



## Superstition and Religious Beliefs in the Works of Jim Corbett

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**Abstract:** Throughout society, the pervasive presence of superstitions and the attribution of supernatural powers are unmistakable phenomena. Superstition, as defined by Merriam Webster, encapsulates any belief or ritual founded upon one's faith in luck or obscure, irrational, or otherworldly forces. While these convictions exhibit regional disparities, their profound influence on the human psyche remains constant. Within the literary tapestries woven by esteemed authors, one encounters a rich tapestry of superstitions, each weaving its own narrative. Even seemingly fantastical attributions of superstition and supernatural prowess to man-eaters are not without their roots in reality. The ingenuity, intellect, dominance, and sheer might of tigers have elevated these majestic creatures to the status of mythical beings. This study endeavors to dissect the role of the supernatural in shaping the superstitions and traditions of the Garhwal and Kumaon regions, where these beliefs are cherished and passed down through the ages, weaving an intricate web that binds generation after generation.

**Key words:** Superstition, Supernatural, Himalayan, Man-eater, Hunter

Superstitions and supernatural powers are common among any part of the society. An account of such supernatural elements and superstitious beliefs may be seen in the plots of many literary texts. In the works of many well-known authors readers may come across several superstitions. "Shakespeare uses superstition and visions such as dreams, omens, apparitions and ghosts in his plays to bring in some dramatic effects, chaos and also to bring in some confusion amongst the characters." (Amuthenu 17-18) Corbett's books are the record of the superstitions and religious beliefs that have their effects on the minds of the high-landers in general and Garhwali in particular. In each of his works, the author sincerely presents the true account of the rural life while recreating his hunting experiences. According to the high-landers an evil or benevolent spirit is supposed to be there in every hill-top, a valley, near the water-sources and even under the pipal and banyan tree. Although "superstition is not founded on scientific judgments, it exists in almost every human culture. Variation in superstitions can be explained with ideas of cultural evolution and environmental psychology" (Mandal). Superstitions are sometimes attributed to lack of education but according to our writer education is not the basis of such superstitious beliefs rather any person born and brought up in the foothills of the Himalaya is bound to develop such beliefs. He asserts:

It is not possible for those who have never lived in the upper reaches of the Himalaya to have any conception of the stranglehold that superstition has on the people who inhabit that sparsely populated region. The dividing line between the superstition of simple uneducated people who live on high mountains, and the beliefs of sophisticated educated people who live at lesser heights, is so faint that it is difficult to determine where the one ends and the other begins. (The Temple Tiger and More Man-Eaters of Kumaon 1)



‘The Temple Tiger’ is the story of the tiger that deals with Corbett’s unsuccessful attempt of chasing a tiger which was considered to be protected by the deity of the temple at Dabidhura in the eastern part of Almora district. With a large commentary on superstition of hill-men the author recreates the atmosphere of mystery created by the temple tiger in the story. The experienced *shikari* Bala Singh is the typical example of superstition of the hill-men, who is supposed to swallow a demon while he was singing near the camp-fire. When being asked about his eccentric behavior, he narrates:

Well, while I was singing a verse of one of our songs last night the demon of *Trisul* jumped into my mouth, and though I tried to eject him, he slipped down my throat into my stomach. The other men saw my struggle with the demon, for the fire was burning brightly, and they tried to drive him away by shouting and beating tin cans: but . . . the demon would not go. (TTT 3)

When asked by Corbett where the demon was then, Bala Singh replies with great conviction, “he is here, Sahib, here; I can feel him moving about” (TTT 3). Though very cheerful in nature and a perfect specimen of a man of about thirty years, this belief led him to his illness, and ultimately to his death. “The demon wanted to be released to return to Trisul” the informants concluded “so Bala Singh just lay down and died.” (TTT 5)

