THE 19th CENTURY COLONIAL ARCHETYPE OF THE INDIAN CROCODILE:

The aquapelagic roots of Rudyard Kipling's 'Muggers'

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ABSTRACT: This article studies the archetype of the Indian crocodile (also called by the British as 'mugger,' derived from the Hindi word *magarmachh*, meaning aquatic monster') in late-19th century colonial anthropological and zoological accounts. These constitute a vital archive of imperial views of environmental others, especially within Indian lacustrine contexts. I attempt to explore the historicity of the crocodile-archetype—that Rudyard Kipling, for instance, used in his famous story 'The Undertakers' (1894) as a scapegoat for overcoming the traumas of the 'sepoy Mutiny' or India's First War of Independence, of 1857 (which saw fierce battles between the British and Indian rebels and revolutionaries on the plains). In taking Kipling's story as the point of departure, this article tries to trace the evolution of the crocodile archetype through its appearances in popular accounts in Victorian periodicals, sporting, adventure, and anthropological literature, in their representations of Indian lacustrine contact zones. What makes the colonial archetype of the crocodile Kiplingesque is the author's historical coupling of it with the gory events of 1857 (as they were represented in British popular imagination) and India's lacustrine settings, as if to relocate the site of Anglo-Indian conflict from the plains to aquatic zones, on the one hand, and the internecine conflict to an inter-species conflict (that is, from British versus Indian to Anglo-Indian versus crocodiles), on the other hand. This ideology of representation of Indian crocodiles in colonial hunting narratives ended up obscuring an emerging geological narrative of the Indian subcontinent's deep past and traces of the hypothetical supercontinent, Gondwana, that British geologists had found in India. Since a holistic understanding of crocodilian origins was key to understanding India's geological deep pasts—that could have created an aquapelagic understanding of the crocodile as opposed to its diabolical image in Victorian popular imagination—demonising the crocodile hurt India's intellectual interests, too.

KEY WORDS: Mugger, Gondwana, Kipling, Conan Doyle, Victorian science, anthropology

Author's note: In this article the word *mugger* refers to the Indian crocodile (Hindi: *magarmachh*, मगरमछ) and has no connection with the English colloquial term referring to a street robber, or other related meanings. The essay frequently uses the Victorian term 'Mutiny' alongside the alternative label 'First War of Independence (1857)'; both are used to signal competing historiographies. Geographic names are given in their historical forms; modern equivalents and country references are provided where relevant. Indian terms such as *Makara*, *pir*, and *ghaut* are used in their local senses, and explained at every first use. Scientific names of crocodiles appear as *Crocodylus palustris* and *Crocodylus porosus* (italicised).

Prologue

In 1887—on Queen Victoria's golden jubilee and thirty years after India's First War of Independence (1857), a bloody Indo-British conflict long pejoratively labelled the 'Sepoy Mutiny' by the colonial regime—Rudyard Kipling hesitantly produced the essay 'In the year '57." It was arguably concerned less with the Mutiny than the "method in dealing with the mass" of a violent past (Tickell, 2009, p. 11). Despite a "documented unwillingness to revisit 'the black year'" and a distrust of "conventional archival historiography" (Tickell, 2009, p. 10), the events of 1857 nevertheless metonymically inform many of Kipling's Indian landscapes (Randall, 1998, pp. 97-98). For Mark Pafford (1989, p. 91), for instance, *The Jungle Book* evokes a stereotypical India of "dark luxuriance and hidden danger." But although 1857 generated powerful metonyms—most notably the Well of Cawnpore, which even displaced the Black Hole of 1756 as a principal signifier of Britain's uneasy hold on India (Pionke, 2014, p. 340)[1]—Kipling avoided the year. While contemporaries such as Meadows Taylor, G. A. Henty and Flora Annie Steel produced explicitly Mutiny-centred tales, Kipling never wrote what might be termed a full-blooded 'Mutiny tale' despite the event's "unparalleled capacity to capture and command the British imperial imagination" (Randall, 1998, p. 97). Kipling was cautious about deploying that folklore openly. Concurrently, he relocated the locus of conflict from rebel combat to imperial struggles against Indian wildernesses along the banks of the river Ganga and inland lacustrine waters (see Figures 1 & 2).

Figure 1 – 'Among the Gavials,' (Hornaday, 1885, p. 44-45).

[1] The Well of Cawnpore (now Kanpur) refers to a notorious site during the Siege of Cawnpore in the First War of Independence of 1857, where, after British forces under surrendered to Indian troops, approximately 120 surviving British women and children were allegedly killed, on July 15, 1857, and their bodies were thrown into a nearby well; this event became a potent symbol of atrocity in British colonial narratives, fueling calls for imperial vengeance. The Black Hole of Calcutta was an earlier incident, from June 20, 1756, when the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daula, captured Fort William in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and confined around 146 British and European prisoners in a small, airless dungeon overnight, allegedly leading to death by asphyxiation for 123; exaggerated in British accounts, it served as propaganda to justify colonial expansion and portray Indian rulers as barbaric (see also Heathorn, 2007).

Supporting, and drawing from, critical claims that Kipling commemorated 1857 obliquely, this essay examines one such commemorative archetype in his fiction—the Indian crocodile (freshwater *Crocodylus palustris* and saltwater *Crocodylus porosus*)—as deployed in 'The Undertakers' and as a possible scapegoat for sublimating the traumas of 1857. While at least fifty 'Mutiny' novels appeared before 1900, Kipling—the coiner of the "white man's burden"—produced no other fictional treatment of the event beyond what surfaces in 'The Undertakers' (Kutzer, 2002, p. 28).

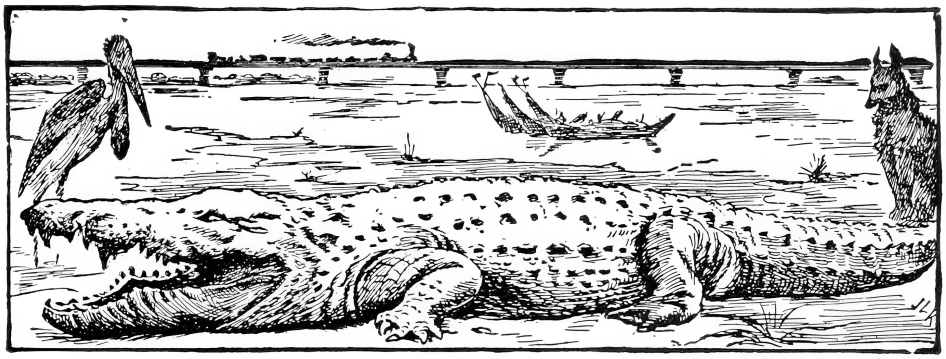


Figure 2 - Title illustration by John Lockwood Kipling to Rudyard Kipling's 'The Undertakers,' (1985, p. 423).

Seen hermeneutically from Kipling's story outward to contemporaneous authors and illustrations, 19th century crocodile imagery operated dually as formal experiments in literature and print and as a vector of colonial ideology. Contemporary accounts located the Indian crocodile in Gangetic and southern rivers, attributing to it feats such as overpowering tigers, while its "plated coat of mail" made it seem "invulnerable to bullets," though a grooved-rifle ball or explosive could penetrate or obliterate it ('The Crocodile and Gavial,' 1877, p. 654)—a fact exploited dramatically in Kipling's 'The Undertakers.'

