

## BEAR: GENTLEMAN OR DEMON?

Bear! The very word itself strikes terror in the hearts of the jungle dwellers.

Yet, unknown to many, this wonderful creature is on the brink of extinction in Sri Lanka, with numbers very drastically reduced, its habitat decimated and the hand of man firmly turned against him out of abject fear. Many men of the jungle have said to me that they would rather face the charge of an elephant as there was still some chance of escape, whereas with the terrible “close quarters charge” of the Sloth Bear there is none. Add that to the distinct possibility of you becoming totally blind, face disfigured so that your own mother cannot recognize you, plus the added bonus of the loss of a limb or two, the reasons for fear and animosity towards this creature is very clear. Yet the greatest fear that lurks among the jungle men is of becoming “the living dead” – blinded, incapacitated and totally dependent on the benevolence of fellow men for a miserable existence till, finally death is looked upon as a welcome relief from a lifetime of suffering.

To describe an animal with such a reputation, as a “wonderful creature” would appear to be gross distortion of the truth. But, yet, it is the truth.

The Bear is a “gentleman” who seeks to lead his life in his own quiet way, undisturbed, grubbing for worms, beetles and termites, breaking open the hard termite mounds with his steel hard claws, or climb the *Palu* trees in search of its beloved berry. Once the “inner Bear” is satisfied, he would retire to his den or to some place of convenience, like a hollow log, or a crevice among boulders to contentedly suck his paws with a humming noise, perhaps to fall into deep snoring sleep. So deep is its sleep, especially with a belly full of *Palu* fruits that several jungle men I know had got to within a few feet of the creature before the snoring alerted them of its presence. Such close encounters, fortunately for both parties, resulted in the respective parties “heading for the hills at great speed” mercifully in the opposite directions.

It is this very same habit of deep sleep, or being totally engrossed in sucking up termites with high relish, that brings about tragedy, both for itself and for the unfortunate human, who unwittingly stumbles upon the bear. Surprised, it hurtles off in the direction it is facing or charges the “attacker” with unbridled ferocity. John Still in his classic of the Ceylon jungles *Jungle Tide* portrays such a charge with poetic eloquence.....

“I have looked in the eyes of a bear, little furious eyes,  
Partly hidden, and piercing a tangle of ragged black hair;  
Then she roared while she rushed, with her mouth gaping wide in surprise  
At my look, and my smell that enraged her and tainted the air;  
And the white of my smooth naked chest and the gleam of my arms,  
Where I stood at the door of my tent under vertical sun,  
But enraged her further, till maddened with hate and alarm,  
She charged on, and came straight for my face in a swift awkward run,  
With fangs shining white as I struck her, when swiftly her head,  
Turned to bite at the wound, as though that were the cause of her pain,  
But a second shot plunged through her heart, she crumbled up dead;  
Just a robe of black fur on the leaves, and a sticky red stain”.

Few creatures would display the courage of a mother bear, defending its young to the death. The late Percy De Alwis, Assistant Director of the Department of Wildlife records of a honey gatherer being charged by a very determined and aggressive bear who was turned away by a well placed *katty* blow to the head. The bear staggered, fell, picked itself up and ran in to the jungle on uncertain feet, screaming, while the man, dropping his gourd full of honey and the *katty*, ran in the opposite direction for dear life. Going back to the place the next day to collect his belongings, he was surprised to find them where they fell. However, a low noise from a partly rotten log nearby alerted him and on investigating with great caution, expecting a charge at any moment, he was confronted with a pathetic sight, for there, within the hollow log, lay a bear, dried blood caked on its head, while two tiny balls of black fur were trying to suckle from their dead mother, crying all the while for her lack of response. In its dying moments, it had dragged itself back to the cubs it had defended with its life. The cubs were more fortunate, being handed over to Percy, who brought them up with love and care. Named “Kalu” and “Zimbo” they became a source of much interest and amusement, not to mention a few scary moments, to the visitors to Wilpattu.