Many times Corbett came face to face with the temple tiger playing the game of life and death but one by one the tiger went on winning his round. This tiger had provided him with one of the most interesting jungle experiences, he ever had. Miraculously the tiger had won the last round of the exciting game they had played without having injured any of them. The tiger went on his way and fully confirmed the words of the priest, “I have no objection, sahib, to your trying to shoot this tiger but neither you nor anyone else will ever succeed in killing it” (TTT 4). The note of reverence and worship is seen in this story for the seemingly godly creature. As the tiger is the mount of Goddess Durga, and ‘The Temple Tiger’ lived in the vicinity of Dabiohura temple, the doubt was confirmed that the deity of the temple protected the tiger. Many of the Indian houses in the foot hills are considered to be haunted by spirits both friendly and antagonistic. Most seem to be capable of moving objects, including men. Corbett himself is conscious of the supernatural and its power, telling the readers how once he and his friends were forcibly ejected from a building and driven to the hillside by an evil spirit. The second time when he was after the Thak man-eater he heard a piercing scream coming from a deserted village which he very inadequately describes as “Ar-Ar-Arr dying away on a long-drawn-out note” (M E of K 205), and thirdly his repeated failure to kill the temple tiger. About these three incidents, he admits:

Though I claim I am not superstitious, I can give no explanation for the experience I met with at the bungalow while hunting Champawat tiger, and the scream I heard coming from the deserted Thak village. (TTT 5)

Having grown up in the surroundings of Nainital and Kaladhungi, and being friends to the Garhwalis and the Kumaonis, he understood the religion and philosophy of the Indian and particularly of the pahari people so much so that their superstitions too influenced him. He claims that he could kill the Chowgarh tigress only after having picked up the nightjar’s eggs. He confesses:

I plead guilty of being as superstitious as my brother sportsmen. For three long periods, extending over a whole year, I had tried—and tried hard—to get a shot at the tigress, and had failed; and now within a few minutes of having picked up the eggs, my luck had changed. (M E of K 94)

Besides, the villagers had the superstitious belief that an evil spirit craving human flesh occasionally took the shape of a tiger and killed people. A villager, who had been mauled by the tigress, boasted that he



escaped death at the hands of the evil spirit because of his strength and Corbett was escaping death because he was a ‘white *sadhu*’.

The reference to *Baramdev*, protecting the Muktesar man-eater in its vicinity, adds a religious and supernatural aura to the atmosphere of the story. *Baram* is the God of jungle, “who protects human beings and does not permit the shooting of animals in the area he watches over” (TTT 73). Around the shrine, the forest is well stocked with game and it was a favorite hunting ground of poacher for miles around, and of sportsmen from all over the India. Yet there was not “a single instance of an animal having been shot in the vicinity of the shrine” (TTT 73). Many times Corbett himself failed to kill it owing to some unusual happenings. The local people have a firm belief that death is inevitable and occurs as decreed by the Tiger-god and nothing can help it. This leads to the worship of ‘*Baramdev*’ for protection against the tiger. All the people, irrespective of their social position, caste and creed, used to sit together to pray the *Baramdev*. The Muktesar tigress lived in the vicinity of a very sacred jungle shrine known as *Baram ka than*. The mystery of the Jungle God’s protecting the tigress was confirmed when Corbett succeeded in killing the tigress a mile from *Baram’s* shrine.

To create an atmosphere of mystery, Corbett in his other story of the Talla Des Man-Eater, gives the reference of the mysterious lights on the hill above the far side of a river. To heighten the readers’ inquisitiveness, he adds that, the thing he had assumed to be burning embers, for “forests in Nepal are burnt annually, the burning starting in April” (TTT 114) were not fires but “lights, all of a uniform size of about two feet in diameter, burning steadily without a flicker or trace of smoke” (TTT 114-5). Watching idly, he found two more lights appearing a little above them, and moved slowly down the hill and merged into the central one and ultimately he found some more lights appearing, some to the left and others farther up the hill. The next morning he tried to find out the mystery of the lights but all in vein. In his words:

From crest to water’s edge and from water’s the edge to crest I scanned,, every foot of the hill, first with my naked eyes and then with field glasses. Not a sign of any human beings could I see, or, reverting to my first theory, was there any smouldering wood and it only needed a glance to see that the vegetation in this area had not been burnt for a year. The hill was rock from top to bottom, a few stunted trees and bushes growing where roothold had been found in crack or canny. Where the lights had appeared was perpendicular rock where no human being, unless suspended from above, could possibly have gone. (TTT 115)

