

Portrayal of ‘Hunting’ in Environmental History of India

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ABSTRACT: *The paper begins with a general discussion on hunting. It is divided into four main parts, discussing about the effect of hunting on environment and ecology in Ancient, Medieval, Colonial and Independent India. Across all the ages, hunting wild animals has been an important activity for the royals and nobles. In ancient India, only Ashoka took some initiatives at protecting the animals and environment. The portion on Medieval India mainly focusses on the Mughals and their hunting styles. In the colonial period, mastery over nature was thought of as a part of mastery over India. Both British officials and Indian princes unabatedly shot many animals, which ultimately led to the extinction of cheetah in India. In the part on Independent India, the efforts by Indira Gandhi like the ‘Wildlife Protection Act’ in 1972, Project Tiger and its effects have been given. In conclusion, the need to conserve our wildlife is briefly cited with reference to a few high-profile cases of hunting in India even after it was outlawed.*

KEYWORDS: hunting, India, conservation, paintings of hunt, environmental history, animals

Introduction

Hunting is man’s natural calling. It is older than agriculture, predates civilisation and is as old as mankind itself. Initially hunter-gatherers hunted for subsistence, but later with the development of settlements, hunting gradually became a favourite pastime for influential people like the royals and nobility. Paintings, myths, folklores legends, stories and poetry have been composed commemorating hunts and have left a lasting impression in people’s mind.

Hunting has formed an important part of kingship since ancient India. It was an important sport for toning the body and sharpening marksman skills. Throughout India’s past, hunting has affected India’s

environmental history in a crucial way. Epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana also involve hunting, which influenced the plot. In the Ramayana, King Dasharatha accidentally killed Shrivankumar while hunting and was cursed by his blind parents to die of *putrasoka* (mourning loss of son). The curse held true as Rama was sent to the forest i.e. *vanvaas* (exile), and Dasharatha died alone mourning. In another instance Rama is depicted as slaying the monkey king Bali. In the Mahabharata, Pandu accidentally killed *Rishi* Kindama (who was disguised as a deer), while hunting and was cursed by the *Rishi* (ascetic), that he would die the moment he engaged in a union with any woman. Pandu left the throne of Hastinapur and went to live as a hermit. All of his five sons were born with the help of Gods. The curse came true one day when Pandu died while trying to engage in a union with his second wife. Animals and forests also play an important role in the stories of the *Panchatantra* and the *Jatakas*. Kalidasha's drama *Abhigyanam Shakuntalam* (Shakuntala), which portrayed a romantic love story between a king and a forest-raised princess, represented the forest as a field for the royal pastime of hunting and a refuge for Brahmin ascetics.

For the past centuries, India was a land with islands of cultivation among a sea of forests. Sometimes forests were cleared for cultivation, nevertheless were replenished again when cultivators died due to diseases or fled to avoid high taxation. We can still find traces of the past in the names of places. e.g. Jharkhand in Persian means 'the land of thickets.'¹

Indian forests were full of exotic animals, which were hunted down by people across all ages. Harappan seals depict many animals, among which the tiger, the rhinoceros and the elephant are the most frequent. Bhimbetka rock shelters near Bhopal, contain paintings (Figure 1) of people hunting animals like buffaloes, rhinos, bears, tigers, and elephants. These hunts were for survival and protection. A painting from Mughal period depicts Emperor Babur hunting rhinos (Figure 2). There is another painting from 1720's, depicting Rao Ram Singh hunting rhinos (Figure 3). This points to the existence of rhinos across the forests of North India and even Indus basin. During the late colonial and post-colonial periods, due to excessive hunting, poaching (for their horns which were used for making sword handles and were highly valued in China for their alleged

¹ Mahesh Rangarajan, ed., "*Environmental Issues in India*", (New Delhi, Pearson, 2007), Pg.: xxiii

medicinal properties) and habitat destruction, Rhinos became restricted to only parts of North-East India like Kaziranga. These gentle vegetarians were killed for their horns.² There are written accounts of hunting yaks in the Himalayan foothill region and wild boars in South India. Boar meat was also prized by the Rajputs for its valour and bravery in fighting tigers.

