



Atithi Devo Bhava?

■ Shivani Pandey/New Delhi

A few days back the Supreme Court banned tourism in core areas of all tiger reserves. These are areas where there is a higher concentration of tigers. India is home to more than half of the world's estimated 3,200 tigers with most living in wildlife reserves. The move though apparently being done to aid conservation efforts could have a ripple effect leaving many jobless. However the other side of the story is equally sad. The ruling comes as a verdict for the PIL filed by social and environmental activist Ajay Dubey. He believes that tourist activities disturb the animals and restrict their freedom of movement in their natural habitat. Tourists are not just noisy they often litter around in the parks that can pose as a threat to not just tigers but other animals as well.

As a situation it is grave since the conservation of tigers is an important issue that concerns the environment and should not be overlooked. At the same time a complete ban on any kind of tourist activity would lead to chaos within the regional and tribal communities currently employed in the sector. And those economically affected range from forest guards, guides, safari jeep drivers, naturalists, shop owners, resort owners and workers in it and not to forget their families. Infact there is a long list of tribals whose means of living will be affected.

Like those tribal dancers making their living out of dancing in front of the tourists or those souvenir makers and hawkers who sell knick knacks.

Madhya Pradesh chief wildlife warden H S Pabla says tourists act as the eyes and ears of the forests. "In 2011, the state received a huge Rs 16 crore as entry fee from different national parks, which almost equals the funds sanctioned by the Centre for forest protection. And these funds were used to pay the staff engaged in forest protection. Banning tourism would leave no other option but to sack them from their jobs on account of lack of funds to pay their salaries. Eventually the forests will be left at the mercy of the poachers," Pabla said, informing that about 500 forest guards patrol inside Kanha alone every single day.

Another important point is that of actual preservation of the big cats. Wildlife conservationists believe that tourism is like a checkpoint where most of the tigers are tracked and traced helping the Forest Department in listing the tigers. Also if there are no tourists it would be easier for poachers and hunters to get in and have their own way since lack of tourism would mean lack of resources to preserve the national parks. Also those tribals currently dependent on tourism would then resort to illegal means of trading the animals inside the parks in order to survive.

"The highest densities of tigers can be found today in the most heavily visited tiger reserves," said a statement from Travel Operators for Tigers. "The busiest reserves have the best protection due to revenue from tourists," said Julian



