

# The King and I

**T**oday, we're going on a 'Nature Cruise' down the river Mandovi in north Goa. There are ten of us, school kids, all about 12 years old. The *patrao*, or owner of the boat, is a tall, thin young man called Brian. He's waiting for us when we get to the small jetty in Nerul where his boat is moored. He takes tourists down the river during the season, showing them the green beauty of Goa in the rains. The boat is yellow, blue, white and fat and bobs gently in the muddy waters. Her name is *Obrigado*, which means 'Thank you' in Portuguese.

"Why did you name her that?" I ask Brian.

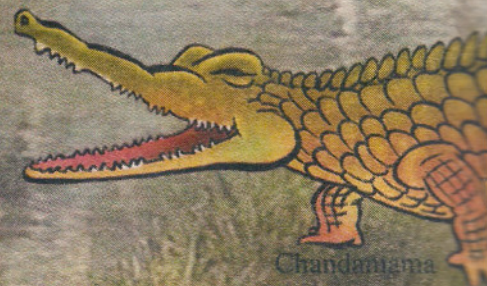
"It's to thank the birds, the animals, the fish, the bugs and the trees... yes, even the bugs!" he says. "Why? Because they're there... what a boring place the world would be without them..! The eagle soaring high above, the cicadas singing at nightfall, the soft, warm feel of a velvet frog cradled in my hands..." Mmm... I don't think I want to touch a frog!! "These forests, these birds, these animals, these fish, they are all a gift to us from God," Brian says seriously, "you children should care for them."

It's beautiful on the river. The water isn't very clean, it's brown and green and slow moving. Brian tells us, this is because the river has almost reached the sea. "It's like when you're coming home from school," he says. "Don't you always run until you're nearly there and then slow down? That's because you're tired from hurrying. The river, too." There are trees on both sides, and small patches of sand where orange and white crabs wave their pincers at us. Are they saying bye to us as we pass? The sun is blazing but there's a cool breeze over the water and it smells delicious – warm and sweet.

Brian talks excitedly about these 'gifts from God': the birds—kingfishers, cattle egrets, night herons, green bee-eaters, finches, hornbills, drongos; the reptiles – the earth boa that looks like it has a head on each end of its body, the green glass snake that isn't a snake at all, but a lizard without legs; the mammals—the mouse deer, looks like a cheetal, but so small that you can hold it in your hand... but birds, fish and small animals don't impress us – we want something bigger – tigers?

Brian tells us that in the jungles near Molém, there are some leopards but they're pretty hard to spot. He laughs. "Get it? Leopards have spots but they're rarely spotted! If you're really quiet and patient today," he whispers, "you may just see the King!"

We're astonished. A lion? In Goa? All Brian will say is *suségado* – 'take it easy'. We stop talking as he shuts off the engine. Now it's quiet,





only Brian's soft voice still praising the beauty of the river, the water lapping gently and occasional birdcalls and camera clicks. Suddenly Brian points to something on the bank. "Look," he says softly, "the King!"

We crane our necks. There, basking lazily on the bank and smiling as though he owns the river, is an immense crocodile. He must be a good 12 ft long, and at first glance it looks like he's mostly mouth and tail. As the *Obrigado* draws up on the bank opposite him, he turns obligingly, so the whole length of his body is visible to us, twisting his head to watch us watching him.

The scales on his back gleam a gold in the afternoon sun. His long tail lies curled on the sands. It looks very strong and thick; in fact, a blow from it could quite easily knock a full-grown cow off her feet and into his waiting mouth. And what a mouth it is – huge and gaping, with big yellow teeth sticking out of the sides of his jaws here and there. Slowly, he opens it wide, yawning, and lies in the sun, warming himself and watching us out of the corner of his half-closed eyes. He's huge, terrifying, and horribly ugly, he hasn't brushed his teeth today... and yet he looks like a real king! He poses for our cameras languidly.

"He's not really sleeping," says Brian, "he can wake up in a second if it means getting a good lunch or dinner." Someone wants to know what crocodiles eat. "Everything," Brian replies, "we found a dead one once that had a bicycle tyre in its belly."

This brings up the obvious question: if crocodiles kill everything, who kills the crocodiles? Brian doesn't beat about the bush. "People do!"

"But why shouldn't we kill them? They're cruel and mean and they eat all the smaller animals," we argue.

Brian explains: If the crocodile doesn't kill other animals for his food, their populations would grow... and

soon, there would be no place in the river for other creatures to live, the river would be dirty because it is so crowded... "The crocodile makes sure there's enough space for everyone," he says. "Just like a king. And the crocodile doesn't kill the other animals for fun, he kills them when he needs them – for food."

I stare at the King, only half listening to what Brian is telling me. I look fascinated and scared, but he only looks amused. He's looking at me. Does he want to eat me, too? He's so beautiful! How can something be beautiful and ugly at the same time? I don't understand it... we're looking into each other's eyes now and there's nobody else there at all, just us. The King and I.

Suddenly, he shuts his jaws with a snap so loud that all of us jump, even Brian. We watch the King of the Goan jungle slide down the bank and into the water. We can't see him at all for a few minutes and we search feverishly... until suddenly, there are shouts of "I can see his eyes!" And indeed, the only parts of the King that are visible are his eyes and the tip of his snout as he glares at us from underwater. Unexpectedly, he rises to the surface and opens his jaws again, hissing like an angry snake.

"We're strangers in his kingdom," says Brian. "Let's go home." We turn the *Obrigado*'s nose homeward and drift slowly along the river until we reach the quay. Here, Brian ties up the boat and helps everyone get off. He takes us to his house nearby. It's made of stone, with a red tile roof. Brian goes into a dingy-looking shed at the back.

He comes out of the shed a few seconds later carrying a crocodile! This croc is a baby, only about four feet long, his mouth tied up with a string to keep him from snapping. He doesn't look unhappy at being tied up. In fact, he looks rather amused. Brian holds him like a baby,







cradling him in his arms. Brian coaxes everyone to come and touch the crocodile. We come up cautiously, closing our eyes, saying 'eee' and 'ick', until we touch the cool dry scales and realize they actually feel quite nice. I look into this croc's eyes and he's smiling at me, too. I decide I rather like the King and his royal family.

Slowly, Brian turns the croc over so that its soft belly is exposed. Just under the chin is a nasty red gash. "This is from a fisherman's hook," explains Brian. "He had just caught a fish and was reeling it in when the croc caught hold of it and the hook got stuck in his throat... the fisherman didn't cut the fishing line, either. It must have hurt this fellow very badly... he was bleeding heavily when

we found him. We haven't been able to take the hook out; he won't let us. Now it's infected and he's dying." That makes us sad and we're silent. Why can't people be kind?

I look at this Prince and tell him in my mind that I'm very sorry he's hurt. In the dim light I can't be certain but I think he winks and smiles his toothy smile. "What did you think of the Kingdom?" asks Brian.

There's silence for a few minutes. "It was beautiful," someone says suddenly. "I wish my friends could have been here to see it, too."

"Come again," says Brian, "if the kingdom is still here... you must take care of it - the

King doesn't have an army to protect it. That must be your job."

We turn to leave, sadly. We're destroying that Kingdom, and so many others without thinking what we'll miss once they're gone. We must do something, anything, to help... "Talk to people," says Brian. "Tell them what you saw today, what you felt. Make them feel it, too."

And that's what I'm trying to do now, by telling you of the day I met the King.

**- By Sweta Sorab**

***Courtesy: Kalpavriksh and the National Biodiversity and Strategic Action Plan***

*(This series concludes with this month's story)*