



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Tiger shikars: The Wodeyars' construction of a Rajput identity through sport

Tresa Abraham 

SBM, SVKM's NMIMS, Mumbai, India

Email: tresaabraham10@gmail.com; tresa.abraham@sbm.nmims.edu

(Received 30 May 2023; revised 30 March 2024; accepted 2 April 2024)

Abstract

This article explores the practice of the sport of tiger hunting among the Wodeyars, the maharajas of Mysore, through an examination of art, archival records, state gazetteers, and a tour diary of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV. It argues that the Wodeyars only adopted the sport as an expression of kingship in the late nineteenth century, under British influence. This, I posit, was part of their larger attempt to align their kingship to more popular Indian modes, specifically the Rajputs. By reading accounts of the sport in Krishnaraja Wodeyar's tour diary, along with examining the Wodeyars' attempts at forging kinship relations with the Rajputs, the article demonstrates how the sport became crucial to the Wodeyars' assertion of a Rajput identity and to attempts to obtain a higher position in the princely hierarchy of the colonial period. The recognition that the success of tiger hunts was significant to Rajput kingship and identity, along with rising concern over the diminishing tiger population, led the Wodeyars to enclose forests, establish private hunting preserves and a shikar department, and classify tiger as game in an attempt to improve the sport and make it exclusive.

Keywords: Tiger shikars; Mysore princely state; Indian kingship; British colonialism

Introduction

In February 2020, the erstwhile royal family of Mysore celebrated the birth centenary of Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar (1919–1974), the last Maharaja of Mysore. Speaking on the occasion, Jairam Ramesh, former minister of environment and forests, recalled Wodeyar's contribution to wildlife conservation.¹ The Maharaja was also the first president of the Indian Wildlife Board, which hosted its first meeting at Lalit Mahal Palace, Mysore, in 1952. His proposal to protect the Asiatic lion and 12 other endangered species—snow leopard, clouded leopard, cheetah, rhinoceros, Indian wild ass, Kashmir stag, musk deer, brow-antlered deer, pygmy hog, great Indian bustard, pink-headed duck, and white-winged wood duck—was added to the resolution passed at the

¹Jairam Ramesh recalls Jayachamaraja Wadiyar's contribution to wildlife conservation', *The Hindu*, 21 February 2020.

meeting.² Surprisingly, this call for protection did not extend to the famed big cats of Mysore: tiger and leopard. Commenting on the exclusion of tigers from the list of protected animals, Ramesh points out that the former Maharaja belonged to a generation of 'naturalists drawn almost predominantly from princely families' and 'clearly did not want to give up the privilege of shooting tigers'.³

Ramesh's speech at the birth centenary celebration brings into focus the long association of Indian kings with the sport of big-game hunting, especially tiger shikars. Before the advent of British colonialism in the sub-continent, hunting was popular as a royal sport, and was regarded as an integral aspect of royal duties within both the indigenous Hindu culture and the later Turkic and Persian traditions.⁴ It was a significant aspect of both Rajput kingship and displays of Mughal power and governance.⁵ The origin stories of the Tondaiman kings of Pudukottai attribute their rise to power to their ability to hunt tigers and tame elephants.⁶ Scholars have shown how the British appropriated the practice from native inhabitants and reinvented it to assert their power and dominance, and to display governance and masculinity.⁷ By the end of the nineteenth century, the spectacle of the hunt had become an important aspect of colonial diplomacy.⁸ This article examines the links between the adoption of the sport by the Wodeyars and its association with their princely identity under British paramountcy.

The Wodeyar family had ruled over Mysore since the early seventeenth century.⁹ The absence of an heir apparent after the death of Krishnaraja Wodeyar I in 1732 led to contention over kingship within the Ursus clan, to which the Wodeyars belonged. The internal political strife changed the fortunes of Haider Ali Khan (1720–1782), a soldier who had lent his services to the Wodeyars in the siege of Tiruchirappalli (1751–1752).¹⁰

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴See Barbara N. Ramusack, *The Indian princes and their states* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 157.

⁵See Julie E. Hughes, *Animal kingdoms: Hunting environment and power in the princely states* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) for the use of the sport in Rajput political practice. For more on Mughals' employment of the hunt, see Anand S. Pandian, 'Predatory care: The imperial hunt in Mughal and British India', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2001, pp. 79–107; Shah Parpia, 'Mughal hunting grounds: Landscape manipulation and garden association', *Garden History*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2016, pp. 171–190.

⁶Joanne Punzo Waghorne, *The raja's magic clothes: Re-visioning kingship and divinity in England's India* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1994), p. 179.

⁷John M. Mackenzie, *The empire of nature: Hunting, conservation, and British imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); William K. Storey, 'Big cats and imperialism: Lion and tiger hunting in Kenya and northern India, 1898–1930', *Journal of World History*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1991, pp. 135–173. For more on the hunt as a colonial display of masculinity, see M. S. S. Pandian, 'Gendered negotiation: Hunting and colonialism in the late 19th century Nilgiris', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 9, nos. 1–2, 1995, pp. 239–263; Joseph Sramek, 'Face him like a Briton: Tiger hunting, imperialism and British masculinity in colonial India 1800–1875', *Victorian Studies*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2006, pp. 659–680. For the use of the hunt as a means of colonial governance, see Vijaya Ramadas Mandala, *Shooting a tiger: Big-game hunting and conservation in colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁸Mukunda Belliappa, 'A natural history of colonialism', *New England Review (1900–)*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2015, pp. 10–24.

⁹Ramusack, *The Indian princes*, p. 28.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 31.

Haider Ali attained glory in the next ten years and took control over Mysore. He and his son, Tipu Sultan (1751–1799), provided stiff resistance to the ambitions of the East India Company.¹¹ After the Anglo-Mysore Wars,¹² Tipu Sultan was finally defeated in 1799 at Seringapatam. Following his defeat, the British crowned the four-year-old Krishnaraja Wodeyar III as the Maharaja of Mysore. Through this, the British restored the Wodeyars to the throne and turned Mysore into a subsidiary state.

Following the Nagara rebellion of 1830–1831, the British annexed Mysore, citing maladministration, and pensioned off Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar III in 1831.¹³ The Maharaja spent the following years trying to convince the British to restore the administration to his adopted son, Chamarajendra Wodeyar. It was through the intervention of the British parliament that the throne was finally returned to him in 1881.¹⁴ This came to be known as the Rendition of Mysore.

From the late nineteenth century, Indian kings became visibly concerned with symbols and honours as their powers became severely curtailed under the British.¹⁵ As Indian kings could no longer obtain honour through battles, they competed with each other for honours and positions. This competition increased in the early twentieth century with the formation of the Chamber of Princes.¹⁶ The Wodeyars, I argue, as part of a larger attempt at gaining a higher social status in the princely hierarchy of the colonial period, began to realign their idea of kingship to the colonial paradigm of an Indian king, which was provided by the Rajputs. Kingship, princely identity, and legitimacy for the Rajputana kings were closely associated with hunting, especially the hunting of big cats such as tigers, leopards, and lions.¹⁷ Examining the Wodeyars' practice of hunting, the article argues that the Wodeyars adopted the sport of hunting as a kingly activity at the end of the nineteenth century to emphasize their claims to a 'Rajput identity.'

