

De-colonizing Nature: Eco-criticism and Traditionalism in Jim Corbett's *My India and Jungle Lore*

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*Girayaste Parvata Himavattoaranaya Te
Prathivisyonamastu /
Babhrum Krashnam Rehinim Viswarupam
Dhruvam Prathivimindraguptam /
Ajitoahato Akshatoadyashtham
Prathivimaham //
Yat te madhyam prathivi yacca nabhyam
yasta urja tanvah sambabhuvuh/
Tasu no tehyabhi nah pavasva mata bhumih
putro aha prathivyah /
Parjanya pitah sa nah pipartu //
(O Earth! Pleasant by the hills,
snow-clad mountains and forests; O
numerous colored, firm and protected Earth!
On this earth I stand, undefeated, unslain,
and unhurt.
The treasure of minerals and
of other elements that provide vigor indwells
in your naval part (central core). Offer these
to us. Your land and the cloud enshowering
upon it nurture us like a mother and father.
May the shelter of these purify and
strengthen us.)
(Mundaka Upanishad 1.1.1)*

The birth and evolution of human civilization was nurtured under the warm parenthood of nature. Worshipping nature and the cosmos appears to be an integral part of mythologies around the world. The ancient Vedic Age in India bears innumerable instances of treating the nature as an embodiment of god. During the formative period of social development, Hindus perceived knowledge and ideas about nature through the mythological concepts associated with god. Mountains, caves, rocks, forests, trees, plants and healing herbs were analyzed as prominent cipher for feminine strength innate with nature. In Vedic science, there are suggestions for building an

ecological strategy based on the concept of *Rta* the cosmic rhythm which balances the earth. The entire earth is a continual by the cosmic principle of *Rta*. It is an uncongenial power which regulates the life on earth at the natural and human level. The two earthly functions of birth and death are embodied in the fundamental ecological principle of interdependence. In every environment the entire biotic community constituting hills, forests, plants and animal species along with soil, water or air forms a unified life support system. Even if one fraction of this elaborate and extensive network is harmed, the whole composition will weaken and face gradual destruction. There is no space for devastation in the nature's finely balanced economy. The fundamental cyclical order of the seasons is celebrated by the seers in the following words:

*Your circling seasons, night succeeding days,
Your summer, O Earth, your splashing rains,
Yours winter and frosty season yielding too spring---
May each and all produce for us milk.
(The Hymns of Atharva Veda)*

The Vedic literature reflects a religion where man is conceived as an integral part of the nature. Vedic man was nature centered and its phenomena became a part of his eternal design. His ideas of *Prakriti* (nature) incorporate countless meanings. The celebrated *Prithvi-Sukta* (also known as *Bhumi-Sukta*) sums up the Vedic attitude towards earth. The ideas of interdependence keeps us bonded with nature. Vedas provide a median for environmental ethics. The Vedas believe man as the protector of natural resources who is supposed to reload the environmental elements rather than extinguishing it. Preservation of Vedic ways leads to a harmonious entity between land, water, forests and nature with full of mysteries. The process of transition from ancient cultural ideologies to modernism and post-modernism proves to be extremely detrimental to nature. The ancient image of 'Mother Nature' was violated and subverted to the whims and fancies of the patriarchal order. The Scientific Revolution in Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries paved the rise of patriarchal science. It transformed nature from *terra mater* (mother earth) into an over-exhaustive machine and a bountiful source of raw material. This mechanization of the environment has erased all forms of ethical and cognitive constraints. The Industrial Revolution converted the primary vision of satisfying the basic needs of individuals to profit maximization. Industrialization possesses a limitless appetite for resource exploitation and modern science provides the ethical and the cognitive license to make it possible.

When the Britishers invaded India, they first colonized the forests. Ignorant of the need for natural sustainability, they displaced the needs, rights and the knowledge of the native reducing this primary source of life into timber mine. Infact, the colonial exploitation of nature was not limited to India alone. Africa's natural density was also drastically affected by colonization. The European powers like Germany, France, Belgium or Netherlands penetrated into the deep African forests and industrialized them or reduced them into a major source of raw materials. Trees like teak from Malabar or conifers from Himalaya were extracted by the King's Navy or the railway system to

construct easier and faster modes of communication. It is highly unfortunate that the local residents are mostly blamed for environmental exploitation. It is the endless commercial demands that have been majorly responsible for large-scale forest destruction. There are sufficient evidences that it was the need of the colonial empire and not of the local people which led to destruction. According to Atkinson's *Gazetteer*:

The forests were denuded of good trees in all places. The destruction of trees of all species appears to have continued steadily and reached its climax between 1855 and 1861, when the demands of the Railway authorities induced numerous speculators to enter into contracts for sleepers, and these men were allowed, unchecked, to cut down old trees very far in excess of what they could possibly export, so that for some years after the regular forest operations commenced, the department was chiefly busy cutting up and bringing to the depot the timber left behind by the contractors.

