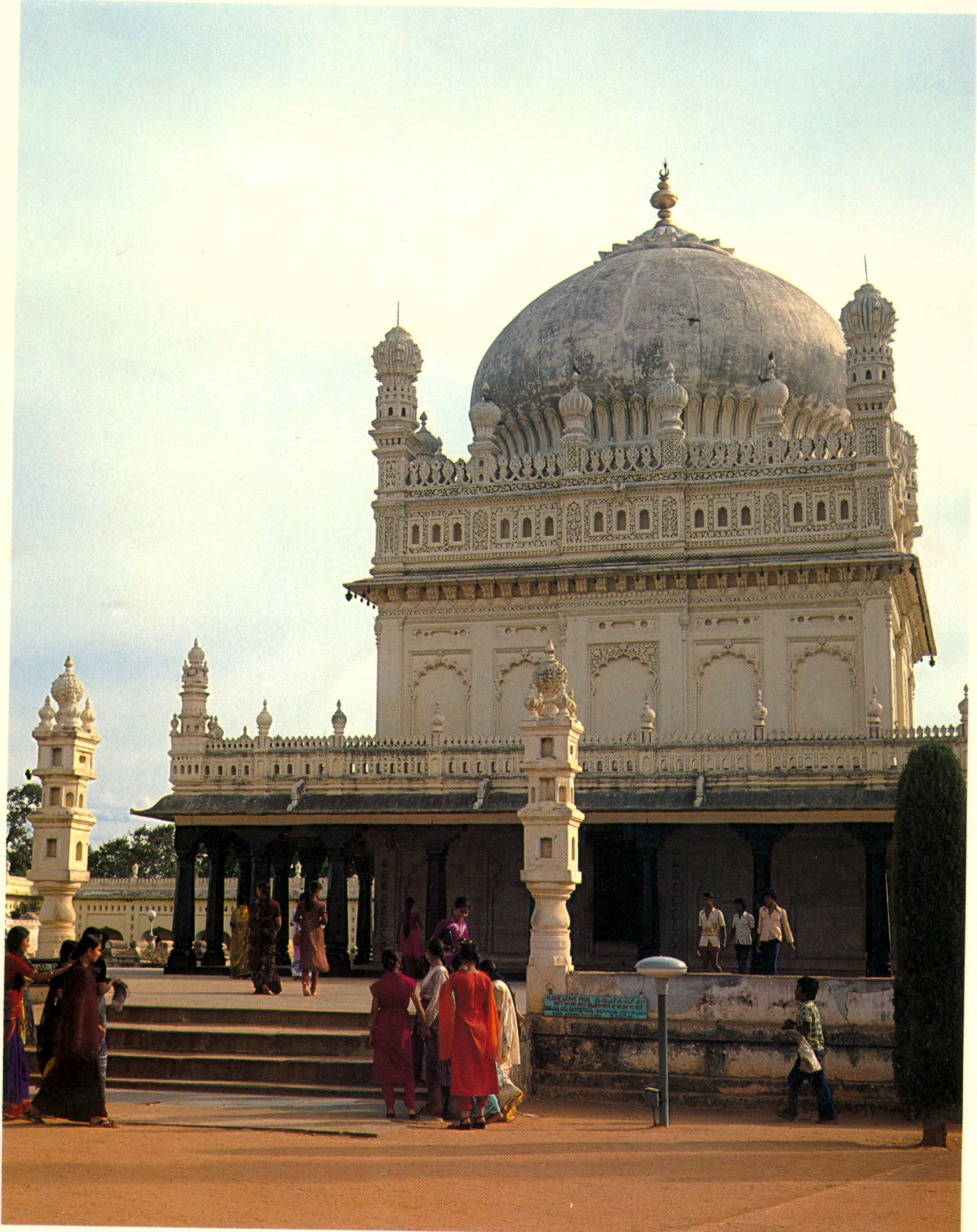


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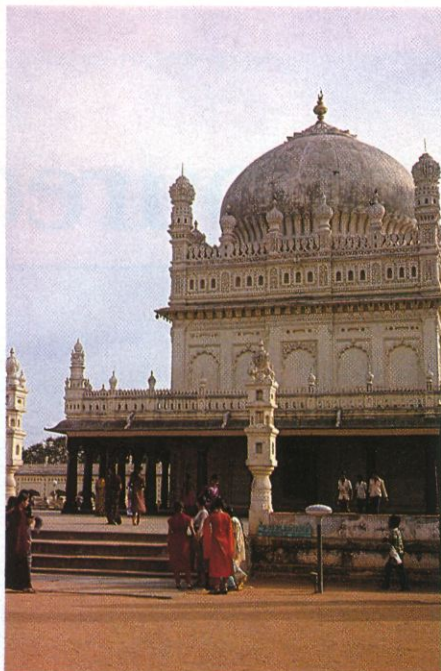
SWAGAT

