Sport In The Himalayan Foothills Of Nepal

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Nepal, as everybody knows, is an independent kingdom tucked away in the Himalayas, the home of Everest, the famous Gurkhas, and " the green eye of the little yellow God "; it includes the birth-place of Buddha; a land of mystery and romance whose frontiers are closed to all foreigners (except by special sanction of the higher authorities). It covers an area of 50,000 sq. miles and has a population of between five and six million, split up into an astonishing number of different tribes and sects, with a score or more of quite distinct languages, all mutually unintelligible.

It is interesting to note that Nepal has within or on its boundaries 26 peaks of over 24,000 feet, which include 12 of over 25,000, eight of over 26,000, three of over 27,000, and the one and only mountain in the world over 29,000 feet. Such an agglomeration of high peaks makes Nepal unique amongst all the countries of the world. Below the great range of perpetual ice and snow there is a continuous belt along the southern boundaries of foothills and Terai, covered with dense forest and swampy savannahs and intersected by mighty rivers and their tributaries. It is this zone which chiefly concerns this article, a sportman's paradise where tiger and leopard, wild elephant and rhino live, and the fisherman can catch the mighty mahseer in the roaring rivers.

In this article I will describe briefly four different types of sport: (1) Tiger shooting in a " Ring "; (2) Catching wild elephants alive; (3) Studying rhinoceros (these are strictly protected and seldom shot); (4) Fishing. These are all forms of sport which I have experienced during my seven years residence in Nepal.

(1) *Tiger Shooting in a Ring*. This method is almost invariably used in all big shoots, organised by the Maharaja for his friends and distinguished visitors on a lavish and wonderful scale. For weeks before the shoot commences, rough but serviceable motor roads and temporary bridges are constructed radiating out from the various jungle camps. All the jungle paths and streams and sandy river beds are examined to see where the tigers are, for in such places they leave their footmarks. A day or two before the shoot starts, young buffalo calves are tied up as bait, in scores or even hundreds, on every likely route a tiger may take. (The cow, being venerated, its progeny cannot be used for tiger bait.)

There are seven or eight groups of regularly appointed shikaris, each consisting of an officer (*subedar*), ten or twelve subordinates, and two mounted soldiers for taking messages. Every group of shikaris has ten to fifteen buffalo calves (*padahs*) for tying up at suitable places. They live in temporary sheds in the jungle, primitive huts of wooden poles, leaves, and jungle grasses fastened with

strands of creepers, which they quickly erect with their kukris from the abundant material all around. Between them the various groups cover the whole tract of forest for miles around the central camp.

At dawn the shikaris go out and examine the *padahs,* tied out the previous evening. If or when one has been killed, they carefully examine the pugmarks (footprints) to see if it is a big tiger or small, or one or several. They examine the drag and the direction taken. They then proceed quietly on foot and make a large circle of a quarter to a half mile diameter, demarcating the circumference with chipped stems and grass knots as they go, and are very careful to see that the drag has not gone beyond the circle. If it has, they make another one, as they must have the circle enclosing the end of the drag. This is called " cutting the circle " by the shikaris, and the final circle makes the future " Ring."

Meanwhile, as soon as it is seen that a *padah* has been killed and dragged, a special messenger mounts his horse and gallops off to bring the *khabbar.* Sometimes motor cars are parked at central spots to accelerate the delivery of the news, and sometimes even a telephone line has been prepared and operators engaged to flash messages to the camp.

Within a very short time the news has reached the camp from all directions whether and where there are kills, and the day's plan of campaign is discussed and settled. Immediately a great string of 200 or 300 elephants move off in single file to the first kill, a few with howdahs, the majority with pads. The shooting party follow at leisure in cars as far as possible, and then on pad elephants.

The tiger or tigers have been approximately located by the shikaris from the direction of the drag, the nature of the cover for lying up, and the process of cutting the circle as already described. When the elephants arrive, they divide into two parties, which proceed very quietly in single file right and left along the line of the cut circle—and it is astonishing how quietly an elephant or line of elephants can move through the jungle. The rear elephants gradually drop out to take their stations at regular intervals, and finally the two leading elephants meet, and the word is passed down both sides that the circuit is completed, "*lam pugyo.*" Then the order "*Mudi phira*"—turn the heads inwards—is passed down.

The shooting party mount the elephants, and the whole circle now move inwards, crushing the grasses and shrubs, and the men on their backs shouting and whistling to drive the tiger towards the centre. The circumference of the circle of elephants gets smaller, until finally it is less than half a mile round, and the elephants get closer and closer until they are almost touching, and the tiger is surrounded by a solid wall of elephants. Then the order "*Lam-tham*"—stop the line—is shouted out, and the ring is complete.

