

# TIGER SYMBOLISM IN THE BRITISH RAJ: COLONIALISM AND ANIMAL HISTORY OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

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**N**ative to the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, the tiger is the largest of the *Felidae* species worldwide, recognizable by its unmistakable black and orange striped coat, and was historically significant and emblematic to not only the people of its native region but also to their colonizers. This paper shall discuss the symbolism of the tiger from both the Indian and British perspectives, focusing on the three-hundred-and-fifty-year period the British occupied India under the East India Company (1600-1847) and subsequently the British Raj (1858-1947), as their histories became inevitably intertwined. Peering through the lens of animal history, an area of historical research that attempts to understand bygone eras from the perspective of non-human species, this paper aims to offer a fresh approach to this well-researched period. Through the examination of various artifacts and primary source material from the British occupation of the subcontinent, this paper attempts to construct the argument that British cooptation of Indian rulers' sacred and beloved tiger for their imperial gains would have a detrimental impact on Indian cultural identity. British colonization would leave lasting damage on India as the tiger shifted from a symbol of power and prestige to a representation littered with racialized, gendered, and classed overtones. This is explored and argued through the significance of symbolism and powerful imagery in constructing cultural identities.<sup>1</sup>

First, a brief history of British-Indian relations: initially founded in 1600 to compete with Portuguese and Dutch merchants, the East India Company (EIC) was an economic endeavor that globalized trade to an unprecedented scale and accelerated colonialism in the centuries to follow.<sup>2</sup> In the era of “merchant capitalism,” economic gain through the exchange of commodities such as spices, textiles, coffee, and tea was integral to the survival and growth of the British Empire.<sup>3</sup> As the British objective shifted from global trade to global colonization following the Age of Discovery, the

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<sup>1</sup> While extensive research has been conducted on British colonization of India (see bibliography of this article), and the tiger has been used as a representative tool of the subcontinent in a number of other historiographical texts, this paper aims to create a narrative of symbolism and its direct repercussions, placing it at the forefront of the discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Pickersgill, “The British East India Company, John Bradby Blake and their Interests in Spices, Cotton, and Tea,” *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* 34, no. 4 (2017): 379, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48505840>.

<sup>3</sup> Emily Erikson, “Merchant Capitalism and the Great Transition,” in *Between Monopoly and Free Trade: The English East India Company, 1600-1757* (Princeton University Press, 2014): 31-50, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wq02h.5>.

Indian subcontinent became a prime target for both, earning the title of Britain's "Crown Jewel."<sup>4</sup>

Ruled by the Mughals for nearly two centuries before the British landed on its shores, India reached its peak during the reign of Akbar the Great, who had attempted to unite the subcontinent both religiously and politically.<sup>5</sup> This united front would not last long though: while external factors such as armed attacks from western powers aided in its downfall, the Mughal Empire's influence had begun to weaken towards the mid-eighteenth-century.<sup>6</sup> Custody of the region passed swiftly to the British thereafter, who had established themselves on Indian territory with the EIC a century and a half prior. The Crown took control of India in 1858, following the Indian Rebellion of 1857, when Parliament passed the Government of India Act, officially transferring power from the EIC to the monarchy. This solidified Britain's place in India's political history, establishing the codependent colonial relationship that this paper shall examine through animal and art history.

As apex predators of their natural habitat, tigers were instrumental to the Mughal rulers' maintenance of power, who used hunting as a token of kingship.<sup>7</sup> Save for the southern tip of the subcontinent, which was ruled by the Kingdom of Mysore, the Mughals controlled the majority of what is now modern India and Pakistan and therefore retained heavy influence over the region. Before the British made their strides of domination against the powerful Mughals to the north, however, they first faced Mysore in the south.<sup>8</sup>

Nicknamed "the Tiger of Mysore" and ruling the Kingdom during the latter half of the eighteenth-century, Tipu Sultan's obsession with tigers caught the attention of the British. Decorating his throne, war banners, soldiers' uniforms, coins, book bindings, and serving as his watermark, the tiger motif and tiger stripe (*babri*)<sup>9</sup> was difficult to miss and distinctly resonated with the British, whose own royal emblem

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<sup>4</sup> William A. Green and John P. Deasy Jr., "Unifying Themes in the History of British India, 1757-1857: An Historiographical Analysis," *Albion* 17, no.1 (1985): 15,

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/albion/article/abs/unifying-themes-in-the-history-of-british-india-17571857-an-historiographical-analysis/9B77C066994DC04009A15A0E85FA59AE>.

