

**Interview with Valmik Thapar [VT]
Taken by Krishnendu Bose [KB]**

KB: How severe is the tiger crisis today?

VT: As far as I'm concerned, in 30 years of me working with the tigers, there has never been a more severe crisis, but the crisis comes from absolutely low-grade governance by the state govts and the central govt. A complete lack of understanding by activists and those NGOs who think they are working to save the tiger. All in all, it's one ball of confusion, and in that confusion the tiger dies.

KB: Can you be more specific on case studies? You'd like to talk about Sariska, Panna or...?

VT: Even before I come to crisis studies, let's just look at 1988 to 1990. These were the last years when recruitment was done to the forest staff. Anyone with even a tiny iota of common sense knows that if you want to keep a system of enforcement in place you have to recruit young people. For 18 years, the finance departments of the state and central govt put a ban on recruitment. Every steering committee of the PT, the meetings of NBW (Wildlife Board) for the last 18 years has recommended lifting the ban. Nobody lifted the ban. So what happened? A forest staff became an old decrepit forest staff. Average age of 50. Every govt and political machinery had either intentionally or without thinking made 160,000 men, which is the forest staff of India, defunct. Young poachers of 20 today can get into the park, and old men – some have alcohol problems, some have drug problems, some are diabetic, some suffer from arthritis – all trying to defend the natural world. This is what this country did to its own natural world. It's like taking a hammer and a nail, and putting it into your own body, because that natural world is not just about tigers, it's about water, it's about medicinal plants, it's about everything that makes for a quality of life. We, very intentionally, combined with terrible governance, destroyed the natural world, by making those who enforce the law there, defunct. No recruitment.

KB: That must be just one of the problems.

VT: It is a critical problem. It's not just one of the problems. You cannot have a police force without recruitment. You cannot have an army and fight a war, if you think you need an international boundary, without recruitment. The force collapses. So you have to deal with the first problems of enforcement. There are 100 other problems, but why did this happen?

KB: I just want to bring to your notice that as per the TTF [Tiger Task Force] report, as far as Sariska is concerned, the land to forest guard ratio is one of the best in the country.

VT: Actually the TTF report is the saddest document created in the history of this country, because running through the entire report is a people-focus and not a tiger-focus. Sariska happened because there were 300 forest guards in Sariska at various posts at various ages between 46 and 49. 49, if I remember correctly, 49 was the average age of a forest guard. Nobody had the will, nobody had the interest to patrol. The Rangers, the DCF, the ACF were all on leave, when the tigers were being poached. The six senior officers were on leave and one ACF was given the entire charge of Sariska. Sariska doesn't happen because TTF report writes that there are 300 men and we couldn't save

Sariska. That's brainless recording in a TTF report. These are the reasons why I gave a dissent note to this report, because you've to think out what you are writing. You've to get into the detail. Even a Field Director who was not trained in wildlife in Sariska, when he was doing the count asked for help from his Chief Wildlife Warden. The CWW did not react for three months in Sariska. No help was sent to the guy. He said I have a problem, I can't count tigers. I have missing tigers. These are all records in the files of the state govt. It is shocking that the senior officers of the state and the senior officers of the centre who were going there on inspection and were saying send us monitoring reports, send us monitoring reports, had absolutely no clue what monitoring is about. They don't understand the very basics. We had a failure of governance here. It had nothing to do with manpower.

KB: Tell me one thing – why should we just depend on the govt? Why just the Forest Department? People like you, Belinda [Wright]...

VT: I'll tell you why we depend on the govt and sometimes like me when I started an NGO. Now I don't work for an NGO. I thought a NGO would play a great role in integrating communities with the forest. I failed. My life in the last 30 years if trying to save the tiger is a total failure. It's a failure because govt has a direct jurisdiction on forestland. It's their responsibility. They impose their laws on it and no individual can come in to do what they think is right. You've to follow govt line. This is not an issue like education where you can have a private school. Today you can't have a private park. This is not about health where you can have a private hospital. You can't have a private park. Anyone who works from outside faces the wrath of the govt if he is critical. Today we have hundreds of cases where harassment is meted out to all kinds of people who have criticised the working of the govt. India, we are a country whose head tries to go to the 21st century and we say that we are a transparent democracy, the tail is in the Middle Ages. Every clerk and govt officer who doesn't like you will harass you. Everyone faces it. Whether it's your phone supply or electricity supply or anything that govt has in control. Same thing with forests.