The stauncher elephants then move into the ring. Glimpses of one or more slinking forms are seen in the grass and undergrowth, when suddenly a tiger breaks cover and charges with a roar, to be

met by shots from the rifle, or shouts and missiles if he charges the ring. It is the moment of climax of a culminating excitement. Backwards and forwards he dashes striving to find an escape, to a pandemonium of men shouting and elephants trumpeting, grumbling and gurgling, thumping on the ground, and occasionally, when directly charged, turning tail and bolting in terror.

It is necessary to emphasise that a tiger is not normally a dangerous animal, and does not attack an elephant or a man, but once he feels cornered, he becomes a fighting mass of diabolical fury, utterly fearless of man or elephant, whom he attacks in hs mad rage without a moment's hesitation. He has been known to climb a tree and hurl a (lady) shikari out a high machan; he has been known to leap a height of 15 or 16 feet into a tall howdah and more often than not a tiger will try to break through a ring by charging home on an elephant unless he is killed or crippled first by a well-directed shot.

It must also be realised that the Nepal Terai jungles, with a fertile soil and rainfall of 100 inches, are either gigantic grass growth, frequently the height of a howdah, or are a dense forest of trees, matted together with great climbers, and a thick undergrowth of shrubs and shade-bearing plants, in which, if an elephant bolts, it is almost inevitable that howdah and rider and mahout and everything on the elephant's back will be swept with a crash to the ground by a thick branch or the loop of a tough climber. In either case it is extremely difficult to see a tiger at all until the area has been well trampled, by which time, naturally, the tiger or tigers are desperate and in a highly dengerous condition. "It is no sport for bad shots, hasty excitable people, or those with no stomach for danger. Even the most blasé hunter is likely to experience for a second or two a sudden spasm of fear when he first hears the blood-curdling roar of an infuriated tiger, and sees the great striped body launched on its charge, a thunder-bolt of death and anger in mid-air. It is one of the most terrific sights in the world." (From Wentworth Day's "King George V as a Sportsman.")

Imagine what it must be like when, as frequently happens in the rings in Nepal, not one but four or five and, once or twice, six tigers have been trapped simultaneously in one ring. The danger and heart-bursting excitement may continue for hours, until a succession of well-placed shots finally brings the thrill and nerve-tension to an end.

(2) *Catching wild elephants alive.* This elephant hunting is probably the most exciting sport in the world! When a herd or, say, a single elephant is located, the swiftest and best elephants set off in pursuit. They are stripped of all pads or howdahs, but the mahout crouches low on the neck band, and a *pachwa* stands on a rope loop behind the tail, also crouching low, and armed with a wooden handle or club studded with blunt nails.

The wild elephant dashes on, and the elephant pack go hell-for-leather after him, crashing madly through the jungle, lashed with

branches, the smaller trees falling like ninepins in front of them, creepers and grasses swishing over the backs and sides, and goaded on by the clubs of the yelling *pachwas* to exert their utmost speed. Elephants can develop a wonderful turn of speed for a short burst, but cannot keep it for long. So after a mile or so the wild tusker turns and shows fight. The domestic females are stopped, and the big fighting elephants go forward to titantic battle. One is filled with admiration at the pluck of the mahouts, as they urge their tuskers to in-fighting with the wild one! One tusker attacks head on, with tusks interlocked and writhing trunks, making what is called *chaudant* (the four-tusks fight), while others push and pommel at the sides. The wild elephant after a time gives up the unequal struggle and turns tail in flight. Again the wild pursuit is taken up, without giving the wild elephant any possibility of rest and recovery. Again he is brought to book, and so the fight and the pursuit continue he is utterly exhausted. Sometimes the fight and pursuit continue for two or even more days. Finally the tame tuskers close in on him for the last time, nooses of strong rope are slipped round his legs and neck, and he is led off into capacity and tied to a tree or strong post. For a week or so he is not allowed to get any sleep, while relays of trained men sing songs and teach him to obey words of command. This may be considered cruel, but a certain amount of cruelty is inevitable in catching and training wild elephants; it is kept to a minimum, and thereafer in the service of man he is well treated, well fed, with three attendants to look after him until the end of his life.

(3) *Rhinoceros*. I have never had the opportunity to shoot a rhino but I have had endless opportunities to see and study them at close range—sometimes at much too close range to be comfortable!

