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**The Colonial Hunt: Metropole, Colony,
and Wildlife in India 1850–1950**

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Independent Scholar



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The Colonial Hunt: Metropole, Colony, and Wildlife in India 1850–1950*

Swati Shresth

The best in the field were English Sahibs coming from cavalry regiments stationed in Africa and India and others were planters, sisal growers, and colonial administrators ... American big game hunters in Africa and India were usually young members of very rich families or retired successful business men ... few of these appeared to be calm nerved, self-confident Cro–Magnon type of sportsman. They were *burra* (big) Sahibs but not *pukka* (correct and confident) Sahibs.¹

Colonial literature on hunting from the late nineteenth century reveals an increasing preoccupation with the etiquette associated with hunting. Articulated in the idea of fairplay, this set of values came to define the “British” tradition of hunting in India. Building on the insights from new imperial history that colonies played a crucial role in producing British imperial identity in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this article will explore the interaction between colony and metropole on the question of wildlife.² Specifically, it will explore how hunting in the jungles

* Lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 19 August 2014.

¹ Edison Marshall, *Shikar and Safari, Reminiscence of Jungle Hunting* (London: Museum Press limited, 1950), 9–10.

² Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects* (University of Chicago Press, 2002); Linda Colley, “Britishness and Otherness: An Argument”, *The Journal of British Studies*, Volume 31, No. 4, (Oct., 1992): 316; Frederick Cooper and Ann L. Stoler, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

of India produced a particular type of *imperial* identity—the Sahib. The identity of the Sahib was in sharp relief from the corrupting *Nabobs* of the preceding century, from “other” Britons who profaned British colonial and domestic culture and colonialists from other parts of Europe. It took specific articulations and performances of morality to carve out the image of the *pukka* Sahib, clearly distinct from that of the *burra* Sahib; *burra* Sahibs might possess wealth and wield power but they lacked the moral authority to govern. It has been argued that the post-1857 era witnessed a changing nature of the colonial state in India, accompanied with a new, self-conscious imperial ideology of paternalism.³ The colonial hunt was at the core of this new ideology of dominance, deeply complicit in producing the iconography of paternal hunter-administrator or the Sahib. The myth of the Sahib produced specific forms of authority which influenced hunting and wildlife conservation agendas in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The crafting of tradition of British hunting in India was multi-layered with multiple meanings, sensibilities, and aspirations. It reveals a desire to articulate a tradition of hunting that *seemed* distinct from Indian traditions (whether princely or that of the native *shikari*) in order to articulate, maintain, and proclaim racial distance between the rulers and the ruled. The undefined but pervasive language of sportsmanly conduct also served as an index of prestige and power that enabled negotiation with class hierarchies within the colonial society. Finally, it reveals a preoccupation with communicating a particular image of the Briton in India—one that appealed to Victorian expectation of frontier men and upholders of the Empire. This preoccupation was important in an age where threats of racial and moral corruption had grown proportionally with the growth of the British Empire. The tales of hunting encounters in India’s lush jungles enabled a wider and eager participation in British *shikar* and as

³ Thomas Metcalfe, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

demonstrated by Martin Francis, British masculinity and identity came to be influenced by the adventures and power exercised by these frontier men.⁴ The figure of the gentlemanly pukka Sahib was a reassuring one and built upon the existing social and cultural frameworks that made notions of power and prestige visible and sensible in Victorian Britain. Victorian effort to produce an ideal type of a ruler—the aristocratic gentleman—ruler was reflected in the image of the Sahib in the subcontinent. In colonial Sahibs of India, Victorian England was able to realize this image and hold it as an emblem of its empire and empire builders.

The period between 1820 and 1850 had witnessed the emergence of sporting journals like *The Bengal Sporting Review*, *The Oriental Sporting Magazine* and *The India Sporting Review* and *The Field* in England. A variety of Britons in India, including soldiers and merchants of the East India Company and private individuals, shared their hunting exploits with fellow Britons in the subcontinent and home. By the 1860s, however, the literature on hunting saw a new genre—the hunting memoir, published largely by men serving in the higher echelons of the colonial administration. British imperial identity was closely bound with notions of class and was therefore largely dependent on the colonial elite: the officers of the Raj. The accounts of their adventures as rulers of India enjoyed great popularity both in Britain and in the subcontinent. The genre of the hunting memoir, along with colonial clubs comprising the “colonial public sphere”, was crucial in perpetuation of the myth of the clubbable pukka Sahib, in defining colonial and imperial identity.⁵

For the purposes of this project, hunting is discussed as a “sport”, whose importance, as noted by Matt Cartmill, “lies in

⁴ Martin Francis, “The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century British Masculinity”, *The Historical Journal*, Volume 45, No. 3 (2002): 637–652.

⁵ Mrinalini Sinha, “Britishness, Clubbability, and the Colonial Public Sphere: The Genealogy of an Imperial Institution in Colonial India”, *The Journal of British Studies*, Volume 40, No. 4 (2001): 497.

its symbolism, not its economics”.⁶ Though hunting of small animals was also prevalent, this article is concerned with big game hunting. The symbolic importance of hunting of course had to be crafted and popularized for it to be culturally and politically relevant. British colonialists invested enormous time and energy in hunting and in memorializing their hunts in writing. In doing so, they elaborated rules and norms of behaviour that defined a unique British tradition of big game hunting in the colonies. Colonial literature on hunting employs several words that embrace the idea of fairplay like “sporting”, “sportsmanship”, “fairplay”, and “hunting etiquette”. Though similar sounding, terms like “sport” and “sportsmanship” meant very different things. “Sport” conveyed the elements of thrill, adventure, and courage. “Sportsmanship”, on the other hand, tempered these elements with restraint and control. Fairplay has been identified as the difference between “sport” and “sportsmanship”. In addition to the immediate feelings of excitement, skill, and adventure, and the display of courage that accompanied “sport”, the colonial hunter’s conduct was dictated by ideas of equal contest and clemency. Fairplay framed the relationship between hunters and the hunted as one of morality, responsibility, and duty: it was the duty of the hunter to execute a quick, painless death and a moral imperative to deliver *coup de grace* to ensure that there was no *suffering*. The notion of suffering, cruelty, and clemency were deeply enmeshed in the idea of fairplay. According to Jim Corbett, a “part of growing up for instance was learning how to use a catapult and putting it away in the closed season for at that time the birds were nesting and it was *cruel* to kill them while they were sitting on their eggs”.⁷ The emphasis on fairplay, description of the native, of Indian jungles, ferocious beasts, and brave white hunters produced a unique flavour of colonial hunt. With an emphasis on normative ideas like fairplay and sportsmanship, shikar was also often used as proof of inherent “differences” between Britons and natives in the late nineteenth century.

