

The Human Experience of Wildlife in India



Introduction

For the last lesson of the module, we turn our attention to South Asia and the Indian subcontinent.* Here, we will see many of the ideas we have talked about in other lessons—such as elite imperial hunting attitudes and practices, de-peopling the wilderness, subsistence hunting turning into poaching—playing out in the historical context of early modern and modern South Asia. This will demonstrate the widespread circulation of these ideas in Anglo-American imperial culture and the way local contexts influenced how those ideas developed on the ground.

THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF WILDLIFE IN INDIA

A VARIETY OF WILDLIFE EXPERIENCES IN PRE-MODERN SOUTH ASIA

ELITE HUNTING IN BRITISH INDIA

RESISTANCE TO HUNTING IN COLONIAL INDIA

WILDLIFE DURING AND AFTER INDEPENDENCE

PEOPLE AND NATIONAL PARKS

* This lesson will be using South Asia and India interchangeably to describe the region during the colonial period. After independence in 1947, South Asia will still be used to describe the entire region and India and Pakistan will be used for the specific nation-states when appropriate.

The Variety of Wildlife Experiences in Pre-Modern South Asia

The relationship between humans and animals in India is complex and the character of this complexity alters over time and place. This statement is not meant to discourage, but rather to highlight that for any example that appears in this lesson, there are multiple counterexamples to be found in different regions, communities, and time periods. One can say with equal confidence that “Indians abhorred hunting and the destruction of animals” and “Indians valued hunting as a demonstration of elite power.” The truth of the statement is solely dependent on the context—the time, place, and people involved. To demonstrate this, we will start this reading by looking at a few examples of human-animals relationships from precolonial India.

An Elite Buddhist Ruler

For instance, the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (r.268-232BC) embraced Buddhism later in life and famously prescribed nonviolence towards humans and animals in his rock and pillar edicts, stone carvings he had had erected across his empire to serve as a material reminder of his rule and instruct his subjects in dhamma or moral duty. One of Ashoka’s rock edicts reads: “Our Lord the king kills very few animals. Seeing this the rest of the people have also ceased from killing animals. Even the activity of those who catch fish has been prohibited.” In another edict he says, “Formerly, in the kitchens of the Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadasi [Ashoka], many hundreds of thousands of living animals were killed daily for meat. But now, at the time of writing of this inscription on *dhamma*, only three animals are killed [daily], two peacocks and a deer, and the deer not invariably. Even these three animals will not be killed in future.” Some scholars cite these edicts as evidence of a long-standing tradition of vegetarianism and nonviolence among Buddhists and Hindus on the subcontinent. However, even though some of Ashoka’s edicts discourage hunting and the consumption of animals, others detail what animals can be killed and eaten, which includes the males of many species. We can see a sense of pragmatism in Ashoka’s edicts. He says that animals *should not* be killed while also naming the animals that currently *are* being killed for his table. Ashoka used his elite power to proscribe some types of hunting while also recognizing the function of subsistence hunting for the well-being of his subjects and court.

Major Rock Edict of Ashoka, with the front sculpted as the head, trunk and front legs of an elephant, Dhauli, India.

Key Terms:

Emperor Ashoka

Swidden

Mughal Empire

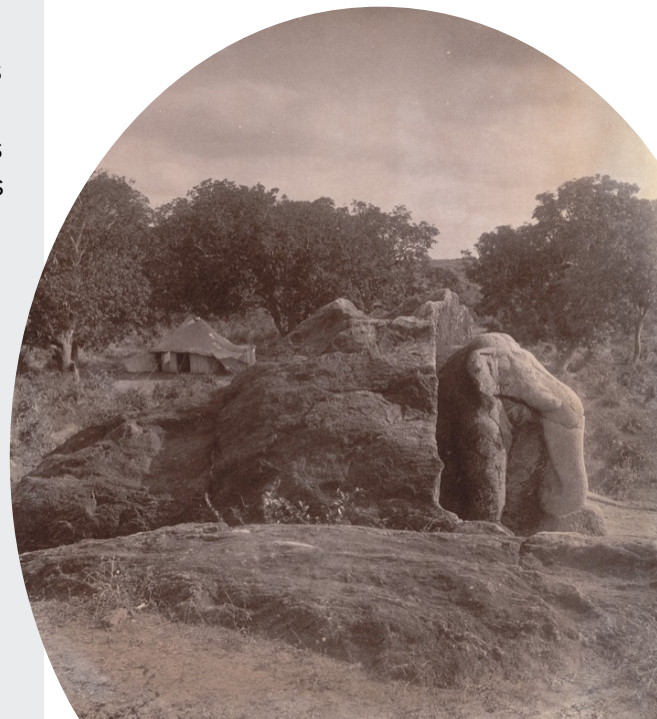
Shikargah

Shikar

Ahimsa

Salim Ali

Ecological
Nationalism





Gond artwork with characteristic elements of nature, rendered with dots, dashes, and curved lines, 2021.

