



HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF WILDLIFE PROTECTION IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Wildlife management is very old in India. Vedas contain hymns in praise of animals. Sanatan Dharma have linked some animals with specific God or Goddess as the best way of conservation of wildlife for Example python has been associated with God Vishnu, snake with God Shiva, swan with Goddess Saraswati, lion with Goddess Durga rendering the animals pious and protected. People in ancient India had recognised the animal's rights to co-exist with the man and therefore they were loved, nurtured and even worshiped. Almost every God and Goddess in our Pantheon is associated with some animals and the animal is venerated almost as a deity itself. Our folklore, art and craft reflect our love and reverence for the animal world. India has a strong tradition of conserving plants and animals. Many kings and rulers also took measures to protect the wildlife. Indian mythology is full of references and instances of our regard and love for wild animals. Since time immemorial wildlife has been conserved and it has enjoyed privileged position of protection through religious ideals and sentiments. The prevalence of wildlife protection movement has been fairly strong in all the developed societies. Wildlife management is very old in India. Vedas contain hymns in praise of animals. Sanatan Dharma have linked some animals with specific God or Goddess as the best way of conservation of wildlife. The environmental protection has been an important fact of Hindu way of life. This ancient tradition has been followed in civilisations of Mohanjo-Daro, Harrappa and Channudare and perished in India in between 2000 and 5000 B.C. Mauryans came to establish their rule in India around third century B.C. During Mugal period, a significant contribution from the point of view of environment conservation has been the establishment of magnificent gardens, fruit orchards and green parks, round about the emperor's palace, central and provincial headquarters etc. The Mugal period witnessed a steady decline in wildlife population due to lack of legal control on hunting. Despite this, there was an abundance of wildlife in India before the commencement of British rule in the country.

Key Words: Wildlife Protection in Ancient India, Mugal Regime, British India & Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972

Introduction:

At the first sight, history and wildlife do not have much to do with each other. If we look from the perspective of a layman, history reminds us of only battles, the monuments, scriptures etc. and on the other hand wildlife portrays a picture of National Geographic Channel showing animals wandering in different parts of the world. India has a rich heritage of wildlife as well as long history and tradition of conserving it in all the best ways. Indian mythology is full of references and instances of our regard and love for wild animals. Since time immemorial wildlife has been conserved and it has enjoyed privileged position of protection through religious ideals and sentiments. The prevalence of wildlife protection movement has been fairly strong in all the developed societies.

Wildlife Protection in Ancient India:

Wildlife management is very old in India. Vedas contain hymns in praise of animals. Sanatan Dharma have linked some animals with specific God or Goddess as the best way of conservation of wildlife for Example python has been associated with God Vishnu, snake with God Shiva, swan with Goddess Saraswati, lion with Goddess Durga rendering the animals pious and protected. People in ancient India had recognised the animal's rights to co-exist with the man and therefore they were loved, nurtured and even worshiped. Almost every God and Goddess in our Pantheon is associated with some animals and the animal is venerated almost as a deity itself. Our folklore, art and craft reflect our love and reverence for the animal world. India has a strong tradition of conserving plants and animals. Many kings and rulers also took measures to protect the wildlife.

The ancient Hindu scriptures directed people to protect their environment. Domestic and wildlife animals have been worshiped by the Hindus and the *Yajur Veda*, the *Bridha Samiti*, the *Yajnavalkya Smriti* and the *Vishnu Samhita*, all emphasise the need to peacefully co-exist with animals and serve them. India's wildlife has been the subject of numerous other tales and fables such as *Panchatantra* and *Buddhist Jataka* tales. Two thousand year old *Panchatantra* contains numerous stories in which the animals have been given prominence. Even today, children as well as adults find great excitement in reading these animal stories. Talkative turtle, stupid frog, rat and lion stories are too well known. Similarly, all grandma stories have crows, sparrows, snakes

as main characters. The court poets have written numerous collections in which the animal life has been described in minute details. In sacred Indian literatures, *Gita, Ramayana and Mahabharata* say that we should show mercy and sympathy to all living things and avoid cruelty to men and animals. Wildlife in India has deep cultural and religious significance. Communities in the different parts of the country still protect wildlife species for their religious and cultural significance

Wildlife Protection during Medieval India:

Archeological evidences in the form of animal remains give us an idea about the changes that took place in the land, in past centuries. There is no doubt that there were several sites in India where rice was being cultivated or collected several centuries before the birth of Christ and cereals-eating, often went together Long before the times referred to by the *Sanskrit* texts, wild animals were a major source of meats in various sites of the Harrappan civilisation. Over 1000 sites across northwestern India dating before 1700 B.C. have been located or studied. A range of bones of wildlife including the *chital*, hare, jackal, the great Indian one-horned rhino, wild ass and elephants have been found. These make up to a fifth of the animal remains in many sites in the Indus valley. In western Indian sites, most seeds found in the old dwellings are of wild plant species not extinct in the region. Some changes in faunal and floral distribution were probably the result of climatic shifts. Others may have been due to the impact of early humans.