From an examination of the gazetteers of Mysore, the scholarship on Wodeyar *vamshavalis* or origin stories, and a variety of archival material that includes, but is not limited to, papers of the 'Game and Tiger Preserves' department, the tour diary of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV (1884–1940), and a hunting mural, the article demonstrates how the Wodeyars' adoption of the sport of tiger hunting to affirm their Rajput identity led them to take steps towards tiger preservation. The efforts to emulate the Rajputs

¹¹Ibid., pp. 31–32.

¹²The Anglo-Mysore Wars is a series of four wars fought in the late eighteenth century between the kingdom of Mysore and the combined forces of the British East India Company (mainly, the Madras presidency), the Maratha confederacy, and the Nizam of Hyderabad. It concluded with the fall of Tipu Sultan at the Battle of Seringapatam in 1799.

¹³Janaki Nair, *Mysore modern: Rethinking the region under princely rule* (Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012), pp. 8–10.

¹⁴Shama Rao, *Modern Mysore: From the coronation of Chamarajendra Wodeyar X in 1868 to the present time* (Mysore: Higginbothams, 1936).

¹⁵Dick Kooiman, 'Invention of tradition in Travancore: A maharaja's quest for political security', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2005, pp. 151–164. For earlier publications, see John McLeod, *Sovereignty, power, control: Politics in the state of western India 1916–1947* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); Barbara N. Ramusack, *The princes of India in the twilight of empire: Dissolution of a patron-client system 1914–1939* (Columbus: Published for the University of Cincinnati by Ohio State University Press, 1978).

¹⁶Ramusack, *The princes of India*, p. 15.

¹⁷Hughes, *Animal kingdoms*.

led the Wodeyars to enclose forests to create private hunting grounds for the Maharaja, to establish a shikar department known as the 'Game and Tiger Preserves', and to shift tigers from the category of 'vermin' to 'game'. The Wodeyars' attempts at asserting a Rajput identity through hunting led them to legislate for tiger preservation in the state.

This article is divided into four sections, the first of which discusses the history of the sport in Mysore and focuses on the hunting practices of Chamarajendra Wodeyar and his son, Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV. An examination of the education records of Chamarajendra Wodeyar and the tour diary of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV brings to the fore how the importance attached to the sport by the British and Indian royal houses, such as the Rajputs and the Marathas, pushed the Wodeyars to take up the sport. The second section explores the reasons behind Krishnaraja Wodeyar's preoccupation with the sporting practices of the Indian ruling houses, especially the Rajputs. The third section attempts to understand how the adoption of Rajput identity led to and influenced the wildlife preservation policies of the state. The fourth section examines tiger hunting by the Wodeyars in the twentieth century and argues that the Wodeyars used the sport to assert their Rajput identity.

Hunting in Mysore

Benjamin Lewis Rice, in his gazetteers, discusses hunting practices in Mysore and Coorg, the region neighbouring Mysore, and deems Coorgis to be excellent tiger hunters.¹⁸ A man who bagged a tiger enjoyed special status among Coorgis and the success of a tiger hunt was celebrated by the entire village.¹⁹ Linga Raja (r. 1811–1820), the Raja of Coorg, 'seldom killed fewer than there were days in the year; and invariably gave a gold bangle to the first man who should touch the tiger after he had fired'.²⁰ The gazetteer makes no mention of similar celebrations in the Mysore region during its years as a province of the British empire or as a princely state. Instead, it provides a detailed account of the destruction caused by tigers in Mysore and the rewards offered for their destruction. In 1875 Coorg, the bounty for a tiger killed was only Rs 5,²¹ whereas it varied from one region to the next in Mysore. In the Nagar division of Mysore, the killing of a tiger fetched Rs 60, while in the Ashtagram division and the Nundydroog division, it fetched Rs 50 and Rs 35 respectively.²² By the 1890s, the reward had decreased to Rs 40 for a tiger or panther.²³ From the high rewards paid

¹⁸Rice published two sets of gazetteers of Mysore. B. L. Rice, *Mysore and Coorg: A gazetteer* (Bangalore: Government of Mysore Press, 1876–1878) is published in three volumes: *Mysore general* (1877, vol. I), *Mysore by districts* (1876, vol. II), and *Coorg* (1878, vol. III). B. L. Rice, *Mysore: A gazetteer compiled for the government* (Westminster: Archibald Constable and Company, 1897) is published in two volumes: *Mysore in general* (1897, vol. I) and *Mysore by districts* (1897, vol. II).

¹⁹Rice, *Coorg*, p. 54.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 160. According to the customs of the region, the person who killed the tiger and the one who first touched its tail were considered the heroes of the hunt. While a person who touches the tail of the tiger slayed by the king is honoured with a gold bangle, those that first touch the tail of tigers killed by others is gifted a silver bangle.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 54.

²²Rice, *Mysore general*, p. 147.

²³Rice, *Mysore in general*, p. 177.

for the destruction of tigers and the lack of mention of any hunts or courtly hunting traditions in Rice's gazetteers, it appears that the sport did not enjoy the same popularity in Mysore.

While the gazetteers do not mention hunting by the Wodeyars, it discusses the hunting practices of Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan. C. Hayavadana Rao quotes extensively from Maistre de La Tour (1784), who describes Haider Ali's love for the sport.²⁴ When on tours or military campaigns that lasted more than a month, Haider Ali hunted twice a week along with his 'Abyssinians, his spear-men on foot, and almost all the nobility armed with spears and bucklers'.²⁵ Their quarry was most often 'the stag, the roebuck, the antelope, and sometimes the tiger'.²⁶ Describing Haider Ali's skill as a marksman, La Tour says '[i]n firing at a mark, with a musket or matchlock, there was not in the world of that day Haidar's equal'.²⁷ Despite having matchlocks and muskets, Haider Ali and his court often used 'spears and bucklers' in hunting tigers, and the honour of administering the first stroke was reserved for Haider Ali.²⁸ Hunting tigers using spears was a sign of a warrior's martial prowess and bravery.²⁹ It is evident that Haider Ali employed the hunt to showcase his kingship and power.

Despite having ruled Mysore from the sixteenth century, the earliest record of the Wodeyars hunting animals is from the 1860s. This paucity of hunting records may be attributable to their adoption of new religious beliefs from the seventeenth century. The Wodeyars, in their quest for regional dominance, had converted to Vaishnavism during the reign of Raja Wodeyar (1578–1617).³⁰ Vaishnavism does not permit either the killing of animals or their consumption, as one of its basic tenets is that all forms of life are a part of divinity.³¹ Therefore, the sport was not popular among many vaishnava kings, such as the rajas of Manipur.³²

In the latter half of the seventeenth century, Chikkadevaraja Wodeyar (1673–1704) adopted Jain principles at the beginning of his reign. Following his conversion, the Maharaja instructed 'his household to bring in water only after filtering it clean of all insects' and forbade animal sacrifices in the kingdom.³³ The absence of any hunting narratives of the Wodeyars from the pre-British period can be attributed to the conversion of Wodeyars to Vaishnavism and their later adoption of Jainism. This, along

²⁴C. Hayavadana Rao, *History of Mysore under the Wodeyar dynasty of kings, 1399–1704* (Bangalore: Superintendent Government Press, 1943), pp. 529–536.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid., p. 536.

²⁸Ibid., pp. 523–524.

