

# **BACKS TO THE WALL**

SAGA OF WILDLIFE IN BIHAR-INDIA

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# the wildlife of bihar

Two books written in the twenties describe the mammalian fauna of Central India as it existed some fifty years ago. Dunbar Brander wrote his well-known book—*Wild Animals in Central India*—in 1923. Captain Forsyth published in 1919 his observations on the forests, the aboriginal tribes and natural history of the territory now covered by the State of Madhya Pradesh in his book *The Highlands of Central India*. An idea of the past faunal wealth of the southern Indian States can be obtained from Sanderson's *Thirteen Years Among the Wild Beasts of India* published in 1890. Unfortunately, no such literature is available for Bihar alone to help us get a glimpse of the wild life of this State over the years. Stray references, however, confirm the belief that the State was as rich in its wild life as the neighbouring State of Madhya Pradesh.

## STATUS OF WILD LIFE IN BIHAR

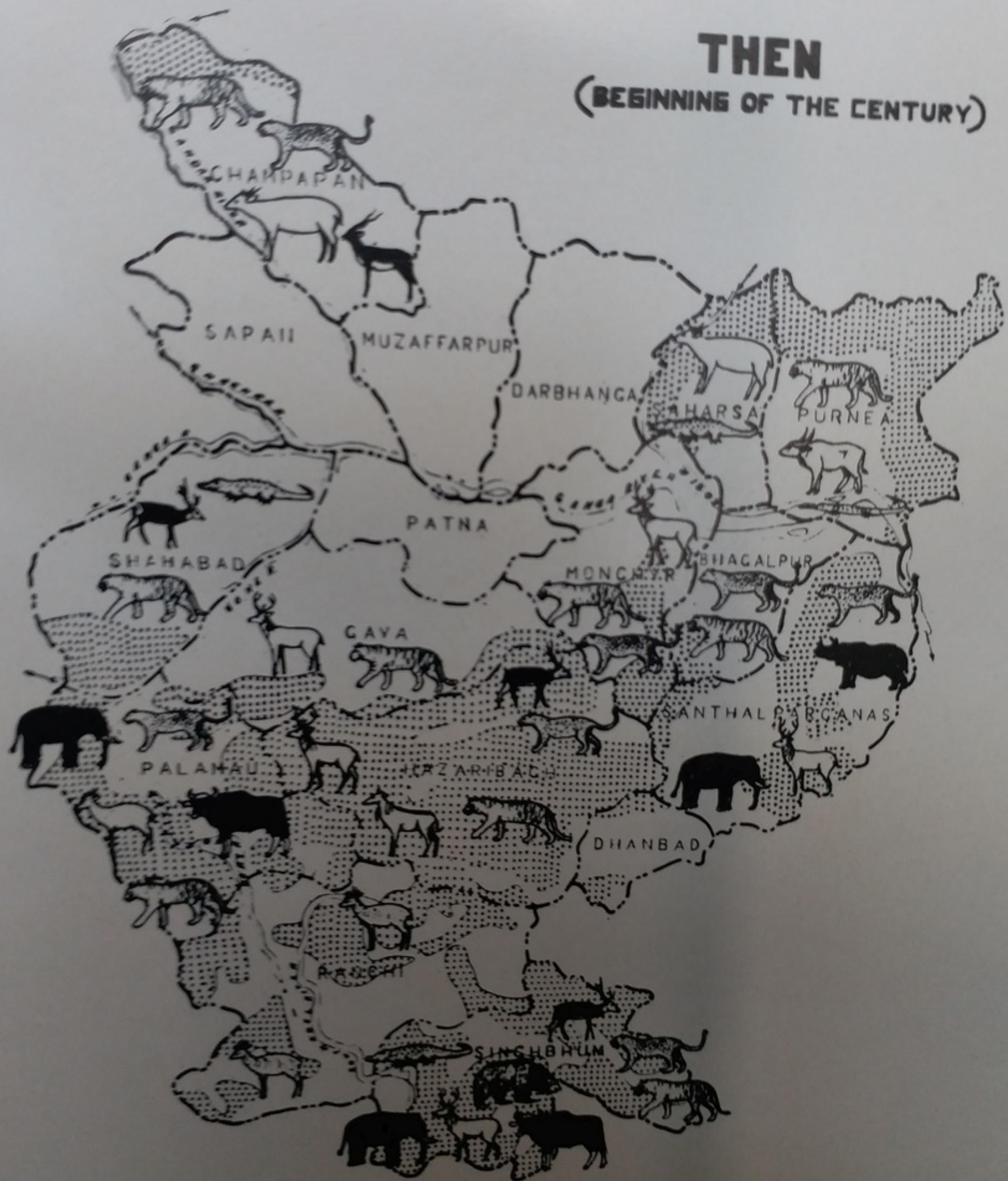


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The one-horned Rhinoceros once common in the Rajmahal Hills of the Santhal Parganas and in Purnea district, North Bihar, is now extinct. Occasionally they, however, visit Champaran forest from the adjoining Royal Chitwan National Park, Nepal.

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Haines, who published his classic work on *The Botany of Bihar and Orissa* in 1925, mentions one Walter Hamilton who described the district of Singhbhum as in a very 'savage state being composed of rugged hills, uninhabited jungles, surrounded by forests infested with wild beasts'. Hamilton found the rivers and waters 'swarming with fish, reptiles and alligators'. Speaking of the Rajmahal Hills (Santal Parganas), Haines mentions the terrible destruction of the forests which contained wild elephants and rhinoceros in a period described by him as 'comparatively recent times'. This denudation of the forests, largely for shifting cultivation, of the Rajmahal Hills was so complete and the natural habitat ruined to such an extent, that these majestic animals appear to have left these forests by the turn of the present century.

Arthur Musselwhite mentions the shooting of a white tiger in Lechuar jungle by the then Maharaja of Gidhaur. This forest is located in the Jamui sub-division of Monghyr district which I had the occasion to visit in my capacity as Divisional Forest Officer, Monghyr, some twenty-five years ago. The sal tree had vanished along with its various associates and the forests, when taken over by the Government in about 1950, consisted only of 'Euphorbea' indicative of the retrogression that had taken place over years of mismanagement. The valuable forests had been cut thus rendering the area unsuitable for the bigger mammalian fauna.

