

## Hunting as a Leisurely Sporting Activity in Colonial Bengal: A Historical Discourse

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*Hunting from age old times is prevalent in the Indian subcontinent. It is also considered as a manly sport which involved a team of men exercising their masculine powers upon the beastly of the jungle. Tiger hunt was something which was looked upon as super masculine activity. Before the institutionalization of hunting, it was a common practice as a form of entertainment. The colonizers however played an important role in institutionalization of hunting. The control of the forest by the Raj also added a new flavour in the sport. Bengal was covered with numerous forest lands and mangroves. Thus, the sport gained popularity among landed potentates who frequented these jungles with a large team as a part of their leisurely activities. Sometimes they took up gun for protecting subjects from the aggression of wild beats. These team members were also efficient hunters though they were sometimes not duly recognized. Contemporary sources including official records and hunting narratives reveals plenty of facts regarding the wide spread acceptance of this institutionalized sport.*

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Hunting can be recognized as a basic necessity of the early age of the social structure. When the pastoral and agricultural economy emerged, hunting was transformed in to a professional means of livelihood and some tribes of the society became inclined towards this profession. Early rock paintings bear testimony to the fact that primitive hunters had a taste of their own.<sup>1</sup> The Paleolithic people felt the need for a tool which would ease the animal chasing process and the outcome was invention of weapons. However, with the advancement of the civilization, hunting became a pass time or sport, and eventually the arms and weapons were specifically designed keeping in mind their application in warfare.<sup>2</sup> Ancient Indian texts speak much of *mrigaya* or hunting as a royal pastime of the men of blue blood. Texts like *Arthashastra* condemned hunting as Kautilya considered hunting as one of the four vices.<sup>3</sup> Manu also included hunting among the eighteen vices and remarked that an ideal king should avoid it. Thus, through the ages hunting got institutionalized as a sporting activity of the modern times and came to be known as a manly sport.

The evolution of hunting can be traced back to ancient times as a practice of pursuing living animals for survival. With the passage of time hunting was transformed from a means of subsistence to a luxurious sporting practice of upper class of the society. Even in some of the ancient Hindu scriptures and literature we find mention of hunting as a skill enhancing leisurely activity of the royalty along with other branches of sports like sword fighting, wrestling etc. The prevalence of hunting narratives of young rajas in ancient folklores, hunting scenes portrayed in *Pot-Chitra*, *nakshi-kantha* bear testimony of the commonality and popularity of the sport. Capt. Thomas

Williamson's *Oriental Field Sports* gives an illustrative description of hunting expeditions of early nineteenth century. One such illustration represents the encampment of the English officers of a Native Infantry Regiment in Bengal; and the hunters used elephants with old-fashioned *haudah*. The author hailed Bengal as the paradise of hog-hunters or pig-stickers. The peculiarity of pig-sticking in Bengal was that unlike other parts of India where shorter spears were thrown at the pig, in Bengal, the spear, a bamboo of eight or nine feet in length, weighted with lead at the butt, used to be carried by the rider close to his knee, the point being depressed, and driven into the pig as he comes up with it.<sup>4</sup>

During colonialism, as Prof. Ranjan Chakrabarti opines, while encountering the orient the Europeans developed certain stereotypes in their own perceptions of the subcontinent which had an enduring legacy. The Tiger image was such a stereotype. The essential elements of the Tiger image were cruelty, furtiveness' and treacherous elegance.<sup>5</sup> Prof. Chakrabarti further elaborates by mentioning that the British saw the tiger as a magnificent animal who establishes its overlordship of the Indian jungle. The British and the Tiger in some ways seemed in some ways was locked in conflict for command of Indian environment. Thus, hunting the tiger, mostly man-eaters, was essentially the prerogatives of the white hunters who sometimes in collaboration with the indigenous elites were keen and passionate about tiger hunting. Thus *shikar* in general and particularly tiger hunt was looked upon as something super masculine and it proved the superiority of the colonial masters in comparison to inferior and effeminate native other.<sup>6</sup> However, as far as the hunting of the tigers of mangroves of sundarbans was concerned the colonial government thought it safe to engage the indigenous elite *shikaris* in the destruction of man-eaters of the mangroves. The government also adopted a policy of endowing monetary reward to encourage indigenous *shikaris* in the mission destruction of man eaters. Notification published in the Calcutta Gazette 16<sup>th</sup> November 1883, mentioned that the foresters and rangers were authorised to pay rewards for killing tigers. Initially the value of the reward was fixed at Rupees Fifty for each full-grown tiger which was later enhanced after periodical review. In 1906 the reward was raised to Rupees One Hundred which was subsequently raised to Rupees Two Hundred in 1909. However, there is no denial of the fact that there were also numerous casualties which occurred during this mission of destruction of man eaters. Indigenous companions of the elites were perhaps the worst affected.<sup>7</sup>

