

Hunting In Indian Context: Spectacle Through Time

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Abstract:Hunting is arguably the oldest sport practiced within human society, transcending geographical and temporal boundaries. It is well-documented that hunting has been a part of Indian culture since ancient times; however, in its early stages, particularly during the prehistoric era, hunting served primarily as a means of procuring food for early humans. As societies evolved from food gatherers to food producers, the significance of hunting as a food source diminished. Subsequently, hunting transitioned into a form of leisure and entertainment predominantly enjoyed by elite military leaders and the ruling class. Despite shifts in the political landscape, hunting retained its popularity among the ruling elite. Hunting was popular in India, and large-scale hunts were organized among various ruling classes in Ancient India, the ruling classes of the Middle Ages, especially the Mughals and the British rulers during colonial rule. Large-scale hunts were organized under British colonial rule, and local ruling classes also participated in hunting activities from ancient times through to the modern era. While hunting became a recreational activity for the elite, it also served various imperial purposes. Historically, the ruling class utilized hunting as a means to assert their unassailable power over subordinate territories, although the imperial motives behind hunting evolved over time. For instance, while hunting primarily served military objectives in ancient and medieval periods, during colonial rule, it became associated with efforts to legitimize the authority of colonial rulers. This article aims to elucidate the significant transformations that have occurred over time regarding the purpose, nature, techniques, methods, scope, and weaponry associated with hunting as a sport in India, spanning from ancient times to the contemporary era. The research for this article draws upon contemporary historical materials from various epochs, as well as a range of analytical texts and articles authored in subsequent periods.

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Hunting In Indian Context: Spectacle Through Times

Introduction

Hunting is arguably the oldest of sports, transcending geographical and temporal boundaries. In prehistoric times, the hunting of wild animals was an essential aspect of the daily existence of primitive humans, serving as a primary means of procuring food. However, with the advancement of civilization, hunting evolved into a recreational activity, predominantly among elite military leaders and rulers, who utilized it to showcase their personal prowess and skills. It became a medium through which the ruling class expressed their dominance and control over forests and nature. Evidence of the activities of primitive humans in the Indian subcontinent dates back to prehistoric times, indicating that hunting has been practiced in India since that era. As civilization progressed, distinct ancient, medieval, and modern periods emerged, yet hunting remained prevalent in the Indian subcontinent, particularly among the ruling class. It was immensely popular among the sovereigns of vast empires as well as numerous smaller kingdoms, a trend that persisted until the period of independence. Nevertheless, over time, significant transformations have occurred in the purpose, nature, techniques, methods, extent, and weaponry associated with hunting. Through these transformations, it becomes feasible to comprehend the political, social, and economic characteristics of that era, thereby aiding in the understanding of the broader social reality.

Ancient Era

Evidence of the existence and activities of primitive humans in India has been documented since the Palaeolithic Age. Artifacts indicating the presence of early humans have been discovered in cave dwellings situated in the northern region of the Deccan Plateau, specifically within the contemporary states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, where microlith¹ weapons were utilized.² During the Palaeolithic Age, the primary objectives of hunting were to procure food and safeguard livestock from predatory animals, devoid of any sporting motivations. Tools such as bows, arrows, and spears were employed for hunting purposes.³ Stone blades of various configurations were fashioned for the tips of arrows; arrowheads crafted from such stones have been unearthed in the Chotanagpur region.⁴ Species such as Barasingha deer, bison, and elephants were targeted in hunts. A Neolithic or Chalcolithic painting from the Bhaldaria rock shelter in Ahiraura, near Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, illustrates a man engaged in the pursuit of a Barasingha deer.⁵ The depiction of a dog within this hunting scene implies that canines were utilized by humans for hunting activities.⁶ This cave dwelling also portrays a wild boar hunt.⁷ Neolithic cave paintings from Bhimbetka illustrate the hunting of elephants.⁸ Mesolithic cave dwellings in Bhopal depict scenes of humans attempting to capture deer.⁹ Evidence of animal hunting is also present in the cave dwellings of Bhopal.¹⁰ Neolithic hunting activities have also been recorded in Kashmir.¹¹ Hunting was prevalent among the populace of the Harappan civilization, with evidence indicating hunters pursuing various species of deer.¹²

