

Animal Kingdoms

Hunting, the Environment,
and Power in the Indian
Princely States



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permanent black



Exceptional Game in Powerful Places

A small bunker-like structure, weathered into streaks of red ochre, cement grey, and lime white, stands on the grounds of the Kalka Mata botanical nursery just south of the Pichola lake. Lightly shaded by an open canopy of drought-resistant foliage and completely surrounded by exposed earth and parched grass, the building's door opens onto a different world. Inside, brilliant blue and green pigments shine against a backdrop painted in rich browns and warm tans. Beautifully maintained shooting towers in diverse shapes and sizes, embellished with colored-glass window panes and architectural flourishes, dot the forested hillsides and open plains that cover the walls. In this painted environment, wild boar and leopards crowd the verdant shoreline, while tigers and bears slip through the trees. On the ceiling, birds and butterflies float through softly clouded skies. Throughout this Mewari landscape in miniature, Maharana Fateh Singh and his huntsmen immerse themselves in their state's characteristic environments to pursue its distinctive local game.

Today the sharpest visual contrasts at this former royal shooting box, known as Nahar Odi, are between the building's muted exterior and drab surroundings, and its vibrantly painted, if faded and flaking, interior. Yet, when Fateh Singh's court artists completed their work in the late 1880s a few years after the maharana's coronation, the most important contrasts at the site were inside the shooting box itself. The

Nahar Odi paintings portray Mewar's hunting grounds as marked by severity, complemented and tempered by an almost omnipresent fertility. On every wall, the reds and browns of the partially exposed hillsides indicate the region's aridity. Just as prominently, scattered uplands vegetation and ubiquitous lowland greens suggest the overall complexity of Mewar's environment.

The landscape most identified with Mewar during Fateh Singh's reign was the one depicted on the walls of Nahar Odi, namely, the hill-bound setting of the Pichola lake and the capital city, Udaipur. Closely associated with the royal Sisodia Rajputs since the late sixteenth century, Udaipur's surroundings embodied its sovereigns' military might in the defensive capacity of rugged hills augmented by fortifications, while the city's gardens, lake palaces, and accumulated waters of its man-made lakes suggested a life of luxury and cultural refinement appropriate to kings. At Nahar Odi, the maharana's artists chose to depict this specific landscape not only because it represented the actual environs of the royal shooting box, but also because its composite nature epitomized a fundamental Mewari environmental ideal.



The best possible environment for Rajput princes, and for their prey, was one that balanced nurturing attributes with suitably challenging aspects. While cultivators preferred fertile fields and merchants wanted open roads, Rajput sovereigns and nobles needed imposing hills and dense forests alongside their pleasure gardens. These same salubrious hills, forests, and grasslands produced and housed better classes of game, which in turn required bigger, better, and braver sportsmen to kill them.

Like their Rajput peers throughout North India, the princes of Mewar saw close connections, and even causal relationships, between the landscapes of their individual states, and the nature and worth of their royal lineages. As a consequence of their contacts with local topography and plant life, Rajputs either grew soft and degenerate

in overly paradisiacal surroundings, or else became hardened and formidable as they struggled within challenging environments. Likewise, the state's most celebrated hunting grounds were those that balanced difficulty with ease, and severity with abundance.

The fine balance of fecundity and ruggedness in Mewar's ideal hunting grounds found expression in steep hillsides softened with foliage, the proliferation of dangerous game, and an abundance of vegetation tipped with thorns. It also found echoes in the cultural refinement and undiluted Rajput masculinity claimed by the house of Mewar and its maharana. Fateh Singh's self-image as a possessor of admirable game and fine shikargahs, and as a keen yet discriminating hunter, coincided with his understanding of a Mewari sovereign's ideal sophistication, strength, and status *vis-à-vis* his nobles, other princes, and the British. Even though environmental severity was a feature shared widely amongst the Rajput states, many of which had more arid or forbidding territories, Mewaris managed to excel by stressing the advantages unique to their homeland, where environmental challenges coexisted with fields of plenty.

The most significant game animals in Mewar were wild boar, tigers, and leopards. Mewaris drew on an established set of qualities that they ascribed to each species, habitat, and hunting method to support flattering conclusions about themselves and their realm. While they based their assessments on criteria similar to those used by other Rajputs and to a lesser degree akin to those accepted by the British, their judgments remained subjective and aligned with local interests. As a result, what made Mewar great and validated its proud heritage of independence in local opinion could undermine the state's image before hostile audiences reluctant either to credit the maharana's claims of preeminence, or accept his avowed reliance on tradition—both of which he used to justify transgressions against British paramountcy and slights against princely houses that he viewed as inferior.