²⁹See Mahesh Rangarajan, 'The Raj and the natural world: The campaign against "dangerous beasts" in colonial India, 1875–1925', *Studies in History*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1998, p. 267.

³⁰Caleb Simmons, 'The goddess and vaiṣṇavism in search for regional supremacy: Wodeyar devotional traditions during the reign of Rājā Wodeyar (1578–1617 CE)', *Indian History*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, pp. 27–46.

³¹Francis X. Clooney and Tony K. Stewart, 'Vaisnava', in *The Hindu world*, (eds) Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 162–184.

³²M. K. Ranjitsinh argues that as the Vaishnavite rajas of Manipur did not engage in hunting, they did not take steps to protect wildlife in their state. According to him, they did not take up the sport in the colonial period, and it was the British who were responsible for any wildlife preservation measures taken in the state. See M. K. Ranjitsinh, *A life with wildlife: From princely India to the present* (Noida: Harper Collins Publishers India, 2017).

³³Rao, *History of Mysore*, p. 480.



Figure 1. Hunting mural. Source: Photograph taken by Mr Gouri Satya, senior journalist, Mysore.

with the absence of hunting traditions and lack of mention of any hunting legends of Mysore kings in the gazetteers, lead me to suggest that the sport was not an essential aspect of Wodeyar kingship prior to the nineteenth century.

Let us examine the earliest record of the Wodeyars hunting animals: a mural located on the eastern wall of the inner hall at the Rang Mahal in Mysore's Jagannathan Palace (today, Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery) (Figure 1). The five panels of the mural depict the Maharaja hunting various animals such as tigers and boar. Each of these panels is labelled in Kannada, the predominant language spoken in the princely state. The labels are translated as: (clockwise from left) 'Tiger hunt near Kittur', 'Hunt of tigers, wild buffalo, and boars in the forests of Kottagala', 'The capture of state elephant "Kempananjiah" in the forests of Chamarajanagar', and 'Hunting scene near Chattanahalli'; the central panel is labelled '*Bangadi shikari*'³⁴ in a 1938 report on the mural.³⁵

The mural was commissioned by Krishnaraja Wodeyar III (1794–1868), a crucial figure in Anglo-Mysore relations, in the 1860s. As stated earlier, the British crowned him as the Maharaja of Mysore in 1799. During his rule, Krishnaraja Wodeyar III relied on old forms of kingship in Mysore, such as gift-giving and patronage of religious institutions, to obtain legitimacy for his rule, which eventually led to financial excesses and bad governance, resulting in the Nagara rebellion and British annexation of the

³⁴The *Bangadi shikari* is very similar to the large-scale elephant capture operations, or the *khedda* employed by the Mughals and later by the East India Company to capture elephants. Mysore was famous for its *khedda* operations in the colonial period.

³⁵*Annual report of the Mysore Archaeological Department for the year 1938* (Bangalore: Superintendent, Government Press, 1938), pp. 46–71.

state.³⁶ Depicting the king's valour, martial prowess, and masculinity through hunts was a popular courtly tradition in eighteenth-century India.³⁷ Faced with the loss of his kingship, Krishnaraja Wodeyar III appears to have turned to more popular modes of shoring up his legitimacy.

Commissioned in the 1860s, the mural reflects the insecurities of a deposed king, who was uncertain of the future of his royal line. Scholars have commented on Krishnaraja Wodeyar III's employment of art in his search for legitimacy.³⁸ They view the mural as part of the larger project of Krishnaraja Wodeyar's attempts at refashioning kingship using strategies that were popular among Indian kings, such as art, genealogy, and devotion. Commenting on the hunting panels, Nair says that it 'visually connects him to epic heroes and legendary battles' for the hunt is 'a stylized form of war'.³⁹ Similarly, Simmons reads the hunting murals as a part of Krishnaraja Wodeyar's use of 'non-military modalities of power within courtly productions', which were 'central to the negotiation of kingship in the early colonial period in India'.⁴⁰ Despite the sport not being central historically to Wodeyar kingship until the nineteenth century, Krishnaraja Wodeyar III employed it in the mural to align Wodeyar kingship with modes popular among other Indian kings and the British.⁴¹

Krishnaraja Wodeyar III appears to have recognized the need to revamp notions of what constituted kingship in the changed political climate. In a letter written to the viceroy in April 1867, he addresses the need for a new system of education that would better prepare his adopted son.⁴² He blamed his removal from the throne on his lack of training and education for the position of king and requested that his adopted son 'receive greater advantages of education and training' than he had received.⁴³ He actively sought an education appropriate for the changed political realities—a Western education. The colonial government promised to provide 'good physical and moral training' to his heir.⁴⁴ He was to be taught to ride, to swim, to play cricket, and to handle firearms, and he was actively encouraged to devote himself to strengthening exercises suitable 'to his country, position, and age', in addition to scholastic activities.⁴⁵

The inclusion of hunting as a sport by the British in the curriculum of a young Indian prince is noteworthy. In nineteenth-century Britain, public schools encouraged

³⁶Nair, *Mysore modern*, pp. 8–10.

³⁷Vishaka N. Desai, 'Timeless symbolic royal portraits from Rajasthan 17th–19th centuries', in *The idea of Rajasthan: Explorations in regional identity*, (eds) Karine Schomer and Joan L. Erdman (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1994), pp. 313–342.

³⁸Nair, *Mysore modern*. See also Caleb Simmons, *Devotional sovereignty: Kingship and religion in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

³⁹Nair, *Mysore modern*, p. 88.

⁴⁰Simmons, *Devotional sovereignty*, p. 170.

⁴¹Vinil Paul in his examination of the history of hunting in the modern state of Kerala informs us that the princes of Travancore and Kochi continued to keep away from hunting in the colonial period. However, they were more than happy to accommodate the desire of their European and British guests to hunt wild animals. See Vinil Paul, *Mrugaya: Keralathinte Nayattucharithram* (Kottayam: DC Books, 2022).

⁴²Rao, *Modern Mysore*, p.17.

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

the sport of hunting, viewing it as morally and physically enabling exercise, and a hallmark of sterling masculinity that enabled character training and inculcated fair play.⁴⁶ The sport was heavily endorsed in British literature for young boys in the period and was seen as a means to produce keen imperialists among young men.⁴⁷ The character training of natives, especially among the non-white ruling class of the empire, gained significance after the 1857 Uprising. As the British considered hunting to be one of the most suitable forms of exercise and sport, it was added to the curriculum of the young Maharaja.

Reports on the education of Chamarajendra Wodeyar make a special note of the young Maharaja's love of riding and hunting from a very young age.⁴⁸ His love for hunting, along with his knowledge of English and cricket, stood him in good stead during his meeting with the Prince of Wales at Bombay in 1875. William Howard Russell, who accompanied the Prince of Wales during his tour of India, described the Maharaja of Mysore as 'an intelligent looking lad of thirteen years of age'.⁴⁹ Describing the meeting, Russell notes that 'the Prince expressed his pleasure at hearing the little Maharaja speak fluent English, and on being informed that he loved the chase, was a good shot, and could play cricket, and sent him away in good contentment'.⁵⁰ The Prince of Wales appears to have judged the efforts of the colonial government and the Maharaja's capability to administer the state in terms of his knowledge of English, and his prowess at the sports of hunting and cricket. Hunting, along with knowledge of English and cricket, not only became a common ground over which the young Maharaja of Mysore and the much older Prince of Wales bonded but became markers of a young Maharaja's capability to rule.

