

# Jim Corbett's 'Green' Imperialism

PRASANTA DAS

Jim Corbett is held in great esteem in India as a compassionate man who had exceptional environmental awareness. A closer look however shows that this image is misleading and that he was in fact a fully paid-up imperialist. The continuance of the Corbett myth is indicative of our failure to read his skilfully written books critically.

Jim Corbett migrated to Kenya in 1947 despite being born in India and belonging to a family that had lived here for two generations. This was partly because he feared neglect if he stayed on (Kala 1999). But few Englishmen have been held in higher esteem in independent India than Corbett. For more than half a century he has been regarded as not only a great shikari but also as a friend of the Indian poor and of Indian wildlife. The fact that the Ramganga National Park was renamed after him is an indication of the respect in which he is held. A good deal of Corbett's fame comes from the popular books he wrote: *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1944), *The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* (1948) and *The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1952). A gifted writer, he conveys effectively the sights, sounds and smells of the jungle and the excitement of the hunt. He also comes across as a modest and compassionate man, an impression created by his apparent empathy with the hill men and women of Kumaon and Garhwal. Such is Corbett's persuasive power as a writer that his biographers tell his life story much as he narrates it in his two memoirs, *My India* (1952) and *Jungle Lore* (1953). But Corbett's reputation is a misleading one. He was, in fact, a fully paid-up imperialist.

Recent scholarship in environmental history allows us to take a closer look at the Corbett myth. It would of course be anachronistic to expect Corbett to display the attitudes that would today pass muster as ecologically sound but to continue seeing him as a pioneering conservationist and protector of the weak is wrong.

## Colonial Control of the Forest

Though environmental historians like Ramachandra Guha have been accused of promoting a golden-ageist view of indigenous, pre-colonial uses of nature, there is little doubt that colonialism involved

commercial extraction of India's forest resources on an unprecedented scale. Colonial exploitation was transnational, extensive and capitalistic in contrast to pre-colonial demands, which were local, limited and feudal. Also, the British, as Mahesh Rangarajan (1996) has put it, started "fencing the forest". Colonial forestry imposed severe restrictions on communities that previously had almost unrestricted access to forests.

The colonial takeover of the forest provided the background for Corbett's dramatic exploits as a hunter. Indian rulers like the Mughals had indulged in tiger hunts in order to demonstrate their fitness to rule. But unlike hawking, which was popular with the Mughals, or sports like bear-hunting and pig-sticking (the latter a particularly dangerous one), it was tiger-hunting which was appropriated by the British and invested with important symbolic meaning. In imperial representation, Indian hunting came to be seen as wasteful and cruel while the British killing of animals, including the destruction of man-eating tigers, was supposedly regulated and defensive. Colonial hunting thus acquired conservation overtones despite the fact that large-scale tiger-hunting was quite the norm for British officials. In his books, Corbett is silent about his role in organising tiger hunts for VIPs who visited Kumaon.

Corbett does not present hunting as a pleasurable sport and he always made it a point to reject any monetary reward for killing a man-eating tiger. In total contrast to George Orwell's ironic and subversive treatment of colonial hunting in "Shooting an Elephant", Corbett depicts shooting man-eaters as a responsible, protective task, undertaken to save helpless, panic-stricken villagers and their livestock. Though he never explicitly states it, the prerogative of getting rid of the menace of a man-eating tiger is clearly that of the white sahib. In *My India*, written in Kenya, Corbett looks back at an India that was largely free of strife as long as hands-on Englishmen like him were in charge. In his hunting books too we get a picture of the villages of Kumaon existing in relative tranquillity, disturbed only by the occasional bad cat. But in *The Unquiet Woods* Guha, who studies the Chipko

environmental movement in the historical context of forest agitations in Kumaon and Garhwal, documents the widespread discontent in the first part of the 20th century against the forest department. Peasants in the region, especially in Kumaon, often protested against the forest policies of the British by setting reserved forests on fire (Guha 2000).

Once we become aware of the ecological and historical context, it becomes possible to detect cracks in the otherwise seamless surfaces of Corbett's texts. Describing the tiger as "a large hearted gentleman" in *Man-eaters of Kumaon*, Corbett says that it, on occasion, turns to killing human beings only because its natural prey has been wiped out by man (Corbett 2008). He comments later on that the tiger named the "Bachelor of Powalgarh" changed its quarters because of the extensive fellings conducted by the forest department in 1930 in the area surrounding its previous home (ibid). It is at such moments that we become aware of the deforestation and widespread change caused by colonial forestry.