Subsistence Hunting and Adivasi Culture

At the other end of the social hierarchy are the Gonds, an Adivasi [indigenous tribal] group from the hills of central India. In premodern times, the Gonds practiced a combination of **swidden**, or slash-and-burn agriculture, and subsistence hunting. Animals such as deer and tiger regularly show up in their religious and cultural rituals and stories, demonstrating the centrality of hunting to their group identity. Some Gonds worshipped a god in the shape of a tiger. During, and possibly before the sixteenth century, they gained a widespread reputation for being a people who could tame lions. They seemed to both fear these animals because of the threat they could pose to humans and revere their ability to keep the deer population in check. A popular Gond folk song sets up deer as the enemies of humans because the deer get into the rice paddies and eat all the crops. The song then proposes a deer hunt as both a necessity for the starving Gonds and fitting retribution for the greedy deer:

Ye are Gonds with hungry stomachs,
 Wherewithal shall they be filled,
 Now [because of] these sixteen scores of Rohees [deer]
 All our rice-fields have [been] demolished?

...

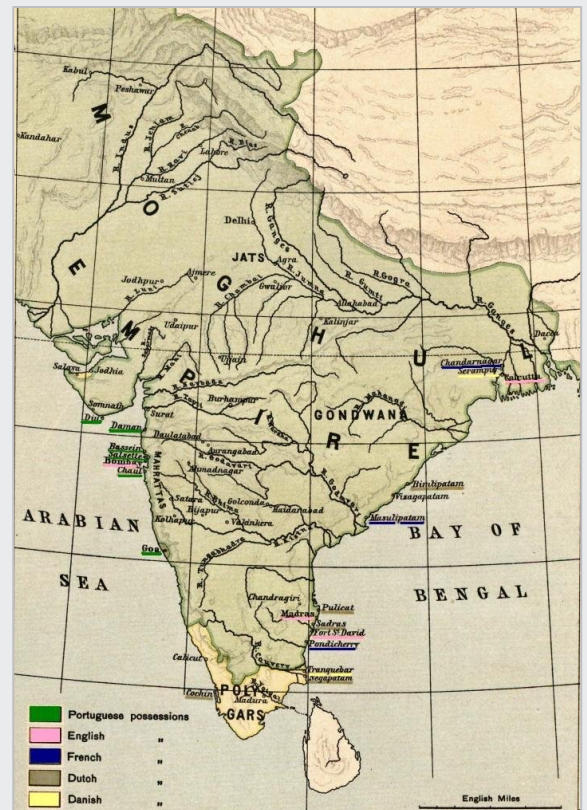
Then the [Gond] Brothers took their weapons
 Bows of bamboo from the mountains,
 Shafts of bulrush from the marshes;
 And in wrath they sought the ricefield.

These passages not only describe the Gonds' willingness to hunt deer for subsistence and ritual purposes, but also the tools with which they hunted them: lightweight bows and arrows fashioned from local plants. This is a far cry from the conditional nonviolent vegetarianism of Ashoka. This example also demonstrates that the three categories of hunting—subsistence, commercial, and elite—are not always sufficient; the Gonds' hunting rituals speak to a relationship with animals beyond subsistence and yet they do not necessarily uphold a social hierarchy in the way elite hunting does.

Hunting for Power in Mughal India

Well into the twentieth century practices and symbols used by the Mughal emperors influenced the ways rulers projected power in South Asia. The Mughal imperial hunt was one of those practices. The Mughal Empire was established in India by Babur in 1526 after the First Battle of Panipat. Babur was born in modern-day Uzbekistan and his empire would combine Turkic and Indian cultural influences.

Babur's descendants—Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb—would rule over a powerful empire that, at its height, encompassed most of the subcontinent. Mughal power began to wane after the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, but a Mughal emperor remained on the throne in Delhi until 1857 and Mughal imperial practices and symbols served as a template of power for both Indian rulers and the British East India Company. Rulers in Rajputana, Hyderabad, Awadh, and Bengal adopted Mughal forms of clothing, architecture, coinage, and hunting. These served as visible links between the historical memory of Mughal authority and the political legitimacy of these Mughal successor states.



The Mughal Empire at its greatest extent in 1700, during the reign of Aurangzeb

The Mughal court was peripatetic, meaning that its capital shifted from place to place depending on the desires of the emperor. The three major Mughal courts could be found in Delhi, Agra, and Fatehpur Sikri in the north, but Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb also spent a lot of time in military encampments on the Deccan Plateau in central and southern India. The processions between royal sites displayed the wealth and power of the court to the imperial subjects in the countryside. Elite hunting served a similar function. The Mughals were influenced by Persian hunting practices that had their roots in the Achaemenid Empire mentioned in Reading 1. These elite hunts and paradises have continued to influence West and Central Asian culture for nearly two millennia.

Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb Hunting Nilgai, c. 1660, attributed to Hashim, left; Detail of tiger and cheetahs from Mughal-era illustration, possibly of the Ottoman poet Lami'l Celebi's "Serefu'l-Isan", c. 1590-1620.