⁶ Matt Cartmill, *A View to a Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature through History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), 28.

⁷ Jim Corbett, *Jungle Lore* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1953), 21. Emphasis mine.



Fairplay was also assumed to be inherent in true Britons of superior class and breeding, making it highly desirable for expatriate community to demonstrate its performances in their personal and collective hunting enterprise. As the idea circulated within the colonial public sphere and among home audience, fairplay received continuous validation establishing it as the predominant language of the colonial shikar. As this article will reveal, fairplay as a moral framework for interacting with wildlife also influenced colonial legislation and management of wildlife.

Despite claims to British tradition, colonial hunting was in reality, a hybrid Indo-British hunting construct; influenced by the native princely hunting traditions, ideas about hunting in Victorian England, and the numerous, varied local practices of native shikaris. The Sahib's success as a hunter was built upon native labour, knowledge, and skill. The Sahib also relied on villagers for rations, information on wildlife, and on their cooperation as beaters. Native shikaris were indispensable as trackers and guides in the Indian wilderness and the landed elite provided elephants, labour, and game in their lands. In addition to these forms of material support, conventionalized *images* of the superstitious, helpless, yet devious villager, colonialist administrators also created a need for the benevolent authority of the Sahib.

Colonial hunters had often drawn distinctions from native forms of hunting from early nineteenth century. Princely hunting was said to be an exercise in excess and indolence, lacking any physical effort or skill. By the late nineteenth century however, in addition to differences in athleticism and skill, the distancing from all forms of native hunting, including the princely, was expressed as a difference in morality, sensibility, and character. While British continued to accept and participate in the great elephant-borne hunts in princely estates, this form of hunting was not regarded as the morally uplifting colonial hunt. The elephant-borne hunting by the British was rendered moral by scaling down the hunt and removing corrupting influences like dancing girls. The smaller numbers of beaters and hunters was argued to make the hunt more of a contest between hunters and the hunted. Forbearance, clemency to females and young, and anatomical

knowledge cemented both morality and technical superiority of the British hunt. When it came to distancing themselves from local hunters employed as trackers, the crucial factor in successful British appropriation of the hunt both on and off the field lay in the moment of death. The shikari who tracked the game and carried guns for the colonial sportsman, was denied agency at this moment. Relinquishing the weapon and retreating into the background (sometimes literally to seek protection in trees from possible attacks by injured animals), the shikaris enabled the colonial hunter to perform the rituals associated with a morally aesthetic hunt. Successful memorialization of the hunt rested on establishing the *initiative* and the *independence* of the hunter in effecting a quick and painless death. In memorialization of the hunt, fairplay and rhetoric of paternal governance became effective tools in diminishing the native agency. Labour and rations were expected as a ruler's prerogative just as the skill of native trackers was explained away as auxiliary of the hunt.

The notion that Indians of all classes were lazy and cruel to animals while the British were fair and kinder contributed to articulating a broader ideology of racial difference. The rhetoric of the hunt in signifying the authority of the Raj lay in the successful appropriation of native forms of the hunt as colonial invention, an extension of the aristocratic tradition at home. During the Ilbert Bill controversy in the 1880s, "native indifference" to hunting, the inability to appreciate sensibilities associated with hunting was held as a proof of inherent difference between whites and natives, however westernized and educated the latter might aspire to be.⁸ The idea of "native indifference"

⁸ Introduced by Lord Ripon in 1883, The Ilbert Bill proposed an amendment that would allow Indian judges and magistrates to try British offenders in criminal cases at the District level. The Bill created a great deal of controversy in Britain as well as in India. In India, the Bill deepened racial antagonism between the British and the Indians. See Mrinalini Sinha's discussion of the effeminate Bengali as incapable of understanding British sensibilities on hunting as an argument against native judges trying Europeans, in her *Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 42.

to hunting remained critical to the idea of racial difference till independence. It was not that Indians were indifferent to hunting, (in fact it was the myriad traditions of native hunting that created a need to articulate difference and distance) but that native hunting was condemned as immoral, lacking as it did, specific demonstrations of skill, athleticism, and sensibility.

The rhetoric of governance was crucial in establishing the credentials of Sahibs as rulers with moral authority. Hunting in Indian jungles to gain knowledge of the landscape was considered essential training for a young recruit on his way to becoming an effective and moral ruler.

Recreation, Natural World, and Governance

Members of the Indian Civil Service (ICS) most readily highlighted the complementary relationship between hunting, touring the countryside, and good governance. Embedded in the image of the Sahib was the idea of indefatigable endurance that enabled administrative efficacy and the power to deal with vast amounts of work. It was widely held that “the labour of *one* Englishman is equal to that of *three* ordinary Indians”.⁹ The officer-hunter’s simultaneous claims to quell dangerous beasts and protect natives allowed the colonial ruler to position himself as the paternal Sahib; the *ma-baap* (mother-father). Indeed, the idealization of the British administrator as ma-baap was central to the identity of the Sahib.¹⁰

⁹ *India: Geographical, Statistical, and Historical*, Compiled from McCulloch and Others, *London Times Correspondence* (London: George Watts, 1858), 81–82.

