

# Similipal “Melanistic Tigers” are not “Pseudomelanistic”: Management of the Case of a Phenotypic Nomenclature Drift

## ABSTRACT:

‘Melanistic tigers’ of Similipal was described first on 21 July 1993. It constitutes one of the 14-phenotypic colours (1987-2026) described for *Panthera tigris*. The ‘melanistic’ nomenclature has been used in a 131-year (1886-2017) review made in 2019, while consolidating records on colour variations in mammals. The term identifies itself within usage while describing the known range of global colour variations of leopard, *Panthera pardus*. In official records of Odisha from 2004 to 2019, the term has been in use for photographs and text. The term “pseudomelanistic tiger” follows from a scat analysis in 2021 in a multiauthor publication.

The “pseudo” prefix appeared out of nothing de novo, without any hint at or justification for replacement of the original “melanistic” phenotype nomenclature. The incorrect “pseudo” prefix has rapidly spread through media sound bites and derivative commentary. This drift has created avoidable confusion, including limited seepage into Government communication in 2025. Objection was raised before the editors of 2021-publication within six months of its publication, in September 2021, and after public resentment around Similipal, reiterated in March 2026. In April 2026, the editors have formally requested the authors to submit a correction. The “pseudomelanistic” prefix, was unknown in Indian literature on tiger. Since the incorrect “prefix” was given the

rapid public diffusion, it needs to be dropped fast from further usage. Restoring exclusive use of the historically and biologically accurate term “melanistic tiger of Similipal” will protect scientific continuity, maintain administrative accuracy, and preserve Odisha’s phenotypic and ecological record spanning more than three decades.

## KEY WORDS

Conservation, Gene-pool improvement, melanistic tiger, multi-author scenario, Similipal Tiger Reserve, terminology drift, phenotypic -14-colour model, pseudomelanistic prefix

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. The first record of the *melanistic tiger* of Similipal

The first confirmed record of a *melanistic tiger* from Similipal dates to 21 July 1993, when a tiger carcass was collected from village Podagad and brought to Jashipur, on the southern fringe of the Similipal Tiger Reserve. Its body colour was neither the typical yellow-orange nor uniformly black, but distinctly blackish, exhibiting the characteristic phenotype pattern that got recognised as “melanistic”. The carcass, examined in the presence of several field staff, was video documented while L. A. K. Singh and Veterinary Assistant Surgeon Sitakanta Dash conducted measurements and the postmortem. This video record constitutes the first verifiable physical evidence of the “melanistic tiger in Similipal” (Singh, 1993).

Subsequent field observations and continued monitoring by the Research Officer and the Field Director provided additional corroboration. The phenomenon received its first formal scientific recognition in *Indian Forester* (1996) through a Letter to the Editor by C. G. Mishra, then PCCF (Wildlife) (Mishra 1996). This communication corrected widespread public and media misconceptions that had variously described the animal as a “black tiger”, “a new tiger due to mutation”, or even “a new species or subspecies”.

The letter provided the earliest morphological description of the broad, fused, expanded black stripes, emphasised the rarity and conservation significance of the trait, and, importantly, it conferred administrative legitimacy to the field findings. Together, these contributions created the historical baseline from which all subsequent ecological, phenotypic, and genetic studies of Similipal’s melanistic tigers have proceeded, and upon which later distribution maps have been constructed (Sagar & Singh 1989, Prusty & Singh 1996a, b; Singh 1999).

From 1996, it was established, for the first time in scientific literature, that got subsequent amplification with more field data, that a portion of the tiger population in Similipal confirms to a melanistic variant of *Panthera tigris*, not a taxonomic novelty or any outcome of exact-mutational repetitions.

## **1.2. Database and development of the 14-colour Phenotypic Model**

From 2004, the state Government at Wildlife Headquarters, Odisha publishes books and reports, where all reference to unusual tigers of Similipal are referred to as the ‘melanistic tigers of Similipal’ (Mohanty et al. 2004, Pattnaik

et al. 2008). By 1996 (Prusty & Singh 1996 a, b; Singh 1999), the 14-colour phenotypic model for *Panthera tigris* had already evolved from an earlier 5-colour model (Singh 2022a). This development drew upon field data from Similipal, including the record of a tiger without stripes (Sagar & Singh 1989, Singh 2024), external documentation of black tigers beginning with Buckland (Buckland 1889), and photographic evidence of multiple colour phenotypes compiled in Singh 1999.