Ancient India

Hunt formed an inseparable part of the ideology of kingship in ancient India. In later Vedic times, meat intake was dictated by the *Varnas* (caste), with the Brahmins generally abstaining from consumption of meat and the Kshatriyas reserving the right to eat certain animals like lion and tiger on special occasions. Medical treatises of Charaka and Susruta, provides a list of animals based on the quality of their meat (protein source) and consumption by people under certain conditions. The *Krishna Mriga* or blackbuck, attained an important position in the folklore of the Brahmins as it was very difficult to subdue. Aloka Parasher-Sen suggests that the lands of the blackbuck was seen as purer than others in cultural and not merely in ecological terms. According to *Yajnavalkya Smriti*, "Sacrifice became a black antelope and wandered over the earth. Dharma (justice) followed his wanderings."³

All information available about forests are from the perspective of the city, the socially and culturally privileged groups and the royals. The perspectives of forest people towards the state are rarely recorded. Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, sees forest people with great suspicion, and advises the ruler to control them through bribery and political subjugation. The Mauryas relied on the nomads and hunters to control such a large empire. Elephants were extracted as tributes from chiefs of forest tribes.

After embracing Buddhism, Ashoka gave up hunting (both leisure and subsistence). This was a part of his *dhamma*, based on non-violence and care towards humans and animals. According to D.C. Sircar "Formerly, numerous animals and birds used to be killed in his kitchen for the

²Jay Shankar, "*Hunting and its Depiction in Indian Art – A Journey through Time*", Virasat-e Hind Foundation, published: 25.01.2017, <https://blogvirasatehind.com/2017/01/25/hunting-and-its-depiction-in-indian-art-a-journey-through-time/> (accessed: 7.09.2019)

³ Mahesh Rangarajan and K. Sivaramakrishnan, eds., "*India's Environmental History Volume 1*", (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2012), Pgs.: 13-14.

preparation of curries; he now confined to slaughter of two birds and one animal (Rock Edict 1). He gave up the royal habit of going on hunting excursions.”⁴ Even this slaughter of animals for cooking was gradually given up. But it was difficult to strictly enforce such an injunction throughout of his empire. Rule breakers existed in spite of a fine of 100 *panas* (punch-marked coins) on the poaching of deer in forests set aside for the king. He even opened special hospitals for animals, and planted trees along the road.

There are depictions of the king as a hunter on Gupta coins (Figure 4), which describe him as the vanquisher of the powerful wild animals, a metaphor used to show his control over men, animals, forests and dominance over adversaries.

Medieval India

Some Delhi Sultans decreed some forests as their personal hunting reserves. This resulted in rebellions by the forest tribes which were crushed. Firuz Shah Tughluq was perhaps the first ruler in India to keep a kennel of tamed cheetahs to hunt animals like antelope, a practice that would be later perfected by the Mughals.

The fauna that came into the notice of the Mughal Emperors were categorised into three types – animals for hunting like lions, tigers; animals for royal use like cheetahs, Indian elephants; and exotic animals gifted to the Emperors like zebra, turkey, dodo and African elephants. With the advancement of weaponry, hunts became more than a means of relaxation, it became an important way to keep the body fit and learn necessary survival skills like the art of stalking. Hunts were often used to camouflage major armed expeditions, whereby the success and failure of the hunt was taken as an omen of the future. Bernier was witness to a hunt, in which the Aurangzeb failed to shoot the lion, and it escaped. Later Aurangzeb's policies began the process of the decline of the Mughal Empire. Moreover, wild meat was highly prized, as the Mughal palate consisted of 35 to 40 meat dishes, including animal meat like venison, and bird meat like quail and partridge.

