

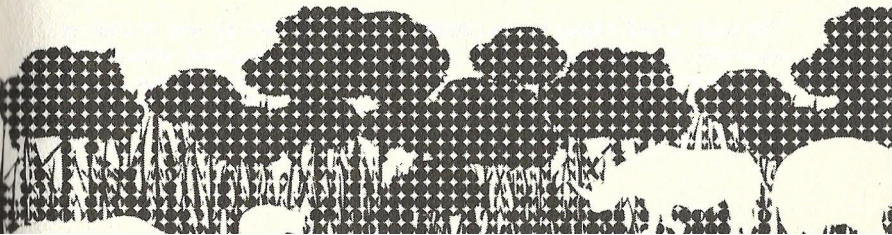
A Boy from Siklis

The Life and Times of Chandra Gurung

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ROYAL PATRONAGE

Talking to me, Sumitra Manandhar Gurung had been very open about her marriage with Chandra. She had also been generous about him. At one point, she said something that resonated with me long afterwards. We had talked about his abandoning her after their return from Hawaii, his long absences from their children during their early years, and the heated legal negotiations they had gone through to reach a childcare agreement. Though Sumitra had criticized Chandra for these failings, she had praised what he went on to do professionally. 'He couldn't give that much to us, but he gave everything he had to the community,' she had said, thoughtfully. 'What he couldn't do for his family, he did for others, you see.'

By 'the community', she had meant his own people, the people of the Annapurna area—the Gurung people—but she also meant the people of Nepal. Chandra gave to the community through his work in conservation, a field that he happened into by chance, by circumstance, rather than by design. His expertise, after all, was in medical geography; his interest lay in development. He had no knowledge of the natural sciences. It was the pioneering environmentalist Hemanta Mishra who—upon hiring him at the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation—inducted him into

conservation. It was the trust that turned Chandra into an environmentalist.

Conservation was then a wide-open field in Nepal. What efforts had taken place had focused on saving one or another species—the rhinoceros, the tiger—in the plains south of the Churia range, in the tarai. Before 1950, this area was a dense jungle. The sparse inhabitants trod lightly on the land. The main human threat to the wildlife then came from the annual hunts, or shikar, of the ruling Shah and Rana dynasties. Shikar was a long-established tradition of the maharajas of the princely Mughal states before and after British rule. Nepal's Shah kings adopted the practice after the country's unification by Prithvi Narayan Shah in 1768. Shikar had become a part of court life by 1849, when the Rana maharajas began their rule.

The Rana-era hunts were grand, requiring the mobilization of the entire court. Tulsi Ram Vaidya, Triratna Manandhar and Shankar Lal Joshi have written, in *Social History of Nepal*, that for a single expedition Jung Bahadur Kunwar Rana took hundreds of officials with him to the tarai, along with '32,000 soldiers, 52 guns, 300 horsemen, 250 horse artillery, 2000 followers and 700 rations officers'. Hoping to curry favour, subsequent Rana maharajas began to invite the maharajas and colonial officials of British India along. These invitations were coveted by the invitees, for game was more plentiful in the Nepal tarai than in most of the other hunting grounds of northern India.

In 1911, Maharaja Chandra Sumshere Jung Bahadur Rana invited King George V to Chitwan, in the tarai, for a hunt in which, according to a 1912 report in *The New York Times*, the

king personally killed thirty-seven tigers, nineteen rhinoceroses, and countless lesser game. 'Cars Ran into Tigers', declared *The New York Times's* breathless headline. The story detailed the luxury at the camp, where electricity was installed temporarily, and where a European-style breakfast was served each morning: 'Porridge. Bakti Maitre d'Hotel. Oeufs aux choux saucisses. Grillies. Curry de legumes viandes. Froides. Café.'

