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Research Article

Wildlife In India During the Colonial Period

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ABSTRACT

The paper throws light on how colonialism affected the wildlife of India, especially the Tiger population which was severely impacted by the policies brought out by the colonial regime. In the colonial period, mastery over nature was thought of as a part of mastery over India. With the heightened hunting of wildlife, several wild predator species were cleared out. To guard the rising livestock and agrarian base after the second half of the eighteenth century, the Brits instituted special prizes for every predator eliminated. Hunting was the standard recreation for the British official; officers even took leave to hunt. Madras, once called Puliyur (land of tigers), was divested of every tiger, as were all the cities of India. At the end of the nineteenth century, there were significantly fewer wild animals that could be hunted. Indiscriminate killing and the declining number of wildlife gave rise to the conservation of the predator species but with a reservation. Wild creatures that endangered these goals were thus systematically culled in colonial India, while those creatures vital for the orderly governance of the British colonial power were spared. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the concept of wildlife conservation gained popularity thanks to the efforts of some hunters who later became naturalists. The 1912 Wildlife Protection Act ushered in a new era of conservation. The requirements of the colonial economy and efficient governance were the main determinants of wildlife conservation. The British devised a program known as "selective conservation" whereby tigers were relentlessly exterminated due to the harm they posed to elephants, which were legally protected due to their importance to the economy and administration. The paper also demonstrates the circumstantial and utilitarian aspects of British policies and behaviour.

Keywords- wildlife, colonial India, selective conservation, hunting, tigers

Introduction

'Since the establishment of railroads, game in general, large game in particular, has suffered great diminution in numbers'.[1]

After the heedless eradication of the fauna at the close of the nineteenth century, efforts were undertaken to conserve it, but they were unsympathetic. Colonial wildlife protection in India was handled in a customized manner to satisfy the material needs of the British administration in India as well as their commercial interests. Examining the history of Indian forestry and the environment is crucial to comprehend the wildlife throughout the colonial period. The British sought to establish a solid agronomic system from the inception of colonial authority, which resulted in the fall of numerous regional forest organisations.[2] The East India Company's growing ambition to broaden imperial control over forested areas at the beginning of the nineteenth century resulted in the theft of Indian animals and forest resources.[3] The British succeeded in reconfiguring the limits of the jungle and woods on the margins of inhabited settlements earlier in the name of exploration and hunting, and later through commercial forestry. As the British authority gained influence over Indian indigenous forests and wildlife, forestry management became an instrument for furthering British rule over politics.[4] Empire forestry stretches back to the Company Raj era. For instance, the founding of the Bombay Forest Conservancy in 1847 prompted the British Indian government to invest in and develop the Imperial Forest Department in 1864.[5] Mahesh Rangarajan's works on the past of wildlife in India constitute a profound addition to the discipline of wildlife history as a whole.[6] The endeavour of defending and encouraging certain wildlife for the intent of hunting leisurely worked hand in hand with the abuse of profit-generating plant species, which in turn

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had an impact on both local communities and the natural environments of forest creatures. To serve their vested interests and requirements, principally those of administration and commerce, the British were among the initial to devise a policy of demonizing wild creatures like tigers, leopards and wild pigs and to favour the passage of their annihilation.[7] There was no established law demanding the slaying of untamed beasts or legally classifying them as hazardous in India, earlier than the British colonization. Thus, the Indian ecology was specifically impacted by the shooting of the game throughout colonial times. The British strategy of protecting wild animals was tailored in its choices and operated concurrently intending to eradicate other species. Elephants were presented with official protection beginning as early as the 1870s, whilst the large voracious animals, especially tigers, were mercilessly eradicated as 'vermins'.[8] In India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hunting and conservation were intertwined as a vital component of the British imperial economy. In his discussion of imperial profiteering and state forestry initiatives, K. Sivaramakrishnan mentions briefly that the 'vermin' eradication practice of eliminating carnivores peaked in the latter half of the nineteenth century.[9] Mahesh Rangarajan also describes the so-called 'war' the colonial government launched against the wild creatures.[10]

