

Web Interview of Valmik Thapar, Tiger Expert , Aug- Sept-2005

The Union government set up the Tiger Task Force in April this year, comprising well-known environmentalists and wildlife activists in the aftermath of the tiger-disappearance scare at the Sariska reserve, Rajasthan. The Task Force report, "Joining the Dots", which was presented to the Centre in August, had a lone voice of dissent, that of conservationist **Valmik Thapar**. In an interview given to **Annie Zaidi**, Valmik Thapar explains his stance on the issue, arguing that tigers and humans simply cannot coexist.

Your name is not included in the list of authors of the Tiger Task Force report.

Yes, it is not. In fact, I was never shown the final report. But I have said what I wanted to say in my note of dissent.

I have problems with the chapter on 'coexistence'. I do not believe that tigers and humans can coexist. The authors talk about 'inviolable tracks' in reserved areas. But in the following line, they talk of giving new packages to allow villagers to coexist [with the tigers]. I also don't agree with the one-year deadline; it is just not practical.

What went wrong?

We must remember that the focus here is on tigers. If you wanted to deal with people's problems, you should have set up a 'People's Task Force'. The Tiger Task Force cannot deal with the whole cauldron of life.

I say, give the villagers the best [relocation] deal money can buy. Don't just throw them out. For example, in the Bhadra reserved forests in Karnataka, the forest-dwellers were given the best agricultural land possible, in Chikmagalur. We should give the villagers the option of the best land, in rural or urban areas. But if you move one person and give the other person the option of staying back where he is, why would anyone want to relocate?

We could also try rationalisation of boundaries. Maybe we need to redraw the boundaries [of reserved forests]. We could tackle it through the denotification of some areas, where relocation is not possible, and extend boundaries in places where there are no human settlements.

The issues raised by the report cannot be tackled through the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972. In its present form, there is no provision in the Act for the concept of coexistence. It would need major amendments and that would mean sending it back to Parliament. According to me, that would be a negative development.

What were the problems you had with the Task Force report?

I think it is great that the Task Force could come out with such a voluminous report about recent events, in just three months. There are some very good suggestions in the report. But when it comes to coexistence, according to me, it takes a nosedive.

Let me give you an example. In 1970, Sariska had 40 tigers. Ranthambhore [also in Rajasthan] had 14. Ranthambhore resettled 12 villages that were located in the heart of the forest. Sariska tried to resettle one village, but failed. As a result, despite two very bad years of poaching - 1992 and this last year - Ranthambhore has 26 tigers. In fact, the figure had gone up to 50 tigers at one point.

Sariska, you know the story. The problem is, poachers use the villages as their base. They enter the village, go out and kill, and return to the village. In places where there aren't many villages, poachers find it hard to strike. At the most, they can strike from the fringes of the forest.

Why do you say that the tiger cannot coexist with people?

You have to understand the tiger as a species. Peacocks can coexist. Nilgai can co-exist. They can eat grain or the people may even feed them. Tigers cannot coexist because the tiger will eat milch cattle and other livestock. That is its food. Or it will eat people. This brings it in direct conflict with humans.

Also, human settlements get bigger and bigger. They will encroach on more and more land, which is the tiger's habitat. The conflict would increase with each passing year. Look at the Caspian, South Korea, Java or Bali [in Indonesia]. Tigers are extinct in these regions. They thought people would be more friendly towards tigers. It didn't happen.

But have forest-dwellers not lived in peace with wildlife for centuries in the past?

I've been to tribal areas where they have the 'cult of the tiger'. The tribal people worship the tiger. But the market and the way people live have changed. There is a huge difference between 1905 and 2005.

Some tribal rights activists claim that the tribal people actually protect wildlife and forests. Do you agree?

Agricultural activity in the Melghat Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra. "Human settlements get bigger and bigger. They will encroach on more and more land, which is the tiger's habitat. The conflict would increase with each passing year."

I am willing to face an open debate on this. Give me one example where people have lived easily with tigers. I've worked with tigers for 30 years. I know the tribal areas and the national parks and the sanctuaries. I also know that if there were no reserved parks and guards, we would not have had any tigers.

There is an opinion that tigers would be better off in the reserves if there were no armed forest guards.

What about Indravati [reserve in Madhya Pradesh]? That is a naxal area, so no guards venture into the forest here, but where are the tigers? What about Palamau [Jharkhand]? Or Manas [Assam]? There were only Bodos, no forest guards. The great one-horned rhino was wiped out, as a result.

Would these activists [who demand fewer armed guards] demand that there be no gunmen outside their banks and ATMs? The forest is a liquid bank. Removing armed guards is like standing outside a bank, with baskets of cash, saying 'take it all'.

What about allegations of guards conniving with poachers?

Surely poachers cannot be so active without the guards' neglect or active connivance. There are mafias everywhere in this country, including the forests. Let us be realistic. We have an entire forest machinery to protect 20 per cent of our country which fall under forests. There are some 175,000 forest guards. But no new recruitment has taken place since 1987. The average age of our guards is between 45 and 50. They cannot patrol much on foot. They cannot chase poachers. What do you expect?

What about tourism?

Tigers are not compatible with tourism either. In this country, tourism has been a great disturbance to the tigers. All hotels should be at least 5 km from the boundary of reserved forests and national parks. They should be open to tourists for one year and closed the next year. A rotational system might work. In any case, out of the 600 reserved forests, only about 10 get visited. The situation is desperate in these 10.

What government policies have been most harmful to the tiger?

The leadership is not taking strong decisions. They don't even realise that our 600 perennial rivers and streams are in areas inhabited by tigers. Protecting the tiger means protecting our water security. Whether this is intentional or because of apathy, I don't know. But after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, we have had no leader who had the wisdom to take decisions in favour of the tiger.

Forests in India are a treasure house. Everyone wants to grab a bit. There is the timber mafia; I know thousands of cases where tribal people were employed to cut down trees. There is the land mafia, out to grab forest land and encroach. There are miners - mining for marble, uranium, diamonds, whatever available. It is in their interest to have forest land denotified.

So, what is the next step?

I think the government needs to decide whether it wants tigers, and how many? If you want only 1,000 or 1,500 tigers, then say so, and allocate resources accordingly. As it is, only 6 per cent of our 20 per cent forest-cover is wildlife-rich. You have to work around that figure and protect these regions. Coexistence can be taken elsewhere.

What would you say is the future of the tiger in India?

I've just finished writing my fourteenth book, *The Last Tiger*, which is to be released in October. The tiger has been placed in its coffin. All that remains to be seen now is what will serve as the last nail in this coffin. Nothing short of a miracle can save tigers in the wild in this country. There are many well-intentioned people, but they don't know the needs of the tiger. We have half the world's tiger population. But on the horizon, politically, I see a zero chance of its survival.