

# 'Villagers are the key to conservation'

Evidently carried away by the issue, Mike Pandey questions the role of the State governments in protecting the wildlife. "Unless there is political will, nothing can happen," says the acclaimed environmental filmmaker. Recipient of numerous awards, Pandey has been conferred the first 'Vasundhara Mitra Award' at the Vasundhara International Film Festival. He spoke exclusively to The Herald before the event.

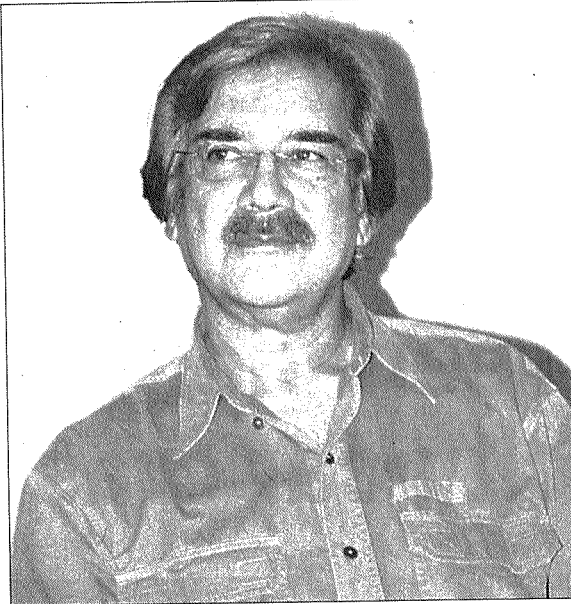
There are "people with good intentions" who care about the plight of Indian wild animals. These intentions must be implemented, says Pandey. "But what are the governments doing?" the conservationist in him asks. Laws, according to him, are "not effective" and organisations like the Wildlife Institute and policy-makers need to have dedicated people to "properly direct" the implementation processes. "It's a shame that we cannot protect our national animal tiger even after independence. We use animals when it suits us and

ignore them in other times. We have not adapted to the planet but changed it to suit our needs."

As we delve into the issue of man-animal conflict, Pandey says that people in the urban areas rarely come in contact with the wild animals. "Sixty seven per cent of Indians live in villages. If they are not aware about the need to conserve the wildlife and maintain the ecological equilibrium, then nothing will happen. They are key to conservation; the rural milieu must realise that their own existence depends on the balance and this understanding can come from education and information," he says at one go.

As an example of how loss of ecological balance can cause harm, Pandey mentions the killing of leopards in Himachal Pradesh. "With no leopards preying on monkeys, crops were lost since the monkeys were destroying them."

To resolve the conflict and to carry forward the conservation movement, funds are essential and



SAVE THE WILD LIFE: Mike Pandey

Pandey thinks "the corporate sector has a social responsibility" in this regard. They should provide the money, for example, to make films and other projects that will be taken to the rural masses. Pandey, who is currently making an underwater film, informs about his wish to make a film on tiger, but there is not enough finan-

cial support that is needed. "How many more awards will prove my credibility?" he asks.

However, all is not negative. Pandey mentions the project of elephant care at Sawantwadi. "It's also good to have people like actors John Abraham and organisations like People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta) collaborating."

But he warns, "We have to treat nature with reverence or else there will be earthquakes, tsunamis and similar other catastrophes. Respecting wildlife is part of Indian culture. Our forefathers knew the importance of animals. Look at the vahanas of the idols that we worship."

According to Pandey, India is treading a dangerous path. "We blame western nations like the USA for maximum carbon dioxide emission, but we are forgetting that if we try to become superpower, then we may end up emitting more CO2 than the USA which is the major offender in this regard now," he puts it bluntly.

We ask him about the role of media vis-à-vis conservation. Pandey affirms that the media has a "responsible role" but there have been instances when the TV channels have portrayed the wild animals in "poor light," particularly when some of the animals have strayed into urban areas. "They go by the Television Rating Points, unfortunately," he observes.

Doordarshan, however, is an exception with their environmental series.

As a filmmaker Pandey has been working for over three decades with over 600 films to his credit. We ask him what keeps him driving. "It's sheer enjoyment. I am programmed to carry the information and messages about conservation and wildlife," he replies. "Not everyone can go to those places, so these films help them to see the beauties of the planet." And for him, the "awards are motivating" since they are recognitions of the fact that some people are listening to the messages.

To make that communication more effective, Pandey thinks the storytelling format will be "more attractive" compared to the documentaries. "A good wildlife, environment filmmaker must have vast repository of information, love for nature, patience like a vulture, strength of an elephant, stamina like a bull, resilience like a tiger and sustainability like a tortoise," he signs off.

—BISWADIP MITRA

MH photo