



COURTESY NIRMALYA CHAKRABORTY

REST IN PEACE

ADITYA 'DICKY' SINGH OF RANTHAMBHORE

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By Bittu Sahgal

There are few people who knew the Ranthambhore of today better than Aditya 'Dicky' Singh. With something like 7,000 safaris under his belt over the last two decades, he was the 'go to' guy for anyone wanting to know almost anything about Ranthambhore and its tigers. What follows is an outpouring from the heart for the loss of my friend Dicky, a fierce warrior for our wilds who, when I asked, described himself as "a *photographer, wildlife enthusiast, conservationist, or traveller – you decide!*"

Ranthambhore has been home to my wife Madhu and our two daughters, Miel and Tara for decades. Instigated by [Fateh Singh Rathore](#), *Sanctuary Asia*, the magazine you are currently reading, was conceived under the famous [banyan tree at Jogi Mahal](#) in 1981. Fateh was my inspiration, as he was for [Aditya 'Dicky' Singh](#), who died far too young, too suddenly, too soon.

Without a shadow of doubt, Dicky was a lovable maverick. Virtually everyone in his family had served in the armed forces. He chose instead to join the Indian Civil Service, from which he quickly resigned, much to the consternation of parents, friends and most well-wishers. Then,

with an engineering degree under his belt, he went into the construction business having graduated from Bengaluru's BMS College as a Civil Engineer. He made a bundle of money in a relatively short while, but that gave him no joy at all. His father prevailed upon his friend Fateh Singh Rathore, Field Director of the Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve to 'look after' Dicky who spent a full month in 1984, living as a personal guest of Fateh's, above Ranthambhore's famous Jogi Mahal gate. Within a few short years, Fateh wrapped Dicky up in tiger magic through Genghis, then Ranthambhore's most famous tiger. That was it! When he discovered that the young man was determined to live the rest of his life in Ranthambhore, Fateh eventually suggested, and Poonam Singh, now married to Dicky, readily agreed, that they would pour *all* they possessed into a home that metamorphosed in 1998 into the now iconic *Ranthambhore Bagh*, homestay.

Luckily for their guests, the *Bagh* was actually managed and run by Poonam, about whom Dicky (largely lacking in business sense) would repeatedly say to anyone who would listen: "I don't know what she saw in me... but all I know is I was damn lucky!" Not surprisingly,

by osmosis, Dicky's magnetism and Poonam's natural charisma and hospitality, led to their home becoming a magnet for some of the finest photographers and naturalists across India and the world.

To his last breath, Dicky rued the fact that, unlike Africa, Ranthambhore's tourism experiences had become sullied by investors more interested in cash than conservation. He rarely if ever engaged with those who accused him of being obsessed by tigers. But with his characteristic smile he would say as an aside, "I'm lucky to be obsessed by tigers, rather than the money that governs the lives of so many unhappy people!" This is also what motivated him and Poonam to acquire and rewild a relatively large parcel of marginal farmland in Bhadlav village (see box) which all manner of wild plant and animal species, including tigers have now occupied.

Typecast as a 'tiger guy', he would readily wade into brawls with those unable to differentiate between animal and species rights. Take the case of T-24, a magnificent tiger that had taken to killing people including guards, if he encountered them away from frequented motorable roads. When asked about his views here is how he responded:

A male tiger called T-24 killed at least four people and ate two of them over a period of a few years. The last victims were forest guards with years of experience. All four were attacked from the back, the way tigers kill prey. Post-mortems confirmed the killing was by neck-bites. Eye-witnesses saw the victims being dragged and eaten. The issue is now over, except that a magnificent tiger who, in my view, should have been allowed to die with dignity in the forest itself, was tranquillised multiple times for multiple reasons and eventually found himself incarcerated for life in a zoo.

Over a decade ago, he explained how his and Poonam's occupation had given him the luxury of following particular tigers from birth to death. At that point he and Andy Rouse, one of his closest friends and his photography 'guru', were documenting the lives of Noor (T39), Krishna (T19) and Arrowhead (Krishna's female offspring) for a series of books they were planning. Long after most of the powerful people in whose hands the fate of forests such as Ranthambhore rests are

forgotten, the likes of Aditya 'Dicky' Singh and Fateh Singh Rathore will be remembered as the true repositories of the wealth of India as represented by the wilds that gave rise to our great civilisation. 🐅

Extract from [Rewilding India, One Parce of Land at a Time Bhadlav, Rajasthan](#)

Over two decades, Aditya 'Dicky' Singh and his wife Poonam Singh bought 35 acres of degraded land once owned by subsistence farmers, that flanked the national park, close to a village called Bhadlav. They fenced the property to protect it from wandering cattle, removed exotic and invasive flora, and allowed the land to restore itself to its original Aravalli landscape. Some well thought out landscaping interventions gave the land a chance to retain water for long periods of time. Today, the two watering holes in these forests are some of the last available sources of water for wildlife come the summer months. An aerial view of the property reveals an oasis of green, stark against the patches of brown, dry land surrounding it.

With the Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve as this private forest's 'seed bank', the land functions as an outward projection of this Protected Area, acting as a buffer zone between the national park just across their boundary wall and the farm holdings on the other side. Once the native flora came back, this forest has turned into a protective buffer zone for the reserve, often frequented by tigers, particularly during the summer season.

The mushrooming tourism economy in Ranthambhore presents a tremendous opportunity to develop pastoral and agricultural lands bordering the reserve in a sustainable manner such as that undertaken by the Singhs at their Bhadlav forest property. Besides tigers, leopards, nilgai, sambar, wild pig, small mammals and birds are also routinely found on site.

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FACING PAGE *Aditya 'Dicky' Singh exemplified the magic of Ranthambhore and its tigers.*

BELOW *Aditya was a prolific wildlife photographer, who generously shared his images with Sanctuary. He won the Wildlife Photographer of the Year award in 2011 for his iconic image of a face-off between a tiger and a sloth bear.*



ADITYA SINGH/SANCTUARY PHOTO LIBRARY