अक्टूबर OCTOBER '84

केवल विमान में पढ़ने के लिए
FOR INFLIGHT READING ONLY



इंडियन एयरलाइन्स
Indian Airlines



Cover:
The tomb of
Tipu Sultan in
Seringapatam

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Rhythms of Ranthambhore

Text & photographs: Nihal Mathur

The Aravalli and Vindhyan ranges meet and merge in southeast Rajasthan to create rolling hills, lakes, scarps, savanna grasslands, nullahs, waterfalls, pools and streams. Within this picturesque rocky tract, the fort of Ranthambhore stands, surrounded by the wilderness of the National Park where the Tiger is seen in the full light of the day.

Nature awakens instantly at the crack of dawn. The crisp night air carries the ambient song of birds greeting the day. As light gradually intensifies, every strand of grass stands out in sharp and vivid detail and whole new world magically begins to emerge from the shadows. Everything that moves is astir — from the tiny turtle to the tiger. This is the time to be in the jungles.

The jungle resounds with whoops of langur and myriad calls of birds as you drive away in a jeep into the Park. Brahminy ducks go skimming across the large expanse of Padam Talao towards the herds of deer feeding and drinking at the lake's edge. Sambar, the handsome deer of our forests, wade knee deep in the lake to feed on underwater vegetation while chital, the gentle spotted deer, graze along the banks and meadows mingling with the wild boars. Sharing the Park with these hoofed species are the nilgai that tread softly through the foliage, seldom coming to water and the shy chinkara, the only Indian gazelle that prefers a solitary life on the grassy

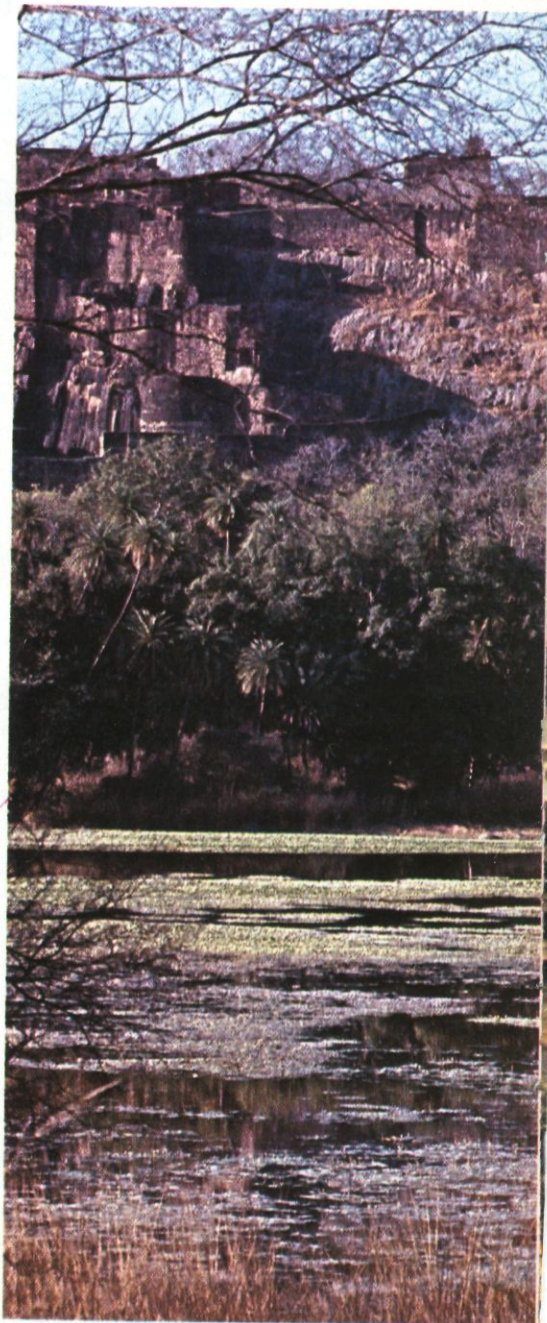
undulating hills.