⁴D.C. Sircar, “*Inscriptions of Ashoka*”, (New Delhi: Publications Division Information and Broadcasting Ministry, 1967), Pg.:8

Coursing blackbuck with tame cheetahs was a favourite sport of Mughal Emperors (Figure 5). Mughals referred to the cheetah by the Persian word *yuz*. Cheetahs from desert regions like Rajputana were preferred over those from mountainous regions, as they were suited to the long, swift animal chase across the open grasslands and were suited to the hot climate of the northern plains. Akbar had thousand cheetahs, but failed to breed them in captivity. Some of them had names like Madankali, and Dilrang. They were carried in palanquins and wore jewel studded collars. In 1613, Jahangir succeeded in captive breeding of cheetahs, whereby three cubs were born. It was the only instance of cheetahs breeding in captivity till 1956, when the Philadelphia zoo bred them successfully. In 1608, Raja Bir Singh Deo of Orcha, a faithful friend of Jahangir, brought a white cheetah (*yuz-i safed*) to show him. This is the only recorded instance of a white cheetah till date. Jahangir described animal in detail in *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*, 'Its spots which are (normally) black were of blue colour and the whiteness of the body was inclined to the same colour.'⁵ Jean de Thevenot, a traveller who visited Ahmedabad during the early years of Aurangzeb's reign notes that only the governors of provinces were allowed to trap cheetahs. It is evident that at that time cheetahs were in plentiful as Emperors kept a large number in captivity.

The Asiatic lion considered a royal game, was common across the scrub forests and dry savannahs across North India. It even featured on the flag of the empire. Only the emperor, his favoured relatives, courtiers, and special guests were permitted to hunt it (Figure 6). Sir Thomas Roe got special permission from Jahangir to kill a lion that was raiding his camp at Mandu in 1617. There is a total of four instances of Akbar hunting a lion, two in *Akbarnama* and two in *Ain-i Akbari*. Both Akbar and Jahangir encountered the lions in and around the outskirts of Delhi, which were full of grassland and scrub at that time, preferred habitat of lion.

Jahangir's favourite wife Nur Jahan also accompanied and assisted him in some hunting expeditions. Jahangir kept a meticulous

⁵ Divayabhanusinh, "Lions, Cheetahs, and Others in the Mughal Landscape" in 'Shifting Grounds', eds. Mahesh Rangarajan and K. Sivaramakrishnan, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), Pg.: 99

record of his hunts. He hunted 86 lions (total 17167 animals) through 39 years. In 1610, Jahangir was saved by a courtier Anup Rai, who battled a lion with his bare hands, near Agra. He was awarded with the title *Ani Rai Singhdalan*, meaning commander of troops, lion crusher. This incident shows the trust and respect among the Mughals and Rajputs that strengthened their personal bond, which held the empire together till mid 1600's. The weighing and measuring of lions were a common practice. In 1623, Jahangir shot a lion at Rahimabad near Agra, which weighed 255 kgs (the heaviest recorded at that time) and was 9 feet 4 inches long.⁶

Tigers were encountered in gorges along the river Yamuna in proximity to Agra and Delhi, hence it was rarely encountered by the Mughals and was of peripheral importance to the them. Akbar's entourage was attacked by five tigers, at Narwar near Gwalior in 1561. Two of the tigers were 'white', earliest known record of albinism among tigers. Jahangir shot a tiger in 1607 near Giri on the Malwa plateau. He even dissected it, and concluded that the cause for its bravery was location of its gall bladder inside the liver.⁷

After the first battle of Panipat (1526), the use of elephants for warfare gradually reduced, with the introduction of muskets and portable cannons. Instead elephant came to occupy a prominent position at court. Akbar is famous for tackling a fierce elephant named Hawaii and subduing another named Ram Bagha. Abul Fazl provides great details about elephants in *Akbarnama*, stating their habits, diets, mating, and gestation period. He notes that elephants contribute to the success of a conqueror and 'It adds materially to the pomp of a king.'⁸ Jahangir and Shah Jahan also put great emphasis on elephants, even arranging warm water for bathing them during winter. African elephants (*daryai hathi*) and 'white' elephants were a prized object. However, the number of elephants available in the wild gradually reduced by the time of Aurangzeb.

