

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INDIA  
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

## MAN EATERS AND THE EATEN MEN: A STUDY OF THE PORTRAYAL OF INDIANS IN THE WRITINGS OF JIM CORBETT

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### ABSTRACT

Jim Corbett was a tracker, hunter, conservationist whose tales of killing of man eating tigers are legendary. These stories are stories of hunting. The protagonists are the cats. Nevertheless from his writings emerge a vibrant picture of Indian villages, of men, women and children toiling for a livelihood under the constant shadow of the man eaters. Corbett shared a symbiotic relationship with the villagers. They needed him to kill the predators while Corbett needed the support of the natives as drum beaters, coolies and runners to accomplish his task.

The aim of the present paper is to study the image of Indians in the writings of Jim Corbett and to examine them in the light of colonial perception of Indians.

Key Words: Orientalism, White Man's burden, Shikar, Social Darwinism

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### INTRODUCTION

India to the Colonial mind was a crazy quilt of multicoloured patchwork- a land of untold wealth and bejewelled maharajas, of snake charmers and tight rope walkers. India was also the land that offered unparalleled game. Indeed Shikar (hunting) was de rigueur for the Raj experience. Tales of shootings were told and retold in clubs and in company, the trophies displayed proudly in drawing rooms and parlours. Pictures of men, and women too, rifle in hand and one foot on the skin of a tiger, were an essential feature of the Raj paraphernalia. Mackenzie says, "Spectacle of British royals and other dignitaries being photographed standing aside dead tiger carcasses depicted the staging of the successful conquest of Indian Nature by 'virile imperialist'". (Mackenzie, 47)

The theorists thus see Tiger Hunting as an expression of British Imperialism. According to Sramek there were three primary reasons why the British went tiger hunting in India: i. in a bid to be

the 'New Mughals', they thought to emulate the great Indian Kings such as Jehangir, Shah Jehan, Tipu Sultan who were avid and skilled hunters ii. To establish their superiority over Nature iii. To establish their masculinity and thereby their fitness to rule over India. (Sramek)

Some celebrated hunters of the Raj era were James Best, author of *Forest Life of India*, Frank Nicholls, who penned *Assam Shikari; a tea planter's story of hunting and high adventure in the jungles of North East India*, ED Miller, who wrote *Fifty Years of Sport* etc. Another was Jim Corbett. Corbett is infact the best known tracker, hunter, writer, conservationist of the Raj. He is acclaimed for the killing of man eating tigers and his reminiscences are compiled in some of the best loved Shikhar books like *Man eaters of Kumaon*, *The Temple Tiger* and *Man eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*.

The stories of Jim Corbett are stories of hunting. The protagonists are the cats. Nevertheless

from his writings emerge a vibrant picture of Indian villages, of men, women and children toiling for a livelihood under the constant shadow of the man eaters. Corbett shared a symbiotic relationship with the villagers. They needed him to kill the predators while Corbett needed the support of the locals as drum beaters, coolies and runners to accomplish his task.

**Objective:** The aim of the present paper is to study the image of Indians in the writings of Jim Corbett and to examine them in the light of colonial perception of Indians.

**The White Man's Burden:** As Kipling sardonically claimed, it was the self avowed burden of the White man to civilize the brown and the black races. The average British officer and administrator lived by the theory of Social Darwinism. Indians were little better than wild beasts and the only way to rule them was to abandon the paternal methods of the company and rule them henceforward with a rod of iron. (Chand, 479) With this mission in mind, the British gave many gifts of western civilization to India. They brought to their colony in India the Railways, Telegraphs, Roads, Western system of medicine, western system of education, and western system of rule of law. They abolished sati, they banned child marriages. They claimed that were the British to withdraw from India, the natives would kill each other. There would be complete anarchy. This inherent belief of the West prompted Gandhi to protest, "The British will have to take the risk of leaving India to chaos or anarchy. If the British weren't here we would still go through fire, no doubt, but that fire would purify us." (Raghuvanshi, 273)

