

April 2010



## A HISTORY OF HUNTING IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

Until barely a century ago, the forests of India echoed with the sound of guns that were set off in pursuit of animals and birds of various proportions, as part of that favoured pastime of the subcontinent's elite-hunting. These rulers (be they colonial or otherwise) were only participating in a tradition that has long been a part of the history of the subcontinent.

This history stretches far back to a time when the concept of time itself remained unmeasured and unknown. Historians have recorded the existence of societies that existed before the Dravidians that subsisted on hunting and gathering food. The Kodas in South India as well as the Baigas and Gonds of the Central Indian plains are said to be the descendants of these early inhabitants of the subcontinent. Cave paintings found in the forests of Mudumalai (in Southern India) as well as in Bhimbhetka (in Central India) depict scenes from a hunt where men put down their quarry with primitive tools such as spears, bows and arrows. Agriculture as a way of life had still not surfaced and hence, it was by hunting and foraging that these people survived. Societies such as the Indus Valley Civilization, which flourished in the North Western regions of India between 3300-1300 BC were pastoral in nature but animals continued to be hunted for their meat. Archaeological digs have unearthed bones, clay tablets and seals, which confirm the presence wild animals such as the barasingha, one-horned rhino and tiger -many of which satiated man's appetite. In fact, the barasingha is said to have become locally extinct in this region due to loss of habitat to agriculture as well as hunting. Hunting for sport became popular with the arrival of the Aryans around 1500 BC. Their fondness for outdoor activities manifested in hunting game, which was a source of food and entertainment. In the early Vedic period, the practice of eating meat was not uncommon and so, animals such as deer were hunted regularly. Likewise, accounts of hunting abound in works of literature such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata. For example, while on a royal hunt, King Dashrat mistakenly aimed at a boy Shraavan, thus earning himself the blight of dying without his son by his side; whereas in the Mahabharata, King Pandu slew a stag in courtship and was cursed with the same fate.

Many a time, hunting acquired sanction through religion. Animal sacrifice being a prevalent custom of the period, several animals met their end at the sacrificial altars of the Aryans. The blackbuck and the sambhar, which were revered animals of that age were offered as sacrifice to the gods. Rituals such as the Ashwamedha Yagya (Horse sacrifice) also demanded the killing of not just horses but 17 other animals, which included feral and wild species. With the stratification of the caste system, hunting became the prerogative of royalty and the occupation of the lower classes. Brahmins and other classes were forbidden to hunt and consume flesh. Later religious texts such as the 'Manu Smriti' would hold the view that hunting for sport denigrated the character and personality of the individual but allowed the consumption of meat that had been purified with holy water. Conversely, other works such as Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita- treatises on medicine, endorse the consumption of the flesh of various animals for the express purpose of remaining healthy.

---

LAST WILDERNESS MEDIA PVT LTD

251 Kewal Industrial Estate  
S B Marg, Lower Parel  
Mumbai 400013

+91 22 24990044  
contactus@thelastwilderness.org  
www.thelastwilderness.org

---



It was during the rule of the Mauryans (321-185 BC) that conservation of forests and use of forest products came to be regulated officially. Kautilya's 'Arthashastra', which was written during this period, waxed eloquent on the duties of the 'Protector of Forests' who was in charge of forest conservation. Forests were protected to ensure the supply of timber and also shelter the creatures within. Because of their value on the battlefield, elephants were offered utmost protection with the death penalty being awarded to those that dared cause them harm. However, viable populations of other wild creatures such as the lion and tiger were to be maintained to provide a supply of skins to the emperor, which were used for ornamental and religious purposes. Also, on rare occasions the flesh of these animals was consumed but the only person accorded this 'privilege' was the emperor himself.

