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**Lost Worlds: Natural world and indigenous
hunting cultures in colonial India
(circa 1770s–1860s)**

Vijaya Ramadas Mandala

Junior Fellow, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi



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Lost Worlds: Natural world and indigenous hunting cultures in colonial India (circa 1770s–1860s)*

Vijaya Ramadas Mandala

Introduction

Hunting as a field of historical inquiry was taken up more prominently with the emergence of John MacKenzie’s seminal work *Empires of Nature* in the 1980s.¹ Since the last two decades various studies across the globe covered the history of hunting and conservation in different regions of the world.² In the case of South Asia too, scholarly appraisal on hunting and conservation, mostly as separate approaches had been taken-up by many historians in the field,³ for

*Paper presented at a Workshop titled ‘Ecology and Society’ at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 22 May 2015.

¹ John M. MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation, and British Imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

² Nicolas W. Proctor, *Bathed in Blood: Hunting and Mastery in the Old South* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002); Greg Gillespie, *Hunting for Empire: Narrative of Sport in Rupert’s Land, 1840–70* (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 2007); Callum McKenzie, “The British Big-game Hunting Tradition, Masculinity and Fraternalism” with particular reference to ‘The Shikar Club’, *The Sport Historian*, No. 20, 1, May 2000, pp. 70–96; “‘Sadly Neglected’ – Hunting and Gendered Identities: A Study in Gender Construction”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 22, No. 4, July 2005, pp. 545–62.

³ Joseph Sramek, “‘Face Him like a Briton’”: Tiger Hunting, Imperialism, and British Masculinity in Colonial India, 1800–1875”, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Summer, 2006), pp. 659–80; Also see, William K. Storey, “Big Cats and Imperialism: Lion

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example, vast historical writings left by Mahesh Rangarajan.⁴ However, despite the progress these historical works have made in the dissemination of knowledge and understanding on the history of hunting and conservation, they do so mostly concerning the dominant political and cultural discourse of privileged elite groups. There is still a gap in the literature, and given this context, we need to address the position of marginal groups, whose histories of hunting practices have not been adequately appraised by the extant historiography or studied them as principal actors.⁵ It is based on this backdrop that the present paper aims to offer some reflections on the native hunting groups in colonial India in relation to their hunting practices vis-a-vis the natural world and conservation thinking during the early part of the nineteenth century.

Some research questions would be of help in outlining some aspects that we are going to discuss in this paper. Does India have hunting mores from the history of marginal groups? What was natural history of India between the later half of the eighteenth and early half of the nineteenth centuries? Who was the native shikari in colonial India? What was his role prior to the Indian hunting field taken over by the British? Did Indian village people hunt, and if so, what are their hunting practices between the 1770s and the 1860s? Information and archival sources on native methods of hunting are varied, and they mostly come

and Tiger Hunting in Kenya and Northern India, 1898–1930”, *Journal of World History*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Fall, 1991), pp. 135–73; Divyabhanusinh, ‘Junagadh State and its Lions: Conservation in Princely India, 1879–1947’, *Conservation and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (December 2006), pp.520–40.

⁴ Mahesh Rangarajan, *India’s Wildlife History* (Delhi, India: Permanent Black, 2001, Reprint, 2006); Mahesh Rangarajan, ‘From Princely Symbol to Conservation Icon: A political history of the Lion in India’ in Mushirul Hasan and Nariaki Nakazato (ed.), *The Unfinished Agenda: Nation Building in South Asia* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2001).

⁵ Ezra Rashkow, “Resistance to Hunting in Pre-independence India: Religious environmentalism, ecological nationalism or cultural conservation?” *Journal of Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 2, pp. 270–301. While Rashkow’s insightful study *prime facie* deals with the aspect of cultural environmentalism in the context of anti-British colonial discourse during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries India, his study was not concerned with the hunting practices of native Indian groups as discussed in the present article.



from late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century period. Before the British colonizers took control over the Indian hunting field, these groups of native shikaris and local people were active hunters until up to the 1860s.

Native hunting cultures during the East India Company Period (circa 1770s–1860s)

Prior to the arrival of the British in India, there were many hunting groups whose occupation was to hunt in the forest and bring game in the nearby markets and sell it for livelihood. What is more interesting is that such local hunters, for years, supplied game for pot and sold it for food consumption to the village populace, which indicates existence of local people whose dietary needs not only encompassed rice and food crops, but also game meat. After the onset of colonization, this thriving native community of consumers were replaced as the British colonizers began to procure the native shikaris' sale of game for their daily food consumption. In addition, some exotic animals and birds captured by natives were kept alive in Anglo-Indian homes for the purpose of amusement. These developments began to surface as soon as the East India Company's civil and military administrators were entrusted to govern the newly conquered territories in Bengal, Bombay, and Madras presidencies.

While these native shikaris' life was subsistence driven, their practices of hunting offers rich details of methods they adopted in hunting of wild animals and birds in the jungle. Before the Britons gradually took control over Indian hunting field by the turn of the nineteenth century, the rural Indians and native shikaris had practiced hunting relatively free from state's interference. Diverse hunting techniques were widespread from the later half of the eighteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century among the Europeans and Indian princes, as well as, village hunters, native shikaris, and forest tribes. The initial phase of the Company period saw no restriction in the realm of shikar—whether it was an Indian prince, native hunter, or a European—as all hunted without moderation or restriction.

After the decline and fall of the Mughal empire when the East India Company was trying to expand its control in the later decades of the

eighteenth century, trade and commerce flourished mostly in towns and epicentres of the Indian sub-continent. During this period, large swathes of the country's geography was shrubs and rivers with ghats, mountains, and dense jungles.⁶ Early European explorers and later British colonizers, who claimed to have given firsthand account of such studies, were not merely writing what they saw when passing through these uninhabited terrains that sheltered wild animals, but also their writings offer greater historical details of natural history that existed then and the early part of the nineteenth century.

One of the earliest colonial accounts of native hunting scene comes from Fra Paolino da San Bartolomeo, a member of the Academy of Velitri and professor of the Oriental languages in the Propaganda at Rome, and an avid explorer, who was resident in India for thirteen years between 1776 and 1789. He travelled at length from Cape Comari (Tamil Nadu) to Malabar Coast (Kerala), and reported that the region had an '...appearance of a green theatre....'⁷:

The sea-shore is covered with white sand; and a multitude of beautiful shells are here and there to be seen. The country is intersected by a great many rivers and streams, which flowing down from the high ridge of mountains on the west, called the Gauss, pursue their course towards the east, and discharge themselves into the sea; some with impetuosity and noise, others with gentleness and silence. In the months of October and November, when the rainy season commences, these streams are swelled up in an extraordinary degree, and sweep from the mountains [into the sea].⁸

The Gauts, the highest ridge of mountains in this country, [on] occasion...[differs] in the weather, and that remarkable change of seasons which take place on both these coasts. This is one of the most singular phenomena of nature ever

⁶ Montgomery Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, Vol. 1–3, (London, W. H. Allen & Co, 1843.)