(Atkinson852)

The Britishers violated the forest timber for their military purposes in a rapacious way. The great continent possessed inexhaustible tracts of dense jungles and a detailed exploration was totally ignored. The colonial government failed to recognize the critical role played by the forests upon nature and the great influence they exercise on the physical well-being. In several areas, forests were regarded as an obstruction for agriculture which was based upon taxation. As a result India's forest diversity was a threat for colonial progress. The policy of rampant agricultural extension whitewashed the forests. For instance, the Virgin forests of the Doon Valley were clear-felled for land grants made exclusively to the Britishers. Thus, colonial forestry was not a result of superior forestry knowledge or forestry management, but through dominant military need and power.

Forests have always played the central role in the development and progress of human civilization in India. *Aranyani*, Goddess of Forest, is worshipped as the primary source of life and fertility. The diversity and self-sustenance of the forest formulated the riving principles of the human civilization. The *aranya samskriti* (forest culture) was an aspect of conscious choice. According to noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore, the distinctiveness of the Indian culture lies in the well-defined lives of the forests. The ecological co-existence is the highest form of cultural evolution. In *Tapovan* he writes:

Contemporary Western Civilization is built of brick and wood. It is rooted in the city. But Indian civilization has been distinctive in locating its source of regeneration, material and intellectual, in the forest, not the city. India's best ideas have come where man was in communion with trees and rivers and lakes, away from the crowds. The peace of the forest has helped the intellectual evolution of man. The culture of the forest has fuelled the culture of Indian society. The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, in sight and sound and smell. The unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, thus became the principle of Indian civilization. Not being caged in brick, wood and iron, Indian thinkers were surrounded by and

linked to the life of the forest. The living forest was for them their shelter, their source of food. The intimate relationship between human life and living nature became the source of knowledge. Nature was not dead and inert in this knowledge system. The experience of life in the forest made it adequately clear that living nature was the source of light and air, of food and water. (Tagore1-2)

After half a century of ceaseless forest destruction, an attempt was made by the colonial government to control it. The first Indian Forest Act was passed by the Supreme Legislative Council in 1865, which authorized the government to declare forest and wastelands as reserved forests. This introduction marked the beginning of scientific forest management in India. This paper attempts a thorough investigation and analysis of the traditional and eco-critical elements in Jim Corbett's *My India* and *Jungle Lore*.

Jim Corbett was a famous tracker-turned conservationist who earned recognition through for hunting a large number of man-eating tigers and leopards in the Kumaon region of India. A colonel in the British Army, he was often summoned by the government officials and the villagers to kill man-eating tigers and leopards who were preying on people. His hunting successes fetched him a lot of fame amongst the locals and he was even considered a saint. The Corbett-nature relation can be defined as a paradoxical co-existence. The process of ensuring local security soon turned out to be a addictive game for Corbett. His memoirs reveals that, from his early teens, he along with his brother and later on with friends went for hunting unique varieties of birds. But, quite significantly he never shot a tiger or a leopard unnecessarily. He was a strange embodiment of both destroyer and preserver of nature. Despite belonging to the colonial family and violating the fauna, his non-eurocentrism makes him an admirable figure amongst the Indians. The writings of Corbett break away from the narrow girds of imperialistic chauvinism and express his love and reverence for India in a simplistic way. His works are not a simple catalogue of his experiences but they function as a kind of self-confession and repentance for environmental violence.