Bengal to the mind of British sporting enthusiasts has always been associated with big game shooting, especially tigers. Few contemporary newspapers and sporting journals regularly published articles as well as advertisements to allure *the hunters who wanted to have a taste of the real adventures of hunting*. Thus hunting in Bengal became a real craze for the outsiders and numerous hunting expeditions were conducted in collaboration with the local landed gentry.<sup>8</sup> A letter from a hunting enthusiast was published in The Oriental Sporting Magazine enquiring about the climate, places to visit and sports to expect in the Soonderbuns as he was planning for a two months' shooting trip there. The editors additionally appealed the sporting friends acquainted with the locality to share the information as they were unable to provide the same.<sup>9</sup> In reply, Young Nimrod of Khulna stated that the cold season appeared to be most suitable for shooting in Soonderbuns. He warned that though the area teemed with large game like tigers, buffaloes, single horned rhinoceros,

four species of deer, etc, they were extremely difficult to get at and only to be obtained with the aid of staunch and skilful local *shikari*.<sup>10</sup>

In another interesting article entitled “Crocodile Shooting on the Ganges” the author W.H.L wrote about the most interesting aspect of the adventurous sport which happened to be a unique one in the Bengal province. The report goes like.....

*“The usual method adopted in shooting crocodiles is to float down stream in one of the large berges which were employed by the boatmen on the Ganges..... Quite a common occurrence would be the spectacle of the dead body of some man or beast floating down with the stream. Then the vultures would assemble and alight on it.”*<sup>11</sup>

In an editorial letter entitled *Pigeon shooting* renowned scholar and civil servant H. Beveridge wrote in Englishman referring to the fact that a considerable portion of Ballygunge maidan was taken possession by a pigeon club. Large basketfuls of birds were brought from Calcutta and sundry sportsmen proceed to massacre the pigeons until the basket was empty, or the shades of evening come on. During this time a large part of the Maidan was closed to the public and the whole place was made hideous with the sounds of guns, and sight of wounded birds. The final portion of the letter is far more interesting which mentions “.... Apparently, pigeon shooting does not come under the Cruelty to Animals Act; but surely the authorities might refuse the use of the Maidan for perpetration of such silly and coldblooded butcheries.....”<sup>12</sup>.

In spite of the false notion of effeminacy labeled on the Bengalis by the colonial masters<sup>13</sup>, Bengali feudal elements as well as the elites showed a keen interest in hunting. The Maharajas of Cooch Behar, Mukherjees of Goberdanga, Chowdhurys of Pabna/Rajshahi, Acharya Choudhuris of Mymensingh, Abdul Shovan Choudhuri of Bogra were hailed as connoisseurs of the sport, whose exploits always caught attention of press and public.<sup>14</sup> Among the lesser light may be mentioned the Zaminders of Mecragacha, Narail, Naldanga, Jamshedpur, Raja Ashutosh Nath Roy, the Raj Kumar of Dubalhati, Babu Krishna Lal Chowdhury of Maldah and many others. All these *shikaris* had not merely to spend days in the field but maintain costly establishment for the purpose.<sup>15</sup>

Memories of Hunting were often pen pictured by authors who were brave hunters by passion. Their passionate narratives were featured in the leading magazines of the then Bengal, viz *Bharatvarsha* under the headlines such as *Shikar- Smriti* or *AranyaVihar*. These narratives were often penned by landed potentates who as a part of their recreational activity were often involved in jungle safari. Sometimes it was a part of their administrative venture and was initiated for protecting their subjects against the wildlife aggression. As far as the hunting culture of Bengal is concerned, it was mostly the initiatives of the zaminders to shield the poor villagers from the sudden attacks of the tigers or the cheetahs and sometimes from the parade of elephants.

