



HISTORY OF WILDLIFE HUNTING PRACTICES IN INDIA

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Abstract

In ancient times, hunting of wildlife were the privilege for elite and royal minority. Meanwhile, they were seem to be the icon of masculine powers. This paper attempted to study such a ancient practice among the Mughal emperors, as there were only few literatures available on the hunting practices of Mughal emperor. In addition this, it tried to compare the similarities and differences in hunting practices of British and Indian rulers by framing a base-line of hunting practices. The present paper interprets the wildlife hunting practices of Mughal emperor and interprets the similarities and differences of hunting practices between Mughal and British.

Keywords: *Hunting, Elite sport, Mughal emperor, Hunting etiquettes, Hunting style of Indian rulers*

INTRODUCTION

Hunting practices of India has three important phases; which were, before the British arrival (1800), the British encounter with hunting in the 18th century and the emergence of Anglo-Indian hunting tradition. British were impressed by the freedom of hunting in India and developed a sense of hunting etiquette along with the distinct hunting tradition of Indian rulers. This leads to the consideration of hunting as an elite sport; at the same time it became as a source of social conflict. Hunting in India can be traced back to Vedic age which was during 1500 to 1000 B.C., Rig veda and even in Mahabharatha, there were few lines which describes about their hunting practices¹. Hunting is often regarded as the perfect marksmanship which builds a masculine & perceptive man and made the warrior ready for a battle.

Statement of the problem & Objectives of the study

As there was only few literatures which describes the tribal hunting practices before the Mughal period, this paper attempted to explore the hunting practices of Mughal empire. To serve this purpose, the present study was conducted to fulfill these objectives;

1. To provide a base line to compare hunting practices in India before and after the British arrival
2. To identify the similarities and differences between hunting practices in Britain and India

METHODOLOGY

¹Narayan, R.K., ed. Mahabarata: A shortened Modern Prose Version of the Great Indian Epic, Viking Press, New York 1978, P.13

The present paper is descriptive in nature, since it attempts to explore the hunting practices in Mughal empire. Further, the current study tried to provide a base line to compare the hunting practices in India before and after the British arrival; in order to identify the similarities that exist in British and Indian hunting practices.

FINDINGS

Hunting practices of Mughal empire

In the Mauryan Empire (unified India), Mughal empire was the first empire from 1526 to 1858, with the establishment of British crown rule. According to British conceptions, Mughal rulers portrayed themselves as “despotic” oriental kings who lacks restraints in killing hundreds in hunting game; as this game embarks their masculine powers and greatness. Mughal emperors were Turkic Muslim rulers and they were avid hunters. After a battle, during their resting period; they from ‘hunting circles’ (man-made enclosure formed by men standing in a circle). In addition to this, it was seen that the Mughal emperors and British write down their games in the lands which was recently conquered by them. Bernard Cohn (1996) mentioned that, this type of surveying by Mughal emperor and British, helps to demonstrate their power over the new conquered land².

Babur, who has the name of ‘*Baburnama*’ in his memoirs recorded different types of games in India encountered by him from 1526-1530³. Mughals named the animals with Turki names and a common Indian name, similar to British’s nomenclature of species. Babur discuss the sacredness of the species with the religious nature. The first Mughal emperor of India, Babur was originally from Central Asia⁴. Babur mentioned that “there are many foxes of fine colour” which he would “ride hunting every two or three days” and fly his hawks after the peasants⁵. He also killed several deer during a single hunting trip⁶; during his trbales and his military expeditions like he hunted goats and wild sheep on the hills while wanting to visit Jahangir Mirza (Ibid, 296)⁷.

In hunting, the Mughals followed a typical hunting style of forming a “hunting circle” to kill the beast by shooting them with bows and arrows and simultaneously using the swords. Similarly, easy bows or stiff bows were used to shoot deer. In present-day Afghanistan, which was earlier known as Kattawaz, Babur mentioned that deer and donkeys were quite fat in 1508⁸. Mughals felt pleasure in killing of a fat beast as it embarks their manliness over the game of Afghanistan. Like British, Mughals were very much involved in hunting of wild animals. Humayan, the son of Babur, second Mughal emperor, reported that shooting, “his

² Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996, P. 3.

³ Babur Emperor, *Babur-Nama in English*, trans. Annette Susannah Beveridge, Stephen Austin and Sons Ltd., London, 1969, Pp. 488-493.

