

Reminiscences from my childhood, half a century ago.

Hunting: In the Shadows of the Raj.

Philip Wollen

I grew up in Post-Independence India.

The years immediately after the sun set on the departed British Raj were complicated.

We were torn between the end of a stable old colonial era in retreat - and the birth pangs of a vibrant new Republic.

We didn't really understand, at that time, the gravitas of India's first Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru's claim.

He greeted the dawn on that first day of India's Independence from Britain, the 15th of August, (coincidentally my birthday). "India has a Tryst with Destiny".

On that morning, the nation and the subcontinent would be changed - and the history books would have to be re-written.

It was a time of deep conflict.

Partition of a massive country, into three profoundly different entities was like playing 4D chess on steroids.

India, East Pakistan, and West Pakistan.

Hundreds of languages, dialects, diets, traditions, religions, prejudices, castes, creeds, and communities. And complex interpersonal relationships, forged over centuries, with the various admixtures of inter-marriage, love, betrayal, distrust, forgiveness, fear, and commerce which politics alone could never reconcile. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Jews and countless others religions and castes – and a massive cohort of secularist humanists with no religion at all.

My community, basically Christian, Anglo-Indian, middle class were ghosts. At one level, with a foot in both camps. British and Indian. But, in the deepest sense, disembodied souls with feet in no camps.

But this is not an analysis of the complex chessboard of my early life.

It is simply my childhood memories of one aspect of life in our community in those fractured days.

It centres on “hunting”.

Today it is just a verb or a noun. But in those days it was sport, a way of life, a badge of honour, a marker of one’s place in the vast tapestry of communities, and an accepted norm of cruelty in an otherwise sophisticated and enlightened civilization.

As a teenage boy, I was taken on two so-called “shooting trips” by a renowned “shikari” (Hindi for “hunter”).

In those unenlightened days, hunting in India was considered a manly sport, practiced mainly, but not exclusively, by those who were part of the departing British or the remnants left behind, vainly hoping that their way of life would continue as before.

The first “shoot” was a “day-shoot” with “beaters”. Barefoot and impoverished villagers were hired to strategically descend in a lateral ribbon-line from the hilltops through the lantana scrub and “wait-a-bit” thorns, making an unholy racket with drums, bells and horns.

The objective was to frighten whatever wild animals were hiding, or more likely cowering, out of their jungle cover into the deadly path of a rifle bullet.

Panther, peacock, wild boar, bear, jungle fowl . . . it didn’t seem to matter. A smorgasbord of murderous opportunities accompanied by an orchestrated cacophony of noise and terror.

I confess that on that day, I saw nothing and remember even less.

I spent the whole day on my own, crawling through the scrub, on hands and knees, trying unsuccessfully to visit the nests of nocturnal nightjars and fire flies! Or searching for “bloodsuckers”, an ill-fitting name for these beautiful,

radiantly coloured lizards, no larger than a rat, with extravagant frills, and bulging eyes.

Naturally, amongst all the cacophony, the meanderings of a little boy was insignificant. I wasn't seen or missed. Nobody cared.

The second trip was a "night shoot" in the jungle. This involved sitting high up a tree at night, in a *machan* (a bamboo platform constructed high up the tree canopy). The location was selected above a spot earlier identified by "pug marks" in the moist soil, indicating that a panther or tiger had recently visited that spot.

The plan was for me to shoot "my first panther" when he came to devour a tethered goat at the bottom of the tree.

This murderous ritual was like a rite of passage, a practice we may have inherited from the departed British Raj.

In the early morning, I was placed in the back seat of the shikari's vehicle. We undertook the long and arduous journey from the city, then finally along interminable dirt tracks until we finally reached a small but bustling village deep in the jungle. I was told that we had to stop to get the "bait".

There, in that village, I witnessed the banal commercial transaction. A goat kid was purchased, after some obligatory haggling, from the villagers. She was a frightened little kid with big eyes, smooth and shiny hair, and a smell of sadness that still clings to my nostrils half a century later.

This poor, terrified animal-child was roughly taken away from her bewildered and terrified mother. She huddled on my lap in the back seat. Her big black eyes, pleading with me, seemed to put her into shock. She became mute. This child shivered with fear, snuggled under my arm, and urinated warmly on me. The long, bumpy, noisy journey into the jungle may have been exciting for the shikari. But to the pathetic victim in my arms, it must have been terror. Even today, half a century later, if I close my eyes, every physical and sad emotion bubbles in my heart.

We finally reached our grim destination, a thick copse of trees surrounded by heavy scrub. The "machan", the bamboo platform, secured and lashed together

with coir ropes in the upper branches of a tree on the edge of a creek bed was constructed by the villagers earlier in the day. They showed us the panther pug marks in the soft ground 20 metres below the machan.

The little goat was firmly and unthinkingly tied on a 6-metre length of rope at the base of the tree. The reason was perfunctorily explained to me. The rope must be long enough to give the shooter a comfortable angle for the shot and not too short to require a steeply angled shot from directly above the target.

In the early evening we climbed the ladder into the machan and waited for nightfall. I remember having to be hoisted onto the swinging rope ladder and scrambling onto the platform perched in the tree.