¹⁰ The interaction with natives in the countryside was not as smooth as professed by colonial hunters. Confrontations between villagers and colonial hunters often occurred due to colonial demands on labour and rations, the killing of the sacred, and the accidental shooting of natives. As for the villagers, while they might not have a choice in the matter of labour or rations, they certainly used discretion when it came to *khubber* (information). They often held back information about wild animals or conditions that might help the hunter.

In his 1844 publication, *The Old Forest Ranger*, Walter Campbell articulated the idea of the hunting gentleman-ruler in the image of Mansfield, a master hunter, a man of power, conquest, and consciously cultivated restraint:

His legs were cased in long leggings of deer-skin ... his head was covered by a small cap of Astracan fur, and an ammunition pouch of dressed bear-skin was tightly buckled around his waist ... into which was thrust a hunting knife of unusual size, with buck horn handle handsomely mounted in silver. His accoutrements altogether were those of a half reclaimed savage; but the aristocratic cast of his features, the proud glance of his eye, and his erect military carriage, declared at once the gentleman, the soldier and the daring sportsman ... A keen observer of the human nature might have detected in the occasional flash of his dark eye, evident tokens of a fiery and restless spirit, well disciplined indeed, but ready to burst forth, if occasion required, like the sudden irruption of a volcano.¹¹

The deer-skin leggings, fur cap, and bear-skin pouch bear testimony to Mansfield's conquest of wild beasts. The final glamorous touch given to this hero is the indication of awesome power which is subject to the will of the hero. Hunting displayed power of the colonial state and its domination over nature and natives. As military annexation of territories ceased after the Revolt of 1857, hunting greatly aided in showing the military potential of the civil administration and their capacity for violence. The Sahib however tempered his capacity for violence with restraint, self-possession, and temperance. Campbell's comment that "Mansfield like all good sportsmen, was temperate himself and the cause of temperance in others" is an obvious call for emulation.¹² The pukka Sahib of the late nineteenth century, the emblem of imperial Britain, differed greatly from other burra Sahib in his demonstrations of restraint and judicious exercise of power.

¹¹ Walter Campbell, *The Old Forest Ranger* (London: Publishers Unknown, 1844), 7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 83.

The idea of restraint in the exercise of power also informed colonial treatment of wildlife. Coupled with ideas of colonial governance and Victorian attitudes toward particular animals, fairplay had a deep influence on wildlife policies in colonial India. Manifest in policies for extermination of vermin and the preservation of game, these ideas placed carnivores (termed vermin) in a domain of destruction, and animals categorized as game in a domain of “mercy”. In the early nineteenth century, themes of aggression, confrontation, and conquest characterized accounts of hunting adventures in the Indian forests, in tandem with policies of extermination and unregulated hunting. For instance, a young William Okeden of The Bengal Civil Service describes taking of an improbable shot at a bear who was injured but instead of following her to deliver the coup de grace, he let her “hobble away” in pursuit of a tigress. He remarks lackadaisically, “having killed her (the tigress), I returned for the bear but she had hid himself (sic) somewhere, I then knocked over four deer and went on to camp”.¹³ This sort of behaviour is rarely seen in the second half of the nineteenth century when “chance shots” were an anathema and hunters diligently followed up injured animals to put them out of their misery. The obsession with coup de grace or concern over injured animals in the late nineteenth century complemented the new language of imperial dominance in which paternalism held a special place.

The idea of fairplay—to convert killing of animals into a contest and to demonstrate mercy was extended to herbivores classified as game. Carnivores like the tiger found no place in the scheme of fairplay. Poisoning carnivores, tying baits to lure big cats, or tiger shooting from elephants—practices which otherwise may seem “break every canon of British regard for fairplay” were necessary aberrations in the larger project of

¹³ Journal entry dated 21 October, 1824, “Diary and sporting journal of William Parry Okeden”: Printed from a manuscript diary of William Parry Okeden of The Bengal Civil Service, comprising a description of a journey from Calcutta to Agra in 1821 and a detailed record of his hunting activities 1823–41, Mss Eur A210, India Office Select Materials, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections, British Library.

ridding the countryside of dangerous animals.¹⁴ In Victorian view, protection by law was given to hares and deer because they were “beasts of compassion never accounted with either cruelty or foul play”. But it was acceptable to “knock foxes and wolves over the head as they can be found because they are beasts of prey”.¹⁵ This was also the principle on which Victorian game preservation was practiced as landlords employed a battery of keepers in order to lure city dwellers desirous of partaking in “traditional” British hunting.

The East India Company had initiated extermination drives against carnivores from the eighteenth century as part of general administrative policy to protect human life, livestock, and to extend the arable. Sportsmen claimed they performed a service for the state and natives of India “by annihilating a portion of the brute creation”.¹⁶ Extermination policies signify a domain of destruction that was integral to the territorial and symbolic reach of British rule in India. While bounties for killing vermin were handed out, these were largely claimed by natives using traditional methods like poisoning and trapping. The Sahibs clearly distinguished their pursuit of carnivores from natives by using firearms and declining bounties. In doing so, their intentions and methods proved to be noble and vastly different from profit-seeking motives of native hunters. Native disarmament went hand-in-hand with extermination and allowed for the Sahib to emerge as a paternal figure protecting natives and their livestock from dangers lurking in the forests.

However, it was in the treatment of herbivores deemed game that colonialists felt the urge to translate their practices into law. Concerns about declining numbers of game influenced colonial administration to devise strategies to restrict hunting, preserve

¹⁴ J.G. Elliot, *Field Sports in India 1800–1947* (London: Gentry Books, 1973), 95.

¹⁵ Duke of Beufort, ed., *The Badminton Library of Rural Sports and Pastimes* (London: Longman, Green and Company, 1889), 26–27.