Conservation would be taken a couple of notches higher during the Mauryan period. Following Emperor Ashoka's bloody battle at Kalinga, between 265-264 BC, he embraced Buddhism and thus the forests and the creatures within were proffered protection. Relinquishing the royal hunt was only a small part of his orders, which are preserved for posterity in the form of the 'Fifth Edict' at the pillar at Delhi-Topara. By this, he granted protection to a number of birds and animals "that were neither useful nor edible"; while he did not ban the practice of eating meat, he forbade hunting and poaching as well as animal sacrifice. With the fall of the Mauryan Empire India suffered the onslaught of a series of foreign invasions. This, coupled with the decline of the influence of Buddhism saw the resurgence of hunting by kings and commoners alike.

Hunting acquired the element of pageantry as well as the precision and planning of war during the Mughal era between the 1700-mid 1900 AD. Mughals brought these Persian pastimes to India. Royal hunts were either organized at the royal game preserve or in open forests. Either way, the distance covered would run into hundreds of miles making it imperative for the hunting party to remain outdoors for months at a stretch. This coterie included courtiers and noblemen, the king's harems, hundreds of horses and elephants, legions of soldiers as well as common peasants who would aid in the hunt. 400,000 soldiers are said to have accompanied Akbar on one of his expeditions. Huge tents, which had the comforts of the palace itself, were erected at the site of the hunt. Spectacles of cock-fighting, duels among rams, buffaloes and pigeons were arranged to regale his royal highness, should he have gotten bored after the hunt. Sometimes, permanent hunting lodges were built-one of them still stands at the town of Sheikhpura (in present day Pakistan). Although expeditions were organized all over, hunting was banned at certain places such as royal preserves and Jain shrines. Both men and women participated in the hunts. In his memoirs, Emperor Jahangir has waxed eloquent about the Empress Nur Jahan's prowess with the gun.

The royal hunt was a way to exert dominion over nature. Therefore, cheetahs and lynx were tamed and sent after antelopes while smaller game such as partridge, fowl, hare and other creatures were pinned down as part of the 'art' of falconry. In the former, cheetahs were either trapped in the wild or bred at the emperor's palaces and then trained to hunt. The lithe animals were hooded until they were within adequate distance of the king's quarry, after which they were unmasked and set after their prey. As soon the hapless game was brought down, the king or his attendants would slay the creature. As a reward, the cheetah would be treated to a part of the animal's hindquarters. Another technique, called the 'Mewari' method, required that the animals be released

---

LAST WILDERNESS MEDIA PVT LTD

251 Kewal Industrial Estate  
S B Marg, Lower Parel  
Mumbai 400013

+91 22 24990044  
contactus@thelastwilderness.org  
www.thelastwilderness.org

---



early so that they may stalk their prey, as they would normally do in the wild. However, this needed time, patience and a complete lack of interference and hence was not preferred

Falconry was especially popular during this period, with Emperor Akbar being an ardent proponent. While the eagle's courage and strength were appreciated, fortunately or unfortunately for the falcon, its speed and agility won it favour. Most beloved among the latter were 'goshawks' and 'sakers'. Usually, one or two of these birds would be taken to the hunting grounds. The king and his attendants would stalk the quarry for a while. At a carefully calculated moment, the falconer would release the birds from their hooded perch to chase the quarry. They would then attack the head or nape of the quarry and injure it after which, a 'shikari' would administer the final deathblow to the animal. Many a time, falcons would hunt in tandem with cheetahs and dogs. The use of decoys to distract and hunt antelope as well as waterfowl was also popular. Other animals that were killed included nilgai, gazelle rhinos, leopards, lions and tigers as well as birds such as francolins, cranes, bustards, ibises etc. While the lion occupied pride of place on the Mughal standard, the tiger, which inspired awe and fear in man, was an object to be overcome by way of the royal hunt. The Mughal penchant for fine dining was also part of the inspiration behind the royal hunt. The typical menu included at least 30-40 dishes with a wide range of meats, many which came from wild, exotic creatures that roamed the hunting grounds of the Indian subcontinent.