The *Annual Report 2019* of the Wildlife Organisation explicitly states that “only Similipal houses the source population of melanistic tigers” (Wildlife Odisha - 2019). All official census figures likewise referred to *melanistic tigers*. The “melanistic tigers of Similipal” soon attracted wide interest among the intelligentsia, scientific community, general public, and in seminars and books (Singh 2000, Swain 2021).

The resulting 14-phenotype model accommodates every known tiger phenotype and also aligns with all major leopard colour variants worldwide (Singh 2022a), demonstrating the broad explanatory power of the model. The Odisha Science Academy subsequently published a special article in Odia describing the 14 recognised colour phenotypes of *Panthera tigris* (Singh 2022b).

A review of published literature confirms that the term “melanistic tiger” has been used continuously in Odisha and national scientific records since the first formally documented case from Podagad, Similipal in July 1993. This terminology is also followed throughout the monograph *Secrets of Similipal: A Wonderland of Elephants and Melanistic Tigers* (Swain

2021), authored by the former Field Director of Similipal Tiger Reserve.

The 239 aberration records between 1886 and 2017, reviewed by the *Journal of Threatened Taxa* (Mahabal et al. 2019), can be substantially harmonised with the 14-phenotype model of *Panthera tigris*. This cross-taxonomic compatibility underscores the value of adopting a spectrum-based, pattern-inclusive framework for future documentation and interpretation of phenotypic colour variations in Indian mammals. The 14-colour phenotype model is a **continuous and gradual spectrum** of pigment expansion, not a binary “true vs. fake” status.

### 1.3. Emergence of, and objections to, the “pseudo” prefix for the melanistic tigers of Similipal

In July 2021, the term ‘pseudomelanistic tigers of Similipal’ appeared as a sudden unwarranted departure and abrupt introduction of a neologism (Sagar et al. 2021).

, without any hint at or justification for replacement of the 28-years old phenotypic term “melanistic tigers of Similipal”.

A “**buzzword effect**” appeared in popular media and official circles. Media interviews and popular science outlets quickly echoed this new terminology without consulting earlier literature or Government records. Magazines such as *Down To Earth* (2024) and *National Geographic* (2025) repeated the prefix (Mohanty 2024, Yadav 2025), giving it disproportionate visibility despite the absence of any supporting evidence beyond the 2021 paper.

This repetition created an incorrect scientific-sounding impression of legitimacy, even though

the science of melanistic tigers has been developing continuously since 21 July 1993. As a result, a drift in terminology emerged in public communication, and by 2025 this inconsistency had begun to appear even in some Government documents alongside the correct term “melanistic tiger” (Wildlife Odisha - 2025).

Media sound bites further amplified the new term, and some officers repeated it in rapid interviews, unintentionally creating the impression that it was an officially accepted designation. This mixed usage has generated avoidable confusion among media personnel, field staff, and the public. To restore clarity and maintain continuity with three decades of scientific and administrative usage, the early discontinuation of the “pseudo” prefix is essential.

The phrase “pseudomelanistic tiger” in the 2021 study reflects the nomenclatural framework chosen by the lead authors of that multi-author publication. It is an approach not uncommon in collaborative scientific work. Its usage should therefore be interpreted as part of that paper’s internal analytical framework, rather than as a revision of the terminology historically used in Similipal or in Dr. Swain’s independent writings (Swain 2021).

In 2025, the Government record is inconsistent in the use of the terms “melanistic” and the one with the prefix “pseudo” at different pages of the 2025-report. The media statements in 2025 September, based on the incorrect use of “pseudo” prefix (meaning ‘false’) after National Geographic coverage in September generated the first objections by people in and around Similipal, and contacted this author

over the phone. Following requests first raised in September 2021 and reiterated in 2026, the PNAS Editorial Office formally asked the 2021 authors in April 2026 to submit a correction.

