

ANGLING IN PUNJAB: A STUDY OF THE COLONIAL PERIOD

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Abstract

The land of Punjab during the British rule was used by the ruling class for their environmental as well as commercial benefits. The water of the five rivers of Punjab was used for irrigation and was directed towards the areas where water was scarce, through canals and small tributaries. In addition, they were also used for angling. During the British rule, the officials preserved nature as well as earned profits by exploiting the environment of Punjab. While serving commercial deeds of the British, waters of Punjab also served as source of recreation for the British, which established complex pattern of social interaction. Such aspirations of the British led to the development of the fisheries in the region. Punjab was introduced to new fish by the fisheries department. Nurseries, hatcheries, and sanctuaries were developed to stock streams for increased fish populations. The fisheries of the state's riverine and canal resources were exploited through a license and lease system.

Key Words: Misal, Rod, Masheer, Trout, Hatchery

Introduction

Punjab was a province of British India. The land of Punjab is rich with minerals and other resources. Maharaja Ranjit Singh compiled other Sikh *Misals* into one under his rule and established Sikh Raj in Punjab. But in 29 March 1849, Lord Dalhousie abolished the Lahore Darbar and the Punjab was merged into British Raj in India. With the colonial rule forests, wildlife, fisheries, and land use patterns changed in British Punjab. The present study will analyze the expansion of fisheries in the British Punjab.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To understand the angling in Punjab under the British.
2. To evaluate the origin and develop the angling in Punjab by the British.
3. To study the purposes of angling.
4. To analyse the rules for protection of fisheries in colonial Punjab.
5. To study the growth of the fisheries in colonial Punjab.

Approach and Research Methodology:

The proposed research work will be based on the analysis of the expansion classification of fisheries in the colonial Punjab with a large study of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources that would be helpful in detailed study of this project will include official reports and records, contemporary newspapers, pamphlets, autobiographies, personal diaries, minutes of Government meetings, private papers and literature related to this topic available in different Archives and Libraries. Secondary sources such as books, articles, journals will also be used for this topic.

Beginning and Expansion of Angling

The sport of angling enabled the British in Punjab to develop the fisheries industry. Moreover, there were large expanses of water available for the angler, with shooting localities being few. Angling as a sport was enjoyed by the British in Punjab but they had already been keen enough fishermen at home. In the 19th Century, anglers in England formed a numerous class whereas in India they formed a small minority of the lovers of sport. [1] A noted angler thus contemplated about the British who came to India: " For every twenty that brings out a gun, perhaps only one brings out a rod." [2]

But why was rifle preferred to a rod? The anxieties about this have been discussed by sportsmen themselves. In the words of H.S. Thomas, Whether for love, or for money, shooting for any sort, and more particularly heavy game shooting, is so much more difficult to obtain in England than India, that many who in England perform content themselves with rod, would in India be seduced by the ruder attractions of the boat-spear, the rifle and the gun.[3]

Thus, hunting a colonial possession had a special attraction as it was more open to the British lower middle class than was hunting in England. This could be one reason why hunting was preferred to angling in India.

Comparisons between the two sports have also been made by sportsmen themselves. Angling was considered to be a "lesser sport" when compared with hunting which was "greater" one. This was due to the time and effort involved in the two sports. Angling was also a "gentle" sport for "thoughtful" people. V.K. Birch classified the catching of fish as merely "pleasant" but most "thrilling" for him were the pursuits of dangerous game like tiger, bear, lion, rhino etc. with rifle or a spear.[4] This clearly indicates the changing British sensibilities when they came to India backed by their personal inclinations and opportunities available in India.