The rhinoceros existed in the plains of the Indus valley in the vicinity of Mohan-jo-Daro five thousand years ago. The swamp deer or Barasingha was found in Mehrgarh in Baluchistan till around 800 B.C. Its local extinction was probably a result of over-hunting and cultivation of the riverside habitat. One reason was the sheer immensity of the forest; iron tools and fire are often celebrated in the *Sanskrit* texts as being responsible for replacing jungle with farmland, and nature with culture. There is no doubt that cultivation, domestication, the taming of animals like the elephant and the rooster the water buffalo and the zebra cow were major landmarks.

The environmental protection has been an important fact of Hindu way of life. This ancient tradition has been followed in civilisations of Mohanjo-Daro, Harrappa and Channudare and perished in India in between 2000 and 5000 B.C. Mauryans came to establish their rule in India around third century B.C. They wanted elephants extensively in warfare instead of horses because they were easy to catch and tame. The protection of elephants became serious business by the time of Mauryan rulers such as Ashoka. In the later part of his reign, Ashoka brought about significant changes in his style of governance. Embracing Buddhism, he protected many birds 86 animals, even giving up the royal hunt, o Efforts at protection of wildlife in India seem to have been initiated as far back as 242 B.C. when Ashoka passed laws for the protection of forests, birds and animals. The earliest codified law traces back to the third century BC when king Ashoka made a law in the matter of preservation of wildlife and environment, where he prohibited killing of certain species of animals such as parrots, ruddy geese, rhinoceros etc. Emperor Ashoka, the greatest and noblest ruler of India has extended complete protection to living beings including animals and birds.

Ashoka was aware of the limits of his power over the forest tribes, who were warned that his patience was not limitless. A ban on hunting, fishing and forest fires was not impossible to enforce. Not only had the people in the forests but even the cultivators probably slew animals routinely. The impact that there was fine of 100 panas or coins for poaching deer in forest, set aside for the king, shows that rule breakers did exist. The fifth pillar edict proclaimed how, "our king killed very few animals." Ashoka's Edicts- "I have enforced the law against killing certain animals and many others, but the greatest righteousness among men come from the exhortation in favour of non-injury to life and abstention from killing living beings." Ashoka depicted exemplary compassion for wildlife. Substantially, he curtailed the consumption of non-vegetarian food by the royal palace. What was most unique of him, he provided medical facilities to animals even beyond the territories of his own empire. During later part of his regime, he had completely prohibited killing of certain species of creatures.

Wildlife experts quote Ashoka edicts on guardianship of animals in their attempt to stop the killing of endangered species. Emperor Ashoka brought game laws under the category of *Dharmaniyamasor* the '*Law of Piety*'. He prohibited killing of certain species of birds, fishes and wild animals throughout his empire and all classes of living creatures on certain specified days; there was also Prohibition for killing primates and carnivorous animals for a total period of 72 days in a lunar year. All hunters, trappers, bird catchers and fishermen were strictly ordered to obey the royal injunctions prohibiting slaughter.

Emperor Ashoka set up sanctuaries for wild animals and it was perhaps the first governmental decree that conserved protection of animals. The *Arthashastras* divided into 14 books that discuss a wide range of subjects, including administration, law, industry, commerce and foreign policy. It was written during 321 and 300 BC in *Arthashastra*, certain forests called *Abhyaranya* with game beasts open to all were specially protected." Kautilya' in his *Arthashastra* exhaustively dealt with the question of environment protection. The rules mandated the rulers to protect forests and animals. They required to setup new forests preferably on the boundaries of State. Rulers provided protection of wildlife. They also prohibited killing or injuring certain animals and birds. Severe penalty was prescribed for offenders.

Wildlife during Mugal Regime:

It has been authoritatively opined that the Mugal emperors from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century were famous as hunters. Akbar the great is said to have kept one thousand trained Cheetahs with which to hunt antelopes, and his successor shot, among other animals, a total of 889 nilgai and as an illustration, it may be noted that 'the great Indian rhinoceros', which was hunted in the Indus valley by the mugal as late as 1519.

During Mugal period, a significant contribution from the point of view of environment conservation has been the establishment of magnificent gardens, fruit orchards and green parks, round about the emperor's palace, central and provincial headquarters etc. In addition, the religious policy of Akbar based on principle of complete tolerance also reflects concern for protection for birds and beasts in so much so as endeavours were taken during his reign to stop their unnecessary killing. In 1634 the Mugal Ruler Shah Jahan chose to hunt at Palam. In one day, he himself shot forty black antelopes with the royal gun. As in previous ages, the hunt was more than a means to tone the body, to test one's nerves and leave the fine art of stalking, killing ferocious beasts or the deer that raided corn were acts of religious merit.