<sup>5</sup> Akbar the Great (reigned 1556-1605) conquered Hindu kingdoms but failed in winning over Muslim communities. He did, however, implement administrative policies and systems that consolidated his reach and influence over the entire subcontinent, such as marriages and diplomatic agreements. Ezad Azraai Jamsari et al, "Akbar (1556-1605) and India Unification Under the Mughals," *International Journal of Civil Engineering and Technology* 8, no. 12 (2017): 769-770,

[https://iaeme.com/Home/article\\_id/IJCIET\\_08\\_12\\_084](https://iaeme.com/Home/article_id/IJCIET_08_12_084).

<sup>6</sup> M. Athar Ali, "The Passing of Empire: The Mughal Case," *Modern Asian Studies* 9, no. 3 (1975): 368, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/311728>.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Sramek, "Face him like a Briton?: Tiger Hunting, Imperialism, and British Masculinity Colonial India, 1800-1875," *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 4 (2006): 659, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4618910>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 660.

<sup>9</sup> From the word for tiger: "babr." Kate Brittlebank, "Sakti and Barakat: The Power of Tipu's Tiger. An Examination of the Tiger Emblem of Tipu Sultan of Mysore," *Modern Asian Studies* 29, no. 2 (1995): 258. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/312813>.

was coincidentally another powerful feline, the lion.<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting as well, that the medal awarded to the British and Indian soldiers who participated in the victorious final battle of Mysore at Seringapatam depicts a lion mauling a tiger<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 1): obvious imagery of British dominance over India. Scenes of this battle are also immortalized in British artwork from the period, such as *The Last Effort and Fall of Tipu Sultan* by Henry Singleton (c. 1800) (Fig. 2).

Tipu Sultan and Mysore had stood as an obstacle to the British conquest of India, and by the end of the Anglo-Mysore wars, “Tipu Sultan was possibly the most famous Indian, if not villain, in the United Kingdom.”<sup>12</sup> As looting of conquered lands was commonplace during the period, the British confiscated Tipu’s tiger memorabilia in an act of conquest, and many of these artifacts are still found in museums across the United Kingdom today.<sup>13</sup> This includes *Tipu’s Tiger*, a mechanical toy created for Tipu Sultan which represents a tiger mauling a near-life-size white man, on display today at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England. (Fig. 3).

Following their successful conquest of Mysore, the British moved north to the Mughal Empire, where tiger-hunting was synonymous with kingship, and quickly adopted the sport in an effort to emulate the rulers and their widespread influence on the subcontinent. The Mughals had an entire department at court dedicated to the royal hunt, its organization, and the tallying of the number of various animals killed—the tiger being one of them.<sup>14</sup> Mughal rulers traditionally hunted tigers while sitting on the backs of elephants surrounded by an entourage; by the 1870s, the British had not only adopted this tradition as their own but also had begun using Indian terms for hunt (*shikar*) and hunter (*shikari*) with a heavy emphasis on the greater importance of the hunter.<sup>15</sup> The killing of Tipu Sultan’s beloved tigers also served as a symbolic reinforcement of Britain’s defeat of Mysore at Seringapatam, as well as a caveat to other Indian rulers who challenged Britain’s imperial ambitions in India.<sup>16</sup>

Hunting also represented British dominance over the natural environment of India, which Europeans were unfamiliar with, as tigers roamed jungles such as the Sundarbans, located in the northern region of the Bay of Bengal—modern India and Bangladesh. In an article concerning the region in question, Ranjan Chakrabarti makes the etymological connection:

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<sup>10</sup> Kate Brittlebank, *Tiger: The Life of Tipu Sultan* (United Kingdom: Claritas Books, 2022), 16.

<sup>11</sup> The Seringapatam Medal was awarded to soldiers who fought in the Battle of Seringapatam in 1799, the last battle of the Anglo-Mysore wars, effectively ending with the death of Tipu Sultan.

<sup>12</sup> Brittlebank, *Tiger: The Life of Tipu Sultan*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Robert B. Marks, “Asian Tigers: The Real, the Symbolic, the Commodity,” *Nature and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2006): 77, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43304080>.

<sup>15</sup> Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher, “Picturing the Indian Tiger: Imperial Iconography in the Nineteenth Century,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 42, no. 3 (2014): 373, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24575887>.

<sup>16</sup> Sramek, “Face him like a Briton,” 661.