⁷ Fra Paolino da San Bartolomeo (translated from German into English by William Johnston), *A Voyage to the East Indies* (London: J. Davies, Chancery Lane, 1800), p. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.



yet observed. On the coast of *Cholamandalam*⁹ the summer begins in June; but on the coast of Malabar it does not commence till October. During the latter month it is winter on the coast of Cholamandalam, whereas on the coast of Malabar it begins so early as the 15th of June. The one season therefore always commences on the east coast at the time when it ends on the western. When winter prevails on the coast of Malabar, when the mountains and valleys are shaken by tremendous claps of thunder, and awful lightning traverses the heavens in every direction, the sky is pure and serene on the coast of Cholamandalam; ships pursue their peaceful course; the inhabitants get in their rice harvest, and carry on trade with the various foreigners who in abundance frequent their shores. But when the wet season commences, when these districts are exposed, for three whole months, to storms and continual rains, hurricanes and inundations, the coast of Malabar opens its ports to the navigator; secures to its inhabitants the advantages of trade, labour and enjoyment.¹⁰

The above account is historically significant as it details the cultural geography of southern-most part of Indian peninsula adjoining the Western Ghats from Cape Comari to Malabar Coast that was abundant with river streams and mountains, giving us an idea of the kind of natural world that existed in this part of the sub-continent in the latter half of the eighteenth century. These parts with hills and green spaces also sheltered wild animals of all kinds. In the region of Madura kingdom, Cauvery and its streams descend from the ghats, and running past Tiruchinapalli, Srirangam, and various other places, the river ‘...discharges itself through several mouths into the sea...’ the Indian ocean. This tract of land is situated higher than the other regions, hence rice was less cultivated, but crops like cotton, cumin, garlic, ginger, gum-lac and capers were cultivated by native inhabitants.¹¹

⁹ It was referred by early colonists such as Dutch, French and English as *Coromandel* which is corrupt form of original Cholamandalam i.e., the country of *Cholas*. Bartolomeo transliteration is *Ciolamandalu*. In this paper, I used the correct term Cholamandalam taking the latter term into historical perspective.

¹⁰ Fra Paolino da San Bartolomeo (translated by William Johnston), *A Voyage to the East Indies*, pp. 3–4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Despite the presence of such excellent agricultural base, Bartolomeo mentions that this region contained wildlife such as ‘bezoar goats, civet cats, wild hogs, deer, antelopes, *tygers* [tigers], apes, and elephants’¹² which were found in greater numbers. In the Malabar region, wild elephants were found in large numbers in forests ghat. In the provinces of Aragojhe, Modclacodata, and Malealur, elephants were often seen in herds of 200 or 300 and ‘...it happens not unfrequently [sic] that they destroy whole fields of rice’.¹³ On such occasions, the native people would endeavour to scare them away by kindling large fires and through means of beating drums.¹⁴ This attest to the fact that wild elephants in India were not killed for ‘sport’ as it was done by the British colonizers when they established their rule in this part of the region from the early decades of the nineteenth century. Instead, the native inhabitants preferred capturing elephants through the method of creating pits, which were covered with green boughs. A wild elephant being unattended or unmindful of crossing its path in the forest, often would fall into such pits, and it ‘...sends forth such a loud cry as astonishes all the inhabitants of the forest...’.¹⁵ Afterwards, the local people using ropes and chains would fasten the elephant’s legs in a very ingenious manner, and soon it would be captured and ‘...conveyed to a place where these animals are generally tamed...’ with the assistance of other trained elephants.¹⁶ The taming process took a few weeks to months. After wild elephants were tamed, they were employed in the work of dragging large logs of teakwood over the mountains, and threw them into the river streams so as to transport these logs to the place of their destination. Of course, this native method of capturing wild elephants was called *kheddah*, and was adopted and systematized by the British all over India in order to extract the forest woods used for the purpose of shipbuilding for the British naval fleet, houses and buildings, and later railway construction works and sleepers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A critical underlining point here is that Europeans and native rulers found elephants useful and practical to carry out the trade and commerce

¹² Ibid., p. 54.

¹³ Ibid., p. 212

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 212.

¹⁵ Ibid., 212.

¹⁶ Ibid., 213.

works such as, large trunks of forest wood to be transported to the sea-coast from the rigid and 'frightful' mountains in the midst of wild beasts, which could have been impossible by labourers with bare hand.¹⁷

In the Madura region, at the bottom of the ghats, the local merchants were accustomed to transport their merchandize on oxen, 'which are with cotton goods of every kind'.¹⁸ These merchants are always '...well armed, because they are obliged to pursue their way through narrow passes in the mountains, which, on account of the numerous tygers [tigers] found in them, are exceedingly dangerous...'.¹⁹ From the above-mentioned cities and the interior part of Malabar, the merchandize was transported to the coast both by land and by water and thence conveyed and boarded to foreign ships.²⁰ Hunting of big animals like tiger and rhinoceroses must have prevailed in the northern and southern regions before Britons could establish their rule in India. As Bartolomeo reports that chief articles that were exported from India to Europe in the eighteenth century include, '... horns of the rhinoceros, from which are made rings wore on the fingers; Indian tyger [tiger] skins; crucifixes, small figures, and other toys of ivory from Goa.'²¹ Great many elephants, wild buffaloes (gaur), parrots of all kinds, and black and white apes were found in the forests near the bottom of the ghats in the Malabar region. The wild apes or monkey tribes which were two to three thousand in number, moved in flocks among trees. Their principal diet consisted of wild fruits. Thus their overwhelming presence would suggest that these primates were relatively undisturbed by human interference or civilization.²²

The abundance of tigers, and in particular, the so called 'royal tiger' was to be found only in the thickest of the interior forests in this region.²³ This striped tiger (not spotted) was believed to be in the size of 'nine to ten feet in length, and from four to four and a half in height,'

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 213 (Emphasis original).

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 56.

²¹ Ibid., p. 83.

²² Ibid., p. 125.