Two popular methods of hunting were the Mongol-style *Qamargha* and the *Shakhbandh*. In *Qamargha*, a gradually decreasing circle of men, consisting of soldiers and beaters would lead the animals

⁶ Ibid, Pg.: 91

⁷ Ibid, Pg.: 94

⁸ Ibid, Pg.: 102

towards the emperor and his chosen nobles, who would then hunt with guns, arrows and spears. Jahangir efficiently used *Qamargha* to hunt *nilgais* (blue bulls) all across north India. In November 1616, Jahangir writes in his memoirs, 'I visited nine times the mausoleum of the revered Khwaja, and fifteen times went to look at the Pushkar Lake... I went out to hunt and killed 53 nilgaw.'⁹ *Shakhbandh* was a variation of *Qamargha* where a stockade (barrier made of wooden posts) was used in place of the circle of men. However, these methods were only suitable for hunting herbivores and lesser carnivore, and not ferocious animals like lions. The *Badshahnama* records Shah Jahan hunting with guns called *Khasban* and *Khurasan*. Falconry, a method in which falcons, eagles were trained for tracing wild animals during hunting, was also prevalent.

The Mughal paintings act as a great source of knowledge about the hunts, the ecology of that time, and the types of animals hunted. There are more than thirty paintings depicting lions, but only one depicting tiger, pointing towards the central position of lion. There are paintings of exotic animals like the dodo, zebra, African elephant, turkey, besides local ones like *nilgai*, blackbuck, most of which were drawn by Mansur during Jahangir's reign. These paintings are known for their stress on the fine and minute details. The Rajput paintings of lions from Kota, depict lions with a black mane, unlike the Mughal ones. In contrast to Europe, the concept of private property was not that strong in India, nor was there any high reward for killing carnivorous beasts.

Jahangir had some superstitions related to hunting, like abstaining from hunting with a gun on Sundays and Tuesdays. Jahangir once displayed his hunting prowess by shooting a lioness in the presence of Prince Karan of Mewar in 1615, at Ajmer. Aurangzeb renounced hunting and advised his son against it, "Hunting is the business of idle persons. It is very reprehensible for one to be absorbed in worldly affairs, and to disregard religious matters."¹⁰

⁹ Enayatullah Khan and Mohammad Parwez, "Man and Wildlife in Mughal India: Jahangir and Nilgaw hunt", *Vidyasagar University Journal of History*, Volume: 2, 2013-14, Pg.: 191

¹⁰ Michel H. Fischer, "*An Environmental History of India*", (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), Pg.: 120

Colonial India

In the writings of Rudyard Kipling – *'In the Rukh'* (1893), *'The Bridge Builders'* (1898), and *'The Tomb of His Ancestors'* (1898), the narrative centres around the hero courageously hunting wild animals feared by Indians and befriending oppressed forest tribes (*adivasis*) untouched by 'civilization'. Mastery over nature was a part of mastery over India for the colonial state.

The Indian princes, disallowed from taking up arms except in service for the British Raj, devoted their time and energy towards hunting. Thus, a policy of exploiting nature by hunting in lieu of the lost political power became an ethic among the princes, by creating royal hunting reserves. In princely states of India, hunting became a rite of passage into adulthood. Newly crowned princes from Rewa in central India, considered slaying of 109 tigers providential. The *Big Game Diary* of Sadul Singh, the ruler of Bikaner, printed in 1936, provides a catalogue of all his hunts over a quarter century including 33 tigers, and a lion. From the 1900's, large game animals became very scarce in British ruled territories, as a result the British officials from Viceroy to district magistrates vied with each other for invitation to the hunting grounds of princely states. Such large-scale hunts by British officials using latest weapons denuded many princely states of their fauna. Scapegoats were used and often the animals were drugged to lure them into the hunting grounds. In the 1920's, Umeed Singh II, the ruler of Kota, modified a flaming red Rolls Royce Phantom car (Figure 7) for hunting, fitting it with spotlights, machine gun and a Lantaka cannon.¹¹