Moreover, in the beginning there prevailed some kind of an ignorance regarding possibilities for angling in India. The idea that prevailed about angling was quite contrary to the idea about hunting. If Indian empire provided wealth of opportunities for hunting then for angling it had nothing "worthy of their skill". The British thought that "having tasted the joys of salmon or trout fishing at home, there could be nothing worthy of their skill in India." [5] However, this belief was eroded after the middle of the 19th Century when a large number of treatises were written on fishing, especially with an aim to make the keen angler aware of the good fishing opportunities available in India and with the hope of developing their angling skills. The idea that was to prevail by the end of the 19th century was that " the keen fisherman will fish wherever the finds." [6] In other words fishing was to be had and enjoyed by these who cared to look for it.

Punjab was one of the important places to be discussed by anglers for good angling, owing to its vast extents of water indicating the vastness of the fish farm. Here, the British developed a keen love for angling. In fact more than any other race in Punjab did they practice this gentle art. Angling in Punjab hill streams and waters of plains remained a favorite pastime for many Europeans. In the snow fed streams trout prospered in the submontane tracts mahseer (The Punjab mahseer, silvery with scales becoming golden below and fins reddish) flourished and in the plains were found carp, cat fishes, murrel, tengras, mulleys, rohu, kalabans etc.

Of the fish to be caught in the Punjab waters, the most popular was the mahseer, which took the lead among the Indian fish much like salmon in Great Britain. Mahseer in India became a perfect substitute for salmon. One angler admits:

As a fisherman and an Englishman however one is always taught to believe that given yourself at one end of the rod, and salmon at the other, the summit of human bliss is reached. And this being India, substitute mahseer for salmon and there you are still at the summit of human bliss. [7]

In fact mahseer fishing was considered to be a "kingly sport", also offering better sport of its size than salmon. MacDonald in his famous book narrated the sport and the fighting nature of *mahseer* among other sport fishes in India. [8] The major localities in Punjab which offered a god sport of mahseer were the districts of Hoshiarpur, Jhelum, Rawalpindi, Simla, Ambala, Jullundhar, Delhi, Gurdaspur and Lahore.

Every district in Punjab in which there was canal irrigation contained some tanks which were of sufficient depth to retain water permanently and which were fed by canal waters at intervals. The Punjab north of Lahore, was wonderfully denuded of tanks, a least those of such a kind as were found down country, and which held vast quantities of fish. The British did detailed study of water bodies in Punjab and their flora and fauna with the hope of being able to introduce their favorite species here. [9] There were also the railway tanks, a large number of which were

used by railway employees. It was their passion and love for such a kind of sport that led them fairly and patiently to try for excellent fishing even in the muddy tanks. The size of the bag determined the joy of the day. H.S. Dunsford, District Superintendent of Police, Rohtak, enjoyed his first attempt in a muddy tank where he took 125 fish. In the plains tank fishing was considered to be a "fair sport" as compared to *mahseer* fishing. H.S. Dunsford says, "You fortunate residents of stations in the hills, or near the foot of them, have your *mahseer* fishing galore, but we poor dwellers in the plains are a good deal shut off from this." [10] It was mainly in the hope of encouraging fellow anglers who were unable to pick their time for a few days *mahseer* fishing that Dunsford tries to show that there is a substitute for the "kingly sport" in the plains and that being tank fishing. But this sort of fishing was not much known and practiced by the British in Punjab. Only a few found great delights about tank fishing. An angler illustrates it as thus:

It gives one day out, in the hot weather or rains, just when one more appreciates it. And if one is a naturalist at all, as are most anglers at heart, one had a never ending source of pleasure in watching the bird and beast life round old tank, Monkeys, parrots, crows, squirrels, king fishers etc. one sees many an amusing little scene while quietly watching.[11]

Celebrated by poets, stalked by the British, admired by multitudes-only few fish could ignite such an ardor as trout. Trout was one of the exotic game fishes to be introduced by the British in Punjab. The British so doted on fly fishing that they internationalized trout. Trout eggs, kept cool and wet could survive for months, making it possible to transport by sea. As the empire expanded, so did the exotic trout: to Tasmania in 1864, India in 1889 and Africa in 1890. Though *mahseer* was one of the important game fishes to be found in India and had favorite angling qualities like salmon, still *mahseer* did not receive so much attention as the exotic trout in Punjab.