The Mughals hunted both in open ground as well as in closed, walled hunting preserves. However, peasants and commoners were allowed to hunt small animals and birds for meat even in royal hunting grounds with reasonable restrictions. Their weapons included guns such as the Khasban, Khursan, matchlocks, pistols and muskets as well as primitive tools such as the bow and arrow, spears, daggers and swords. The hunt was masterminded by a group of local hunters called 'shikharis', which was headed by a 'mir shikaran' or the head shikari. They tracked the animal on foot with help of a large retinue of beaters, while the king and other noblemen rode on horse or elephant back. When found, the animal would be forced out of its cover by 'beaters' with drums, sticks and lathis. When the animal was cornered, the king and some of his noblemen would shoot the animal. More often than not, royalty accorded the king the privilege of firing the first bullet. The killing fields of the Mughals weren't restricted to land alone- in marshes, lakes and rivers barges, bridges and boats were used to carry out hunting, fishing and fowling with the help of decoys, nets and guns.

However, little could override the Mughal ambition for power and prestige and political conquest was at the heart of every hunt. It was considered a sign of political goodwill for lieges and princelings to be invited to hunt with the emperor. The culling of dangerous game such as lions and tigers was testament to the attributes of daring and courage, which were sought by kings and noblemen alike. According to historians, the hunt in itself was a precursor as well as an imitation of the act of war, where stronger parties subjugated the weak to maintain their superiority over the latter. It made men proficient in the art of stalking while ensuring that they remained fit. Keeping with the guileful ways of regency, hunting was a way to mask invasions upon unsuspecting kingdoms. Thus the techniques employed demanded levels of precision, planning and discipline akin to those used in the army. The 'qamargarh' or crescent shaped formation or the 'nihilam' and 'tashqawal', which were ring-shaped, fenced hunts were commonly employed

---

LAST WILDERNESS MEDIA PVT LTD

251 Kewal Industrial Estate  
S B Marg, Lower Parel  
Mumbai 400013

+91 22 24990044  
contactus@thelastwilderness.org  
www.thelastwilderness.org

---



techniques. The game would be driven into these fenced portions which were lined with fluttering strips of cloth that frightened the animals into remaining within the enclosure, after which the slaying would begin. Both, the king's army as well the local population of the region was involved in the hunt. While at a hunt at Lahore, Emperor Akbar engaged every member of the local populace into the royal beat. This enabled him to regulate and keep a watch on their daily affairs. Hunting gained its merit from the fact that citizens felt protected with the extermination of dangerous, wild beasts. The Rajput kings, many of whom were the vassals of the Mughal emperors, also took to hunting with great zeal, regarding it as a ritual of immense importance. Paintings and manuscripts record instances of them hunting wild boar in spring; it was believed that bagging the creature ensured a plentiful harvest.

On an average day, the hunting party would kill a couple of tigers, some elephants and rhinos, large numbers of antelope, deer, jackals and birds. But given the frequency of their hunts, this resulted in the decimation of huge tracts of forest and wildlife from the Indian subcontinent. Between AD 1580-1616, Jahangir was witness to the slaughter of about 23,532 animals of which he killed 17,000. Thus the Great Indian one-horned rhinoceros began to lose its foothold in the Indus river valley while the Asiatic lion would soon cease its stalking in the Deccan plateau. Hereafter, the arrival of the colonial powers as well as the consolidation of the British Empire in India provided a tremendous impetus to hunting, lending the sport unparalleled dimensions.