However, some enlightened rulers guarded rare species by limiting hunts and encouraging scientific study of flora and fauna in their states. Rao Khengarji, the ruler of Kutch protected the flamingos in the Great Rann of Kutch since 1890's, which made him one of the early pioneers of wildlife conservation in India. The Thakur of Morvi protected the rare wild ass in western desert from 1930's. Nonetheless the conservation of forests resulted in the jungle being taken for the pleasure of a few royals from the many forest tribes for whom it acted as a source of livelihood.

¹¹ Sharon Guynup, "A Concise History of Tiger Hunting in India", National Geographic, published: 10.03.2014,

<https://blog.nationalgeographic.org/2014/03/10/a-concise-history-of-tiger-hunting-in-india/> (accessed: 13.09.2019)

Likewise, the colonial government too took an interest in forests to utilise its resources like timber. A Forest department was set up in 1864, accompanied with the Government Forests Act of 1865 which specified strict regulations. The rules were further tautened by the Indian Forests Act of 1878, which made forestlands a government monopoly. The Act combined with the game laws intruded into the lives of the traditional tribal communities who resided in the wilderness and affected their livelihood, besides threatening the ecological balance due to excessive logging for industrial purposes and 'trophy hunting' by colonial officials. This adversely affected the traditional *jhum* (hack and slash) cultivation and subsistence hunting of the forest people. These led to many tribal uprisings throughout the 19th century in various parts of colonial India.¹²

In colonial times too, cheetahs were tamed by the royals for hunting (Figure 8). Tipu Sultan had just 16 cheetahs in 1799. The glaring reduction in the number of domesticated cheetahs, point towards the fact they were endangered. In Rajputana, the royals used cheetahs for hunting blackbucks. Each cheetah was provided with a trainer. Cheetah cubs suffered as both male and female cheetahs were captured and cubs were left unprotected in the wild. After her marriage to Jai Singh of Jaipur, Gayatri Devi (princess of Cooch Behar) went on tiger and buck hunts in Sawai Madhopur forest (now Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve) with captive cheetahs. The practice of taking cheetahs for hunting continued till they became extinct in India in 1952.

The lion became restricted only to the Gir forest (then a royal hunting reserve, now a National Park), and was an important political pawn at the hands of the Nawab of Junagadh, who established strict quotas to curtail their hunting. The Nawab strictly controlled the hunting. His close ties with the Viceroy helped in fending off other prospective Indian princes and British officials from hunting. The lion became a rare and valuable trophy in hunt, which paradoxically contributed to its continued survival. In 1943, Viceroy Lord Linlithgow made a trip to the Gir forest to hunt a maned lion. The rulers of Junagadh, were perhaps the first in the world to extend such a protective umbrella to the endangered carnivore lion. Animals were mainly shot by a hunter from a raised platform in a tree called *machan*.

¹² Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "From Plassey to Partition and After", (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2017), Pg.: 200-201

The colonial officials took to hunting tigers after the drastic reduction in the number of lions. Gradually the number of tigers reduced in the British Indian territories and British officials went to princely states in search of tigers. They legitimized the hunts by vilifying the tigers as man-eaters, with an ever-growing desire for human flesh. In some regions, big cats like tigers were considered as vermin, and were eliminated by hunters with support from the administration. King George V, on his visit to India in 1911, slayed 39 tigers in 10 days.

