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Indagare Global Conversations: Melissa Biggs Bradley speaks with Suján's Jaisal and Anjali Singh



Courtesy Suján

After being closed to international tourists for just over two full years, India officially ended its moratorium on international flights in March 2022, and the Indagare team couldn't be more excited to get back to one of our favorite, most colorful, eye-opening and all-around sensational destinations.

While dreaming of India throughout its extended lockdown, Indagare founder and CEO, Melissa Biggs Bradley sat down—virtually—with power couple Jaisal and Anjali Singh, pioneers in conservation tourism, wildlife preservation and community development, as well as the minds behind some of the finest hotels in the world.

At just 21 years old, Jaisal built one of the very first eco-conscious luxury safari tented camps in India—[Sher Bagh](#), on the edge of the famed Ranthambore Tiger Reserve—and with Anjali, they expanded their brand, Suján, internationally, adding The Serai and [Jawai](#) camps in Rajasthan and the Elephant Pepper Camp in the Maasai Mara in Kenya.

Jaisal is also Vice President of Relais & Chateaux's Executive Committee of the Board of Directors (the youngest person, and the only Indian, to ever be elected to that position). Anjali is an accomplished businesswoman and the Executive Chairperson of ANAND Group; and in 2016, she was named by *Forbes* as one of the 12 young female business leaders on the rise in Asia.

Below, Melissa speaks with the two about conservation in India and how Suján's commitment to community became all the more critical during the pandemic.

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A tent at Suján Jawai (left) and a tiger in Ranthambore. Courtesy Suján

Melissa Biggs Bradley: Jaisal, I'd love to have you talk about how you became involved in tourism from a young age. I know your family had some wildlife conservationists that were influential, but I'd love to hear when you knew that this was going to be a path for you.

Jaisal Singh: So, it's a funny one, and I'll give you the no holds barred account. I

actually got into the travel and tourism business and the safari business as a ploy to get out of going to university. That was the real reason. I had grown up in Ranthambore with my family who were working in conservation, documenting the tigers during one shooting preserve's transformation into a wildlife refuge and reserve, which it is today. It is arguably one of the finest places in the world to see big cats in a very historic landscape. So, I had the privilege of growing up there, and in the 80s, my family bought some land at the edge of the park that was completely degraded and barren. There wasn't even a bush on it. They said, 'We're going to try and reforest this land at the edge of the park and let's see what happens.' And that is where Suján Sher Bagh stands today, and it has 10s of thousands of trees, and that entire valley where we were is forested now. Though quite a few hotels have mushroomed in the recent past, it is still much healthier in terms of being an ecosystem for wildlife than it was in the 1980s. So, I took a few years off in my teens to play polo and travel the world, and when I came back to Ranthambore, a bit like a homing pigeon, I was set to go to University in England. But I realized I actually wanted to do something meaningful here, and that's how the idea of Suján Sher Bagh was born. We built a tented camp that would become a model for positive impact tourism, giving everyone a very high level of experience in terms of comfort and luxury, but also delving deep into the whole world life experience.

MBB: And so Anjali, at what point did you join in this hospitality mission?

Anjali Singh: I think it was probably on our first date... No, in all honesty, quite literally, Jaisal and I have had the privilege of being together for a very long time—we've just shared our 15th wedding anniversary. I went out to Ranthambore with him very soon after we got together and saw my first tiger in the wild. It didn't take long to be converted. They are magnificent animals—and I have a love for animals as it is, whether that be horses or our dogs or all the wonderful animals we've seen and spent time photographing in Africa. But certainly the tiger is the most majestic of them all and you do fall very, very deeply in love. As you can see, they are such a big part of our lives. And it was intoxicating and in a way. I think it was all encompassing with Jaisal's father and his uncle being such strong figures in his life and then in my life and in our life now and in our children's lives and the legacy of what they did with tigers. I think for us as a family, and I joined that in full force and in whole heart, it's really, it's just who we are, what we do and what we stand for. We love wildlife across all nations and all continents.

MBB: And Anjali mentioned, Jaisal, about your father and uncle's influence in the tiger wildlife conservation, can you talk a little bit about what their mission was and also how you both have evolved it both at Sher Bagh and in the new properties?

JS: My parents first went to Ranthambore a few months after India passed its Wildlife Protection Act outlawing the shooting and killing of wild animals in 1972. So, conservation was a very new happening in India, in terms of the sort of conservation we talk about today, which is not shooting or conserving to shoot, but rather conserving for conserving.

And then after university, they decided to make documentary films, and one of them was on jungle life in Rajasthan, and that took them to Ranthambore. They turned up in the winter early in 1974, and they pitched camp under the great banyan tree near Jogi Mahal under the great Ranthambore fort and fell in love with the place and then stayed involved. In the 1980s, my family spearheaded the starting of the Ranthambore Foundation. My uncle ran it as the executive director for a while. It did everything from reforestation to development projects with cattle farmers and alternative energy (so that people wouldn't go and cut trees). I now serve on the Executive Board of the foundation. My father, mother and uncle have all stepped aside for the younger generation to take charge.