Hunting In Indian Context: Spectacle Through Times

Hunting was also popular among the Aryans, recognized as the architects of Vedic civilization. Given that Aryan society was predominantly pastoral, wild animals were hunted to safeguard domestic livestock from predation, to procure wild meat for sustenance, and as a form of leisure and entertainment.¹³ Although nets and traps were employed for hunting, there is also evidence of the utilization of bows and arrows.¹⁴ Nets were specifically used to capture birds, while snares were designed for deer.¹⁵ Domesticated dogs were utilized to pursue wild boars.¹⁶ Additionally, there exists a vague account of lion hunting employing traps.¹⁷ References to hunting can also be found in the *Atharvaveda*.¹⁸ The renowned grammarian Panini, from the 4th century BCE, employed the term '*lubdhayoga*' to denote hunting, and the terms '*margika*', '*paksika*', and '*sakunika*' to refer to hunters.¹⁹ Evidence suggests that dogs were employed by professional hunters in their pursuits.²⁰ The *Ramayana* contains numerous instances of hunting, indicating its popularity.²¹ Hunting, avian hunting, and fishing were widely favoured among the populace; however, excessive indulgence in these activities has been identified as perilous, suggesting that they were particularly prevalent within society.²² The *Ramayana* even describes the use of bows and arrows for fishing.²³ Archaeological findings of fishing hooks have been discovered at the notable site of Athranjikhhera, located near Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh.²⁴ Hunting is also depicted in the *Mahabharata*, highlighting the particular interest of kings in this activity.²⁵ In this context, arrows with sharp blades were primarily utilized for hunting, with deer hunting regarded as especially honorable.²⁶ The illustrious king Pandu of the *Mahabharata* is noted for having slain multiple deer with a single arrow.²⁷

Hunting was one of the most esteemed activities among the ruling class and the elite during the Mauryan period. Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, a seminal historical text from this era, endorses hunting and elucidates its advantages.²⁸ Both Megasthenes and Strabo provide numerous accounts of hunting expeditions undertaken by kings.²⁹ Ashoka's inscriptions reference *Viharayatras*, which encompassed hunting alongside various other forms of entertainment.³⁰ Deer hunting was particularly favoured by royalty. Although elephants were also hunted, this was conducted through a highly organized and systematic approach, which is described in detail in historical accounts.³¹ Royal hunting often took place in controlled environments, frequently resembling festivals that attracted large audiences as spectators.³² However, Ashoka later prohibited hunting, as indicated by his Girnar inscriptions and several other rock inscriptions.³³ The depictions of hunting on the Sanchi³⁴ and Bharhut³⁵ stupas reveal that hunting remained a popular pastime during the Shunga and Kushana periods. One scene from the Sanchi stupa illustrates a man wielding a spear and another with a bow entering the forest, presumably for hunting purposes. In the foreground, two individuals are depicted returning from a hunt, one of whom carries two deer suspended from a pole.³⁶ The representations of lions and tigers on the Sanchi stupas suggest that these animals were targets of hunting during that time.³⁷ Furthermore, the imagery indicates that women frequently participated alongside men in hunting activities.³⁸ A scene from the Bharhut stupa portrays a

Hunting In Indian Context: Spectacle Through Times

pack of dogs pursuing a wild boar, thereby confirming the use of domesticated dogs in hunting practices.³⁹

While describing the popularity of hunting during the Gupta period, the renowned writer of that era, Dandin, articulated the advantages of hunting (*Mrigaya*). According to him, hunting not only enhances physical and mental skills but also safeguards the roads from attacks by wild animals.⁴⁰ Another eminent writer of this period, Kalidasa, in his play *Raghuvamsham*, provides a comprehensive depiction of hunting by King Dasharatha. It is noted that long before the king ventured into the forest for hunting, his attendants would create an artificial environment, allowing the king to hunt deer, wild boar, wild buffalo, tigers, lions, and other animals.⁴¹ Kalidasa also mentions that during hunting expeditions, the princes would don a specific type of attire.⁴² The coins issued by the Gupta rulers further attest to the significant allure of hunting among the ruling class during that time. Numerous coins from Samudragupta depict tiger hunting⁴³, while many coins from Chandragupta II illustrate lion hunting⁴⁴, and several coins from Kumaragupta I portray hunting of tigers and rhinoceroses^{45, 46}.