Let us now examine a tour diary of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV, which is the earliest written account of hunting in English by a Wodeyar.⁵¹ This tour of the state was arranged by his British tutor, S. M. Fraser, from 18 November 1901 to 8 January 1902. Mysore had issued its first set of game regulations in April 1901. The diary, a holograph in Fraser's hand, provides glimpses into the young Maharaja's deliberations on hunting, the state of wildlife, and his views on game laws.

During the tour, the Maharaja held discussions with people from various walks of life regarding game laws, gun licences, and the availability of game animals. He initially thought that the proposed licence fee of Rs 10 was too high for the villagers to pay. He believed that the steep fee would encourage poaching and therefore that the law would not only make the government unpopular but also fail to protect game animals.⁵² Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV appears to have been trained in the relatively democratic ideals of sportsmanship espoused by the British. However, Wodeyar's attitude

⁴⁶J. A. Mangan and Callum Mackenzie, *Militarism, hunting, imperialism: 'Blooding' the martial male* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

⁴⁷John Miller, *Empire and the animal body: Violence, identity and ecology in Victorian adventure fiction* (New York: Anthem Press, 2012).

⁴⁸Report on the Education of H. H the Maharaja of Mysore', British Library (BL), India Office Records (IOR)/R/2/Box 44/404, 1871.

⁴⁹William Howard Russell, *The Prince of Wales' Tour: A Diary in India, with Some Account of the visits of His Royal Highness to the Courts of Greece, Egypt, Spain and Portugal* (New York: R. Worthington, 1878), p. 134.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁵¹Diary of H. H the Maharaja of Mysore: Provincial tour 1901–02', Royal Society for Asian Affairs (RSAA).

⁵²*Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

changed when most beats arranged in his honour in the course of the tour turned 'absolutely blank'.⁵³ Despite being earnest in their desire to hunt animals, the party was able to bag only a tiger and a bison. What shocked the young Maharaja was not the absence of tigers but the lack of small game, such as deer, and the local officers' non-chalance towards the failure of the beats. They appeared to be 'quite prepared always for a blank'.⁵⁴ Frustrated with the lack of competence and disarray in the arrangements, Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV concluded that '[t]he only way to get sport for myself and my guests seem to be to appoint a State Shikari with a few trained men under him, and to pay them chiefly by the results'.⁵⁵ Utterly disappointed with the arrangements and the lack of game, he found merit in Fraser's suggestion of creating private hunting grounds, as was the practice of the Nizam of Hyderabad, Scindias of Gwalior, and most Rajputana princes, to ensure the presence of 'a tiger whenever wanted'.⁵⁶ The Maharaja attributed the failure of the hunts to the absence of demarcated preserves and well-trained game staff.

From our examination of the history of the practice of the hunt by the Wodeyars of Mysore, it appears that they did not engage in it as a sport until the end of the nineteenth century. The absence of references to the Wodeyars practising the sport in the gazetteers and state histories make clear that hunting was not a significant aspect of the Wodeyars' idea of kingship or princely identity until the advent of the British. Although the Wodeyars had taken up the sport in the late nineteenth century, under British influence, they lacked the enthusiasm and commitment of the Nizam, the Scindias, and the Rajputs, which is evidenced by the lack of private preserves and a shikar department. Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV appears to have wanted to improve the quality of the sport in Mysore to match the standards available in the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent. The next section will explore the reasons behind Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV's emulation of the North Indian royal houses.

Rajputization of the Wodeyars

David Cannadine argues that the British empire was 'first and foremost a class act'.⁵⁷ He writes that during the colonial period, in addition to the marginalization and exploitation of the native population, the 'British settlers overseas sought to create a full-scale replica of the elaborately graded social hierarchy they had left behind at home'.⁵⁸ In the British empire, 'individual social ordering often took precedence over collective racial othering'.⁵⁹ This social ordering was codified and rationalized in the imperial honour system. This section brings to the fore the efforts by the Wodeyars to attain a higher status among the Indian kings and their various attempts at gaining it.

⁵³Ibid., p. 62.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 110.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 111.

⁵⁷David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British saw their empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 10.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 14.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 10.

The colonial government ranked the Indian kings based largely on the size of the state, its revenue, the date at which they became allies of the Company, family history, their relationship with the Mughals, and acts of loyalty to the British empire.⁶⁰ Mysore ranked highly in this imperial hierarchy, with a 21-gun salute.⁶¹ Its annual revenue was surpassed only by that of Hyderabad. Despite this high ranking, the British considered Mysore to be inferior to many of the princely states in northern India, such as the Rajputs. In seeking to replicate the feudal order and social hierarchy at home in India, the British often remarked on the lack of a noble class in Mysore, unlike in northern and central India.⁶² Aware of the British perception of the ruling house and community, the Wodeyars strived to create a new nobility by educating the young Bada Urs, from the villages, by establishing boarding schools in Mysore.⁶³ However, the project to create a gentry class by educating the 'Bada Urs' was a failure as they preferred to take up government jobs and were reluctant to return to the villages.⁶⁴ The Wodeyars also lacked ties with other ruling families in the sub-continent. The tours, introduced by the British as part of the princely education, brought the Wodeyars into contact with other ruling houses in the sub-continent. Unlike Mysore, most other ruling houses of North India, such as the Marathas and the Rajputs, had kinship ties with each other, forming elite circles from which the Wodeyars were excluded. In order to obtain entry into this elite circle, Chamarajendra Wodeyar sought alliances for his children from the North Indian royal houses.⁶⁵ When a proposal of marriage between Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV and the Princess of Baroda was floated it was dropped as the Maratha princess was only five years old.⁶⁶ Donald Robertson, the Resident of Mysore, opined that the Mysore court appeared not to have been affected by the failure of the plans for a 'marriage with Baroda would have extinguished, for all time, the chances of a matrimonial alliance with a good Ruling family in Rajputana, but ... the prospects of such a match are exceedingly remote'.⁶⁷ Rajput kings such as Jaipur and Jodhpur considered the Maratha kings of Gwalior, Baroda, and Indore as 'of Sudra descent' and looked

⁶⁰Bernard S. Cohn, 'Representing authority in Victorian India', in *The invention of tradition*, (eds) Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 165–210.

⁶¹In the British-created hierarchy of princes, each Indian king was accorded a certain number of gun salutes: 21 was the highest and nine was the lowest. Queen Victoria stood at the apex and received a 101-gun salute, followed by the viceroy with a 31-gun salute. At the 1877 Durbar, Lytton raised the three richest rulers, namely of Hyderabad, Baroda, and Mysore, to a 21-gun salute.

⁶²While making arrangements for the vice-regal visit in 1913, Hugh Daly, the Resident of Mysore, suggested an evening tea party 'as the Indian gentlemen who attend mixed functions here come mostly from the official class & are at home at a garden party than at an evening reception'. He reminded the military secretary that 'there is practically nothing to correspond with the class of nobles & Sardars whom one meets in the states of northern & central India'. 'His Excellency the Viceroy's (Lord Harding) visit to Mysore', BL, IOR/R/2/Box33/320, 1913.