Rhinos in Nepal are now confined to the famous Chitawan area in the Rapti valley and near the Gandak river. In this rhino preserve *chaukis* or posts are stationed at various points ; these *chaukis* are under the forest inspectorate, and five to seven guards are stationed at each. In all there are over 100 guards in Chitawan, whose main duty is to protect the rhinos from poachers, and to find out where the rhino feed and wallow and lie up. The fact that the rhino horn has a very high commercial value in India—a good horn is worth over £100—makes it a very valuable prize for the professional poacher, and the species was nearly exterminated in Assam by poachers until adequate steps were taken for its protection. (Rhino horn is supposed to be a strong aphrodisiac, hence its fantastic valuation.)

In Nepal, however, the rhino has been more carefully preserved and there are probably more specimens of the Indian rhinoceros in the Chitawan preserve than in all India put together. It is estimated that at present the total number is between 300 and 400. Camping in this locality in the early cold weather, when the rice fields are ripening, is an unforgettable experience. At nightfall the wooly evening mist forms, enveloping the little en-

campment in silence and darkness. Sometime afterwards one often hears the footsteps and breathing of a rhino moving calmly from the riverain savannah towards the rice fields for his nightly meal. He pauses, curious but suspicious, to inspect the tent into which he has nearly blundered, and then moves on. Half an hour later a burst of yelling and a clatter of tins reveal the watchful Tharus protecting their fields from the marauder, to be repeated at intervals as the night advances. In the early morning the calling of rhinos to one another in the savannah forest behind mingles with the ringing alarm call of a chital at the glimpse of a hunting tiger, and the piercing calls of swarms of peafowl, sailing down from their roosting places for their daily feed in the rice fields.

Then the morning sun dissipates the mist, and from one's bed an amazing panoroma becomes visible. The flat plain of rice fields, dotted here and there with a mango grove and a cluster of Tharu huts, spreads for several miles northwards to the forest-clad hills and the dark backing of Mahabharat beyond. Behind Mahabharat again, floating in the sky, ethereal, glowing like pink pearls in the early morning sun, tower at close range the great giants of Himalaya (Himal-chuli, Manaslu, Annanpurna, Dhaulagiri, all about 26,000 feet), the eternal snows "changeless since the world's beginning, but changing to every mood of sun and cloud." There is no such view to equal this in all the Himalaya, and so in all the world.

On innumerable occasions my wife and I, sleeping in a little tent, have heard the heavy tread of one or two rhino gradually approaching, and have wondered anxiously what we should do if in the dark they should blunder into the tent or tent ropes. Once in the middle of the day we saw a large bull rhino come down to the river bank where we were camped, and swim across the 250 yards of flowing water to land on our shore within a cricket pitch of where we sat; a wonderful and beautful sight.

On another occasion when I was out shooting partridge with a shot gun, two great rhino came blundering in my direction, and when only a few yards away I hastily scrambled up a convenient tree to avoid them. An hour later, when riding back to camp on a young tusker elephant, the big bull rhino suddenly charged us out of a patch of thick grass, rushing like a runaway tank straight for the elephant. Luckily the elephant stood staunch, head on to the rhino, who at the last fraction of a moment turned aside and dashed past into the forest. A forest officer has plenty of thrills in the forests of Nepal!

But the forest officer, touring through thousands of square miles of forests, seldom has the opportunity of shooting tigers in a "Ring," or seeing wild elephants caught alive, but takes his sport as it comes on a more humble scale. We had 3 or 4 elephants at our disposal, equally useful for tranport, inspection, or as moving platforms for

shooting. Three or four times a week during the touring season we moved camp 10 or 12 miles, our tents and belongings piled into a dozen carts, and we, and as many of our staff as could find room, piled on to the elephants. Roaming through the gloaming of the dark forests, we were liable to meet at any time anything from wild elephants to junglecock and so carried both rifles and guns with us. Sometimes we saw nothing to shoot at, which did not worry us, as we always had the thrill of exploring country that no European had ever seen. Then the luck would change, and we might end the march with a leopard or a deer loaded on to one of the elephants, or some duck, swamp partridge or snipe picked up round some jungle marsh. In the evening, with camp pitched, and the flames of a roaring fire flickering on the surrounding trees, we would often hear the alarm calls of monkey or deer who had spotted a tiger or leopard slinking through the undergrowth nearby.

Once or twice a month we would have the good luck to find a natural " kill " of one of the carnivores, and our orderlies would build a " machan " or platform in some convenient tree, on which my wife would sit patiently and silently, to see and perhaps shoot the animal coming for its evening meal. Incidents such as these are much more typical of the sport enjoyed by a forest officer in the Nepal foothills than the great Ring shooots of the Maharaja or the rare kheddah operations for catching wild elephants.