¹⁶ “The Sportsman”, Untitled, *The Bengal Sporting Magazine*, Volume 1, No. 4 (New Series April 1845): 382.



adequate stock, and banish undesirable hunting practices. The push toward the preservation of game came during the 1870s from the Nilgiri Hills from influential big game hunters like Richard Hamilton or “Hawkeye” whose derision for native hunting was matched only by his concern at declining standards of British hunting. Referencing game preservation methods in Britain, he sought special provisions for the “noble” deer family—a species that both natives and Britons hunted for food. Like in the case of carnivores, Britons that claimed to epitomize British hunting distanced themselves from the ignoble business of consuming their kills. Hunting memoirs are startlingly silent on consumption of meat by British hunters, who demonstrated their largesse by purportedly distributing their kill among villagers and trackers. Records on game legislation however reveal that “hunting for the pot” was widely prevalent amongst various classes of Britons, including the Sahibs. In a series of writings, urging state and central government to legislate on game preservation, Hawkeye, admonished this practice and complained against the sportsmen who killed fawns and does, amongst deer and antelope, “These people who are not ashamed to confess their sin, excuse themselves by saying ‘but I wanted meat, you know.’ I say far better live forever on the ‘eternal mutton and murchi’ than destroy game in that reckless and selfish manner.”¹⁷ Social disapproval of this kind by prominent Britons and colonial clubs was important in disciplining expatriates to follow appropriate behaviour. India, once celebrated as a hunter’s paradise, devoid of onerous game laws till mid-nineteenth century was to become the site for etiquette-bound hunting that would define British shikar and British Sahibs.

The Nilgiri Game Association, of which Richard Hamilton was a founding member, was one of the earliest organizations to campaign for legalizing the domain of mercy to animals classified as game. The prevalent notions of game preservation and laws in Britain were often held as justification of the need for protection

¹⁷ Extract from “Lion Shooting In India”, *The Field*, 23 December, 1871 in Hawkeye, *Game* (Ootacamund: Observer Press, 1876), 243.

of the “gentler” species, particularly deer. While the Indian Forest Act of 1878 established colonial control over forests and animals, The Nilgiri Game and Fish Preservation Act of 1879 set the direction for articulating a moral (and not just a legal) jurisdiction over game. It was deemed illegal to hunt immature males, shooting at females and the young was prohibited, as was shooting at animals near water holes. Poisoning or trapping game was made illegal, transforming many native hunting groups into poachers. From the 1890s, the state extended its claim over “game” animals not only within protected forests but also outside them. The categorization into vermin and game was to shape relationships between British hunters and Indian wildlife as they became closely bound to each other in an institutionalized framework of fairplay.

The frequent referencing to British traditions and practices is evidence that the colonial administrators were influenced by perceptions of prestige and established mores and norms of the traditional British hunt. Recent histories of the Victorian period however tell us that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were a period of great flux which had profound impact on shaping social formations and re-defining cultural identities. What the colonialist perceived of old British tradition of hunt was, in reality, a nineteenth-century construct; an effort to define an imagined British tradition in a period of social and economic change.

The “Traditional” British Hunt in Victorian Britain

Hunting in England had been accompanied with rural unrest since the Norman Conquest. Hunting in England—deer stalking, fox hunting, and small game shooting remained activities that were secured exclusively for the landed elite by the state.¹⁸ Laws

¹⁸ Dan Beaver, “The Great Deer Massacre: Animals, Honor, and Communication in Early Modern England”, *The Journal of British Studies*, Volume 38, No. 2 (1999):187–216; Raymond Carr, *English Fox Hunting: A History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976); James Hawker and Garth Christian, *A Victorian Poacher: James Hawker’s Journal* (New York: Oxford



reserving game to the upper classes had not been designed merely to secure material privileges; they persisted “because the symbolism of hunting was military and aristocratic; the sport was an assertion of social superiority”.¹⁹ Game laws asserted a strict control over access to deer, pheasants, partridges, and hares because these animals were currency of rank and honour. The circulation of venison, for instance, was an important and noble gift that only a few could bestow. The power of the hunting elite and their social standing further cemented the linkages between prestige, power, and a legitimate ruling class.

The Game Act of 1831 fundamentally changed the social relations of the hunt. The Act put an end to property in game and tied it as property attached to land owned. It benefited landholders who wished to supplement their incomes by allowing people to buy an annual game certificate to hunt. This Act also benefited the urban wealthy, who could now participate in the rural hunt, and who now had easy access to venison, fur, and feather in cities. For hunting, which first made its appearance as a measure to control fox in the sixteenth century saw a resurgence in the nineteenth century with the active induction of the urban bourgeoisie.²⁰ Fox hunting however was dressed as British *tradition* through a conscious process of ritualization that included formalizing of codes of dressing, prescribed behaviour, and esoteric language for common practices of the hunt.²¹ The aspiration to hunt, in modern Britain, was rooted in the social and economic power of newly empowered social class in the

University Press, 1962); P.B. Munsche, “The Gamekeeper and the English Rural Society 1600–1830”. *Journal of British Studies*, Volume 20, No. 2 (1981): 82–105; P.B. Munsche, *Gentlemen and Poachers: The English Game Laws, 1671–1831* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) for detailed discussions on social and political relations around the question of the hunt.

¹⁹ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 164,183.

²⁰ Raymond Carr. *English Fox Hunting: A History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976)

²¹ James Howe, “Fox Hunting as Ritual”, *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (May 1981).

countryside and newly prosperous urban elite seeking to legitimize their position around pre-existing meanings of authority.