Hunting narratives has a charm of its own. Example may be cited of *Aranya Vihara*, written by Kumar Sri Tegendra Kishore Archarya Chowdhury. These narratives were not only the collection of his own chivalrous takes but about other landed magnets who were passionate about adventures in the jungle. In one such narrative, he mentioned about Kumar Kalikananda Singha of Purnea and

his brother Kamalananda Singha who procured hunting license from Nepal before arranging a gala hunting expedition in South Western part of Bengal. These narratives mentioned about every odd detail of the initiatives sometimes even the transport fares of different destinations. These accounts reveal the vivid descriptions of the tents and the ambience in which the hunters enjoyed their trip along with the numerous men engaged in their scheduled activities, who accompanied their masters in these hunting expeditions.<sup>16</sup>

In the outskirts of Bengal hunting became a regular feature among the so called 'effeminate' Bengalees who bagged good many animals. Contemporary newspaper reports reveal interesting account of the Bengalee *shikaris*. A keen *shikari* Mr.S.K.Roy relieved the inhabitants of Kurulgachi in the Nadia district who were in a state of panic owing to the sudden appearance of leopards which had done much damage to cattle in the district. Mr. Roy visited the village and succeeded in bagging one of the leopards, which measured eleven, feet six inches in length. While cut shooting birds the following morning another leopard sprang at him from behind. With great presence of mind Mr. Roy thrashed the barrel of his gun down its throat and fired the beast measuring eight feet in length.<sup>17</sup> The Hindoo Patriot reported that at a mangrove grove in the vicinity of Madral near Kankinara, a tigress was lying in ambush and shot dead by Babu Shaktipada Ghosal, an employer in the judicial department of the High Court. The animal measured about 5 cubits long.<sup>18</sup> A correspondent wrote from Champanagar (Purneah) about the usual summer hunting excursion of Raja Kalanand Sinha and the Hon'ble Kumar Kirtyanand Sinha of the Baneilly Raj in the jungles bordering the Purneah and Jalpaiguri districts. In spite of Raja's favourite elephant 'Moti Prasad' going mad, Kumar Kirtyanand Sinha succeeded in bagging two big leopards and a tiger had a narrow escape. The Kumar Sahib was a keen marks man from childhood, and bagged numerous tigers and leopards and he had made a sort of museum at Champanagar, with stuffed head and bodies of wild beasts including tigers, leopards, wild boars, deer and alligators.<sup>19</sup> The Hindoo Patriot sarcastically mentioned about Babu Ganoda Prosunna of Gobardanga when a panic prevailed among the inhabitants of Haripal and the adjacent villages in the district of Hughly, in consequence of the depredations of a tiger. The locals determined to make a combined and well-defined attack upon the beast but the tiger by a dexterous movement killed one and the others were seriously wounded. The reporter enquired about the whereabouts of the prince of Bengalee *Shikaris*, Babu Ganoda Prosunna and questions his intention to rescue the fellowmen.<sup>20</sup>

The Meherpur Sub-division of the Nadia district was fortunate, in view of frequent depredations of wild animals, - mostly leopards and wild boars- in possessing a zamindar family which for generations had been known to the entire countryside as famous *shikaries*- of whose exploits in the jungle there had been frequent mention in the public prints. This family had long been famous in the area for their achievements in the sporting line. They maintained two elephants and a large number of men for *shikar* purposes and whenever 'khubber' was brought to them of the appearance of tigers, boars or alligators; they deemed it a duty to subordinate every other consideration to that of ridding the people of pests. In this way they had earned the gratitude not merely of their own tenantry in Nadia and Murshidabad but of the people as whole. Babu Dino Nath, the patriarchal head of the family, was so renowned as a *shikari* that the Government exempted him from the

operations of the Arms Act. His nephew Babu Kishori Mohun Bagchi was also an intrepid *shikari*. Within a span of 11 or 12 years he had killed two score and more leopards and tigers, 25 to 30 man-eating alligators and many scores of wild boar. Amrita Bazar Patrika published a full-length article with a purpose of dealing with the feats of this family, particularly of Babu Kishori Mohun Bagchi and concluded that-

“...it is a pity that Government has not yet recognized the services rendered by him to the district by the pursuit of big game. It would we all feel here, be a graceful recognition if the exemption enjoyed by his uncle, who has practically no need for it in his old age, were extended to him.”<sup>21</sup>

K.M.Bagchi had written about his experiences in a narrative *shikar* account especially for Amrita Bazar Patrika where he mentioned about the shooting of a leopard in Arabpur which measured 8 ft 6 inch.

