

Tiger Protection Force needs a rigorous test

By PRAVEEN BHARGAV

We now accept that the tiger faces a serious crisis. There are three major facets to this “tiger crisis”. First, on the positive side, tigers would be long gone but for the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and Forest Conservation Act, 1980 — two powerful laws that provide protection to tigers and their prey from illegal hunting, and buffer tiger habitat from the ravages of humans. Second, the remarkable recovery of tigers between the 70s and 90s was possible because of a strong commitment to protection on the part of the Indian Forest Service. Third, on the negative side, the steady drift of forest departments away from protection has been triggered by the gradual metamorphosis of the forest service from a ground level enforcement agency into a “white collar service”.

The level of tiger protection on the ground, in terms of fit personnel, pa-

trolling systems, and even, prompt payment of wages to lower staff have all plummeted. It is little wonder that tiger populations are being pushed over the edge by poaching, prey depletion and habitat fragmentation. Thankfully, the government has finally moved away from a denial mode. The recent allocation of Rs 50 crore to form a Tiger Protection Force (TPF) by hiring ex-servicemen seems like a major step forward. In reality, however, this idea throws up more questions than answers on tiger protection.

Are forest departments planning to create an elite “strike force” comprising ex-servicemen which will guard our tiger reserves? Or is the idea simply to hire ex-army personnel and integrate them into the existing structure of forest departments?

While the contours of the plan are vague, a simple analysis would reveal that both these options need to first address some core issues with regard to empowerment, selection of personnel, and integration into the command

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structure before effective deployment.

One of the fundamental issues will be to legally empower such combat units and personnel to do law enforcement. An ex-serviceman toting a Self Loading Rifle — hired on contract — cannot “loosely” operate with forest staff and open fire on tiger poachers.

The Wildlife Protection Act does not empower army officers, leave alone ex-army personnel, to do that. The fledgling experiment will end right there. This legal hurdle can be addressed by formally recruiting them as forest guards or foresters or rangers to protect tigers under a defined jurisdiction and command. On the other hand, if the idea is to constitute an elite strike force, the same problems — with respect to appointment in government service and delegation of powers to carry out protection duties — will have to be addressed first. And, unless the Centre agrees to fully underwrite the costs permanently, states will not be interested.

The issue of selecting personnel with the right skills is important. Army personnel from the supply corps or those trained to fire howitzers, tanks and other tactical weapons will be ineffective for forest patrols. Whether sufficient sharpshooters or personnel trained in jungle warfare would be available for re-

cruitment and deployment in their home states with the local forest staff is another question.

Integrating such skilled and disciplined ex-servicemen into existing protection units of forest departments — that lack leadership — is another major challenge. Since rank and hierarchy are deeply ingrained in the services, composition of such units will have to be carefully handled with proper cross matching of ranks based on pay scales and service.

One of the major protection problems that forest departments face — in areas not affected by armed insurgents — is from local mobs who intrude into reserves to smuggle timber, graze cattle and encroach tiger habitats. Tackling such intrusions require training and skills in law and order enforcement, which the police know best. Army personnel are trained and conditioned to use maximum force which may lead to excesses and become counter productive.

Considering the range of prob-

lems on core aspects of deploying ex-servicemen, it might be a better option to revitalise the existing multi-tiered protection system in states where the law and order situation is satisfactory. Hiring sufficient local staff, training them and paying good wages with Central government grants must be considered.

However, in order to overcome the limitations of forest departments in tackling armed insurgents who have even taken over some tiger reserves, the goal must be to raise and deploy the TPF, duly empowered under law, to regain control. The TPF can also function as a special strike force deployed under the command of reserve wardens without being burdened with multifarious wildlife management responsibilities. Lastly, it may be necessary to test this model in a few tiger reserves before the final structure and scope is finalised.

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