Even during the reign of Harshavardhana, hunting served as a highly appealing form of leisure and entertainment for the ruling class, as evidenced by several contemporary sources. Harshavardhana's court poet, Banabhatta, articulates the profound interest, skill, and expertise of his patron ruler in the pursuit of hunting.⁴⁷ Banabhatta's renowned work, *Kadambari*, illustrates the significant allure of hunting for the heroic prince.⁴⁸ The Chinese traveller Hiu-en-Tsang, who visited India, documented the hunting of wild boars by Indian rulers.⁴⁹ While hunting functioned as a recreational activity for the elite, it also represented a means of sustenance and livelihood for the primitive tribes residing in the forests.⁵⁰ Various species of wild animals, including different types of deer, wild boars, tigers, and leopards, were pursued as formidable creatures. Nevertheless, throughout history, diverse opinions have emerged opposing the killing of wild animals through hunting. Various scriptures predating the Kautilya era characterize hunting as a sinful act, despite Kautilya's endorsement of the practice.⁵¹ Even during Harshavardhana's time, learned *Brahmins* condemned the act of hunting.⁵²

Medieval Era

Hunting was a popular pastime among Mughal emperors and the aristocracy, as was the case with earlier Indian rulers. Large-scale hunting events were organized for the emperors and the aristocracy. Although hunting was already practiced among the aristocracy in India prior to the arrival of the Mughals, the Mughals integrated it with the nomadic traditions of Central Asia.⁵³ Hunting was also highly esteemed by the Mughal rulers. Mirza Haider Dughlat, a relative of Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire in India, who also authored an early history of Babur's life, notes that hunting was a compulsory subject for the princes of the royal family, serving not only as a means of leisure but also as a method of acquiring knowledge pertinent to governance.⁵⁴ Babur had a particular interest in hunting and actively participated in hunting expeditions in various forests in the vicinity of the Peshwa.⁵⁵ Babur mentions in his

Hunting In Indian Context: Spectacle Through Times

autobiography several hunting grounds located in Farghana, his father's kingdom.⁵⁶ He also refers to the use of falcons for capturing small birds in his autobiography.⁵⁷ Even the Mughal ruler Humayun, during his exile from India while residing in Persia, engaged in hunting expeditions there.⁵⁸ Abul Fazl provides multiple accounts of tiger hunting conducted by Akbar, through which the author undoubtedly aims to depict his patron king as a valiant warrior and an adept ruler.⁵⁹ Initially, the emperor, followed by the nobles, from the highest to the lowest ranks, entered the hunting grounds according to their status within the imperial administration. The hunts were organized on such a grand scale that they served as an ideal platform for showcasing the power of the empire and demonstrating military prowess.⁶⁰ These hunts even influenced Akbar's policy-making within the empire. Once, in 1563, while hunting in the vicinity of Mathura, he observed that Hindus were required to pay a tax for visiting their religious holy places, which he perceived as divisive. Consequently, he abolished the pilgrimage tax imposed on Hindus for visiting their sacred sites.⁶¹

The Mughal rulers adhered to the Mongolian tradition of hunting, which involved the creation of artificial environments.⁶² Prior to the king and his courtiers entering the forest, professional hunters would confine wild animals within designated areas. Subsequently, the king and his courtiers would enter the forest for the hunt. This method of hunting was referred to as '*Qamargah*'. Despite the establishment of such an artificial environment for hunting, Abul Fazl, a Mughal chronicler and courtier of Akbar, noted that this practice had its own advantages; one of which was that the king could gain insights into the conditions of the populace in the surrounding areas through the act of hunting.⁶³ Additionally, the king could assess the physical abilities and wartime preparedness of the nobles participating in the hunt.⁶⁴ The inherent risks associated with hunting, even within an artificial environment, are exemplified by an incident in 1611, during which King Jahangir's life was spared from an attack by a wild tiger, thanks to the intervention of Prince Shah Jahan and the noble Anup Roy.⁶⁵ Jahangir would also take the women of the royal family along with his courtiers to the hunting ground.⁶⁶ The extensive number of wild animals hunted by the Mughal emperors can be illustrated by the statistics from Emperor Jahangir, who reportedly hunted approximately 17,000 wild animals between 1580 and 1616 AD, including 86 tigers.⁶⁷ Subsequently, royal hunts were also organized during the reigns of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb.⁶⁸