“...after this event I frequently had my outings in search of sport. I need to spend my idle shots on crocodiles and wild boars but sometime clasped before. Leopard hunts however are so very devoid of any special interest that it is hardly possible for one to say something new on every first occasion.” The Patrika opines that the life of a *shikari* though full of risky and sometimes unpleasant, adventures to himself is yet full of tingling and pleasing tales for others.<sup>22</sup>

Babu Jamini Kanta Sanyal narrated in Amrita Bazar Patrika about the hunting story of Babu Kishori Mohan Bagchi, the well-known *shikari*, Zemindar and Hony. Magistrate assisted by Bholanath Bagchi in leopard infested villages of Jamshedpur. They bagged a big leopard measuring 8 feet and two wild boars. The writer also mentioned that these *shikaris* had won the esteem and praise of the local people by killing two other leopards in the neighbourhood some time ago and wished that may God grant them a long life and strength to save the weak from the devouring grasp of wild beasts.<sup>23</sup> The hunting feats of this renowned Bagchi family were almost a regular feature in the newspaper. Reports were published about K.M. Bagchi bagging a big leopard in Kamurdia, a village in the district of Murshidabad<sup>24</sup> and another leopard shooting in Natua near Jamshedpur.<sup>25</sup> Mr. Bagchi gave a clear proof of his undaunted courage and dexterity by shooting 4 leopards in 2 months.

Another feat of a royal lineage got published in Amrita Bazar Patrika. Raja Nagendra Nath Sinha Sabu Rao of Ramgurh bagged one leopard about 9 feet in length in Midnapore. The Raja killed the animal at the first shot of a breach-loader fowling piece, as it lay in wait for its prey a cow- grazing near the jungle.<sup>26</sup> The *shikar* party of the zeminders of the Mechpara consisting of the zeminders Babu Jatindra Narayan Chhowdhury, S. N .Chowdhury, P.C. Chowdhury and the manager of the said estate Mr. Bignold shot a huge tiger, 10 feet in height, in a forest near Lakhipur. Six elephants belonging to the estate were with them.<sup>27</sup> Mention can be made of the Tiger-killer Chowdhuries of Roydogachia of Burdwan. For generations the family was famous for killing tigers occasionally and hence got the title. Earlier they used to kill tigers with *lathis* and other weapons rather than extensively using guns. It may be noted here that though there was a big jungle extending over a hundred bighas of land just behind their homestead which was infested with tigers, boars and other animals, they never made any attempt to kill them unless and until any harm to human life was

reported.<sup>28</sup> Here the emphasis on the hard working hunter-protector with a paternal concern for the native villager's welfare was said to be taken a prime motive to destroy noxious animals as part of their duty to guard the helpless villager.

Hunting played a significant role in strengthening the diplomatic relation among the British officials and the landed Indian elites. Often the British officers were invited to accompany and participate in the regal hunting expeditions of Indian aristocrats. However, these grandiose events also required active involvement of numerous native servants and local *shikaris*. The aristocrats were fully reliant on these "helpers" for the success of their expeditions. A local correspondent from the village of Maheswarpasha in Khulna wrote about the traditional process the local *shikaris* resorted to for killing leopards. Their machinery consisted of several pieces of nets made of jute ropes interwoven with each other. These nets were usually eight to nine feet in height, propped up by bamboo pieces, the base being stuck to the earth by bamboo hooks closely set. A stretch of jungle was encircled with it with the object of driving the brutes into it. Once entangled, they used to try to break through them by making a hole downwards. The *shikaris* then assembled round the tightly enclosed net and spear the brutes.<sup>29</sup> Though very few, some of the feats of natives also found mention in the pages of newspapers. A *paloan* had a duel with a tiger in the village in the sub-division of Jhenidah. A woman called out for help when she was attacked by a tiger. A *paloan* went to the field of action and caught the tiger in his iron embrace. The tiger fought a good fight but was unable to withstand the pressure of the *paloan* and died in his embrace.<sup>30</sup> Kangali Sikari, a "bunia" hunter of Banibaha, an ancient village three miles from Raj bati, killed a large leopard with a rifle and brought it to the criminal court. It was about six cubits long and 2½ cubits high. Kangali was rewarded with Rs. 10 from the criminal court.<sup>31</sup>