KB: This is the same govt that you had worked with around 20 years ago, when Indira Gandhi was...

VT: I still work and am on the NBW [National Board of Wildlife] . It's about to be reconstituted. I am on the SC committee. You've to work and be vocal. You've to criticise what you work for. You've to make sure there are correctives. We're passing through a moment of history where we are facing the worst crisis of the natural world because the priorities have changed. The economics governs the rule of law today. Everything is about making money and in the process everybody is greedy. The amount of effort that govt and private sector spend in trying to denotify forests, in trying to make sure that there is no enforcement – why is that? Because land mafias get in, timber mafias get in. You can't have tiger conservation authority in Delhi and say that now we've got a new legislation and now the tiger will be saved. You can't say that now tribals will protect the tigers. Anyone with an iota of common sense knows that in the last 100–150 years, 50,000 tribals and forest dwellers have been eaten flesh and blood by tigers. You take all the man-eating records, the British diaries, you will see in the 150 years what has happened. At least 20,000 tigers have been poisoned by tribals and forest dwellers. At

least half a million livestock has been eaten by the tiger. It's a relationship of conflict. You have to use this brain to try and see where you can separate this and where you can't. I'm not saying have 5,000 tigers. Have 500, 400. Just have enough land for 400 tigers but keep those tigers at peace. Don't mix the two because they don't mix.

KB: You've talked about the Forest Department, the state, the govt and even people like you who have failed. Obviously in India, people constitute a huge player in conservation, especially of an animal like tiger. Why have they been missing not only from the Forest Department, the state and the govt's list of priorities, but also yours?

VT: Which are the people you're talking about?

KB: The people who live with the tiger.

VT: They don't live with the tiger. This is total nonsense. This is where you all are brainless. It's a brainless comment. No person lives with the tiger. When people live with the tiger, the tiger has a fence. The guy is trying to guard his buffalo and himself. The levels of conflict are huge, so let's not get into this romantic vision that people live with tigers.

KB: The point is not about coexistence. Maybe there is no coexistence – what I am saying is that what do you do with the 3 million people inside the parks?

VT: I am saying, give them the land. Take a decision saying that you don't want tigers in this country. Give this 1% of your national parks to the people. Give the tribals their rights. Say bye-bye tiger. Don't have foolish dreams about how you can make them work and coexist.

KB: That's too simplistic.

VT: I don't agree with you.

KB: It's not a choice. Why should it be a choice?

VT: Tomorrow when you give your land – national parks and sanctuaries – to the people, will you tell me day after that we should invade Nepal? Go into Bhutan, because now at 20 million a year, we've become 1.4 billion? Would I call that simplistic or stupid? What I am trying to tell you is that if you don't want tigers, be very clear, come out as a political leadership and say that we want to give land to the people. We want green deserts. We want Chhattisgarh forests. We want the Bastar region where birds don't even come on to trees.

KB: So you are saying that either we should have the *adivasis* or the tribals or the people who are living inside or outside the forest or we can have the tiger. Both can't [live] together.

VT: No, I am saying that... – and I hope people get this into their *bheja* because normally they don't – out of the 23%, distribute 17–18% to the tribals. Give this much land of the country to the *adivasis*, families, nuclear or whatever way. Use bad anthropology, bad governance – distribute those. Keep 5% for the unborn India, neither for you, nor for me – for the unborn Indian – and lock it. If you can do that, there will still be a quality of life. If you can't do that say bye-bye natural world.

KB: What I don't understand is that everybody is talking about this. Ashish Kothari in his NBSAP report says the same thing. Sunita [Nariain] in her TTF report talks of inviolate zones. The point is how we should do it, because all the three are the same as far as I am concerned.