Many British officials like Forest Officer F.W. Champion and former *shikari* (hunter) Jim Corbett, turned away from hunting and took to photographing and documenting wildlife to conserve endangered animals. Moreover, these forms of documentation outlived the trophies of hunt in the long run. Both Champion and Corbett played an important role in setting up of the first national park of India in 1936, the Hailey National Park, for protecting the tigers. Later it was renamed Jim Corbett National Park in his honour. Champion published two books '*With a Camera in Tigerland*' (1927) and '*The Jungle in Sunlight and Shadow*' (1933). The collections of Corbett's stories like '*The Man-Eaters of Kumaon*' (1944), reiterated the thrill of hunt and regret over the declining number of tigers and leopards. Corbett insisted that tigers became man-eaters due to old age, wounds or when human activity disrupted their habitat, as humans are not natural prey of tigers. R. E. Hawkins states, 'Jim Corbett was the most modest, companionable, and unassuming of men.'¹³

After Independence

The Indian independence led to increased cases of hunting, whereby anyone possessing a gun joined in. This was similar to the shooting spree of 1880's that led to disappearance of bison herds from the Great Plains of North America. Many agencies grew up in different parts to lure hunters, both foreign and Indian into hunting expeditions. Animals like elephants, lions, tigers, rhinos, etc. were hunted down and taken as trophies. The government had also subsidized the hunting of *nilgai* and wild boars, under the 'Grow

¹³ R. E. Hawkins, ed., "*Jim Corbett's India*", (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), Pg.:7.

More Food' campaign to protect crops.¹⁴ The price of a tiger pelt rose from \$50 in 1950's to \$10,000 in 1960's. Most of them were exported illegally. The biggest and best animals vanished from the gene pool, as they were hunted down as the best trophies. The Maharaja of Surguja (in Chhattisgarh), hunted 1150 tigers by 1965. According to Valmik Thapar, Indira Gandhi emerged as 'India's greatest wildlife saviour'.¹⁵ In 1969, export of animal skins was outlawed. In 1972, 'the Indian Wildlife Protection Act' was passed.

Project Tiger was launched in April, 1973, to primarily protect tigers, which was chosen as tiger population was spread across India. The nine initial tiger reserves like Manas, Ranthambhore, Sundarbans, were located in widely varying terrains, which also gave an added protection to all endangered plants and animals in the reserves besides tigers. Project Tiger played a key role in broadening ecological perspective. This project benefitted other animals also, like the lions of Gir forest as their habitat and prey were given better government protection. In 1978, Morarji Desai government banned the export of rhesus monkeys. Related issues of riverside protection and ecological value of reptiles were also highlighted.

In February 2005, the local extinction of Bengal tiger from Sariska Tiger Reserve, made newspaper headlines. The primary cause was attributed to commercial poaching, due to absence of adequate number of properly armed security; besides lack of proper awareness among the locals. The Tiger Task Force (TTF), was established by the government in 2005, to resolve the crisis. The Task Force suggested improvement of habitat in the reserves based on scientific study of habitats. A re-census of tigers was conducted, which adopted a new technique involving intensive camera-trapping instead of the old pugmark-based technique. In July 2008, two tigers were relocated to Sariska from the Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve, located about 200 miles away. By October 2018, there were 18 tigers at Sariska including 5 cubs.

¹⁴ Mahesh Rangarajan, "*India's Wildlife History*", (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), Pg.: 96

¹⁵ Guynup, "*A Concise History of Tiger Hunting in India*", <https://blog.nationalgeographic.org/2014/03/10/a-concise-history-of-tiger-hunting-in-india/> (accessed: 13.09.2019)

Conclusion

The decline in number of captive cheetahs from 1000 under Akbar to just 16 under Tipu Sultan illustrates the fall in the number of cheetahs available in the wild from Mughal to colonial times. Moreover, the number of animals hunted by the rulers in ancient and medieval India was miniscule in comparison with those killed for trophies by officials and princes in the colonial era. The colonial government passed the Wild Birds and Animals Protection Act of 1912 but the act was not strictly implemented and it only applied to territories under direct British rule.