Across fiction, natural history, memoirs, and visual ephemera, the reptile was often exaggerated beside human figures so that broad riverine or lacustrine panoramas could provide romantic or sublime backdrops while close encounters offered ocular spectacles. Such representations steered a colonial production of knowledge and mastery over landlocked lacustrine spaces, whose waters were exoticised for metropolitan consumption even as narratives naturalised imperial technocratic competence, ranging from taxonomy to violent intervention. The crocodile archetype thereby functioned as an instrument of epistemic authority, legitimating both conservationist and exploitative practices while celebrating technological domination—explosives, batteries, guns and bullets—as performances of imperial virility. Even seemingly benign deployments that framed crocodiles in sacred registers instrumentalised ritual relations, reframing local meanings as curiosities or eradication targets. Collectively, Victorian crocodile imagery fused natural history, sensational journalism, and literary illustrations into an iconography in which crocodiles signified spectacle, danger, sacredness, and a ruse to stage colonial supremacy in feral aquatic terrains.

Kipling's 'crocodile-eye-view' of 1857 culminates in imperial triumph, with the natives taught 'to say nothing, to pay tribute (taxes) to their imperial lords, and to go back to

ploughing the land so they have the money for the taxes and can avoid further retribution' after the crocodile's extermination; it frames 'The Undertakers' as an ideologically loaded fable (Kutzer, 2002, p. 29). In deconstructing that story, this article is neither primarily about the War of Independence nor an exercise in Kipling biography; rather, it traces the crocodile archetype's evolution across Victorian periodicals, sporting and adventure writing, and anthropological literature as they represented Indian lacustrine contact zones. What renders the crocodile archetype distinctly Kiplingesque, I argue, is its historical coupling with the 'Mutiny' in British popular imagination and its repeated relocation of Anglo-Indian conflict from plains and polity to aquatic zones—shifting an internecine human struggle into an inter-species confrontation.

This representational transposition, common in hunting narratives and colonial reportage, effectively occluded a deeper geological and cultural narrative of the Indian subcontinent's past; it suppressed what might more productively be read, following Philip Hayward, as an aquapelagic understanding of the crocodile archetype. Hayward's idea of aquapelagos—assemblages in which islands or lacustrine spaces are constituted by dynamic land–water relations and their attendant cultural, political, and historical correlates—offers a corrective to territorialist framings. An aquapelago is not merely a geographic description but "a social matrix wherein 'aquatic spaces between and around a group of islands' or lacustrine spaces are 'fundamentally interconnected with and essential to the social group's habitation of land and their senses of identity and belonging'" (Hayward, 2012, 2017, 2018). Read through this lens, crocodiles are not simply monstrous adversaries; they are actors within an integrated terrestrial–littoral lifeworld whose subjectivities and ritual meanings are co-constituted with human communities (Hayward, 2019, p. 90).

Hayward's work on mediatised mermaid figures—where "the fish-tailed mermaid is visually and associatively given a variety of phallic powers in Western audiovisual media fictions that make her a type of 'supercharged femme fatale'" (Hayward, 2018, p. 3)—is instructive by contrast. His aquapelagic imaginary treats folkloric figures as expressions of sustained human engagement with aquatic locales, and thus as positive cultural agents embedded in islandic and littoral heritage (Hayward, 2019, p. 90; Hayward, 2017, pp. 15-26). Late-Victorian colonial accounts, however, imposed a coercive imperial subjectivity on the Indian crocodile. They stripped it of prehistoric and cross-cultural resonances, recasting it as rootless treachery, and rendering it a warrant for extermination. This rhetorical removal severed the crocodile from its aquapelagic context—its deltaic and islandic genealogies linking Gangetic and Nilotic histories back to the hypothetical supercontinent of Gondwana—and instead reimagined it within a landlocked colonial panopticon. What might have constituted an aquapelagic imaginary—with the crocodile as relational—was transformed by colonial discourse into a phantasmagoria of menace, instrumentalised as moral and practical justification for imperial violence and 'civilising' interventions upon colonised spaces.

A Species or a symbol?

'The Undertakers' opens one night beneath a newly erected railway bridge at a deteriorating yet rapidly transformed riverine reach, where a chat ensues between an adjutant crane, a jackal and the 'Mugger of Mugger Ghaut' (literally, the 'crocodile of the crocodile bank'). The bridge itself recalls Kipling's infrastructural imaginings from his short story, 'The Bridge-Builders' (1893). Although the crocodile poses a lethal threat to both British and Indian lives, Kipling's surveillant eye on this characteristically Indian ecology—personified by the primitive crocodile and its comparatively insubstantial avian and canine

interlocutors—remains overt.[2] Midway through their colloquy, the crocodile narrates the carnage of the 'Mutiny' years, boasting that he "got my girth in that season—my girth and my depth" from the bodies that littered "the Right and Left of Gunga" (Kipling, 1895b, p. 142). He boasts of having become fatter than his kin by feeding on the corpses of English men and women, whom he notes were less burdened with jewellery and body ornaments—items, he suggests, taken by the rebels. The crocodile recounts a later encounter near Monghyr with "a boatful of white faces—alive!"; and a "naked white child kneel[ing] by the side of the boat," whom he handled "for sport and not for food"; only to be shot by five bullets fired by the child's mother, one penetrating the crocodile's neck-plate (Kipling, 1895b, pp. 142-45). Flattered by the jackal as "The Protector of the Poor," the crocodile is eventually baited and delivered to its death. The same child—rescued in that episode thirty years earlier—has become the engineer who erects the railway bridge and, with an English companion, now arrives to finish what the 'Mutiny' begun. The engineer later recounts that as a five-year-old "Mutiny baby" he had once had his hand "in a Mugger's mouth" until his mother fired his father's "old pistol at the beast's head" (Kipling, 1895b, p. 154). The animal's summary execution functions as a theatrical exorcism of imperial anxieties. By spectacularly avenging 'Mutiny' massacres, the narrative seeks to resolve the trauma through a fantasy of technological prowess.

Kipling's mugger, however, is no lone exemplar. 19th century Victorian literature abounds with analogous tales of wretched, avenged crocodiles. Although Mary Leighton and Elizabeth Surridge (2007, p. 258) have traced the reptile's role as "something of a narrative cliché" in the imperial imagination, what follows is a sustained examination of Indian crocodile hunts, whose narrative agency intensified after 1857 and especially from the 1880s onward. In colonial discourse, the crocodile archetype conformed to the catalogue of vices and anxieties identified by Leighton and Surridge—"excessive appetite, hypocrisy, violence, and, most predominantly, alterity," accompanied by "false emotion," "cannibalism," "rapacious, excessive, or deviant sexuality" and "colonial treachery" (Leighton and Surridge, 2007, pp. 249-50). It has also been observed that Kipling's crocodile embodies "forces of colonial disorder" (Randall, 1998, p. 116). These projected traits—mapped from racialised characterisations of the 'Oriental' (indolence, licentiousness, cunning, and, by virtue of Mutiny's lingering power in British imagination, accentuated cruelty and brutality)—found in the mugger an efficacious symbolic substitute for human antagonists (Hotchkiss, 2001, p. 438).