By the mid-nineteenth century, amidst concerns that English tradition was under threat by city folks uneducated on the ways of the rural hunt, sporting journals and books intending to guide the new hunting public on the etiquette to hunt became popular. The concern to render hunting “less cruel” first becomes apparent in this period. Stonehenge in his *Manual of Field Sports*, while defending the practice of hunting, found it necessary to call on legislators to formulate game laws in order to “to purge it of all the bad and vicious tendencies” such as shooting of does and immature males.²² *The Field*, which began in 1853, soon became the largest newspaper in England and was widely lauded for propounding a *moral code of true sportsmanship*, which called for the “elimination of cruel practices”.²³ The notion of cruelty in hunting had in fact, an older history rooted in class prejudice. Indeed, commentators often remarked that poachers were a cruel and singularly unrepentant lot. In his study of the Black Act of 1723, E.P. Thompson notes poachers were at times at the forefront of the battle over custom, rights, and law that characterized a period of rapid transformation of the countryside with agrarian commercialization and consolidation of lands under the enclosure movement.²⁴ The Game Act of 1831 was particularly harsh on a large majority of the rural masses—dispossessed farmers, small artisans, and wage labourers. With smaller landholders zealous about their game, it made the rural poor more vulnerable to the law of trespass. The inclusion of the urban moneyed class into rural hunting made game preservation a priority for landholders who employed bailiffs, game keepers, and “watchers” to keep a close eye on poaching and game management. In addition, the

²² Stonehenge, *Manual of British Rural Sports* (London: Fredrick Warne and Company, 1867), 27.

²³ R.N. Rose, *The Field 1853–1953: A Centenary Volume*, Foreword by The Duke of Beaufort (London: Michael Joseph, 1953), 9. Emphasis mine.

²⁴ E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origins of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon, 1975).

Night Poaching Act of 1844 and the Poaching Prevention Act of 1862 increased police powers of search and confiscation. For the rural population, poachers as symbols of defiance to landed authority were often popular heroes. James Hawker, a famous poacher of the Victorian era, claimed that he poached more for revenge than gain and drew his legitimacy from the popular support he enjoyed. Poachers often got their tools of trade like wires, nets, traps, ferret, dogs, and guns from local villagers. In addition to poaching, Hawker also encouraged villagers to hunt and collect fruits from hunting reserves on the eve of festivals and holidays.²⁵ For Hawker, taking game was an extension of a traditional and independent way of life when village commons and wastelands had been used by rural communities for food, fuel, and pasture. This right had been taken away from rural communities with enclosures and the Game Act of 1831 which encouraged proprietors to exercise their ownership over game and fishing. By the early nineteenth century, trapping and snaring had been condemned as cruel and illegal. The practice of maiming gentry's dogs and deer by poachers gave credibility to the image of the cruel poacher. It is no surprise that a large number of illegal activities involved maiming the gentry's dogs and deer. These animals were seen as symbols of aristocratic privilege, threats to their customary rights and were mutilated as protest.²⁶ The increase in poaching in the nineteenth century was a result of greater impoverishment and alienation brought on by absentee landlordism, enclosures, the new Poor Law of 1834, and evictions. Hunting and collecting from forests (irrespective of private or not) was seen as deriving a subsidy from nature rather than earning a rational wage in factories. Victorian contempt of poachers and regarding poaching as cruel and immoral (and not just illegal) was a reflection of a rapidly changing attitude to rural poverty and labour.

The various guides on hunting etiquettes and game keeping of the nineteenth century also reveal anxieties about new

²⁵ James Hawker and Garth Christian, *A Victorian Poacher: James Hawker's Journal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 20.

²⁶ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World* (London: Allen Lane, 1983).

commercial classes, an anxiety well-documented by historians. The attack on the “weedy” physique of the competition *wallah*, for instance, was a masked attack on the social class of new recruits and their capacity to represent British authority in the colonies. The guides on estate management and hunting were intended to educate new entrants to the world of the aristocratic hunting and to teach smaller landholders to manage their lands and behaviour befitting of aristocratic tradition. The public school emphasis on athleticism and fairplay similarly reveals the preoccupation with personal and public morality and various methods of its indoctrination. The notion of fairplay was deeply influenced by the ongoing discussion between gentry and working classes and it found resonance in the pragmatic distinction between amateurs and professionals. Amateurs, mostly drawn from the elite, symbolized sport in its idealized, pure form and were hailed custodians of British morality.²⁷ Amateurs played purely for pleasure and owed allegiance to exclusive clubs that excluded the working class. Professionals played for money, and while they enjoyed the patronage of gentlemen-amateurs, they too were excluded from most clubs. Fairplay emerged as a prerogative of the elite who had leisure and the means to pursue a sporting activity for its own sake. This distinction informed both Victorian and colonial hunting and articulated the differences between hunters and poachers: true sportsmen hunted for moral gratification as opposed to the poacher who killed for material profit.

Hunting in Britain continued to be a restrictive activity of the rich. However stories of exotic and wondrous wildlife in the colonies and hunting exploits of compatriots enabled a much wider participation in the colonial hunt and fostered a fondness for tropical wildlife. By the late nineteenth century colonial hunters had voiced concern about the decreasing game. In the first decade of the twentieth century, big game hunters from Africa in particular spoke of dwindling wildlife in general (and not just

²⁷ Derek Birley, *Land of Sport and Glory: Sport and British Society, 1887–1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).



game) and formed the Society of Preservation of Fauna in the Empire (SPFE) in 1903. Its core membership comprised of big game hunters and its patrons included prominent politicians and naturalists who had hunted in the colonies.²⁸ In 1905, its membership included a number of colonial official and administrators who had consented to act as official and honorary members. Influential hunters were not only at the forefront of preservation efforts, but the strongest argument for preserving all wild fauna was to ensure a stock for hunting. Popular articles, reports of decreasing game in the colonies in journals and newspapers written by big game hunters garnered wider public support in the favour of preserving wildlife in the Empire.

