



Colonial masculinity and indigenous *śikārī*: a history of sport-hunting in Kashmir during Dogra rule

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Abstract

Hunting was recognized and practised as a popular sport by the adventure loving people of the ruling community during British rule in India. Colonial hunting which emerged in the late nineteenth century reflects the changing nature of the Colonial state and also a new imperial ideology of dominance. The importance given to the hunting and to the notion of fair play while hunting reflects the moral and physical superiority of British rulers. Kashmir also became hunting ground for the big game hunters of the British Rāj from the late nineteenth century. The British and even the other Europeans came to this mountain girt territory for shooting the game animals like Markhor, Ibex, Kashmiri Stag etc. The present study is an endeavour to show the Game Laws which were prescribed by the Kashmir Game Preservation Department for the colonial as well as for indigenous hunters along with the various shooting routes which were followed by them during the hunt. The focus of the paper is also on the identity of British colonial sportsmen and indigenous hunters and how the former maintained dominancy over the later in matter of fair play and marked themselves off from the indigenous hunters.

Keywords Colonial hunting · Game laws · Indigenous hunters · Masculinity · Sports-hunting

1 Introduction

During British rule, hunting was considered to be a popular sport by the adventure loving members of the ruling community. It not only provided an opportunity to test one's marksmanship and sporting expertise but also demonstrated the control and mastery of the ruling community over the natural and human resources of Colonial India. Hunting expeditions were there for viceroys, governors and high officials. Almost all the magistrates, revenue collectors and other officials played a very important and active role in field sports (Temple, 1882, p. 247). Hunting for sport was integral not only to the lifestyle of officials but also to the self-image as men who believed in fair play (Rangarajan, 1998, pp. 265–99). The British officials often considered themselves as brave enough to face large and hostile beasts. Sport was a term used to describe certain specific kinds of hunting. These were identified on the basis of variety of circumstances, including the purpose, the techniques and

the identity of the hunter. Sport was said to maintain the physical fitness of the hunter and develop qualities of leadership (Webber, 1902, pp. 317–318). The hunting reinforced the sense of superiority to the British civil and military officials over Indians. Besides this hunting by the British sportsmen became another indirect way to dominate their culture over the natives which also was the victory of the European culture over nature. The British after establishing their indirect control over Kashmir began to make Kashmir a sporting ground for their own game hunters. With the advent of the spring season, a large number of sportsmen started their journey towards the country of Kashmir. By the turn of twentieth century, the princely state had become a paradise of big game hunters of the British Rāj.

Sports men from India, and a considerable number from England, America and even Germany, France and Russia were to be met throughout the summer months, going to and returning from Kashmir by Rawalpindi Srinagar road. Among the big game hunters who visited Kashmir included A.E. Ward, Col. Rowland, Col. S.D. Turnbull, H.E. Malandaine, S. Macdonald, Capt. H.L. Haughton, Major D.G. Oliver, C.R. Radcliffe etc. (Aflalo, 1904, p. 131). With the advent of spring season, large numbers of enthusiastic British sportsmen started entering into the happy Valley of

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Kashmir. They came to the region for shooting and stayed for a period of 2–5 months at a time, in Kashmir Valley during the initial years and later on in the early twentieth century they were travelling to the highlands of Baltistan, Gilgit, Ladakh and Hunza. Srinagar was the starting point where all the onward arrangements were made for these sportsmen for hunting purpose. First, all the sportsmen had to procure license from Major Wigram, Secretary of the Kashmir Game Preservation Department and the camp kit which included sportsman's own tent, two servant's tents were also to be hired.¹ Everything required in the way of provisions, such as butter, biscuits, jam, tea, soup, salt, candles, oil etc were obtained.

The British sportsmen were accompanied by a local *śikārī*²—the one who had been a professional hunter, for their shooting trip who would help them in providing the local knowledge and guide all the way. The skilled *śikārīs* were frequently in high demand by British sportsmen, who frequently depended on each other's recommendations when hiring a *śikārī*. The participation and support of indigenous *śikārīs*—their understanding of the animals and their habitats, interaction with local communities—contributed to the success of sportsmen hunting and the creation of their identity as superior to indigenous hunters. The local *śikārīs* that associated the sportsmen quickly learned the significance and value that the sportsmen placed on trophy heads. To gain their colonial masters' approval, the indigenous *śikārīs* imitated their hunting codes.

The whole hunting party consisted of a single officer, accompanied by a cook, a second *śikārī* and somewhere between twenty to thirty porters (Hussain, 2010, p. 112). The British sportsmen were much cautious while planning their trips for shooting. They were staying in the tents placed on the most favourable ground and away from the sleeping places of porters.

