



Tiger Conservation: An Indian Success Story

August 1, 2025

Abhiroop Chowdhury

The Tiger (*Panthera tigris*), is the national animal of India, which is the world's largest democracy. Tigers have five living subspecies restricted to Eastern and South-Eastern Asia. These are Indian or Royal Bengal Tiger, Indochinese Tiger, Siberian (Amur) Tiger, South China Tiger and Sumatran Tiger. The Royal Bengal Tiger boasts the highest wild population numbers compared to other tiger subspecies.

The enigma about this specialized solitary predator revolves around its brilliant yellow-black striped body, ability to camouflage within the dry and moist deciduous forest, retractile claws, and paw pads, which make it a silent hunter and the top predator in the ecosystem. Such is the regal stature of the tiger, that it has inspired poets and sages of ancient India, and its symbolism is associated with royalty. In the classic Tamil text '*Silappadikaram*', a prayer reads as follows:

“May the tiger, emblem of our king,
carved on the Himalaya's golden peak,
forever stamp that king-of-mountain's brow”

(Page 5, Alain Danielou's translation from the ancient Tamil, published as a New Directions paperback in 1965)

Local tradition and culture have also adorned the tiger with a unique position that **symbolizes** the divine domain and regality. '*Shakti*', the ancient form of feminine **power**, is often depicted through the symbolism of the Tiger. But these age-old beliefs were altered by the British Raj, for whom tigers only manifested hindrances towards the reclamation of India's vast forests for agriculture and mining. To morally justify the state-supported killings of tigers, the demonization of the animal was promoted in most parts of India. One example is the myth of Bon-Bibi,

where the Tiger, or '*Dakhin Ray*', is the demonic king of the forests while the goddess protects the vulnerable in the Indian **Sundarbans**. The situation began to change after India gained independence, with the introduction of specific wildlife protection laws, notably the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972. Project Tiger was launched in 1973 from the Jim Corbett National Park. This has seen a phenomenal shift in local perspective on tigers across India. Tiger-human conflict was a reality, which made enlisting local communities' support in tiger projects challenging in the initial years. Later, ecotourism projects centered around the enigmatic flagship species and traditional beliefs of divinity associated with tigers successfully **bridged** this gap. Tiger poaching fuels the demand for Tiger body parts in the illegal Chinese medicine market, making conservation efforts more challenging. Tiger body parts were frequently trafficked across borders, fueling the **illegal** wildlife trade.

Globally, tiger conservation struggles with challenges like poaching and the illegal use of tiger body parts in Chinese traditional medicine markets; however, India has been performing comparatively better. According to research, Tachilek, a border town in Myanmar, and Mae Sai, a neighbourhood in Thailand, served as central hubs for the tiger trade in Southeast Asia. In the border town of Mong La, Myanmar, parts of tigers were freely sold for use in traditional medicine and decoration. In India, the number of tigers has increased above 20% between 2018 and 2022. On 09 April 2022, the Hon. Prime Minister of India announced that the tiger population in India is 3,167. This number can be as high as 3,925 if both camera trapping and non-trapping estimations are taken together, indicating a 6.1% annual rise in tiger numbers. As per the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red-list, the population trend remains 'declining' globally, with conservation status still 'endangered'. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) reports that the global tiger population is around 4,500, which is a drastic decline from the historic estimates of around 1,00,000 wild tigers. The majority of wild tigers now reside in India. China is taking an unorthodox approach to combat this crisis by 'farming' tigers in their many 'tiger farms'. Recent estimates indicate that around 8,900 tigers are held captive across China, Lao PDR, Vietnam and Thailand, but these ex-situ conservation models fuel the illegal wildlife trade rather than aiding in restoring the wild population of the species to near historic records.

India has taken the most challenging route to conserve its national animal. India has 55 tiger reserves across the nation, conserving around 78,735.6 sq km, including core and buffer areas, which is around 2.3% of our nation's total land area. Corbett National Park has the largest tiger metapopulation, estimated at around 260. In India, instead of breeding, conservation is prioritized; instead of

captivity, the wild population is conserved, resulting in the pro-in-situ conservation strategies. Over the last 100 years, this enigmatic creature has disappeared from Singapore (1930s), Bali (1940s), Java and Hong Kong (1960s), Central Asia (1970s), and very recently from Vietnam, Lao PDR and Cambodia (2000s). India remains the last frontier in the long-standing battle between development and the Tiger, and as per recent statistics, at least in our nation, the Tiger is winning the fight and co-existing with the growing population of our country.

Author Biography

Prof. (Dr.) Abhiroop Chowdhury is a Senior Fellow at the Jindal India Institute. He is Professor and Dean at the Jindal School of Environment and Sustainability, O.P. Jindal Global University.