Wildlife in Peril: Empire and Trusteeship

Though efforts to preserve wildlife by the SPFE placed hunting restrictions on all class of hunters, its primary concern was with limiting hunting by the natives who were seen as over-hunting wild fauna for financial gains and/or subsistence. In this they were aided by the ongoing preservation efforts by colonial administration which had already made many forms of native, particularly subsistence, hunting illegal. Of the legal means to hunt, the policy of disarmament, regimes of arms licenses, and licenses to hunt ensured that local shikaris could no longer hunt legally. Many shikaris found serving as trackers to the Sahib the only way to legitimately participate in hunting. The provisions of the Nilgiri Game and Fish Preservation Act of 1879 were extended to the rest of India by GOI Act XX 1887. These measures however were seen as inadequate and many influential sportsmen and officers of the Forest Department spoke of “imperiled” game and wildlife. They called for stricter measures for game preservation and for an inclusion of dangerous but charismatic carnivores, particularly the tiger. The effort to limit killing of carnivores did not meet with success. The extermination

²⁸ A list of historical records of the Fauna Preservation Society, Compiled by Phillipa Bassett Center for Urban and Regional Studies, University of Birmingham, and Institute of Agricultural History, University of Reading, 1980.

of carnivores was so deeply ingrained in the idea of colonial governance that any measures to the contrary seemed irrational. And, those in the lower rungs of the administration opposed any move to limit their chances of hunting charismatic animals. Even when it came to preserving traditional “game” species, colonial administration struggled to accommodate the conflicting interests of preservation, privilege, governance, and hunting. In 1904, the Government of India asked the provinces to give their opinion on preservation while keeping two cardinal principles in mind. First, where there was any conflict between the interests of cultivation and those of game preservation, the latter must give way. Second, the destruction of wild beasts dangerous to human beings and cattle must not be interfered with by any arrangements for game preservation. The central government was unable to evolve a uniform set of laws that could be enforced across the subcontinent. After prolonged discussions with provincial administration, the Government of India passed the Wild Birds and Animals Protection Act of 1912 which was amended in the year 1935 by the Wild Birds and Animals Protection (Amendment) Act, 1935. These Acts extended the list of animals that could be shot and introduced a limit on the numbers of heads of a particular species; they also empowered provincial administrations to deal with game preservation to the best of their abilities. While crop protection and native opposition was often cited as reasons for not implementing a central directive for game preservation, in reality, game preservation was equally fettered by colonial notions of legitimate privilege and the right to hunt. In a period that saw extension of cultivation, reduction of forested areas, and expanding population, traditional measures for preservation did not go very far in either protecting human life or killing of wild animals. Demarcating areas where access was controlled and all hunting prohibited, was presented as a rational mechanism to resolve conflicting interests of humans and wildlife. The establishment of the first game sanctuary in Assam in the early 1900s was a result of this mode of thinking within officialdom. The establishment of sanctuaries and national parks also allowed for a broader language of protection. Though the term “game” preservation continued to be used, from the 1920s,



it had varied meanings—protecting herbivores designated as “game”, and wildlife that could be hunted for game and wild animals in general.

Globally, the move towards national parks had been gaining momentum since early twentieth century. Yellowstone National Park established in 1872, and Kruger National Park, in 1898 and game sanctuaries in the colonies had re-defined traditional ideas and practices of game conservation. Influential hunters from India on their return to England continued to bemoan the loss of wildlife in the colonies, became active members of the SPFE and collaborated with individuals and associations leading preservation campaigns in India. By the 1920s, wildlife was being viewed as a universal asset and it was argued that, “precious fauna does not belong to provinces and states but whole of India and further to the whole world therefore her protection is the task of the Central Authority”.²⁹ The SPFE had earned prestige in influential circles by its successful leveraging the Central Authority (the Colonial Office) and colonial administrators to create game reserves in Africa. During the 1930s, its members played important roles in two international conferences convened to discuss standards and legislation affecting the protection of African flora and fauna. The conference in 1931 Paris resulted in the signing of the London Convention of 1933 by a number of African powers who agreed to undertake measures to protect flora and fauna in their colonies. This convention formed a basis for demands of SPFE and its sister organizations in India for a similar convention in Asia.

The language of trusteeship and the “British” burden of ensuring that wildlife survived for posterity were largely framed by organizations like the SPFE who claimed:

Some responsibility rests on the present generation for the transmission to our successors as a sacred trust, the

²⁹ Theodore Hubback, “Principles of Wild Life Conservation, Society”, Vol. 40, No. 1 (1938), reproduced in Burton, *The Preservation of Wildlife in India*, 92.

perpetuation of the wonderful fauna of the lands with constitute the British Empire. It is not sufficiently realized how many of *our* most interesting animals are in danger of extinction.³⁰

While hunting of carnivores continued to frame the myth of the ruler-hunter and an important rationale of governance, this appropriation of “interesting” animals as “our” was a remarkable departure from accounts of vanquishing brute creation of the past. The language of trusteeship also allowed the SPFE to make a case for the Colonial Office to assert itself in the face of changing political reality in the colonies. In 1926, in thanking the various Colonial Secretaries of State for their support, the editorial of its journal asked that the Colonial Office give primacy to wildlife protection over any local administrative or politics needs:

Most of the colonies where a wealth of fauna exists have progressed in political status and Colonial Office control, although still existence is being applied with a much “lighter hand”. Local legislatures have been established, and owing to the growth of agricultural development, *local* interests are daily becoming of greater weight. The situation is this far more complicated than it was some twenty years ago.³¹

Official records reveal that the SPFE was very proactive in soliciting support from the top officials of the colonial bureaucracy in India. Lord Onslow as a patron of SPFE wrote to Viceroy Linlithgow to encourage the governors of various provinces to support the expansion of its membership and activities in India. The Viceroy felt it was his “duty” to encourage such an association and issued orders that governors when approached, should try to extend cooperation to the SPFE.³² In

³⁰ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

³¹ Editorial comment, *Journal of Society for the Protection of Fauna in the Empire*, Volume VI (1926): 3, emphasis mine.