(4) *Fishing.* Fifty years ago I started fishing, and ever since I have lost no opportunity to indulge in this most fascinating sport. I have fished for salmon and sea trout in Kerry and Devon; for brown trout in Killarney, Switzerland, Germany, Kashmir, and elsewhere; I have had sea-fishing off many coasts, but to my mind there is nothing to equal the mahseer fishing in the Himalayan foothills.

Here the great Himalayan rivers break through the last rampart of mountains before spreading out into the flat plains of Northern India. Let me try and describe one of these, the Sarda river, which forms the boundary between Nepal and India. It is a gigantic river, with a minimum flow of 7,000 cu-secs, and a flow in the monsoon floods of up to 700,000 cu-secs. I do not know how many times this is greater than the Shannon, or any other river in Eire. About fifteen miles from the foothils a great dam has been built across it, to divert some of its water into an immense canal which irrigates and serves several million acres of cultivation in the thirsty districts of the Plains.

This dam and barrage is of great interest to the fisherman. It is fitted with a fish ladder to assist the migration of fish. At certain periods of the year (March and April) milloins and millions of small fish (called *chilwa*) have the urge to migrate *en masse* up the river. Ths fish-ladder is the first of many obstacles they have to overcome. They struggle up in scores and hundreds, and at the top great numbers of large mahseer are waiting for them and gobble them up as fast as they can. It is quite a sight to see!

But the dam has another effect on the fish life of the river. For a fortnight every year the sluice-gates are opened wide and the great canal is closed and run dry for repairs and cleaning the bed. Thousands of fish of all sorts, large and small, are thus trapped, and left to flap about in shallow pools. The news gets around by village telegraphy (which is older and quicker than wireless), and whole villages of aboriginal Tharus and other cultivators turn up and indulge in their annual orgy of catching and eating the helpless fish.

Above the dam the river winds its way between islands covered with quick-growing trees and grasses, the home of countless deer and tiger and occasional wild elephants. A few years ago a battle to the death was actually witnessed here between a big male elephant and two infuriated tigers whose cub had been hurt by the elephant. The fight went on for several hours before the tigers finally succeeded in killing the wild tusker, after first blinding it with their claws.

As the river approaches the foothills, boulder beds and foaming rapids become more frequent, a stretch of 6 or 8 miles of splendid fishing water . Just where the foothills are met, there is a small hamlet called Barmdeo, where there is a boom across the river to catch the tens of thousands of pine sleepers that have been floated 50 or 60 or 100 miles down the river from the great pine forests of Kumaon and Nepal. The Barmdeo pool is 500 or 600 yards long, 100 yards wide and 20 feet deep, in which hundreds of splendid mahseer live, and also goonch (freshwater sharks which run from 20 to 200 lbs. in weight).

At the top of this pool is a most terrific rapid, where the whole flow of this great river rages down a steep incline in a channel only about 30 yards wide and for 150 yards or more there is only this boiling white broken water from bank to bank. It is here that the big fish go to feed, and it is this characteristic of the mahseer that makes mahseer fishing such grand sport. In my experience, a salmon is usually hooked in a pool, and a salmon that takes out more than 50 yards of line in its first rush is quite exceptional. A big mahseer, on the other hand, is usually hooked in a raging current, and in his first frenzied dash 150 or 200 yards of line screeches off your reel before you can move a step. And if you want your finger neatly cut off, just put it against your line for two seconds.

I have mentioned the annual migration of *chilwa* in March and April. When a run of *chilwa* is on, you see a continuous stream of these little fish going up the edges of the pool placidly and undisturbed. But when they come to the boiling rapids, they are checked, thrown into confusion and bunched in thousands, fighting their way as best they can against the cruel current. This is what the big fellows have been waiting for, every fish in the pool goes to the rapid and there takes a terrible toll of the poor little *chilwa*. It has been said that a fisherman lives on hope, but when he strikes a run

of *chilwa* in a Himalayan river, he has no further use for hope, as he KNOWS that within 3 or 4 casts he will be into a big fish. Can a fisherman ask for more?