⁴ John Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, P:9.

⁵ Babur, *Babur-Nama*, P. 114.

⁶ Ibid, P. 492

⁷ Ibid, P. 296

⁸ Ibid, P. 325

arrow, which struck the animal behind the ear, and it fell struggling on the ground; at which all the Persians were astonished” on a hunting enclosure near Persepolis⁹. Later, Mughal emperors used swords more than bows and arrows as they were seem to be standard hunting gear. Meanwhile, hunting is regarded as form of diplomacy between two kingdon’s princes as similar to British and maharajas and the Humayun and Prince Bahram of Persian Empire¹⁰.

In addition to this, it can be observed that Akbar had enormous hunting enclosurein which Jahangir’s *Memoirs* state included 11, 000 antelope and 12,000 *nilghais*, rams, rhinoceroses, and ostriches¹¹. During the ruling period of Akbar (1556-1605), guns were introduced and used for hunting expeditions. Jahangir wrote that Akbar enjoyed hunting and named his fowling-piece as ‘Jennauzah’. While, Akbar wrote a poem for his fowling piece, “In the pleasures of the chase with thee, my soul breathes fresh and clear (*Tawzah*), But who receives thy fatal mission, sinks lifeless on the bier (*Jennauzah*).”¹² Before the establishment of British rule i.e. pre-colonial period, hunting was the privilege of elite and royal minority from Babur to Aurangzeb. This can be understood by the Mughal carpet from Lahore which was woven during Akbar’s reign. This carpet portrays the bravery of the Mughal hunter on his chariot¹³. Rather than Shikaris, Mughals used hunting cheetahs for their hunting expeditions.

Enclosed hunting grounds called, ‘Qamarga’ where built for corporal punishment for prisoners. For instance, in Qamarga, Akbar kept the prisoner to be trampled by the elephants as a punishment for his crime. British followed the Mughal policy of paying men those who assisted in the hunting activities¹⁴. Akbar gifted Jahangir with the gun, named Droostandanz (never misses). With that gun, Jahangir killed twenty antelopes in a single day and mentioned that, “after attaining to the age of fifty, I would never more make use of a fowling piece.”¹⁵ Later one day, he went into unconscious state because of the death of an animal which made an impression on him. Thus, he promised to himself that he wouldn’t use fowling pieces to shoot game. Meanwhile, Jahangir’s son Khusrau weared a skin of black coloured ass and took a tour on the town of Lahore. As mans power portrays their strength, Mughal’s highly prized the use of masculine powers in hunting activities.

While, Shah Jahan during his expeditions, hunted in Palam near Delhi and shot forty blackbucks in four days and “ all of which he brought down at the first shot.”¹⁶. The Royal Librarian accounts how Shah Jahan killed “two lions, 20 nilghaus, and 60 deer” in eight days

⁹ Ibid, P. 67

¹⁰ Ibid, P. 66.

¹¹ Jahangir Emperor, *Memoirs of the Emperor Jahangueir*, trans. Major David Price, J. Murray, London, 1829, P. 46.

¹² Ibid, P. 47.

¹³ *Indian Mughal Hunting Carpet. 1595.* Lahore, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

¹⁴ Emperor Jahangir, *Tuzuk-i-Janagiri –Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, P. 83. August 17, 1608.

¹⁵ Ibid, P. 60.

¹⁶ Inayat Khan, *The Shah Jahan Nama*, ed. Z. A. Desai and W. E. Begley, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1990, p.122.

at Bari, which was the location of his hunting retreat in Rajasthan¹⁷. Shah Jahan often left his military expeditions to seek out hunting. For example, during his campaign against Jujhar Singh in 1628, he went to Gwalior to hunt¹⁸. 26. In some instances, the Mughals employed men to perform the duties of the driving game to an enclosure. To celebrate the holiday of *Id al-Qurban (Eid al-Adha)*, Shah Jahan ordered *chital* hunting at Bhimbal where 5,000 men were employed to drive the game to the hills¹⁹. Shah Jahan hunted onagers, also called wild Indian asses in Bhera, which was a *pargana* or district of Punjab. There he killed twenty onagers, always more than his sons and other grandees as their number came up to forty-three only²⁰.