Just as the hills and plains of Rajmahal abounded with rhinoceros, so did the tracts of Purnea abound with wild buffaloes. Herds of these handsome beasts used to roam in the Katihar sub-division of Purnea district until the end of the last century. A few solitary animals survived till about 1940, but now both the rhinoceros of Rajmahal and the wild buffaloes of Purnea cannot be seen. In fact, they have left the State altogether.

The gaur (*Bos gaurus*), popularly known as 'bison,' inhabited the Simdega sub-division of Ranchi district and it is on record that an Army Officer shot one there in 1883. But it too has com-

# mir shikar toli of patna

*Taj-ul-Maasir*, the earliest Persian chronicle of mediaeval India which deals with the history of Qutubuddin Aibak and Iltutmish (1205–1225), has left us an account of the hunts organised by these two Sultans. Often *yuz*, or hunting leopards, were used to chase and hunt small game deer and the like. Falconry, too, was a favourite pastime of these two Sultans. *Chargh*, the hawk, and *shahin*, the royal white falcon, were let loose to go after the chosen quarry. Trained cranes were set upon water-birds and were assisted by efficiently trained dogs in the final assaults.

Minhaj-i-Siraj, author of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* (1259), refers to the high esteem in which those proficient in *shikar* were held by the Sultans. Under Sultana Razia, Ulugh Khan, one of the royal *khassadars*, or attendants, received State recognition and was honoured as *Amir Shikar* (chief huntsman). This is perhaps the first recorded use of the title *Amir Shikar* (later changed to *Mir Shikar*) which was conferred on noblemen and courtiers in charge of arranging the Sultan's hunts and falconry.

Amir Khusrau, the poet, musician, historian, courtier and Sufi, was a prolific writer. He wrote his *Ijaz-i-Khusrawi* ('Miracles of Khusrau') at the end of the thirteenth century which mentions the hunting sports of Ghyasuddin Balban and the two Khiljis, Jalal-ludin and Alauddin, and refers to the role of *Mir Shikars* in organising royal hunts. Of course, the language used is rhetorical but one gets very valuable information about the hunts, wild animals and birds of various types from it. Ziyauddin Barani chronicled the history of India from Balban to the first few years of the Tughlak dynasty in his *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi* . . . He mentions that when reports of the hunts and sports that Balban organised reached the ears of Halaku Khan, the grandson of Chenghiz Khan, he said, 'Balban is a shrewd ruler. He ostensibly goes to hunt but really to have his men and horses exercised so that they may not be wanting in warfare'. About Alauddin Khilji, Barani states that the Sultan went out daily to hunt with the help of his huntsmen and horses who drove the game into a *narghah* (circle). The *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi* vividly describes the hunts that Sultan Feroz Shah indulged in. Among the many animals that the Sultan hunted, the wolf was the most sought after and was ranked with the lions and tigers. The Sultan, in fact, had given instructions that only he was allowed to kill a wolf. This contrasts strangely