Fateh Singh endeavored throughout his reign to engage with Mewar's environment and hunting landscapes in authoritative ways. He built better shooting towers, promoted thicker forests, and fostered game to create opportunities for hunting in a manner consistent with and constitutive of Rajput sovereignty and legitimacy. Like Pratap Singh of Orchha, Fateh Singh needed well-stocked shikargahs where

he could obtain abundant game with minimal risk of failure. Unlike Orchha's prince, Mewar's maharana required more ostentatious links with hardship and danger while hunting. Fateh Singh's preeminent rank and the perceived dignity of his office as Maharana of Mewar forced him to outclass every prince in India, not just his immediate rivals. In addition, the maharana's nobles were more independent and powerful than their counterparts in Orchha, and some of them tended towards outright defiance. As a result, Fateh Singh's displays of strength and skill had to be that much more impressive.

In line with the maharana's requirements, the wall paintings at Nahar Odi touted the full range of habitats available in the immediate vicinity, each conducive to different game and sporting styles, and each capable of making its own unique contribution to the constitution of Mewar's Rajputs through the particular difficulties and advantages it posed. Both the lowlands and the hills around Udaipur were conveniently accessible to the prince as he went about his daily routine, which included mounted excursions along the shores of the Pichola lake, and target practice at the rifle range just west of Tikhalya Magra.

The lower reaches around Udaipur housed the maharana's wild boar. The gentle contours of these grounds were suitable for pigsticking from horseback, or for shooting from the roofs of low-profile boxes like Nahar Odi. Hunters at such sites came into intimate contact with their prey, often dispatching animals by hand with spears or swords. These places and their signature prey showcased a hunter's strength, daring, and superior horsemanship or marksmanship. The hillier regions with their thicker vegetation contained leopards and tigers. These landscapes required elaborate beats to guide an animal's movements through ravines and over slopes. Such places also encouraged the use of multi-storied shooting boxes, which provided sportsmen with security and a clear line of sight over tall bushes and trees. As a result, the hills foregrounded tactical skill and leadership.

Apportioned out between the lowlands and the highlands, wild boar, tiger, leopard, sambar, blackbuck, bear, wildfowl, and hare populated the ruggedly bountiful Mewari landscapes inside Nahar Odi. The almost implausible abundance of wildlife in these paintings represented Udaipur's immediate surroundings as a hunter's

paradise. The conflation of every kind of game occasionally seen in these hills into one sprawling illustration, along with every method used to hunt them, conveyed the false impression that each animal was available concurrently and continuously. In fact, appearances in the closest hills of certain game, like tigers, could be separated by months or even years.

Fateh Singh's artists painted an exaggerated environment to suggest that Udaipur's natural surroundings, by virtue of their proximity to the center of power and regular contact with the maharana, were ideal. Fateh Singh's policies, righteousness, and presence unlocked the potential of Mewar's topography, giving the land fecundity and the game distinction. One lowland scene in particular stands out as a fantastic overstatement: a pair of rhinoceros in the same panel as a deer and two wild boar. The Indian rhinoceros is a species that inhabits riverine grasslands, adjacent swamps, and forests.¹ While their famously tough hides were once prized for shields in the area, no wild rhinoceros lived in arid Rajasthan, making their inclusion in Nahar Odi an environmental hyperbole. Of course, it is not inconceivable that Fateh Singh had acquired a rhinoceros or two for his menagerie, which he was building up from an existing collection that reportedly included "a terrace-full of tigers, bears, and Guzerat [*sic*] lions bought from the Nawab of Oudh's sale."² Nevertheless it seems likely that his artists' depiction of a lone huntsman and hounds approaching the rhinoceros on foot suggests some naiveté regarding these animals.

The maharana's artists did not necessarily believe that their ruler could transform Udaipur's countryside into a lush environment suited to rhinoceros, assuming they even knew what sort of habitat rhinoceros required. More likely, they tailored their art to Fateh

¹B.K. Talukdar, R. Emslie, S.S. Bist, A. Choudhury, S. Ellis, B.S. Bonal, M.C. Malakar, B.N. Talukdar, and M. Barua, "*Rhinoceros unicornis*" (2008), in *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species*, Version 2011.2, accessed March 24, 2012, <http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/19496/0>.