The next shikar to involve the British royal family took place in 1921, when the Prince of Wales killed seventeen tigers, ten rhinoceroses, two leopards and two bears. Another particularly resplendent shikar took place in 1939, when Maharaja Juddha Sumshere Jung Bahadur Rana invited the British viceroy—Victor Alexander John Hope, Marquess of Linlithgow—to the Chitwan. The viceroy killed 120 tigers, thirty-eight rhinoceroses, twenty-seven leopards and fifteen sloth bears during that hunt.

According to Nina Bhatt's article 'Kings as Wardens and Wardens as Kings', the Rana maharajas also encouraged the Shah kings, who were under their control, to hunt—as a means of diverting them, and distracting them from trying to regain power. Thus the living rooms of many a Shah and Rana home in Kathmandu today still boast many moth-eaten hunting trophies.

All this took a toll on the wildlife of the tarai. According to Hemanta Mishra in his memoir, *The Soul of the Rhino*, only two hundred years ago, the greater Asian one-horned rhinoceros, *Rhinoceros unicornis*, inhabited a vast area in South Asia, from the Indus River in present-day Pakistan in the west to Burma and the southern reaches of China in the east.

Today they survive only in India and in Nepal's tarai, that too in small, fragmented communities. At the turn of the twentieth century, by the account of WWF Nepal, the rhinoceros population in the jungles of Chitwan was approximately 1,000. The rhinoceros has no predator in the animal world; humans are its sole threat. By the mid 1960s, Chitwan's rhinoceros population had shrunk to a startling ninety.

Like the rhinoceros, the tiger is considered by environmentalists to be a 'flagship' animal, an animal whose abundance or scarcity mirrors the health of its habitat. Of the eight original tiger subspecies worldwide, the Caspian, Javan and Bali subspecies have become extinct due to unregulated hunting and habitat loss. The remaining five species—the Royal Bengal, the Siberian, the Sumatran, the Indochinese and the South China—are all endangered now, critically so, with a combined worldwide population of only 5,000. (At the turn of the twentieth century, the tiger population was 100,000 worldwide.) The only tiger found in the tarai is the Royal Bengal: *Panthera tigris tigris*. According to WWF Nepal, the Royal Bengal tiger was already endangered by 1940. Most of the 3,176 to 4,556 that are now living are found in India. Approximately 123 live in the tarai today.

The other endangered animals of the tarai include the wild Asian elephant, the swamp deer, the hispid hare, the sloth bear, the wild water buffalo, the black buck, and the four-horned antelope. Their habitat came under accelerated destruction after 1950, when Nepal launched on its mission to develop. In particular, the eradication of malaria—following a global campaign by the World Health Organization—helped to make the tarai more habitable for people. When King

Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah took absolute power in 1960, he instituted a policy of mass migration—relocating the people of the hills to the tarai, which was more cultivable, and agriculturally more productive than the hills.

By then the Forest Nationalization Act of 1957 had taken ownership of the forests away from those who lived in them and invested full ownership in the state. This enabled mass clearing of the forests for human settlement. The depleted settlements of today's tarai are stark illustration, perhaps, of the position of human beings as the earth's most dominant animals. This is a species still multiplying worldwide. Ten thousand years ago there were ten million people on earth. Today we number more than 6.6 billion, and that number is set to rise to nine billion by 2050. Half of Nepal's population came to live in the tarai. The local ecology was irrevocably changed as agriculture altered and simplified the composition of the local flora, and as grazing led to further depletion. Poaching also posed a new threat, with a burgeoning national and international market for rare pelts and animal parts. By the 1970s, vast swathes of the tarai forests had been lost. What remained of the wilderness was broken into ecological 'islands': small, unviable areas surrounded by human habitation.

Yet, if the development of Nepal after 1950 made the country vulnerable to environmental destruction, it also opened it to new ideas, including ideas about the environmental movement, which in the West was newly galvanized by Rachel Carson's 1962 publication of *Silent Spring*, on the unforeseen damages wrought by DDT.

As in much of the rest of the world, conservation in Nepal

began as an attempt by well-placed hunters to protect their gaming lands from further human encroachment. The hunters in this case were members of Nepal's royal family. The Shah kings took up the cause not out of their own initiative, but out of the initiative of the country's pioneering environmentalists.