⁶³Aya Ikegame, *Princely India re-imagined: A historical anthropology of Mysore from 1799 to the present* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 71–96.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 101–102.

⁶⁶The Government of India had implemented the Age of Consent Act of 1891 which prohibited the consummation of marriage for girls below 12 years old in British India. In Mysore, marriage was prohibited for Hindu girls below the age of eight. For a discussion of the debates around it, see Nair, *Mysore modern*, pp. 219–244.

⁶⁷Robertson to Elgin, 22 October 1897, BL, IOR/R/1/1/195.

down on them. While the British classified the Rajputs, Marathas, Gujjars, and Jats as warrior castes and of similar origins, the Rajput kings enjoyed a higher status.⁶⁸

The British held up the Rajputs as the ideal of Indian kings and James Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajast'han* (1829) was greatly responsible for the elevated status of the Rajput kings in British eyes. Tod assumed a common origin for the tribes of early Europe and the Rajputs. Beginning with this assumption, he then 'constructed through a detailed explication of these similarities, a shared cultural past between the British and the Rajputs'.⁶⁹ The Rajputs, with their martial prowess, love of hunting, and bardic literature that extolled the bravery and loyalty of its men and virtues of its women, became, for the British, the paradigm of Indian kingship. The word 'Rajput' literally means 'son of a king'. Rajputs were pastoralist bands who had obtained landed status sometime between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries.⁷⁰ They did not constitute endogamous castes, but formed largely open-status groups of clans, lineages, or even families and individuals, some of which were connected to each other by exogamous connubial ties. It was only by the Mughal period that the top layers of Rajputs had established their status as *kshatriyas* and, with the help of the origin myths created by their bards, had traced their genealogies to the great Indian dynasties of the past.⁷¹ The genealogies pushed into the background their more ancient character as an open-status group. Soon, political power and social status among the Rajputs began to be exclusively legitimized in the language of descent and kinship. By the late sixteenth century, a new 'Rajput Great Tradition' had emerged, which recognized little more than unilineal kin bodies as belonging to the genuine Rajput history.⁷² In the colonial period, the Rajputs were ranked as *kshatriyas* and were known for their martial character.

The Wodeyar house never enjoyed the status of the Rajput kings of the north. Mewar, with its declining territories and revenues and 19-gun salute, considered Mysore to be inferior. A marriage alliance with the Marathas would have irrevocably affected Mysore's attempts to link the Wodeyars with the Rajput houses in the northern part of the sub-continent. On the other hand, being accepted as appropriate marriage partners of the ruling Rajput houses, such as Mewar, was a means to claim Rajput status.⁷³ Maharani Kempa Nanjammani Vani Vilasa Sannidhana, the regent of Mysore, attempted to claim Rajput status for the Wodeyar house by forging marriage alliances for her children with Rajputs. However, the Mysore court needed to prove their Rajput origins to seek an alliance.

Marriage alliances in Hindu caste society are customarily limited to members from the same caste. In order to obtain Rajput alliances, the Mysore court needed to present

⁶⁸W. Crooke, 'Rajputs and Mahrattas', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 40, 1910, pp. 39–48.

⁶⁹Jason Freitag, *Serving the empire, serving the nation: James Tod and the Rajputs of Rajasthan* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), p. 125. It is important to note that Tod (1829) did not place the Rajputs and the European races at the same stage of development. Like many other Orientalists, he believed that the Rajputs were at the infantile stage, while the Europeans had reached maturity.

⁷⁰Dirks H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput, and sepoy: The ethnohistory of the military labour market of Hindustan 1450–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³*Ibid.*

a claim of the Wodeyars as belonging to the Rajput caste. For this, the Mysore court used an origin story created in the seventeenth century to justify Wodeyars' conversion to Vaishnavism.⁷⁴ According to the origin myth, the founders of the Wodeyar dynasty were two brothers: Vijaya (often referred to as Yaduraya) and Krishna, from Dwaraka, in present-day Gujarat. The Hindus consider Dwaraka as the birthplace of Lord Krishna. According to the myth, the brothers were *kshatriyas* belonging to the Yaduvamsha of the lunar race. Employing this origin story, the Mysore court worded the Wodeyars' desire for a Rajput bride as an attempt to rekindle old kinship ties and, at the same time, bring 'a more intimate intercourse between the Ruling Houses of the North and South'.⁷⁵ It took more than three years and several failed attempts for Maharani Vani Vilasa Sannidhana to obtain a Rajput alliance for her son Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV of Mysore. The bride was the elder daughter of the Rana of Vana and connected to the ruling Rajputs in Kathiawar. The marriage was solemnized in June 1900. Vana did not enjoy the same status as the comparatively more important Mysore in the colonial honour system. The colonial perception regarding the alliance was that it was beneficial to both houses. The Rana of Vana was being linked to the wealthiest houses in the sub-continent by the alliance, and Mysore was able to enter into kinship relations with the Rajputs.⁷⁶

The marriage did not immediately change Mysore's status. The colonial government continued to refer to the Mysore kings as 'Sudras'. Even as late as 1927, the Mysore Maharaja was referred to in the colonial records as the 'Sudra ruler'.⁷⁷ It was only in 1928 that the British decided not to describe the Mysore king as the 'Sudra ruler' in official correspondence.⁷⁸ The British government was wary of the offence that the Kathiawar Rajputs would take if they referred to their son-in-law as 'Sudra' which led them to effect the change. Writing for the *Times* on the occasion of the visit of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV to London in July 1936, Sir William Barton, a former British Resident to the Mysore court, briefed his readers on the history of the royal family. He commented that '[t]he [r]uling family of Mysore traces its origin to a princely house in Kathiawar of Rajput extraction'.⁷⁹ By the 1930s, the official narrative of the Mysore family shifted its origins from Sudra to Rajput.

To summarize, the Wodeyars had no kinship ties with other ruling houses in the sub-continent nor did they have a noble class within the princely state. This resulted in the Mysore royal house being considered inferior by the colonial officials and Indian kings. The origin stories crafted by an earlier generation to legitimize their kingship

⁷⁴A. Satyanarayana, *History of the Wodeyars of Mysore, 1610–1748* (Mysore: Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, 1996). For more on the use of origin myths and legends for vested interests in Mysore, see Simmons, *Devotional sovereignty*.

⁷⁵Confidential Memo of Instruction, 26 July 1898, BL, IOR/R/2 temp. 30/278.

⁷⁶On the other hand, the reactions to the alliance from the local populace were not very favourable; see Ikegame, *Princely India re-imagined*, pp. 97–118.

⁷⁷In discussions regarding the re-evaluation of the succession to the throne of Pudukottai, the opinion of the Maharaja of Mysore, who was 'a sudra ruler' like that of Pudukottai, was given due weightage over other rulers. The Maharaja of Mysore was in opposition to the succession, unlike the Rajputs who supported it. See Angma Dey Jhala, *Courtly Indian women in late imperial India* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008), p. 66.

⁷⁸'Indian States: Pudukota; succession (1927–1930)', BL, IOR/L/PS/10/1221/1.