Birds and animals have been a part of our mythology, folklore, epics and literature since time immemorial. The Mugal court patronised the use of birds and animals as essential elements in the composition of landscapes and portraiture.

The painters of *Rajputana* and *Pahari* schools also used animals and birds freely in their creations. Take, for instance, the book 'Flora and Fauna in Mugal Art.' Its jacket is adorned by a magnificent portrait of a black buck. 'The Mugal Emperor exhibited deep interest in wild life of India during medieval period. They have created hunting reserves called '*shikargaha*' for protection and preservation of game animals.

In the first 12 years of his reign alone, Jahangir killed over 17,000 animals. These include as many as 889 *nilgai*, 86 tigers and lions and 1,670 gazelle and antelope. The hunt was not only means to put fresh meat on the plate, it also symbolised the ability of the ruler to overcome '*noxious animals*' - a term used by Jahangir for a huge tiger he killed near the fort of Mandu. The success or failure of a hunt on the eve of a major military expedition was taken as an omen of what lay ahead. Babur wrote of 'great masses' of rhinos between the Indus River and the city of Bhira. There was a flourishing trade in rhino horn cups, which was said to be useful in detecting poison.

During the days of Mugsals in India, wildlife provided magnificent sport and excitement for the nobility of time. Babur was a great nature lover and highly concerned with preserving the trees and wild animals. The emperor Jahangir was a naturalist and has left a remarkable record of his observations of birds and animals and his memoirs contain descriptions which, for their accuracy and great insight have won the admiration of latter-day naturalists. His description of the now extinct bird, *Dodo*, is the only evidence in this subcontinent of observation of the bird. His observation on birds was as close and scientific as that of the modern bird watchers.

It is interesting to note that the Emperor Akbar used to maintain a contingent of a thousand cheetahs trained to hunt. In 1398, invader Timur killed many rhinos in areas near the present day border of Kashmir. The rhinoceros is now found only in certain parts of Nepal, West Bengal and Assam. There was a time when hunting was considered as a royal game. It was the duty of the king to destroy ferocious animals so as to save his subjects from their attack. Elephants and horses were used in battles and killed in large numbers.

Wildlife Protection During British India:

The Mugal period witnessed a steady decline in wildlife population due to lack of legal control on hunting. Despite this, there was an abundance of wildlife in India before the commencement of British rule in the country. Within two decades of defeating the rulers of Bengal in the historic Battle of Plassey in 1757, the British decreed special rewards for any tiger killed. Part of the British animosity to the forest and its wild inhabitants stemmed from the situation in Bengal, the very first reign of India they conquered. Much of eastern India suffered a major famine around 1770, with one in three people dying. As a result of the massive mortality, large areas of farmland remained uncultivated and reunited to jungle.

Fewer tigers meant more cultivation and more revenue, their elimination a blessing of imperium after the elimination of an oriental despot. Larger rewards were given out for killing tigresses and special prizes for finishing off cubs. The slaughter of deer and boar by sahibs or villagers out to get extra meat reduced the base of prey for wild carnivores. The rhino and wild buffalo, major prey items, vanished from the north Bengal plains by the 1850; in the drier regions, the *nilgai* became scarce. Colonial strictures against the annual hunts of the *santhal* tribals removed a major check on wild animal population. In 1870s' local practices across British-ruled territories were evaluated and the Government of India worked hard to assess the best method of exterminating wild animals.

In the Madras Presidency, Collectors paid out 25 rupees for each specimen. The Maharao of Kotah in Rajasthan awarded anyone who killed a lion, 25 rupees, more than twice what he gave for the head of a tiger. By 1920, the lion was extinct in British India and only survived in Princely States of Saurashtra. The *Cheetah* was already in serious decline, and perhaps found no refuge because it was not a key trophy animal. Over 80,000 tigers, more than 150,000 leopards and 2, 00,000 wolves were slaughtered in the fifty years from 1875 to 1925.

It is a matter of great concern that during 18th and 19th Centuries, the British rulers and some Indian rulers have caused ruthless destruction of Indian wildlife for food, recreation, hide, horn, musk, etc. and also the deforestation (i.e. the act of destruction of natural abode of game animals), for the constructions of highways, railways, dams, human dwellings and many other similar purposes.

