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### Hope burns bright for Indian tigers

BY GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN on APRIL 30, 2016 in ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES, INDIA

*Tiger, tiger burning bright*

*In the forests of the night,*

*What immortal hand or eye*

*Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*

So wrote William Blake, who lived from 1757 to 1827.

But Blake could not have imagined that mere mortals would in the 20th and 21st century brutally hunt down the tiger for pure sport or to use its skin and organs as drawing-room decoration and medicinal ingredients respectively.

More than the skin, tiger parts, most importantly the penis, were touted as a cure for several diseases and conditions including rheumatism, arthritis and sexual impotency. These organs were lapped up in China and some East Asian countries such as Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia.

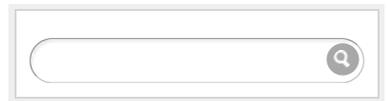
While nothing has ever been proven about the curative ability of tiger parts, poachers made merry with their loot, making huge profits by dumping the dead tiger on gullible people. The majestically feline creatures were killed in their hundreds in India. At one point of time, it was said one tiger a day was butchered. This was till 1972 when India's Project Tiger was established to protect the big cat in the wild.

Project Tiger saw more downs than ups with officials — probably in connivance with poachers — fudging figures. In 2009, it turned out to be scandal when not a single tiger was found at the Panna Reserve in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh — when only a few months before that the administration had claimed the place had several of these cats.

Cutting to the present, the National Tiger Conservation Authority places the number of tigers in



*Incidence of illegal killing of the big cat has gone down in India because of stronger policing and conservation efforts*



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India at 2,226 (out of a global total of 3,890) — up from 1,411 tigers in 2006 and 1,706 in 2010 — years when surveys were conducted. The reasons for this rise were favorable functioning of ecosystems, reduction of human pressure on tiger country, improved protection, availability of prey and so on.

However, when AT spoke to two of India’s leading tiger experts and conservationists — Ullas Karanth and Valmik Thapar — it seemed that the tiger was burning bright, but not quite as bright as the government wanted us to believe.

Karanth, who lives in the southern Indian city of Bengaluru — prided as the country’s Silicon Valley — says these so called tiger numbers for large landscapes, regions and countries of the world are compilations of official figures. “All are derived using very poor methodologies. Therefore, they are not reliable at all...

“They are not useful for managing individual tiger populations either. For that we need rigorous methods that count tigers in each individual population accurately... this is being done in a few cases ... and those figures are helpful”.

And now comes the shock: Karanth quips: “Please note these country and state-wide estimates are for public and media consumption with not much conservation utility.”

However, Karanth avers that India has done a reasonably good job in holding on to its tigers, and in some places, even increasing their numbers.

“We should be proud of this. We have done better than other Asian countries. But then officials overdo things needlessly coming up with these irrelevant numbers etc which lower our credibility,” he says.

So assuming the tiger population has gone up compared with the 1970s, can we say poaching has been checked? Karanth agrees the incidence of illegal killing of the big cat has gone down — quite impressively in some protected reserves like the Western Ghats and the states of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra because of stronger policing and conservation efforts.

But a lot more needs to be done to save the tiger and help it multiply.

Thapar, who works out of New Delhi, feels the best way to go about this is to “outsource tiger management. The forest department, which now takes care of tiger protection, needs to retreat and allow private players in the management of tiger landscapes. Directors of national parks must not be forest officers.

“Now if I were in charge, I would induct — on short and long term consultancies – 1,000 specialists into the country’s 49 tiger reserves. This will create new and more creative partnerships, and breathe fresh air into the management of these reserves. This will change the static role of the ignorant government bureaucrat,” he says.

Beyond the administrative changes that Thapar advocates, he is absolutely certain about the enormously significant role of the poor, humble villager, who lives in close proximity to the tiger.

“The villager is a key player and will support conservation as long as there is better implementation of (man-animal) conflict resolution measures outside tiger landscapes, which is why it is so important to outsource management activity,” he says.

When man-tiger conflicts are not addressed properly, and the administrative engagement with villagers is either minimal or non-existent, they feel terribly alienated — especially when they suffer economic losses because of tigers entering human habitations and preying on domestic cattle. Those affected then begin to support poachers, offering them food and shelter in return for money, which is often much more than government compensation for cattle loss.

Thapar adds: “Though forest guards today are better equipped than they were a decade ago, they still need a more specialized kind of training to tackle poaching”.

Poachers are a deadly lot, criss-crossing forests as they do in sophisticated vehicles with modern guns and night glasses. In contrast, the often poorly paid and impoverished forest guard has just about a baton and sometimes not even footwear as he trudges along treacherous jungle tracks — not knowing when the big cat will pounce on him or the poacher’s bullet fell him.



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Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic, who has worked with The Statesman in Kolkata and The Hindu in Chennai for 35 years. He now writes for the Hindustan Times, the Gulf Times and Seoul Times

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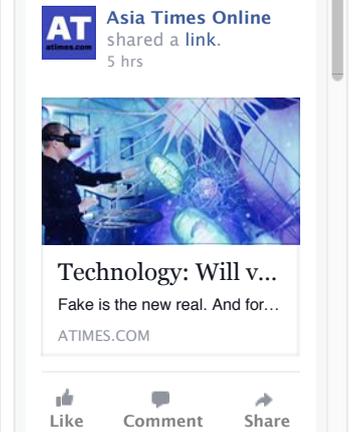
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