

On the BBC film Lost Land of the Tiger

This week, the BBC screened in the UK a three-part television series entitled *Lost Land of the Tiger*. It was about an extensive operation to study tigers in Bhutan and perhaps the largest and the most extravagant scientific expedition to take place in our country so far. The programme was a popular primetime TV watched by millions and it brought to the screen many parts of Bhutan which most of us have never seen before. The footages of the vast forests, gushing rivers and the high mountains were breathtaking and the expertise of the visiting scientists impressive. The use of the sophisticated cameras and the pictures they captured were amazing.

Sadly, my praises end here. I could not help noticing a whopping gap in the representation of local knowledge and expertise. Apart from our distinguished naturalist Rebecca Pradhan and one other officer who featured briefly on the sidelines, the programme was dominated by visiting scientists and cameramen so much so that it looked almost like a reality docudrama rather than a film on nature. Why was there no mention of the works of Nature Conservation Division and National Biodiversity Centre and why were our cat specialists not at all featured in it? The programme does not give even a hint of the vigorous nature conservation policies and programmes the Bhutanese state and people have endured or the credit the foresters, who tirelessly work to protect the tigers, deserve. On the contrary, Bhutan was portrayed as a missing link in the tiger habitat puzzle rather than as the strongest link we ourselves claim to be. Even worse is the team's callous claim of the first discovery of tigers over 4000m above sea level. Bhutanese know this and our conservation specialists have already collected evidences to confirm this many years ago. It is wrong that a team with money can walk in and claim all credits in one sweep.

It is no mystery that there are many tigers in Bhutan, even above 4000m. Herders across the country lose livestock to tigers regularly. Stories of encounters with tigers are all too common. But these Bhutanese stories, according to the presenters, are 'rumours' or 'legends' and only the team can find out 'if they are true'. I was appalled by many such parochial and patronizing views and condescending remarks. The local farmers have knowledge and direct experience of the tigers' behaviour and movements no less than the specialists and it is primarily their knowledge, their outlook on nature and approach to wildlife that tigers are relatively flourishing in Bhutan. The programme does very little to acknowledge these local knowledge and outlooks.

I work as an academic researcher in Humanities and we consider it important for researchers to respect local sources and cultures. What the team should have done is a collaborative research with national counterparts to respect and build the work that locals have already done. But, it was a very extractive operation filled with offensive Eurocentric superciliousness and Orientalist imagination. As the world discovers Bhutan, we will increasingly see proposals for such research and filming projects and it is crucial that our authorities seriously weigh the pros and cons before they give permission. While Bhutan must seek to carry out meaningful and collaborative research with foreign counterparts, it is about time that we shred off our naivety and became aware of the politics and ethics of scientific research and their ramifications.

Finally, the overriding concern of the programme is the conservation of tigers? Can a few scientists and cameramen arriving as champions on what they say 'could be the last chance to save this magnificent animal' really save the tigers? The most important proof of this will be in what ensues

from the operation. We may hope that the operation is followed by substantial funding and conservation efforts. Otherwise, what was a primetime entertainment, broadcast both on TV and internet, may as well end up being only an advertisement of Bhutan's tigers to poachers across the borders. Meanwhile, we may have to pray even harder that the poachers do not show up with the same thermal imaging cameras as the BBC team did. The programme will no doubt help our government's drive to bring 100,000 tourists a year, roughly 1000 intruders for each tiger; so much for preserving an undisturbed corridor. We hope our foresters and conservationists will continue their hard work despite the team's snub, for Bhutan will now see even harder times in protecting what some of us affectionately call *meme chedpo* - 'the great grandpa'.