

Wild and Wilful

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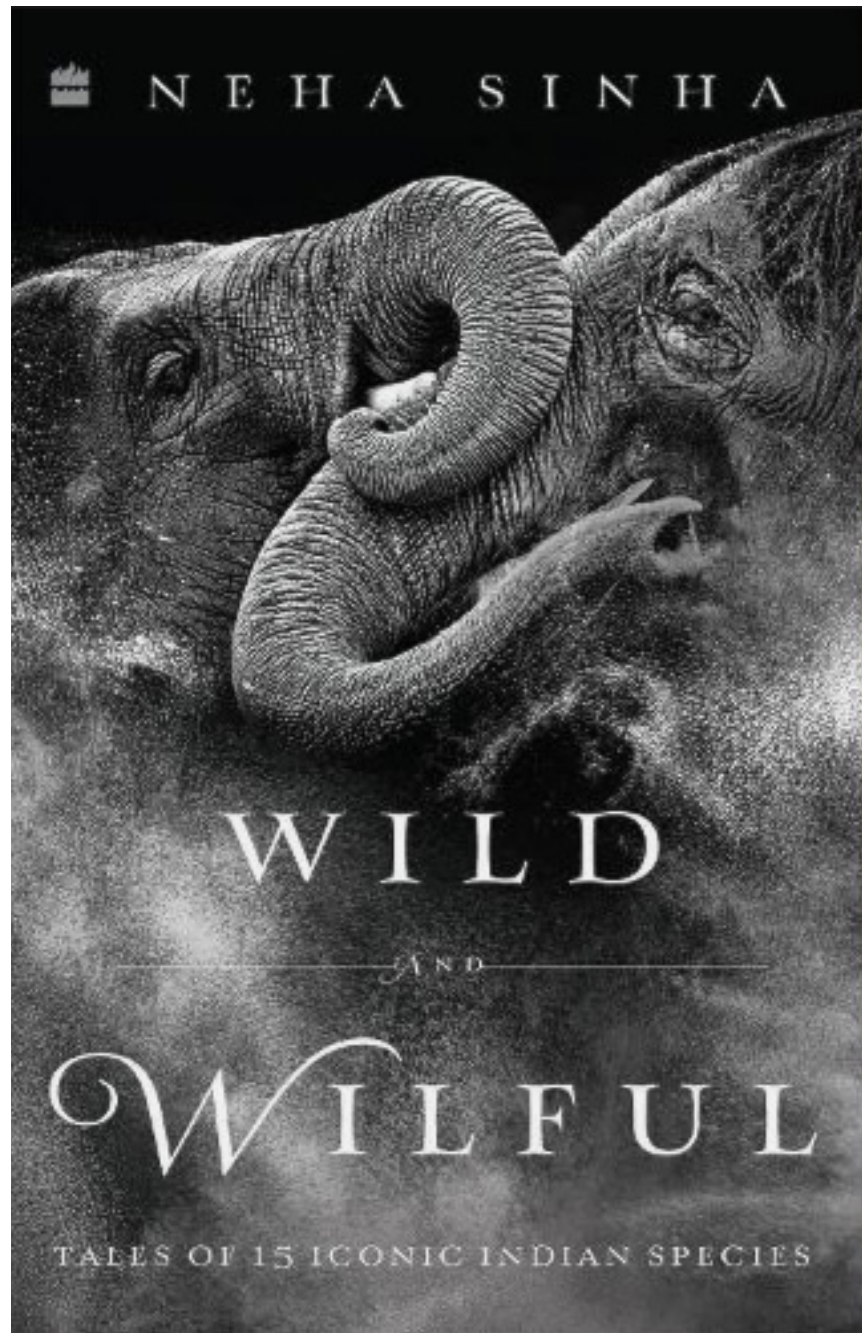
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Lot many aspects stay hidden in the world of wildlife. Neha Sinha, with her cinematic narration, and more than a pinch of satire and 'worth narrating' realities of working towards wildlife conservation, traverses these paths with panache. Keeping aside the passé style of arranging the contents page, she rather adopts a refreshing idea of categorising these chapters on 15 different animals largely based on where they occur the most- the earth (land), sky, water, and our hearts. Through her elegant writing, she puts forward the urgency in conservation and the many struggles and achievements in the process. We tried our hand at reviewing the book and here is our take on it, chapter wise. Go ahead with caution, spoilers here and there.