In *My India*, Jim Corbett meticulously observes the traditional and cultural beliefs of the Indian villagers in association with nature. The very introduction of this book violates the norms of Eurocentric discourse by analyzing the question of 'My India' from a unique perspective:

What do you mean by 'My India?' The question is justified. The world has developed the habit of using the word 'Indian' to denote an inhabitant of the great peninsula that stretches upwards of two thousand miles from north to south, and as much from east to west. Geographically the term may pass muster, but when it comes to applying it to the people themselves one should not, without further explanation use a description whose looseness has already led to infinite misunderstanding. The four hundred million people, of India are divided horizontally by race, tribe and caste into a far greater diversity than exists in Europe, and they are cleft vertically by religious differences fully as deep as those which sunder any one nation from another. (Corbett5)

The very *metanarrative* of the colonizers are fragmented into numerous *micronarratives* relaxing the oriental-occidental conflict to a large extent. In the beginning he maps the beauty and the diversity of the entire nation and then shifts his focus towards Naini Tal analyzing its measureless flora and fauna. His mythological and geographical depth is very much evidenced from the way he describes the origin and development of the Naini Lake. Geologists believe that the lake originated from glaciers, landslides or volcanic eruption. But the Hindu legends give the credit to the three sages *Atri*, *Pulastya* and *Pulaha*. According to *Skanda-Puran*, while going for a penitential pilgrimage, these three sages arrived at the crest of Cheena and finding no water to quench their thirst drilled a hole at the foothills and syphoned water into it from the Mansarovar, the sacred lake in Tibet. The goddess Naini arrived after the departure of the sages and took up her abode in the waters of the lake. Riding on these mythological stories he carries the reader into the depth of the nature's beauty. In this book the readers enjoy the privilege of experiencing an aura-topic view of the dense forest of Naini Tal. Besides his brother Tom, Corbett also received useful inputs about flawless hunting from Kunwar Singh.

Kunwar Singh was by caste a Thakur and the headman of Chandni Chauk village. He was the best and the most successful poacher in Kaladhungi. He has been a lifelong companion, friend and admirer of Kunwar Singh till he died. Singh was very well versed in the basic aspects of hunting. He had a huge load of experience in his kitty. On several occasions Corbett assisted him on hunting expeditions shooting *sambhar* (a species of deer), tiger, leopards or wild-boars. The jungle adventure aggravates with Corbett's expeditions with Mothi. In this chapter, Corbett not only matures as a hunter but at the same time he observes the cultural and traditional orthodoxies of the Indians. Illiteracy was the greatest barrier faced by the Indian rural folk to encounter their irrational beliefs and practices. As a result even severe diseases like cholera or typhoid were left in the hands of destiny without undertaking any senior medical initiatives. Fatal poverty coupled with illogicality claimed the life of Mothi. The death of Mothi reveals the agonies of the Indian women folk who were compressed to a severely restricted life. After marriage even they lost their identity. They were either identified with their husband's name or with their sons. Yet few possessed the inert power of resisting the dominance which is revealed in the following words:

The women of our foothills are the hardest workers in India, and the hardest working of them all was Mothi's widow, Punwa's mother. A small compact woman, as hard as flint and a beaver for work---young enough to remarry but precluded from doing so by the reasons of her caste---she bravely and resolutely face the future, and right gallantly she fulfilled her task, ably assisted by her children. (Corbett45)

The youngest son of Mothi, Sher Singh emerged to be very brave and from his early teens he explored the jungles of Kaladhungi. The cordiality that existed between Sher Singh and the dense wildness of Kumaon, carries a fine essence human-nature co-existence. When human beings and animals live in close association with each other subjected to regular dangers, each infuses the other with a measure of courage and confidence. The complicated ethical and moral norms are further

revealed through ‘Pre-Red-Tape Days.’ The clash of traditionalism and modernism reaches a new height when the British officials along with the village headman made collective decisions on the various public and private grievances of the villagers. The confused state of the current law system is rooted back to the system of the colonial times implemented by feudalism. This ruined the poor, simple, honest and hardworking peasantry.

Corbett portrays the ecological supremacy through the laws of the jungles. The nature has its own laws and order within which all its elements function. The memoir very beautifully infuses the ecological system with human civilization. A co-existence is only possible through minor adjustments and compromise. The harmonious co-existence of the Kaladhungi villagers universalized the most simplified way of environmental conservation. Corbett has not only admired the Indian people and culture, but also unbiasedly criticized them as well. This criticism was not unleashed from an exploitative imperial tongue but from a benign worshipper. The burdens of traditional darkness under which the villagers suffered largely bothered Corbett. Corbett’s India was not an uncultured, uncivilized land of darkness. *My India* is a mixed account of the unique cultural and natural diversity of India perforated with rural taboos.