Making sure we were concealed, fully covered with khaki clothing to avoid mosquito bites, two humans crouched uncomfortably in the hide, with the rifle, a sealed beam spotlight, and a canvas ground sheet.

As night fell, I listened intently as the jungle came to life. Peacocks, jungle fowl, and the vast array of birds that had enchanted me during the day, sought refuge in the cool treetops or bushes for their nightly rest.

Nocturnal animals, panthers, a tiger, and the occasional bear, gaur, elephant, wild boar crashed through bushes in the distance.

Crouched high up in the crown of the tree in the machan, I heard the soft terrified cries of the little kid-goat below, whimpering in fear at every sound in the encroaching jungle night.

By midnight we had heard the sounds of the panther. . . . Odd grunts, more like a stifled cough. Sounds I had not heard before. Timidly, furtively, cautiously she approached. I could hear her, and could feel her presence. But I was unsure from which direction she would emerge.

I raised the rifle stock to my shoulder, acclimatizing my eyesight to the moonlit darkness. I drew the gun-sight on the kid-goat, awaiting the imminent lunge of the panther, whose throaty grunts we could hear more distinctly. My heart raced.

I smelled the machine oil from the gun-bolt close to my cheek and focussed the gun-sight on the goat. In the moonlight I saw her pleading face. She looked

so fragile. So powerless. So small. . . . Small. . . . That is the word that sticks in my mind.

She was so small.

Inexplicably, my eyes filled up with tears. I trembled uncontrollably in fear. Feeling physically sick with the bitter taste of vomit, raw reflux in my throat. It resembled an asthma attack, and drowning at the same time. Scared, choking and utterly alone.

It felt like an eternity.

I was terrified.

I never did squeeze the trigger. I just made strange, audible, sobbing, gurgling uncontrollable noises.

Trembling, I lowered the rifle to my knees.

I remember the shikari, who did not say a word, clicking on the spotlight and moving the beam in ever-widening arcs, trying to catch a glimpse of the reflections of panther eyes in the dark, to give him a chance to take the shot.

But to no avail. The panther had heard me crying and had fled.

My inability to perform my designated role was complete.

As was my disgrace.

The respected shikari did not say another word. Silently, he took the heavy rifle from my sweaty grasp and turned away from me. His adrenaline and his disgust in me was clear.

We both knew there would be no panther killing that night.

And for me, on no other night either.

The seeds which germinated, and from which my vegan roots grew, were planted in that jungle half a century ago.

On the long and uncomfortable journey home the next morning nothing was said.

It was as if the events of the previous night had not even happened. The machan was dismantled by the villagers.

My presence, and my shame was not to be forgotten or forgiven. It would simply not be discussed. In a sense, it was obliterated completely. I was never to be taken on a shooting trip again.

Naturally, when we returned home to the city the following day, word had spread in the “macho” community. Philip had behaved in an inexplicable and cowardly way. Although no one said it to my face, I heard indirectly that the bigger boys called me a “skit”.

For a young boy, living under the fading shadow of the British Raj, this was the worst insult one could heap on the fragile male ego.

This probably explains why I took such a keen interest in boxing, to show my mockers that I was unafraid to spill blood – or shed my own if necessary.

Looking back on it now, I think I over-compensated. Always looking to get into the ring with the biggest opponent available. And where one was not available, keen to spar with the boxing instructor and hope he would accidentally give me a bloodied nose, which I could deliberately instruct the “seconds” in my corner not to wipe dry.

A foolish badge of honour, undoubtedly. Simply so I could proudly proclaim that I, as a bantamweight was matched against a cruiserweight and went the whole distance.

But to this day I still remember with crystal clarity that strange feeling. One I had not encountered before or since; that twilight evening, deep in the jungle, when a nameless, powerless and terrified soul, a child, nestled trustingly in my boyish arms, crying for her mother, pleading and in fear, urinated in my lap. It still unleashes a deep and sinking feeling of sadness, a wretched sickness in my gut, a sense of powerlessness, emptiness and shame.

Half a century later I returned to India, to the same place.

The jungle was still there, only sparser. There was a machan, now in a state of disrepair, built no doubt by another aspiring killer many years later. Tigers and panthers are rarely seen nowadays.

I took a picture of the machan, feeling nauseous as I did so, wondering how many innocent victims had been murdered in its shadow.

A creek now runs alongside the tree, and I wondered if the rains had washed away the memories and the bloodstains into the Kaveri river.

As I sat on the rock near the tree, I recorded a piece of Meditation which I subsequently posted on the internet.

My mind was drawn back to those innocent days, when a child of one species reached out to the child of another species and said:

“This is wrong, and I will have no part in it”.

I thought about her small face and fragile body and I recalled the words of the Greek poet Horace. “Change only the name and my story is also about you”.

I don’t have a name for this precious child.

I wish I had.

I like to imagine a happy ending for her.

But I am sure she was never reunited with her grieving mother.

I am sure she never found peace. The powerless rarely do.

But on that moonlit night, over 50 years ago this Christmas, a young boy found something.

He found his character.

That, at least, is something.

And for that, I am grateful.