²³ Ibid., p. 125.

and was allegedly portrayed ‘as large as a small cow’ by the Europeans who had travelled through these forest regions.²⁴ Bartolomeo mentioned that he had seen three kinds of tigers in the Malabar region, in addition to a number of panthers or leopards:

Of tygers I have seen three kinds in Malabar. The royal tyger [tiger], called in the Malabar language *Caduva* or *Parienpuli*, and in the Samscred *Vyacra* [sic i.e., Sanskrit – *Vyghra*], or *Duibina*, is of a yellowish colour, with long black horizontal stripes. It is as large as a two-year-old heifer; but long, and rather of low stature. It is much scarcer than the Malabar *Puli* or *Cuguar*, which is the real leopard, whatever may have been said to the contrary by Pliny and Linnæus. The *Puli*, or common Malabar tyger, is of a yellowish colour, inclining to black, and marked with a few perfectly black spots on the back: hence it takes its name *Puli*, that is, the spotted animal.²⁵

The panther, which frequents the Gauts, is a kind of royal tyger, but of a dark chestnut colour. Here and there it is marked with a few horizontal stripes, like the royal tyger; but with this difference, that they are considerably blacker. This animal is much fiercer than the tyger, and pursues its enemies with the most savage ferocity.²⁶

The aforementioned account is invaluable as it outlines the existence of different kinds of tiger species and leopards in the region. Tiger during this period was referred as ‘tyger’ or *puli* in vernacular tone by the inhabitants of southern India. While the largest wild cat known as ‘royal Bengal tiger’ or ‘tiger’ was widespread across the Indian sub-continent, from the above description, we can infer that the Europeans, including the British, did not determine the actual name for each big game animal. There was some confusion as these animals were not found in their native country. Thus, panther or leopard was inadvertently referred as ‘a kind of royal tiger’, but its traits such as ‘fierceness’ and ‘ferocity’ would help the reader to identify this animal

²⁴ Ibid., p. 125.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 215.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 216.



as Indian leopard. In spite of this, the aesthetic appreciation for tigers and leopards, including the commercial activities like trading in skin etc. could be traced back to the later half of the eighteenth century.

The puli or Malabar tiger was reported to be troublesome and often created fear and panic in the Malabar region. Unlike the Bengal Presidency or other parts of India, these tigers were not man eaters. Bartolomeo mentions that he himself was witness to Malabar tigers known to have entered towns and villages. In 1786 at Vaypur, a puli entered a village in the noon, when there were more than 200 people around, and carried off ‘...a dog which was running about in the street’.²⁷ On such occasions, people of Vaypur took measures to protect themselves by shutting the doors of their houses.²⁸ Likewise, village cattle too were reportedly lifted off by forest tigers during this period.²⁹ The analysis so far underlines how agricultural societies, thriving mercantile communities in the Cholanmandalam region, and Malabar coastline had to contend with the natural onslaughts of wild animals in their day-to-day lives.

Besides, other animals like wolves and mountain bear were believed to be more dreaded than the tiger by the common people who lived in the nearby ghats and forests.³⁰ Bartolomeo stated that ‘... if the king of Travancore could resolve to hunt these wild animals, he would procure essential advantages both to himself and his subjects. But this is not done, because the Indians believe in the doctrine of transmigration...’³¹ While this kind of assertion is certainly questionable, it is noteworthy to point out that such thinking persisted among native societies and some rulers led to a conservation belief that happened to sustain large number of flora and fauna. This cultural belief system just happened. Thus, their numbers remained unchecked in the absence of large scale hunting in some parts of the Indian subcontinent. Whereas, during the same period, other parts of colonial

²⁷ Ibid., p. 216.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 216.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 216.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 214-215.

³¹ Ibid., p. 215.

India wild animals were killed as they posed greatest danger to human lives than the doctrine of co-existence like mentioned above would have us believe. For example, in the Bengal Presidency annual hunts were organised by the zamindars or the local rulers to eliminate man-eating tigers and other troublesome animals as a pressing necessity as we shall examine this aspect in the following sections.

In the Malabar region too, tigers that were dangerous to human habitation were shot by men usually from platforms built on top of trees (machans) ‘...near a pond or ditch where an animal is accustomed to drink’.³² The slain tiger or leopard’s skin then was handed over to the king, and ‘...the hunter always obtained a reward from the inhabitants of the district’.³³ This kind of offering of rewards for killing predatory animals was institutionalized by the British through the colonial policy and programme of ‘vermin eradication’³⁴ in the nineteenth century.

Another large animal was the *urus* which belonged to the genus of the wild ox, was never seen beyond the borders of the dense jungles of the Western Ghats. This animal was about ten feet high with thick skin and ‘large beautiful horns, and very fine hair of a silvery ash grey colour’.³⁵ The *urus* was believed to have such strength that it would not shy away from fighting the elephant or the tiger, when these animals cross its path.³⁶ At that time, Indians used *urus* hides to make shoe laces and various other things such as bags and so on.³⁷ It was believed to feed ‘only on aromatics herbs’ and thus its meat was consumed by some of the inhabitants of the Malabar country.³⁸ This animal was likely to be a *gaur* or wild bison as it was described as ten feet in height and an animal of gigantic proportion. In addition, the wild hog was hunted by natives throughout the Indian sub-continent. In the Malabar region, a wild hog killed in a hunt was priced one rupee in the 1770s or it

³² Ibid., pp. 216-217.

³³ Ibid., p. 217.

³⁴ Emphasis mine.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 214.

³⁶ Ibid., 214.

³⁷ Ibid., 214.

³⁸ Ibid., 214.



could be procured in exchange of ‘two or three charges of gun-powder’.³⁹ The economics behind such pricing shows how native people and also Europeans considered wild hog meat profitable and therefore, having a ‘very agreeable aromatic taste’, and thus a huntsman who sold hunted wild hogs at such price would contend himself sufficiently paid and would go on to kill more wild hogs.⁴⁰

The cultural geography of this wetland region along the Cochin coastline, which had great many rivers, provided a haven for variety of duck species. Thus, *taraya* or tame duck were found in abundance, where these duck species could procure nourishment from the river bodies.⁴¹ They were consumed as food both on the ships and in the mainland. It was observed that ‘...an immense trade is carried on with these fowls in the maritime towns of India’. It offered ‘employment, in particular, to the Christians, Mahomedans, and black Jews’.⁴²

But the practices of hunting varied across India according to topography and geological formation of different regions. Daniel Johnson, formerly a medical officer at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the East India Company’s service of the Bengal Establishment, had the following remarks on the Bengal region:

The villages throughout the greater part of the country are from six to twelve miles distant from each other; the land around them being cultivated only for a small space in proportion to the number of inhabitants.... All the intermediate parts are covered with forest trees and underwood, in some places quite impervious... near the foot of the hills the trees are largest, and the underwood thickest. The country is here and there intersected by deep ravines, caused by heavy rains rushing down from the mountains towards the rivers, the channels of which are for the most part dry and hot in the cold seasons, but in the rainy season are generally full, and streams run with great rapidity. The

³⁹ Ibid., 214.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 214.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 222.