The initial introduction of trout was at the instance of Europeans during the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. Mitchell explains the reasons for the introduction of trout in the following words:

Work tied me to Sri Nagar and I was told the nearest stream where sport could be had was the Arrah river which then flowed through the reservoir of Harwan. The streams and surroundings I found to be ideal but the fish were spawning at the time when one expected to find them most sporting and were very disappointing in appearance. I felt that if they could be replaced by the beauties I had loved at home, here was indeed a true angler's paradise.[12]

It was in this spirit that Mitchell made efforts to introduce trout in Kashmir. Following his efforts after 1889 and the shipment of fish seed (ova) from England, trout was successfully

introduced in Kashmir. A hatchery was built in Kashmir in 1908 from where eyed ova was distributed all over Kashmir and even sent to Kangra, Simla, Kulu, Nainital and Shillong.

Brown trout was first introduced in the river Beas in Kulu valley in 1909 by G.C.L. Howell, who brought it from Kashmir. This stock established itself in the river and since then many lakhs of Brown trout fry were planted in Beas and its tributaries and other streams in Punjab. Rainbow trout was also introduced in Kulu waters from Kashmir in 1919. Prior to the efforts were also made to arrange the supply from America. Though both Rainbow and Brown trout were introduced in the waters in Punjab, basically the hill streams, Brown trout was the most suitable trout in Punjab as in subsequent years rainbow trout failed to give satisfactory results in view of its greater susceptibility to diseases than brown trout. On the other hand Rainbow trout successfully thrived in the Nilgiris. Anglers however, seemed to be less opinionated regarding Rainbow or Brown trout. A keen angler expression his feelings about trout as:

Anglers whose experience of trout fishing has been limited to the smooth chalk streams of England or the small 'burns' of Scotland will not be inclined to regard the Beas as an ideal trout river until they have sampled the sport obtainable, but to the fisherman who has had the opportunity of casting a fly on the mountain rivers of Norway or north west America, the sight of the Beas during the fly fishing seasons of the year will provide a thrill of anticipation.[13]

Anglers were advised not to fish near the temple and must keep away from vicinity of temples and other religious institutions. Fishing everywhere near the temples was to be avoided. Memories and books dealing with fishing in India reflect this kind of an attitude. An angler usually avoided fishing in these tanks he was sensitive to the sentiments of the people. "At Mukerian by rail from Jullundhar city are two good tanks..... with nice shady trees", writes Skene Dhu. He further says:

Two or three men have definitely told me of these, yet when I tried to get latest news of these from a Naib- Tahsildar, he said they were Hindu tanks and no fishing was allowed. But I do not believe this, it is unfortunately the case now a days and a sign of times, that difficulties are quite needlessly put in ones way, simply because one is a Sahib.[14]

The fish in these tanks was fed and protected by priests, and in return the priests derived a small income by showing them off to the sahibs. This kind of care taken by the priests of the fish generally changed the character of the fish-from a "shy creature to defying the angles skill." The fish grew in large sizes in these tanks. Thus, it was H.S. Thomas who in 1870 suggested the utilization of religious institutional waters for the protection and breeding of fish like *Gourani*

and other species.[15] These waters served as excellent fish sanctuaries and the British were able to persuade the authorities to allow pisciculture in their tanks with due consideration for prevailing religious sentiments.

Big fish like *mahseer*, though not considered to be palatable afforded good trophy, especially its head and teeth. So huge, it is said were the heads of the *mahseer* that they fully covered the skeleton of an unusually fine sambar's head. The pharyngeal teeth of the *mahseer* were also preserved and made interesting souvenirs

In Punjab as may be the case like in the rest of India, European angling was seen as different from fishing by Indians. They saw a clear difference in this. The distinction primarily was between angling as a sport and fishing as a trade or a source of livelihood. Europeans were convinced that they were sportsmen and fished for pleasure. While the Indian fishermen were no sportsman-why should he be? His object was to remove everything from that water. The Indian fisherman did not allow anything, however, small to escape. Such concerns played an important role in shaping the policy in later years. The years following 1867 illustrate this point well.