³² Pros. Department of Education Health and Lands, GOI, 22-7/37, NAI.



the International Conference for the Protection of Nature held in Paris in July 1931, the British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald sent a message where he clearly indicated the policy of the British government:

In the territories for which they are responsible His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom regard themselves as trustees for the Protection of Nature not only in the interests of their present inhabitants, but in those of the world at large and of future generations.³³

Theodore Hubback, influential hunter, naturalist, and the President of Society for the Preservation of the Flora and Fauna of Malaya further justified the intervention of international bodies like the Society for the Protection of Fauna in the Empire: "Are we as a Nation, to allow the conservation of wild life to be undertaken by local governments as a purely domestic policy? The pronouncement of the Prime Minister is against this."³⁴ In India, a similar urgency to preserve can be seen in publications and efforts of regional preservation associations as well as institutions like the Bombay Natural History Society which had close links with the Society for the Protection of Fauna in the Empire. The attitude of alarm, the sense of imperiled wildlife was also largely a result of political reforms and induction of a greater number of natives in the administrative services. The SPFE urged the Colonial Office and colonial administration because its members—big game hunters—were convinced that Indians lacked the sensibility to appreciate and protect wildlife. Preservationists in Britain and in India often invoked the myth of "native indifference" to hunting as proof that it was the white man's burden to protect India's wild animals. They claimed:

More and more Indian functionaries will fill up the place of British authorities in the management of agriculture, forests etc. Will they be decided to conserve the precious inheritance and will they take care, like their ancestors that

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

treasures will not perish in a short time, having needed aeons to develop?³⁵

The efforts of the Association for the Preservation of Game in United Provinces (henceforth APUP), founded in the 1920s, and the Forest Department is particularly interesting. Like the SPFE, APUP's stated objective was to launch "extensive propaganda by bringing like-minded individuals together" on the issue of National Parks.³⁶ This association headed by Jim Corbett seems to have been successful at soliciting the support of important officials and prominent people. Not only was Frederick Canning, the Chief Conservator of Forests, U.P., a member of the association but it also secured the patronage of Lord Hailey, the Governor of United Provinces. Taking a cue from the SPFE efforts to convene conferences for wildlife protection, the APUP encouraged an All-India conference to deliberate on the question of wildlife preservation and to consider if the African convention could be extended to India. While the participants were divided on several issues including arms licenses, crop-protection and categories of protection to different animals, one of the resolutions passed was that various provinces would attempt to create reserves in suitable areas to ensure that wild animals survived in India. This greatly empowered the APUP and the United Provinces Forest Department. From the early twentieth century the Forest Department had been able to effectively manage conflicting interests and political opposition to reassert its control over wildlife over large sections forests in the areas which eventually came to constitute the National Park. With the combined efforts of the APUP and the Forest Department, the National Parks Bill was passed by the United Provinces Legislative Assembly in April 1935 paving the way for the declaration of the Hailey National Park (renamed Corbett National

³⁵ Demi-official letter to Government of India from secretary to government of United Province, proceedings, Education, Health and Lands, 15-3/38-F, NAI.

³⁶ *Annual Report of the Association for the Preservation of Game in the United Provinces, 1933.*



Park in 1957 in memory of Jim Corbett) later in the year. And while British hunters continued to hunt in other forests, the Hailey National Park became a potent symbol of British paternalism, sensibilities and established a new identity as trustees of wild animals of the Empire.

Conclusion

What can the practice of big game hunting in the colonies tell us about the relationship between colonies and the metropole? While British interactions with Indian wildlife were generated primarily in the colonial encounter, they also bear anxieties, tensions, and desires that accompanied assertions of Victorian sensibilities from the mid-nineteenth century. The metropole was an important influence in shaping the contours of the colonial hunt in India. But how did colonial shikar in India influence home?

While colonialists themselves often termed British hunting at home to be “tame”, they were unable to impact hunting practices. This was both due to the nature of wildlife, lacking as it was in the charismatic, ferocious carnivores (the wily fox was the only worthy contender) and due to the socially closed nature of hunting. The influence of colonial hunting in India and adventures of the courageous Sahibs lay in psychological and ideological power; in the creation of ideological frameworks and evolution of identities in the British Empire.³⁷ The hunting of exotic, ferocious beasts in wild jungles, bought moral and psychological benefits in a way that wildlife at home could not. Even as the contours of British masculinity in the nineteenth and twentieth

³⁷ Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); McDevitt, Patrick F., *May the Best Man Win: Sport, Masculinity, and Nationalism in Great Britain and the Empire, 1880–1935* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Philippa Levine, *Gender and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2004); Antoinette M. Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

centuries changed in response to domestic and international events, the image of the robust, paternal frontier man continued to be important to British men by exercising a powerful hold in their imagination and identity as imperial men.³⁸ Specifically, it was the colonial Indian Sahib that came to embody the British imperial man.

The idea of the Sahib was particularly desirable to metropolitan audiences in the way it addressed and soothed Victorian anxieties while creating moral authority to govern. It has been argued that imperial racism and bourgeois classism co-evolved during nineteenth and early twentieth century.³⁹ Given the broader milieu of social Darwinism and the belief that climate could influence *character*, colonialists became the centre of metropolitan preoccupation with racial contamination, as much because of the disdain and mistrust for the middle and “trading” classes at home, as it was due to their location in the environs that were seen to engender racial inferiority. The question of race, class, and physical capacity that informed colonial discourse on racial differentiation in the late nineteenth century did not just highlight differences from the native but also claim distance from perceived bourgeois sensibilities at home.

However, the evolution of the Sahib was not a simple matter of transferring class prejudices to the Indian social landscape.⁴⁰

³⁸ Martin Francis, “The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth and Twentieth Century British Masculinity”, *The Historical Journal*, Volume 45, No. 3 (2002): 637–652; Graham Dawson *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994).

³⁹ Susan Thorne, *Congregational Missions and the Making of an Imperial Culture in Nineteenth-century England* (Stanford, California Stanford University Press, 1999); Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and Frederick Cooper and Ann L. Stoler, eds, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁴⁰ David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).