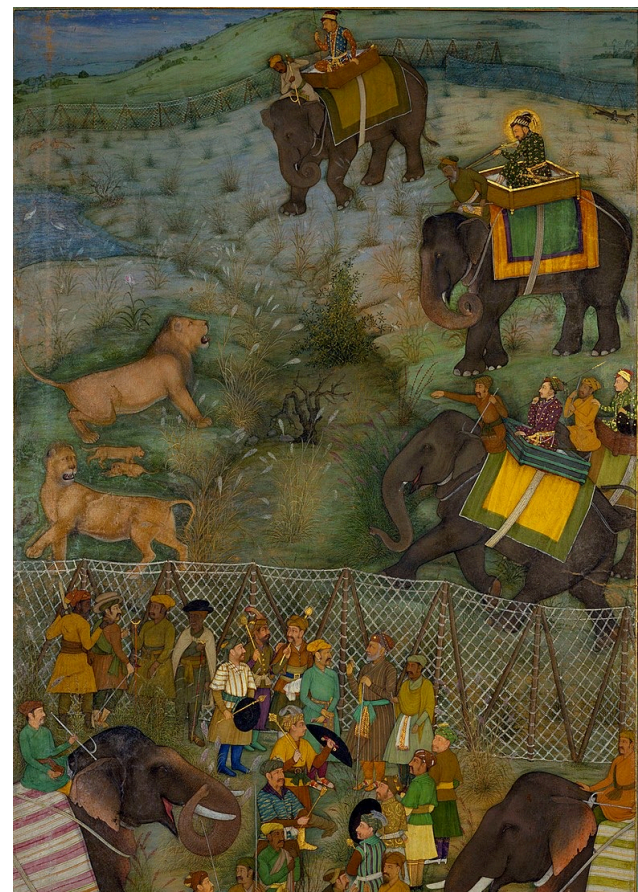
A gilded painting of Prince Aurangzeb facing an elephant, linking hunting to imperial splendor.

The Mughals constructed elaborate hunting paradises, or **shikargah**, which literally translates to the hunting place. These paradises had managed forests, watercourses, and hunting lodges that often looked like miniature palaces. Gamekeepers would raise or herd deer or antelope into the shikargah before an imperial hunt. A feast would often follow the hunt, but its main purpose was to demonstrate the wealth and fitness to govern of the Mughal emperor.

Elite hunting outside of the shikargah served as an even more potent projection of power. Hunting parties would set up camp with elaborate tents and awnings made of cloth of gold. The emperor would traverse the countryside on an elephant or horseback. He might use dogs or human beaters to flush out prey because, with such a large party, stalking animals was essentially impossible.

These hunting expeditions were not just a performance of power, however. They could also be a projection of military strength or a way to gather intelligence. Abu'l Fazl, vizier and historian of Akbar's reign, wrote in the *Ain-i Akbari* that the emperor "always makes hunting a means of increasing his knowledge, and besides, uses hunting parties as occasions to inquire, without having first given notice of his coming, into the condition of the people and the army."

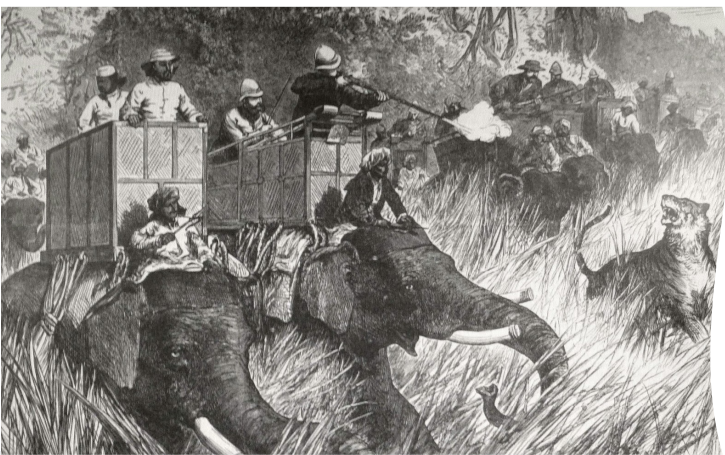
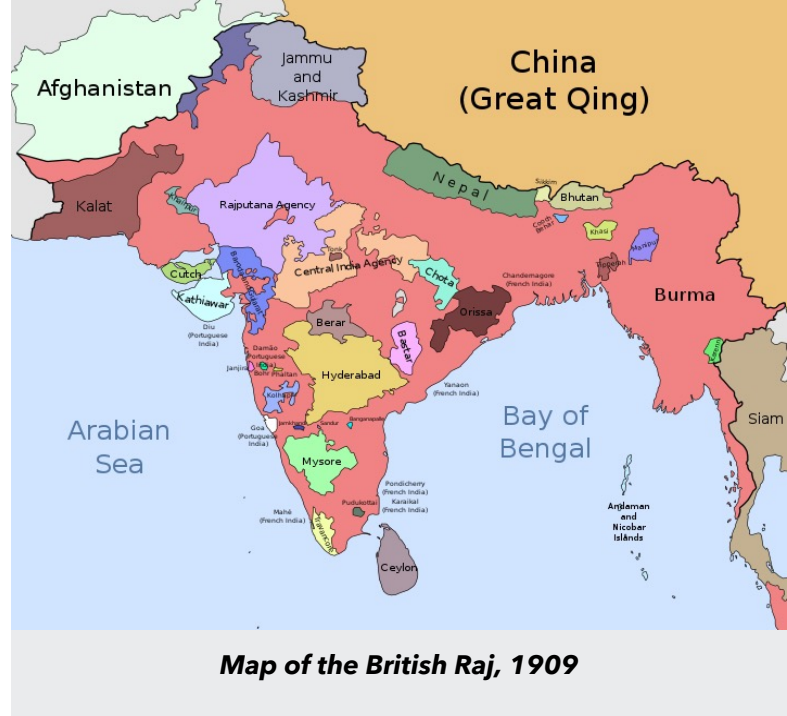
Hunting parties could also be used to showcase the martial talents of the emperor and his retinue and provided opportunities for them to practice riding, shooting, and archery on a landscape that may become a battlefield. Tiger hunting, in particular, provided a way for elite Mughals to show off their marksmanship, as the exemplary tiger kill was a single shot from a stationary platform or a howdah (platform) on the back of an elephant. Elite Mughal women might also participate in tiger shoots or falconry and contribute to the elaborate pageantry of the elite hunt with a separate purdah-like (enclosed) encampment. The hunting traditions established by the Mughals were copied by their successor states, including the British East India Company (EIC).