India with its abundant wildlife held fascination for all who ruled this country and hunting game was popular with princes land owners and other gentry alike. The Nawab of Junagarh made the hunting of lion an exclusive sport meant only for a 'chosen' few Elephants were meant to be captured alive because they were used in warfare. With the advent of the British Raj, hunting for sport gained more popularity, from the historical point of view this era heralded the death toll of India's wildlife. An account of duck shoot gives a grand total of 3511 birds being killed in one day. While undoubtedly big game hunting in the Raj was usually indulged in for the sake of an ostentatious display of sportsmanship, in the case of elephants the idea of hunting moved beyond the consideration of mere game and achievement of physical prowess alone. British conceptions of the elephant as sport transformed with the changing value of the animal. The shikar of the elephants assumed a very different meaning than the general nature of field sport that the British indulged in throughout the 19th century. After Sir Sydney Cotton's words on the importance of an elephant in military operations, the elephants became an indispensable item of warfare despite the modern innovation of artillery.

The British army officials, civil servants and teaplanter in India were also fond of hunting using high powered weapons. Shooting of tigers was a popular game in India for years. Deforestation and the consequent loss of habitat continued to endanger the lives of many wild animals and birds. High demands for goods made of tusks, skin and horns of animals coupled with development of taxidermy contributed to faster pace of destruction of wildlife. It is only when many species reached the stage of extinction that strategies were evolved for their protection.

Preservation of Wildlife after Independence:

The fall of British Raj in India heralded a new era in the history of wildlife. However, some effects of Raj still lingered and hunting was prevalent till 1960s'. The advent of automobiles, long range rifles and other implements of 'modern civilisation' helped to further hasten the decline of India's wildlife. During the British Colonial rule whatever was a common property for common good available to nearby community freely was used by the colonial rulers solely for the government revenue needs, be it land, forests, wildlife species or common grazing pastures. This resulted in exploitation of the local people under the guise of sovereignty. Indeed independence ushered in an era of freedom from restraints, especially in regard to killing of wild animals. Rejecting shooting regulations, the government in its drive to protect crops from depredations of wild animals issued guns freely to farmers and others- an action which literally led to large scale destruction of wild animals. The cheetah is extinct- the last having been shot in 1951. From 1947 to 1951, the destruction of wildlife everywhere and by everyone continued. With the rulers of princely States having lost their power and control, poachers with scant regard for the rules and regulations of the forest department indulged in indiscriminate shooting of wild animals. By the time Government took up the cause of wildlife, irreparable damage had already been done.

Unfortunately, during the recent turbulent history of India much of the tradition has been lost. Extensive hunting by the British and Indian Rajas, large scale clearing of forests for agriculture, availability of guns, poaching, strongpesticides and the ever increasing population have had disastrous effects on India's environment. In the past few decades the government has taken serious steps towards environmental management and has established over 350 parks, sanctuaries and reserves.

The appreciation of faunal wealth in urban areas was encouraged in people by one of the earliest documentation on the birds of Delhi by British Officer, Major General Hutson and published in 1854. Wildlife in India is at present in a crisis. Along with the increasing population the increasing commercial interest pose a bigger threat that wildlife faces in the country.

The bigger crisis is from the conflict between the local communities and the authorities that are meant to protect wildlife. With the setting up of the Colonial Forest Department and the establishment of the Wildlife (Protection) Act in 1972, the local communities probably got the worse deal. Wildlife sanctuaries and National Parks, established for the protection of wildlife, limited the local communities' access to these areas that were their mainstay for fodder, fuel-wood, food and medicines. Local people have been seen as intruders, poachers and destroyers of wildlife.

Wildlife in India has deep cultural and religious significance. Communities in the different parts of the country still protect wildlife species for their religious and cultural significance. The Bishnoi community deserves a special mention here. A Bishnoi will not burn wood until it is free of all insect life. They have a unique relationship of love with the black buck and have often risked their lives to save the black buck from poachers.

Five hundred years ago the seeds of a unique conservation movement were sown when Guru Jambheshwar launched a new faith, known as Bishnoi. There are simple day-to-day living and way of life which constitute the highest code of conduct which in all are numerically 29- linguistically in local dialect- described Bishnoi and those who follow and adhere to these principles are known as Bishnoi. Five centuries have since

lapsed but these remarkable people still conserve flora and fauna in their area with fervent zeal. Be it black buck or the spotted deer, the great Indian bustard or the partridge, all enjoy life in a fearless environment around Bishnoi villages.

Legislation on Wildlife Preservation in India:

The cause of wildlife preservation in India has been sustained through legend and history. Every God and Goddess of Hindu mythology has his or her favorite animal immortalised in scriptures, sculptures and paintings. Kautilya laid down the first recorded game laws of history in the third century B.C. The earliest efforts for protection of wildlife seem to have been limited only to individual species rather than their habitats. Although Indian Forest Act, 1878 for the first time attempted to protect certain patches of Government owned forests by declaring them as reserved forests. Realising the importance of wildlife resources and in order to prevent its depletion many legislations have been enacted by Central Government as well as by the State Governments. It was in the year 1972, about twenty five years after independence, when the legal remedies could actually be imposed through the passing and enforcement of the Wildlife Protection Act.

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