⁷⁹Rao, *Modern Mysore*, p. 496.

were employed by the Wodeyar court in the years following the Rendition to claim a Rajput status, thereby improving their position in the princely hierarchy. This status was further cemented through marriage alliances with the Rajputs. As can be seen from the earlier section, the provincial tour of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV occurred in the year following his marriage. His constant comparisons of the practice of the sport in Mysore to North Indian, especially Rajput, traditions and method of hunting resulted from the proximity brought by the marriage. The next section will discuss in detail the effect of the assumption of a Rajput identity on the wildlife of Mysore.

Tiger preservation and the making of game and tiger preserves

By the late nineteenth century, the colonial government believed that the 'best shooting is probably in Mysore' and directed its guests to the princely state.⁸⁰ Abundant game, the royal house's indifference towards the protection of the tiger population, their willingness to conduct tiger shikars for guests, and the publicity brought by Tipu Sultan and the visit of Prince Albert Victor in 1889–1890 appear to have turned Mysore into the hunting destination of choice at the end of the nineteenth century. Despite Mysore's popularity, an issue continued to nag at the colonial government when making shikar arrangements with the state as 'big game cannot always be supplied to order' in Mysore.⁸¹ There was a high chance the beat would not bring out a tiger. Here, ensuring success in a beat did not enjoy the same overriding importance as in Rajputana states, which had demarcated hunting grounds. However, this changed in the twentieth century with the Wodeyar assumption of a Rajput identity.

Princely power, legitimacy, and identity were closely tied to hunting in Rajputana states.⁸² Hunting privileges were sparingly granted by the Rajput kings.⁸³ Unlike in Mysore, where big cats were treated as vermin, tigers and leopards were considered royal game by the Rajputs. In Rajputana states, hunting these big cats required direct permission from the king, and their haunts were zealously protected. Poaching or hunting without the king's permission was considered a challenge to his sovereignty.⁸⁴ Simultaneously, invitations to hunt were part of diplomacy among the Rajputs and other Indian kings of the northern belt. According to Hughes, they invited each other as princely legitimacy was 'rarely serviced by exclusively hunting within one's state'.⁸⁵ She views Rajput princely hunts as

[a] sort of 'professional courtesy' existed among Indian rulers according to which a friendly prince would support his guest's sovereign image by supplying some shooting, while simultaneously bolstering his own reputation by playing the ideal host or dutiful relative.⁸⁶

⁸⁰'Visit of a Grand Duke of Russia to Mysore on a shooting trip', National Archives of India (NAI), Mysore Residency (MR), 1891, Prog no. 14, 1891.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Hughes, *Animal kingdoms*.

⁸³Ibid., p. 115.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 55.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 60.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 61.

The ability to offer guests opportunities to hunt was a sign of kingship and, by extension, royal identity. According to Hughes, the inability to obtain tigers or game at the beat was a mark against notions of Rajput kingship, for it betrayed 'a distinctly ignoble inability to commune with the "dark power" of the forest and its beasts'.⁸⁷ While a blank beat for a guest was considered mortifying and an injury to a ruler's pride, it was also seen as a sign of his lack of power and control; many blank beats would raise questions about the ruler's legitimacy. The princely legitimacy of the guest and the host was closely linked with success in a princely shikar.

The Rajputs and other North Indian states such as the Holkars of Indore and Scindias of Gwalior ensured the success of shikars arranged for their guests by creating royal preserves, disallowing others from hunting, and so on. These maharajas had absolute rights over their private preserves. The ability of the maharaja to allow or deny permission to hunt wild animals was an expression of his sovereignty not only over humans but also of animals and was an assertion of his kingship. This was unlike the policy in British India, where anyone with a hunting licence could hunt. In addition, arranging and managing the hunts, which were expensive affairs, required huge manpower. In the colonial period, princely hunts became a space for displays of kingship and princely power.

Krishnaraja Wodeyar's rumination over the policies of the Rajputs during his provincial tour stemmed from his concern for the arrangements made for the sport. This in turn was closely linked not only with colonial perceptions of the ruling class but also of the Wodeyars' assumption of a Rajput identity and kingship. Following the Maharaja's tour in 1901, the princely state contracted Albert Theobald, a forest officer with the Forest Department, as state shikari.⁸⁸ Despite Theobald's appointment, the lack of a permanent establishment continued to plague the arrangements made for the sport. In January 1904, the government passed a Shikari and Game Preservation Scheme. G. E. Ricketts was appointed as assistant conservator of forests and placed in charge of the game preserves.⁸⁹ Three shikaris were appointed as part of Ricketts' staff. In addition to the shikaris, the Shikar and Game Preserves establishment boasted a clerk, eight peons, one kalasi or manual labourer, and 18 watchers,⁹⁰ with its headquarters in Bangalore, the capital of Mysore state.

With the growing importance of the sport, especially tiger hunting, to princely diplomacy, the Maharaja of Mysore passed legislation in 1917 to protect tigers to ensure their availability for royal and state hunts.⁹¹ In 1917, on the recommendation of the conservator of forests, Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV issued orders prohibiting

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 78.

⁸⁸Albert Theobald and his sons Charles and William were popular naturalists and big-game sportsmen in the region. Theobald Brothers, the family's taxidermy enterprise, was one of the most popular taxidermy firms in colonial India. File: 'Appointment of Mr. Theobald as State Shikari', Bangalore State Archives (BSA), Forest Department (FD), 1901, 74 of 1901, 1–6.

⁸⁹Order No FI. 1757–68/Ft. F. 29–95, dated 12 January 1904, BSA, FD, Proceedings, 1903–1904. As result, Theobald's appointment as state shikari ceased from 1 January 1904. See Usha Suresh and J. V. Gayathri, *Selections from the records of the Mysore Palace: Game and tiger preserves of the maharajas of Mysore* (Bangalore: Department of Archives, 2001), p. 188.

⁹⁰See Suresh and Gayathri, *Selections*, p. 2.

⁹¹By royal hunts, I am referring to hunts arranged for the entertainment of the maharaja and his personal guests. By state hunts, I mean hunts arranged for the entertainment of state guests. Separate

the shooting of tigers in the demarcated areas and also restricted the number of ordinary shooting licences to the minimum for the area.⁹² The tiger preserves in Mysore and Shimoga districts of the state came into existence in November 1917: Varanchi, Paduvakote in Hunsur taluk, Manchegowdanahalli in Heggaddevankote taluk, Haradanahalli in Chamarajnagar taluk, and Gurupura in Tarikere taluk.⁹³ Wildlife historians such as Mahesh Rangarajan place the shift in attitude from extermination to preservation of tigers to the mid-1920s.⁹⁴ Therefore, this attempt to partially protect tigers by the Wodeyars may be considered as one of the earliest steps towards tiger preservation in the sub-continent.

In the creation of these tiger preserves, proximity to railway lines was taken as a requirement to ensure the comfort of guests. Arrangements for a state shikar included baiting a tiger with food for an extended period to ensure their availability, netting the area in which the tiger was located once the shoot was scheduled, and constructing a machan⁹⁵ for the guests to shoot from.⁹⁶ Shooting of tigers from machans, instead of elephant howdahs, was more in alignment with Rajput practices of hunting. It is important to note that the archives make no mention of the Wodeyars' adopting Haider Ali's use of spears to assert power or martial prowess. In their adoption of the sport, the Wodeyars clearly had a preference for the traditions of the Rajputs. As can be seen, the new legislation was passed with the intention of obtaining easy access, ensuring the comfort of the Maharaja and his guests, and asserting the Wodeyars' Rajput identity.