Interestingly, each displayed its own individuality, a feature recorded by D. J. G. Henessy, too, in “Green Aisles” in respect of his own two pets, Yakka and Dikky who came to him as orphans. However, such cubs appeared to have bonded very closely to their masters, displaying much affection, showing great concern at his absence and tracking their way back through as much as 20 miles of jungle to be with their beloved master. De Alwis records that Kalu and Zimbo, abandoned at Kali villu in an attempt to revert them back to the wild, found their way back through the jungle to Maradanmaduwa a couple of days later, to greet Percy with much affection, clasping him around the legs with much heaving and pulling, obviously overcome with joy at finding the master and very proud of their feat!

In our jungles there is not a creature, including man, that the bear would back down from in any confrontation, many records exist of standing up to our top predator, the Leopard, the latter being the one to take the step back. Yet the bear rarely seeks conflict with fellow jungle dwellers, preferring peaceful co-existence.

Our distinct sub species *Melursus ursinus inoratus* has no predator in Sri Lanka, though in India, Tigers are known to kill sloth bears, some even becoming habitual bear killers. Some tigers are said to have evolved a specific procedure for the kill, causing a disabling injury with a surprise attack, retreating to a safe distance while the unfortunate bear exhausts itself struggling to escape. Once weakened, the tiger gives the Coup de Grace with no danger to itself, before making its meal. These tigers appear to be well aware of the ferocious defense that will be put up by the bear which could result in disabling injuries to themselves. Injuries of that nature spell doom to jungle folk. Leopards, too, are said to kill bears in India, but I have no knowledge of actual kills in Sri Lanka, though many confrontations are recorded.

Veddhas of a bygone era had their own methods of avoiding the bear, whom they come across frequently in their hunting and food gathering forays. Approaching likely places where bears maybe found, they tap tree trunks and boulders with their axes, utter “hoo” cries to give warning of their arrival, so that the bear has adequate time to retreat without feeling threatened, which would result in a precipitate charge. With the passing of these true children of the jungle and the advent of the urbanized colonist, alien to the ways of the jungle and its denizens, much conflict arose. That the veddhas looked upon bear as a feared and hated enemy is well reflected in the very abusive name given to the creature. Many claim of manthrams that send a bear scampering away in fear, but it is more the vociferous, aggressive

utterance, the bold front and the sound of the hated human voice that puts it to flight, given an avenue of escape. If not, there is no escape. Moving with surprising but rolling ungainly speed, it will be upon the man, rising on hind legs to rake the great claws across the face, wiping away half the face and perhaps an eye in one stroke, baring the bone in the process, biting, scratching, clawing accompanied by demonic roars all the while. Suddenly the attack is over and the animal runs screaming away from the scene of mischief with loud wails and roars as it is he who had been attacked, leaving behind a man so horribly disfigured, mutilated and broken, but more often than not, barely alive.

Folklore and legend, too, has been very unkind to the bear, for it stands demonized. While other animals have been connected with benign deities and spirits, not so the bear. The elephant is associated with Ganesh the elephant headed God, the peacock with Lord Kataragama, the cobra with the mythical Nagas and many others are looked upon benignly as creatures of the Pansiya Panas Jathaka or the 550 reincarnations of Siddhartha, in his quest for Buddhahood. The bear however is linked to “The Lord Devil of the cemeteries”, the dreaded Mahasona who sports a gaping bear’s head fixed “back to front” and walks the jungle paths at night searching for human prey, bringing pestilence, disease and death to terror stricken villagers in the remote corners. Thereby hangs the legend that two yodhayas of King Dutugemunu, Gotaimbara and Ritigala Jayasena, came into conflict and fought for several hours, both being exponents of martial arts. Gotaimbara finally leapt into the air dealing a flying kick which shattered the head of Jayasena, the lifeless body falling to the ground. Saturn or Senasura passing that way came upon the wife of Jayasena weeping disconsolately by the dead body of her Lord and felt a deep pity. Making an astrological calculation, he found that he could be brought back to life if the first head found in the auspicious direction is cut off and fixed on the dead body. This had to be done before the auspicious hour expires. Senasuru hastened in the prescribed direction, but found no human head and time was fast running out when he came across a bear whose head he cut off and rushing back to the body, with the last few seconds running out, fixed it to the body, bringing life to it. But in his great haste, he had wrongly fixed the head “back to front”. Springing back to life Jayasena, realizing the hideous transformation undergone, ran away with blood curdling screams to hide in the cemeteries, away from humans, devounering the corpses brought there and to forever seek vengeance from humans.

