

That'll Be £15 Bn, Your Highness



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Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be making his first official trip to Britain next month. With the recent demand, triggered by author and Congress MP Shashi Tharoor, for reparations for the economic exploitation by the British Empire as the backdrop, India shouldn't overlook another fact: the irredeemable, but quantifiable, wildlife damage wrought on India by British colonialism.

The ecological impoverishment of India has been chronicled graphically in the personal diaries, memoirs and photos of British officers who ruled India. According to a chronicle of the imperial visit to India of George V, the shooting ring formed on December 25, 1911, comprised 600 elephants. The first tiger was shot by the British monarch. By the close of day, there were 39 tigers, 18 rhinoceroses, four bears and a leopard killed during this hunt.

General William Mitchell, regarded as the 'Father of the US Air Force', recounted his visit as a guest of the viceroy in 1924. "We had killed so many animals during our last three days that their pelts were not suffi-

ciently dry to pack, so we had to spread them on top of the truck that was to carry our baggage south, allowing them to dry en route."

So spoilt by the fruits of India's jungles were the British, that with great flamboyance they enacted the Forest Act of 1878, practically converting over one-fifth of the land mass of South Asia into prime hunting ground. The Indian subcontinent became the best source of unlimited supply of timber and 'forest produce' — which included skins, tusks, bones and horns — for Britain.

The exclusive control of the forests was a boon for the colonial rulers who gave permits to hunt in government forests. This encouraged and gave legal sanction to shikaar. Berthold Ribbentrop, a former inspector general of forests, acknowledged in *Forestry in British India* (1900) that British policy affected forest-dwellers adversely and disturbed th-

eir traditional relationship with the environs. So, they were rendered alien in their homeland. The Chôta Nagpur tribal insurrection of 1830, and several others after that, were manifestations of that discontent.

George Yule, a civil servant, killed more than 400 tigers and a Geoffrey Nightingale shot more than 300. The British hunted tigers, cheetahs and leopards with high-velocity rifles, speared bears and conducted khedah-catching of elephants for ivory. They invented the logic that hunting was good for the development of 'character', and that it trained young men to be good soldiers, while keeping them away from more harmful pursuits like gambling and opium.

Tiger-hunting also influenced the construction of the British imperial identity. Smarting from the insolence of Tipu Sultan of Mysore, who revered the tiger and flaunted it in all his coins, uniforms, arms and flag,

the British hunted the animal down with renewed vengeance.

To taunt the British who had failed to get him, Tipu had a life-size mechanical gizmo showing a tiger pinning down a uniformed British soldier — Tipu's Tiger — crafted. Not surprisingly, after defeating Tipu, the British rejoiced with a gold coin depicting the British lion pinning down an Indian tiger.

There were more than one lakh Royal Bengal tigers in India in 1900. That was also the year the taxidermy firm Van Ingen & Van Ingen set up shop in Mysore. Between 1875 and 1925, at least 50,000 tigers were slain as per estimates based on home department records. Van Ingen factory accounts reveal that in their first 50 years, they had stuffed about 25,000 tigers, 30,000 leopards and lakhs of other wild species, earning them the sobriquet of 'Artists in Taxidermy'.

Cheetahs, which once roamed freely, are extinct today. Tigers, rhinos and elephants remain endangered species. Since 1971, when Project Tiger was launched, it has taken scarce resources and 45 years of rigorous effort at various levels to raise tiger numbers by about 300.

If the marginal cost of conserving a tiger is ₹3 crore, then the reparations owed to the Indian environment for the killing of, say, 50,000 tigers — never mind the lakhs of elephants, cheetahs, leopards, rhinoceros and other wild animals hunted during British rule — should be about ₹15 billion (₹1,49,200 crore).



Curzon woke up feeling restless again