2 Overview of the literature

The study of British hunting in India is mostly available in essays and occasionally chapters in works focusing primarily on Africa. In M.S.S. Pandian's study of the Nilgiris, hunting was viewed as an activity through which unequal gender roles in colonial India were expanded to various areas of social life and established power relations. The colonial encounter in India produced its own language of sport,

hunting and domination. For example, the neat metropolitan classification between 'vermin' and 'game' in the subcontinent became increasingly difficult to maintain. While the British in India followed the British practice of designating herbivores as game-like animals, it was the 'vermin tiger' that caught British imagination. The scholarly works regarding the wildlife policy and colonial hunting in India are not enough. Rangarajan traces the emergence of the notion of sport as a conscious tactic of the colonial power to create a distinct identity with respect to the natives, a subject also explored by Pandian and Mackenzie. However, Rangarajan also points out that hunting, coupled with a growing preservationist agenda in recent years, has led to conflicts over the issue of limited game access. According to him, hunting-dependent native populations were either forced to change their living habits, or join the profitable trade in animal products.

He also suggests that, in terms of the loss of species, the colonial period represented a watershed and the reduction of the carnivorous population of mammals was an important feature of British rule in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, Rangarajan pays little attention to the cultural contexts that generated conflicts between colonial administrators. However, Rangarajan does not talk about those native hunters, the *śikārīs*, who served as trackers for British hunters (Rangarajan, 1999, p. 227).

After their arrival in India, the British took upon themselves the symbolic meaning of tiger hunting to affirm their power over the native society, but in the process they infused it with a different meaning (Pandian, 2001, pp. 79–107). William Storey claims that hunting became an indirect way for British sportsmen in India to control Western cultures over rebellious natives, which also marked the European culture's triumph over nature (Storey, 1991, pp. 135–173). This literature also examines how hunting has become for the British colonialists a way of exhibiting and claiming a masculine self-identity over local society and some fellow countrymen, an ideology that was then expressed with victorious nationalist rhetoric (Sramek, 2006, pp. 659–680). There are various other scholars who have made similar arguments about the colonial hunters that they were presenting a superior character over that of the local population and further argued that the English gentlemen had defined their status within the members of their own society. The main thrust of this article is to examine that the idea of fair hunting incorporated by the British in colonial India towards the end of the nineteenth century in the form of hunting codes and game laws was a critical aspect in the identity and governance of British colonialists in India.

¹ Tent hire costs Rs. 3 to Rs. 10 a month.

² *Śikārī* is an Urdu word which simply means a hunter. The professional *śikārī* who assisted the colonial officer were mostly themselves current or ex-hunters, who used their skills in the existing commercial opportunities.



3 Game laws

It was only in the late nineteenth century that the Kashmir Game Preservation Department was set up and before that there were no game laws prevalent in the region. The Department's objective was to reduce hunting pressure by instituting a set of criteria for shooting 'game'. The ideal hunting code to which the sportsmen had adhered had failed to provide the prey a fair chance in practise; norms of fair hunting practises needed to be institutionalised legally through the creation and enforcement of legislation. The sportsmen were shooting a large number of wild game and some of them were shooting as many as 30 trophies in one season (Darrah, 1898, p. 2). The decrease in the number of games in Kashmir in 1890 forced the state to reintroduce the rules for the preservation of Barasingha (*Rucervus duvaucelii*), Ibex (*Capra sibirica*) and Musk deer (*Moschus*) which had fallen into abeyance after the death of Maharaja Ranbir Singh (Lawrence, 1895, p. 111). The Kashmir Game Preservation Department was set up by Maharaja Pratap Singh, then framed and placed under the charge of a British Officer and sportsman Major Wigram. There were certain places preserved mainly for the Maharaja's own use and for his guests and general public was not allowed to shoot in those area. The main aim of the Department was to lower down the pressure of hunting by introducing some rules which would be followed during the shoot. The hunting by the colonial officers and sports hunters was limited to some extent while the hunting by native hunters was considered to be illegal or out of their reach. Each *sikāri* had to be registered with the Kashmir Game Preservation Department. But despite these game laws, the population of the local Markhors (*Capra falconeri*) continued to diminish in the first decade of twentieth century. This has forced the Kashmir Game Preservation Department to revise its game laws and put a complete ban on Markhor shooting mainly in the Gilgit and Skardu which were having their biggest population.

The Game Law Notification of 1913–1914 stated that 'killing of Markhor is prohibited in all *nallāhs* flowing into Indus above Rondu in Baltistan'. Koenigsmarek (1910, pp. 94–95) mentions some of the elements of revised game laws:

Each aspirant receives a clearly defined district, and may only shoot a certain number of heads of the game. For every 60 rupees one is entitled to shoot two Markhors, two Black Bears (*U. torquatus*) and one Red Bear (*Ursus arctos*).

The number of head of various kind of game which sportsmen may shoot was laid down and also the number of sportsmen permitted to visit each locality in the year was fixed (Youngusband & Francis Youngusband, 1996, p. 119).

The allotment of places among the numerous applicants was also determined.

