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Documentary shows failure of Project Tiger

Nitin Sethi | TNN

New Delhi: In India, a wildlife documentary and a natural history movie are often thought to be the same thing. A film on tiger conservation is invariably all about the big cat in the wild, its royal splendour on display before an indulgent camera.

But filmmaker Krishnendu Bose's *Tiger: the Death Chronicles*, presents the notso-pretty picture of official lethargy and squabbling "experts" who seem to be presiding over a story with tragic portents. Shot over an entire year, after Sariska's vanishing tigers made headlines, the documentary reveals that things haven't still changed for the king of the jungle.

Bose's film shows that the Indian tiger remains at considerable risk. In some sanctuaries, the big cats have disappeared and naturalists who asked awkward questions turfed out. At others, the prey base makes the number of tigers officials claim to exist seem quite untenable. And, throughout the film's production, says Bose, senior ministry and environment officials refused to meet him.

Screened in the Capital on Thursday, the film explains why there are more tigerwallahs around some national parks today than the cats. It will help people understand that tigers face a threat not only from poachers, but also from a relentless pressure on their habitats, as decades of misplaced policies have turned the big cats' human neighbours against them. The documentary presents telling examples. In BR Hills (Karnataka), Soliga tribals, living in the tiger-dwelling habitat for ages, once denied their rights, take to indiscriminate chopping. In Kalahandi (Orissa), bauxite mining threatens to displace both wildlife and tribals.

In Buxa (West Bengal), science is shunned to list tiger numbers beyond any reasonable estimate. In Panna (MP), controversy and the forest department hounds a scientist who reports missing tigers. Bose uses such instances well — he uses personalities better.

"Is the tiger's story actually about the tigerwallahs?" TOI asked Bose. "It's a story of their ideologies," he says. So, you have not so subtle battles between Valmik Thapar and Sunita Narain. The latter is a late entrant but has shaken up the business (with her Tiger Task Force) to get India thinking if 30 years of jargon and breastbeating for the tiger did enough.

Bose uses these debates to build the narrative, but at times turns a bit polite. This is understandable as it is tough to tell your audience — the tiger loving middle class — that if the big cat wasn't their motif of natural glory and was, instead, seen to symbolise a

conflict threatening India's forests and those who directly depend on them, the current crisis may have been averted.

nitin.sethi@timesgroup.com