#### **1.4. Purpose of this note**

The “pseudo” prefix was introduced for melanistic tigers of Similipal only in 2021. It has already travelled widely through media interviews and popular magazines. Government documents remained consistent till 2025, and the science developed since 1993 is also consistent. But the incorrect use of “pseudo” prefix is deepening confusion among researchers, officers, and the public while describing the rare phenotypes of tiger. The incorrect term is spreading faster. The drift is occurring outside the scientific record, primarily in media communication and derivative commentary.

An early academic clarification is therefore essential to prevent further terminological drift. Dropping the use of the “pseudomelanistic” term now will protect both scientific accuracy and Odisha’s historical record, ensuring continuity with three decades of verified field evidence and official usage.

#### **2. METHODS**

This clarification note is based on a direct examination of Government of Odisha documents spanning 1993–2025. It included, the annual reports, census summaries, monitoring records, and official publications that were systematically reviewed to assess terminology and consistency of usage. Newspaper reports and media articles were consulted only to trace how the “pseudo” term entered public communication.

Scientific literature from 1993 onwards was analysed for consistency, continuity, and acceptance across sources. The process included the 14-phenotype model (1999) and the 2019 JoTT review from 1886 to 2017 (Mahabal et al. 2019). Photographic records and published captions were also examined to verify the terminology used in field level documentation.

No unpublished data, informal communications, or speculative sources were used. The analysis relies exclusively on publicly available Government documents and peer reviewed scientific papers. This approach ensures that the clarification rests entirely on verifiable records and long established scientific understanding.

#### **3. RESULTS**

This section presents five correlated observations that collectively demonstrate the historical accuracy, scientific continuity, institutional legitimacy, and ecological insight associated with the long standing use of the term “melanistic tiger of Similipal.” Similipal merits such treatment because of its documented history of melanistic tigers since 21 July 1993, as well as other colour variations described in the literature since the 1970s (Singh 1999).

##### **3.1. Observation-1: Drift popularising the incorrect “pseudo” prefix**

A clear example of terminology drift is evident in the media portrayal of Similipal’s colour variants. *Down To Earth* (15 February 1998) accurately described the phenomenon as part of a natural continuum of tiger colour expressions, explicitly using the term “melanistic” and citing field-based explanations

that melanistic colouration is not caused by a mutant gene, but is part of the species' recessive genetic expression.

However, by 2024, the same magazine had overlooked its earlier accuracy and adopted the scientifically unsupported term “pseudomelanistic” (Mohanty 2024). Of course, it happened under a different reporter. This shift amplified a post-2021 media drift, rather than the long standing field evidence from Odisha. The change illustrates how popular communication can overwrite its own historical clarity and inadvertently propagate incorrect terminology, despite the availability of earlier, well documented scientific descriptions.

### **3.2. Observation-2: Drift within Government usage (1996–2025)**

The review of Government of Odisha documents shows complete consistency in the use of the term “melanistic tiger of Similipal” for nearing three decades. From 1996 to 2019, every available official communication employed the scientifically correct term “melanistic tiger.” This continuity begins with Mishra (1996), is reaffirmed in Mohanty et al. (2004) and Pattnaik et al. (2008), and continues unbroken through the Wildlife Organisation Annual Report 2019 (Wildlife Odisha - 2019), which prominently features the “melanistic tiger of Similipal” in both text and photographic captions.

However, by 2025, the incorrect term “pseudomelanistic” had also begun to appear in the Government's Annual Report, despite having no historical basis in Odisha's scientific or administrative record (Wildlife Odisha - 2025). This shift does not reflect new field

evidence or explanation; rather, it represents an attempt to adopt a “scientific-sounding” expression influenced by post-2021 media usage and external academic terminology. The result is a clear case of terminological drift.

### **3.3. Observation-3: Context-dependent usage shaped by leading authors**

A noteworthy pattern emerges when comparing the terminology used by Dr. D. Swain, the former Field Director of Similipal Tiger Reserve, in two separate publications from 2021. By July this year, Dr. Swain is a coauthor of Sagar et al., 2021, He is associated with the introduction and use of the term “pseudomelanistic tiger”. This incorrect terminology had never appeared in Indian literature prior to July 2021.

