

TELEVISION REVIEW | JOHN ANDERSON

Following a Feline Dynasty in India

LIONS GET TOO MUCH exposure. They're regal, but they're filthy. Cheetahs are action-packed, but run out of gas. Jaguars are too solitary—not enough drama. And who can find a snow leopard when he needs one?

"Legendary Tigers of India" may be a "Nature" show on PBS, but it is unlike most other nature shows on PBS. It's got no lions. It's not shot in Africa. And rather than the usual business-like narrator we have a travel guide—Valmik Thapar—who spent nearly 50 years among the tigers of northwestern India and whose voiceover is both deeply passionate and deeply personal. The setting is haunted by 1,000-year-old ruins. The red-stone Trinetra Gane-

sha temple pops against the green mist of the forest primeval. The cats are like ghosts.

Directed for the BBC by Mike Birkhead and Beth Jones, the film avails itself of Thapar's own footage of the tiger dynasty he has known, photographed and protected—with mixed results—during his decades at Ranthambore National Park in Rajasthan. It's an enclave teeming with prey and situated in the former hunting grounds of the Maharajas of Jaipur. Once estimated to number 100,000, the Bengal tigers of India were slaughtered by the Indians themselves, then with the assistance of English guns, and finally reduced to such a paltry number that a hunting ban was imple-



and, in one filmed instance, a soft-shelled turtle the size of a garbage-can lid. It's an ancient area with many lakes, and much of the footage involves tigers interacting with—or eating—the water-borne. But Thapar's focus is really the intimate life of the wild tiger and how it survives. And he uses the five pivotal cats in his life—Padmini, Noon, Machli, Krishna and Arrowhead—to chart the development of a tiger legacy. (A conservative

estimate of the population of Ranthambore is now 70 cats, along with vultures, pythons, hyenas, sloths, nilgai and rhesus macaques.) Our host and his enthusiasms help make "Legendary Tigers of India" (which was broadcast elsewhere as "My Tiger Family") more than memorable and a refreshing entry in the catalog of wildlife TV. The tigers, naturally, are the main attraction. But Thapar, who never tries to make a fairytale out of Padmini and her progeny, is—and was—an entertaining advocate for his "ambush" (the collective term for a group of adult tigers) and a journalist who wore his devotion to his sleeve.

The cats, however, are majestic. Thapar, who died a little less than a year ago at age 73, integrates the life stories of the five principal ti-

gers—tigresses, actually—by which he can trace his own history at Ranthambore, the site of an ancient fort and sanctuary. Although his interest began in the mid-70s, he cites March 1984 as the time "that rewrote tiger history." Helping his brother-in-law film a documentary, Thapar watched as their subject stalked a herd of sambar deer in one of the many Ranthambore lakes. The water proved no deterrent to the hunt. "No one had ever filmed a tiger killing in deep water before," Thapar recounts. "But then no one had really filmed wild tigers at all. And I was there. In the heart of it!" The history of tigers may not have been rewritten. But the history of Thapar certainly was.

His affection for the cats is almost matched by his affection for Ranthambore, which normally provides plenty of nutrition—including, when times are tougher, crocodiles

Legendary Tigers of India
Wednesday, 8 pm, PBS

Mr. Anderson is the Journal's TV critic.



COURTESY: VALMIK THAPAR, DHARMENDRA CHANDAL

The big cats of 'Legendary Tigers of India,' directed by Mike Birkhead and Beth Jones, left and above.