One of these pioneers was Hemanta Mishra. He writes, in *The Soul of the Rhino*, of a rhinoceros census that he worked on in 1968, assisting an environmentalist from New Zealand, Graeme Caughley. Funded by the United Nations, the census concluded that not only was the rhinoceros population down to between ninety and 108, but the rhinoceros would be locally extinct by the late 1980s if the trends of the day continued. A Kathmanduite with family links to the royal court, Hemanta Mishra was aware of King Mahendra's love of hunting.

Indeed, King Mahendra and his brothers, Prince Himalaya and Prince Basundhara, conducted shikar all over the tarai, from east to west. (They also crossed the border to hunt: at the bird sanctuary in the Keoladeo National Park in Bharatpur, India, is a placard recording the 3 April 1957 hunt of the King of Nepal: 76 bags with 26 guns, over a half-day shoot.) As the Rana maharajas had, the Shah kings too invited foreign dignitaries to Nepal to hunt. In 1961, soon after taking absolute power, King Mahendra hosted a tiger hunt during Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip's state visit to Nepal. The hunt took place in Meghauri. The airport built for it still operates today. To make the hunt more efficient—for the state visit was brief—a tiger was corralled beforehand into a pen. One can only speculate on what the UK royals thought of this; for by then Prince Philip was already a champion of

conservation, and even the former maharajas of India had begun to frown on the hunting of tigers. The ethics of hunting would itself disapprove of shooting a corralled animal. In this case, the guests were on elephant back, sipping refreshments. Offered a chance to shoot the tiger, Queen Elizabeth modestly declined. Prince Philip too cited a boil on his trigger finger. It fell to Prince Philip's treasurer, Rear Admiral Christopher Bonham Carter, and Queen Elizabeth's secretary, Sir Michael Adeane, to shoot the tiger, which they did, inelegantly, after several failed attempts. A 1961 *Time* magazine report on the hunt was titled 'Hapless Hunting'.

While working on the rhinoceros census in 1968, Hemanta Mishra saw an opportunity in the royal penchant for shikar. 'A copy of our report was discreetly passed directly to King Mahendra, through the help of my father's friends,' Mishra writes in *The Soul of a Rhino*. 'Alerting this wildlife-loving Nepalese king was the only way of getting quick action in the slow-moving bureaucracy of Nepal.'

His strategy proved effective. King Mahendra famously died of a heart attack during a 1972 shikar in Chitwan. By then he had ordered the drafting of conservation legislation.

The next king, Birendra Bir Bikram Shah, was not as avid a hunter, but he and his family—including his brothers Gyanendra Shah and Dharendra Shah—continued the tradition of shikar. They were not skilled marksmen: Hemanta Mishra writes that during one shikar, Prince Dharendra accidentally shot his stepmother, Queen Mother Ratna. By this time the maharajas of India had turned into serious environmentalists: Project Tiger was launched in India in 1973. In Nepal, too, environmentalists tried to educate the royal family.

They did and did not succeed. In 1972, following through on a decree by his father, King Birendra ordered the establishment of Nepal's first national park, the Royal Chitwan National Park. To establish it, 22,000 local people were evicted. Tirtha Man Maskey was appointed the park's first warden. In 1973, the government passed the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act. The Royal Chitwan National Park was protected, at the start, by a *gainda gasti*, a 'rhinoceros patrol'. It later came under the guard of the Royal Nepal Army.



