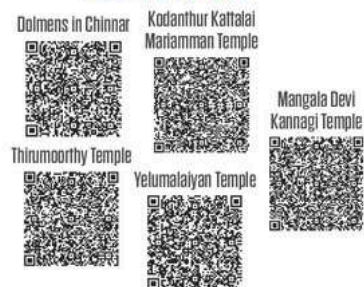
Rajasthan



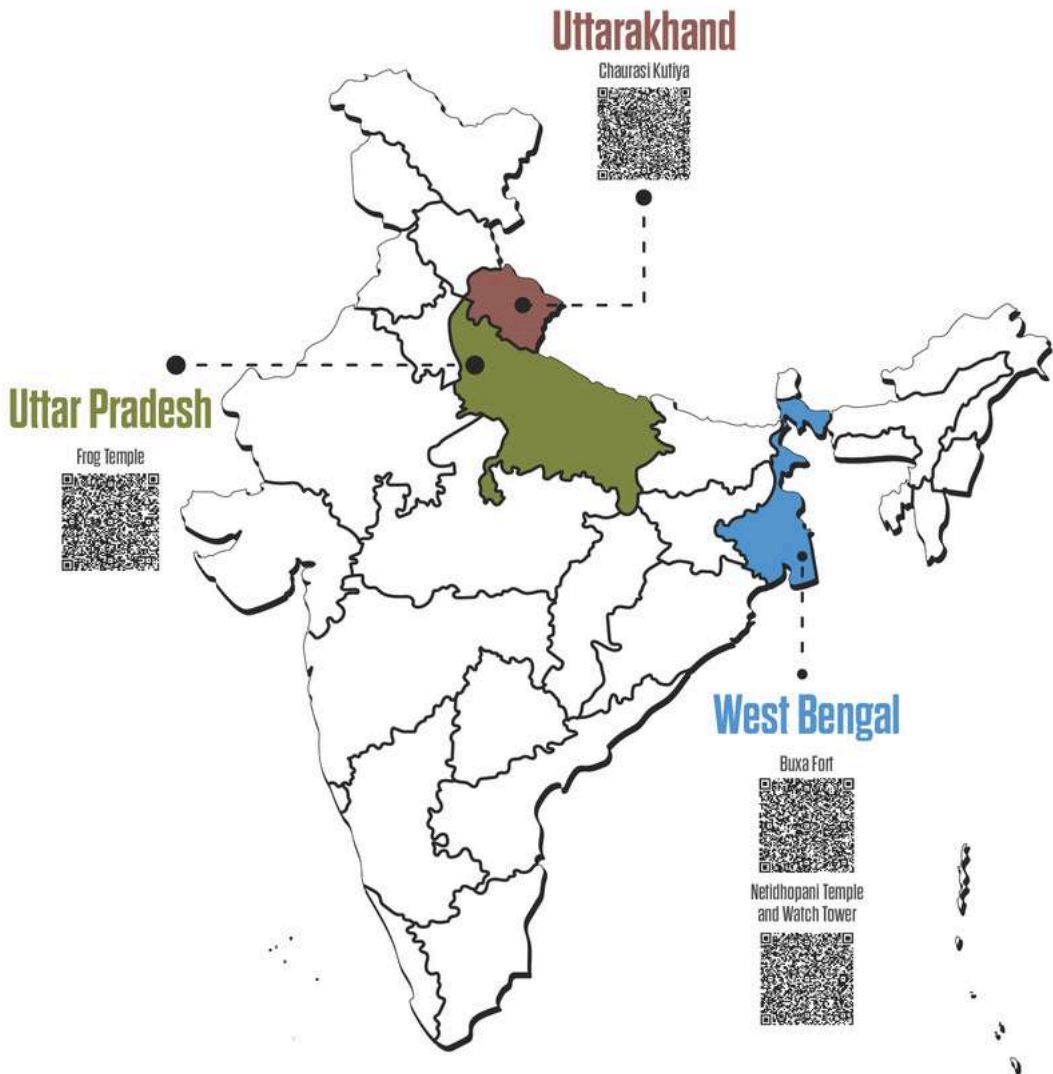
Telangana



Tamil Nadu



Scan codes to reach locations





Bharat Lal

Bharat Lal is the Secretary General of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), India. Since 1988, after joining the civil service, he has held key positions in the Government of India and Gujarat state. He is the Founder Mission Director of the National Jal Jeevan Mission, a programme to ensure clean tap water to every rural household in India.

In a career spanning more than three decades, he has worked at the highest level of policy-making and is well-known for his innovative thinking and problem-solving approach. His long association with forests and wildlife and his work with the forest dwellers have given him deep insights into India's forests, wildlife and tribal communities.



Dr S P Yadav

Dr S P Yadav has served in the Indian Forest Service and is currently the Interim Head/ Director General of the International Big Cat Alliance. In his 35-year long career, Dr Yadav has worked for more than a decade at the National Tiger Conservation Authority and at the Global Tiger Forum, contributing significantly towards tiger conservation.

He has held several senior positions in the government, including as Director of Wildlife Institute of India, Member Secretary of Central Zoo Authority, and as the CITES Management Authority of India.

Dr Yadav was conferred the prestigious National Award for Wildlife Conservation by the Government of India and has also received the first Global Leadership Award in Conservation from the Global Tiger Initiative.



National Tiger Conservation Authority

Project Tiger was launched in 1973 to address the decline in the tiger population in the country. It designated landscapes as Tiger Reserves to exclusively protect and conserve the national animal. The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) was established, in 2006, as a statutory body under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, to enhance conservation efforts for the then dwindling tiger population in the country. It gives statutory authority to Project Tiger, thereby, ensuring legal compliance of its directives.

The NTCA fosters accountability of the Centre as well as the state governments in management of tiger reserves and due to its statutory nature, it enables parliamentary oversight as well. Within the framework of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, NTCA has been carrying out its mandate to strengthen tiger conservation in the nation by maintaining oversight through advisories and normative guidelines, which are based on assessments of tiger status, ongoing conservation initiatives, and recommendations from specially constituted committees.

Today, NTCA plays a crucial role in on-ground protection, scientific monitoring, support for reserves, and international cooperation. Engaging local communities in conservation, providing livelihood opportunities, and mitigating human-wildlife conflicts are key focuses of NTCA.



Sankala Foundation

The Sankala Foundation, a non-profit organisation, is dedicated to expanding knowledge, fostering cutting-edge research, and promoting dialogue among various stakeholders on climate issues, nature conservation, sustainability, and cultural and natural heritage. Committed to mitigating the impact of climate change, particularly on vulnerable communities, the Foundation engages in research, education, training, advocacy, and outreach through knowledge-sharing and partnerships. It is dedicated to the protection and conservation of forests and wildlife.

The Sankala Centre for Climate and Sustainability (SCCS) aims to advance knowledge and action to combat climate change and promote sustainability. The Centre focuses on building alliances with the government and non-governmental organisations, UN agencies, international organisations, scientific communities, and domain experts with shared objectives to create synergy and drive collective action.

The Sankala Centre for Cultural and Natural Heritage (SCCNH) aims to preserve, promote, and study India's rich cultural and natural heritage. The Centre is dedicated to advancing knowledge and awareness of cultural traditions, historical sites, ecosystems, and biodiversity through interdisciplinary research, conservation efforts, and community engagement. It serves as a bridge between academic research, policy development, and community-driven heritage initiatives.



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