VT: It's not the same. It's different. What is an inviolate zone? People talk with different brains. People who have not lived and have not understood how the tiger behaves are talking about inviolate zones. You have to take a map of this country. You've to know that a place like Kanha has 1,000 km of core inviolate zones. You've to take Corbett, which has roughly about the same inviolate zone. You have Kaziranga where for different reasons, no human being exists, because the animals kill human beings. Animals are the Forest Guards there, besides the Forest Guards who also patrol the area. You have some examples in the map of India, where you've inviolate zones. In all those inviolate zones, the tiger is booming because there are no people either hunting or poaching the deer, poisoning the tiger or cattle doing grazing. We know one thing which is true over the centuries. All across where big predators have existed – Africa, S America – where you have too many people, the predator declines. You don't have people, the predator increases. This is a common scientific fact and based on this we should decide. Here is a map of India – this is Kanha, can we have a little corridor here, can we have a small thing here? Don't say that because we have 85 national parks, we should save all of them. No, I don't believe in saving all of them. Have a think tank. Have a completely new system. Take a map of India and say we can have 50-60,000 sq km inviolate. That's all. At the moment PT is in 38,000, only 12-14,000 to go. Let's stick to PT, whatever is to be done. Reduce some parks. Start new ones. Link up some corridors. Keep them inviolate. Keep 500–800 tigers free. Let them live in peace. Without our foolish brains of human beings – tribal activists, forest dwellers, wildlifers, who have failed, like myself. Everybody, all going yap-yap. Biting. For what? The fact is that tigers live alone. The fact is that if you want peace in human beings, they have to live alone. You decide how many tigers you want. Keep a small population. Give the rest of the land away. Where's the problem?

KB: What happened to Ranthambor? You have guards, why is Ranthambor today completely...

VT: Ranthambor is not completely... You see, you can't compare it to Sariska. There is only one reason that no poacher could go and camp inside the core area – because there is no village in the core area. They are only on the fringes of the forest. That's why its population of 15–18 tigers always survives. No poacher could get to them, because they were deep inside and they could not get shelter. He had to come out. He was naked out there. In Sariska or any other poached area, he is staying in the forest dweller's home. It's clearcut and absolute, 100%. In Ranthambor a small population crashes down because of poaching and starts to grow up. Right now, it is...

KB: But why did poaching happen? There are armed guards...

VT: Because that place has been managed so poorly, so badly, that it's shocking.

KB: But you always said guns and guards change the scenario...

VT: Where are the guns? Who told you? Why do you people who interview don't understand that there is not one gun on patrol? They've four guns that work in

Ranthambor. Where are the guns? Who is telling you about the guns and the guards? What is this? You've crossed Delhi to come and interview me? Would you've come had there been no traffic lights on a working day?

KB: Do you think guns and guards are going to stop poaching?

VT: Of course they will. They stopped it in Africa – if you read about Richard Leekey and what he did in the late 80s. Where do you think Africa was going?

KB: But your friend and field biologist Raghu [Chundawat] says that guns and guards are not important.

VT: I am not concerned about what my friends are saying. I am saying that you require trained people who know how to use guns, trained personnel who are fit as the poacher. Equally you need people who are sensitive and run training schools for locals so you can take local people into the forest staff. You need to do many different things together. Not one. But if you drop guns and guards in this country, you are dead meat for any mafia, and anyone who thinks otherwise is a fool.

KB: [Those are] very strong words.

VT: It's absolutely correct. This country wouldn't have international borders and you'd have Pakistan sitting in Srinagar if you didn't have guns and guards and the army. If you didn't have an armed police, you'd see the riots in Gujarat. You want to know how many people would have got burnt? Why are you distinguishing with the natural world?

KB: See, I have personally been with you and seen you over the last 10–15 years. I've seen 1,000 people stand up and give ovation in London for your tiger speech in NationaGS.

VT: What does that mean?

KB: You've put tiger on the world map. You've made films. You've inspired a whole generation of people, but still Valmik Thapar has not been able to save the tiger. ... Personally I am trying to explore what went wrong, because for me there is no personal commitment problem with you. You've put your heart, soul and life into tigers. Then you failed. What happened? [Is it] your policies?

VT: It's not my policies. Why don't try and think of what went wrong? Have a bigger mind. In 1990, Narasimha Rao comes into power. You change the market economy of this country. You bring in a new policy across the board in this country, which combines itself with the western world. It changes a concept in thinking. It changes a concept in priority. Our shops change. Our TVs come in. Our conspicuous consumption increases 2000fold. Instead of dealing with the needs of people, you have an enormous greed even in the village. I'm not keeping the village out. I am not some romanticist. There is a mafia in the village, town and the city. All the mafias combine to titillate the human being to greed. How do you get money? How do you get cash money? Take those 5–10 years and how they went? How much timber cutting took place. Look at SC orders that start in 1996 in the NE, when bans come into place. What'd have happened without those bans? The forest is cash. You've created a huge demand for cash. Everybody was out there to get into the slaughter. While this was happening, there was no enforcement. There was no

