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JIM CORBETT: AN ENVIRONMENTALIST AND VISIONARY LEGEND OF WILDLIFE AND RURAL FOLK IN THE FOOTHILLS OF HIMALAYAS

Abstract

Edward James Jim Corbett popularly known in India as ‘Jim Corbett’ whom we generally consider as a hunter was also a front-runner tiger and environmental conservationist too. As it is well known that between 1907 and 1938, he trailed and shot 19 tigers and 14 leopards; a total of 33 recorded and documented man-eaters in the Himalayas. It is an estimate that these tigers and leopards had killed more than 1,200 men, women and children in the region. In spite of killing these deadly animals; Corbett in India is still remembered as a great environmentalist, who devoted his life to jungle ecosystem. He has achieved great love and respect in the memories of peoples in the areas where he worked. Jim spent his childhood in solitude observing nature. He has immense love for the flora, fauna and local folks of his area. Books written by him contain good accompanying information on the flora and fauna and also village life of the Himalayan region. To credit his valuable work in the field of animal and plant conservation first national park of India earlier known as ‘Hailey National Park’ now named after him as ‘Jim Corbett National Park’. The present paper explores the role of Jim Corbett as a hunter, environmentalist and savior of his people. The paper reflects the light upon the unseen sides of Corbett; the inner side of a hunter, the Legend of Jim Corbett which is alive in hearts and minds of people all over the world and his contribution to mankind and wildlife which cannot be ignored.

Keywords: environmentalist, flora, fauna, foothills of Himalayas, jungle ecosystem, local folk.

Introduction:

Jim Corbett, the second youngest son of the Corbett family was a modest man of modest parents. Jim was a reserved man with selected friends, drawn from those who shared his love for nature, the fauna and flora of hills and plains, simple people like himself, with whom he lived and exchanged unfaltering devotion. Corbett spent his childhood in solitude observing nature while roaming in the mountains and jungles of Nainital, where the family lived in summer and the jungles surrounding Kaladhungi lower down, where they lived in winter.

With the passage of time Jim Corbett became more concerned about the conservation and preservation of flora and fauna of the Himalayas. He would only choose confirmed man-eaters and was one of the first hunters to believe that carnivore are not man eaters by nature but become so only because of some disability. The advocacy for the preservation of wildlife ranks among the major contributions of Jim's life. Other major contributions include his clearly written, thrilling and informative books, which will continue to enthrall people many generations to come. Jim's present claim to fame is based largely on this ability to convey people into the Indian jungles, whether in the pursuit of man eaters, or as a casual observer (Souvenir of the Corbett centenary, 1975-1976).

Explanation: Jim Corbett: An Environmentalist and Visionary Legend of Wildlife and Rural Folk

"A man-eating tiger is a tiger that has been compelled, through stress of circumstances beyond its control, to adopt a diet alien to it. The stress of circumstances is, in nine cases out of ten, wounds, and in the tenth case old age."

These are the lines by the hunter and environmentalist Jim Corbett from his famous book *"Man-eaters of Kumaon"*. The word hunter and environmentalist used in the same line very clearly display the personality of Corbett. In spite of being a hunter of the man-eaters, he was an environmentalist too, which is very clearly understood by the above stated lines by him.

"Human beings are not the natural prey of tigers, and it is only when tigers have been incapacitated through wounds or old age that, in order to live, they are compelled to take to a diet of human flesh."

The above lines by Jim Corbett clearly show the picture that despite being a hunter, his hours and moments spent in the lap of nature left an impact deep within his heart developing immense love and respect for wildlife and nature and how closely he knew about tigers. In the “Forewords” to Jim Corbett’s book “*Man-eaters of Kumaon*”, the Marquess of Linlithgow bears witness to this respect and admiration.

Corbett knew the jungles of the Kumaon region better than any of his friends even the native people, which he describes in his book *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, “I had walked through these jungles by day and often by night for near on half a century, and could have found my way blindfold to any part of them”(34).

