

John and Tiger man Pandey to join hands for film on the big cat

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BIG PLAN: John Abraham, left, and Mike Pandey will appear in *The Return of The Tiger*.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

Mike Pandey is no Jim Corbett – who once upon a time roamed the hills of the Himalayas shooting down rogue man-eating tigers and leopards. But Corbett Sahib as he was fondly called by those hundreds of villagers, who perhaps owed him their very lives having been saved from the jaws of those ferocious feline creatures, turned into a great conservationist in his later life.

Pandey – who was born in Kenya and who grew up in England and still carries a British passport – never gunned down animals or any other living creature. He was always into conservation, trying to protect mammals, animals and birds from the two-footed predator, why man himself! And Pandey has been doing this

through power-packed documentaries on tigers, on whale sharks on vultures and so on.

As he told me during a recent chat, while whale sharks were being butchered on Indian shores some years ago by fishermen – who used the oil from the fish to grease their boats – the government was blissfully unaware of this monstrosity. The carcasses were thrown away to rot. And when Pandey drew the attention of the administration, they refused to believe him, saying that when India did not have whale sharks, where the question of fishermen slaughtering them was. It was only when Pandey filmed a documentary on this “murder of whale sharks” that the government sat up and took note. Even the government passed a law banning the killing of these poor creatures.

Pandey’s documentary efforts have gone a long way in saving vultures – millions of which were dying because of pesticide poisoning, thus creating disturbance in the environment. These birds are scavengers that help in clearing rotting garbage. Of course, Pandey is much better known for his films on tiger and how they helped fight the menace of poaching.

So, it does seem very interesting that he is all set to walk into a feature now titled *The Return of the Tiger*, and Bollywood star John Abraham has been roped in. Now this looks like a fantastic combo.

Pandey regrets the fact that while everybody in India is shouting that the tiger must be saved, nobody really cares how and why. Is it because it is a beautiful animal? Is it because it is at the top of the food pyramid chain?

Pandey feels that a movie with someone as big a star as Abraham and someone with that kind of raw appeal will go a long way in creating an awareness of the pressing need to take care of the tiger. The big cat is absolutely essential to maintain the food chain without which we humans will perish.

And since documentaries are passed and nobody really watches them – or they are hardly ever exhibited in commercial theatres (with only India’s Doordarshan showing them and with a 30- minute slot on NDTV) – a feature length work with a big actor like John Abraham seems like a good bet to attract footfalls into the cinemas and help spread the message to save the tiger.

Mike himself plans to direct and act in *The Return of the Tiger* – a story about two men whose adventures in the jungles of India promises to turn out into a fascinating film. Drawing on the close encounters with the tiger that Pandey has had in his adult life (even as a boy he lived next to a wildlife sanctuary in Africa), he avers that it is only a celebrity like Abraham who can help draw the attention of the people and the powers that be. “The idea is to tell a good story and pack it with important messages”, Pandey contends.

The movie will examine a whole lot of issues as two friends (Pandey and Abraham) journey across the narrative through some of India’s most dense forests. The core plot deals with the tale of a tigress with three cubs that has strayed outside the reserve area and poachers are around when the two men get into the act to save the animals.

Inspired by Pandey’s own true adventure that he had along with his brother some years ago, *The Return of the Tiger* holds the potential to turn into a thrilling wildlife work, fictionalised from fact and culled out of a tragedy that India has been facing for decades.

Admittedly, Project Tiger – which was launched in 1973 to save the animal – has helped in the multiplication of these wonderfully handsome feline creatures.

But poaching still happens and quite a lot of it takes place, and poachers still have better weapons and equipment to outsmart forest guards (poorly paid, often just armed with lathis and not even proper footwear).

And most significantly, poaching has a free run because tiger parts in regions like China and South-East Asia are still mistakenly believed to cure a whole lot of diseases.

Pandey and Abraham (who have had a varied and illustrious career) will run us through such ridiculous notions to point out that tiger parts offer no such health benefits and that the animal must be allowed to roam the wild without any fear of being shot down. Time, the tiger is allowed to burn bright.

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