⁴² Ibid., p. 222.

ravines often cross the road, and afford excellent shelter to animals of prey.⁴³

What is interesting from the above account is, during this period, villagers in the Bengal country cultivated and practiced agriculture for their own needs, and forests and mountains adjacent to their village hamlets offered a safe haven for the wild beasts of prey.

Even as the natural scenery of landscapes offered pleasant view to the travellers passing by, the presence of tigers and other wild beasts abounded in the thickest of bushes, preying on unsuspecting travellers. There were no official records to suggest how many common people were killed in the ambush attacks led by predatory wild animals during the 1800s. A question arises then, given that there was no ‘vermin eradication policy’⁴⁴ at this time, who could be protecting the people living in the villages and the travellers on transit? In this context, Bengal Presidency offers a good example where wild animal attacks often necessitated the village people to seek the help of professional hunters. In the rural areas of the Bengal Presidency, in every village near the ghats (ghats are junctions or transit roads connecting the hill stations and plains) were stationed *ghautdwars*, whose duty was to accompany the travellers through the ghats and pathways.⁴⁵ The *ghautdwars*’ usual

⁴³ Daniel Johnson, *Sketches of Indian Field Sports* (London: Robert Jennings, 1827), pp. 5–6.

⁴⁴ (Emphasis original) Since the 1820s onwards, after the conquest of jungle and woodland areas by the British colonizers, necessitated them to formulate the programme of ‘vermin eradication,’ which continued throughout the nineteenth century. It categorised big game species such as tigers, leopards, wild pigs and wild elephants as dangerous and threat to civilization and colonial interests. Thus under ‘vermin eradication policy,’ India’s big game animals could be hunted and shot indiscriminately with additional incentives in the form of rewards offered by the colonial government both to the locals and British hunters. For example, the archival source, i.e., Bengal Rev (LP) 10 Sep 1828, draft 472/1827-28, IOR/E/4/723 pp. 243-45 shows that rewards were offered by the colonial government for the destruction of 5,673 tigers in the Bengal Presidency between the years 1822–24.

⁴⁵ Daniel Johnson, *Sketches of Indian Field Sport*, pp. 7–8.



clothing was covered with ‘the skin of a tiger, leopard, or some other animal’.⁴⁶ They carried a bow, arrows, and a large shield.⁴⁷ Typically these weapons were ‘ornamented with peacock feathers, or cow’s tail’.⁴⁸ The ghautdwars offered people only marginal protection by killing predatory wild animals, but could not prevent the majority of the attacks as the dense forests offered greater protection to tigers, leopards, and other dangerous beasts of prey. As ghautdwars possessed no land, their livelihood depended on some allowance given by the local Rajah (a zamindar or provincial ruler). But these men were rewarded by the travellers in return for offering protection to them, or when killing a predatory animal.⁴⁹ It should be noted here, what became of the ghautdwars is unknown as the nineteenth century progressed.

There is a difference between ghautdwar and native shikari. Ghautdwars were self-employed hunters being in charge of protecting the rural countryside and travellers—whether on the forest paths or village roads, or ghats—from the onslaughts of wild animals. Whereas the native shikari, during this period, was a village hunter, whose profession was to bring wild game and sell in the nearby market. It could be argued that the native shikaris probably replaced ghautdwari tasks of offering protection to villagers till about the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century as many zamindari and princely states lost their political power to the British, who began consolidating their rule in India. Of course, it should be noted that British hunters replaced the native shikaris approximately from the 1860s onwards.

Given this context, a question arises, who is a native shikari in colonial India? Native shikaris or village hunters in colonial India were from low caste groups who had gained their livelihood ‘entirely’ by catching birds, hares, and all sorts of animals. These native hunters were further divided into the following groups: (1) those exclusively confining themselves to catching birds and hares; (2) those catching birds and various small game animals; and (3) the shikaris who made

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

a livelihood by killing tigers and leopards.⁵⁰ Within the realm of the shikari world, different methods are adopted in catching birds and hunting animals. For example, split bamboos were made into a form of shaft, and to that were attached green bushes and horse-hair nooses of different sizes and strength which was fastened to the shaft.⁵¹ Hunters also carried two lines of shafts ‘...to which horse-hair nooses are attached for catching larger birds, and a bag or net to carry their game’.⁵² The typical hunt started, when hunters hid themselves underneath the green bushes of the shaft thus ‘concealed from the view of the birds’.⁵³ To a great extent, they mimicked and imitated ‘a variety of calls for the different kinds of birds’ while traversing the hunting field.⁵⁴ When unsuspecting birds passed by, with considerable skill and patience, the hunter fastened the noose and caught all kinds of birds—from smaller birds such as the quail to the big ones the size of partridges.⁵⁵ Different kinds of partridges, numerous during this period, hunted by shikaris include, the common brown partridge which occasionally flew into the trees, the long-legged partridge, the black partridge—a bird of jet black colour with white spots on the chest, the long-tailed partridge with dark brown colour, and the speckled partridge.⁵⁶ To lure the birds the hunter spread grain near the nooses, thus ‘...when birds are eating the grain, he gives it a sudden pull, and catches several at a time...’ by snatching their legs.⁵⁷ Likewise, the pea-fowls and the jungle fowls were hunted by means of wooden pegs and fastening nooses to neck or feet, when these birds passed unawares through the nooses and were immediately fastened to the ground.⁵⁸

Unlike the Bengal Presidency, hunting of pea-fowls was not allowed by many rural Indians in other parts of colonial India, which brought physical confrontations with British hunters during the nineteenth century.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 22.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.28.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.25.



