

DOCUMENTARIES ►► **THE GREAT INDIAN TIGER CRISIS** • directed by Arindam Mitra and Chandramohan Puppala, producer, Arindam Mitra • 77 mins **TIGER: THE DEATH CHRONICLES** • directed by Krishnendu Bose, commissioned by PSBT • 63 mins

Tiger debate: New frames

SANJAY KAK

To many of us the name Sariska once suggested a forest in Rajasthan, perhaps even the magnificence of its tigers. Today it epitomises the full-blown crisis in Indian wildlife, and when the lid blew off the long festering story in 2005, it turned out that while there was a budget and staff, jeeps and wireless sets, what was missing from the Sariska Tiger Reserve were tigers. Two years on, as those alarm calls begin to grow distant, two new films try to raise the debate on the future of the great cat.

drying water hole of the Indian tiger reserve, the speaking parts remain sharply differentiated, with ‘conservationists’ on one side, and ‘parks versus people’ on the other. Ranged with the conservationists, in a more sober role, are the ‘concerned scientists’. The walk-on roles (often non-speaking) go to ‘adivasi forest dwellers’ (sometimes called encroachers); the poachers (exemplified by the infamous Sansar Chand); and the ‘consumers’, identified by images of massed Tiger skins in festive rituals from Tibet/China.

All this is very much like what we see and hear and read in the mass media,

commandos, a wildlife crime bureau. His point is: “Tigers and people have never lived together, coexistence is a myth: so it’s either tigers or people.”

It’s left to the scientists, like Ulhas Karanth and Raghu Chundawat to explain why. For one tiger needs at least 50 chital a year, and a habitat to support them. The livestock of the people living in forests will eventually deplete the forest, so that the tiger’s prey *will* thin out. Inevitably, man and tiger *will* be pushed into conflict, and the tiger *will* lose.

Mitra and Puppala structure their film with a kind of informed naiveté, using it to draw us into a complex debate. Much of *The Great Indian Tiger Crisis* is centered on the familiar, but there are some highly rewarding forays away. In Maharashtra, we meet villagers turned into criminals in their own jungles by the forest department, as they search for minor forest produce, frightened that they will soon be called ‘ter-



Stills from *The Great Indian Tiger Crisis* (left) and *Tiger: The Death Chronicles*

Neither film carries the high budget, high-gloss—and admittedly high-skill—of the A-list international wildlife film. But *The Great Indian Tiger Crisis* and *Tiger: The Death Chronicles* are not celebratory films, and in place of the always-perfect light in which we adore nature on our TV sets, instead of the stunning sagas of revelatory observation, we have here something much simpler. A modest digital-video approach piecing together the problem with conservation in India.

The public co-ordinates of this debate are marked by familiar—and rigid—positions. Ranged around the

and both films share these familiar positions. So it’s not on their common ground, but at points of divergence that things become interesting.

The Great Indian Tiger Crisis takes off from the Tiger Task Force report, commissioned at the behest of prime minister Manmohan Singh, which ended up only sharpening the debate. Almost immediately, we are forced to choose. There is Valmik Thapar, in yet another bravura performance as the Man Who Loves Tigers Most (and Best), calling for inviolate forests, fully protected with crack teams of forest

rorists’. There are some vivid juxtapositions: the prime minister sweeps into a tiger reserve in a cavalcade to receive the task force report, followed by a description from a villager on how long it took to produce a tiger on the scheduled day. A eulogy for Indira Gandhi for all she did for Indian wildlife, is balanced with a reminder that it was she who cleared the Kudremukh iron ore project, which destroyed vast swathes of irreplaceable primal forest in Orissa, for a few decades of third grade ore.

But the technique of naïve interest doesn’t always hold the film together,

and towards the end the loss of control begins to overwhelm. As Mitra and Puppala make way at dusk through the Sunderbans forest, trying to understand why the great cat is doomed, “none of us are tigers”, they say, “none of us stakeholders”. None of us may well be tigers, but the evidence of their own film suggests that we are indeed stakeholders.

Krishnendu Bose’s *Tiger: The Death Chronicles* is hinged around the more self-assured presence of the filmmaker’s person, who is anchor and interlocutor. That persona is non-adversarial, and shorn of naiveté, and the film carries the stamp of someone who has closely followed Indian wildlife. Although this film too first takes us to Sariska, and the same watering hole of opinions—Thapar and Belinda Wright, Karanth & Chundawat, Kothari and Sunita Narain—there is much more to it.

The valid insistence of the ‘conservationists’ that tigers need inviolate spaces is balanced against the fact that almost 3 million people live within the forests that shelter tigers. This shared habitat is where the poorest, and most neglected of Indians—*adivasis*—live.

Conservationists are quick to take on encroachers, poachers and foresters. But the mining lobby gets away with murder. Bose’s film examines the problem

Relocating them is a farcical idea—after all, in 15 years the majority of the 400,000 people ousted by the Sardar Sarovar Dam remain without resettlement and rehabilitation. Add to this the fact that the bulk of India’s mineral resources *also* happen to fall in these forests: you have a Molotov cocktail tossed towards the Indian tiger.

Bose tries to nuance the insistence by the ‘coexistence is bunk’ school by looking at some successful examples, like eco-tourism in Corbett Park, or work with the Soliga tribe in the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Sanctuary, Mysore. But more critically he pushes in a direction that the tiger debate has conspicuously averted its gaze: irreparable damage to forests by mining.

Bose walks us up the densely forested Niyamgari hill in Orissa—home of the Dongria adivasi, source of the perennial Vanshadhara River, notified as a Reserve Forest—replete with bark-

ing deer, leopards, and at least four tigers. Just below it, the Lanjigarh alumina refinery has come up in anticipation of environmental clearances. In Orissa alone, between 1980-2005 almost 95,000 hectares have been diverted for mining. Why do the conservationists not speak up about this? Or is it that the poor ‘encroaching’ *adivasi*, the corrupt park director, the venal poacher Sansar Chand are all manageable foes? And the global mining conglomerates (and our very own Vedanta), more dangerous adversaries? In *Tiger: The Death Chronicles*, Karanth provides a useful metaphor. The engine of economic growth in any country, he says, are the economic ministries, while the brakes are the environment ministries.

The film reminds us that the murder of the Indian tiger is deeply connected to the suicidal impulse that seems to have convulsed us all. Highly recommended for educational viewing. ■

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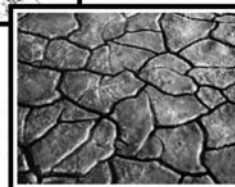
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