4 Game animals and shooting routes

While shooting in Kashmir one had to determine what kind of animal a hunter was going to shoot and accordingly would reach near to his habitat. There was the choice for the sportsmen to use four different tracts of the country. The first in the vicinity of Kashmir valley (Wardwan *nallāhs*), Sindh valley and Wular lake country, all of them were holding a game. There were plenty of Black bears (*U. torquatus*), Ibex (*Capra sibirica*) in the Wardwan *nallāhs*. There were Red bears (*Ursus arctos*) in Tilel as well, but mostly they were found in Kishtiwār. Kashmir Stag or Barasingha (*Rucervus duvaucelii*), continued year after year to march from west to east during September and October and their line ran within a few marches to Srinagar all the way from Tragbal Pas on the Gilgit road, up to Sind valley and across Wardwan (Aflalo, 1904, p. 141). The second tract lied east up in the Sindh Valley in to the Ladakh. The game animals found here are Ovis ammon and Tibetan antelope along with a chance of Sharpu and Burhel. The third one lied north to the Baltistan with Ibex as the object of pursuit or to Astor and Gilgit after Markhor. And the fourth one lied in the difficult country of Chilas on the west of Gilgit road. After having roughly mapped out the contour of the land, one can turn to the animals themselves which must be the determining feature in the choice of direction (Aflalo, 1904, p. 142).

The most important animals among the games mentioned in the licences which might be an object of a shooting expedition were: (i) Red and Black Bear (*Ursus arctos* and *Ursus torquatus*); (ii) The Argali (*Ovis Ammon*); (iii) Markhor (*Capra falconeri*); (iv) Ibex (*C. Sibirica*) and (v) Kashmir Stag or Barasingha (*Cervus Duvauceli*).

The Black bears were found in all the *nallāhs* running up in to the mountains from the valley, from Baramulla to Islamabad (Anantnag). During the fruit season, the Black Bears were very obnoxious to the villagers residing near the hills, and their ravages in the gardens and corn fields were often very considerable (Bates, 1980, p. 26). Tilel was the good *nallāh* for Red Bear and they were also found in Gagai, west of Kazalwan, on the Gilgit road and the Pulwar *nallāh*, due east of Tragbal choki. The best time of the year for the Red Bear was in March, April and May when they still had long winter coats and were found on any grassy slopes below the snow. The Barasingha or *hangul* was found in Lolab, Lar, the Sind valley, Gurais, Tilel, Dachinpara, Wardwan and throughout the Pir Panjal range. The Markhor, a species of gigantic goat was migratory and found all over the Pir Panjal range beyond the Baramulla Pass and up on



the mountains between the Jhelum and Kishenganga rivers, including Gurez and Tilail (Bates, 1980, p. 27).

5 Colonial masculinity: British sportsmen and indigenous *śikārī*

The practices of indigenous hunters who were in competition with the British sportsmen were highly criticised mostly on the grounds of fairness that these indigenous hunters did not follow a fair hunting code to be followed by sportsmen. These kind of insulting remarks on indigenous hunting practices were popular although the British sportsmen were aware about the fact that hunting for sport was not their main motive. As already mentioned above, when the game laws were introduced, hunting was considered illegal for indigenous society. There was a law regarding the purchase of license for hunting and the license fee for indigenous hunters was so high that it was well beyond their reach. The hunting for Englishmen was merely a sport, while for local *śikārī* it was his subsistence. In the indigenous hunting practices, the fairness in hunting did not exist, especially when we conceive hunting as a sport. They were not restraining themselves and hunted opportunistically round the year especially during the summer months when they were on the high pastures for herding their livestock. However, this does not mean that the concept of fair hunting and importance of trophies was not present in the indigenous hunting practices. For them, the fairness and importance of trophies was set within a different set of beliefs about nature and relationship between nature and society. If we talk of the indigenous belief system, the competitive and adversarial mode in hunting did not acquire either between nature and society or between two individuals as seen in sport hunting. In sport hunting, the main aim was to win over nature through fair and healthy competition while in indigenous hunting practices the only aim was to earn subsistence from nature through the process of fair exchange. These two different concepts regarding hunting reflect two different types of relationship between nature and society and hence two different types of moral ecologies. During the hunting, the indigenous hunter does not ask for the best hunt, rather he wants weakest, lamest and even eyeless (Hussain, 2010, pp. 112–126). While on the other hand sportsman was looking for what he deserved which was determined by his own abilities rather than the agency of nature as in indigenous hunting case.

6 Conclusion

For claiming the superior self-identity, hunting became a popular means for the British during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The fair hunting codes

that were applied by the British in colonial India proved to be of little success in making hunting a fair sport in reality. At the end of first quarter of twentieth century, the population of many game animals had suffered considerably mostly due to the brutal onslaught at the hands of British sportsmen. The game laws which were introduced in order to regulate the hunting practices of both the British sportsmen and indigenous hunters did not contribute to the recovery of local wildlife population. It was only due to the effort of different governments that some game animals were recovered and were treated as protected species within their habitats. Thus the fair hunting codes applied by the colonial hunters were only having an unfair impact on the local society. No doubt hunting remained a chief attraction of Kashmir during Dogra rule but colonial sportsmen always considered it their own game and continued to remain dominant over the indigenous *śikārī*s with whose guidance and support they were able to shoot effectively in Kashmir.

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