But in his monograph *Secrets of Similipal: A Wonderland of Elephants and Melanistic Tigers* (Swain 2021), Dr. Swain consistently employs the term “melanistic tiger”, fully aligned with the terminology in use since the first formally documented record of the Similipal melanistic phenotype in 1993. It is a silent, practical rejection of the neologism by someone who actually managed the landscape.

This contrast indicates that the adoption of the new term in the PNAS paper reflects the nomenclatural framework created by the lead authors of that multi-author study, rather than continuity with the terminology historically used in Similipal or in Dr. Swain's own independent writings. The difference is therefore best understood as a context-dependent usage, and co-author disconnect, shaped by the conventions and analytical choices of the respective publications, rather than as a shift in Dr. Swain's long standing descriptive practice.

### 3.4. Observation-4: Context-dependent choices shaped by media

The occasional use of the term “pseudomelanistic tiger” by senior officers in media interactions reflects ‘buzzword effect’ of the terminology that gained visibility after Sagar et al. (2021). It is often repeated uncritically by journalists.

In the context of the 2024 tiger census coverage, the census data quoted officers describing 13 individuals as “pseudomelanistic tigers” (Mohanty 2024). Around the same period, translocation efforts introduced normal colour tigers from outside Odisha into Similipal. One of these females successfully bred with a wild male and produced four normal cubs in May 2026. It was during this phase, which is the post-2021, the subject got further focused amid heightened media attention. The “pseudomelanistic” term began appearing in official statements and media reports.

However, in their own written communications, the authors consistently use the historically correct term “melanistic tiger of Similipal.” This includes the articles in *The Indian Express* (Nanda 2026, Maharana 2026). This aligns fully with the 1993 Podagad record and with long standing scientific and administrative usage. The contrast indicates that such deviations are context-dependent. It is shaped by media-framing and the nomenclatural conventions of multi-author publications, rather than by any change in scientific understanding.

This reversion marks an important administrative correction: the scientifically unsound “pseudomelanistic” term was replaced by the historically and scientifically validated

terminology. The episode demonstrates that timely scientific clarification can effectively restore accuracy in official communication and prevent further institutional drift away from established ecological knowledge.

### 3.5. Observation-5: “Full Circle Travel” of the Pseudomelanistic Term

Over the past five years, the term “pseudomelanistic tiger” has travelled a complete and unintended circle through multiple communication channels. In July 2021 the “pseudo” prefix reflected the nomenclatural framework adopted by the lead authors in Sagar et al. (2021). From there, the term entered media sound bites, where journalists and television anchors repeated it widely. They did so, evidently without reference to the implications built into the long established scientific usage of “melanistic tiger of Similipal.”

This media echo then influenced spontaneous public statements using the term in interviews to align with the vocabulary circulating in the press. Yet, in their independent, reflective writing, including articles in national newspapers, the same officers returned to the historically correct term “melanistic tiger of Similipal,” consistent with the 1993 Podagad record and nearly three decades of scientific usage. National newspapers such as the Times of India continued to use the correct term through 2025–2026 (Times of India 2025, 2026).

Lasting for less than five years, the “pseudo” prefix travelled fast from scientific paper to media, to public speech (Table-1). It has finally given way to corrected usage after creating avoidable confusion. Although the 2021-Journal has issued information to authors for correction

of the “pseudo” prefix, it also underscores the need for a faster academic clarification with evidences of avoidable confusion.

## DISCUSSION

The subject of the melanistic tiger (21 July 1993) of Similipal has gained renewed importance after 2024. In early October 2024 the Chief Wildlife Warden of Odisha, Mr. Susanta Nanda, informed in media that the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) and the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) had given the green light to translocate two young, normal-coloured female Royal Bengal Tigers from the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) in Maharashtra. The purpose is for improving the gene pool constituents of normal-coloured tigers in Similipal.

Breeding success of the translocated tigress Zeenat became evident when she produced four normal cubs in May 2026. It brought the biological and conservation implications of melanism back into sharp focus. These developments directly echo the concerns articulated in Singh (1999: pages 49-57). The work highlighted the potential genetic consequences of a small, colour-biased population and emphasised the need for strategic management, including genetic reinforcement and the establishment of functional tiger corridors.