Francis Day, Inspector General of fisheries and ichthyologist, made investigations into the conditions of Indian fisheries in 1867. In his report on freshwater fisheries of India and Burma, Francis Day recorded his dismay at the "wasteful destruction" he observed. The report submitted by him gave the impression that " a large amount of immature fish were yearly killed for food before they had been permitted to attain a fair size and then this destruction was in many places being affected in government waters, which had, or had not, been leased out for fishing purposes".[16] While referring to the wasteful destruction he clearly attacked the methods pursued by the Indian fisherman. He insisted that the reason for this was the lack of an effective regulation. F. Day recommended that "native precedent" should be "modified by British law", not as proposed in India but as existing in England. He was not the only one to see the problems in these terms. Even the North Punjab fishing club in 1887 wrote to the government recommending that a fishing act should be enforced, and submitted certain propositions considered necessary to be enforced, in order to check the "enormous destruction" of small fish, which sent on by every possible method in almost all small tributary streams in Punjab. Such efforts also inspired the Dehradun fishing association, which also invited the attention of Lieutenant Governor to the necessity of an act in order to protect the fisheries.

The British government responded to the consequences of depredations with preservationist initiatives. In 1897, the Indian Fisheries Act was passed, which was applicable to the whole of India and Burma but nothing specific was said about Punjab. Then, the Punjab Fisheries Act was passed in 1914 regulating fishing in the province under a license. This act was

a critical turning point in transforming the context of fishing and enabled the government to dramatically increase its control over fisheries. The legislation provided for a more rigid concept of fishing and the government had wider powers now since it invested the government with the power to regulate access to fisheries. Several methods of fishermen like poisoning, use of fixed engines, erection of dams, weirs and traps for killing fry and fish, which the British considered were instrumental in diminishing the fish supply were prohibited. This act gave a very rigid notion of techniques or methods to be used for fishing(for rules and regulations). The fishing regulations were clearly directed towards the Indian poacher, his methods and techniques.

Though the British saw a clear difference between themselves and the Indian fisherman regarding technique and purpose used for fishing, yet they ignored the differences in many other spheres. They hardly saw any difference between first condemning the Indian fisherman for being destructive and cruel and then giving him rewards for killing otters and crocodiles. The Punjab fisheries department made provisions for rewarding those who killed otters, crocodiles and cormorants etc. Killing them meant doing good to the fish since they were the enemies of the fish. The difference between "preservation" and "destruction" was not always clear. Otters, crocodiles, cormorants, turtles were killed to preserve fish. One species being killed to preserve another. It is an example of narrow thinking.

Even the English sportsman who regarded the techniques and methods and purpose of fishing more sporting and considered himself to be a sportsman never saw any difference between killing a fish or its enemies. Turtle was the biggest enemy of any sportsman. The tortoise seemed to have scared away the fish by its presence.

With the passing of rules and regulations and starting of Punjab fisheries department the context of fishing changed in Punjab. The Punjab government introduced and propagated various species of fish. The most striking feature of the transfer of English angling traditions to the region was the successful introduction of trout in Punjab. Their object was to obtain a heavy stock of fish, to make fish the staple diet of the province, to derive revenue, to expand the angling opportunities and to make the hill streams of Punjab an angling paradise. But even more important was to remake these waters the nostalgic image of their home.

Conclusion

The British efforts at increasing the value of commercial fishery had brought about important ecological changes within Punjab. New water bodies had been brought under the fisheries. Fishing in Punjab was merely an expression of British preferences. Indian fisherman was seen as a device to cater the interests of the British. So in British Punjab, the angling developed to cater to both the British's economic interests and sporting interests as well.

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