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Photographer, filmmaker Sandesh Kadur discusses the agony & ecstasy of shooting for TV series Planet Earth 2

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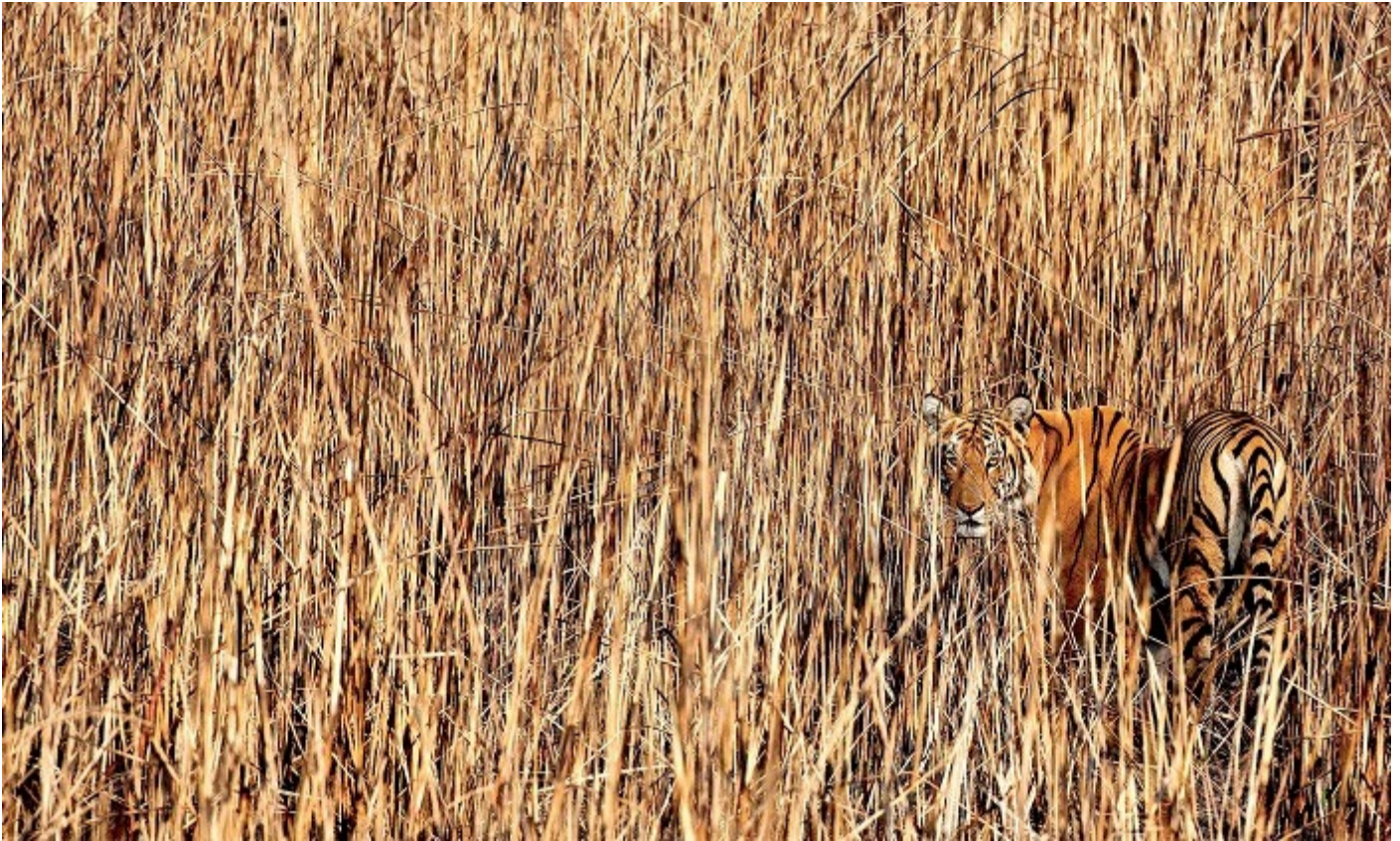
‘Sandesh Kadur’ and you’re bound to chance upon a news story that asks the BBC to give him a raise. Kadur – who shot the ‘Grasslands’ episode of Sony BBC Planet Earth 2, the 2016 British nature documentary series produced by the BBC as a sequel to the hit Planet Earth, which was broadcast in 2006 – won the fast-beating-hearts of viewers when he camped out in Kaziranga National Park in a camouflaged hideout, staying quiet as a mouse, to capture a tiger feeding on a rhino carcass. “It was just 15 metres away from me,” city-based Kadur says. Not surprisingly, the experience is one of his favourites from his Planet Earth 2. It’s excellent, intense camerawork like that that immerses the viewer in Planet Earth 2. Finally set to premiere on Indian television next week, it’s also special because it features the snow leopards of Ladakh in the Mountains episode, as well as the langurs of Jodhpur in the Cities episode – both of which Kadur’s Felis Creations helped

secure necessary permits for. Add the narration of Sir David Attenborough and theme music composed by Hans Zimmer, and this has all the makings of a winner.