The hunted birds, as discussed above, were, as a rule, sold in the nearby markets and villages to Mohammadans, and a few to the lower caste Hindus, 'for the value of a half penny or a penny each'.⁵⁹ The reason why we have to bring forth the above aspect is to outline the fact that in early nineteenth century India, marginal groups and common people were able to supplement their food table provided by native hunters' wild game exploits. But, there were higher caste Hindus too, who purchased many of such birds solely for the pleasure of recreation.⁶⁰

A typical native hunter's family consisted of his wife and children, who also participated in hunting for example hares, and '...take with them four or five nets, each of them sixteen feet long, and eighteen inches high'.⁶¹ According to the ground and other conditions, they extended the nets for about forty or fifty yards in a set location, most likely where hares could be found in plenty in covers near cultivation fields.⁶² One person would hide near the nets, keeping an eye on them, while the other people '...(would) go off to the distance of about a quarter of a mile, and commence beating the underwood with sticks'.⁶³ As soon as the person in-charge of finding hares, discover them, he makes a shrill noise, '...which is well understood and answered in the same manner by the other (hunters) at a considerable distance'.⁶⁴ By means of sticks and making noises, they would drive '...the hares to the exact spot where the nets are set, being surrounded on every side by cover', thus on average the native hunter would catch 'six or seven hares a day'.⁶⁵ Whether this kind of method culminating the catching of hares offers an indigenous form of sport remains unknown, in reality, for a native shikari, two to three hares in one day's hunt would supplement food for his family for about two days. Additional hares, if remaining, would be sold to Indians for three pence each, but to

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–32.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

Europeans not less than seven or eight pence or four annas.⁶⁶ Here, we may ask, what would be the significance of such subsistence-driven hunting. These figures are interesting from the point view of the economic dimension of indigenous hunters, which offers greater insight into their freedom to sell wild game at different prices to natives and Europeans, respectively as the control they held over the hunting field. Historian John MacKenzie refers to a European market stocked by meat purchased from native Indian shikaris in Calcutta, which was well-supplied with varieties of meat, including hare, duck, teal and wild pigeon, attesting to a thriving native business in hunting, since the meat was bought from native shikaris.⁶⁷ This attest to the fact that native hunters were able to supplement food not only for their own livelihood, but also sold game meat to the villagers and the Europeans.

During this period, European travellers, who witnessed the native hunting methods on the sidelines had admitted that such ingenious method of catching hares and driving them out of covers by a four member shikari family would have required twenty or more for the common people to do the same.⁶⁸ For the native shikaris bird catching mission equally offered the thrill of hunt as well as sustenance for their livelihood, however, it should be noted that their profession of hunting was carried out not without dangers. During many such hunting excursions, a shikari, who could be a father or mother or a brother, occasionally got carried off by tigers. Even so, the remaining family continued the same profession, notwithstanding, the impending dangers in the hunting field.⁶⁹ Therefore, native shikari profession during this period also warranted considerable risk-taking ventures on a daily basis, though their resilient lives, on the whole, do not offer such an underlying grim view.

⁶⁶ Four annas amounts a quarter of a rupee and a rupee during this period (first quarter of the nineteenth century) would amount the value of half a crown, that is, two rupees equivalent to one pound sterling.

⁶⁷ John M. Mackenzie, *The Empire of Nature*, p. 173.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35.



In addition, the native shikaris were also employed, more out of necessity than by choice, by the British civil servants in their newly established homes, when these colonial men would join their administrative posts across India. In southern India, for example, during the 1830s a series of letters was written by an English woman, Julia Charlotte Maitland, wife of an East India Company judge or collector—who was posted in the Rajahmundry division (present day Andhra Pradesh) in Madras Presidency—on the aspect of vivid presence of wildlife that existed in and around the Godavari districts.⁷⁰ In this context, native hunters in this region too emerge as a principal subject of our study as the Company civil servants and officials, in general, heavily relied on such hunting assistants to supply food for the European families. Hence, it is not surprising that hunting was predominantly utilitarian in its approach for the most part of the Company period, where native hunters exercised considerable freedom in shooting forest game or varieties of deer in order to supply food for their European masters. As Maitland in one of her correspondence to home in Britain wrote thus:

We have a [native] hunting Peon, or “shoot-man,” as he is called, who goes into the jungle every day to catch us half our dinner according to his taste or his luck. He brings hares, wild ducks, pigeons, &c, and yesterday he brought a magnificent peacock. It went to my heart to have such a beautiful creature cooked; but there was no help for it, and he was dead when he arrived. There are pretty spotted deer and antelopes [roaming] wild about [sick] the country, and I am going to have some caught to keep in the compound: they soon grow quite tame, and come and eat out of one’s hand.⁷¹

The above letter is interesting as it refers to how the natives were employed as hunters to supply wild game to the homes of the senior Company officials in the Rajahmundry division. On the contrary, in

⁷⁰ Julia Charlotte Maitland (under pseudonym By a Lady), *Letters from Madras – During the years 1836–1839* (London: John Murray, 1846).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp.43–44.

some parts of northern India, peacocks and pea-fowls were accorded sacred protection among the villagers, in particular, Hindus.⁷²

Communal hunts were also a common feature during this time. Johnson mentions one of such community hunting trips in the early nineteenth century India, in the nearby forests of Rogonautpore, Bissunpore of Bengal Presidency, where petty chiefs and zamindars, whose territories were abound with jungle and wild animals, and it was customary for them to organise a *hunquah* or an annual event of driving animals of the forest into the nets.⁷³ Johnson mentions that he had seen one of the local rajas arranged a hundred people for one such hunting expedition. The *hunquah* was a large-scale hunting party, for it involved the necessary participation of ordinary villagers, hundreds of them, including women and children:

At day break, about a hundred were sent off to set fire to the sides of the reserved jungle; and the main body, consisting of men, women, and children, many of them carrying all sorts of noisy instruments, match-lock guns, bows and arrows, spears, fire-works... [proceeded] to the extremity of it [hunting], where they...[arranged] themselves in a line of some miles in extent. Then they raised a most hideous noise, continuing it as they advanced towards the nets, which they tried to do as well as they could in the form of a crescent, but it was impossible to proceed regularly, on account of the unevenness of the ground, and the thickness of the cover in many parts. Numbers were far left behind, and yet none of them were injured. It seldom happens that any are killed or taken away by tigers *on such occasions* [emphasis mine]; the animals are too much alarmed to think of anything but their own safety, and naturally run from the noise; the only part where there is danger, is near the nets; the tigers seeing them, and not knowing which way to escape, become enraged, and sometimes a poor fellow in their way feels the effect of their [tigers] fury.⁷⁴

⁷² J. Moray Brown, *Shikar Sketches with Notes on Indian Field Sports* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1887), p. 128.