“The reader will find in these stories many proofs of the author’s love of nature. Having spent in Major Corbett’s company some part of such holidays as I have contrived to take during my time in India, I can with confidence write of him that no man with whom I have hunted in any continent better understands the signs of the jungle.”
— Marquess of Linlithgow, Governor-General and Viceroy of India (1887-1952).

He goes on to add that Jim Corbett had often told him “of the intense happiness he has derived from his observations of wildlife”.

The observant nature of Corbett as a child and the familiarity with the woods helped him to understand the behaviour of wildlife including birds and animals as he curiously listened to the cries and calls of them. The voices often fascinated him as magical music and he could imitate them exactly. This curiosity and fascination developed a feeling of love for them in his heart. Corbett’s environment since childhood made him learn the signs and sounds of the jungle, the footprints of birds and the paw marks of the animals, the cries and calls of the fauna and the rustling sound of leaves that told of unseen movement. Soon he realized that the birds give warning calls when the hunter was around and he too could imitate their cries.

Jim had all the qualities of a successful hunter, physical strength, immense patience and high power of observation; power to notice and imitate signs and draw right inference from these signs. He was a great man with qualities of a saint. He was against cruelty and slaughtering and laboring of animals and this would often create a feeling of grief in him. To him the killing of a man-eater was not a reward; it merely gave him any happiness or satisfaction. He was convinced that animals and birds should be killed only when necessary and not for pleasure. He served mankind especially the poor of India without any motive or in

expectation of reward. Once he staked his life in protecting the life of “LALAJEE”-a merchant of Mokamaghat who was seriously affected by cholera and for whose recovery there was no hope. When Jim saw Lalaji he was so very moved emotionally that he did not care and took him to his home and treated Lalaji himself. He not only saved his life but also helped him with cash loan of Rs.500. He helped and guided everybody; was a friend, guide and philosopher of innocent village folk and jungle folk alike. Jim Corbett’s greatness lay in this generosity, in his love and regard for lowly artless hill men (Souvenir of the Corbett centenary, 1975- 1976).

In his book “*The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon*” he writes:

“My ambition when I was very young was to see a tiger, just that, and no more. Later my ambition was to shoot a tiger.... Later still, it was my ambition to photograph a tiger. In the course of time all three of these ambitions were fulfilled. It was while trying to photograph tigers that I learnt the little I know about them. Having been favoured by Government with the ‘freedom of forests’.... I was able to move about...in those forests in which tigers were plentiful. Watching tigers for days or weeks on end, and on one occasion for four and a half months, I was able to learn a little about their habits” (164).

He wrote earlier about the tiger in the same book:

“Tigers, except when wounded or when man-eaters, are on the whole very good tempered. Were this not so it would not be possible for thousands of people to work as they do in tiger- infested jungles, nor would it have been possible for people like me to have wandered for years through the jungles on foot without coming to any harm” (153).

Jim Corbett was always introduced as a hunter to the world; very few know exactly what Corbett actually was. If we read deep about Corbett we come to know many unknown things about him like his love for wildlife, his love for the local mass then, his passion for writing. As Jim loved glaring the wildlife and nature so did he loved to pen down his experiences with them in fact he was one of the first persons to take cine-films in the wild. His devotion, sincerity and love for wildlife and nature is the reason that one of India’s largest national parks and tiger reserves near Corbett’s winter home in Kaladhungi bears his name.

He never shot a tiger or leopard until he was convinced the animal had taken to man-eating. Much of his time was spent boating and angling on the lake in Nainital. Kaladhungi was his winter home, wherein the jungles he learnt his first lesson in hunting from his eldest brother

Tom. He hunted his first leopard at the age of six. Jim was blessed with excellent eyesight, keen hearing, remarkable memory and the power of deduction and observation supplemented with toughness and courage.

He helped create the Association for the Preservation of Game in the United Province, and the All-India Conference for the Preservation of Wildlife, and he established India's first national park, inaugurated in 1934 in the Kumaon Hills. He was first to initiate the establishment of a bird sanctuary in 1933 at Nainital within the boundaries of the municipality where the killing of wild animals and birds was forbidden. As a member of the municipality, he initiated several bye-laws for the protection of forests and wildlife in the United Province with Sir Malcolm Hailey as its patron. The association brought out 36 volumes of the journal *'Indian Wildlife'* and conducted several outreach activities.