Shah Jahan hunting lions, 1630

Elite Hunting in British India

The British had an official presence on the subcontinent from 1608, for the first 150 years in India controlled of a small number of trading forts, known as factories, along the coast. These factories often only existed at the sufferance of local rulers. It was only after losing a series of battles to the British in the mid-eighteenth century that the weakened Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II granted the EIC the diwani of Bengal, or the right to collect land taxes in a large swath of eastern India centered around what would become the first capital of British India: Calcutta (Kolkata).



The Prince of Wales hunting tigers, 1876

Throughout the period of formal EIC rule (1765-1857) and direct rule by the British imperial government (1858-1947), there were still relatively few actual British people on the subcontinent. One or two Europeans might oversee a district with the rest of the judicial and revenue staff being Indian. This meant that outside of cities like Bombay (Mumbai), Madras (Chennai), or Shimla British imperial administrators felt there was little to no “appropriate” society, as they would not socialize with local people. Instead, most British administrators filled their leisure time with outdoor pursuits, such as botany, geology, or hunting.

The Shikar

There were two main forms of elite British hunting in India: the elaborate shikar modeled on Mughal forms or more solitary stalking endeavors drawn from the frontier and wilderness tradition. The **shikar** became a ubiquitous part of imperial life beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It was often used to forge diplomatic ties between the imperial government of British India and the rulers of independent subsidiary states across the subcontinent. For instance, when Queen Victoria’s eldest son, the Prince of Wales, toured India in 1875 and 1876, he visited sultans and maharajas in their own territory and took part in shikars in nearly every location he visited, mostly shooting tigers, but also taking part in pig sticking (hunting boar with spears on horseback) and hunting deer and antelope.



The Prince of Wales with his first tiger, 1875-6

In one hunting vignette, told in William Howard Russell's *The Prince of Wales' Tour: A Diary in India*, the Prince of Wales was staying as the guest of the maharaja of Jaipur in Rajasthan in early 1876. The maharaja arranged for a tiger hunt, complete with beaters and elephants. A game warden alerted the maharaja where a tiger kill had taken place the night before and the party set out to an elevated hunting box where they might stake out a goat and wait for the tiger to appear.



Tiger-hunting party in India, 1875

In this instance, however, beaters acting as scouts observed that the tiger had moved down into a ravine, and so the prince followed the animal on an elephant. He injured the tiger with his first shot and wanted to follow the tiger on foot to complete the kill, but the rest of his party dissuaded him. Instead, the beaters threw rocks into the brush until the tiger came out of hiding and the prince could deliver the kill shot from a safe distance. A notable aspect of Russell's account is the casual acceptance that being on the ground with a wounded tiger was too dangerous for the Prince of Wales but was an acceptable risk for the Indian beaters employed by the Maharaja of Jaipur. Though elites imagined tiger hunting to be an act of *noblesse oblige*, a way for the ruler to protect his subjects, it was the local people who took on the physical risks in these elite hunts.

Solitary Stalking

By the end of the colonial period, most popular elite hunting memoirs took on a more paternalistic and frontier-like character. The works of Jim Corbett and Kenneth Anderson exemplify this genre. They were both self-described sportsmen who worked for the imperial government in various capacities—Corbett at one time managed a railway depot and Anderson worked for the British Aircraft Factory—but both were able to get away from work for significant periods to hunt. Corbett spent most of his time hunting in the foothills of the Himalayas, while Anderson primarily hunted in the Deccan. They both also published over a dozen books between them. Arguably, Corbett's most famous memoir is *My India* and Anderson's is *Nine Man-Eaters and One Rogue*. These books are set up in a similar fashion: they are a collection of short hunting stories, most of which begin with the elite white hunter being summoned to a village to protect its inhabitant and crops from a tiger, leopard, elephant, or boar.