Despite this gesture towards conservation, the tradition of royal shikar remained in place through the Panchayat era, and even after the restoration of democracy in 1990. The hunts put on by the Shah kings were not much different from those put on by the Rana maharajas. Tirtha Man Maskey's widow, Laxmibadan Maskey has written of them in *Tiger Warden*, a memoir of her life with her husband. The national park staff had to assist full-time when a royal hunt was on, she has written. Preparations for these hunts got under way months before the royal family arrived. After flying in on helicopters, royal family members would settle into the best local accommodations. Their hunting day started at 6 a.m. All but the 'queens'—Queen Aishwarya and her sisters Princesses Komal and Prekchya, who were married to Prince Gyanendra and Prince Dharendra—went on the hunts. The queens played

cards, usually a game called marriage. Her husband's duties ended only when the royal family left. 'When the kings were there, there was no chance of his having any free time,' Laxmibadan Maskey writes. 'Only when the kings all went back did he have any time to himself. Not even free time: just the feeling that a big hassle had come to an end.'

The hunting committee of the royal palace directed the hunts. But as Nina Bhatt has pointed out, it is difficult to know what, if any, regulations the committee put in place. Tigers and rhinoceroses—classified as endangered—were by now officially off-limits, thanks to pressure created by environmentalists. Quotas were set for other animals; but Prince Gyanendra sat in on the meetings that set the quotas, and no one dared to openly disagree with him. Writes Nina Bhatt: 'Indeed, these were valuable opportunities for park staff to ingratiate favors with the palace by insisting on a generous quota.'

Laxmibadan Maskey writes, 'When the king [and his family came], they mostly hunted rhinoceroses, tigers, deer, antelopes, bears and alligators.' If they were going to hunt tigers, the beasts would be encircled a full day ahead, to make things easier for the hunters. 'Tigers are never hunted without encircling them.' In her innocence she adds: 'I think that might be a rule. They search out a place where there are tigers, and encircle them. I think rhinoceroses are found more easily. And you don't have to search that hard for deer and antelopes.'

None of this was, strictly, illegal, since members of the royal family were above the law during the Panchayat era. Even

after 1990 they enjoyed impunity. But it did engender resentment locally. The people living near the national park came to view the park staff as guarding the jungles for the exclusive use of the royal family. It did not help that some of the army personnel guarding the parks indulged in hunting, and even poaching and the smuggling of wildlife contraband. The Royal Nepal Army, for its part, behaved as though the people of the area were menaces to be kept away by the use of force. This led to parks-vs-people conflicts and, more generally, to an erosion of trust regarding the entire concept of conservation.

In hindsight—looking back from a Nepal that has abolished the monarchy—it is easy to see the perils of seeking royal patronage for conservation. Yet Nepal's pioneering environmentalists clearly found this the most expedient way of pushing through conservation policy.

In 1974, the young King Birendra asked his brother Prince Gyanendra to establish a network of national parks and wildlife reserves throughout the country. This turned Prince Gyanendra into the main patron of conservation in Nepal. Over the years royal patronage enabled the establishment of the Royal Shuklaphanta Wildlife Reserve (declared a hunting reserve in 1969, and gazetted as a wildlife reserve in 1973), the Sagarmatha National Park (1976), the Langtang National Park (declared in 1972, and gazetted in 1976), the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (1976), the Rara National Park (1976), the Shey Phoksundo National Park (1984), the Parsa Wildlife Reserve (1984), the Khaptad National Park (1985), the Shivapuri National Park (1985), the Royal Bardiya National Park (1988) and the Makalu-Barun National Park and Conservation Area (1991). (As with the Chitwan National Park, the parks in Shuklaphanta

and Bardiya are no longer called 'Royal'.) The Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve was established in 1987. Three further conservation areas were established in the 1990s—in the Annapurna area, the Manasalu area and in Kangchanjunga. Almost 20 per cent of Nepal's total landmass now falls under one or another kind of protection, in what today's environmentalists consider a major achievement.

By the time Prince Gyanendra came to be the main patron of conservation in Nepal, he had gained a reputation for misusing his royal privileges for private gain. Worse, he was said to have links to the underworld of drug and idol smuggling, of organized crime. In the Panchayat era—an era of simmering political discontent and suppressed democratic aspirations—it was also easy for those who opposed the absolute monarchy to spread rumours of the prince's involvement in wildlife poaching, and in the smuggling of wildlife contraband.