In 1921, the Shikari and Game Preserves establishment was abolished under general retrenchment.⁹⁷ Game and Tiger Preserves, established as a separate department in July 1926,⁹⁸ were protected forests in which hunting was permitted only with the explicit permission of the Maharaja, and became the private hunting grounds of the Maharaja. Following the formation of the Game and Tiger Preserves department, multiple discussions on the preservation of game were held. A committee consisting of, among others, the chief conservator of forests and the deputy commissioner of Shimoga and Mysore districts was formed to investigate the diminution of game and the issue of tiger preservation in the state.⁹⁹ The committee was divided in its opinion on the status of the tiger. For instance, the deputy magistrate of Shimoga believed that tigers could not be classified as game as the term

accounts were maintained for the expenses incurred by the game preserves officers for the two kinds of hunts.

⁹² 'Constitution of Tiger Preserves', No R. 4507-16-Ft. 98-16-2, dated 16 November 1917, 'Constitution of Game Preserves', BSA, FD, 1916, Prog: 98 of 1916, 1, 2, 3.

⁹³ Letter from M. G. Rama Rao, Chief Conservator of Forests, Mysore to L. Krishna Rao, Secretary to the Government of HH the Maharaja of Mysore, Revenue department, dated 13 November 1916, 'Constitution of Game Preserves', BSA, FD, 1916, Prog: 98 of 1916, 1, 2, 3.

⁹⁴ See Rangarajan, 'The Raj and the natural world', p. 294.

⁹⁵ Hunters often wait for game on elevated platforms of considerable height, known as machans, which are often constructed on tree branches.

⁹⁶ Gayatri Devi, *A princess remembers: The memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd, 1995), p.183.

⁹⁷ Order no I.C.2962-3/Ft.112-21-1 dated 19 November 1921 (referred to in Order no G 13449/ft 210-28-3), 'Appointment of Mr D.N Neelakanata Rao', Mysore Regional Archives (MRA), Game and Tiger Preserves (GTP), 1926.

⁹⁸ Order No. I.C.516-18/Ft. 30-26-2 dated 20 July 1926, MRA, GTP.

⁹⁹ Govt. order No. I.C.251-61/Ft. 352-25-3, dated 12 July 1926, MRA, GTP.

... generally conveys the idea of edible animals and birds. It is not feasible to include Tiger under 'Game' as it is more a menace and scourge in the Malnad Parts and a carnivorous brute causing great havoc to the cattle which are already scarce in the land.¹⁰⁰

On the other hand, forest officials stressed the importance of preserving tigers to ensure better sport. The Committee recommended that the "[t]iger" be declared the game and the offer of rewards for killing tigers be abolished.¹⁰¹ On 10 July 1928, the government declared the tiger to be game.¹⁰² The bag was limited to one tiger per licence.

From the examination of colonial and princely records, it is evident that the increasing difficulty in obtaining tigers for sport led the Wodeyars to create royal hunting preserves and to reclassifying tigers as 'game'. By the end of the nineteenth century the sport of tiger hunting had grown to be a significant aspect of colonial diplomacy. Ensuring the success of shikars gained additional importance with the Wodeyars' adoption of a Rajput identity. The Wodeyars' need to display this identity by arranging and participating in the sport led them to pass legislation to improve the quality of the sport in Mysore. With the assumption of Rajput identity, the Wodeyars' interpretation of what constituted sportsmanship moved away from colonial ideals towards those of other Indian ruling houses. In the next section, we will look into the Wodeyars' performance of a Rajput identity through the sport.

Tiger shikars and Rajput identity

Shikar camps, especially tiger shikars, for colonial guests in Mysore became increasingly rare after the second decade of the twentieth century.¹⁰³ While there was an increase in camps organized for Indian royalty from the 1930s, tiger shikars were almost never organized in their honour. Only two big cats were killed by royal guests in this period.¹⁰⁴ The Mir of Khairpur bagged a leopard in 1936, and the Maharaja of Jind killed a female tiger in self-defence in 1939.¹⁰⁵ The Mysore princely records indicate that, increasingly, arrangements were being made for bison shooting for visiting Indian royals in lieu of tiger shikars.

Wild buffalo and bison populations had been seriously depleted by rinderpest epidemics at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁶ While tigers were available across the sub-continent, bison were available only in the western ghats and the surrounding hills, and the Mysore forests were its stronghold. Unlike in a tiger shikar, where the presence of the quarry could be ensured by enclosing the area with nets, bison hunting

¹⁰⁰Amendment of the Game and Fish Preservation Act of 1901', BSA, FD, 179 of 1926, 1–4.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²G.O. No. G 12144-200-Ft. 179-26-2 dated 10 July 1928, in 'Amendment of the Game and Preservation Regulation II of 1901', BSA, FD, 1926, 179 of 1926, 1–4.

¹⁰³Records mention only seven tiger shikar camps held for European guests from 1931 to 1947, with six tigers bagged.

¹⁰⁴Reports on the Working of the Game and Tiger Preserves for the years 1932–33; 33–34; and 34–35, MRA, GTP.

¹⁰⁵While tracking a bison, the party encountered a tigress at close quarters and the Maharaja shot her. Entry dated 19 April 1939, 'Weekly diaries of D. N. Neelakanta Rao 1936–1939', MRA, GTP, 1936.

¹⁰⁶Mackenzie, *The empire of nature*, p. 172.

involved stalking them in the forests. As it challenged the sportsman and posed considerable risks, bison hunting was considered good sport. The Wodeyars appear to have been pushing forward the sport of bison hunting to their guests in the period. Indian rulers, in the twentieth century, looked for ways to make sport in their state unique. In Mysore, elephant capture operations were popular, but the sport did not involve any active participation by visitors. This may have also been a factor that led the state to the practice of arranging bison hunts for its guests.

Through the promotion of the sport of bison hunting among his guests, the Maharaja was limiting their access to tigers and thereby making the sport of tiger hunting more exclusive. In this way, he was also asserting his Rajput identity and kingship which was closely linked to the hunting of these big cats. The Maharaja was exercising his sovereignty by allowing only a select few to hunt the tigers in the preserves, which were his private domain. These select few consisted only of high-ranking officials in the princely state's Forest Department as the Maharaja viewed it as a means to encourage them to be more vigilant towards wildlife protection. Despite this permission, it was only when a hunt organized for guests was cancelled due to unforeseen reasons or as trial runs for new methods in arranging shikars for guests that these officers killed any tigers.¹⁰⁷

At the same time, the state also threw open many areas due to human-tiger conflicts. While few records exist of rewards given for killing 'man-eaters', records were not maintained of those killed in the open areas. A close scrutiny of the diary of the Game and Tiger Preserves officer reveals that the number of tiger shikars conducted by the department for the Mysore royal family in the preserves were on the rise.¹⁰⁸ Eleven tigers were bagged by the Maharaja and the Yuvaraja of Mysore in the 1930s, whereas only eight were killed by the numerous guests that visited the state in the entire decade.¹⁰⁹ In the 1940s, with Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar ascending the throne, the number of tiger hunting camps held for the royal family increased steeply. Fifty-nine tigers were shot within a span of nine years by the Mysore royal family, whereas only three tigers were shot by guests and four by staff during this period. The high number of royal shikars, lack of records, throwing areas open to shooting, and allowing officials to hunt make evident that the central concern of the state was ensuring game for future sport and not conservation in particular.

