

Web Interview of Sunita Narayan, Chairperson Tiger Task Force ,Aug-Sept-2005

In Chennai to address a session of the international conference on "Human Centred Sustainable Development Paradigm" organised by the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, **Sunita Narayan**, Director, Centre for Science and Environment, and Chairperson, Tiger Task Force, spoke to **Asha Krishnakumar** on the main findings of the Task Force, the lessons learnt from Project Tiger, the way forward in the conservation of tigers and management of forest reserves, and the dissent note by one of the Task Force members, Valmik Thapar. Excerpts:

What was the focus of the Task Force?

The Task Force was set to probe the crisis at the Sariska Reserve and to learn from it. We had to look at the paradigm of conservation in the country and to see whether we needed to make it more inclusive. But crucial is how we save the tiger in a densely populated country like India. So, it is a double challenge.

How did you go about your work collecting data/information?

The time given to us was very short - just three months. It was very important to gather information from a large number of people - to listen to many voices, and to understand the situations well - rather than come out with solutions.

We spent the first two months essentially learning. We held four consultations, met over 200 people and visited six reserves. In the reserves, we met the top managers, the guards and frontline staff. We also met people living inside the reserves and those in the nearby villages. We got a very broad and in-depth view of what was happening in the six reserves.

We also wrote to people across the country for their comments and recommendations. We got over 200 submissions. My idea was to evolve solutions rather than dictate them.

What is the main finding of the Task Force?

It was clear early on that there was need for resolution. There was a conflict, a stalemate - logjam, as I call it. Nobody quite knew how to move on.

We understood that one of the biggest crises facing the tiger today was that we had never cared for the poor who lived in the tiger reserves. There was growing alienation and antagonism among the people there. This was destroying the management framework at these reserves.

We found that the tiger was also under threat from outside - the poachers. Even though the tiger trade starts in India, it ends up in China or Tibet. Very little was known about the nature of the trade and how underground and illicit it was. Other forces - mining,

developmental pressures and so on - were also at work. Thus, there was enormous pressure on the tiger from within and outside.

After we met people, looked at data and analysed the problem, we realised that we cannot continue the way we had over the past 30 years. We needed to learn from the [experience of the] past three decades. We have to evolve new ways of dealing with the problem.

What are the lessons learnt from Project Tiger in the past 30 years?

Every crisis has given us an opportunity to reinvent ourselves and to get our strategy right. But we did not make use of the opportunities.

Project Tiger started in 1973. The Project Tiger report of Dr. Karan Singh was excellent. It looked at the reality of the country and argued that the tiger reserves were essentially small breeding grounds [small islands]. The larger breeding ground [the conservation belt outside the forest] of the tiger was in the forest beyond.

In 1983, the late Madhavrao Scindia also came out with an excellent report, which again argued that it was because we were turning these [reserves] into islands that we were not able to protect what was outside, which is disappearing. Between 1983 and 2005, I believe, these voices have got lost.

In the mid-1990s, a similar crisis struck. Reports showed that tigers were vanishing. There was an opportunity then, as now, to reinvent our ways, to argue that these small islands [the 28 tiger reserves that constitute 1 per cent of India's total land area] must not remain so. They must become larger areas in which the tiger can thrive. The reason why the tigers are disappearing is also that half of them were found outside the reserves. And to address that we need a different strategy of conservation in which people and animals coexist. We could have got it right even in the mid-1990s. But we did not.

What was the prescription for the crisis of the mid-1990s?

Two British organisations - the Environmental Protection Agency and the Tiger Trust - were involved at that time. Their approach was that we need more guns, guards and fences. They wanted the tiger to be protected and the war [against the poachers] to be intensified, in some sense. But it was an opportunity we lost. In the past 10 years we have done exactly what we did in the earlier 20 years.

In the past 30 years, what steps we took were detrimental to the tiger?

We made these [reserves] into islands; they have become smaller and smaller; the landscape around them has become more and more degraded; the tiger cannot go out because it [the area outside] is deforested and populated; people have been poisoning them [poaching]; and people come in [to the reserves] as more and more areas are getting deforested. All these have put enormous pressure on the tigers' habitat. It is double jeopardy for the tiger.

What is the way out of this situation?

The way to break this would clearly be a different answer, which would have to depend on our ability both to manage our forest, to regenerate them and to find ways in which animals and people can live together.

But the dissent note in your report argues for creating inviolate spaces for tigers.

As discussed in the [Task Force] report, we have to create inviolate spaces for the tiger. But the reality of India is that people share the tiger's habitat and that is why we call it the Indian way of conservation.

The reality is also that in the past 30 years we have only been able to relocate 80 villages. There are still 1,500 villages inside the reserves. We need Rs.11,000 crores to relocate those villages. There is then the practicality and logistics of relocation; not just about money but also about the administrative capacity to be able to relocate 1,500 villages. There is also the larger challenge - that in the forest outside, beyond the reserves, people live in any case.

So, how are you going to manage this situation? Are you going to protect the tiger's future in the little reserves, making them smaller and smaller and say that this is my core area, I am going to fence it, make it into a large zoo and keep the tiger in it? Or, are you going to expand the boundaries of conservation by involving the people who live there?

But this is easier said than done.

I know it is a difficult challenge. I know there are no easy answers. But we have no option, given our situation. We will have to take the more difficult route and find ways in which the tiger's future can be secured through inviolate spaces and coexistence. This is the reality of India. We cannot escape that.

But there are several criticisms of the solutions that you are providing in the Task Force report.

The conservationists believe that our solutions are impractical, romantic and cannot happen. The tiger needs space. Tigers and humans cannot live together. This is fair. But the reality is that you do not have the land. And, even if you relocate, how many can you relocate? The conservationists will have to come to grips with reality.