Little wonder then that the bear is looked upon as “the devil incarnate” by the superstitious jungle dwellers!

Such are the legends and beliefs that demonize and vilify this “gentleman of the forests”. The truth is different. Bears are wonderful and caring parents displaying much love and attention to their young. Etched in my memory is a wonderful moonlit night I spent 40 feet up in a hut built among the entwining branches of three huge trees at the edge of a paddy field from which the harvest had been taken several weeks previously. In this remote corner of the North Central province, there was said to be a herd of elephants who regularly visited the field, attracted by the new growth springing from the stubble of paddy, as also did the deer and sambhur, among many other visitors. Alone, armed with nothing more than a torch and a *katty* for defense, I had climbed in to the hut to enjoy the bright light of the full moon that turned the little field and the surrounding jungles into ever changing shadows of fantasy, to watch the denizens of the surrounding forests appear from time to time engaging in their chores of existence, to enjoy the cool breeze that blew through the clear night and to be at peace with myself. Sitting at the edge of the platform, my feet dangling high above the ground below, the roof being only a couple of feet above not permitting one to stand inside, I

watched the creatures come and go. Around 2 in the morning a “hoo” cry from the jungle was answered by another a little more to the right and presently, three blobs of black moved on to the threshing floor about 25 yards away, unaware of my presence. It was most fascinating to see the mother bear rootling around, stopping now and then, often with one fore paw in the air, to look around for the two cubs who were indulging in a game of their own. If they strayed too far from “mum” they would be called back with a low sound. The cubs would run around the mother, chasing, then try to climb on to her back, while the mother very patiently put up with all the “horse play”. The concern of the female was quite evident as was the love with which she moved them aside from time to time, so that she could continue with her feeding. Running, wrestling, rolling around, cuffing each other in a mock fight, they really had a “ball” before it became the time to go, the mother carefully shepherding the two young ones, still bent on play, towards the bushes. Finally, tiring of their play they hitched a ride on “mum’s” back and faded quietly away into the shadows.

Bear is a peculiar creature, evoking surprising emotions in many. He is hated, feared, avoided, killed at any opportunity provided, but yet there are those that look upon them as fellow beings, treat them with respect, cohabit peacefully understanding their ways, those that love them and are moved to tears of deep sorrow at their passing.

One gloomy monsoon afternoon at Magul Maha Vihara in Yala, I was shown a bear who was fast asleep on the fine warm dust on the floor of a rocky crevice around 30 yards away from the ancient rock shelter which was the abode of the lone human caretaker of the ruins. This bear was said to be a “habitual” there and quite undisturbed, of the human presence. Another, a huge, fine young male who frequented the vicinity of a water hole in Wilpattu became quite an attraction to the visitors and the staff. As the then warden M. M. D. Perera records, it suddenly fell ill. The body was found a day later, floating on the water. Perera says “I recollect how the tracker Karunaratne wept over his death” evidence of the fondness and extreme emotion evoked in a grown man of the jungle, to whom death was an ever present certainty, daily witnessed.

For others, the encounter with a bear is a life changing occurrence, not only by way of disfigurement, disability and blindness but also as an event precipitating an extreme attitudinal change and all encompassing compassion. D. J. G. Hennessy, intrepid jungle man, hunter of rogue elephants, having shot at a family of bears at night over a water hole, follows the blood trail, to quote his own words “The harsh scream of the peafowl, from the leafless trees they love so well, brought in the Dawn. I found her lying in a pool of blood on a game track a hundred yards away, her tongue lolling out of her mouth. Keeping watch over her still body was a cub, who, at our approach, rose up on his stumpy little hind legs and snorted defiance at us before scampering into the jungle, crying pitifully for the one who in his small world was everything. That is why I became a protector of the wild”.

Gentleman or Demon, caring parent of unbridled courage, well-spring of extreme emotions, and this fascinating creature is fast retreating along with his forest habitat, before the tide of urbanized man. The world will be that much poorer if he is allowed to fade away in to extinction.

*Penned down thoughts of  
Rohana Nanayakkara*