Earth

Chapter 1: The Leopard and the Cockroach

The story goes about telling the tales of different scenarios that a leopard might find itself



in (Or might not want to be found itself in.). The author has described the leopard as elegant as it is, as it should be talked about. The story starts from the middle and

then as the chapter goes on the details are revealed which makes the reader interested to know how the story unfolds. The chapter travels from one story to the other narrating

incidents of what a leopard goes through in an area populated by humans. Some of the stories don't just start off, a narrative is set first and then built up to its climax which is helpful in understanding the whole scenario. References were given so as to make it simple and understandable to even common people who might not know about the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. The title is well served when the author compares a leopard (near or in the human settlements) to a cockroach, which resonates with how most people treat the creature. The chapter though has some harsh realities of what a leopard faces in this country; it ends on a hopeful note.

Chapter 2: The Monkey Joint Family

The chapter revolves around the love-hate feelings (mostly hate when people are troubled due to their own doings) that people share towards the Rhesus Macaques. Love – because people connect the creature's existence to a religious component and feed them, and, hate – due to the troubles that are caused. The story has quite a few puns which make the chapter more interesting to read also it compares how humans get very irritated when they see a similar behavior to theirs in an animal and want it to be in control. Callbacks are there in this chapter as the price of an animal's life is compared to a cup of coffee which was mentioned earlier in the chapter. It also mentions some basic problems of our society that are not so much related to the monkeys but makes one think.

Chapter 3: The Phoenix of the Desert

Beginning with narrating a friend's experience of observing the Great Indian Bustard (GIB),

the author takes the readers through a tour of the arid stretches of Gujarat and Rajasthan, the habitat of the bird. Mocking at the irony of the bird's bejewelled name with its present situation, the author unfolds the persistent threats faced by the bird in detail. Talking of this, she also mentions how the bird had lost the pageant to being the national bird. She vividly explains the phrase 'development comes with a price' and also throws light on the mirage that has blinded hollow brains to see deserts as wastelands. Talking of this neglect, she talks of yet another species in the north-east, the White-bellied Heron and its tryst with surviving in the dam doomed Arunachal Pradesh. The Black-necked Crane also makes an appearance which tells a different story. The chapter explains the steps taken so far by the governments, most of them floppy and done with slothfulness. She narrates her story of going in quest of the bird in the army land of Pokhran and finishes off the chapter with the recent conservation efforts being taken in favour of the birds.

Overall, the author's excellent writing takes you through a visual tour through the deserts. We like how she has explained minutest of things cinematically and has given ample facts and descriptions to make the audience understand the plight of the birds. However, at some places small errors cause one to pause and wonder, e.g., 'many fingered sea' (p. 52); does the author wish to compare it to a marine animal? 'GIBs dying of thousand cuts in a chemical-laden field' (p. 54) was found rather confusing. Yet another was 'the upturned beaks' (p. 56) of the greater flamingos, when in reality they have quite the opposite of it. Then there are a few

grammatical/printing errors (pp. 58, 61, 66). However, these hardly hinder the wonderful read.

Chapter 4: Don't kiss a Cobra

The whole chapter is about two snake species—the Indian Cobra and the King Cobra, the deep-rooted superstitions around them, their rescuers and their quest to educate people about the reptile. Talking about mythology and human understanding of wildlife, the author tries to explain the dilemma of conserving snakes due to their slithered position between myth and reality (and as a god and a troublemaker). She also adds how amidst the existing problems in the conservation of the animal, sociological problems wedge in too. She does not fail to mark the mention of pop culture's role in moulding people's understanding of and attitude towards the already persecuted animal. Narrating stories of experts' experience with these reptiles, she also tries to explain how the King Cobra is different from other snakes. Through her writing, the author mocks at the prejudiced attitude of the people and government towards its national reptile.

Chapter 5: The Obituary that will not be

Written

As is the signature style, the chapter begins with a description of the elephant. A pleasant read, in the chapter the author mentions how some people don't address the gentle giant as 'it' but as 'who' since they believe they are no less of people than we are. Neha also includes contrasting stories of how some people would choose a golf course in the no development zone. A single line – 'An elephant maybe wild

but it's not entirely free to be wild' – captures the entire essence of the chapter. The story travels through various places, explains the problems faced by such majestic creatures and the extent to which these animals are pushed and their safety compromised both in and out of a wildlife sanctuary. An elephant in this country has a lot to face – a golf course, railway tracks, plastic, electric fences, fireballs, abuse, and humans. Yet in some places, there is still hope and happy stories of the re-establishment of elephants in a tiger reserve that didn't have any for several decades.

Though everything seemed fine with the narration, one information about the incident was missing in the chapter. A friend of ours who was present at the time of the 'The Railway Elephant' mentioned in the book, pointed out to us that the elephant was pregnant at the time of the incident.