Forest Guard being recruited. There was no training of them. There was nothing – no senior forest officer to give inspiration. No inspiration at all. The Forest Service as a whole, from senior to junior, collapsed. There were people shouting reform. Did we require a National Park Service? Did we require to reduce our sanctuaries and national parks? Why couldn't there be a brainstorming about it? Why couldn't the recommendations of the early 1990s be implemented? Even today they are not implemented. The entire TTF report is based on partly Subramaniam Committee report of 1993–4 and if you take all the Steering Committee of PT recommendations, all of them done in the 1990s figure here. The only difference is some statistics. How many villages do we have in the buffer? How difficult is the problem? I don't think that the problem is difficult, because I'm not taking the whole lot into consideration. I want to take a small lot into consideration. If you want to save something in this country, it'll be a miracle if you could save 50,000 sq km of forestland and make it inviolate. Forget the rest. You can't do it. I am not even attempting...I am not trying to say that the country failed because it didn't protect 600 tigers.

KB: Why did you fail?

VT: I failed because this was not my jurisdiction. No recommendation from the Kamal Nath days of early 1990s to 2006 saw the light of day. They kept travelling on various paths. No one reformed anything. From recruitment of Forest Guards, to separate Ministry, to finding out how to create a financially autonomous way of dealing with national parks. Every recommendation and note gathered dust. This country was not interested in saving its natural world or its tigers or rivers. Absolutely zero interest. The only thing that interested the country was the share market, irrespective of what happened with farmers committing suicide or tigers being poached. These were not issues. The whole focus of this country from Narasimha Rao days went down that direction, till today. There's not one political leader today who has the commitment and the passion and the understanding – most important is the understanding – of how to reform the system in the interests of the natural world. That's no.1, and how to reform the system in the interest of the forest dweller, no.2. They are two separate things and need to be done separately, and then linkages need to be found between them. We do *khichri – dal-chawal-sabzi* mix.

KB: You've bifurcated these two worlds – the natural world and the people. But there are as strongly committed people on the other side. Why have these two worlds not reconciled?

VT: I have not found one person who is working with the people, forest dwellers and NGOs, who has one iota of understanding – I am not talking of Ashish Kotharis here...

KB: I'm talking of Ashish Kotharis.

VT: There are more. Other *andolans* across the country are much more powerful. Ashish Kotharis have no understanding of wildlife. They laugh and joke when they talk about wildlife, and they command the power.

KB: But today they command the power, not 10 years ago.

VT: 10 years ago. I don't understand. I've talked to Ashish many times. I went with Ashish to Rajinder Singh and tried to start something, which failed totally. Rajinder Singh wept with me about Sariska. He said Sariska is my failure. With a huge battalion of people behind him, he didn't know that all the tigers were dying. No villager told him.

KB: Do you think this lack of partnership is also a failure?

VT: I think the entire community has a lack of information about the reality because you have a lack of information about the reality of governance. You tend to go for each other. You tend to fight or you retire out like me. I've no desire to fight something which is not fight-able. You can't go on repeating yourself. It's like Ashish still fights with environmental notifications, or he is trying to stop this huge notification taking place by the MoEF, by which you don't require this and that. There are 100 issues he is fighting for. I'm not fighting. My situation is very simple. These are the suggestions I've given. From PM downwards everybody has them. You are not interested, don't be. I can't do anything after that. There is nothing you can do. You can't repeat yourself. Your mind tells you, you are becoming boring. You hear your own voice – I said this, I said this... There is something dull about the human brain. Something boring. If nobody understands you, that means you failed fully. Let other people talk. This is the time for Sunita Narain to explain her expertise on the tiger, and tell people how to govern with the tiger. This is the time for Madhu Sarin to say how do you save tigers. This is the time for all the activists that are there. Jean Dreze, please come out and tell how you'll protect the tiger. Come out on camera and tell and work with Manmohan Singh. Work with a core team of tribal activists and save the wildlife and the tiger. ... People say Valmik Thapar is [a] very poor guns and guards man. I pull back. Do what you like.

KB: People are saying that. There was a voice which was kind of homogenous and they were talking the same thing. They didn't check out what the reality was, where in India tiger was situated. It was about people. It was about entire biodiversity. People are saying that the dominant voices, including Valmik Thapar, were elitist, and out of the reality of India. Thereby we've left the people on their own and today the politicians are actually mining the people. Brinda Karat is going to decide what tiger...