⁷³ Daniel Johnson, *Sketches of Indian Field Sports*, p. 12.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

The above account is historically significant on three aspects. Firstly, it points out to the large scale participation of Indian villagers, discarding the gender based stereotypes, as it involved women and children along with men as *equal participants*, something not always been the case with British hunts in colonial India. In that sense, historian Mary A. Procida's study is relevant here concerning the disruption of gender hierarchies, where she argues that the British women broke the barriers of gender—by taking the gun in hand and to go out hunting along with their English husbands by embracing the hyper-masculine image of the Raj in order to protect the British families and imperialism. However, here our study has attempted to show that such disruption of gender hierarchies was something not unique to colonizers alone, but could be germane to the native hunting communities, although the parameters are fundamentally different.⁷⁵ The wife of a native shikari or village women, who often participated in community hunts as discussed above offers us an alternative history of how Indian hunting tradition too provided a space for women and children as active participants in hunts, even as suffrage rights were not accorded to women in Britain until the early twentieth century,⁷⁶ thus distinguishing the position of

⁷⁵ See, Mary A. Procida, "Good Sports and Right Sorts: Guns, Gender, and Imperialism in British India", *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 4, At Home in the Empire (October, 2001); Mary A. Procida, *Married to the Empire: Gender, Politics and Imperialism in India, 1883–1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

⁷⁶ See, Sophia A. van Wingerden, *The Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain, 1866–1928* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 1999). This book argues that the women in Britain started demanding voting rights from as early as the mid-nineteenth century onwards which resulted into active women suffrage movement until the outbreak of the First World War and until into the 1920s, thenceforth they secured voting rights to participate in the British parliamentary democracy. For example, in 1835, The Municipal Corporation Act used the word 'male', not 'person', thus deliberately denying the women the right to vote, which they had 'technically been allowed to exercise in the older boroughs,' see, p. x. The need for bringing British women suffrage movement in the context of the present study is to highlight the level of freedom women communities among the subaltern cultures and metropolitan societies enjoyed or not. More importantly, the communal hunts as discussed in the present paper had disappeared from the mid-nineteenth century onwards as the British colonizers began to occupy Indian marginal landscapes to impose as class,

women among the literate metropolitan societies and the subaltern populace of Indian countryside. Secondly, the description such as ‘unevenness of the ground’ and ‘thickness of the cover’ or jungle offers features of geophysical landscapes that the sub-continent once held. Thus, jungle in Indian scenario represents a thick cover consisting of large trees, underwood, and grass and each jungle based on vegetation types and its location in a particular topography would suggest that there are various forms of jungles that existed in colonial India, i.e., grassland jungle, thick forests on mountainous regions and up-hills, jungles in plain areas, and so on. Thirdly, the local zamindars or rajas organized ‘hunquah’ with a considerable sporting spirit, but principally carried out as a pressing necessity, ‘...in order to rid their countries of the tigers that were troublesome’.⁷⁷ It has been reported that whole villages often have been wiped out by tigers. A number of villages could be seen ‘(or rather sites where they once stood), in Ramghur, wholly uncultivated and deserted’.⁷⁸ Thus, along with hunquah, the practice of fire-burning during summer months of May and June had been carried out for new grass to grow, and to drive off animals of prey from the neighbourhood of their villages, into the impenetrable covers on the mountains, or into the ravines bordering large rivers’.⁷⁹ Without this form of hunting, ‘it would have been almost impossible for anyone to have lived’ in many parts of the rural countryside.⁸⁰ These developments have to be understood in the context of the existence of early Indian hunting practices among the common people before the British introduced the ‘vermin eradication’ programme in the later decades of the nineteenth century. While Britons largely viewed these native hunts as disorderly to the European eyes, it could be argued that, hunquah was a variant of landscape ordering among the Indian zamindars, who did not want to see their villages being wiped out because of wild beast attacks, and this was achieved without destroying the forest.

gender, and racial-based policies and legislation against Indian marginal groups such as hunting communities discussed in this paper, among whom, women’s participation too was completely curtailed under the auspices of the British colonial rule.

⁷⁷ Daniel Johnson, *Sketches of Indian Field Sports*, pp. 12–13.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.



Some rulers kept special hunting dogs to chase game. For example, the Koondah raja from this region maintained a ‘special breed of hunting dogs’ to chase the deer.⁸¹ The *nilagai* (the largest Asian antelope) was likewise ‘hunted by the natives and European residents, both with Indian and English dogs, much after the British method’, chiefly in the Bengal presidency—a region where the East India Company had consolidated its political ascendancy by this period.⁸² But there existed many ordinary hunters in other parts of India. Antelope hunting among the natives can best be described in the following example:

The poorer class of natives, who take up the occupation of hunters for their own subsistence, or pecuniary emolument, sometimes avail themselves of the services of a bullock in approaching within shot of a herd of antelopes. There is a matter of business [here], not of excitement, and they have no idea of allowing a chance to the objects of their pursuit. A bullock is *carefully trained* for this purpose, and *when his education is completed*, he [the bullock] makes a quiet entrance into the jungles, followed closely by his master, who contrives to screen himself completely behind the animal. The bullock grazes carelessly as he advances, making circuitous and apparently unpremeditated movements; at last he arrives at a convenient distance without having disturbed the unconscious [antelope] herd, he then stands still, the *shikaree or* [village] hunter fixes his clumsy matchlock along the back of the animal, and still [being] unseen takes unerring aim: down drops the devoted antelope, and away fly the rest of the [antelope] herd, dispersed and out of sight in an instant.⁸³

What the above hunting episode would illustrate for us is how domesticated buffaloes came to be regarded as anthropomorphic subjects for the poorer classes of the natives across India, where educating these animals and training them in antelope hunting constituted

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.

⁸² Delabere Pritchett Blaine, *An Encyclopaedia of Rural Sports* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1840), p. 34.

⁸³ *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellany*, Vol. XII, (London: Parbury, Allen, and Co, 1833), p. 192.

a noteworthy characteristic of countryside life. This form of sport continued well into the later nineteenth century.

In addition, black bears and spotted deer, and a variety of antelopes were caught by using traps or nets as well as killed from *machans* and pits.⁸⁴ The shikaris were also adept at hunting deer. Deer were captured by means of nets and nooses. The noose methods of hunting is as follows, whereby a strong line with wire is ‘fastened to trees, and extends across the cover fifty or hundred yards’.⁸⁵ The hunters hiding in thick bush would then drive the deer towards the cover—which was arranged in such a way that wires were fixed to the height of deer’s necks and legs, and when the deer ran against this line—where they got trapped by nooses and wires, and caught.⁸⁶ Often, deer were shot by Indian villagers and shikaris from *machans* or tree platforms where they were known to feed on grain or near agricultural fields during the night.⁸⁷ But this form of hunting came to be regarded as ‘unsportman-like’ and ‘cruel’ (emphasis original) by British hunters by the turn of the late nineteenth century.⁸⁸ Johnson too was critical of natives using cheetah as a ruse in capturing the antelope and the deer. He pointed out, ‘...It is distressing to see [cheetahs] catch the deer; they [cheetahs] are led out in the chains, with blinds over their eyes.’⁸⁹ This criticism is an instance of Europeans trying to ascertain good and bad forms of early Indian hunting practices.⁹⁰ But more importantly, what the early nineteenth century history of deer hunting culture in India would suggest is that the marginal groups like native shikaris and Indian villagers were active hunters of deer species, not just entirely dependent on catching birds and hunting small game. It further points out to a historical picture of the existence of a number of deer species and rich natural world, which lent itself to the agrarian communities

⁸⁴ Daniel Johnson, *Sketches of Indian Field Sports*, pp. 35, 36, 53.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁸⁸ C.H. Stockley, *Big Game Shooting in the Indian Empire* (London: Constable and Company Ltd. 1928), p. 4; James Inglis, *Tent Life in Tiger-Land* (Sydney: Hutchison, 1888), p. 111.