For most Europeans the term [jungle] connotated danger and lack of order. Europeans usually saw jungles as hotbeds for deadly tropical diseases and hideouts for dacoits and predatory beasts. The same hope runs through most European narratives from this period: that at some point the jungles will be cleared.<sup>17</sup>

British colonizers' aim to "tame" the subcontinent was prevalent in not only the semantics around words such as "jungle," but also was rather blatant when it came to their persistent use of gender roles. Tiger-hunting did not only serve to cosplay Mughal rulers and assert dominance through emulation, but it also began the much more dangerous discourse of Britain in the masculine role and India in the female role.<sup>18</sup> The idea of British "superiority" over "inferior" India relied heavily on differentiating colonizers from the native "others" through the use of sexist and racist rhetoric. British men in the colony who held positions of power, such as army officers or policemen, were expected to also be tiger-slayers.<sup>19</sup> This directly linked masculinity with the killing of animals that were significant to Indian natives for centuries prior. To reinforce this, the Game Act, enacted in 1879, limited native access to hunting and granted permits to mainly white men living in colonial India. Prominent social scientist M.S.S. Pandian writes: "the Game Act amounted to an effort by purists [of the hunt] to uphold and discipline the hunting world in the hills, so as to make it rigidly cohere with a broader colonial discourse about authority, gender, and race."<sup>20</sup> It is clear that the hunt for the British did not hold ceremonial significance in the way it had for the Mughals, but it was rather a political move to garner submission from natives and to communicate this submission to Victorians back home.

Many artworks from the period immortalized the hunt in a triumphant and patriotic fashion. In their home country, the British relationship with the tiger was undeniably strong and held significant value in not only their perception of the colonies but of their self-image as well. The role of the tiger in the iconography of the British Empire—as the most powerful in the history of empires—can be observed through paintings, periodicals, memoirs, illustrations, and books from Victorian England, all of which depict the mighty tiger fallen in one way or another at the hands of white British men (literally as well as metaphorically). British superiority over the natives of their overseas colonies was available to Victorians of all social classes, readily on display in live zoos, traveling menageries, and taxidermized specimens in museums (Fig. 4).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ranjan Chakrabarti, "Local People and the Global Tiger: An Environmental History of the Sundarbans," *Global Environment* 2, no.3 (2009): 79, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43201488>.

<sup>18</sup> Marks, "Asian Tigers," 78.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>20</sup> M.S.S. Pandian, "Hunting and Colonialism in the Nineteenth-Century Nilgiri Hills of South India," *Nature and the Orient*, eds. Richard H. Grove, Vinita Damodaran, and Satpal Sangwan, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 294.

<sup>21</sup> Crane and Fletcher, "Picturing the Indian Tiger," 371. See also: Jacqueline Banerjee, "The Victorians and Animals, II: Animals in Entertainment," <https://victorianweb.org/history/animals/entertainment.html>.

It is nowhere more apparent the racial motivations of the British than in the allegorical depictions of tigers as Indian men. In their analysis of English illustrator John Tenniel's political cartoon titled, "The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger," (Fig. 5) Crane and Fletcher discuss the triangulation between the three subjects: the white woman who is under attack by the tiger is avenged by the lion. The illustration was published in the British weekly satire magazine, *Punch*, after the massacre of two hundred British women and children at the hands of Indian forces rebelling against the EIC during the Indian Rebellion. This inevitably evoked an angered reaction amongst the British public and consolidated the damaging image already imposed on Indians. Tenniel used the underlying issues of rape, gender, race, and violence to point to the common theme being communicated to his viewer: the tiger (representative of Indian men) is a direct threat to English honor (the woman) and needs the protection of the righteous lion (British men).<sup>22</sup> The utilization of rape imagery is powerful, provocative and almost always ensures an emotional reaction; in this case, in conjunction with racial undertones, it amalgamates into the prejudice against brown men, painting them as violent perpetrators out for blood. The image also bears a suspicious resemblance to the Seringapatam medal (Fig. 1), as the lion and tiger battling one another is a common allegorical depiction of Britain and India's ever-present conflict.

Images like Tenniel's opened the public floodgates to the widespread belief that the Indian Rebellion was a real threat to Britain. Illustrations of tigers pinning down women warped the culture to the point that the imagery of the tiger alone invited the audience to finish the story: the dangerous tiger will face its demise at the retributive hands of the British hero.<sup>23</sup> This is clearly depicted in an 1859 painting by Edward Armitage fittingly titled "Retribution," in which the figure of Britannia avenges the dead white woman and child in the foreground by killing the predatory tiger (Fig. 6). In the latter half of the nineteenth-century, the tiger undeniably became a tool of imperialist ideology and propaganda, used to reinforce the British Raj's control over the Indian subcontinent.