VT: Brinda Karat has worked out three amendments of the new wildlife act with the Director of PT [Project Tiger]. Many people have called me elitist – he is a conservationist, he is interested in writing his books, he is interesting in presenting his films. You are sitting in front of me – most people can say you're making a film and it's elitist. Who cares two hoots whether DD shows this film to the mass of forest dwellers and forest dwellers? Are they going to sit and say wow, KB made a fantastic film and it has moved us and inspired us to now save the tiger? No, doesn't matter what people say. You follow an instinct. Everyone – at least [those] I know in my life – follows an instinct in terms of what you think is right for the animal. When there was [talk of] TTF...I met the PM, at a meeting of the NBW. It's in the records. Twenty minutes after the meeting, the Ministry turned it down, saying it's terrible. That's also on record. The PM accepted that there should be a TTF. He asked me very quietly a few days later, who should be on the TTF? And I explained to the PM that there should be people who work for the tiger. It shouldn't be a mix. It's not about tribals and forest dwellers. There should be a separate

task force for forest dwellers and tribals. It can work separately, and then the two can meet. Don't mix it. Once you make a *khichri* in this country, you cannot extract from it the rice and *dal* – it's *khichri* forever. That's all we are doing. After the *khichri* that was made in the TTF, we are having the *laddoos* now. This is a *khichri*, a mixture. Some wildlifers have moved out. Some people who were concerned both with tribals and wildlife were half critical, not sure whether the JPC on the Tribal Bill is right. What is going to happen in the Tribal Bill? It's total confusion, because who is the governor? Who is going to enforce the Tribal Bill? Who is going to enforce the Tiger CA properly? This MoEF, with its track record! Impossible.

KB: Don't you think for the...*adivasis* who are living inside the forest – there is no choice. They are there. They're now being shackled by the politicians. Don't you think we've lost an opportunity?

VT: The *adivasis*. If you look at SC records on forests, from Chhatisgarh and MP came a huge amount of cases, where the rich, the super rich, used the tribals, and in the guise of the tribal, cut trees and took everything. Exactly the same is going to happen to all these bills. Enforcement is so poor today. Whether it's the *gram sabha* or the Forest Department, they are in their worst moment. Totally politicized. Without any inspiration, and we are creating the most complicated legislation for them to deal with. Yes, I don't know what is going to happen to the *adivasi*, who is going to shackle them. All I know is that right across the system – I know I've failed – the tribal activist with the Tribal Bill, and the wildlife activist with the TCA will watch the horrors of governance. It can never be so bad as it's going to be. If you want a retrospective – what could we have done to prevent it? That was your earlier question. Maybe many things. I tried in a very small way, with people like Rajinder Singh, to some extent with Ashish, when we had some conversations about what to do. We never were able to work out something with a larger focus, because there were always important tribal activists and NGOs who didn't want to talk. Who would call me an elitist, or that he doesn't know about *adivasis*, or his knowledge about *adivasis* and tribals, whether it's about the cult of tiger or his sociology...comes from a tradition that's far gone and now we are in a new revolutionary world of understanding sociology. It's like the sociologists from the DSchool, [they] say the same thing. ... If I have to be very frank with you, I believe, [in] 2006, this country is more brainless than it ever was. It was a much better country to live in, in the 1970s and 80s – now this country is very tiresome and very difficult to live in. To get inspired and passionate to do things, which are going to show results, is nearly impossible. In any field, except IT, except moneymaking, share index. These are fields where everybody is very happy getting into. You talk to the younger generation today, you're talking about the future. Whether it's someone who works in a village with people, or someone who is working with wildlife – they are not to be seen. They are busy trying to find the next university they can go to outside India. The fate of the tiger, in my opinion, is decided. Why do ask me what is going to be the fate of the tiger? I am not leaving it to the corporates, I'll tell you what I think is going to happen. Year after year, and you prove me wrong, I'm talking about 2–3 years. You'll see what'll happen.

KB: You'd like to talk of some specific cases? We've been to Orissa and it is appalling. We were filming there and it's appalling. The way Naveen Patnaik is going about his 56

crore[Rs project]. He is opening to Mittals, Tatas. In the Niyamgiri forests, we climbed right up the hill, and we filmed all that. Fantastic biodiversity and tigers are there. They're going to kill that place. Of course the CEC[Centrally Empowered Committee] is there. Would you like to say something? Not about Niyamgiri. Goa, which is a very stark case. ...Goa-Karnataka border, the Belgaum border. Below 5 hectares, you don't need EIA permissions, you don't need public hearings. So they are coming in with 4.99 hectares, which is just opening up the forest in parcels. It's horrible. So the commercial pressures must be huge. ...