But first, the tiger. Kadur, who chuckles and says he didn't get that raise, recalls how he had spent nearly a week camped in that makeshift hideout, frustrated that all the camera traps they had laid were being stomped upon and destroyed by the animals every day. Wildlife shooting is a game of patience, but even so, the limits of Kadur and his team's patience were being sorely tested here. But then – call it luck or reward for his effort – that Sunday, just as he called the forest guard at 4.45pm to come pick him up (he was going to call it a day because it was already dark), he saw a tiger coming out out of the corner of his eye. "It was the moment of a lifetime," he says. And it was about to be ruined by the guard walking in, which would have sent the tiger scuttling back. "So while I was filming, I was messaging the guard to tell him to abort. It was exhilarating – the tiger had no idea was so close," he says. "People ask me if I was scared – of course I was! Being scared keeps you humble. So I never actually saw the tiger with my bare eyes, I was afraid she would make eye contact. I only saw her through the viewfinder, which offers a sort of shield, and made me feel more brave about shooting."

The sense of wonderment never abates as he talks about the tall grass at Kaziranga. How tall? Enough to dwarf some of India's largest mammals – from the Greater One-horned Indian Rhinoceros to the Bengal Tiger and the Water Buffalo and get this – even the Asian Elephant. Conveying the claustrophobic nature of this grass, its fecundity that helps host some of South East Asia's largest population of prey animals, and the way animals have to adapt to it and thrive in it, was Kadur's mission. "The elephants and rhinos work as bulldozers, creating paths which the other animals such as deer, buffalo and tigers use," he explains. The height and density of the grass creates unique ecosystems – the fertile, nutrient-rich soil of this alluvial floodplain makes the abundant grass vital to the survival of the prey animals there, such as the Hog Deer, Swamp Deer, Buffalo, Rhino, Sambar Deer and Barking Deer ("a virtual buffet for a tiger," Kadur says), while helping the tiger camouflage itself superbly for an ambush. The grass itself is "the most resilient and fastest growing of the plant species", he says. "It dries out quickly and burns in the heat, sometimes looking like

a desert, before springing back to life as quickly. Anything that grows there grows very well, which is why it is valuable for cultivation and therefore becomes a highly endangered ecosystem.”



Which brings us to the oft-repeated criticism of the Planet Earth series – that it showcases a utopian majesty and beauty without focusing on the reality of the drastically shrinking areas and animal populations featured in it. Kadur is unperturbed by the criticism that it doesn't do enough for conservation. In his mind, when Planet Earth 2's episode featuring snakes chasing an iguana can compete with Game of Thrones's 'Battle of the Bastards' for viewership numbers (and it did), the job has been done. "For a nature show to do that, is huge. A conservation film won't get you that audience. Planet Earth doesn't claim that it helps conserve the world. It makes people inquisitive and feel concerned even if it is through the eyes of a cameraperson. Education is the first step towards long-term conservation. To educate, we entertain. And then finally, we create a generation that becomes aware of what is outside them," he says. Kadur points to the end of Episode 6, when Attenborough talks about how there is phenomenal wildlife in the world's cities – all we need to do is give them space. Plus, there is the 'direct' contribution of a show such as this. "When they take permissions to spend time in national parks and wildlife sanctuaries to shoot, they pay money directly, which

goes into their fund. This, in addition to creating agents of change in viewers.”

Seems hard to dispute, when one watches any one episode. There are a combination of wide angle and low angle shots; shots that have you running – quite literally – with the animal as it is on its chase; intense, tight shots that put you beside them; shots that show you things from their perspective.

All of which contributes to an experience that Kadur hopes will “blow away” the audience. There’s also the guttural reality of it, which should help audiences be ‘blown away’. Such as the time when, while filming the langurs in Jodhpur while on the edge of a rooftop, Kadur felt two arms grab his pants from behind. “I had been concentrating on filming the alpha male, who was intently looking in the other direction, without realising that I had gotten too close to the troupe of female monkeys he was protecting,” he says. “I had to hold all my nerve to not move and stay on the edge, or she would have sunk her teeth into me. We were careful after that – we named her ‘Grouch’ and stayed away from her,” he says, chuckling. Now really, who wouldn’t be mesmerised after such a story?