Intense effort was exerted by the assistants of the landed aristocrats to make these safaris fruitful and productive one. These second class *shikaris* did not receive any recognition from their masters and were never mentioned in any accounts whatsoever. However, there is no denial of the fact that these local *shikaris* were competent enough to guide the elite *shikaris* who were often outsiders in the unknown jungle. These unknown *shikaris* were the masterminds who framed these *shikar* expeditions and often shoot the beasts for their masters. But once the actual battle was over and the beast was killed, the master *shikari* of the hunting party usually took control over the place and posed in front of the camera with the beast under his feat thus showing off his pseudo vigour and strength. Thus, by glorifying their image in front of camera these babu hunters of Bengal showed off their expertise and their super masculine image in the public sphere.

In fine it can be stated that hunting in colonial Bengal became a part and parcel of the life of the landed aristocrats as well as ordinary people in their own ways. In the forest regions of Bengal tribal people as well as common villagers used to hunt sometimes for their livelihood, sometimes for self protection and also for entertainment. The landed potentates were also keen about this sport from leisurely perspective as it was a practice for the royal class from age old times. Hunting which was a means for survival from time immemorial got a class upliftment when it became a favourite leisurely activity of landed elites. For them, hunting expeditions served multi purposes- testimony of their bravery, projection of benevolent role of protectant to their subjects, an opportunity

of appeasing the colonial officers to strengthen the diplomatic relations. The British officers posted in the eastern part of India for the sake of the love for the game often accompanied the local zaminders in their hunting expeditions. This got attention in press both in local and international level. Thus institutionalization of hunting in colonial Bengal had its own impact on social lives of the entire race.

**Endnotes:**

1. For details see, H.D Sankalia: *Pre-Historic Art in India*. Delhi, Vikas, 1978 cited in, Mohan Chand (ed): *The Art of Hunting in Ancient India of Raja Rudradeva of Kumayun*, translated by M. M. Haraprasad Shastri. Delhi, Eastern Book Linkers, 1982.
2. Mohan Chand (ed): *The Art of Hunting in Ancient India of Raja Rudradeva of Kumayun*, translated by M. M. Haraprasad Shastri. Delhi, Eastern Book Linkers, 1982, p.15.
3. *Arthashastra VIII*, 3, cited in, Mohan Chand (ed): *The Art of Hunting in Ancient India of Raja Rudradeva of Kumayun*, translated by M. M. Haraprasad Shastri. Delhi, Eastern Book Linkers, 1982, p. 27.
4. *Illustrations of Indian field sports: selected and reproduced from the coloured engravings* first published in 1807 / after designs by Captain Thomas Williamson of the Bengal Army.
5. Ranjan Chakrabarti: 'Tiger and the Raj: Ordering the Maneater of the Sundarbans 1880–1947'. In Ranjan Chakrabarti (ed.): *Space and Power in History: Images, Ideologies, Myths and Moralities*, Calcutta, Penman, 2001, p. 67.
6. Ibid.
7. Annual Progress Report of Forest Administration for 1881-2 through 1912-13, cited in Ranjan Chakrabarti: *Tiger and the Raj*, pp. 74-75.
8. *Calcutta Sporting Chronicle*, 8 April 1899.
9. *The Oriental Sporting Magazine*, Vol V, 1872.
10. Ibid.
11. *The Indian Sportsman*, 15 April 1900.
12. *The Englishman*, 19 August 1886.
13. For details see Mrinalini Sinha: *Colonial Masculinity: The Manly Englishman and the Effeminate Bengali in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995.
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15. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 4 May 1909.
16. *Bharatvarsha*, Magh 1322 BS.
17. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 10 April 1913.
18. *The Hindoo Patriot*, 27 April 1908.
19. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 5 May 1913.
20. *The Hindoo Patriot*, 13 May 1916.
21. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 4 May 1909.

22. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 23 September 1905.
23. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 April 1913.
24. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 12 May 1913.
25. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 7 June 1913.
26. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 3 September 1917.
27. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 30 April 1913.
28. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 28 December 1930.
29. *The Times of India*, 17 May 1894.
30. *Amrita Bazar Patrika* 7 April 1913.
31. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 25 November 1930.