Narrativising crocodile hunts offered the Victorian psyche an adversary that preserved martial aesthetics while displacing internecine conflict onto an environmental or inter-species plane. My intervention is to ask whether alternative representations were available; if so, how extensively they were mobilised within Victorian culture and in Kipling's own vision. Was the zoological crocodile—the species occupying diverse Indian habitats and historically entwined with human communities—identical to the politically charged aquatic daemon fashioned by 19th century hunting accounts?

[2] I am mindful here of Gautam Basu Thakur's coinage of "necroecology" (2016), which addresses the rise of ecological topoi in Victorian texts written after 1857, including by Kipling, among others. Basu Thakur defines the term as "a way to explore representations of human-nonhuman networks" and "the nonhuman as constitutive of the human" (2016: 202-203), symbolising "imperial dread of ontological erasure via entrapments in (un)natural chasms [that] enunciate a nascent recognition about the planet's deep history and mangled ecology, or inhabiting an *uncanny* planet" (2023: 322). This article seeks to go a few steps ahead to unveil the nonhuman as not merely constitutive of human but also of narratives of geological epochs.

This query becomes urgent when set beside modern conservation histories. Indian crocodiles, once "widespread and common, living in a wide range of habitats" and long held in "traditionally amicable relationship" with people, are now scarce; two years after India's Wildlife (Protection) Act (1972) there were fewer than 1,000 adult crocodiles (Bryant and Hall, 1989, pp. 276-78). Four decades of concerted conservation have increased numbers to roughly 4,000 ("The Indians sharing their villages with crocodiles," 2019). Yet any account of the species must reckon with Victorian eradication narratives: the crocodile was neither merely a hapless subaltern nor a simple synecdoche for 19th century Indian wilderness. Nor does its symbolic linkage to the 'Mutiny' necessarily mean that the crocodile archetype uniformly functioned as a cipher for rebel atrocity—though some texts imply as much (Randall, 1998, p. 117). The critical task here is not to force a teleological reading of Kipling's crocodile as mere commemoration of 1857, but to interrogate what he sought to accomplish by mobilising this archetype—whether to memorialise the calamity, to naturalise imperial mastery over lacustrine spaces, or to perform some other consolatory operation upon a fraught imperial past.

Negotiating the animal turn

Recent scholarship on colonial biopolitics and interspecies conflict has sought to answer Philip Armstrong's critique that postcolonial literary studies once neglected animal rights within colonial contexts (Armstrong, 2002, p. 413). Revisiting the animal in colonial discourse, John Miller contends, is not a diversion from human suffering but central to dismantling the violently hierarchical oppositions (self/other, coloniser/colonised, human/animal) that sustain colonial master narratives (Miller, 2012, p. 15). Echoing this, Evan Mwangi argues, from African colonial contexts, that while scholars rightly fear trivialising human victims, "the interests of animals are intertwined with those of the humans, plants, and the entire ecosystem" (Mwangi, 2019, p. 25). Kenneth Shapiro has likewise emphasised the peculiar "ontological vulnerability" of nonhuman environments—an existential precarity heightened by human action—and the consequent exclusion of such environments from humanistic subjectivity (Shapiro, 1989; 1990). Fayaz Chagani similarly criticises 21st century humanities for an enduring anthropocentrism that occludes nonhuman subjectivities (Chagani, 2016). Recent work urging finer-grained accounts of animal agency also insists on assessing dangerous animals by individual histories rather than species-wide stereotypes (Maglen, 2018).

Within this theoretical field, Jopi Nyman exposes how Victorian literary imaginings of Indian environmental others consolidated colonial stereotypes to naturalise racial superiority and to otherwise Indianness (Nyman, 2003, pp. 39-45). Accordingly, the crocodile was routinely "[a]nthropomorphised and orientalised" in Victorian iconography (Leighton and Surridge, p. 249). Comparable patterns appear in Simon Pooley's study of 19th century crocodile hunts in colonial Africa. Colonial accounts manifest an often-irrational contempt for reptiles that, among local peoples, were simultaneously feared and revered (Pooley, 2016). Echoes of such complex human–crocodile relations recur across Southeast Asia—most strikingly in the Philippines—where indigenous belief systems enabled cohabitation with large carnivores in ways that occasionally outperformed modern conservation interventions (Jan van der Ploeg, et al, 2011).

In colonial India, however, crocodile hunts tended to polarise opinions. The animal became a fulcrum on which jubilations over their eradication crisscrossed with sympathies for sacred water-gods (recalling the mythical *Makara*, or the vehicle of the river Goddesses,

Ganga, Narmada, and the Ocean God, Varuna), yet there was a suppressed polarity within colonial discourse itself. This essay therefore reads Kipling's crocodile not merely as political allegory for 1857 but as a nexus where Victorian zoology and emergent geological thought—invoking sites such as Mugger Peer and deep-time frames like Gondwana—converged. This conjunction was an aquapelagic occasion, or a theoretical juncture where literary allegory, natural history, colonial science, and aquapelagic imaginaries intersected. To develop this argument, the article moves in three linked stages. First, close readings of Kipling and contemporary reportage trace the crocodile's symbolic labour as a commemorative political figure of the 'Mutiny'; second, surveys of Victorian natural-history and hunt narratives reveal how zoological discourses shaped popular and administrative responses to the mugger; and third, dialogues with geological debates—most notably the Mugger Peer–Gondwana axis—demonstrate how the crocodile operated as both political emblem and geological motif within Victorian colonial consciousness. Together, these gestures show the crocodile as an index of intertwined cultural, scientific, political and temporal imaginaries rather than as a mere zoological cipher.

Monopolising righteous violence

On April 3, 1886, the *Illustrated London News* published an article on crocodile hunting, where it was reported that Charles F. Gilbert, Executive Engineer of the Indian Public Works Department, and Conservator of the Fishery at Rajputana, "found it needful to make war against the 'muggers,'" that "came in from a neighbouring sacred lake, and proved destructive to the fish in the Ana Sagar" in Ajmer. Like Gilbert, several 19th century colonial officials, naturalists, and adventurers "obliged" Victorian readers with "sketches of the hunting, shooting, snaring, hooking, and otherwise killing or catching these obnoxious animals" ("Mugger Hunting in India," 1886, p. 353). Although colonialism is only one of several factors responsible for the still-diminishing numbers of Indian crocodiles—in a history where Indians too have played active assailants against the reptile—Victorian accounts of the colonial war on crocodiles, so to speak, routinely performed the imperial regime's monopolisation of both virtuous vulnerability and righteous violence. A large number of historical, zoological, and fictional accounts of the Indian crocodile projected the reptile as ferocious vermin whose political function was to be killed under imperial licensing, regulation, and protection, constituting the normalisation of "the crucial fact that benevolent imperialism is nevertheless undergirded by violence" (Mondal, 2014, p. 748). Maenwhile, the credit of forging the archetypal link between the crocodile and the 'Mutiny' goes not to Kipling but his correspondent, Arthur Conan Doyle, who, in the novel *The Sign of the Four* (1890), used the archetype to rationalise 'The Strange Story of Jonathan Small.'