Modern Era

Hunting as a leisure sport was notably prevalent during the British colonial rule, as it had been in ancient and medieval periods. Given that hunting has historically been associated with a certain degree of nobility, the British who arrived in India exhibited a particular interest in this activity. The British engaged in large-scale hunting during the colonial era, drawn by the rich wildlife present in India's expansive forests. Consequently, hunting became an integral aspect of Anglo-Indian culture.⁶⁹ During this period, colonial officials, British adventure sportsmen, rulers of native states, and various tribal communities among the indigenous populations of India were all

Hunting In Indian Context: Spectacle Through Times

linked to hunting. For the first three groups, hunting served primarily as a form of entertainment. Colonial officials would take breaks from their demanding professional responsibilities to travel to picturesque locations, where they would partake in hunting as a leisure activity. For British sportsmen seeking thrills, hunting represented an exhilarating sport. For hereditary rulers in native states, hunting was emblematic of aristocratic pursuits. In contrast, for the various tribal communities residing in India, hunting constituted a means of subsistence, primarily undertaken for the procurement of meat.⁷⁰ Moreover, the colonial authorities were able to assert their dominance over the wildlife and natural resources of the country by indiscriminately depleting wildlife populations through extensive hunting campaigns in India.⁷¹

Indian native rulers organized hunts on various scales. Particularly, when British high-ranking officials visited the native states, hunts were arranged in their honour. In fact, hunting became a means of establishing and maintaining amicable relations between the colonial government and the rulers of the native states of India. However, the customs observed during hunting clearly underscored the notion of British dominance and superiority over the native states. For instance, when the Viceroy accompanied an Indian native state on a hunting expedition, the largest animal of the game was reserved for him due to the Viceroy's elevated position within the power structure.⁷² Alongside various species of deer, tigers were also hunted, with the latter being regarded as particularly prestigious. Overall, hunting was perceived as a means of demonstrating masculine valour and prowess. Given that tigers were the most perilous of wild animals, tiger hunting emerged as a significant symbol for the colonial rulers in the construction of their masculine identity.⁷³ The British success in hunting tigers was utilized as evidence to portray the subjugated Indians as inferior and feminine, while depicting the British as superior and masculine.⁷⁴ Hunting was favoured among local rulers and landlords in various regions of India, including Bengal.⁷⁵ Contemporary sources provide numerous accounts of the substantial numbers of wild animals killed by the rulers of the native states and the British throughout India. Furthermore, hunting equipment underwent considerable transformations during this period. Bows and arrows, spears, and javelins constituted the primary tools employed in ancient and medieval hunting. Although firearms were introduced during the Mughal period, they became the predominant hunting equipment utilized during British rule.⁷⁶

Conclusion

Despite various setbacks leading up to independence, hunting has remained a popular activity in India. In prehistoric times, prior to the establishment of permanent food production for humans and subsequently for various tribal communities residing in forests, hunting served as a means of procuring animal meat. However, since ancient times, it has evolved into an engaging form of leisure and entertainment for the local ruling class, particularly among the ruling and military elites. Although it has transformed into a recreational pursuit for these elite groups, hunting has consistently been favoured by the ruling and military classes. It is evident that various imperial objectives of the ruling class have historically influenced hunting practices. Until the modern era, when firearms and gunpowder became prevalent in warfare, hunting likely served as a method

Hunting In Indian Context: Spectacle Through Times

for testing personal and military skills. Throughout history, from ancient to modern times, hunting has been a means for the ruling class to assert their dominance over the forests and wildlife within their territories. Even during British colonial rule, hunting was driven by imperial motivations. Indians were often depicted as weak, while the British portrayal of their prowess in hunting wild animals, particularly tigers, was framed as a symbol of British masculinity. By eliminating ferocious tigers, they were presented as protectors of ordinary Indians from tiger attacks, thereby depicting British rule as a guardian and benefactor of the vulnerable Indian populace.

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Hunting In Indian Context: Spectacle Through Times

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Hunting In Indian Context: Spectacle Through Times

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