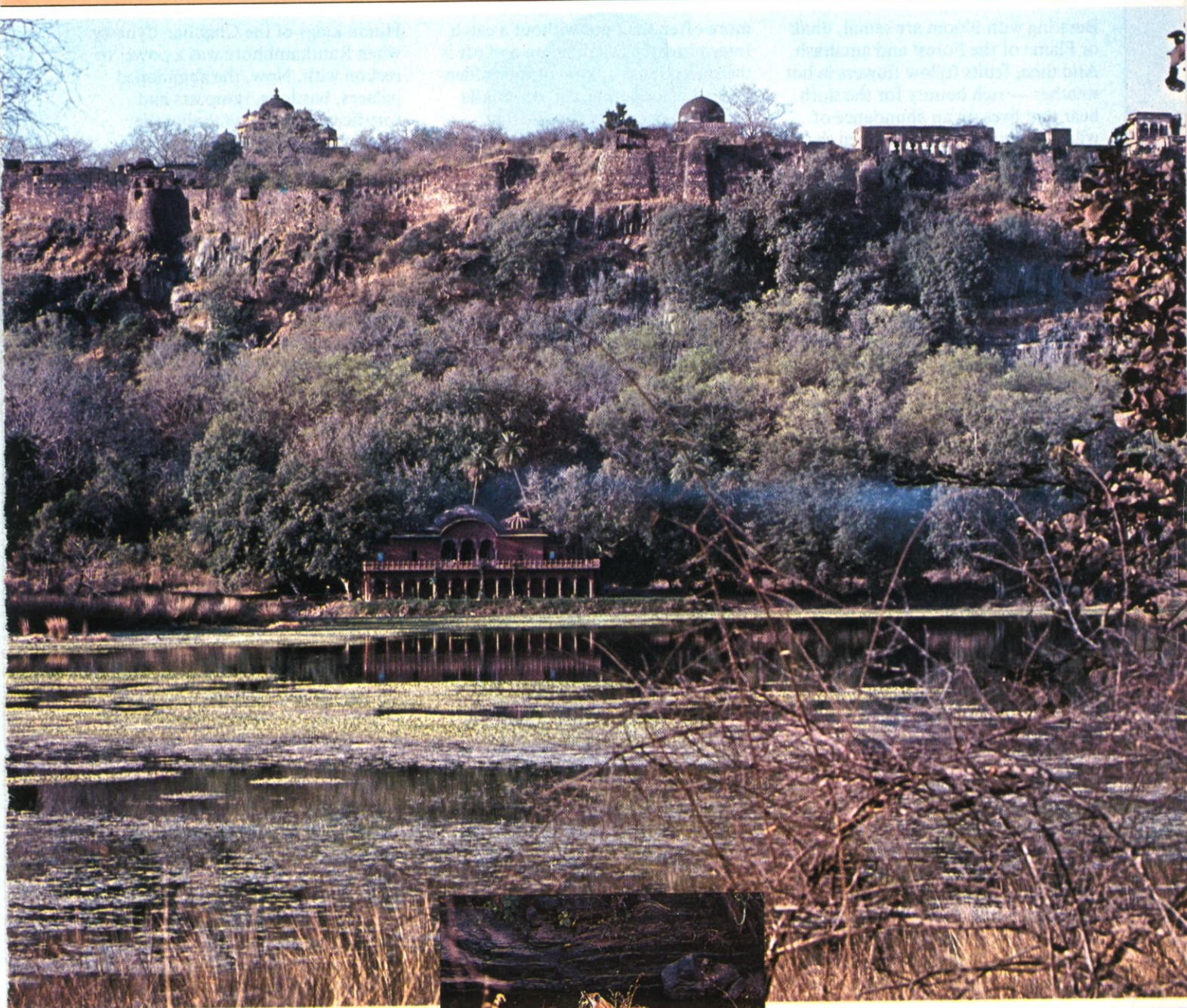
Cresting a small hill, a stunning sight of Rajbagh unfolds. Crumbling pavilions at the far end of the lotus laden lake look like an image from a Raj picture-book, but in the slanting sunshine of the morning, it shimmers like a canvas of Monet. Sailing past in uncertain formation, painted storks wing their way towards another lake. The three lakes in Ranthambhore are excellent ecosystems for the soft backed turtle and the marsh crocodile that feeds on a teeming variety of fish. The banks bustle with the activity of waterbirds — herons, egrets, ducks, darters, grebes, teal, coots, kingfishers, jacanas and ibis.