Contrasting with the violent imagery of Tenniel's illustration, John William Godward's use of tiger skins in his Neo-Classical style paintings demonstrates a different side of tigers in British artwork. In many of Godward's works, women in Roman dress lounge on tiger skins, creating an atmosphere of exoticism and luxury (Fig.7). Contrasting to the paintings which depict the tiger having killed the woman, in Godward's work the tiger skin lying at the woman's feet is a powerful representation of the final conquest of human over animal. In this sense, Britain is embodied by the living and thriving woman; India by an animal, the dead tiger. The centrality and emphasis on the tiger skin yet again leaves the viewer with a sense of superiority and

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 374.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 377-78.

adds to the ongoing discourse of the British colonization of India. The use of tiger skin in the artistic realm is also found in Rudyard Kipling's popular children's story *The Jungle Book*, in which villainous tiger Shere Khan meets his demise in a humiliating manner and is then skinned by Mowgli, the human protagonist, who proceeds to wear his enemy's skin as a trophy of retributive justice.<sup>24</sup>

By incorporating tigers in so much of the cultural landscape of the time, British artists created a world in which English presence in India was indisputably necessary. The tiger imagery throughout the British occupation of India, particularly during the Victorian period and the British Raj, carried significant symbolism with regard to power dynamics. What had initially begun as a British copy of the Mughal rulers' ceremonial significance of the tiger through hunting, gradually transformed into racist imagery in which the animal symbolized the colonized male Indian. Paintings that carried this damaging message circulated throughout the British Empire and reinforced the idea of segregation in terms of white superiority and class division. After the disintegration of the British Empire in the first half of the twentieth-century, the arts and popular culture moved away from such strong depictions of the tiger. Unfortunately, due to excessive hunting which continued throughout the 1900s, tiger populations in India drastically declined.<sup>25</sup> The tiger, an animal that had once been synonymous with regality and prestige became an endangered species, and images of tigers now instead resonate with environmental protection.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 381-82.

<sup>25</sup> Over 80 000 tigers were killed in the fifty-year period between 1875-1925. Mahesh Rangarajan, *India's Wildlife History* (Delhi, India: Permanent Black, 2001): 32.



Fig. 1 – Front and back of the Seringapatam Medal awarded to participants of the final battle of Mysore by the East India Company. Source: Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK.



Fig. 2 – Henry Singleton, *The Last Effort and Fall of Tipu Sultan* (c. 1800). Source: [https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/empire\\_seapower/tiger\\_of\\_mysore\\_gallery\\_11.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/empire_seapower/tiger_of_mysore_gallery_11.shtml)



Fig. 3 – *Tipu's Tiger*, (c. 1780s-1790s), Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK.



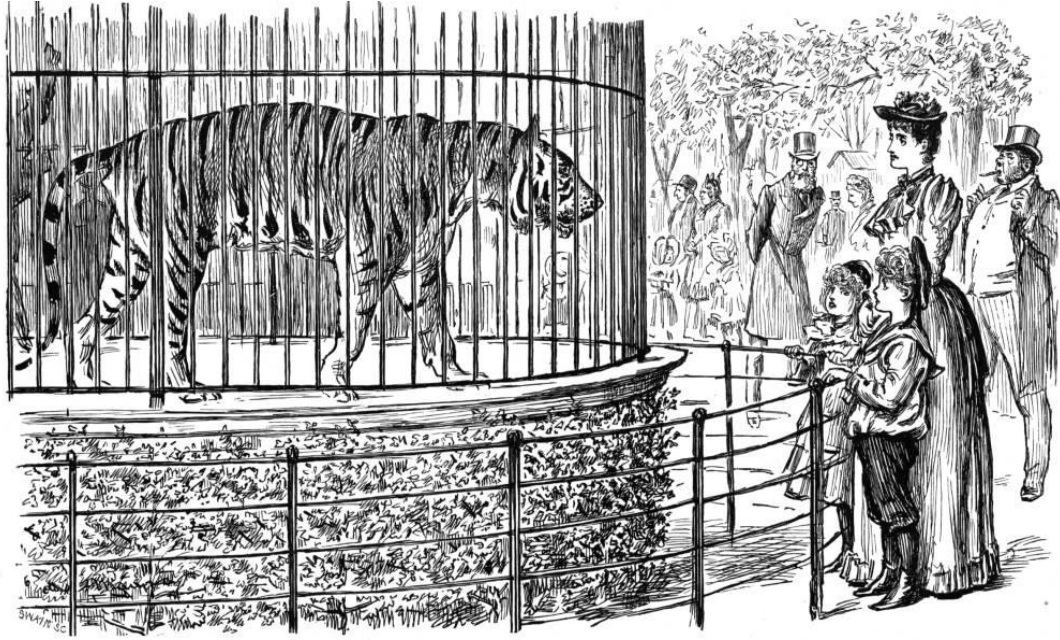


Fig. 4 – George Du Maurier, *At the Zoo for English Society* (1897). Source: <https://victorianweb.org/history/animals/entertainment.html>



Fig. 5 – *The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger*. Illustration from *Punch* (22, Aug. 1857): 76-77.



Fig. 6 – Edward Armitage, *Retribution*, (26 February 1859), British Museum, London, UK.



Fig. 7 – John William Godward, *Expectation*, (1900), Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester, UK.

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