Shah Jahan was also the emperor who reputedly had killed the largest number of games in a single day (as he killed 52 deer)²¹. Shah Jahan, on one occasion, for example, displayed the trait of benevolence and concern for animals as he allowed 1,700 blackbucks and deer to go free after shooting 300 games from a total of 2,000 enclosed in a *Qamargah*.²² In addition to a *Qarawal Beg*, there was also a *Mir Shikaran* or Master of Hunting employed in the Mughal kingdom. This Master of Hunting usually oversaw the buying of trained hawks²³. Mughal hunting scenes would later be followed by Indian renditions of hunting scenes that were embroidered by Indian court women. One such example depicts men on horseback with bows and arrows and swords and guns shooting a tiger, sambar, a female lion, and antelope²⁴. T his cloth cover is similar to Mughal designs that capture hunters and animals galloping in motion.

Hunting practices of Princely rulers

Princely rulers including *Nawabs* and *Maharajas* would succeed the ailing and eventually the fallen Mughal Empire. They established successor states where they presided as rulers of their kingdoms. The *Nawabs*, or successors to the Mughals, also enjoyed hunting as it was almost an obsession for them. The *Nawab* was essentially a governor of a province of the Mughal Emperor or a Muslim ruler of a state who also acted as *faujdar* or enforcer of criminal law in his state. In many cases, *Nawabs* were also challengers to Mughal rule. The *Nawab* of Hyderabad rode on an elephant on his way to Lucknow and shot wild animals along the way. He bagged four partridges and antelopes in 1795²⁵. The *maharajas* similarly used Mughal techniques of hunting whenever they held a hunting event for the British.

¹⁷ Ibid, P. 211.

¹⁸ Khan, OP.Cit. P:28.

¹⁹ Ibid, P. 124.

²⁰ Ibid, P. 141.

²¹ Ibid, P. 247.

²² Ibid, P. 265.

²³ Ibid, P. 244.

²⁴ Shah Jahan Hunting a Lion with Jahangir. 1640. Windsor Castle, Royal Library, Padshah Nama, fol.P.135v.

²⁵ News-letters, 1767-1799 (Nawab Mir Nizam Ali Khan's reign), Ed. Yusuf Hussain,

Indian princely rulers emulated the Mughals and engaged in a *Shikar*. The *Nawab* of Hyderabad was recorded bagging game on the 14th of June in 1797²⁶. Imamuddin Khan for example reported to the *Nawab* that five wolves and seven foxes were spotted in the forest. So, the *Nawab* ordered that Roshan Khan go out and shoot them²⁷. Unlike the British who instantly killed the animals when the news was reported to them about the whereabouts of wild game, princely rulers had others shoot the animals for them. The unsportsmanlike physical attack on the animal would have been viewed by the British as cruel and not be categorized as hunting, yet the princely rulers believed that wild animal fights were genuine *Shikar*.

History of hunting during 18th century

There were only few records of hunting in the colonial period of 18th century. The primary reason for this is that records of sport multiply exponentially in the 19th century in Britain and this phenomenon is mimicked in British India. The sport was not quite as much of an obsession in the 18th century as it was in the 19th and 20th centuries, mainly because the British were primarily busy fighting numerous wars and trade and politics were of prime importance. Hunting was a leisurely exercise and a way for Britons to immerse themselves in the bounties of the game that the Indian subcontinent provided. It is evident from the sources that British male hunters or *Sahibs* were awestruck with the “free” game that India had to offer and took full advantage of unrestrained *Shikar* hunting in the subcontinent because there were no regulatory constraints on hunting as in the metropole.

The British began to hunt in India out of sheer boredom. Men who fought in the military for the East India Company often hunted while they were travelling to another destination. A passage from Captain Little's accounts of the fight against Tipu Sultan shows how hunting was often a sideshow for soldiers. India was described as teeming in foxes, hares, partridges and jackals²⁸. When invited to a regal hunt, most British participants were impressed and awestruck with the power of the *Nawab* as well as his hunting skills. This is one of the main points in British hunter accounts. L.F. Smith writing in July of 1797 to another Briton in Calcutta expresses this viewpoint as he states “His Excellency is one of the best marksmen I ever saw [...] as one day with another he fired above 100 shots at every species of birds and animals.”²⁹ Smith praised the *Nawab*'s shooting skills as good marksmanship and also as the mark of a refined gentleman, and this was highly favoured.

Awareness on wildlife extinction

²⁶ Jouhar, Tezkereh Al Vakiat, or Private Memoirs of the Moghul Emperor Humayun, p:71.