With varying levels of assistance from local people, Corbett or Anderson then track and eventually dispatch the threat with their rifles. The texts brought in drama by highlighting the danger of waiting up all night for a leopard to enter a village or tracking a tiger through the brush. Corbett and Anderson acknowledged their mistakes and setback, but in the end, they always triumphed over their feline foe.



Photograph of a bird shooting party in Mandalay, Burma, taken shortly after Burma was annexed to British India, 1886



***"Tiger Killed by a Chance Shot Near Meidah,
from William Rice, Tiger-Shooting in India, 1857***

The texts are a product of imperial society, one in which there is a clear hierarchy dividing white imperial hunters from the rural poor of India. This mirrors the racial and class hierarchies prevalent across British India. In the case of access to the wilderness and hunting, these divisions were widened by hunting and forestry laws. From 1878, wardens of the Imperial Forest Service had the legal right to oversee the collection and trade of all forest products, which included the skins, horns, tusks, and bones of wild animals. This was the first of several pieces of legislation drafted into the 1930s designed to disarm Indians and bar them from hunting by denying them firearms licenses and persecuting them for poaching if they were found with the skin or meat of wild game in their possession. These laws made the rural poor increasingly vulnerable to the depredations of wildlife on their person, livestock, and crops. By the twentieth century it was illegal to even fire birdshot to scare elephants away from fields and gardens. Corbett notes that one elephant destroyed most of a village's vegetable crop in a single night despite a sentry keeping watch with a drum in hopes of scaring the pachyderm away with noise.

As the population of game continued to decrease in the twentieth century, the inequalities inherent in these hunting laws became even more obvious. Though elite hunters had killed an estimated 50,000 tigers between 1875 and 1925, they were the only group legally allowed to own firearms by the 1930s. Similar to the case in Lesson 3, these laws demonstrated an elite mistrust of the rural poor to act as responsible stewards of the environment. As game began to retreat from accessible hunting grounds, imperial laws restricted local access to forests and forest products but still allowed elite hunting parties, such as those who accompanied King George V on his 1911 visit to the subcontinent, to kill 39 tigers and 18 rhinoceroses in a single day of hunting near the Nepali border.

Corbett and Anderson were products of this stratified social context. Because imperial laws dictated that only elite, and usually white, hunters could own guns Corbett and Anderson continually cast themselves in the role of white savior when they were called into a village to hunt a man-eating tiger because no one else could legally do so. In their texts then, we can see the tension between individual imperial hunters who seemed to genuine, if paternal, affection for the Indians among whom they lived, and the imperial system that was designed to widen the gulf between Briton and Indian. While both Corbett and Anderson participated in organized efforts to conserve India's wildlife, neither took an active part in the anti-imperial freedom struggle of the twentieth century.



***Photograph of Tiger Hunt by Lord Reading,
Viceroy of India, before 1935*** ⁸



Resistance to Hunting in Colonial India

Corbett and Anderson's accounts of hunting in the final decades of empire presented an image of Indians as generally accepting, if not grateful, for the work of imperial hunters in their midst.

However, there was also widespread resistance to British imperial hunters by large portions of the population. This resistance to hunting took on many forms: "an urban Hindu might refuse information to a sportsman, a Brahmin in a position of local power might block access to hunters, rural villagers might attempt to petition the *darbar* or court of their princely state to prevent hunting on their lands, or villagers might scare off game before a sportsman had a chance to make his mark. Physical resistance to hunting was never merely spontaneous or frivolous—it was almost always a last resort" (Rashkow, 273).

As we have seen, scholars in the school of Subaltern Studies pioneered the technique of reading "against the grain" to uncover the narratives of people who did not leave their own record in texts written by those in power. In India, these are often texts written by British administrators, journalists, or travelers. Ranajit Guha, a founding member of the Subaltern Studies collective, also argued that one of the most illuminating ways to understand the lives of marginalized people is to look at their practices of resistance. The types of resistance to imperial hunting listed in the preceding paragraph can alternatively be interpreted as a desire to protect all animals or a certain species of animal because of religious and cultural reasons, resistance to imperial government, or both. As so often happens in history, matters and motivations are complex.

Stretching back to even before Ashoka's rock and pillar edicts, there has been a tradition of **ahimsa**, or nonviolence, towards animals in some of the religions on the subcontinent. Both Jainism and Buddhism are founded on these principles of non-violence; many Buddhists are vegetarian, and some Jains even avoid eating root vegetables because the act of harvesting them could harm creatures that live in the soil. Vegetarianism is also prominent among certain caste groups in Hinduism, though this practice varies from region to region.