Chapter 6: The Mother of Men and Tiger

The author brings many stories together and narrates a different perspective of the people in each one. The chapter starts with two tales of tigers from two different places, yet the narrative is somewhat the same, it's a beautiful creature but a distance should be kept. The chapter is a good read but one has to read it a few times to truly get the whole story that the author is trying to convey. The story travels many places from Sariska to Seoni and with the change in place, there are also many changes in perceptions. To add on the scientific names of the trees in a particular place was something important to mention. The more proximity to the creature the more hate/fear is in the people. It also draws attention to the fact that

even with an animal as popular as the tiger, only a few individuals get attention from the public, even though they might not be right for the cause they are supporting the animals, other remains unnoticed – it is evident how people pay attention to an extraordinary narrative.

Sky

Chapter 7: Tiger of the Gardens

Between the megafaunas, butterflies also find a place in Neha Sinha's Wild and Wilful. Talking about the various butterfly species she has observed (a skill she has mastered over the years), she tries to explain the readers the vast variety and occurrence of the insect. Through narrations of their life and behaviours and role in the environment she tries to spill out facts. Also, she forgets not to emphasise on the threats they have been facing. But amidst all, she highlights the fact of how the most polluted of cities like Delhi hosts these winged beauties, thus highlighting how adaptable the animals have been.

Thus, through her engaging writing style, she does capture the attention of the audience in the first go itself. Also, the inclusion of factual descriptions about the insects and not just their beauty serves the purpose of educating people about them. Repeated use of some metaphors can put the reader a little off. Also the author could have avoided some unnecessary mentions like that of the Malabar Thrush (a bird), amidst the conversation about butterflies. It completely leaves the reader wondering where it appeared from, and thus diverts them from the context.

Chapter 8: Letters in the Sky

The chapter explains the infamous Amur Falcon massacre in Nagaland's Doyang Reservoir. Giving a description of the place and the people, the author explains about the Naga people's legacy – hunting. In the chapter, she explains the bird's migration, the onset of the massacre, and the consequences of the massacre. She mentions how stereotypical social views led to the outcry within the nation. Being a part of the action plan team, the author narrates her own experiences of the ups and downs towards the road to successful mitigation of the problem.

Meticulously covering all the phases of mitigating this human-animal negative interaction, the author, through her narrations, grasps the attention of the readers to the incident. The addition of some basic understanding about the falcon and its migratory behaviour gives the reader a fairly good understanding of the unique bird. Through the chapter, she explains how calculated team actions and collaborations with communities can lead to successful interventions.

Water

Chapter 9: Dolphins of the Mind

Walking the readers through the ghats of the ill-fated Yamuna, the author describes the abode of the dolphins and also lays out interesting facts about the animal. Talking about overseeing the animal and what causes it, she also lists what can be a solution to the problem. Giving a glimpse on the studies being done on dolphins, and excerpts from conversations with scientists, she also explains the struggles of it. She also explains the age-long cultural

connection of Indians and rivers. Additionally, through explanations and unapologetic criticisms on the follies of laws (E.g., National Waterways Act) and actions related to rivers, she highlights the grievous situation of both river and dolphin conservation. She ends it with the hope that one day things will work out.

The very quirky entry of the protagonist here is unlike that of other chapters. So is the writing style followed throughout. Making use of an interactive way of writing, Neha makes the audience a part of the journey. This is one of the best ways to garner interests of the audience and can help build a connection with the topic being narrated (here, about the dolphins). Yet another way to make the audience empathise with the character is to use more humanized feelings and situations, which the author has made good use of. She uses the word 'assault', a term generally used on humans, to the animal so as to explain to people the intensity of harm. Elaboration on how rivers have always been a part of Indian culture, also strikes the right chords with our audience. Apart from criticising, the mentioning of salient features of the Wetlands Act which works towards the conservation of the river and hence the animal, makes the audience aware of how a law should look like.

Chapter 10: The Stone-faced Neighbour

A strangely brave man, who even after the situation he is in due to the mugger, does not have a bit of hate towards the creature, but considers them as his kids. While this is the case in one part of the country, on the other hand where relocating these creatures as a 'precaution' without a proper management

plan was carried out. In yet another part of the country, even though there is not much love towards this species, people know the schedule of the creatures and manage their own so as to reduce conflicts, the title is apt as Muggers doesn't have very expressive features – a thing which people often look for, for relatability and since that's not present these are some of the creatures which don't get candlelight march even when the Wildlife (Protection) Act is violated in the name of tourism/precautions. 'Conservation is not a thing to be 'done' it is just to be lived through' this would be the ultimate lesson that should be considered in this chapter.

Heart

Chapter 11: Love in times of COVID-19

This chapter isn't about the crimes or misconducts against wildlife, which we usually hear about, it's just about how an international visitor, the rosy starlings, which goes unnoticed otherwise or only a few people care to notice plays an important role in the life of the author in the times of uncertainty and life comes to a stand-still, due to the pandemic. The author has already seen these visitors in a different form in a different place, and the realization sunk in only after some time.

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