Along with Lord Malcolm Hailey, the governor of the United Province, he played a key role in the establishment of the first National Park of the country. The National Park was named after Hailey in 1935, and then renamed the Ramganga National Park in 1955, and finally, as a tribute to Jim Corbett, it was called the Corbett National Park in 1957, two years after his death. (Singh, 2011)

In the book *"Jim Corbett of Kumaon"*, D. C. Kala has written about the life of Corbett where he has stated how Corbett used to spend hours in the forest sensing the wildlife and how he became addicted to the nature and the natural beauty of hills. He has also written about the experiences he had in the jungle and how he became a hunter. Jim Corbett was treated as a saviour by the hill folk and later how he turned into a conservationist is also highlighted in the book.

D. C. Kala writes in the book *"Jim Corbett of Kumaon"*:

"One must be a Sherlock Holmes of the wild to be able to stalk a tiger on foot. The art come after mastering the jungle telegraph, the knowledge of what every animal or bird call means, and the capacity to read the jungle floor, what a footmark or imprint means. This knowledge has to be backed with a sound eye, ear and nose" (Kala, 1979, 85-86).

In another book *"Carpet Sahib: A Life of Jim Corbett"*, by Martin Booth, the life and incidents of Corbett are shown. Speaking about Corbett's growth as a hunter, Prosenjit Das Gupta makes an illuminating observation in his book *"Tracking Jim: A Hunt in Corbett Country"*.

“Whereas during the earlier hunts Corbett had relied on either organizing a beat and flushing the man-eater out from its cover or enticing it to approach a bait so that he could shoot it over the kill, in the later years he preferred to stalk his man-eaters... pitting his own instincts against the predator’s” (Gupta, 2005, 103).

Conclusion:

Though the life of Corbett remains enigmatic for many I have drawn some conclusions after reading and researching about him. The real Jim Corbett was a hunter who tracked down man-eating tigers and leopards, a nature lover who spoke the language and acted the symbols of the jungle. He was one of the first photographers to capture the pictures of devouring tigers and leopards in their natural habitat. A conservationist who articulated his warnings beforehand India’s declining natural heritage. A legend, whose knowledge about Indian forests including flora and fauna which he rendezvoused was unrivaled. His books on ‘Shikar’ and Jungle lore have galvanized many generations of wildlife addicts.

Jim Corbett was a multifaceted personality; a hunter of man-eaters, a naturalist, an environmentalist, saviour of local folks, a writer and so on. The local mass treated him like God for he always saved them and their children from the deadly monsters (man-eater tigers). Showing high regard for the religious practices of people, Corbett always took care to restore the piteous remains of the victim of man-eater so that the relatives are able to carry the cremation rites. Corbett’s love for travelling and his interest in people and their culture shows in his personality and make him an outstanding travel writer of travel literature. It is a remarkable persona of Corbett that in spite of being an iconic hunter he was also a revolutionary environmentalist of British India. Corbett’s increasing environmental awareness molded the enthralling development of his career as a hunter-environmentalist. Corbett was becoming impatient over growing deforestation, poaching and haphazardly random killing of wildlife during 1930’s. He started a campaign against these threats to environment by writing to newspapers sometimes anonymous.

The final picture of Jim Corbett that emerges in a composite that he was a patriotic Englishman who contributed in both world wars and served the mankind in many ways. He also loved and cared for the Flora and Fauna of his place; for which he took many initiatives and tried to preserve nature. He has even contributed to the world of literature by his writings in which his deep interest and love for nature is clearly visible. He observed and highlighted the cultural traits and habits of the hill folk, praising the natives for their strong sense of

loyalty. Corbett will always be remembered whenever the word conservation will come. Though the world knew him as a tiger hunter but the awareness of conserving nature and wildlife, that he inculcated in the hill folks is still not forgotten.

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