The multifarious rural experiences in *My India* create a deep psychological impact upon the mind of the readers which gets further enriched by penetrating deep into nature’s crest in *Jungle Lore*. This account bears a series of Jim Corbett’s hunting experiences in Kaladhungi forest. Corbett in his previous memoir criticizes the traditional irrationalities in a very ironic manner and the legacy continues here as well. An ancient belief exists amongst the jungle folks that the forests are haunted by the ‘long-drawn out scream’ of the *churail* (ghosts). The call sounds exactly similar to the ghosts and it is believed that anybody mistaking it as a woman wailing and follows will be hypnotized and won’t return ever. Corbett was introduced to this jungle myth of *banshee* by Irishman Dansay who was very superstitious by nature. Dansay believed that *banshee* was an evil female spirit that resided in the dense forest and was ‘so malignant that the mere hearing of it brought calamity to the hearer and his family, and the seeing of it death to the unfortunate beholder.’ (Corbett204) The trick of the jungles was soon unfurled by Corbett. One day while he was out on a hunting expedition he heard the *banshee* and summoning all his strength he looked for it to discover an unknown species of a bird resembling the golden-eagle. *Jungle Lore* is like a safari carrying the readers from one adventure to another through various time and spaces. It celebrates and records the hunting expeditions of Corbett leading to the unnecessary exploitation of the forest ecosystem. The stories are paradoxically intertwined with both violation and a warming care for nature. Though he indulges senselessly in hunting varieties of birds on a regular basis, he also criticizes the way forest lands are being cleared for developing agriculture.

This criticism of Corbett is significant beyond eco-critical perspectives. He also lashes out at the violence induced by capitalism and feudalism in India. During the colonial period, the Britishers came to India as traders monopolizing the entire nation with their profit-based marketing norms.

They formulated their trading strategies in a way to secure the support of the Indian landlords as well. The colonizers manipulated the sensibility of the rich land-lords, converting them into mere puppets and throwing the natural density and the village folk into a critical condition. Corbett's grief is captured in the following words:

I might have done, the fault is mine, for I had ample opportunities of doing so. Opportunities which will never be enjoyed by another, for pressure of population has brought under cultivation large areas on which in my game wandered at will; while standardization of forests, with all evils it brings in its train of wild life, has resulted in the total destruction of the trees that bore the flowers and the fruit that birds and animals live on. (Corbett236)

Corbett never forgets to make the reader aware of his natural consciousness. Despite being involved in the game of hunting he also made sure to keep it occasional and not habitual. Corbett's memoirs are not only adventurous. They are occasionally speckled with humor. The incident of Wyndham along with the *shikaris* (hunters) trying to capture a python for the Lucknow Zoo evokes unstoppable laughter. The python was found on the bed of a shallow stream. Accordingly Wyndham ordered the mahout to stretch a length of rope from the trappings of the elephant. When it was done, Wyndham made a noose at one end of the rope and handing it to the *shikaris* told them to dismount from the elephant and noose the snake. When he explained this to the *shikaris* they handed the noose to Wyndham saying that he will pass the noose under the snake's tail and they will haul on the rope. Eventually, after several trials of advancing and retreating to ensure that the snake is unalarmed of their presence, they got into the water. And as they inched close to an arm's length, the python raised its hood out of water and started gliding towards them. The hunters yelled and splashed out of water followed by Wyndham.

This humorous incident synthesizes man and nature within a united familial frame. Memoirs of Corbett provide simple ways of confronting the man-nature conflict. Corbett exists in a dialogic relation with nature. The resplendence of man-nature interaction is spiritually sublimated through Corbett. His parallelism of confrontation and co-existence bears a universal message of environmental harmony. His works are not pegged with any critical scientific or geographical ideas. It mystifies Corbett's existential coherence and simplifies the multifarious ways of conserving the nature. He not only describes his challenging hunting expeditions but also beautifully captures various environmental activities. During his jungle expeditions, Corbett meticulously analyzed environmental psychology. This later on established him as a natural expert in this field. He understands every natural warning enabling him to confront wild challenges. He ends *Jungle Lore* with a self-appreciation, claiming that his thorough jungle sensitiveness has intervened in critical moments to ensure his safety.

The simple methodologies adopted by Corbett for environmental preservation matured further by the Chipko movement. It has become a political landmark for fuelling new ecological insights and highlighting the social and political powers of women. In the era of globalization, the massive industrial developments are causing irrevocable natural damage. The contemporary era has politicized the aspects of natural degradation in a much generalized way through the rural-urban conflict. Recently parts of western and north-eastern India has experienced severe center-state struggle over the preservation of forest and agricultural greens. The humans become aware of the mystical natural rhythm only when it lies in the verge of destruction. So before it is too late let us summon the traditional Vedic messages of conserving our ‘Mother Earth.’

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