⁸⁹ Daniel Johnson, *Sketches of Indian Field Sports*, p. 34.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.



and indigenous tribes to pursue hunting as part of their daily life. The deer are varied in numbers. For example, animals like sambur, nilgai, the common red deer, spotted deer, the common antelopes, four-horned deer, and small species of deer with long ears, hog deer, which were abundant in number and reportedly had been seen across the Indian countryside, and some other types of deer, which were not given any name during this period, but occasionally met with.⁹¹

The well known elite game of pig-sticking which flourished under the British colonial rule—though its exact origin was unknown—historically could be linked to the native practices of hunting wild pigs during the Company period, where the initial idea was drawn from native hunters from the 1800s. For example, Edward Baker, who worked as deputy inspector general of police in the Bengal Presidency in the later half of the nineteenth century pointed out that he witnessed wild pigs being hunted by native shikaris on foot assisted by their dogs.⁹²

I have often seen wild hog run down by [Indian] *Shikarees* (emphasis mine) on foot, assisted by their dogs, the common village, country cur, but trained to the sport. Men and dogs, equally active and sinewy, effect [sic] their purpose by perseverance, and not by speed. A boar or sow, found in the bushes or canes round a village or some old pond, will be first baited by the dogs, and worried out of covert, when one or more men may take a shot at it [i.e., the wild pig], and failing to bring it down, away they go over the plain to the next village or bit of jungle, Mister Pig leading far ahead, Messieurs the Curs [hounds], six or eight in number, following at a respectful interval behind, and by no means overtasking their strength by their speed, and lastly, half a dozen “Shikarees,” armed with old flint fowling-pieces and heavily-tipped spears, bringing up the rear in a lobbing kind of run, at which they will cover miles without being blown, [and kills the runaway wild pigs].⁹³

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35; Also see, Thomas Jerdon, *The Mammals of India: A Natural History* (London: John Weldon, 1874), pp. 274, 278.

⁹² Edward Baker, *Sport in Bengal* (London: Ledger Smith, 1887), p. 57.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58.

Such kind of wild pigs being hunted in the Bengal Presidency does have a rationale. Seeing the destruction to crops by wild pigs the zamindars in the Bengal region took the help of native shikaris and paid them to cull wild pigs to safeguard their crops.⁹⁴ The aforementioned method of hunting wild pigs was practiced by native hunters as early as the 1800s or even could be traced back to the pre-colonial period. When the Company Raj began to assert its control over zamindari territories and forest lands, these native hunters were eventually replaced by the British hunters in the later decades, who used such opportunities to create the sport of pig-sticking by introducing their own methods and practices. For example, Frank B. Simson of the Bengal civil services, who was the collector and magistrate in the 1850s in the east Bengal region, had acquainted himself with a local lady zamindar and persuaded her to remove the native shikaris from their jobs, and he subsequently obtained for himself the best country grounds on purchase, where wild pigs were believed to be abundant, and transformed hunting into a pig-sticking ‘sport’ with his fellow company officials.⁹⁵

James Inglis, a British planter and hunter in the mid-nineteenth century India reported on the native method of wild boar hunt, which was different from the one seen in the Bengal Presidency. As he pointed out, ‘...In some parts of India, where [wild] pigs are numerous and the jungle dense, the natives adopt a very ingenious mode of hunting.’⁹⁶ During the 1860s he had seen the village people hunting wild pigs on the back of their buffalo herds, near river Kosi at the Indo-Nepal border.⁹⁷ In a typical native wild boar hunt, vast herds of cattle and tamed buffaloes attended by ‘the owner [of the cattle] and his assistants... belonging to the *gualla*, or cow herd caste’, were engaged.⁹⁸ On the banks of the river Kosi, every village hamlet consisted of a few huts called *batan* which were created for the purpose of the

⁹⁴ Frank B. Simson, *Letters on Sport in Eastern Bengal* (London: R.H. Porter, 1886), pp. 27–30.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 27–30.

⁹⁶ Maori (James Inglis), *Sport and Work on the Nepaul Frontier*, p. 86.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.86.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.



wild boar hunt. Whenever the village people prepared for a hunt, they would contact the nearest batan for *khubber* (news or information).⁹⁹ The *batanea* or proprietor of the establishment, posted up at batan would look after the arrangements of the hunt:

Every herdsman as he comes in at night tells what animals he has seen through[out] the day, and thus at the batan you hear where [a] tiger, and pig, and deer are to be met with; where an unlucky cow has been killed; in what ravine is the thickest jungle; where the path is free from clay, or quicks and; what fords are safest; and, in short, you get complete information on every point connected with the jungle and its wild inhabitants [i.e., forest animals].¹⁰⁰

It is pertinent to note that it is the villagers themselves who were formed into spy groups to apprise the hunting party leader, who is also a village man, on whereabouts of the wild boars. Using groups of buffaloes as a ruse and protective shield, the *guala* [village herdsman] ‘...ventures into the darkest recesses and tangled thickets’ of the forest cover, making ‘wild calls’ between themselves to find out whether their quarry is a tiger or a wild boar, each armed with a heavy iron shod for of killing the wild beast.¹⁰¹ Village huntsmen chose a favourite buffalo ‘...on whose broad back they perch themselves, as it browses through the jungle, and from this elevated seat they survey the rest of the herd, and carefully observe the scenes of jungle life’.¹⁰² And there is a caveat in this native method of wild pig hunting. By way of preparing milk and rice diet—hundreds of wild pigs are lured near the hunters’ trap.¹⁰³ Using the long speared shaft as his weapon, the herdsman hunter mounts his buffalo, ‘and guides it slowly, warily, and cautiously to the haunts of the pig’.¹⁰⁴ When a wild pig is spotted, the *guala* hunter seated on the back of his buffalo, within a striking distance hurls ‘his spear with

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 88.