About 10 years ago, in the last week of March, my wife and I made a trip to Barmdeo, partly to inspect the boom and the sleepers, partly to fish. There was a boat and two boatmen on the pool, used for repairing the boom, and two more men for catching the odd sleepers with " sarnais." Let me explain a " sarnai." An inflated bullock skin, with the neck and four legs sticking up in the air, floats on its back in the water, and a man lies on it, with his legs paddling on one side, and his arms working a small wooden paddle on the other. It looked very easy, but when I first tried to work one, it promptly rolled over on its side and deposited me head first into the water! But the expert sarnai-man worked these unstable bloated skins with wonderful skill. Indeed, when occasion arose, I sat on the back of the man, holding on to one of the legs, and was paddled about the pool with safety if not comfort.

Our fishing tackle included one large strong spinning rod with a silex spinning reel and 250 yards of strong line. Also a 9' split cane fly rod and 50 yards of line for small fish of 2 or 3 lbs. When we arrived at Barmdeo we were greeted with a very welcome sight, the terns were diving and screaming over the rapids, a certain sign that *chilwa* were running. It was a brilliant hot sunny day—ideal conditions for mahseer fishing—and we hastily got out our rods and tackle, and crossed to the further bank in the boat. Thus started one of the red-letter days of our fishing career.

I fixed up the spinning rod with a plug bait, that fascinating and deadly lure that floats in slack water and wiggles temptingly in a swift one. I said to my wife: " I'll just show you how to do it. You throw far out across the current, then let the bait swing round, and reel up slowly—like that," and, as I spoke, there was a jerk and the reel was screaming out. I should have explained that at this place the current of the great river swept down into the pool and came up against a cliff on our bank, where it divided, some of the water swirling round into a backwater making a whirlpool 40 or 50 yards in diameter, and the bulk of the current sweeping on far into the pool. If a fish could be guided into the backwater, it was fairly safe, if not, the chances of a catastrophe were serious. Well, my fish behaved respectably and came into the backwater, and was duly landed in under 15 minutes, a lively 13 pounder.

Then my wife took the rod, and about her third cast the reel was again singing its glorious song, and after a 20-minute struggle she safely landed a 15-pounder. I then went off in the boat to inspect the timber depot, and left her to fish. At the next attempt she hooked and landed successfully another fine fish of about the same size. After a rest she tried again and was soon into a monster, who dashed down to the cliff, hesitated, and then—oh, horror!—tore on down the river; 100 yards of line was out, then 150—200—

250 yards and all the line and all the backing was out, down to the last bare inch round the drum, when the fish stopped.

Here was a pretty fix. No tackle ever made would pull a big fish up against the tremendous current, and the big backwater cut off any chance of going down the bank after it. The two sarnai-men were with her, and suggested she should sit on the back of one of them, while the other held on to increase stability, and they would thus take her down the river after the fish. It demanded some nerve to go down that roaring river on flimsy and unstable sarnais, but as there was nothing else to do, she managed to scramble on, sitting on the man's back and holding grimly to the rod. They paddled slowly down the backwater, at the end of which she had recovered a precious 50 yards of line. On they went, creeping along the shore out of the main current, my wife reeling up as fast as they floated down. When she reached the point where the big fish was sulking in the pool, all but 50 yards was back on the reel. Then the sarnai-men paddled bravely out into the main current to cross to the other side, and were, of course, rapidly washed down. At this moment, the fish decided to make another dash for liberty, and tore *up-stream,* with the result that the line raced off faster than ever, until again over 200 yards were out. So now the sarnai-men paddled up-stream in the slack water on the further shore, while my wife reeled in for dear life. And so the fight went on.

Meanwhile I had heard the news and came hurrying back to help, and was just in time to see the end and to help to land a magnificent fish of 27 lbs. My wife was almost as exhausted as the fish, dripping with perspiration, purple in the face, and scarcely able to stand. The temperature was 90 degrees in the *shade,* and she had been for two hours or more in the *blazing sun,* under tremendous strain and exertion while landing the three big fish. Reader, have you ever experienced the sensation, when big fish are rising madly, of being physically unable to fish any more ? My wife has!

While my wife laid down under a shady tree nearby I took the small rod and a fly spoon and the two sarnai-men, to try my luck with smaller fish. As I could not reach the edge of the strong current from the shore, I copied my wife's example and sat on the back of one of the sarnai-men, who paddled out to the edge of the current. Here I had grand sport, and during the next 90 minutes landed eight fish varying from 2 to 7 lbs., with one big one (for a fly rod and 50 yards of line!) of 11 lbs., which towed me a long way down stream before I managed to land it.

Then the *chilwa* run ceased, the terns settled on the shores to digest their big meal, the mahseer left the rapid water, and the day's fishing was over. We retired to our camp nearby with about a hundredweight of fish! It was a day of glorious sport we shall never forget.