Nevertheless, Hemanta Mishra—who was largely responsible for turning the prince into an environmentalist—remains unambiguous in his praise:

Through his personal contacts and royal connections, the prince had been instrumental in forging Nepal's relationship with the Smithsonian Institution, the World Wildlife Fund, and the World Conservation Union. Though he was not popular in many Nepali political circles, I found him to be a kindhearted intellectual with a deep commitment to nature conservation.

But it did not help that the royal family kept up the tradition of shikar, enlisting the national park staff as aids. So unreformed

was the royal family that even environmentalists suffered direct conflicts of interest. Hemanta Mishra's memoir, *The Soul of the Rhino*, culminates in his receiving a confidential letter from the royal palace in 1978, ordering him to organize a rhinoceros hunt for King Birendra. This, for a ritual called the tarpan, which Hemanta Mishra learned, to his dismay, the Shah kings felt duty-bound to perform at least once upon ascending to the throne. The tarpan was said to date back to the Rajput maharajas of India in the ninth and tenth centuries. It required a new king to sacrifice the blood of a male rhinoceros to his ancestors, and even to enter its disembowelled carcass as part of the ritual.

'The order hit me hard,' writes Hemanta Mishra:

I was a Western-educated scientist and did not believe in these superstitious ceremonies. Furthermore, I was a member of the Species Survival Commission of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (World Conservation Union)—a Swiss-based global custodian of flora and fauna. Rhinos topped the list of rare and endangered species in the Union's Red Data Book.

The hunt threatened to invite infamy, scandal. But his objections were easily overridden, and not just by the court. 'Surprisingly,' he notes, 'some of the supporters of the rhino hunt were not even Nepalese but a few Western anthropologists who had flocked to Nepal in the seventies. They openly voiced concerns that young, Western-educated youths like me did not know the significance of our own cultural practices.'

Prince Gyanendra himself presided over the meeting of the

royal palace hunting committee to decide whether or not to go ahead with the tarpan. To no one's surprise, the meeting decided in favour of the rhinoceros hunt. All Hemanta Mishra managed to do—to ward off scandal—was to persuade the committee to broadcast news of it publicly, and to explain its cultural significance: the hunting of a rhinoceros by a king was not akin to the hunting by a common poacher. On Prince Gyanendra's orders he also informed the World Conservation Union, the World Wildlife Fund, the National Geographic Society and the Smithsonian Institution about the hunt.

The next few chapters of *The Soul of the Rhino* detail the hunt, just outside the Royal Chitwan National Park, till—“‘Bang!’ went the monarch's rifle.’ A description of the gruesome, atavistic ritual follows. The king had to enter the carcass of the disembowelled rhinoceros to perform his ancestor worship. By the end, however, even Hemanta Mishra had been won over: ‘Killing one rhino was both a cultural and a political necessity,’ he writes. ‘Moreover, as aptly pointed out by an anthropologist, the Tarpan elevated the rhino to a royal or sacred status. And in many ways this helped preserve the species.’

From today's perspective it seems obvious that just as the environmentalists used the royal family to push through conservation policy, the royal family used the environmentalists to do as they pleased. ‘Anyway, what choice do you have?’ Hemanta Mishra's wife asked him at one point, as he was agonizing over the ethics of the rhinoceros hunt. Of course everyone has a choice. Hemanta Mishra chose to work for conservation from within the Panchayat system. This was the

choice that all of Nepal's pioneering environmentalists made: to make the most of an imperfect situation.

The payback, in terms of conservation, was not inconsiderable. In 1982, King Birendra decreed the establishment of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation. A non-government organization, the trust nevertheless enjoyed quasi-government status as the king himself was its patron, and Prince Gyanendra was the chairman of the board. During the Panchayat era, all non-government organizations were regulated by the Social Services National Coordinating Committee, headed by Queen Aishwarya. (The 'coordination' done by this body usually amounted to controlling all funds.) By directly involving the king and the prince, the trust was able to bypass this body. Hemanta Mishra was appointed its director, as the member-secretary.