Hunting during the Colonial Period

Researchers in environmental history investigated the extent to which the English Empire controlled India's supply of lumber and other natural resources throughout the nineteenth century.[11] The Forest Act of 1878 effectively enclosed the forest by bringing more than one-fifth of the region's topography completely under the thumb of the government, which was the result of British attempts to have jurisdiction over the resources of the forests. The rule had a substantial impact on imperial foraging, establishing the Raj's forestry as not merely "the largest land manager in the subcontinent but one of the largest forestry enterprises in the world," as Rangarajan outlines.[12] To catch the game in state forests, one must now get a hunting license. This approach not solely exacerbated the disparities between Brits and Indians but additionally conferred on Forest Department employees substantial influence over poaching in India after 1878. Licenses were seldom, if ever, issued to Indians and not necessarily to all Europeans at this point.[13] As a way to control India's wilderness, the British predominantly slaughtered tiger species. Hunting served as an emblem of colonial "dominance of the environment" and played a crucial part in the emergence of English royal virility.[14] The British frequently compared " disobedient humans" like goons and thieving criminals to" recalcitrant wild animals" like tigers.[15] Whenever plausible, colonial leaders relentlessly sought these rebels' "elimination" and exhibited minimal or no compassion for them.[16] According to W. K. Storey, the massacre of big cats like tigers and lions throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries represented for the British "the triumph of culture over nature and of the colonizer over the colonized."[17] British poaching was drastically altered by the colonial state's burgeoning assertiveness, as shown by the Forest Act. Tiger and other forms of shooting got more "regularized and hedged surrounded with codes and rules," according to Mackenzie, as "British rule moved into the era of imperial bombast," and the "social distance between Britons and Indians" increased throughout and following the 1870s.[18]

Hunting: Rewards and Recreation

The British Raj and the East India Company both vigorously promoted the obliteration of tigers along with other carnivores by enticing hunters who annihilated them with cash, engaging both European and Indian hunters. For tiger hides throughout the early part of the nineteenth century, the company typically offered prizes of anywhere from five to ten rupees, while paying less for the claws and other parts of the body. Whenever a notorious "man-eater" was gunned down, usually a significant amount extra was awarded.[19] Even "more systematic" efforts were made by the British Raj to promote the "extermination" of tigers and other great predators: Starting in the 1860s, motivation for adult tigers was boosted in the Central Provinces and other areas, and now rewards range from twenty to fifty rupees for adult tigers and ten to twenty rupees for the younger ones.[20]

Though a handful of writers and colonial revenue administrators had reservations about Indian hunters selling their tiger skins to various revenue collectors, many rationalized the arrangement because tigers were seen as a threat to Indian society.[21] The sightings of tigers frequently made "the passage of the ghats or public roads imminently dangerous to travellers," posing them as "ferocious" threats to the public.[22] Tigers also frequently killed farmers' livestock and harvests and caused "serious injury on industrious husbandmen." Even amid sporadic complaints by the British competitors that the reimbursement of incentives for slaying tigers crushed the "elitist" spirit of hunting,[23] many government figures perceived the spending of monetary resources on rewards as necessary to motivate Indian hunters to be " more active and enterprising" in terminating tigers.[24] The majority concurred with Williamson that the colonial authority should not have "treated the death of a tiger with indifference," as he put it.[25] Indian tigers were hunted down throughout the Raj with strong support from the government, which occasionally offered incentives for finding rogue tigers. Real tigers were sought because they were prized as trophies and manly foes.[26] The great white hunters, who pretended to be saviours protecting a vulnerable native populace from a ruthless carnivore, saw it as their duty to eradicate game species like tigers as part of their colonial responsibilities. Mahesh Rangarajan has compared the colonial efforts to wipe out tigers in India with the European policy of eliminating predators like wolves on a structural level.[27]

Wolves and tigers hunting and judicial accounts demonstrate that there was also a rhetorical similarity. Like wolves in Europe, tigers were vilified in India.

The Raj often awarded rewards to anyone who killed roaming creatures throughout the nineteenth century.[28] As early as 1822, the company administration offered incentives of 38,483 rupees in the Bengal Presidency solely for the extinction of 5,573 tigers.[29] Around the same time, the Bombay government started a system of offering rewards for the killing of tigers and other untamed creatures.[30] Tiger chasing came to be associated with British might and power at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as with imperial pride. It was also developing as a business, with tour companies and local guides earning enormous sums of money by assisting hunters in bringing in kills. Hunting served as a meeting point for recreation and government for the British Raj. In British Indian provinces and princely states, hunting animals had developed into a lucrative industry by the 1920s, particularly for cherished treasures like wild tigers. Tiger pursuing has traditionally required a lot of money. Because there were fewer game animals accessible for hunting in the 20th century, it was essential to regulate hunting privileges with greater associated costs and punishment. Stebbing claimed in his Diary of A Sportsman Naturalist that the Indian Forest Department was required to consider animals as resources of the forests and continue to protect them suitably for the lucrative big game hunting trade by 1920, when the sector had grown rather large. He intended the authorities to codify the haphazard but extensive market for wild animal skins, meat and other desirable organs in addition to the money obtained from hunting licenses.[31] Some areas of India were already experiencing a thriving commerce in animal body parts. Eugene Malville Van Ingen established a thriving taxidermy business in the rich south Indian state of Mysore in 1912. During the years of existence, the business was sufficiently profitable to deal with 43,000 tiger skins.[32] Due to the enormous popularity of tiger hunts, tiger shooting commercials were widespread. A British Indian newspaper promoted strong velocity “Cordite Rifles” as the ideal tools for killing tigers in 1904.[33] Similar adverts used to flash in the appendix of hunting publications, showing how ingrained hunting was in the imperial recreation industry. A portion of the town was always employed by hunting, serving as beaters, trackers, servants, gun carriers, and chefs while hunters camped.[34] 22,907 people were killed by tigers in 1887, according to a lengthy piece from Saturday Review published on January 15th.[35] 80,000 tigers were allegedly slaughtered between 1875 and 1925. E. P. Gee, a former hunter who became a conservationist, claimed that there were 40,000 Indian tigers at the start of the 20th century; by 1964, there were only a pitiful 4000 wild tigers left.[36]