all his force' aiming at the runaway wild pig.¹⁰⁵ This native method of chasing wild pigs, the buffalo riding, is historically significant as it could be compared with pursuing wild pig on the horseback as practiced by the British and Indian princely rulers in the elite sport of pig-sticking. Thereafter, the village hunter would follow the trail of the wounded animal, and by frequent strokes of his speared shaft, he eventually kills the wild pig. This method of hunting game in an ingenious and bold way was practiced in the Bihar region until the commencement of the forest and arms acts of 1878.¹⁰⁶

From the aforementioned discussion, one could infer that the presence of village cattle suggests a historical picture of a thriving self-sustained village economy, where buffaloes are milked twice a day — in the morning and in the evening — to meet the daily demand of the village populace. Besides, the milk is converted to large quantities of ghee and clarified butter, and then sent down to the nearby towns by country boats.¹⁰⁷ A question arises then, if these rural economies were reasonably self-sustained, why did the Indian villagers hunt wild animals? Perhaps, large numbers of wild pigs destroying cultivated fields propelled the villagers to invent their own kind of hunts which also offered them a form of native sport of hunting, where gualla-hunter emerges as destroyer of wild pigs and protector of agricultural fields.

Archival evidence also points out that it was an ongoing tradition for many Indian villagers and tribal communities to go out for annual hunting parties—a privilege that they believed as their customary right. In this context, Inglis refers to a ritual among the inhabitants of the jungles in the region of Indo-Nepal border who conducted annual hunts, followed by a festival called *Sirwah Purrab* in the months of March and April. He compared such hunts to 'old carnivals of the middle ages' or local festivals in Sardinia, Italy, and Switzerland.¹⁰⁸ The *Sirwah Purrab* is held in honour of *chumpabuttee*—a forest goddess believed to be the protector of herds, deer, buffaloes, huntsmen, and herdsmen,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 87–88.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 131.



and held in high veneration by all the wild tribes and denizens of adjacent jungle, or those who are accustomed to forest life.¹⁰⁹ A typical annual hunt was described as follows:

On the appointed day all the males in the forest villages, without exception, go [out] hunting. Old spears are furbished up; miraculous guns, of even yet more ancient lineage than Mehrman Singh's [a native shikari] dangerous flint piece, are brought out from dusty hiding-places. Battle-axes, bows and arrows, hatchets, clubs and weapons of all sorts, are looked up, and the motley crowd... [goes] to the forest, the one party beating up the game to the other... . Some [people would] go [out for] fishing, others try to secure a quail or partridge, but it is a point of honour that something must be slain. If game be not plentiful they will even go to another village and slay a goat, which, rather than return empty-handed, they will bear in triumph home. The women meet the returning hunters, and if there has been a fortunate beat [i.e., a successful hunt], there is a great feast in the village during the evening and far on into the night. The nets are used, and in this way they generally have some game to divide in the village on their return from the hunt.¹¹⁰

These annual hunts in the form of festivities show that no European participated in such hunts almost till the 1860s, attesting to the fact that freedom-bound forest and agriculturist societies in the interior parts of India were relatively free from external forces and without any interference. Further, it underlines the co-existence between the natural world and indigenous societies, where forest goddess was revered as the protector of humans as well as flora and fauna of the forest. Thus, the world view of these hunting festivals emphasized on the philosophy of sense of balance between human societies and wild species in the forest through means of co-existence.

However, it is pertinent to note that such type of hunting parties were either curtailed in British India domains or continued in princely

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 131–132.

Indian territories after the Forest Act of 1878 and Arms Act in the same year. Some local groups even contested against the British. As Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil's writings have shown, '...among the shifting cultivators, there was often a ritual association of hunting with the agricultural cycle. Despite game laws restrictions, the Hill Reddis of Hyderabad clung to their ritual hunt—called *Bhumi Devata Panduga* or the hunting for the earth goddess—which involved the entire male population and preceded the monsoon sowing'.¹¹¹ After 1878, the reserved forest policies of British Indian government interfered with the movement of hunting parties across state boundaries which often resulted in the bitter contestation between the native groups against the colonial state's curtailment of their age-old customary rights.

Conclusion

The present paper has attempted to show some reflections on the history of hunting and natural world in relation to native and marginal groups in colonial India. As one could deduce from the discussion in the paper, in colonial India, hunting was also practiced by marginal groups and common people at varying levels. Thus, the regions of Cholanmandalam [the sea coast of Tamil Nadu] and Malabar Coast [Kerala] in southern India, which were known for maritime trade with both the European and Asian nations, also held unfamiliar natural environment in their interior wetland forests and ghats that provided excellent shelter for numerous wild animals of predatory and non-predatory kind, apes, and varieties of bird species, greater than in proportion to human population. As we have seen, despite being neighbouring provinces, their climate varied considerably. More importantly, local hunting economies thrived along with mercantile and agricultural economies in Cholanmandalam and Malabar Coast during the latter half of the eighteenth century.

In addition, the paper has demonstrated how the ghautdwars in the early years of the East India Company were eventually replaced by three groups of native shikaris. Then, we had village hunters for

¹¹¹ Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil, "State Forestry and Social Conflict in British India", *Past and Present*, No. 123, pp. 150–151.



whom hunting was a great *tamasha* or recreation, but it also offered protection to their agricultural fields and from onslaughts of predatory wild animals. Finally, numerically large sections of hunters in the sub-continent were indigenous tribes such as Gonds, Baigas, Khonds, Bhils, and Santhals. Different kinds of hunts emerged according to different topography and environment of each region and the kind of faunal life or wild game these regions held. From the present paper, it is clear that whether native shikari or Indian villager, or indigenous tribe hunter—all in all—they were free to hunt in the forest in the latter half of the eighteenth century and until the 1850s and the 1860s. What had followed later on was the British acquisition of forest territories and imposition of Forest and Arms acts from the 1870s onwards which created an endemic struggle between the native peoples and the British. It could be argued that the British dominance in the colonial administered territories were, many a time, challenged and contested by the Indian villagers and indigenous tribes in a successful manner.

The unearthing of early Indian hunting practices among the marginal groups is significant as it shows a powerful story of the ruptures that surfaced within the system of colonial rule; begs us to think over how the atrocious policies of the British rulers eliminated the customary hunting rights of the native people and destroyed the erstwhile thriving hunting economies of local and tribal population. Thus, the paper has successfully demonstrated how certain Indian societies between the 1770s and the 1860s had rich hunting mores that offer a persuasive historical narrative of early hunting practices from the point view of marginal groups, before the politics of British colonialism and its oppressive forms took over the Indian hunting field. To conclude, the history of hunting in colonial India could not be studied without equally appreciating the parallel hunting cultures that existed among the common populace and indigenous tribes other than the high end socio-economic-political culture of shikar of the Indian princes and the British.