By direct descriptive methods Corbett seems to build a religious atmosphere by referring to Purnagiri, dedicated to the worship of the Goddess *Bhagbatti*. Purnagiri is situated at junction of the tracks of Baramdeo and Kaladhunga, and is visited each year by thousands of pilgrims. The writer shows a perspective of religious beliefs by saying that only those “whom the Goddess favours are able to reach the upper shrine; the others are struck blind and have to make their offerings at the lower shrine” (TTT 116). Further he says that after the *puja* at the upper shrine, which goes on from sunrise to midday, no one is permitted to pass the lower shrine. Near the upper and more sacred shrine, there is a hundred feet high pinnacle of rock, the climbing of which is forbidden by the Goddess. In spite of being a Christian, Corbett’s regard for the Hindu religion is unequal. His faith on Hindu God and Goddesses and the myths and legends connecting to them can be clearly understood by these lines:

...long ago a *sadhu*, more ambitious than his fellows, climbed the pinnacle with the object of putting himself on equality with the Goddess. Incensed at his disregard of her orders, the Goddess hurled the *sadhu* from the pinnacle to the hill on the far side of show-fed river. It is this *sadhu* who, banished for



ever from Purnagiri, worships the Goddess two thousand feet above him by lighting lamps to her. These votive lights only appear at certain times (we saw them on 5 April) and are only visible to favored people. This favour was accorded to me and to the men with me. . . . because I was on a mission to the hill folk over whom the Goddess watches. (TTT 117)

Of his supernatural experiences, Corbett is “usually reticent, his attitude being that one should accept the supernatural and leave well alone” (Booth 140). The Purnagiri event impressed him so much that he writes twice about it. Though his stories are based upon the reality, he equally gives credence to the supernatural.

Corbett regards superstition as a form of mental complaint similar to measles, which attacks an individual or the whole community with few exceptions. A high degree of superstitions among the people, particularly in Alomora district is shown with a reference to lepers. He admits:

Leprosy, the most terrible and the most contagious of all diseases in the East, is very prevalent throughout Kumaon, and especially bad in Almora district. Being fatalists the people look upon the disease as a visitation from God, and neither segregate the afflicted nor take any precautions against infection. (TTT 69)

As the high landers, particularly Garhwali, are intensely superstitious so added to their real fear of physical contact with the man-eater, was even greater imaginary fear of its supernatural power. This is very clearly illustrated in the reply of the man whom the hunter asked to sell one of his goats to him, to be tied up for the man eating leopard of Rudraprayag. He frankly replies:

. . . it grieves me that you should have come all this long way from your home on a fruitless errand. The evil spirit that is responsible for all the human deaths in this area is not an animal, as you think it is, that can be killed by ball or shot, or by any of the other means that you have tried and that others have tried before you. (Corbett, The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag 15)

The cunning operation and mysterious existence of the leopard were so commonly talked about that it was supposed to be the most terrible incarnation of some evil spirit craving human flesh. The leopard was caught, in one instance, in a baited door trap but the local Hindus were, however, afraid of killing it for the fear that after killing it, the evil spirit that was believed by many to be that of a dead *fakir*, would escape and enter them. Again and again the lucky escape of the man eating leopard of rudraprayag had a slight impact on Corbett about the supernatural existence of the leopard. These incidents made him somewhat believe the superstitions of the Garhwalis. He comments:

Even so, it was no longer any matter of surprise to me who had only been acquainted with the leopard for a few short months that the people of Garhwal, who had lived in close and intimate association with him for eight long years, should credit him—animal or spirit with supernatural powers, and that they should cling to the belief that nothing but fire would rid them of this evil spirit. (Corbett, The Man-Eating Leopard of Rudraprayag 98)

The killer tiger carries the human soul of the victim, such is the concept amongst certain sections of the people and tiger-worship largely got the momentum from such concepts. They also thought that the man-eating tiger swings his head while walking inside the forest, the reason being that the immortal soul of the human victim exerts pressure on the tiger to cause such swinging. Corbett “considered Fridays bad for starting a journey” (Kala 74). The killing of a snake before any hunting expedition always brought good luck to him. The killing of snake by Ibbotson had turned the magical tables and after a life-and-death struggle for three months the man-eating leopard of Rudraprayag was killed.



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