Colonial wildlife preservation

Colonial conservation is understood to have been the result of a shift in the colonial administration’s perspectives towards the protection of wildlife, which was brought about by a small number of forest authorities and administrators.[37] Or, to put it another way, the British Raj’s survival depended heavily on the colonial policy of protecting wildlife. The British Indian Forest Acts were created to conserve while retaining beneficial ownership of animals and forest resources.[38] Protecting wildlife for the purpose of hunting was the underlining concern of colonial officials and naturalists. Due to their years of experience and observation, imperial administrators- hunter-turned-naturalists---came forward to promote the preservation of plant and animal life. Forest officers can now hunt and conduct more in-depth research on Indian flora and animals, thanks to the Indian Forest Service’s expansion. Beginning in the 20th century, there was a shift in how people saw hunted animals and how much they valued nature. As colonial officer-hunters also embraced an upright viewpoint towards animals, a wildlife preservation movement arose. The British Raj’s reduction in the number of wild animals caused the colonial attitude towards wildlife to shift from one that supported the eradication of undesirable species to one that was shared by reasonable hunters and naturalists. This gave some colonial officers who enjoyed hunting the chance to advocate for wildlife protection.

The mythological aura of the tiger played a significant role in the animal’s elimination in British India. With their hunting tales that portrayed the tiger as both a valued trophy and a pest, nineteenth-century big game enthusiasts added to this legend. Tigers were revered for their grandeur and valour but despised for their propensity for cannibalism. The British hunters, who viewed tiger hunting as a manly blood sport requiring boldness, grit, and tact, portrayed man-eating tigers as evils terrorizing native settlements, and tiger poaching became a distinctive aspect of the broader Indian experience. Over the course of the period of the Raj, the extermination of Indian tigers had considerable governmental backing. Colonial authorities would occasionally offer incentives for finding rebel tigers. The twentieth century, however, saw the commencement of initiatives to protect game species. The British Raj was concerned about the burgeoning nationalist movement in India during and following World War 1, which is when discussions about protecting tigers, now seen as a national treasure, started to heat up. The tiger’s status as a creature that should be preserved and safeguarded rather than hunted persisted unabatedly during the Raj.

By the beginning of the 20th century, colonial forestry had developed itself in India, and the forest areas had been accurately surveyed for commercial use, but nothing had been decided for the animals that lived in the forests. The laws enacted before World War 1 were insufficient to protect game species in a nation with a

diversified political landscape, like India. Due to their capture and usage for heavy lifting, elephants have been safeguarded by the Elephant Preservation Act of 1879. The Act had made sure that the number of wild elephants was well under the thumb of bureaucrats. Following it were the Wild Animals and Birds Act of 1887 and the Indian Wild Birds and Animal Protection Act, which was greatly expanded in 1912. Starting in the twentieth century, in particular following World War 1, the movement to dictate the game grew more fervent. The lobbying organizations that supported stricter game rules and the humane handling of animals had improved in organizations both globally as well as inside the British Empire. In 1903, the Society for the Preservation of the Wild fauna of the Empire was established as a result of the diligent promotion of Edward North Buxton. The society was home to numerous powerful individuals who had strong connections throughout the Empire.[39] The members were concerned about the lack of a game for the hunt. As the "heritage of the Empire," wildlife was said to be the best conserved in protected areas with stringent hunting rules.[40]

The Raj responded to a trend that was occurring throughout the Empire by passing laws in India to protect wildlife and guarantee hunting rights. Foresters, however, promptly, criticized the Act of 1912 for having structural flaws. Sections of the Act were overly imprecise and confusing, according to famous British entomologist and forester E.P. Stebbing, who made this observation in his book Diary of a Sportsman Naturalist. The Act placed the responsibility for determining open and closed seasons as well as the quantity of game slaughtered on local governments. This, he thought, would add to the complexity in a country like India, where people have too many entitlements.[41] The government found it challenging to put the rules into action since forestry officials had been heavily overworked and because hunting was still regarded as an entitlement that, if refused, might insult anyone of some repute.