Avenging Colonial Victims

Small, a Worcestershireman serving with the '3rd Buffs' (the Royal East Kent Regiment, formerly the 3rd Regiment of Foot), arrives in India only to have his military career abruptly curtailed by a riverine accident: while swimming in the Ganga "a crocodile took me, just as I was half-way across, and nipped off my right leg as clean as a surgeon could have done it, just above the knee" (Doyle, 1903, p. 170). Arthur Conan Doyle's dramatic image—a surgical excision of limb by a nonhuman predator—resonates with a range of late-Victorian representations that cast crocodiles as implacably warlike submarine adversaries. Frank B. Simson's *Letters on Sport* (1886), for example, describes crocodiles as such antagonists, recounting local defensive measures ("places near the villages in Backergunge and Jessore were surrounded with palisades of bamboo stakes to keep crocodiles away") and scenes of

multiple reptiles "floating and apparently asleep on the surface of the deep pools," ready to seize stray dogs or humans and leave "nothing of him ever be seen again" (Simson, 1886, p. 235). Simson's own field anecdote—of a Noakholly bathing-party man mauled and subsequently undergoing an above-knee amputation performed, in effect, by a young English doctor—closely anticipates Small's fate and subtly links crocodile violence with the experiential training ground of imperial medicine (Simson, 1886, p. 236).

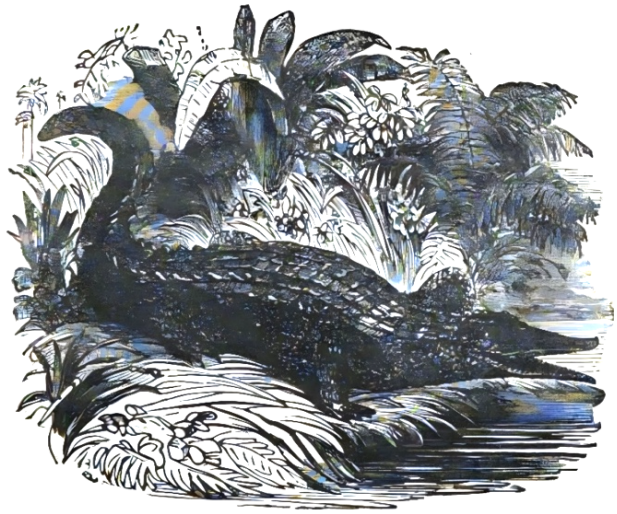
Other contemporaneous texts reiterate and amplify this concatenation of reptilian violence and imperial trauma. Louis Rousselet's *A Tale of the Indian Mutiny* (1888) stages a serpent-charmer felled by an enormous crocodile that snaps at his leg as he struggles to reach shore, losing both limbs and snakes in the encounter (Rousselet, 1888, pp. 4-5). The pattern—a sudden, clean, surgical maiming followed by narrative recollection of colonial peril—fuses an archaic, furtive Oriental menace with the late-Victorian technological aesthetics of precision and engineered control, particularly resonant in an era defined by bridge-building and infrastructural conquest. In *The Sign of the Four*, although the crocodile's dramatic presence is brief, its symbolic efficacy endures. Small's misfortune indexes a colonial vulnerability that the plot transforms into the pretext for criminality and revenge. The reptile is an emblematic catalyst that returns the 'Mutiny' to metropolitan inflections of danger and loss. Leighton and Surridge thus characterise the crocodile bite as a symptom of "the infection of empire," a topos that manifests in parallel objects of colonial fear—the poisoned darts of Small's accomplice, the Andamanese tribesman, Tonga, for instance (Leighton and Surridge, 2017, p. 249; Chatterjee, 2020). While Doyle's crocodile episode looks "particularly gratuitous" and "almost perfunctory" (Leighton and Surridge, 2017, p. 258), it nonetheless exemplifies how the reptile served as an ideational tool to register colonial corporeal fragility and to legitimate contingent colonial violence.

The same macabre repertoire appears across imperial geographies. Samuel White Baker's *Wild Beasts and Their Ways* (1890), though set in Africa, rehearses a familiar script. The slaughter of crocodiles as punitive reprisal for the loss of native retainers, the discovery of a missing girl's ornaments and hair in a crocodile's entrails, and the consequent vengeful resolve to exterminate the species ("a vast number of these vermin in revenge for their misdeeds") (Baker, 1890, p. 261). Baker's forensic retrieval of bracelets, necklaces, and woolly substance from a crocodile's innards echoes the grisly excavations of European female victims in Indian reports—and, by association, the traumatic imaginings of the 'Well of Cawnpore.' The trope of undigested jewellery as proof of violated European femininity thus became a transimperial sign, a recurrent motif that bound African and Indian crocodile narratives and consolidatesd a gendered frame for colonial outrage.

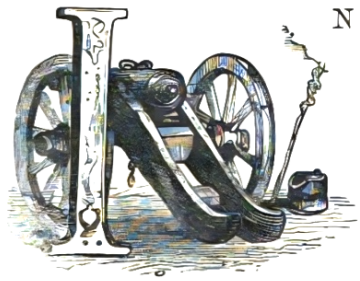
The Anglo-Indian press reinforced this iconography. *The General Baptist Magazine* (1879) recorded one Mr. Chapman, Inspector of Police at Chandbally, who tracked and killed a crocodile at the Damrah river; when quartered, the beast yielded "twenty-six pairs of brass anklets and bangles … two sets of gold earrings and a number of toe-rings," from which the periodical inferred the devouring of four women, five children, and others ('A Man-eating Alligator,' 1879, p. 79). Such harvest-like inventories of jewellery, which distinguished victims who "wore no jewellery," mirrored Kipling's own detail that English victims of the 'Mutiny' were less encumbered with ornaments (Kipling, 1895b, pp. 142-45), thereby knitting together folklore of the mugger with journalistic atrocity lists and the forensic evidence touted by hunters. Lieutenant-Colonel A.J.O. Pollock's *Sporting Days* (1894), published contemporaneously with Kipling's story, likewise narrates post-mortem discoveries—a woman's toe-ring recovered and contested before ending up as a "souvenir" in Pollock's keeping (Pollock, 1894, p. 228). Fictional and juvenile reading materials

reiterated the trope. *The Boy's Own Annual* printed a letter (January 6, 1899) in which one "Uncle Jack" kills a crocodile whose entrails produce "a whole handful of native jewellery—silver bangles and nose and toe rings (some evidently belonging to a little child)" ('Life in the North-West,' 1899, p. 663). The circulation of such accounts fed a symbolic economy in which the crocodile's stomach functioned as a grisly ledger of social and other kinds of transgression, confirming imperial narratives of threatened European womanhood and furnishing material tokens of colonial conquest.