There are arguments aplenty against the above claims. Indians saw British imperialism only as economic exploitation, impoverishment of the masses, dwarfing of the moral structure and the dignity of the subject people. (Chand) Dada Bhai Naroji formally propounded the theory of Drain of Wealth, wherein he claimed that England was draining enormous wealth from India in form of taxes. To this the later Nationalist leaders added that this drain of wealth 'was the fountainhead of all evil in India' and its backwardness till date. Also some Indians swore by the relevance of the

indigenous systems. Gandhi advocated boycott of English courts of law and British educational institutions as part of the Non Cooperation Movement. During his trial post Chauri Chaura, Gandhi said that the British advent in India systematically ruined the cottage industry that was vital for the sustenance of the villages, the British legal system only ensured a systematic exploitation of India's masses. (Gandhi)

**The Writings of Jim Corbett:** Amidst this cacophony of dissention and debate, there is a lone voice that is neither hegemonic nor worshipful- that is the voice of Jim Corbett. Hunter and tracker, Jim Corbett published his memoirs *The Maneaters of Kumaon* in 1944 and as Ruskin Bond puts it, "Corbett's exploits brought him fame as a hunter. His book turned him into a legend." (Corbett)

**The Maneaters:** Till the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, big cats, more especially tigers, were a menace to the villagers living on the periphery of the thick jungles of India. Entire villages would get paralyzed when a man eating tiger appeared in the vicinity. In the remote villages of Kumaon the tigers killed and maimed hundreds of men and women as they toiled to earn their daily bread in a hostile terrain. Corbett narrates how when he reached Pali, "I was informed that for five days no one had gone beyond their own doorsteps – the insanitary condition of the courtyard testified to the truth of this statement – that food was running short and the people would starve if the tiger was not killed or driven away." (Corbett,4)

As in the case of village Pali, so other private villagers and civil administrators alike sought out Corbett to get the maneaters in their districts killed. The tales of chase, the thrill of encounter and the ultimate deliverance from the menace have been narrated in the books published by Corbett later in his life. He is a master story teller and the tales make riveting reading.

The protagonists in the tales are the cats. – The Bachelor of Powalgarh, the Champawat Maneater, the Pipal pani Tiger, The Thak Maneater, etc. Though all these tigers ultimately fell to the unerring marksmanship of Corbett, not once does Corbett gloat over or boast of the conquest. On the contrary, the dominating emotion in the narrations

is that of respect for the fallen enemy. Repeatedly Corbett mentions the physical beauty and grace of the cat. Talking of the killing of the Pipal Pani Tiger, he writes, Pleasure at having secured a magnificent trophy- he measured 10'3" –over curves and his winter coat was in perfect condition – was not unmixed with regret, for never again would the jungle folk and I listen with bated breath to his deep throated call resounding through the foothills and never again would his familiar pugmarks show on the game paths that he and I had trodden for fifteen years. (Corbett,134)

Repeatedly Corbett reminds the reader of the circumstances in which a tiger turns maneater. The Thak Maneater had been wounded by gun shots and the wounds having turned septic she was starving and hence turned into a maneater. Similarly the Champawat Tigress became a maneater because a gun shot wound had permanently injured her teeth and she could no longer hunt for her natural prey.

Corbett turned into a conservationist later in his life. But all through his writings there is a palpable motif of regret for killing such magnificent beasts. This is magnified when a particular tiger was killed at the cost of true sportsmanship. The killing of Mohan Maneater brought him no satisfaction. "The finish had not been satisfactory for I had killed the animal that was lying five feet from me, in his sleep....I did not awaken the sleeping animal and give him a sporting chance." (Corbett, 108)

#### Indians in the British Psyche

Literature of the Raj has given us memorable characters like Aziz, Prof Godbole (Forster's *A Passage to India*) and Kim (Kipling's *Kim*)- emotional, inscrutable, not entirely truthful. It appears that the representation of Indians in the literature of the Raj follows a pattern. "These images are recurring- either a morally less evolved, devious unscrupulous lying brute or an inscrutable mystic, communing with his pagan gods and immersed in his Eastern spirituality." (Roychowdhury & Randhawa, P100)

**Corbett's Indians:** Western hunters, though the master and the protector, depended upon the Natives for their hunting.- to fetch ,carry, locate and call . The overriding opinion of the Native was

however that of supreme condescension and scorn. Most were explicitly disparaging of the Natives. One such recorded remark reads: "There are plenty of frauds among shikaris... He (Kashmiri) is often a poor climber and indifferent stalker." (Stockley, pp191-192)

As a hunter, Corbett too needed the villagers- to beat the bush, to give alarm, to carry the dead beasts. Corbett lived amongst these villagers, shared their simple meals, joined in their joys and sorrows. Throughout his writings he uses phrases like 'our village Chhoti Haldani' or 'our hill people' etc.