²Sharma, ed., *Haqiqat Bahida*, 2:5; there was a new zoo by 1897: *ibid.*, 3:71; Rudyard Kipling, "Diverse Passages of Speech and Action Whence the Nature, Arts, and Disposition of the King and His Subjects may be Observed," *From Sea to Sea*, vol. 1, 69.

Singh's sporting tastes and association of Mewari exceptionalism with the hunting state landscapes offered. Their painting asserted the maharana's prowess, therefore, by showing an abundance of game rather than fields of sprouting grain. The images inside Nahar Odi would have appealed far less to the general populace, which was more likely to associate plentiful game with damaged crops and decimated livestock. But Nahar Odi was not designed for them. Instead, "the relevant 'public' whose loyalty had to be regulated and ordered was [the prince's] kinsmen, the nobles and 'aristocrats' of the state."³

Hills dominate the Nahar Odi paintings by providing backdrops for most hunting scenes. The same is true of the well-known Mewari miniatures executed on paper, which depict royal sport around Nahar Magra, Udai Sagar, Jaisamand, and Chittorgarh. The basic features of the state's hunting landscapes remain constant between the wall and miniature paintings, indicating that Mewar's shikargahs shared a similar aesthetic either in fact or in the imagination of local artists. Few hunting miniatures violate these standards, which prescribe tiger or leopard beats in intimate amphitheaters of undulating green-brown hills dominated by *anwal* or Indian gooseberry (*Phyllanthus emblica*), acacias, and cactus-like thuhar (*Euphorbia caducifolia*). These often feature exposed rocks and are cut here and there by ravines or stream-fed valleys carpeted with banyan, pipal, mango, and mahua trees. Wild boar appear in the same settings as the big cats or in more open forests with smaller brush and lower hills. Paintings that differ from the norm do so only slightly. In some, the field of view spills out between the foregrounded slopes into distant hilly plains. In others dating to the end of Fateh Singh's reign, barren summer landscapes full of skeletal trees and bleached grass replace the usual greens and warm earthen tones.⁴

Although hills occupied a place of prominence in almost all Mewari paintings of the hunt, Fateh Singh's shikari Dhaibhai Tulsinath Singh Tanwar reported that around the Jaisamand shikargah most animals

³Edward S. Haynes, "Rajput Ceremonial Interactions as a Mirror of a Dying Indian State System, 1820–1947," *Modern Asian Studies* 24, 3 (1990): 468.

⁴Topsfield, *City Palace*, Figs. 54–6, 58–9, and 61.

lived not on the slopes or summits but at the base of the hills and along their margins in the plains below.⁵ The occasional placement of shooting boxes in the flats, and of many more halfway down the hillsides and overlooking ravines around Udaipur and at Nahar Magra, suggests that the same was true of game at these sites. But Fateh Singh's artists did not frame the action so narrowly as to exclude the hilltops, even though the pictured events usually took place at least partway down or at the bottom of the hills. The geographical scale of hunts, during which the prey had ranged far and wide in its attempts to escape, certainly would have encouraged them to show skies and hills alike; but they did not limit their panoramic depictions to such scenes. In Mewar, it was consistently as important to document the landscape as to detail the animals, actions, and human participants.

These were not hunts like any other, transpiring anonymously in unimportant places. These were exceptional kills of exceptional prey by an exceptional ruler accomplished in an exceptional and specifically Mewari setting. For Fateh Singh and his followers, immediately recognizable formations like Machhla Magra and Nahar Magra set the scene as effectively as glimpses of the royal reservoir at Rajsamand or the victorious Vijay Stambha at Chittorgarh. One state shikari even claimed such thorough familiarity with his prince's favorite hunting grounds that "the hill slopes, the trees, and even the stones, nothing is unknown."⁶ Cloaked in the same vegetation and rendered in a consistent style, even the less distinctive contours around the Koriyat, Hinglajya, and Amjhar hunting grounds looked fundamentally Mewari.



The importance of Mewar's landscape helps explain Fateh Singh's apparent preference for miniature paintings of the hunt over photographs. Even after improved technology eliminated many of the problems associated with the long exposure times and bulky cameras of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the maharana remained

⁵Tanwar, *Shikari aur Shikar*, 312.

⁶*Ibid.*, 141. All translations from this source are my own.