While not every detail in these reports is verifiable, their rhetorical force is extraordinary. The image of defenceless women and children consumed by crocodiles resonated with the English public because it amplified memories of Mutiny victims and the associated discourse of violated femininity. Jenny Sharpe and Nancy Paxton have shown how Mutiny fictions mobilised victimhood narratives to justify retaliatory violence and manage crises of authority—enabling redemptive warrior codes that buttressed colonial self-representation (Paxton, 1992, p. 27; Sharpe, 1993, p. 67). Crocodile stories thus offered a nonhuman proxy for such anxieties, allowing the dramatisation of vulnerability and the performance of retributive virility without the immediately destabilising burden of intercommunal human culpability. At the same time, the trope generalised bodily vulnerability across colonial bodies. *The Spectator's* April 2, 1898 discussion of crocodile hunting ('Crocodiles,' 1898, pp. 475-477)—which juxtaposed Kipling's fiction and E. Stewart's contemporary naturalist report in *The Contemporary Review*—illustrates how literary and natural-historical narratives converged to produce archetypal frames. Another author reiterated Stewart's accounts of skulls and putrid remains, of attacks on bathing children, and of failed paternal endeavours to rescue victims (Cornish, 1898, pp. 244-245), thereby institutionalising a set of imaginative coordinates in which the crocodile signified both spectacle and menace. By the late 19th century, then, crocodile hunts were a canonical trope in the imperial imagination. Crocodile victims included natives and Europeans, but the narrative emphasis invariably foregrounded the vulnerability of those the Empire claimed to protect. Victorian crocodile hunts and reports staged theatrical confrontations that spectacularised imperial technological competence and moral authority—a repertoire of forensic gleanings, revenge, and souvenir-making that legitimated continued intervention in the riverine and terrestrial remains of colonial India.



Blowing up a Crocodile.



N the summer of 1846, when every body in England was crazy with railway gambling, I was sojourning on the banks of the Rohan, a small stream in one of the northwestern provinces of India. Here I first became acquainted with the Mugger, or Indian crocodile. I had often before leaving England, seen, in museums, stuffed specimens of the animal, and had read in "Voyages and Travels," all sorts of horrible and incredible stories concerning them. I had a lively recollection of Waterton riding close to the water's edge on the back of an American cayman, and I had a confused notion of sacred crocodiles on the banks of the

Figure 3 - Opening page of John Frost's account, 'Blowing Up a Crocodile' (1854, p. 129), in *The Pictorial Family Encyclopedia of History*—whose parts were later republished as part of his *Incidents and Narratives of Travel* (1857)—containing illustrations of a lacustrine scene featuring a crocodile and a small cannon/battery used to blast crocodiles.

Figure 4 - Illustration titled 'The Crocodile Battery' in the eponymous section in John Frost's *Incidents and Narratives of Travel* (1857), p. 331.

Spectacularising crocodile hunts

After 1882 the British Indian government legally incentivised crocodile killing, offering bounties of five to twenty rupees for skins—sums exceeding a sepoy's monthly wage—to mobilise "particular courage and endurance" among villagers who sought headmen's certificates for their kills (Saha, 2021, pp.86-90). Economic inducements reframed crocodiles as criminalised game with bounties, hunted by militias of armed villagers. Yet precise mortality figures remain elusive because crocodile deaths were recorded under the colonial Government of India's "other animals" category alongside "wild boars, deer, and other prey mammals"; unlike others, crocodiles were uniquely "targeted for eradication" in an "'imperial war' against creatures deemed to be a danger to humans, livestock, and cultivation" (Saha, 2021, pp. 86-87). Crocodile-inhabited lacustrine and riverine stretches perpetuated Victorian fears of treacherous, bestial terrains and colonial otherness, while granting colonists the consoling illusion of knowledge outposts over vast, fluid tracts whose flora, fauna, and indigenous peoples confounded empiricist typologies and Manichean binaries of human/beast or mind/matter. Crocodile hunts routinised the "microphysics" of power in a Foucauldian register, normalising quotidian violence as administrative practice (Saha, 2021, p. 85).

In the Victorian imaginary, crocodiles also carried evolutionary and racial baggage. John Mackenzie and Leighton and Surridge locate the reptile within a repertoire of evolutionary primitivism and racial degeneracy, images that licensed descriptors of the animal as rapacious, ruthless, cannibalistic, and a symbol of a primitive epoch (Saha, 2021, p. 87; Mackenzie, 1988, 301; Leighton and Surridge, 2017, p. 250). The colonial craze for dead crocodiles, their skins and body parts, thus extended the history of crocodile hunts well beyond singular events like the 'Mutiny,' embedding them within imperial economies of killing, collection, and museumisation. Although it would be reductive to read all Victorian

crocodile accounts as straightforward allegories of 1857, they did create affective equivalences—evoking the moral certitude and monopoly of colonial violence. The spectacle's "real purpose," as Kim Wagner observes, was often the "performance of colonial power pure and simple" (Wagner, 2016, p. 195): both reprisals during the Mutiny and retributive crocodile executions staged public demonstrations of authority. These narratives functioned as an archive that refused to let "disturbing slaughters" recede into oblivion, instead keeping the memory of rebellious actors—sepoy rebels or slimy crocodiles—alive in grisly tableaux of imperial justice "blown from the mouths of cannon" (Willcock, 2015, pp. 159, 145). Whatever the precise target, the effect was similar: Indian subjects were drawn "into submission," their loyalties to empire buttressed by spectacles of violent retribution (Wagner, 2016, p. 204).

Contemporaneous reportage and travel writing merged these logics of vengeance and exemplarity. John Frost's 'The Crocodile Battery' in *Incidents and Narratives of Travel* (1857) depicts Britons avenging a villager, Sidhoo, by bombing a crocodile (Figures 3-4). A mistakenly killed crocodile is followed by the blasting of Sidhoo's perpetrator, producing a "great bloated mass of flesh and blood" and "disgusting" flotsam (Frost, 1857, p. 345). Frost, like Kipling's crocodile-slayer, assumes the mantle of "protector of the poor," joining a long succession of avengers whose deeds were repeatedly resurrected in print. Fictional and juvenile periodicals reproduced this vernacular of popular retribution. In *The Boy's Own Annual* the figure of "Uncle Jack," hailed by villagers as "protector of the poor," shoots a thirteen-foot "ugly, wicked-looking brute" whose entrails later yield human ornaments and whose depredation of a "well-grown cow" rallies natives to petition the sahib for vengeance ('Life in the North-West,' 1899, p. 662). That this tale appears only five years after Kipling's 'The Undertakers' suggests a porous textual economy in which tropes circulate freely: the sahib is called upon to perform collective redress, and the ensuing hunt is narrated in gory detail that mirrors the spectacular executions of 1857. Taken together, monetary bounties, bureaucratic classifications, forensic spectacles of exhumed jewellery, and popular renditions of the hunt produced an imperial cultural infrastructure that normalised eradication, licensed communal violence, and aestheticised retribution—transformations that made crocodiles both object and instrument of colonial power, as in this passage.