It is true that by the late nineteenth century, the British in India regarded netting and trapping by natives with the same contempt as rural elite regarded the poacher in Britain. However, this apparent class bias was heavily underscored by an overarching discourse on racial superiority. While the idea of killing for consumption was a trope familiar to the figure of the desperate poacher in Britain as well, the notion of cruelty was not couched as an inherent trait of the British poacher but as an *aberration*, a corruption of public morality. In India, however, the image of the cruel, lazy hunter was hailed as an *expression* of the inherent racial difference between colonizers and the colonized. There is remarkable continuity in the narrative of indolent princes, craven native shikaris and “native indifference” to the hunt from the early nineteenth century to the last years of British rule in India. The narrative of “excess” that attended descriptions of princely hunting spoke to Victorian disdain of the newly rich domestic bourgeois. The concerns around “suffering”, and absence of “self-regulation” in native hunting traditions, whether princely or that of the small shikari not only erased differences between classes but at once proclaimed the native “ruling classes” to have as much legitimacy as the activities of desperate, lazy, criminally-minded poachers. The idea of native “indifference” to hunting when it came to the native educated class was also imbricated in notions of race and class. Though taught in the ways of the British, the failure of the new ruling class in participating in activities of authentic rulers demonstrated racial differences. This collapsing of race and class when talking about natives from varied classes lent credibility to the idea of racial difference. It allowed British hunters to deny native forms of hunting as legitimate; and doing so it also allowed them to deny native authority as legitimate authority.

It would be interesting to see conversely, if the narrative of “oriental despots” shaped the creation of Victorian identity as aristo-military rather than bourgeois? In what ways did descriptions of ruling classes in the colonies, specifically India, provide a *cultural* foil to the social and economic power of the newly-rich in Britain? The Sahibs and their production of colonial

culture provide an interesting opportunity to understand the intersection of race and class. British administrators in India played an important role in the way British public saw itself as imperial. The *idea* of the Sahib, if not the Sahibs themselves, was crucial in articulating forms of authority which could be recognized as legitimate.⁴¹ It was in the many assurances of class, race, and power that it provided, that the iconography of Sahib became a potent symbol of authority, an emblem of British rule in the Empire.

Tony Ballantyne's argument that an excessive focus on the colonialists and colonial culture in shaping imperial identity writes away the ways in which imperial cultures might reflect indigenous mentalities is an important intervention in British imperial history.⁴² Given the enormous efforts that the Sahibs put into claiming the hunt to be embodying British sensibilities, is there a way to capture native sensibilities in the morally aesthetic colonial hunt? Is there more to the Indo-British hybrid than the appropriation of indigenous knowledge and practice as British invention? Britons had never hunted on elephant-back before or killed dangerous carnivores. These were traditions of native rulers. In what way did the modified elephant-borne hunt re-assert claims of tradition, paternalism, and authority in India, Britain, and the Empire?⁴³ While there has been work on the tradition, paternalism, and colonial ideologies in the colonial context, the

⁴¹ Satoshi Mizutani, *The Meaning of White: Race, Class, and the 'Domiciled Community' in British India 1858–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

⁴² Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand's Colonial Past* (Bridget Williams Books, 2012).

⁴³ Bernard Cohn, "Representing Authority in Victorian India", E. Hobsbawn and T. Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Neeladri Bhattacharya "Remaking Custom: The Discourse and Practice of Colonial Codification", in R. Champakalakshmi and S. Gopal, eds, *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology, Essays in Honour of Romila Thapar* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 2000).



specific kinds of authority and identities produced in assimilating native mentalities as *imperial* sensibilities remains under-explored.

In her influential work *Civilizing Subjects*, Catherine Hall analyses how Britons of varied backgrounds defined themselves in relation to subject peoples in the colonies. She sets out to establish, “what provincial men and women knew of the empire and how they knew it”.⁴⁴ Hunting memoirs, trophies, and photographs provided a window through which men and women from various classes came to “know” their empire and become attached to its wildlife. The Victorian distinction between professional and amateurs and emphasis on fairplay informed hunting practices at home and in the colonies. It also produced a moral relationship that was instituted as a legal relationship between British hunters/conservationists and wildlife. That this relationship seems to be stronger with wild animals in the colonies rather than that at home is testament both to the power of the imagery of exotic jungles, charismatic and ferocious animals as it is to restricted access to hunting at home. Game Laws in Britain continued to assert a strict control over access to deer, pheasants, partridges, and hares and these animals remained currency of rank and honour. By contrast, carnivores found few supporters as hunting estates largely continued to pursue vermin extermination as part of game preservation. While the colonial regimes continued to carve out areas dedicated to the Empire’s wildlife, Britain’s domestic carnivorous fauna found few care-takers.

The arguments for preservation led by organizations like the SPFE found support among broader public opinion because it invoked the moral relationship which had been forged with the British public over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition, it urged colonial administration and the Colonial Office to exercise political authority as *moral* authority on the question of wildlife. It took the wildlife in the colonies for metropolitan Britons to think of wild animals beyond categories of “game” and

⁴⁴ Catherine Hall, *Civilizing Subjects* (University of Chicago Press, 2002).



“vermin” and discover their new conceit as “trustees” of wildlife. Wildlife preservation in the colonies rarely hurt the hunting interests of Sahibs in the colonies; they were mostly directed at native hunting. The moral returns from thinking of metropolitan Britons as protectors of wildlife could be had without de-centering the symbolic importance of colonial hunting or experiencing any quotidian impacts. These impacts had to be borne by distant native populations. Their framing of “white man’s burden” as saviours of the Empire’s wildlife provided new justifications for the domination of foreign lands. It redefined ideas of modernity and welfare in early twentieth-century Britain.

The idea that the world’s exotic wildlife needs protection and intervention “from the top” as it were remains prevalent in the global North and in middle-class opinion in many parts of the global South. There is less tolerance of damage by domestic fauna (deer, bears, and wolves in Europe and North America) or public support for the re-introduction of carnivores—as in the case of wolves in Britain. The history of hunting and conservation in the British Empire can help us complicate the way in which strands of Anglo-phone modernity have defined global modernity. It can perhaps also help us understand the manner in which class and race, and power and morality continue to inform our thoughts on wildlife.