VT: I can't say site specific. Basically the one bit of land as land bank is forestland and everybody is after it. But the first people who are after it is the corporate world. They want more and more mines. In Orissa, they want as much iron ore and bauxite that they can take out of Orissa. So some of our best forests are going to die. In Jharkhand they are going to die, or they've already died. In C India, they are going to die. Everybody wants a chunk of the richest land. The land of the tiger. The tiger walks on the richest land of India. Everybody wants a bite of it. This is going to lead to a serious degradation of the tiger's habitat. You and I can't stop it. SC will stop some, but the pressures are so intense that it requires an ED [Enforcement Directorate] in the SC to make sure that every order of theirs is followed. It's not easy, because there are so many people wanting to bite, eat and take this land away. The tribals who live there are the last ones who are going to get their bite – because even if you have leftist parties in India trying to fight for the rights of the tribals, and you have a new bill called the Recognition of Tribal Rights Bill, first have a Recognition of Forest Rights away from Corporates Bill, that this forest is not meant to be used for mining and for destruction. We don't have that. We have created a grey area in our laws, whether it is the MoEF or the state govt. And now we are relaxing powers to the state govt, to say that you release more land. These processes that are taking place, and have started in the last two years, will roll away forestland so fast that before we know it will be gone. I am very clear in my mind that the fate of the tiger is sealed to the extent that the population will fall to 500 in the next 2–3 years. I am certain, irrespective of what Director, PT, says or the MoEF says. They can't stop it. The disasters of the last three years are going to impact now. In the next two years, and if you have a great two years of decision making, that impact will come after three years. You may be able to stop the fall at 400–500. We lost it, irrespective of what anyone says. We have 1,200–1,500 tigers left somewhere, declining at 200 a year. I am 100% certain that there is no priority left in saving the forest, because the forest officer deals with a defunct service, so he is not interested. He has a 100 rich businessmen vying to get the land. He has his politician ready to give him anything that he wants if he can find a way under the Forest Conservation Act or some other act to give this land.

KB: Dr Rajesh Gopal says that people like yourself and others are not part of the system. They don't want to work within the system. They are busy critiquing the system and if they had partnered with us, then we could've fought it together. That's what he is saying.

VT: Dr Rajesh Gopal should go back to college and learn about how people partnered. There is a record in the MoEF, from 1992 to 1996–7, that's Kamal Nath and Rajesh Pilot, on what a partnership was created between individuals and govt. There is a record from late 90s to 2003, when Dr Gopal entered the fray, about the partnership that was created between the then Director of PT – a man called P.K. Sen, and all the NGOs and

scientists. In it were involved Ullas Karanth and everybody. These are records on govt files. If Dr Gopal can't find them, I invite him to my house to read the detailed records of the partnership. There was no partnership with the govt that wasn't tried at the central as well as the state level. I worked for four years with the MP govt, when Digvijay Singh was the CM. He will himself tell you how we worked as a partnership. I worked with the Rajasthan govt, with Vasundhara Raje and Ashok Gehlot on hundreds of issues of state. Very difficult to track, very difficult to find solutions. But a lot of forest officers from different parts of the country will tell you of the partnerships that were created. If Dr Gopal still doesn't believe it, I'll give him all those forest officers, who I have partnered with, for him to understand. And he does require to go back to college to understand, because it's a course that should be given to forest officers about the history of conservation. I've kept a detailed record of it. Some of it has been published in my books. I have an unpublished manuscript section also.

KB: You mean that Dr Gopal didn't want these partnerships, that's why they didn't happen?

VT: I believe that Dr Gopal couldn't get the partnerships going the way he wanted, because a partnership also requires criticism both ways. You have to have the humility to take criticism and you have to have the humility to also shout and scream and know that the other side is not going to impact on it. I think Dr Gopal chose to be detached. He wanted to live isolation and he got his dream.

KB: Now he has got his partners in [Dr Y] Jhala, Kamal Qureshi and WII [Wildlife Institute of India].