To these vibrant havens come hordes of winter travellers from frozen frontiers to find refuge and a place in the sun. Nearly 250 different kinds of resident and migratory birds populate the Park. There could never be a dull moment for a bird lover with all the bulbuls, the bunting, barbets, bee-eaters, doves, drongos, mynahs, munias, shrikes, swifts, wagtails, warblers and peafowl everywhere and that fairy of the forest — the paradise flycatcher.

To the enchantment of birds, flowers unfurl to cast their spell in the springtime months of February, March and April, when the forests are aflame with red, orange and yellow.

Right: The tiger lies tranquil in a deep jungle pool. **Inset:** Jogi Mahal — a charming rest house lapped by the waters of Padam Talao.





Bursting with bloom are semal, dhak or Flame of the Forest and amaltash. And then, fruits follow flowers in hot weather — rich bounty for the sloth bear that lives on an abundance of wild figs and mango, and when the Park closes for visitors in the monsoon months, the bear is busy tucking into ripened blackberries.

Summer, when the hot winds blow in April, May and June, the mercury clocks 48°C and the water dries up in the reserve, save the lakes and a few perennial pools. To these water points come the scattered denizens to slake their burning thirst, in greater concentrations. This is the best season to see Ranthambhore's wildlife and the tiger as well. Not only to wet his parched throat but also to beat the heat, the tiger lies tranquilised in the deep jungle pools, away from the scorching sun.

As the sun climbs steadily overhead and morning progresses towards noon, a strange silence fills the forests accentuated by the drone of cicadas. The animals retreat to dense cover escaping the midday glare and the forests appear deserted in the hazy light. Chital shelter under the luxuriant canopy of trees while in a cool and shaded corner, the tiger sleeps, serene and undisturbed. Nothing seems to move, not even the 'mugger' crocodile that basks all afternoon long in the winter on its favourite rock or bank.

But from the verandah of Jogi Mahal — a charming rest house lapped by the waters of Padam Talao, the meditative stillness is repeatedly broken by the SPLASH of a pied kingfisher that resurfaces from the dip

more often than not without a catch. Intermittently switching on and off is the staccato tok-toking of the golden-backed woodpecker and the **kokila** calls of the naughty tree pie that comes daringly close to share your meals. Below the balcony, yellow-headed wagtails walk on waterlilies snapping up aquatic insects. But the bewitching wonder of the forest is the butterfly that flits about silently through the dappled trees.

Before rain transforms the forest into verdant green, the trees are quite leafless and brown. Described tropical, dry and deciduous in a botanist's lexicon, the trees predominant in the Park are **dhok**, **tendu**, **rayara** and **salar**. But the trees that would inspire a Thoreau are the ancient tamarinds with hollows of owl, the skyreaching date palms festooned with baya nests and the **katphadi** that weaves its roots in stone like the creations of a zen gardener. It is the 'Walking Banyan' outside Jogi Mahal that remains the most celebrated tree in Ranthambhore. Under its awesome spread reputed to be the third largest in the country, peacocks rest awhile in the empty hours and langur delight audience with playful antics.

Towering above the big banyan, the fort of Ranthambhore rises on a precipitous plateau. Huge gateways and stone-paved paths and passages lead as far back as 950 A.D. to the

Hindu kings of the Chauhan dynasty, when Ranthambhore was a power to reckon with. Now, the abandoned palaces, bastions, ramparts and fortification walls symbolise the aggressive defiance of this proud Rajput citadel that withstood repeated onslaughts of the Sultans of Delhi. Only by treachery did Raja Hamir lose his final battle to Khilji in 1282 and to save the honour of the vanquished warriors, legend says that 10,000 women committed **jauhar** or burnt themselves alive rather than submit to the victors. Ranthambhore came under the yoke of Muslim monarchs. Landscaped with rock and water, the ruins of Ranthambhore tell their own tales of tragedy and romance.

Gifted away as a present from Emperor Akbar in the 17th century to the kings of Jaipur, the fort was forsaken by the inheritors, but the surrounding wilderness was maintained as a royal shooting preserve till India gained independence. Ranthambhore bled again when the plunder of its forests began, even though it was a notified wildlife sanctuary in 1959. A deteriorating situation was finally arrested when in 1974, Ranthambhore became one of the nine Project Tiger reserves in the country. It was under the versatile and dynamic Field Director — Fateh Singh Rathore, that a herculean task of shifting villages out of the 400 sq. kms. reserve was achieved and illegal grazing, wood cutting and poaching activities were stopped. In wildlife circles, his name is synonymous with that of Ranthambhore which is one of the finest habitats of the tiger in India today.