with the way the wolf has been treated in India in subsequent years (see Chapter 11). It is only the Wild Life (Protection) Act of 1972 which has given the wolf the recognition, and, therefore, the protection, that it deserves.

It was, however, during the Mughal period that the *Mir Shikars* received the greatest encouragement. The *Babar Namah*, the *A'in-i-Akbari* and the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries not only provide a wealth of detail regarding the characters and habits of various Mughal emperors but also give us an idea of the great wealth of flora and fauna that existed in India. The Mughals were great lovers of Nature. They loved and admired birds, beasts, flowers and fruits and considered them the richest assets of their domains. Some of Babar's descriptions of wild animals would do credit to a twentieth century zoologist. Their forefathers being nomads, the Mughals had always been very close to nature and they kept this interest and passion alive even after they had settled down in India. They loved to hunt deer and tiger, they bred cheetah and trained gaming hawks to help them in hunting. From the *Babar Namah* we learn that one of Babar's favourite pastimes was hunting rhinoceros on the Indus.

The *A'in-i-Akbari* describes in detail the animals Akbar hunted, and the pets he reared. It mentions that the Emperor personally trained cheetah or hunting leopards and that a thousand of them were maintained at his Court. Not only did he employ them while hunting blackbuck and deer but he would often appear in Court with cheetah by his side and would arrange fights between them. All this must have needed an efficiently organised machinery and those noblemen and courtiers who excelled in these were recognised as *Mir Shikars*. His son, Jahangir, even when he was Prince Salim, was a connoisseur of arts and sports and, as the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* reveals, the Prince excelled even his great grandfather, Babar, in his detailed and accurate observation of animals. He maintained a large number of them as pets and spent considerable time in observing their habits. Jahangir was indeed a naturalist to the core and the paintings of his reign portray the marvels of plants and animal life. There are a large number of animal studies belonging to Jahangir's period which depict animals in great depth unlike those of Akbar who seemed more interested in pictorial representation. Ustad Mansur, the most famous of all the painters in the atelier of Emperor Jahangir, was reputed for his intense life-like portraiture of wild animals like the mountain goat, the elephant, the zebra, the falcon and hundreds of others, and was honoured with the title of *Nadir-al-Asr*—the 'Wonder of the Age'. Such was the recognition accorded by the Emperor to a man who loved, studied and painted animals.

The *Mir Shikars*, who served the Mughals in the procurement, training and maintenance of animals and birds and organised hunts, flourished as a great institution and quite a few settlements of *Mir Shikars* survive up to this day in Lucknow, Allahabad, Banaras and Patna. In Patna, a *Mir Shikar Toli* was established towards the end of Mughal rule. With the fall of the Muslim





empire and the loss of state patronage, the *Mir Shikars*, whose number must have been substantial in the hey-day of the Akbar-Jahangir period and who, over the years, had become respected men in their own profession, have readjusted their life style to the changed conditions. They have commercialised their knowledge of animals and birds to eke out an existence by trapping and selling water fowls and other animals.

Few people know about the existence of the *Mir Shikar Toli* at Patna. It is situated about eleven kilometres from Patna Railway Junction, near the famous Pathar-ki-Masjid, and is well worth a visit. Approximately fifty families have stayed on in this business at Patna. However, most of them are poor hawkers who move about from town to town selling parrots, mynas, quails, etc. Only three families have made good and are flourishing in the export and wholesale trade in animals and birds.

An important activity of the three prosperous *Mir Shikars* is to supply rare animals to the zoos of the country, either on a cash or on an exchange basis. Each has a folder for the different zoos, containing numerous enquiries about the birds and animals needed by them. I have visited this *Toli* a number of times of late and although the *Mir Shikars* are reluctant to give definite figures, some sixty to eight, cubs of sloth bears and thirty hyena cubs are either exported or supplied to the various zoos yearly. I was told that most of the bear cubs are obtained from the forest areas of Ranchi and Singhbhum with Chakradharpur as the collecting centre.