Relief sculpture depicting the concept of ahimsa, or, the statement, "ahimsā paramo dharma" (non-injury is the highest duty), at the Ahinsa sthal Jain temple located in Mehrauli, Delhi

So, in some cases, resistance to imperial hunting could come from a religious perspective. British imperial administrators, however, were eager to attribute *all* resistance to elite hunting to religious sentiments, as that meant they didn't have to consider potential political resistance to their regime. Therefore, when a group of upper-caste Brahmins petitioned their maharaja to stop allowing British hunters to shoot near the local water tank in 1925, the British interpreted the petition strictly through religious terms—that their hunting offended the religious sentiments of the vegetarian Brahmins—rather than consider local elites might not appreciate foreigners intruding on their territory with weapons.



Tiger hunt in colonial India, 1876-77

Conversely, the twentieth century Indian press interpreted instances of resistance to imperial hunting through an anti-colonial nationalist lens. Any time there was an affray between British hunters and local villagers, they used the incident to highlight a groundswell of resistance to imperialism as well as the links between protecting India's non-human environment and resisting imperial rule. This ecological nationalism, however, was not taken up by the leaders of the independence movement. Even Mohandas Gandhi, famous for his non-violent resistance to imperial rule, advocated for the protection of certain species but did not see a problem with hunting animals dangerous to humans, such as tigers and leopards. Local resistance to imperial hunting could be religious, political, or a combination of both.

What is certain, however, is that these elite hunting expeditions were a point of contact between imperialists and Indians. As we have seen, elite hunting was meant to be a projection of power across the countryside. For every Corbett or Anderson who demonstrated the paternal and protective aspects of the elite hunt, there were dozens of imperial hunters who offended local cultures by shooting revered animals such as the peacock. Putting beaters and porters in harm's way in order to protect the elite hunter, as we saw in the case of the Prince of Wales, was standard practice and the injuries or deaths sustained by these people rarely made it into government reports or hunting memoirs.

Additionally, the Indian press often reported how elite hunting parties created situations in which British imperialists could enact violence on a local population, either as discipline for employees of the hunting party or in response to protests against trespassing or shooting the wrong type of animal. In 1891, a Hindi-language newspaper published in Benares wrote, "the humane Government of India regularly publishes an annual statement showing the number of men killed by snakes and wild beasts during the year. The Government would do well to publish another statement giving particulars of the deaths of natives who fall victim to the kicks and blows of Europeans" (Rashkow, 288). Such violence from imperial hunters may have ostensibly supported imperial rule by highlighting the physical power the state, but it also highlighted the vast inequalities of imperialism and fanned the flames of resistance toward the British Empire.



"Tiger Hunt," by Briton Rivière, 1920



Wildlife During and After Independence

Reservoir of the Thattekkad Bird Sanctuary, also known as the Dr. Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary

As we move through the transition from colonialism to independence and hunting to conservation in the twentieth century, we will see that these conditions were not always solely oppositional. Just as Jim Corbett simultaneously cared for the villagers of Choti Haldwani and benefited from his privileged place in the imperial hierarchy, Salim Ali and the Bombay Natural History Society demonstrated that world-class biology could be conducted by Indian scientists and that Indian biology and conservation could materially benefit through links with neo-imperial US scientific networks.

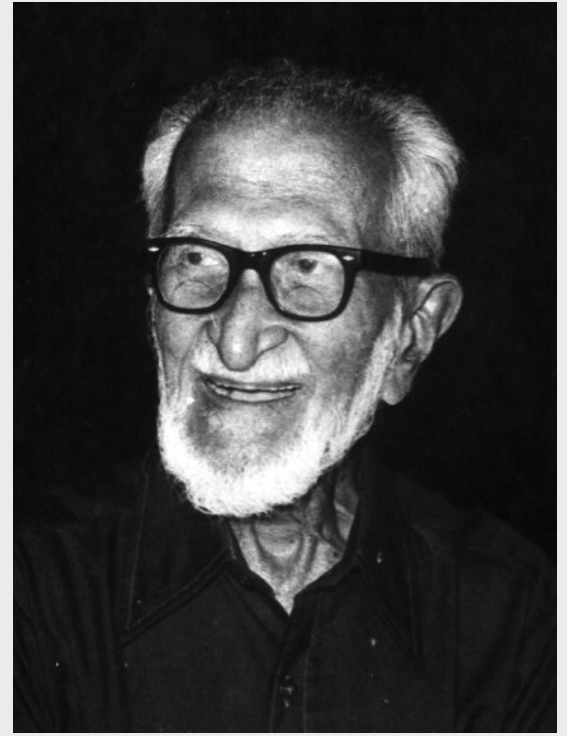
Ali is fondly remembered as the father of Indian ornithology, or birding. As a young boy he hunted sparrows and, in his autobiography, says that that experience helped him to learn how to observe avian behavior. This was his first written description of the cock (male) sparrow.

"1906/7. The cock sparrow perched on the nail near the entrance to the hole while the female sat inside on the eggs. I ambushed them from behind a stabled carriage and shot the male. In a very short while the female acquired another male who also sat 'on guard' on the nail outside. I shot this male also, and again in no time the female had yet another male in attendance. In the next 7 days I shot 8 male sparrows from this perch; each time the female seemed to have another male in waiting who immediately stepped into the gap of the deceased husband."