The animals are afoot once again in

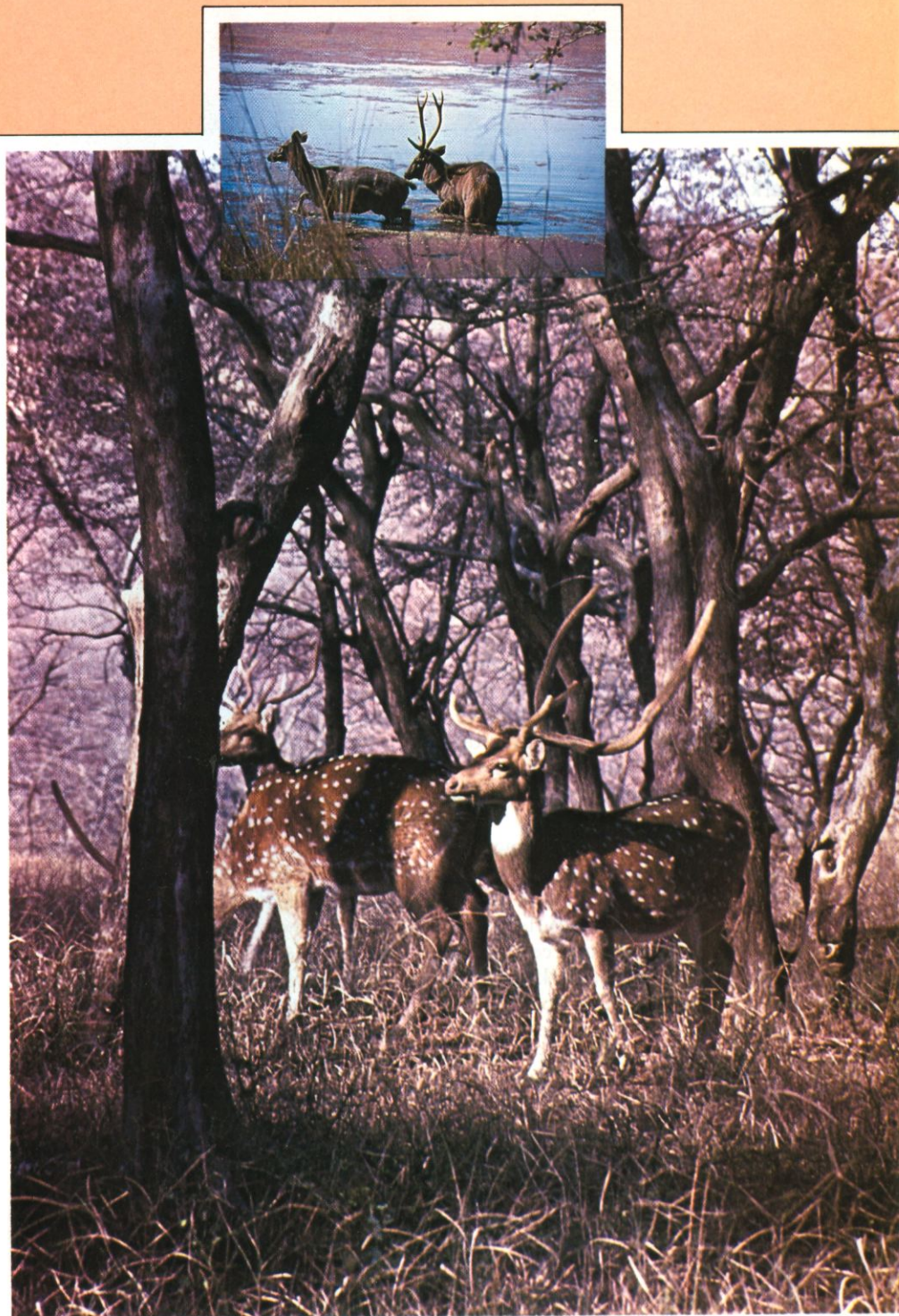


the Park as the sun starts descending and shadows begin to lengthen into evening. In soft golden light, the deer trek slowly and cautiously back to the open spaces of the banks while quails and partridges scatter about nervously from bush to thicket, calling out to one another reassuringly. The tiger — a principal participant in the game of predator and prey, yawns and stretching after his long siesta, leaves his lair and an exciting restlessness pervades Ranthambhore.