Due to the unrestricted illegal hunting coupled with poaching in the present day very little of wilderness is left. Even after hunting was banned, there has been a few high-profile cases of hunting, like the case of Salman Khan and Saif Ali Khan hunting the endangered blackbuck in 1996. In November 2018, tigress named Avni was shot down, in spite of protests by conservationists. Flora and fauna form an important part of the ecosystem. Already many of them have gone extinct due to our negligence. We should come forward to stop illegal hunting and preserve the wildlife for our future generation.

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Images



Figure 1: Hunting Image in Bhimbetka Rock Shelters (Courtesy: Google Image)

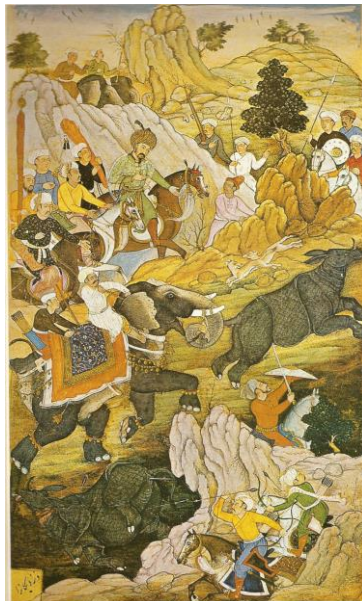


Figure 2: Emperor Babur hunting Rhinos (Courtesy: Google Image)



Figure 3: Rao Ram Singh hunting a rhino (Courtesy: Google Image)



Figure 4: Gupta Coin depicting the King as a Hunter (Courtesy: Google Image)



Figure 5: Emperor Shah Jahan hunting blackbucks with cheetahs (Source: Google Image)

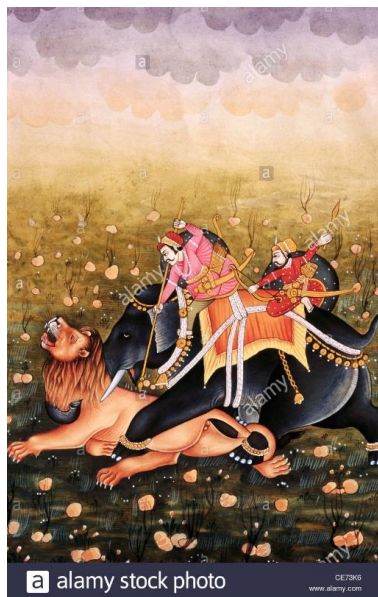


Figure 6: Mughal lion hunting (Source: Alamy)



Figure 7: Modified Rolls Royce for Tiger Hunting (Courtesy: Google Image)

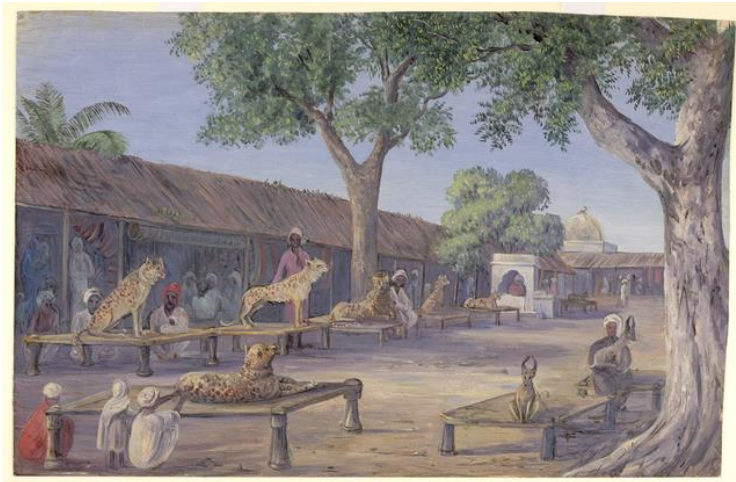


Figure 8: Tamed Hunting Cheetahs in Alwar, 1878 (Courtesy: Steemit)