Yellow-Throated Sparrow (*Petronia xanthocollis*), the object of Salim Ali's youthful ornithological study



Like so many other people who turned toward conservation at the turn of the twentieth century, Ali began his life as a hunter and spent hours outdoors, observing his preys' behavior. In 1941, he published *The Book of Indian Birds*, an illustrated guide to Indian ornithology, written for the average reader. This book was taken up by prominent members of the Indian nationalist movement, including the future prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter (and also a future prime minister) Indira Gandhi. Not only was the book enjoyable, but it was a celebration of Indian wildlife by an Indian naturalist. While Ali himself generally avoided politics in the public sphere, his work fit in well with ideas of **ecological nationalism**: that nation's non-human environment possesses certain unique characteristics and that those characteristics should be celebrated as part of the nation's heritage. Such ideas were visible in anti-colonial nationalist news stories on resistance to hunting and would continue into the independence era with Nehru celebrating the unique natural beauty of India in his semi-autobiographical writings.



Portrait of Salim Ali

Later in life, Salim Ali would collaborate with American Dillon Ripley to create the ten-volume *Handbook to the Birds of India and Pakistan*. This collaboration produced work of biology that is still the standard in India. It also signaled an increasing partnership between Indian and American biologists in the decades following independence. Ali and the BNHS made a point to recruit American scientists to work in partnership with them, thereby granting the BNHS access to money and material they would have had otherwise. Americans, conversely, appreciated have a willing partner in India, a territory that had been previously difficult to access owing to the monopoly of the British Empire on knowledge production in the colony. Already, both India and the United States were on similar trajectories regarding the shift from hunting to conservation that brought about hunting legislation and a system of preserves and parks. This continued collaboration, which also saw a generation of Indian biologists educated in the United States, would contribute the creation of American-style national parks in India.

Great white pelicans in Keoladeo National Park, formerly the Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary



People and Parks

India began to experience a population boom at the turn of the twentieth century. Even though birth rates began to plateau and then fall by the turn of the twenty-first century, the population is currently 1.2 billion and rising. After a series of devastating famines during the colonial period, the government of independent India has been committed to achieving food security for its entire population. This means employing efficient farming techniques and also putting as much land under cultivation as possible. Therefore, most spaces in India, including those that could be considered “wild” are being used by humans for agriculture and other subsistence activities. Even national parks, which, according to the American model, should be unpeopled, contain marginalized groups engaging in foraging and, in some cases, hunting practices.



Sambar deer in Keoladeo National Park, in Bharatpur, Rajasthan

These conditions lead to two major debates in the formation of Indian national parks: What size should a national park be to ensure that at least its core remains “wild”? And what role, if any, should humans play in the management of resources in a national park?

We can see how these debates play out in the example of the wetland park at Bharatpur in northern India. In the 1890s, the Maharaja of Bharatpur returned from a trip to England where he had enjoyed wildfowl shooting. He therefore enlarged the wetlands occurring naturally on his property. Because there were so few wetlands in the area, Bharatpur became a magnet for local and migratory bird populations and even though the maharaja, his friends, and descendants continued to shoot through 1950, the population of birds never seemed to noticeably decrease. In the years following independence, local people and politicians intent on securing a steady food supply wanted to take the wetlands at Bharatpur and put the land and water to agricultural uses.



Painted storks in one of the wetland habitats of the Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur

At this point, Salim Ali and the BNHS stepped in. Ali convinced Prime Minister Nehru that the wetlands held ecological value for the birds and use value for the rural poor, who foraged and hunted (or poached) at the edges of the wetland. Hunting was phased out of the area by 1968 and in 1981 the former hunting grounds became a national park. During that first year, forest guards allowed the local population to continue to graze their cattle on park land, despite the fact that the new national park fell under the jurisdiction of the 1972 Wildlife (Protection) Act and was therefore to be a cattle-free zone. When the guards started to enforce this law in 1982, nine villagers were shot during an altercation that arose when they were barred from bringing their cattle into the park to graze.

Such violent measures were taken because, for a long time, ecologists believed that overgrazing led to desertification and the extinction of local browsing species. However, a study of the Gir Forest—home of the last Asiatic lions—in 1967 demonstrated that cattle ate different plants than the local ungulates, and so removing the cattle from the forest would not necessarily lead to an increase in the deer and antelope population and could even deprive the lions of some of their food source. Despite this evidence, cattle are not considered “wild” species and therefore still have no official place in the imagined wilderness space of the national park, whether in India or the United States.

Humans were another unwelcome interloper into India’s new national park spaces. From the mid-nineteenth century, imperial forestry law sought to keep people out of protected natural spaces. At first, official attention was turned towards people who foraged, cut grass, or collected fallen timber in the forests. Because the British imperial government needed timber for railway sleepers and other building projects, they wanted to protect the forests from what they considered to be trespassing and theft. Regulations on hunting and firearms ownership quickly followed. Enforcement was imperfect throughout the imperial era and into the first decades of independence. Access laws were a patchwork and forest guards would often let local people into protected areas for a small bribe. With the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972, however, people were increasingly kept out of national parks, ostensibly keeping them wild.