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MBB: And at Suján Jawai, how did India's lockdown force you to think differently—or even more clearly—about the importance of the sustainable model that you created?

AS: Jawai is a community conservation project, and we have our guests working as partners with us to really create a positive effect through their stay. We're deeply passionate about protecting the greater Jawai area— and by that I don't only mean the area in which the camp exists, but also the larger surrounding ecosystem in which the leopards roam and in which the Rabari, which is the nomadic tribe, grazes its cattle and in which the communities have lived in coexistence with the leopard. It's an incredibly special place which has a very delicate balance with both the living human population and their livestock and the population of the leopards themselves—not to mention some of the smaller species and the bird life that also exist because of all the wonderful tributaries and of course the Jawai Dam itself, which attracts a lot of a lot of birds and crocodiles and other species.

Through this Covid time, we realized that our commitment to Jawai is more important than ever, because in a year like this where guests have been missing completely and hence their contribution and their partnership with us has been missing, we have had to

be that much more committed, financially, physically, emotionally and with energy, to keep all of the work there going, for when tourism does come back. And we firmly believe it will, otherwise we wouldn't go in for renovation. We believe completely that these places are where people will want to go. Offbeat places which have nature and so much to offer, so much learning, so much beauty, so much tranquility. Our commitment to that area to those communities and to the wildlife programs we are running there has been re-emphasized through Covid because otherwise they'd simply vanish, and that just wouldn't be acceptable.

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Suján's impact includes supporting local schools and communities as well as conserving and researching critically endangered tigers and leopards. Courtesy Suján

MBB: You're really involved in the community and things like healthcare and education. Do you feel that your model has been something that has influenced the wider tourism industry within India?

JS: What I hope for, and I do expect some of, is that lockdown has given people a lot to think about. I think there's a lot being said in the mainstream media as well as social media about the importance of protecting our planet, about giving back, about being sustainable, about having a positive impact. And I think that hotels, at least the smart

ones, the smarter safari operators and even larger hotels, will in the coming years start to give back if they're not already. Some people have seen our model and some people have tried to emulate it. I think we still remain the only ones to charge a mandatory conservation tax from our guests, which goes directly into conservation. So, I hope people will pick up from that and do it because at Jawai, for example, 20,000 people benefit from it. The wildlife benefits, the guests benefit, and we're able to make a profit. So, you know, we can run medical healthcare, we can run animal health care, we can run education. We've run sanitation projects. We've laid an entire water system of fresh and clean water pipes to everyone's houses in an entire village, and we are now looking at alternative energy as our next big push for the region. We can do that and make a profit. So, I believe others can, too.

MBB: And as travel does open up, can you talk a little bit about the ways you think about the activities that you include guests in, and how that may be different in response to this new awareness and consciousness on the part of travelers of having an impact.

JS: We are coming up with new experiences. One which we're very excited about is called Healing with Horses. We have a stable of Marwari horses, a local Indian indigenous breed, and we will be offering an equine experience that goes beyond just riding out and enjoying the countryside (which of course we will also encourage). But this will be about actually working with the horses, and is for people who live stressful lives and who have had a stressful time through Covid, like most of us have. It is also for people who are convalescing, and people who are dealing with trauma. So, we will be able to offer a new dimension to what we do.



Suján Sher Bagh. Courtesy Suján

MBB: I'm not going to make you choose between your favorite properties because that's like choosing a favorite child, but I'd love to have you talk about what makes each of them different or special because they are, as you said, very different in terms of the regions and the personalities.

AS: I always say that Sher Bagh is the grand dame, she's the sort of the countess that's arrived beautifully dressed at a dinner party. She's arrived. She's mature and very sophisticated, I think. Of course, she was there before I arrived, so I can pay all those compliments. Serai is a chic young woman in her 30s, very confident and knows what she's about. Very distinct personality. Really, really at one with the desert. The colors, the palette, the experiences, they all really are out of a movie set in the desert...The white of the tents are like sails. And then we have Jawai, which is very much the young sort of snazzy lady in her 20s, about town, very cutting edge—I hope—very chic, a little bit edgy and there to make a point. Jawai has all the punchiness, Serai has all the wonderful mature tones, and Sher Bagh has the wisdom of the years gone by.

MBB: And finally, for somebody who's either been to India before once or many times or someone who's never been, how would you explain the destination, or why someone should go? Obviously, Ranthambore is going to draw people who want to go for the tigers, but I'd love to hear who you think the right person is

for each of the other destinations, and why.

AS: The destinations are so distinct from one another that they actually fit in beautifully in the same itinerary. Sher Bagh is for tigers. It's right near Agra and Jaipur, and easily done. The Serai is more if you want to get out and experience space and see a medieval citadel that dates back to 1131. And Jawai is perfectly situated halfway between Jodhpur and Udaipur, and is probably one of the greatest examples of coexistence between big cats and human beings, where you see these magnificent leopards in a semi-agrarian, semi-pastoral landscape with billion-year-old granite rock formations and an amazing water reservoir with flamingos and cranes...Jawai is sort of out of this world, it's India in the 17th century. It's a shot out of Narnia.

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- Bridget McElroy on June 15, 2022

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