Although Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV created the Game and Tiger Preserves department, he does not come across as a hunting enthusiast in the Game and Tiger Preserves records. Aware of the value of the spectacle of the hunt to his kingship, Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV often sent the Palace staff to kill troublesome tigers, leopards, and elephants.¹¹⁰ It was Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar who truly adopted hunting as an essential aspect of his *rajdharm*a or kingly duties. By the time of his accession to the throne in 1940, the identity of Mysore kings had become more entrenched with Rajputs. He married Sathya Prema Kumari, the daughter of the Bundela Rajput ruler of Charkhari state in 1938. Although the marriage did not last long, it further aided the Wodeyars' *kshatriya* and Rajput identity. In the following years, Jayachamarajendra

¹⁰⁷Weekly Diaries of the Game and Tiger Preserves Officer 1929–1949, MRA, GTP.

¹⁰⁸'Weekly Diaries of D. N. Neelakanta Rao 1929–1949', MRA, GTP.

¹⁰⁹The number of tigers wounded is not included.

¹¹⁰'Weekly Diary of the Game and Tiger Preserves Officer from June 1937–June 1938', MRA, GTP.

Wodeyar slayed many rogue elephants and trouble-causing tigers and leopards in highly publicized spectacles to engender awe and respect among the populace. The villagers celebrated the Maharaja and his staff hunting 'troublesome animals' that raided their cultivated fields and threatened their lives.¹¹¹

Under Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar, the privilege of hunting in the royal preserves became more exclusive, with shikars being arranged only for the Maharaja's relatives through marriage and hunting tigers became a royal family activity. Unlike in the early years, when camps were conducted only for the Maharaja or the Yuvaraja, camps were now conducted for women in the royal family. This was in sharp contrast with the reign of his predecessor, Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV, when the women of the Mysore royal household did not participate in these activities.¹¹² His sister, Rajkumari Sujayakantha Ammani, who later became Thakurani Saheba of Sanad, bagged four tigers.¹¹³

While big-game hunting became the perfect site for the reaffirmation of British imperial identity and masculine virtues, hunting was also integral to imperial femininity as it allowed women to participate in the empire-building process.¹¹⁴ British women, in defence of the empire, took up tiger hunting as early as in the Company period.¹¹⁵ A distinct huntswoman culture and codes of sportswomanship emerged in colonial India at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹¹⁶ The existing scholarship on the huntswoman does not discuss hunting by Indian women. Although Rajkumari took up the sport in the twentieth century, there are no published narratives on her hunting prowess or mentions of the details of her hunt in the princely state archives. This absence of literature makes it difficult to understand her sudden interest in the sport.

Nevertheless, hunting was a common practice among the Mughal and the Rajput princesses. An eighteenth-century miniature painting from Kotah, in present-day Rajasthan, of women hunting tigers is displayed at the National Museum, New Delhi. Nur Jehan, an ace marksman/hunter, often hunted with Jehangir, the Mughal emperor. Miniature paintings depicting royal Rajput women hunting tigers from the eighteenth century are available in the National Museum in Delhi. Hunting was not a purely masculine royal sport even in the pre-colonial period. From the memoirs of Maharani Gayatri Devi of Jaipur, we understand that hunting was part of her childhood education.¹¹⁷ Young princesses often accompanied their parents on shooting

¹¹¹'Weekly Diaries of D. N. Neelakanta Rao 1929–1949', MRA, GTP. For an opposing view of natives to big-game hunting, see Ezra Rashkow, 'Resistance to hunting in pre-independence India: Religious environmentalism, ecological nationalism or cultural conservation?', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2015, pp. 270–301.

¹¹²Many photographs show the Maharani Pratap Kumari of Mysore at the *khedda*. However, the records make no mention of any bags nor of her presence during the princely shikars.

¹¹³'Administration Report of the Game Preserves Office, 1940–41 to 1947–48', MRA, GTP, 1940.

¹¹⁴Mary A. Procida, *Married to the empire: Gender, politics and imperialism in India, 1883–1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

¹¹⁵Vijay Ramadas Mandala, 'Tiger huntresses in the Company Raj: Environmentalism and exotic imaginings of wildlife, 1830–45', *International Review of Environmental History*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2019, pp. 97–113.

¹¹⁶Vijay Ramadas Mandala, 'British huntswomen in colonial India: Imperialism and gender hierarchies, 1980–1921', *International Review of Environmental History*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2020, pp. 71–99.

¹¹⁷Devi, *A princess remembers*, p. 54.

excursions and their first hunts were recorded.¹¹⁸ Gayatri Devi notes with great pride that she bagged her first big cat, a panther, at the age of 12. The importance of hunting in the life of an Indian princess appears to have increased significantly in the twentieth century. It had become a rite of passage for these young women.¹¹⁹

Indian princesses were not only expected to supervise and arrange for hunts for their guests but also to protect their subjects, in the absence of the maharaja, by killing dangerous animals.¹²⁰ Therefore, the sudden introduction of the sport to the women of the royal house was part of the reaffirmation of their Rajput identity, a continuation of the Wodeyars' act of establishing tiger shikars in the maharaja's preserves as a privileged political practice, and a means to showcase themselves as the ideal ruling class of the empire.

Conclusion

Hunting was considered a sporting activity important to the lives of the ruling elite in colonial India. The desire to be reckoned with among the ruling elite led the Wodeyars to adopt hunting as a royal sport. Initially, the Wodeyars followed British codes of sportsmanship and had no private hunting grounds. This changed at the beginning of the twentieth century, as part of the Wodeyars' attempts at forging a *kshatriya* and, specifically, a Rajput identity. Adopting Rajput notions of kingship led the Wodeyars to create private hunting grounds, establish a department to cater to the hunting requirements of the royal family and its guests, and reclassify tigers from 'vermin' to 'game'. As can be seen from the examination of the Game and Tiger Preserves records, the wildlife protection legislation passed by the princely state was mainly motivated by the desire to assert their Rajput identity.

A close examination of the shikar practices of the Wodeyars reveals that their attempts at tiger preservation were largely focused on ensuring the continuation of the royal sport. For the twentieth-century Wodeyars of Mysore, hunting tigers was no longer merely a sport designed to display power and control or a means of entertaining their guests but an assertion of their assumed Rajput identity. Jayachamarajendra Wodeyar probably excluded tigers from the list of animals that were to be protected, as hunting tigers was a significant aspect of his royal identity.

Acknowledgements. I thank Dr Ratheesh Radhakrishnan and Dr Paulomi Chakraborty for their valuable feedback and support. I express my sincere gratitude to Mr Gouri Satya for granting permission to use his photograph of the mural displayed at Jaganmohan Art Gallery, Mysore. I am grateful to the Charles Wallace India Trust for their travel grant which funded my visit to the UK for material collection. In addition, I acknowledge the financial assistance obtained from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Bombay, for travel within India.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

¹¹⁸Gayatri Devi records that she went on her first shoot at the tender age of five. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 62–63.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 138–139.

Cite this article: Abraham, Tresa. 2024. 'Tiger shikars: The Wodeyars' construction of a Rajput identity through sport'. *Modern Asian Studies*, pp. 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X24000192>