The consequences of this policy were seen at Bharatpur National Park. Not only were there violent altercations between local farmers and forest guards, but a study of the park in 1991 demonstrated the crucial ecological role humans and cattle had played in supporting the diversity of the ecosystem. Prior to their ejection from the park, humans would cut the fast-growing grass *paspalum* and cattle would graze on water hyacinth. Without outside forces stemming the growth of these weedy plants, the “natural” condition of the park was one in which the local plants were smothered by this grass, birds could not find ideal nesting habitats, and aquatic life was choked out by the prolific weed. After the results of this study were sent to the forest department, they allowed a small number of local people to come into the park to cut grass for fodder. Such cases demonstrate the reciprocal relationship humans have with the non-human environment.

The idea of untouched, primeval nature is a fallacy; humans have spread across the globe and altered every environment with which they have come into contact. There is certain trouble with the way humans think about wilderness. The evolution from hunting to conserving wildlife in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries both helped to preserve the biodiversity of certain ecosystems while simultaneously imposing human class and race relations onto the non-human environment.

***Nilgai in Keoladeo
National Park***



Further Reading

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Image Citations:

Page 1:

Map of the British Indian Empire, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Oxford University Press, 1909, Public Domain,
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Page 2:

Sculpted elephant on top of rock with Asoka inscriptions, Dhauri, Uri District, photographed by Alexander E. Caddy, 1895, British Library,
<https://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/apac/photocoll/s/019pho000001003u0330b000.html>

Page 3:

Gond artwork, done to preserve and communicate the culture of the Gond community, 2021, CC: BY SA, Sumitra Roy Dutta,
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Page 4:

Map of India 1700 showing the Mughal Empire and European trading posts/factory towns, from Charles Joppen, *A Historical Atlas of India*, New York, Bombay, and Calcutta: Longman Green and Co, pp. 16, 26, 1907, Public Domain,
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Aurangzeb Hunts Nilgais, ca. 1660, Chester Beatty Library, Public Domain,
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Album leaf (recto), detail of tiger and cheetas from Mughal-era illustration, possibly from 'Serefu'l-Insan, CC: BY-NC-SA 4.0, The Trustees of the British Museum,
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/38087001>

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Abdul Hamid Lahori, Prince Aurangzeb facing a maddened elephant named Sudhakar, June 7, 1633, Public Domain,
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Abdul Hamid Lahori, Shah-Jahan hunting lions at Burhanpur, July 1630, from Padshahnama of Shah Jahan showing Moghul Soldier & Civilian Costume, 1636, Public Domain,
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Map of the British Raj in 1909, CC: BY SA, Jiangkm3,
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Lithograph of "The Prince of Wales Killing a Tiger," from the *Illustrated London News*, May 13, 1876, Public Domain,
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Prince_of_Wales_Killing_a_Tiger_1876_\(1\).JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Prince_of_Wales_Killing_a_Tiger_1876_(1).JPG)
The Prince of Wales and party, with first tiger killed by H.R.H. in India, by Bourne & Shepherd, 1875-6, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington D.C., Public Domain,
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2003689409/>

Page 7:

"A Tiger-Hunting Party in India, preparing to Start," Illustration for *The Illustrated London News*, April 2, 1870, Public Domain,
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Bird-shooting party near the Nanda Tank reservoir in Mandalay, Burma, by Willoughby Wallace Hopper, 1886, Public Domain,
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"Tiger Killed by a Chance Shot Near Meidah," Print from William Rice, *Tiger-Shooting in India*, London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1857, pg. 7, Public Domain,
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Tiger Hunt by Lord Reading, Viceroy of India, before 1935, Public Domain,
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Jim Corbett with the slain Bachelor of Powalgarh, 1930, Public Domain,
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Sculpture depicting Ahinsa (non-injury), Ahinsa sthal, Mehrauli, Delhi, CC: BY-SA 4.0, Jain cloud,
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Skinning a tiger for the trophy head and fur, 1876-77, photograph by Willoughby Wallace Hooper, Public Domain,
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Briton Rivière, "Tigerjagd," 1920, Public Domain,
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Thattakkad Reservoir, October 29, 2013, CC: BY-SA 3.0, PP Yoonus,
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Yellow-throated sparrow (*Petronia xanthocollis*), Mangaon, Raigad, Maharashtra, India, Feb. 19, 2016, CC: BY-SA 4.0, Shantanu Kuveskar,
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Keoladeo National Park in Bharatpur, April 19, 2022, CC: BY-SA 4.0, Sainiikshank1410,
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Keoladeo National Park in Bharatpur, Rajasthan, 2011, CC: BY-SA 3.0, Nikhil Chandra,
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Painted storks in Keoladeo National Park in Bharatpur, Rajasthan, February 13, 2011, CC: BY-SA 3.0, Nikhilchandra81,
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A nilgai inside Keoladeo National Park, December 28, 2013, CC: BY-SA 4.0, Anupom sarmah,
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