When the East India Company first arrived in India, they made it their mission to control the Indian subcontinent but first they would have to bring the region's vast forests under control. There was one problem- to the "disciplined" European mind, India's forests were dark and dangerous places that sheltered creatures of most hideous and dangerous manifestations. From lions and tigers to snakes as well as the ubiquitous mosquito, these creatures of the wild were the bane of the Europeans and of civilization itself and so they would have to be done away with. Also, the British had money on their minds. Clearing these forests made land available to grow vast plantations of tea, coffee and opium that were loaded onto vessels made from sal and teak trees, which were hacked to carry shipments of native fabric and spices the world over, thus filling the crown's coffers. So, they set about the systematic destruction of India's forests and thus large swathes of forests in the Sundarbans, Nilgiris and the Central Indian plains would forever be consigned to history. The European propensity toward hunting ensured game-seekers of fine quarry with which to satiate their thirst for blood. Skilled as they were as hunters, they also employed the expertise of local tribesman as they set about the task of clearing India's forests of her fauna and flora. Huge rewards were announced for the culling of animals, which enticed a great many people to take to the sport.

The British too regarded hunting as a show of masculinity, which was supposed to reflect virtues such as patience, skill and ethics! When hunting, strict rules were to be adhered to. The hunter was supposed to be discipline's minion and expected to lead a healthy, active life while avoiding vices such as overindulgence in food and alcohol. The sport was expected to be undertaken in the spirit of fair play. Thus a number of rules and regulations regarding hunting from a vehicle, the use of dynamite and torches etc. were debated and discussed. Meanwhile the British cloaked hunting in the guise of the

---

LAST WILDERNESS MEDIA PVT LTD

251 Kewal Industrial Estate  
S B Marg, Lower Parel  
Mumbai 400013

+91 22 24990044  
contactus@thelastwilderness.org  
www.thelastwilderness.org

---



Empire's 'benevolence' and sought justification in hunting animals that destroyed crops, cattle and people. What they did not realise or care to, was that the destruction of these forests resulted in animals losing their habitat, thus forcing them to stray into human settlements. Those animals that had the misfortune of being the target of unskilled hunters who couldn't kill them sustained injuries that forced them to seek easy prey such as domestic animals and man. Meanwhile, the trigger-happy hunters basked in the fallacy of their roles as saviours of the natives.

As time passed the forests of India became the playgrounds of men of money and rank-soldiers, members of the Indian civil services and the aristocracy were expected to participate in shikar, while the rest were simply excluded. To ensure this, access to forests was made difficult. Befitting their noble stature and intentions, it was only fitting that they spent a vast amount of time in stalking and hunting that "lawless beast"-the Royal Bengal Tiger. The reasons for killing the tiger were many- it was regarded a "scourge" that preyed on man and beast and the subcontinent was expected to be obliged to her conquerors for their efforts in eradicating this creature. The two most favoured methods of hunting a tiger were either on a beat or "buttue"(as the French called it) or by using bait. In the first method, a trained tracker called a 'shikari', would comb the jungles for any sign of the animal. Once the animal was found, the hunter would head to the forest on elephant or horseback. The hunting party that consisted of beaters and troopers would set out on foot. With the help of drums, firecrackers and loud clanging noises, they would send the game scurrying in the direction of the hunters. When the tiger was well within range of the hunter's gun, it was quickly dispatched. Many hunters speak delightedly of the joy of seeing the confused animal as they sat perched on their elephants. In the second method, a calf or a goat was often tied to a spot, which was known to be frequented by tigers while a shikari kept watch. A 'machan' or a wooden platform was constructed in the trunk of a nearby tree, which was the hunter's perch. After sundown, the hunter kept watch from the machan and should the tiger have acquired a taste for the meat of domestic cattle, its death was almost certain. Sometimes, the hunter arrived until after a kill was made and would shoot as the tiger fed on the carcass. The quarry was then measured and skinned or stuffed. Many a time, the flesh was given to local villagers and tribesman as a token for their effort in the hunt.

Tigers were also tracked on foot but only skilled, accomplished hunters resorted to this method. In North India, the beat was the method that was used whereas hunters in the southern regions preferred to track it on foot. This method was also employed to kill other elusive carnivores like leopards, and cheetahs. Lions were also favoured as game because they lacked the elusiveness that characterizes the feline species and were thus, easier to find and kill. Meanwhile, guns continued to be trained on most wild animals and birds. Blackbuck, nilgai, leopards, lions, deer, barasingha, wild buffaloes, elephants, sloth bears etc. were all hunted –some as trophies while others for meat. Another popular sport was pig-sticking, wherein men on horseback would employ the beat and spear wild boars that emerged from the forest cover.