> *I think that all the ablebodied men and boys in the village must have turned out to watch the proceedings; and when they saw the dreaded crocodile being towed ignominiously across, they began to cry out and jeer at their vanquished foe; and the man who was punting, becoming suddenly very brave, gave the crocodile a poke on the side of the head, saying, "Oh, he! Maharaj"—but he never finished his jibe, for the crocodile, suddenly opening his huge jaws, snapped at the thick bamboo pole (as thick as a man's fist), his teeth crunching into the wood. The man nearly fell overboard in his fright, and though he tugged and pulled, it remained immovably fixed in the great beast's jaws, as though they were a great steel trap. But it was the last dying agony of the crocodile, and a few minutes later all the villagers lent a band—some tugging at the big punt pole still sticking out of the beast's mouth—in dragging him up to the camp, while all the little boys danced and screamed with delight in front.* ('Life in the North-West,' 1899, p. 662.)

The scene establishes the mythopoeic *feebleness* of the "ablebodied" village men and boys when faced against the dreaded crocodile, while conferring the status of 'Maharaj' on the *virile* sahib out there to avenge his subjects' enemies. By eliminating the crocodile, the colonial warlord assumes a sovereign agency of violence for his own. More spectacularly,

and gruesomely, not all hunts were executed as righteous revenge. American zoologist and taxidermist, William Temple Hornaday's *Two Years in the Jungle* (1885) laid out the macabre science of killing in narrating the shooting of a gavial (small Gangetic crocodile) with self-avowed "morbid prejudice" (Temple, 1885, p. 27). In Hornaday's time, it was known that gavials—wrongly described by some as "the scourge of the Ganges" and a "ferocious animal"—was actually a predator of cattle and horses; it was harmless to human swimmers ('The Crocodile and Gavial,' 1877, pp. 653-654). Yet, Hornaday's unprovoked killing of the gavial is preceded by cold-blooded empirical guidelines on how to kill the reptile, prospecting violent spectacle as a zoological act.

> *I have found by a long series of experiments, that the only sure way to stop a large crocodile or alligator is to shoot him in the neck or at the shoulders, so as to strike the vertebral column. It is easy enough to kill small specimens by shooting them in the head, but a crocodile with the top of its head blown off is useless either for its skin or skeleton, while one shot through the heart or lungs will get into the water much faster than one not shot at all. The brain of a twelve-foot gavial is so small that it would hardly fill an egg cup, and it is surrounded by such a huge mass of solid bone that it offers no mark at all to fire at. The sides of the neck and the shoulders, however, are wholly unprotected by bony plates, and when a bullet strikes the vertebral column, the whole nervous system receives such a terrible shock that the animal is instantly paralysed, at least for a time, and rendered powerless to move a single yard. When the spinal column is struck by a bullet, the crocodile's jaws fly wide open, as if the bullet had touched a spring, the legs draw up and quiver convulsively, and the reptile lies still for further treatment.* (Hornaday, 1885, p. 40).

Hornaday's narrative relocates spectacle from combat to the crocodile's viscera, treating the animal's bodily responses as epistemic data. The gavial, after being wounded, clanks "his bony jaws together" and flings "his head from side to side as if in great agony"; a second shot plunges it into "agonies of death," and it groans "three or four times, like a strong man in distress," emitting a "pure vocal tone," before a third shot demolishes its jaws and it is left "quite still" (Hornaday, 1885, p. 41). Hornaday rehearses a zoological theatre in which the creature's dying sounds constitute a scientific spectacle sanctioned by Victorian adventure culture. Stewart's account of crocodile-shooting at the Tiljuga stream in Tirhut (modern Bihar) restages a comparable gruesomeness. He emphasises the "blind ferocity of the Indian crocodile," the defensive invulnerability of its head, and the ideal moment for shooting when animals are "basking in the sun," claiming to have "made crocodile-shooting a special study for a while" (Stewart, 1898, pp. 541-42). Like Hornaday, Stewart's exults in the convulsions of hunted crocodiles; unlike Hornaday, however, Stewart insists the reptile is a "voiceless creature," asserting that it "produces no sound whatever" (Stewart, 1898, p. 545). That contradiction—between Hornaday's groaning victim and Stewart's "voiceless" reptile—demands symbolic reading. For these naturalists, crocodile hunts were not only sport but also a staged denial of the animal's testimonial capacity. Stewart went further, dismissing crocodilian cognition as minimal, its "reasoning powers are very feeble indeed, if he has any at all. He is a mere automaton, acted on by certain instincts or desires" (Stewart, 1898, p. 545). Such pronouncements recoded the human/animal binary, repeatedly consolidating hierarchies that occluded any possible response from the animal. This produced a "legitimised sovereignty, through the hierarchisation of difference," granting colonists the presumed right "to decide whether to kill and to make suffer" (Wadiwel, 2015, p. 36).

Colonising the deep past

The Spectator article contrasted Kipling's fiction with Stewart's science, citing Stewart's grisly hunt—extraction of a crocodile's gall-bladder (valued as a charm by villagers), and two human skulls and remains in the animal's entrails—and his account of a crocodile "holding a native girl in its mouth," which ended in her death. Stewart's graphic detail was used to extol Kipling's story as a realist exposé of the superstitious elevation of the crocodile to "the dignity of a 'godling,' of local fetish" ('Crocodiles,' 1898, p. 476). At the story's end the dead crocodile's friends, the adjutant and jackal, repeat, "That was worth sitting up all night for" (Kipling, 1895b, p. 154)—words first spoken by the engineer who shoots the Mugger of Mugger Ghaut. Their echoing of the engineer aligns animal spectators with the colonial enterprise; the line's strategic ambiguity suggests they cannot offer a proper tribute but are roused to a new alertness in a rapidly civilising post-railway society, where violent spectacle is both imminent and, for victors and survivors, perversely enjoyable. Yet Victorian crocodile imagery did not end with hunting narratives. A concurrent geological discourse—parallel to the symbolic conquest of India's fauna—sought to expand imperial knowledge of India's antiquity.

The Limits of Gondwanaland

In the 1860s two British naturalists, Andrew Leith-Adams (1867) and Andrew Murray (1868), were prompted by the crocodiles at Karachi's Mugger Peer (Mangho Pir) to propose sensational geological links between India, Africa, and Australia. Kipling's era circulated many accounts of the shrine and its crocodile lake. An article in the inaugural issue of *The Royal School of Mines Magazine* (Nov. 1, 1876) called them "crocodile saints" ('Crocodile Saints,' 1876, pp. 28-30). On June 18, 1884, *The Messenger* reported that the "huge, scaly, old crocodiles" were fed by priests and worshipped by thousands of Baluchis, even though the correspondent derided the "naked, dirty, unkempt … fakirs" ('Sacred Pets,' 1884, p. 2). Legends variously traced the crocodiles' arrival to a deluge transported by Pir Mangho (or Saint Mangho) around 1300 AD or to worship by Bronze-Age settlers from 2500 BC. Intrigued by such lores, Leith-Adams and Murray sought to trace the primitive aquamarine roots of India's inland rivers across the Indo-Gangetic/Indus belt.