²⁷ News-letters, 1767-1799, P. 48.

²⁸ Anon, A Narrative of the Operations of Captain Little's Detachment, and of the Mahratta Army, commanded by Purseram Bhow; during the late Confederacy in India, against the *Nawab* Tippoo Sultan Bahadur. The Critical Review, or Annals of Literature (September 1794): Pp. 1-6.

²⁹ Smith, L. F., Description of a hunting part in India, A letter from a gentleman at Calcutta,” Scots Magazine, July 1797: P. 449.

As the dominant hunters of the jungles, the British also had to become the protectors of the jungles. The preferential treatment of European hunters during the 1890s coincided with the need to conserve the dwindling stocks of wild animals.

By the 1890s, the shift to preferential treatment for European hunters also coincided with the rapid decimation of the game and the shift of the game frontier to remote areas like the Sunderbans, where today's wildlife reserves are located. As Edward Baker notes in the late 1880s, rhinoceros "have disappeared from Purneah [Purnia] and the neighbourhood of Rajmahal and Sikrigully, where they were plentiful fifty years ago."³⁰ Similarly, Baker states that marsh-deer or *Barasingha* only survive in Maldah, Dinagepoor, and near the Soonderbuns [Sunderbans], and in Julpigoree³¹. The extent of the decimation of the game was therefore widely apparent in many sportsmen's memoirs and obvious from their subtitles, as they directed European sportsmen on where to find the remaining game.

Regulation of hunting in the late 19th and 20th centuries

The Anglo-Indian tradition of hunting was solidified by the late 19th century when the British began to hunt with Indians and traditions of hunting amalgamated together. The amalgamation occurred as Indians and British hunted together and employed each other's methods. The late 19th century also witnessed the rise of legislation designed to restrict the hunting of games. As the Anglo-Indian tradition consolidated, however, a series of problems developed in Indian hunting, especially a decline in-game, and scientific and political awareness of environmental issues grew widely in the British Empire. This stimulated policies to protect the environment in many colonies. These problems and these new environmental concerns led to a substantial change in Indian hunting, which led to the introduction of legislation designed to curtail and restrict hunting. These conservation policies had the aim of restraining Indian hunters in their 'excessive' pattern of hunting. In application, these policies showed that many Indians could adapt to new information and circumstances. Hunting laws were simultaneous with the steps the *Raj* was taking to move towards independence.

In the late 1880s, the government took up the question of whether an all-encompassing game law was necessary. The government decided that there was no underlying reason why the game needed to be protected by an all-encompassing law and believed that the best thing to do was to leave game laws to local governments. The Punjab government proposal was upheld, rather than a federal solution for game preservation. The Punjab government proposal entailed that local governments would have the power to close hunting for any particular season as it saw was best to protect the extinction of game or birds. Local governments would have extensive knowledge of the rareness of particular types of animals or birds therefore a grassroots attempt at game preservation was to be more successful. Soon, a flurry of acts, as well as a system of licenses and bills would appear for each region and locality.

³⁰Edward Baker. Op. Cit. P36.

³¹ Ibid, P. 46

Hunting and British hunters in Colonial India, 1900-1947

While certain characteristics of hunting in colonial India remained constant from the 19th to the 20th century, such as the British involvement in hunting and its status as an “imperial sport,” other aspects underwent substantial changes. The character of British hunting can be summarized as gentlemanly masculine, as well as imperialist. Distinct differentiation between hunting by tribal peoples, which the British classed as “poachers,” and by British sportsmen, which they classed as legitimate was also clearly defined in the 20th century. By the 20th century, several new developments appear, including humanitarian hunters who only hunt to protect villagers, the introduction of new technology, a greater sense of nostalgia, a greater introduction of emotion and artificial rearing, and the emulation of maharajas by *Sahibs*. These changes along with a strong sense of restraint and a conservationist awareness were important features that differentiated most (though not all), 20th-century hunters, from their 19th-century counterparts.

CONCLUSION

Based on the exhaustive overview of the hunting practices of the Mughal emperors, it can be observed that they were not ecologically conscious as British. From the study, it was observed that there were 71 major similarities between British and Indian hunting tradition. During Mughal period, hunting was regarding the privilege of elite and royal sport. But later, British realized the extinction of wildlife and initiated the conservation measures. In these years, several new developments occurred and the more awareness on conservation of wildlife has been created.