Hunting was symbolic of the crown's dominion over nature and man. When a hunt was to be organized, the administration of the district went into a tizzy. Trackers were sent into forests to ensure the abundance of game-the higher the rank of the official, the

---

LAST WILDERNESS MEDIA PVT LTD

251 Kewal Industrial Estate  
S B Marg, Lower Parel  
Mumbai 400013

+91 22 24990044  
contactus@thelastwilderness.org  
www.thelastwilderness.org



greater were the demands to be met. It was a matter of prestige for a district to be able to produce fine quarry. On the one hand, the razing of forests and the killing of animals was an extension of the British penchant for order and discipline in place of all that was unruly and wild. On the other hand, it was a front to keep a check on the administration of the provinces. The beat consisted primarily of locals that would track the animal and deliver it to the hunter. Etiquette demanded that the region's local officers be invited on the hunt thus giving the administration a chance to observe and study the region's terrain and topography while aiding the development of the field of natural history. In fact, most naturalists and hunters were keen marksmen who regularly took to the hunting and study of their quarry.

This destruction was exacerbated during the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the British more or less controlled the domain of hunting. Following the various uprisings, the peasants and villagers were denied the possession or use of certain implements and weapons; consequently they couldn't hunt. With the passing of the Indian Forest Act (1878), forests were classified as 'Reserved', 'Protected' and 'Village.' Hunting was banned in most parts except for certain designated shooting blocks, which were accessible with the acquisition of a license that was made available to very few people, most of whom were British. In order to hunt, requisite permits would have to be obtained from the Divisional Forest Officer of the region who would assign shooting blocks to the applicants. A forest guard would have to accompany the party to ensure that no rules were flouted. This complex set of rules and regulations, coupled with the invention of new weapons enabled the colonialists to continue their rampages.

However, hunting was not just the prerogative of India's colonial masters-it was a much abused privilege of the princes and maharajas of India's provinces. They hunted frequently and did so in pomp and splendour. Like their colonial counterparts, they hunted all manner of game and measured skill by numbers. The Maharaja of Sarguja, (situated in modern-day Madhya Pradesh), is believed to have killed atleast a 1000 tigers. In fact, most of modern India's protected areas were the hunting grounds of Maharajas that continued to thrive until the 1970s. One of India's best birding grounds at Keoladeo Ghana National Park, Bharatpur, was a game reserve for waterfowl, which was inspired by the creation of duck-shooting reserves in England. Most Hindus desisted from slaying elephants due to their association with the elephant-headed god-Ganesha, but not certain section of royalty whose palaces housed various articles made of ivory as well as umbrella stands made of the stumps of elephant legs. They carried on the legacy of hunting with cheetahs as well as the sport of falconry-pastimes that the British didn't take to. Special hunts were organized by them that they might curry favour with the imperial masters such as governors, viceroys and even the king and queen of the empire. On a hunt in Bikaner, Viceroy Irwin was reputed to have killed 10000 Imperial sandgrouse, whereas in Nepal, a hunt organized in the King George's honour resulted in the culling of 39 tigers, 12 rhinos and four bears.

Having gained approval from the highest echelons of society and the government, hunting went on unabashed until the realization that too much was being destroyed forced some people into action. Game reserves began to operate according to strict rules; previously where shooting of animals and their young was encouraged with hefty bounties, the practice was now banned. Initially, this practice was just to ensure that a

---

LAST WILDERNESS MEDIA PVT LTD

251 Kewal Industrial Estate  
S B Marg, Lower Parel  
Mumbai 400013

+91 22 24990044  
contactus@thelastwilderness.org  
www.thelastwilderness.org

---



steady amount of game remained but it grew into a conservation movement, which was supported by hunter –turned-conservationists such as Jim Corbett, A.A. Dunbar Brander, Kenneth Anderson and the likes. The only animals they shot were those that were declared man-eaters.