Leith-Adams, who visited Mugger Peer in the 1860s (Figure 5), expressed sympathy for the crocodiles and censured "mischievous young Englishmen" who threw stones at basking monsters (Leith-Adams, 1867, p. 42). His report noted that the "largest crocodile [living] in a narrow tank" had his forehead "painted red"; and that the locals "venerate[d] the old monster"; this led Leith-Adams to wonder how such animals reached this solitary oasis (Leith-Adams, 1867, pp. 43-45). Leith-Adams suspected local transport. But Murray offered a bolder inversion theory: "instead of the animals having come to the oasis; the oasis may have come to them," the latter argued (Murray, 1868, p. 300). Murray hypothesised that an ancient estuarine or inland sea once connected the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian region so that, with changing Himalayan altitudes and basin tilting, riverine stretches drained away leaving isolated pools—oases like Mugger Peer—where crocodiles persisted (Murray, 1868, p. 301). Framed in the geological debates then emerging—Edward Suess's Gondwanan ideas in the 1880s and Alfred Wegener's continental drift (c. 1912)—Leith-Adams and Murray interpreted crocodile distributions as evidence of deep temporal continuities between continents. Murray rejected human-transport accounts in favour of geologically driven migrations and paralleled crocodile evolution with that of the Indo-Gangetic dolphin, thus sketching a biological-geological matrix linking Egyptian and Indian sacred traditions via ancient riverine and marine connections (Murray, 1868, p. 302). Around Mugger Peer, Leith-

Adams and Murray fashioned a geologically inflected narrative that saw crocodiles as living archives—biological witnesses to ancient marine, lacustrine and riverine geographies that could be read alongside local legends to reimagine India's deep past.

Figure 5 - Illustration of Mugger Peer in 'The Crocodile Pond of Muggerpeer' (1868, p. 395); inter alia, the article refers to Leith-Adams' *Wanderings of a Naturalist* (1867), and its representation of crocodiles in the context of India's geological past.

Crocodiles and Sacrality

Leith-Adams and Murray were originally drawn to Mugger Peer owing to its sacred significance. However, not all observers of Mugger Peer were as sympathetic as them, either to the nascent narratives of sacrality—a mystical geology of sorts—or to the crocodiles themselves. In 1890, English geologist Alexander F. Baillie suggested that "Mugger Peer"—believed to be the Sanskritised contortion of "Mangho Pir"—was sacred to Muslims but not to Hindus (Baillie, 1890, p. 178). Baillie loathed the sacred spectacles of pilgrims and visitors feeding slaughtered goats to the crocodiles as part of a picnicking ritual. Accordingly, "that the hateful inhabitants of the muddy pools at Mangho are in any way sacred, or connected originally with the shrine—an opinion which has now been held for a long period—ought therefore to be at once discarded," held Baillie. Although he acknowledged that the crocodiles had "probably dwelt there so long as the warm springs have been in existence," he opposed the belief of priests and visitors "in their sanctity" and the continuing "savage spectacle of feeding the voracious creatures" (Baillie, 1890, p. 179). He even recommended the conversion of Mangho Pir into an "alligator farm" to harvest crocodile skin for manufacturing purses and cigar cases, to bolster Anglo-American crocodile-skin trade. Unsurprisingly, although Baillie's view (Figure 6) preceded Kipling's story by four years, his *geological* lens was in keeping with receptions of the Kiplingesque aesthetic, yet not all English views sought to delegitimise the sacrality of crocodiles in Indian cultures.

Figure 6 - Illustration of Mugger Peer from Alexander Francis Baillie's *Kurrachee* (1890, pp. 178-179).

The February 1874 issue of *Frank Leslie's Pleasant Hours* published 'Tame Crocodiles,' likening the crocodile's sacred status in Egyptian culture to the cow's veneration among Hindus, and noting that "[o]ne of Vishnu's incarnations is said to have been in the form of a crocodile" ('Tame Crocodiles,' 1874, p. 105). John Lockwood Kipling's *Beast and Man in India* (1891) records crocodile-feeding rituals in Rajputana (Kipling, 1891, p. 323) and, following Alexander Cunningham, observes that crocodiles and tortoises recur as sculptural devices used by Hindu artists to evoke epic riverine episodes (Kipling, 1891, p.356). Ethnographic and folkloric scholarship amplified these textual readings. William Crooke's *The Popular Religion and Folk-lore of Northern India* (1896) treated the crocodile as the *Makara*, a hybrid marine beast and the vehicle of Lord Kamadeva and Goddess Ganga (Crooke, 1896, pp. 252–53). The *Makara's* affiliations exist not only in Hindu but also Jain beliefs; besides, it is also recorded that Portuguese chroniclers, upon first encountering Goanese coasts in the 16th century, referred to crocodiles rather benignly as the "Lizard of Water" (Krishna, 2010, pp. 91-92). The Portuguese occupation of Goa—and Baillie's suggestion that crocodiles were originally sacred to Muslims—complicates any simple sectarian account of the animal's devotional status.

But these antiquarian framings are limiting. Crocodile veneration in India is arguably braided into oral traditions and seeped in environmental, geological, and zoological memories of the deep past across the global South. While naturalists such as Leith-Adams and Murray sought palaeogeographic explanations for crocodilian distributions by postulating ancient riverine and lacustrine continuities (what may also be seen as

aquapelagic continuities), a strand of the Victorian imperial imagination more readily conceived colonial space as "a vast, uncharted and uncanny new territory to conquer with sword and pen alike," with Rudyard Kipling often exemplifying this outlook (Torri, 2013, p. 46). Kipling's own encounters with crocodiles were intensely sensory and often hostile. Writing of Jaipur Palace, he described a crocodile "that grew and grew and grew like a thing in a nightmare, and became presently an aged mugger," with "the green slime thick upon his eyelids"; its sigh he called "the most suggestive sound in animal speech," and its eyelids "horny," making proximate contact "unpleasant" (Kipling, 1895a, p. 42). Such visceral description inflected his fiction: sensory disgust and fascination combined to produce animals that were at once real presences and symbolic instruments.

In 'The Undertakers,' the crocodile's killing performs an epistemological operation. It both evokes and represses alternative memories—geological narratives associated with places such as Mugger Peer and local devotional practices—that might complicate the colonial story of supremacy over India's landlocked feral lacustrine expanses. Kipling's crocodile is depicted as "increasingly obsessed with tasting white-face flesh" even when not hungry (Rajamannar, 2012, p. 150). The colonial engineer's command—"Haul that head up the bank, and we'll boil it for the skull … The skin's too knocked about to keep" (Kipling, 1895b, p. 116)—refuses scientific preservation of the carcass and thus denies material traces that could recall the animal's deeper, uncolonised pasts. Kipling's other stories repress similar tensions between sacred invocation and imperial engineering. In "The Bridge-Builders," the Gods of Hindustan are ceremonially summoned to bless the fictional Kashi Bridge over the Ganga—a clear echo of the Dufferin or Malviya Bridge—fusing ritual language with technological modernity (Ahuja, 2004; Chatterjee, 2018, pp. 116-119). Meanwhile, in 'The Undertakers,' nominal English deference to local religious feeling does not prevent the elimination of the crocodile. The villagers remain silent while the adjunct animal figures—the adjutant and the jackal—acquiesce to the colonial act. Much criticism of Kipling frames his India as a dialectic between presumed Indian primitivism and colonial modernity, yet the crocodile's extermination equally stages a disenchanting colonial fiction; herein imperial historiography masquerading as zoology displaces geological narratives that might otherwise have told different stories about India's antiquity.