In *My India* Corbett recounts how he assisted the policeman Freddie Young in the hunt to bring the dacoit Sultana to justice. Corbett depicts Sultana as a romantic and gallant figure – "India's Robin Hood" (Corbett 2000). When the dacoit is finally caught and condemned to death he sends for Young and bequeaths him his wife and son. This episode underlines Corbett's point that Indians were trusting of the British who took their role as protectors of the poor and underprivileged seriously and honourably. However, it is revealing that he describes Sultana as belonging to one of the criminal tribes. The "fencing of the forest" meant that many tribes that had earlier relied on shifting cultivation, food gathering, and hunting for survival could no longer do so. These nomadic communities, some of whom took to a life of petty crime, were branded as inherently criminal by the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871.

Corbett also relates an incident concerning two untouchable basket makers, Narwa and Haria, who, one December morning in 1939, set off on foot from Kaladhungi (near Nainital) to obtain a licence to cut bamboo from the forest guard at a nearby village.

On the way through the jungle Narwa stepped on a sleeping tiger and was severely mauled by it. With great courage and strength, Haria carried Narwa to Kaladhungi. Corbett describes Haria's rescue of Narwa as the bravest deed he knows of. However, he finds that Haria is oblivious of his remarkable display of courage: "I have not done anything, Sahib, have I, that is likely to bring trouble on me or on my brother Narwa?" (ibid). Narwa too pleads with Corbett to see that Haria does not get into trouble. Corbett evokes the colonial stereotype of the simple and law-abiding hillman to explain the incident. However, a different interpretation suggests itself when we consider that Haria and Narwa's anxiety probably arises from their knowledge that the forest is no longer free.

### Discrepancies

Because of the enormous respect that Corbett has so far enjoyed, few have wanted to question his accounts. But discrepancies emerge when even an otherwise deferential biographer like Martin Booth does a little probing. Corbett's first man-eater was the Champavat tigress, which he killed in 1907. In *Carpet Sahib*, Booth notes that Corbett claimed to have killed the Mukteswar man-eater some weeks later, and the Panar leopard soon after. "The truth is", writes Booth, "that Jim got his dates wrong" (Booth 1986). While Corbett did kill the Champavat man-eater in

1907, official records show that the Panar leopard was killed in September 1910, and the Mukteswar tigress in the spring of that year.

Booth also mentions an incident that occurred in April 1910 when Corbett began his hunt for the Panar man-eating leopard. On the evening of the first day he found a young farmer and his 18-year-old wife who had been dragged off by the man-eater only to be snatched back by the husband. The young woman was unconscious from loss of blood and was dying. Corbett decided to stay with the couple to see if the leopard would return. The following morning he left the area but not before spending some time hunting (for sport) a tiger reputed to be protected by the gods. Booth comments:

One has to ask here several questions which throw some doubts upon Jim's character, suggesting that it was not as unblemished as his future legendary reputation would make it appear.

He had possibly waited three years to go after the Mukteswar and Panar man-eaters, when he could have made attempts for them over that time. He was in the area of the man-eater on the night the girl was snatched back by her husband and yet, the next day, he seemingly did not seek to ...go after it although he knew it must still be in the vicinity. Finally, he obviously had enough time on leaving the area to indulge in a bit of would-be sport hunting after the temple-guarded tiger of Dabidhura... (ibid).

But Booth does not really look at Corbett's life closely which is why there are

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(Forthcoming – April/May 2009)

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two Corbetts in *Carpet Sahib*. There is the Corbett who was an overworked and underpaid railway employee at Mokameh Ghat in Bihar from about 1894 till 1917. And there is the shrewd and successful businessman who in December 1906 took over F E G Matthews and Co. Where he got the money to acquire this Nainital hardware and house agent business is not known. Booth speculates that Corbett paid from an investment he had made previously. But this does not explain why Corbett stayed on in his poorly paid railway job at Mokameh Ghat till the first world war, when he offered his services to the army.

There is some irony in Corbett's imperialism. The hierarchal nature of British colonial society meant that Corbett, who belonged to a family that had been domiciled for two generations, was an inferior Englishman. Corbett however was clearly on the side of Empire, and rushed to its defence whenever he thought it was

threatened. Thus when the Boer war broke out he unsuccessfully sought permission to enlist. Corbett volunteered again when first world war started. He was given a wartime commission as captain and ordered to raise a labour corps to take to France. During second world war, Corbett, now in his late 1960s, trained soldiers going to Burma in jungle warfare.

### Continuation of the Myth

A consideration of the ecological and environmental context helps us to place Corbett in perspective. However, even environmental historians continue to accept Corbett's estimation of himself. Thus, Guha's introduction to him in *Lives in the Wilderness* (which includes *My India* along with the autobiographies of Verrier Elwin and Salim Ali) is an appreciative one, unaffected by his knowledge of the environmental history of Kumaon. Similarly, Rangarajan gives us a friendly

account of Corbett in his essay on nature writers in *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English*. Corbett's ability to seduce us is of course a tribute to his talent as a writer. More generally, the persistence of the Corbett myth seems to be symptomatic of our failure to be sufficiently on guard against ideological constructions of nature and wildlife. There is little doubt the myth will endure as long as we continue to read Corbett uncritically.

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