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the causes of both conservation and hunting were trumpeted. Laws such as the Wild Birds and Animals Protection Act, 1912, Bengal Rhino Preservation Act, 1932 etc began to be promulgated. In 1936, India's first national park, Hailey National Park (now known as Jim Corbett National Park) was set up. However, when India gained independence in 1947, the tables were turned against wildlife. As India tried to break free from the shackles of feudalism and slavery, people of all classes took to hunting to rebel against their former oppressors. Apart from this, land was to be cleared to grow enough food to feed the entire country. Hence, farmers were freely issued licenses to shoot animals that strayed onto their land. Apart from this the maharajas continued to retain their hunting rights and thus, animals continued to be slaughtered. However, by the 1960s, people began to realise that the number of India's animals had taken a serious toll. While tiger numbers were down to a little over 1000, the population of wild buffaloes and rhinos was restricted to few areas in the North-East. Nilgai and blackbuck, which were found in plenty in forests and plains, were hardly seen. This caused a flurry among conservationists and the government alike and resulted in the passage of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. But by this time the Indian cheetah, the lesser one-horned rhinoceros and the pink-headed duck were declared extinct in India. Following the apparent success of Project Tiger (which began in 1972), the government initiated conservation measures for animals such as the elephant, the gharial(fish-eating alligator) and the hangul(Kashmir stag) while listing the chiru(Tibetan antelope) and musk deer as 'protected'. Efforts have been made to save the Great Indian Bustard, a game bird hunted for sport and food since the time of the Mughals but the birds continue to teeter on their last legs.

Thus, this sustained massacre that began as a quest for food, took on the connotations of a sport that forever changed the course of Indian wildlife. There continue to be proponents of hunting who demand the implementation of game reserves that will emulate those that exist in Africa. They support their stance by insisting that this will not only provide livelihood for people living around these reserves but will also result in stricter enforcement of laws. Their belief is that professional hunters will impose a far lesser strain on the reserves than would the average tourist. Money paid for licenses and other expenses will be directed towards conservation.

However, while debates rage over the possibility of this form of sustainable slaughter, a band of men and women stealthily drain the life out of India's forests. Paid by and acting under the orders of kingpins in the wildlife trade, these poachers mostly belong to nomadic tribes, the most notorious of which is the Bawariya community and its various offshoots which include Moghiyas, Pardhis, Baheliyas and others who live and operate in different regions of India. Wracked by poverty and with no access to health or education, this landless lot (whose ancestors were hunters by tradition) is now forced to turn to poaching for it is the only skill that they possess. They claim harassment by the Forest Department, whose beleaguered personnel insist that they are only doing their duty by taking action against them. Deplorable as it is, this game of tug'o'war plays on but the ones that stand to lose out the most are those voiceless inhabitants of the Indian

---

LAST WILDERNESS MEDIA PVT LTD

251 Kewal Industrial Estate  
S B Marg, Lower Parel  
Mumbai 400013

+91 22 24990044  
contactus@thelastwilderness.org  
www.thelastwilderness.org

wild.



References:

- *Rangarajan, Mahesh: India's Wildlife History, Permanent Black, 2001, pp.135*
- *Pye-Smith, Charlie: In search of Wild India, South Asia Books, 1993, pp. 192*
- *T. Allsen, Thomas: The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History, University of Pennsylvania, 2006, pp. 416*

---

LAST WILDERNESS MEDIA PVT LTD

251 Kewal Industrial Estate  
S B Marg, Lower Parel  
Mumbai 400013

+91 22 24990044  
contactus@thelastwilderness.org  
www.thelastwilderness.org