One often comes across some uncommon animal at the *Shikar Toli*. The Binturong (Bearcat), which is found only in Assam in this country, leads such a secretive nocturnal life spending the day curled up in a hole in a tree, that it is rarely seen. I saw a pair once in the *Toli*. Three to four Binturongs are received at the *Toli* from their agents in Assam, and are supplied to Indian Zoos. Another animal I was over-joyed to see was the Golden Langur. This exquisite, rare, cream-coloured langur—which was once described by a sportsman, as quoted by E. P. Gee, as follows: 'The whole body and tail is one colour—a light silvery gold, somewhat like the hair of a blonde'—occurs in certain parts of Assam and Bhutan only, between the Sankosh and Manas rivers along the Bhutan border. Their number was estimated by Gee to be about 550 in 1964. Some twenty Golden Langurs, mostly a year old are, I understand, brought to this *Toli* every year and sold to zoos. However, Golden Langurs are difficult animals to rear and, as one of the *Mir Shikars* told me, hardly two or three out of the twenty or so captured survive. It is unfortunate that our forests are being depleted of this rare monkey.

Leopard cats are another great attraction. Some thirty or so are exchanged with zoos yearly. The leopard cat, the size of a domestic cat, resembles a miniature panther. Although its distribution in the country is very wide and they can be found from Kashmir to Kanya Kumari, it is also very rarely seen because of its nocturnal habits. It hides in the hollows of trees in the day just like the Binturong. The *Mir Shikars* are able to procure even these creatures and I have always seen a pair or two of them huddled



up in small cages whenever I have visited the *Toli*.

On one of my visits to the *Toli*, I saw a *gharial* in a small bath-tub. When I went there the next day to photograph him, he was no longer there nor could I find out whether the animal had died or had been surreptitiously sold.

Water birds like pelicans (Rosy Pelican and Dalmatian Pelican), Demoiselle Cranes, and other water-fowls like the Bar-headed Goose, Muscovy, Grey-lag Goose and the Pochard are netted all over Bihar in such places as Barh, Begusarai, Purnea, Bettiah and Bhagalpur, and brought to this *Toli*. The Dalmatian Pelican (*Pelecanus crispus*), with its naked eye-rim and conspicuously silvery grey colour, nests in several parts of South-east Europe, Asia Minor, Persia and across Central Asia as far as Mongolia and migrates to Monghyr, Bhagalpur and Purnea in winter. I was told it sells for Rs. 500 a pair.

Birds also come to this wholesale market from far off places in the country. In my presence, a crate of Blue-winged parakeets had arrived from distant Alway in Kerala. These rare handsome parakeets, rare because of their blue wings, sell for something like a hundred rupees a pair. Once I saw the Sulphur-crested White Cockatoo. This bird is reputed to live up to 100 years. One in Gloucestershire reached the age of 120 years and another in Sydney was 119 years old when it died. It is a rare and beautiful bird and the price demanded for it was four thousand rupees only.

With the improvement in methods of transporting live animals by air in recent decades, the export of a number of Indian birds has become popular. The *Mir Shikars*, with their network of agents and sub-agents, now procure these birds and export them in large numbers to several foreign countries, including Britain, through such exporting firms as M/s Dey & Dutta, Calcutta, M/s Sachetan, Bombay, M/s India Zoologicals, Delhi, M/s B. D. Ram & Co., Meerut and a host of others. These export dealers have their counterparts in Japan, London, U.S.A., Frankfurt and the Arab countries.

The birds most in demand abroad are the parakeet, the shama, the thrush, the stork, the pelican, finches, munias, buntings and budgerigars. A network of trappers spread throughout Bihar, Orissa, and Nepal keep the *Mir Shikars* supplied.

In 1972-73, out of some twelve crores worth of animals and animal products exported out of India (not including the hides of domestic cattle), eighty lakhs came from the export of birds. The shares of the *Mir Shikars* of Patna, according to them, was some ten lakhs. Besides export, animals and birds worth a few lakhs are also traded from the Patna *Mir Shikar Toli* within the country every year.