The present situation that has emerged after successful breeding by the translocated tigress, therefore, reinforces the long-standing scientific position that accurate terminology is not merely semantic; it is essential for guiding appropriate conservation decisions. Mislabeling

the phenotype as “pseudomelanistic” risks obscuring the very management challenges that Odisha had recognised decades earlier (Table-1).

Observations and findings in this article reveal a clear separation between official usage and public usage of the terms “melanistic” (from July 1993) and “pseudomelanistic” (from July 2021). Government documents from 1993 to 2025 have remained internally consistent, recognising the Similipal form as a melanistic phenotype. Scientific literature from 1993 to 2019 also supports this classification. Together, these demonstrate that the scientific basis for the melanistic classification is strong, stable, and widely accepted.

In contrast, the “pseudo” term entered public communication only after 2021, spreading through interviews, media reports, and popular magazines such as *Down To Earth* (2024) and *National Geographic* (2025). This spread occurred without reference to Government documents or long established scientific understanding. Such divergence between official usage and public usage can create longterm confusion and may weaken the continuity of Odisha’s own scientific record. Therefore, the issue requires timely academic clarification to prevent further drift.

Although PNAS issued an email to the authors of the 2021 paper in April 2026 requesting a correction, it has become pertinent for future wildlife conservation management to record the situations arising due to the incorrect use of “pseudo” prefix for melanistic tigers of Similipal. There is no justification for allowing additional time for the incorrect term to circulate further in media or creep into Government reports.

**Table1. Chronology of the use of the terms “melanistic” and “pseudomelanistic” in the context of *Panthera tigris* in Similipal Tiger Reserve, Odisha**

Year	Source	Term Used	Notes
1993	Podagad specimen (Singh 1993; Mishra 1996; Singh & Prusty 1996a,b)	Melanistic tiger	First scientific record of melanism in Similipal
1993–2020	Odisha Forest Department; Indian literature	Melanistic tiger	No usage of “pseudomelanistic” anywhere
2019	<i>Journal of Threatened Taxa</i> review	Melanism	Review does <b>not</b> use the term “pseudomelanistic”
2021 (July)	Sagar et al., PNAS	Pseudomelanistic tiger	First introduction of the incorrect term
2021	Swain, <i>Secrets of Similipal</i>	Melanistic tiger	Book title and text confirm correct terminology
2021–2026	Media & some officers	Pseudomelanistic	Spread due to PNAS paper; media amplification
2026 (April)	PNAS Editorial Office	Term to be corrected	Editors request authors to submit correction

The “pseudo” prefix for the melanistic tiger of Similipal needs to be dropped immediately before it causes further confusion in policy, communication, and public understanding.

Restoring the long established term “melanistic tiger” is essential to maintain continuity with Odisha’s scientific record and to prevent the dilution of a nomenclature that has stood unchallenged for over three decades.

### CONCLUSION

The present analysis demonstrates that the prefix “pseudo” entered usage not through longterm scientific consensus, but through a shortlived, superficially technical terminology that appeared only after 2021. Its uncritical adoption in administrative and media communication led to a gradual erosion of the established term “melanistic tiger.” In turn, it has been used consistently and unambiguously in Odisha’s scientific and governmental records since 1993.

The corrective communication is now formally conveyed to the PCCF (Wildlife) and Wildlife Headquarters. It has emanated from the PNAS Editors’ correspondence and the 1993–1999 phenotype documentation. It provides the necessary scientific basis for restoring accuracy. The correct term is, and has always been, the “melanistic tiger” of Similipal.

The review clearly shows that the term “pseudomelanistic” has no foundation in Government documents and no foundation in the scientific understanding developed since 21 July 1993. The only consistent and evidence based term for the Similipal phenotype is melanistic tiger.

The “pseudo” term arose from a single scientific paper and spread through public communication without reference to long established field evidence or administrative usage. Its continued use risks distorting both scientific accuracy, administrative continuity

and of diluting the management actions for gene-pool improvement in Similipal.

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