VT: These are wildlife scientists. I think they've always partnered with the govt in some way or the other. WII – most people think it's a part of govt. I don't call that a partner. That's a in-built partnership. A partnership comes when you pick outside people. The wisdom of a Kamal Nath when he dealt with individual experts or NGOs was that he made you a partner. Whether in the end he took a decision or not, he sat together like a partnership. His worst critics were sitting in front of him. The exact opposite today. The worst critics of PT, I consider myself to be the worst critic of PT – the state govts, how they are running places like Buxa, Simlipal, Indravati, Palamau, the mess that they are in. I am the worst critic. I'll shout at the top of my voice that these places have been devastated by poor governance. The other side has to say, yes Mr Thapar, we agree or we don't agree. Come and talk to us. Tell us what we can do together. Why is there not one letter on record from the Director, PT, to people like me or Mr Sehgal or to P.K. Sen, who was the former Director, from Mr Gopal, saying come let's work together. Where are the letters, the telephone calls? Why did it take two years for a meeting of the Steering Committee of PT? That happened at my instigation at the PMO. Otherwise that meeting wouldn't have taken place last April. Ask Mr Gopal, why did he tell me that he has no tiger work to do because the Ministry takes all my time and sends me to do other assignments. I keep a record of every little conversation I have had. The failure is totally within the govt. We, as I told you, are so-called failed experts who live in this country. Jurisdiction is govt – they have the power, the ability and the nastiness to harass when they want. And I have a record of their harassment including the present lot and what they tried to do with people like Dr Chundawat. How many meetings were held in Delhi,

where they were held, who was invited to them, how they thought they'll get NGOs and make them suffer. No detail has been kept out. Every detail is with us.

KB: Even Ullas [Karanth] has cases against him of skin export.

VT: That's one side. There are cases of trespass. He is a wildlife biologist who has cases of trespass against him because of Kudremukh. Everybody who fights the system gets a slap by the system. You have to stand there and say when is the next slap coming? In between you've to have the courage to talk. Not an easy thing for young people in their 20s and 30s to fight back the govt. Whether it's a tribal activist or a wildlife activist, they both suffer. Even if it's a good tribal activist who is trying to get his point through to the forest officer, and is criticising the forest officer, the forest officer can be really nasty. We haven't worked out a system because we haven't joined hands. It's a tragedy we haven't found a way to work together. But not for not trying. I don't know which tribal activist tried with me. I know I tried to whatever extent I could with Rajinder Singh or whoever I could, in my limited way. With all my humility, I tried to understand another point of view. Nobody came to me and said tell us about tigers. How do they live? What do they need? Do they need spotted deer or do they need livestock?

KB: Ashish says in his interview with me – he hasn't named you – that wildlife conservationists friends of his never visited community forests, never came and saw community conserved areas.

VT: I don't know who he means, but I went with Rajinder Singh to see his community forest and I went on his Bagh Bachao Andolan. I remember there was a big dam and a big *gram sabha* and big village speeches and I'm not a people person. I've lived a very reclusive life. I've lived with tigers, under the umbrella of a tree. I tried to come out of my shell, which is my personal shell...

KB: Unfortunately what has happened is that if you are an expert on tigers, you've got knowledge, which others don't have – this sharing has not happened. It's not your fault. But this system has not allowed...

VT: I agree with you. Sharing has not happened. It's a failure of sharing, but there were efforts made of trying to share. Those didn't work. To understand the mechanism of why they didn't work – what were the impediments that prevented it from working? I believe they come from both sides. Hard stands taken by those who believe that wildlife should live and hard stance taken by those who believe that wildlife shouldn't live, and forest dwellers should have rights. We could never join the lines. It was very difficult because there is no coexistence between them. That's why it is such a difficult issue. That's why I came out in 2005–6 and said decide exactly the tract of land you want to keep inviolate. Keep it small. Country wouldn't take big lands. ... Have 400–500 tigers in that land and give the rest away.

KB: [About how] Raghu [was] treated – not only you, Belinda, WPSCI and everybody came together, but why not Ashish Kothari. Why not all these people? Why not Rajinder Singh? Everybody should have come together and protested that this is what is happening to a wildlife scientist in our country. He has been penalized, thrown out of the park.

VT: You should make a film. How this happened, how MP reacted, how they worked with Delhi to harass Raghu. You should find out. I'll tell you my story also, without going into detail. When I was talking to the PM and when the TTF was coming into being, a major effort was made by people, senior officials in Delhi, who work with tigers to harass me. Fortunately, I have friends who tell me, and give me the exact scenario of it. When I say the tail of India lives in the Middle Ages, it's this Middle Ages. Even when you try and get together with NGOs, tribal activists, wildlife activists, a few people from govt, there is so much force trying to divide and rule – finish them off, harass, make them fight, don't let there be a unified statement – this is the India we have in 2006. Everybody wants to fight with everybody. Nobody wants a solution.

KB: People are saying today that there are no problems with tribals and tigers – it's the tribalwallas and the tigerwallas who have created this rift.