Selective conservation of wildlife by the British

As the tiger was perceived as the "threatening predator" constituting a significant risk to the Indian agrarian basis, agricultural development, together with other causes like the disarmament of Indians after the 1857-1858 insurrection, led to the systematization of "vermin eradication" policies throughout India. The British were obsessed with eliminating tigers from the start, as seen by their programme of eradicating vermin and enthusiasm for tiger hunting. But this conflict with the tiger was not at all one-sided. The Indian elephant, for instance, was initially targeted because it was seen as a danger to the colonial economy, but later received governmental protection, and under Colonial amendment legislation put in place starting in the 1870s, poaching of elephants became illegal. The doctrine of biased species conservation was, thus, the primary inconsistency of colonial protection law.[42] The British were seen to be in constant conflict with the tiger for control of the Indian forest areas. Such an image was elicited for reasons other than the tiger's value as hunting reward or the excitement of tiger hunting. The primary factor that contributed to the tiger species' decline was the imminent danger it brought to the colonial economic system. Tigers endangered the colonial building of water reservoirs, dams, engineering, and railways in nineteenth-century India, and frequently workers in these construction endeavours wouldn't come back to work until the colonial authorities coordinated with the hunters to eliminate the tigers from that region. The government representatives regularly voiced their concern for these men's safety. When the Indian Railway and the Indian Engineering Services designed the East Coast Railway expansion, a study that appeared in Indian Engineering in 1888 emphasised the necessity of ensuring the security of the workers along telegraphic lines, where they "[had] to be safeguarded against tigers."[43] Thus, at the close of the nineteenth century, the British took care of systematic procedures for the legal eradication of wild animals. In the years between 1875 and 1925, almost 80,000 tigers and 150,000 leopards had been washed out. Although the colonial government appeared to support "vermin eradication," this was frequently an authorization to kill given because of public pressure. For instance, as many as 227 individuals had been massacred by tigers and leopards in the Bengali Midnapore district in the 1870s. A total of forty-two leopards and sixteen tigers were slain in retribution.[44]

The tiger was the animal that held the top spot in British culture. British tiger hunting, according to Joseph Sramek, "depicted the British Empire's control of not only India's political but also of its untamed habitat."[45] The British used the brutal hunting and killing of tigers to further their own colonial goals. In the Madras and Bombay presidencies, the colonial government even hired specific officers to exterminate tigers, citing economic considerations in addition to the responsibility to protect the local inhabitants.[46] Ever since the British arrived in India, they continued to imagine the tiger as a powerful and formidable foe. The tiger was prized for its size, power, brutality, and elegance throughout imperial India. One's lifetime accomplishment was recognized with a tiger trophy.[47]

In Imperial India, elephants were treated more fairly than tigers. The colonizers were motivated to initiate action for the sake of the preservation of the elephants for economic advantages. Elephants had to be conserved since the British were able to control their usage for trade, hunting and official functions. The elephant was viewed as the greatest danger to maintaining the colonial economy and agrarian foundation in the early years of the Company Raj.[48] For instance, it can be seen from company records from the Madras and Bengal Presidency that incentives were given for killing untamed elephants that had ruined farms and fields for

farming.[49] Elephant pursuing by colonizers as a pastime in the early nineteenth century has been repeatedly documented. Elephant hunting was therefore not so unusual or unheard of in the early nineteenth century.[50] However, the empire's attitude towards the elephant changed starting in the 1850s. Despite posing a threat to agriculture and the economy, the British Raj realized the elephant's usefulness and employed it for military transportation, access to jungle hunting, and the lumber trade. Starting in the middle of the 19th century, the capture of elephants was advantageous for the British Raj on a commercial scale. Around 735 elephants were seized in the Assam province between 1877 and 1883, earning the government 12,173 Pound sterling.[51] As a result, the Indian elephant received immunity from the state and was spared from hunting and shooting.[52] Up until 1946, the 1879 Elephant Preservation Act remained in force. The fact that elephants have been guarded under colonial policy since the 1970s illustrates the Raj's entrenched stakes in elephant protection. The British Raj, on the other hand, depicted tigers as 'vermin' threatening animals, and they were extensively killed while people were having fun. National parks and wildlife organizations were established in the early 20th century, but these developments largely served as a pretext for colonizers to portray themselves as protectors and preservers while making use of the wildlife population. In reality, the wildlife acts continued to be exclusive and justified the extinction of predatory great game species.

In conclusion, imperial hunting and conservation programmes were closely related. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were much fewer animals used for game due to merciless killing, particularly tigers. The primary goal of colonial protection was to restore the wildlife that had been lost so that India's sports industry could prosper in the future. As a result, wildlife conservation worked to strengthen the colonial economy and infrastructure. Therefore, in colonial India, wild carnivores that threatened these objectives were relentlessly eliminated, while those species necessary for the efficient administration of British colonial power were ignored. The 1912 Wildlife Preservation Act marked the introduction of a new era in conservation.

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