Consequently, India's crocodile fears, veneration, and the species' erasure must be read together across multiple registers—scriptural claims, oral and local memories, palaeogeographic and ecological theorising, and literary strategies that convert living beings into emblems of antiquity and authority. Whether figured as *Makara*, a saintly creature, a living fossil, or vermin, the crocodile remains a contested symbol. It was enlisted by naturalists and writers to map deep-time continuities that served scientific curiosity and imperial narratives and was simultaneously expelled from material records when it threatened those very narratives. In this conjuncture, crocodiles were both witnesses to, and instruments for, competing visions of India's past and of colonial supremacy.

Figure 7 - From Edward J. Detmold's 'Illustrations to Kipling's *The Second Jungle Book*,' featuring one of the last scenes from 'The Undertakers': 'The Lumbering Adjutant Crane; The Jackal, The Lowest of His Caste; And the Blunt-Nosed Mugger of Mugger-Ghaut.' *The Illustrated London News*, November 26, 1910, p. 823.

Epilogue

Reading Kipling's 'mugger' allegorically—whether or not to excavate traces of 1857's victims in its entrails, as it were—is not the only possible interpretation of his story. Evidently, the 'Mutiny' was not the only commemorative referent or trigger for his crocodile hunting fable. Naturally, Kipling may have been alert to the increasing rationalisation of crocodile hunts in India, especially after 1880, that led to the crude taxological virtue of identifying vulnerabilities of crocodiles, laying efficient baits for them, or catching them basking before hunts. It must be added that Indian villagers and tribes also participated in dramatised spectacles of revenge killings, comprising bulwarks and armory drawn up against crocodiles to allegorically bolster the imperial regime's prowess. Paradoxically, these hunts also underscored the crocodile's famed invulnerability and the constant colonial gaze on it. If the letter to "Master Teddy"—that epistle so undisguisedly reworded from Kiplingesque crocodile hunts of the late 19th century, including Kipling's own tale—is anything to go by,

such accounts conditioned the universe of moral and valorous values for young readers in the Empire, preparing them for life in colonial India and elsewhere.

Recent geological and paleontological findings, however, complicate such comfortable colonial narratives. It is now suggested that the oldest continental crust to have emerged from the sea, dated to about 3.2 billion years, occurs in the Singhbhum region of Jharkhand, India (Chowdhury, et al, 2021)—roughly two hundred miles from Purnea, whose crocodile-inhabited streams were noted by colonial civil servants such as Simson. Meanwhile, paleontological work on *Adalatherium* (a 66-million-year-old mammal provisionally associated with Gondwana) reports morphological affinities that invite comparison with modern crocodilians (Hoffmann, et al, 2020). Geo-paleontology also proposes that the earliest crocodilians radiated from the Australian craton of Gondwana (Hopkin, 2006) before differentiating into forms we now label Gangetic and Nilotic. Taken together, these threads suggest meaningful correlations between crocodilian history and the deep geo-heritages of the global South.

Studying such correlations is not an exercise in mysticism, nor should it be consigned to the theosophical margins that crocodile-hunting colonials—and writers like Kipling—tended to stigmatise. Obviously, popular colonial writings did not simply erase all links to India's geological origins; rather, a vermin subjecthood was not the ontological core of the colonial imagination of Indian crocodiles. As Leith-Adams and Murray inferred from Mugger Peer, crocodilian distributions could serve as evidentiary access points to palaeogeographic processes implicated in the uplift of the Himalaya and Siwaliks and in the formation of salt and riverine deposits across Punjab-Sindh and the Indo-Gangetic basin. Their hypotheses, avant-garde and imperfect, offered alternatives to the pervasive Kiplingesque jungle aesthetic already current by Kipling's birth in 1865. Kipling's own textual strategies reveal both awareness and suppression. The sacrality long attributed to Mugger Peer—an aspect repugnant to colonial hunters—was not unknown to Kipling. Thus, his narratives do not simply observe caution regarding chauvinistic imperial folklore of 1857, but also mark his reticence regarding geological narratives that colonial naturalists sought in crocodilian fossils. If the 'Mugger of Mugger Ghaut' can be read as commemorating the social and political aftermath of 1857, there is no principled barrier to also reading it as commemorating contested palaeogeographic histories and aquapelagic pasts of India and Africa, for instance. And so, the larger casualty of the Kiplingesque campaign against crocodiles was epistemic, that is the marginalisation of an aquapelagic imaginary of ancient India.

It has been argued before from within the discipline of island studies that "[t]he task of decolonisation remains unfinished, and is perhaps unfinishable," especially in realms of "competing demands of a Western-oriented 'modernity'—of fitting into the globalised world—and the desire to maintain and revitalise indigenous, non-Western traditions" (Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2016, p. 441). Extending the vision of island studies as a decolonial project that works at "a deeper ontological and epistemological level," reclaiming the crocodile archetype demands breaking with colonial trappings and postcolonial traces of colonising theories. "Theory," as has been argued by key affiliates of island studies, "can seek to tame 'knowing' into 'knowledge,' thereby restricting localised, Indigenous, marginalised, or inconvenient agencies within a scope that can be encompassed and managed by globalised academia" (Nadarajah & Grydehøj, 2024, p. 14). Far out of that scope lie the crocodiles of this article, living archives, and missing links, that point to aquapelagic origins the British imperial project could not—or would not—excavate.

While outlining a vision for island studies, almost a decade ago, Adam Grydehøj, citing Godfrey Baldacchino, echoed that islandness was "a state of tension between 'openness and closure'" (Grydehøj, 2016, p. 5; Baldacchino, 2004, p. 278). That is, islands are "more than simply microcosmic research laboratories for mainlanders or worlds-unto-themselves for islanders"; for "islandness is an intervening variable that does not determine, but contours and conditions physical and social events" (Baldacchino, 2004, p. 278). In that light, it is important *not* to see the erasure of crocodiles as a species or as vermin from India by a colonial administration as brutal acts of dispossession. For such a reading might be a re-exoticisation of indigeneity in the name of belated activism for crocodiles, which is not the intention of *this* article. Rather, taking island studies as more than a methodological and metaphorical lens, it becomes evident that the Empire's war crocodiles, framed as progress and civilisation, was a wilful defiance of evolutionary and aquapelagic insight—which is an epistemic argument, not an emotional one. Is that why the reptile that "took" Small acted "as clean as a surgeon"?

Nonetheless, more than a century after Sherlock Holmes, we have still not wholly traced the crocodile's five-continent-spanning footprints.

AI Declaration

This article made use of Artificial Intelligence-based online software, Grammarly, to proofread, shorten sentences, correct syntaxes, and most of all rectify multiclausal sentences, given the nature of quotations being used (from Victorian sources that were often challenging to parse for modern-day interpretation).

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