The agitated babbling of babblers arouses the suspicion of a python raiding a colony of birds or slithering inside burrows seeking gerbilles, bandicoots, field mice and hare. Eyewitness accounts abound in Ranthambhore of pythons constricting peacocks and swallowing small mammals like fawns. Crawling through rustling grass and leaves are other reptilian relatives like the monitor lizard, cobra and krait in search of unwary little rodents, birds, frogs and eggs.

In the extraordinary interconnecting webs of nature, the predator becomes prey to the large mongoose and the crested serpent eagle that swoops down like lightning on snakes, lizards and junglefowl, bearing them away in its talons. Keeping a sharp lookout, the blackwinged kite is the lone sentinel frequently seen perched on the highest branch. Birds of prey like kites, kestrels, falcons, buzzards and harriers often put up thrilling performances in pursuit of their

Left: Sambar, the handsome deer of the forest. **Right inset:** Sambar wade deep in the lake to feed on underwater vegetation. **Right:** Chital, the gentle spotted deer.



quarry. But the true aerobat of the Park is the Jungle Crow — an audacious creature with a cheek to disturb the tiger at his kill.

Suspicious movements of a jungle crow often lead to the discovery of a tiger at his kill. The tiger feasts mainly on large herbivores and with a bit of luck, picks up a peacock, porcupine or langur. Constantly interloping in the tiger's territory for chital, is the leopard — the 'Prince of Cats'.

Anxious to avoid an encounter with a more powerful predator, the leopard generally haunts the peripheries of the Park where it thrives on langur and peacock, occasionally lifting village dogs and goats. On the prowl also are the caracal, jungle cat and leopard-cat — the other members of the feline family. It is the tiger however, the uncrowned king of Ranthambhore that commands complete attention and, as he moves majestically through his domain, his presence is announced by the jungle.

Preternaturally alive to danger, the peacock spots the stripes and sounds the alert in a splitting scream and with ponderous flapping takes flight. From the vantage position of tree tops, the frightened langur cough 'kharr kharr kharr' reiterating the peacock's fears. Alarmed, the deer stand tense and terrified, their eyes and ears cocked in the direction of distress signals. Then suddenly, piercing the charged atmosphere, a sambar bells a warning loud and clear as the tiger breaks cover and the animals thunder away.

Condescending to be followed and photographed by harmless humans, the tiger takes to the jeep trail. In the fading twilight, when its coat and

contours begin to blurr, the tiger prepares to stalk. Inconspicuous in its camouflage, the master of stealth crouches and creeps closer to the prey.

In a rippling burst of energy, the tiger pounces, seizing the prey by its neck and killing it outright or crushing its windpipe till life ebbs away. And then, the kill is almost always dragged to a secluded site to be devoured at night.

Light dissolves quickly in the deepening shadows as a separate reality of nocturnal birds and beasts become manifest. Surreptitiously gaining ground and grappling in the dark with tooth and claw are the cats and other carnivores. In this nether world, death strikes swiftly and surely and the interval between two notes of a hooting owl deepens the mystery of the night.

Bats fly out of their murky caverns into the starlight exploring the forests for fruits. Foraging for roots in the ground, the porcupine shifts, shuffles and rattles on through the brushwood while the pangolin probes and digs deeper into the termite mound. Tearing away flesh and feather and crunching the bone, are the common palm civet and the ratel. Trotting along and on the hunt too, is the Indian fox, a canine cousin of the striped hyena and the jackal — camp followers of the tiger. But drifting with the scented breeze hawkwing moths, beetles and other insects is the



Above: From the vantage position of tree tops, the frightened langur cough.

Left: Nilgai treading softly through the foliage.

nightjar that wanders in the Park all through the night.

Imagination soars with the rising moon and as sleep settles slowly lulled by the mystic music of darkness, Hamir and his beautiful women arise from the ashes of memory to become real in the consciousness of the dreamer. There are no ghosts in Ranthambhore — only the Spirit. Nature reasserts itself when man relinquishes control.

As the eastern skies get tinted with shades of pink and blue, the grey junglefowl, harbinger of dawn, trumpets the advent of dawn. In the timeless turning of the heavens and the earth yet another day begins and Ranthambhore repeats its eternal rhythms.