They will have to understand that they need to protect the tiger better in the reserves, in the core areas that are undisturbed.

But to secure the tiger's future they will have to also find strategies for coexistence outside these core tiger reserves.

Today you have 37,000 sq km under tiger reserves with a core area of 17,000 sq km. This can support about 1,000 tigers. One option is to secure 17,000 sq km and make a big zoo for the 1,000 tigers. If you want to double it and relocate all the 1,500 villages, maybe you can get in 1,500 or 3,000 tigers in this area. You will have to increase the space so that more tigers can live. But for that the strategy of conservation will be different.

What is the locus standi of the people living within the reserve areas?

People living inside the reserves have rights. But the rights of these people have not been recognised despite the law that says that you cannot notify a sanctuary unless you have taken care of the rights of the people - compensate or relocate them - living in the area. We have notified our sanctuaries and national parks without doing so. So, people live as trespassers on their own land. I do not think you can protect the tiger if you make enemies of your people. And that is my biggest plea to conservationists.

What are the alternatives?

Alternatives have to be found. Once you accept coexistence, you can look at options. For instance, income from tourism can be reserved for the people who live inside [the reserves]; all tourism opportunities can be managed by them; and all guards can be recruited from among the locals. This will take the pressure off the cattle and the livestock that they need to keep. Sustainable harvesting of certain crops can be done.

For instance, in Tawa and Pench [reserves in Madhya Pradesh], they can do fishing, depending on the level of sustainability. And in some cases, you can also think of collaborative management. There are different options.

In tourism, one can think of levying an environmental cess on all tourists entering the reserves. Money from this can go to the reserves, to the local community, in particular, those who live inside the reserves.

What are the major recommendations of the Task Force?

We have given a series of recommendations. But we have selected seven key ones on which we want immediate action.

*The Prime Minister should chair the steering committee of Project Tiger to bring changes in the governance and institutions, with a political oversight.

*More autonomy should be given for the Project Tiger Directorate to improve its working with the States.

*Set up a wildlife crime bureau for the better management of poaching problems.

*Do the next tiger census based on the new methodology.

*Do an independent audit of the tiger reserves, which can then be made public.

*Identify the priority villages and come up with a relocation strategy for them. Simultaneously work out a strategy for coexistence.

*Share the revenue from tourism with local communities.

We had only two options - centralise or use the existing system and tighten it. I have not only given solutions within the system but also suggested independent checks and balances. I have also suggested involving people down the line and strengthening the institutions as well.

A major issue has been the techniques of estimating the number of tigers. Did the Task Force look into it?

Yes. This was a major issue before us. The pugmark system that was used earlier was being misused and was unreliable. Therefore, people were counting the same pugmark several times. In fact, the Project Tiger Directorate itself had come out with a new pugmark system. For the past two years, it had been working on a new system of estimation. That is what we reviewed. Basically, we looked at three levels of monitoring: First, extensive monitoring - you get a sense of the larger habitat, the prey base and the presence of a tiger through GIS [Geographic Information System] monitoring. Second, intensive monitoring - you do stratified sampling and use a variety of tools such as the camera trap, digitised pugmark technique and so on to improve the estimates. At the third level, you do a careful monitoring of tiger population over time. So, looking at all the three levels you get a robust estimate of the number of tigers. You can also get the estimation verified at different levels.

But this will only give estimates, not exact numbers.

Yes. You are not going to know the exact number of tigers, but you are going to get more reliable estimates. That is a step forward.

What exactly is the issue underlying the dissent note given by one of the members of the Task Force?

A prominent tiger expert, [Valmik] Thapar, has given a dissent note. We disagreed basically on two issues. Coexistence, he felt was not possible. He also wanted centralisation of power, put them all [the reserves] under one authority and to manage them all from Delhi. But we believe that in a federal country like India that will not work. We wanted to deepen the involvement rather than centralise it. We believe dialogue is far more powerful than dissent. So his dissent note as well as my response to it form part of the report.

We [others in the Task Force] also believe there is a need to provide inviolate space for the tigers. My question is: How?

For the first time we have put together data. Only 80 villages have been relocated. There are 1,500 still to be relocated. How are you going to do it?

I want an action plan rather than emotional outbursts. They say no coexistence. Okay, no coexistence. But how are you going to do it in a country like India? Come up with a clear work plan.

We have tried to do that. We have asked to identify priority villages and relocate them. Maybe that is not enough. Maybe you need to relocate all of them. But then come out with a plan along with a strategy to go about it.

I am not against Thapar. But I believe that we need to move on. And under the given circumstances, I have suggested a dual approach: relocation where you can and coexistence where it is not possible, aiming at reducing pressure on the forest and tigers.

All of us [in the Task Force] believe that the tiger agenda is the forest agenda. Managing forests requires the deepened involvement of the States, their agencies and the people, and not greater centralisation. In fact, centralisation has been the bane of Project Tiger. There is no involvement of the State leadership in this programme. It is very important to rebuild the State leadership and that is why we have suggested a steering committee at the State level with the Chief Minister heading it.

Your report mentions problems in getting data/information. Was that a serious issue?

That has been our biggest frustration. We found it hard to put together information. I was getting a lot of opinions but no data; absolutely no analyses. There were pretty picture books on tigers. But not about understanding the nature of the crisis of tigers.

There were a lot of people who came out with opinions. But I was not getting a sense of the analysis that was driving that opinion. So one of our biggest efforts has been to compile information. We have put everything on the Web for all to see, analyse and discuss.

I am happy that all the information is now in the public domain. Now the dialogue and the dissent on this will be better informed. We can now have a dialogue based on information. That is the big difference, I hope, this report will make.