Corbett's villagers are simple folks -simply dressed, eating simple meals, toiling away in their everyday humdrum existence. They touch Corbett's feet to show respect, beg him to rescue them from the man eaters, avenge the killing of a relative, and look upon him as a protector, a benefactor. Corbett found Indians gullible, subservient, superstitious, and uneducated. Men and women who believed that, "the gods do not favour the killing of bird or beast on this sacred hill, and the last man who disregarded their wishes – a soldier on leave during the war- unaccountably lost his footing after killing a mountain goat and in full view of his two companions fell a thousand feet into the valley below." (Corbett,6).

Time and again mention is made of how the villagers fled when the tiger sprang suddenly upon them and carried away a villager.

However Corbett is never judgemental. These were simple folks, unarmed, untrained. And the tales are replete with acts of individual generosity, dignity and grace and raw courage as demonstrated by the Natives . The story of the bania who would not charge Corbett for his cigarette, Chamari who though the lowest of the low in the Indian social hierarchy, was a just and conscientious account keeper, Lalaji who came dutifully to return a money lent to him by a complete stranger and who did not seek to get it back. Corbett has devoted one entire book, *My India*, to these, the poor of India. He sums up the people thus: "During the war years Maggie spent the winters alone in our cottage at Kaladhungi without transport, and fourteen miles from the

nearest settlement. Her safety gave me no anxiety for I knew she was safe among my friends the poor of India." Corbett,55).

And if at all there are judgements, then the west is not spared. He is blunt in his observation of the British Legal System. "Now since the introduction of red tape, these cases are taken to courts of law where both the complainant and the defendant are bled white." (Corbett, 63)

Critical of war rhetoric Corbett muses that if men followed the laws of the jungle then the strong in men would have spared the weak. He illustrates his point with the anecdote where two young children strayed into the forest and though they must have been smelt and seen by the wild animals, not a scratch was found on either when finally they were traced, after having seventy seven hours alone and undefended in the jungle.

#### Conclusion

In his most comprehensive work on Orientalism, Said claims that the Orient was an invention of the West, whereby the West judged, studied or disciplined the East. Corbett alone defies Said's all these three categories of approaches to the 'Otherness of East'.

Corbett's writings do not abide by the Discourse on Social Darwinism of the East. Other writers have created recurring images of a people who were like children and hence it was the White man's burden to civilize them. Fanny Park Bowls recalls that while sailing with a number of servants, there was a sudden storm and this frightened the grown men she was travelling with. She had to take command and motivate and pacify the Indians to not lose heart and fight on to survive. (Parks)

Another discourse was on the Exotic East. "Out of the myriad tales of splendour and the work of the Orientalists was woven the Imperial legend: Bengal lancers and silk robed maharajas, tiger hunts and green polo maidan, royal elephants caparisoned in gold..." (Lapierre and Collins, P xliv) Though Corbett's be the tales of hunting and big cats, his writings do not perpetuate the picture of the exotic East. The stories are peopled with very ordinary villages, neither living in opulence, not practising witchcraft or walking on ropes.

Corbett sought no privileges, he refused all rewards. Physical discomfort did not deter him and companionship he did not seek. In his narrations he is the lone observer talking of people as he found them. There is no palpable design in his writings. His deep sympathy and genuine affection notwithstanding, and despite his obvious assimilation into India, Corbett did not become one with the men he lived and toiled with. He was the 'other' thought not necessarily a superior other, which give his writings objectivity of view and portrayal of Indians.

Corbett's animals are treated with deference, with a great deal of respect, treated as an enemy who is an equal. Corbett's men and women are no cattle nor are they elephant riding maharajas. They are individual men and women, a hard working people of courage and grace. What seeps in his writings reflect the genuine regard he had for the people he worked and lived with. As he chose to put it, "Those who visit India for pleasure or profit never come in contact with the real Indians- the Indians whose loyalty and devotion alone make it possible for a handful of men to administer for close on two hundred years a vast subcontinent with its teeming millions". (Corbett, 150)

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