

## Waterman brings local guardians back to protect Sariska tigers



Sunny Sebastian

Good days ahead: Tigress T44 which was released into the Sariska Tiger Reserve near Alwar last year.- File Photo: Rohit Jain Paras

The New Year augurs well for the Sariska Tiger Reserve, for the local guardians of the 400 sq km sanctuary nestling in the lap of the Aravallis are back vowing to protect the land, the trees, the fauna and the apex animal, tiger.

One could visualise the return of the good days for Sariska as early this past week villagers in the neighbourhood of the park -- which had lost all tigers in the wild some five years

back to alleged poaching -- inspired by Waterman Rajendra Singh started a 19-day *padyatra* committing themselves to protection of this precious island of bio-diversity towards which the metropolis of Delhi is stretching its hands greedily!

### Making dead rivers flow

It was, in fact, Mr. Rajendra Singh, who was awarded a Magsaysay in 2001 for making dead rivers flow in the arid terrains of Alwar, and his organisation Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS), that had fought the mining lobby in the 1990s and kept a watch on the poachers. From time to time the village people and the TBS volunteers kept a watchful eye on the tigers in Sariska.

### Lack of coordination

The reserve fell into bad times with the TBS and the Sariska administration falling apart after lack of coordination. When the senior officers who served the reserve for long with clear understanding of the animals in the wild and the people who lived in the surroundings retired, the persons who took over perhaps missed this important link in conservation — the local population.

Then again Mr. Rajendra Singh too got busy in the protection of the rivers of India including the major ones, the Ganga and the Yamuna. The net result was the devastation of the reserve.

“The close relationship between the people and the forest here in the past had served as a guarantee for its survival. The tiger, the local people, their animals all co-existed. There had never been even a single instance of tiger attacking humans in Sariska,” notes K. L. Saini who served the area as Field Director in its initial days.

“I decided to devote more time to Sariska to bring together the land and its people once again. The villagers have co-existed with the woods and wild animals from times immemorial and they are the best protectors of tigers,” said Mr. Singh talking to *The Hindu* during his *padyatra*.

### Felicitation programme

The start of the *padyatra* at Raipura Bagh, a village on the border of Rajasthan, on Tuesday also marked the revival of "Paryavaran Premi Puraskar", annual felicitation of both villagers and forest staff, which was started in the '90s at the initiative of TBS and was discontinued 11 years back.

"The award programme was to acknowledge the good work of villagers and forest staff in saving the trees, nabbing the poachers, conserving water, restoring the ground water level, reviving the rivers and putting off the forest fires. This recognition went a long way in keeping the morale of the staff high and ensuring the cooperation of the local population," said Rajendra Singh.

Sariska Field Director Raghuvver Singh Shekhawat, who was shifted to Sariska from Ranthambhore after the death of a male tiger re-introduced in the park some time back, gets the credit for re-connecting the tiger land with the TBS and its "natural patrons": "The tigers are doing fine. This movement has come as a reassurance on the much needed cooperation of the population surrounding the reserve," says Mr. Shekhawat.

Amid the thud of *padyatris'* footsteps and slogans favouring "*Jangal, jameen, janglee jeev*" (forest, land, wild animals) around Sariska Mr. Shekhawat also talked about the "progression" of the new tigers-- as the major concern ever since the first re-introduction that the tigers has been that they are not multiplying. "I spotted them mating recently. I hope the results will be before us next year," he said.