VT: I take them back to the statistic then. How did 50,000 people die in the last 150 years? Answer. How did 20,000 tigers get poisoned in the last 150 years? How did 0.5–1 million livestock get eaten by tiger in the last 150 years? Take all the British District Records and tell me there is no problem between tigers and tribals. This illiterate statement I'll not tolerate. The only time the man-eating or fatality curve came down was when PT started. Look at the graph. Upto 1970, which was the beginning of PT and census, all the conflict because they start to relocate. Sixty villages they relocated. This is alphabet of wildlife. I am not against tribals or forest dwellers. I am saying give them 2/3 of the forest land. Let them enjoy it, do what they like, but just keep 1/3 for the tigers. What is wrong in this argument? Give them what you want but keep this little river system, this little quality of life, the jungle, away from everybody. Don't have tourism, hotels, wildlife cameramen, nothing.

KB: Practically, it's not going to work. You know it. The landscape approach – tigers are coming out of Corbett and getting killed. Even Lakhimpur Kheri.

VT: Corbett is just one example. There you can still walk from Dhikala all the way to Tanakpur on the Nepal border. If you'd worked hard between Pench and Kanha or Kanha and Achanak Marg, you'd have saved a corridor. Today you have no chance to save, because there is no one working. WII has done lots of studies on corridors. Now you're left with 2,000 sq km of Kanha with a few strands going to Balaghat and here there. I am still saying that whatever you may have – it may not be great – but keep that alive. If you don't, it's gone forever. Have a think tank, which is coordinated beautifully. Choose five of your most intelligent tribal activists, five tigerwallas and bring five people, who are thinking people from the village, so there is no question of who is genuine and who is not. Put them in a room for five days and tell them to thrash everything out. Don't leave the room. When we started our discussions with the PM, he did exactly that. The meeting was held with the PM. He sat for two hours, with five tribal and five tiger activists. He heard this huge, ferocious debate that took place and said that nobody should leave this room. I am coming back after dinner at 10. If necessary you stay the night and thrash it out. This was a moment to reach a solution for the Tribal Bill, for the Tiger Conservation Authority. But the MoEF and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs fought. As he left the room, they said we don't see eye to eye and this meeting should close till we find a consensus, because there is a complete gap between us. But that's what is actually needed to happen.

We need to be locked up – those who are interested in this issue, genuine people – and come out with what is called in bureaucratic language a white paper. We haven't even done that. We just hang around with TTF report. Everything is solved in the TTF report. TTF report doesn't have any of this. TTF report is written in one strain and one language with statistics that are not valid for people and resettlement and the crores that are mentioned for resettlement. These are not accurate stats.

KB: Recently, the CWW [Chief Wildlife Warden] of MP[Madhya Pradesh] said that out of the 700 villages inside national parks and sanctuaries, at the most 100, villages can be relocated.

VT: Ask the CWW of MP. A detailed session has been held with him about Satpura and Pachmarhi and system was worked out with exactly the villages that require being relocated, which is what people like myself in TTF told Sunita and everyone. Don't give these big figures. Out of a 100 villages that you've listed for relocating, probably 12 are strategic. Those are the ones to be relocated. The other ones can be islands, giving them their rights. Let's work out an entirely new, revolutionary system. I am not suggesting for a moment that every village should be relocated. But we don't even have a system of using this *bheja* to figure out which are the strategic villages. We don't even have a list of strategic villages. We say TTF report says 1,600 villages and 2,000 crores... There are enough brains in this country. It's full of experts in different fields. Make them sit down and list the strategic villages. Look what they did to the amendments to the TCA. They gave the right to social scientists to find out the negative impact of tigers on a village. Have you ever heard this? Social scientists can tell you how people feel. The negative impact of people on a forest, he can tell you. And this has gone in law that he is going to tell you the negative impact of people on a forest. That's the job of a biologist. He has to have a plot and grow trees and see the grazing... I've got a study done in my old days in Ranthambor Foundation. A guy did a study like this, but they made a mistake... Because Brinda Karat and Director, PT, didn't understand [what] they have written, that social scientist has to tell whether a village has a negative impact on the forest. That's not a social scientist's job. It has to be a wildlife biologist. He has to do a 2-year study to say that. They have done it *ulta*. And it's a law passed in Parliament. Read the clause and tell me how a social scientist is going to determine the negative impact of people on forest. How? He is not a forester. He is not a biologist. He doesn't know about tree and leaf growth. How can he?