

Wild beasts in the city

HARINI NAGENDRA

WITH India on a seemingly unstoppable fast track to urbanization, cities and towns are expanding across the country. The growing urban footprint extends across vast expanses of countryside and forests populated by a rich diversity of wildlife. Many Indian cities deal with challenges of frequent incursions of wildlife. National parks such as Bannerghatta National Park at the southern periphery of Bengaluru, Sanjay Gandhi National Park in the northern part of Mumbai, and Van Vihar National Park in the heart of Bhopal, pose problematic challenges for wildlife conservation. Yet, the challenge of dealing with human-wildlife interactions in the urban context rarely, if ever, figures in considerations of urban planning in India and across much of Asia. Dealing with megafauna remains a challenge in the populated landscapes of South Asia. In the main, this discussion is centred on the rural and the forest, spaces that are increasingly shrinking as the city enlarges its footprint on the rest of the country.

We often forget that urban wildlife has played a major role in the imagination of nature in South Asian settlements over centuries. Such issues are common across many emerging

economies and deserve careful scrutiny and attention before irreversible changes overwhelm landscapes. An examination of narratives of wildlife in and around Bengaluru provides a fascinating account of the changing ways in which encounters with wildlife have been framed, appreciated, and sought to be managed as settlements have formed and grown into towns, cities and metropolises. Given its global linkages in a networked age, its recent past as an industrial town and its long history of human settlement, it also provides a fine instance of a multilayered yet ever changing history.

Archival sources allow us insights into human-wildlife relations related to human settlements in the past millennium. Epigraphic inscriptions found on hero stones, pillars, rocks and temple foundations around Bengaluru provide some of the earliest available accounts of encounters with wildlife in this southern megapolis. It is an interesting fact that most epigraphical inscriptions that describe wildlife hunts and encounters with wild beasts have been found in the area around Kanakapura, at the southern periphery of the city. Formerly called Kankanahalli, this region continues to be well known as a wildlife habitat today, containing the Bannerghatta National Park.

*Epigraphia Carnatica*¹ describes an inscription from 1120 CE

*This article expands on material from a blog post I wrote on 15 February 2015: The Wild Beast as the Other: Framing of Urban Wildlife in Popular Imagination. The Nature of Cities collective blog. Accessible at <http://www.thenatureofcities.com/2015/02/15/the-wild-beast-as-the-other-framing-of-urban-wildlife-in-popular-imagination/>. I thank USAID PEER for research funding via a grant to ATREE.

1. B.L. Rice, *Epigraphica Carnatica*, Volume IX: Inscriptions in the Bangalore District. Mysore Government Central Press, Bangalore, India, 1905.

(Kn 85) discovered in the village of Hagadur, recording the death of Augandan from an attack by a tiger while on a hunt. The inscription is careful to note that while the tiger attacked Augandan, he in turn pierced and killed the tiger before his own death. That is, Augandan died a victorious hero, not a vanquished nonentity. In the village of Levarahalli, an inscription from 1310 CE (Kn 11) narrates the death of Sokka-Illingaton and his dog from an attack by a wild boar, again stressing the fact that the boar was pierced by Sokka-Illingaton before he died. Other deaths were less provoked. In 1351 CE, in the village of Muralebekuppa, Vira-Somaji was killed by a tiger while tending cattle (Kn 40), while at Budikuppe, Devappa was mauled by a tiger in 1653 CE (Kn 96).

The topography of the city influenced the location of wildlife attacks. Kanakapura is located in a dry deciduous forest landscape, where archival records describe a largely pastoralist existence, in comparison to settlements in more fertile, flatter areas such as Begur, where settlements were dependent on irrigated agriculture. Early rulers such as Hiriya Kempe Gowda, the founder of the medieval city of Bengaluru in 1537, recognized the importance of wildlife in providing a barricade of natural protection to his growing dominions. The local historian Fazlul Hasan remarks that Kempe Gowda, having annexed the regions of Shivaganga and Domlur, protected the landscape between these settlements. He ‘allowed the forest to grow thicker since it provided a natural barrier and thus gave protection to its principality.’²

Rulers of the Bengaluru realms two centuries later also favoured a

relationship to wildlife. However, it was no longer treated as a safety zone against intruders. Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, who governed Bengaluru during most of the 18th century, actively kept captive wildlife as a sign of royal prestige. Monsieur M. Maistre de La Tour, a French officer in Hyder’s army, described Hyder as owning a number of tame ‘spotted tigers’ (presumably leopards). If his stories are to be believed, Hyder fed sweets to these beasts with his own hand.

As part of his daily routine, ‘[i]f he has leisure, he appears at a balcony, and receives the salute of his elephants that are led before him, as well as his horses. His tigers of chace likewise pay him a visit. They are led by hand, and are covered with a mantle of green and gold hanging to the ground, and a bonnet on their head, of cloth embroidered with gold, with which their eyes can be immediately covered, if they should chance to prove mischievous. Hyder himself gives each of them a ball of sweetmeats, which they take very adroitly with their paws, being exceedingly tame. These are the spotted tigers, and their keepers lead them every day into those places where the greatest crowds are: but the grand tiger, or tiger royal, has never been tamed by any attempts yet made.’³

Further accounts by de la Tour described Hyder’s hunts in detail. ‘When he is obliged to remain a month in camp, or in any town, he usually goes to the chace twice a week. He hunts the stag, the roebuck, the antelope, and the tiger. When notice arrives that this last animal has been observed to quit the forests, and appear in the plains,

3. Monsieur M. Maistre de La Tour, *The History of Hyder Shah, Alias Hyder Ali Khan Bahadur: or, New Memoirs Concerning the East Indies With Historical Notes*. J. Johnson, London, 1784, pp. 18-19; reprinted and published by Sanders, Cones & Co., Calcutta, 1948.

he mounts his horse, followed by all his Abyssinians, his spear-men on foot, and almost all the nobility armed with spears and bucklers. The traces of the beast being found, the hunters surround his hiding place, and contract the circle by degrees. As soon as the creature, who is usually hid in some rice ground, perceives his enemies, he roars, and looks every where to find a place of escape; and when he prepares to spring on some one to force a passage, he is attacked by Hyder himself, to whom the honour of giving the first stroke is yielded, and in which he seldom fails. Thus the pleasures of the sovereign are varied to infinity.’⁴

What is interesting about these narratives is that they portray a great deal of knowledge about the ecology and behaviour of wild beasts, including the fact that the covering of the eyes disorients leopards and makes them easier to handle. It also demonstrates the knowledge that tigers in settled landscapes move seasonally between the uphill forests and agricultural villages in the plains, depending on the availability of water and easy prey. This knowledge was strategically deployed to tame and hunt wild beasts.

Tipu Sultan, the ‘Tiger of Mysore’, allegedly used captive tigers to maintain discipline in his army. As described by a British captive James Scurry, ‘Tipoo, thinking his mode of punishment towards those poor creatures who happened to fall under his displeasure not severe or terrific enough, ordered nine large tiger cages to be made, and placed opposite his kerconah, or treasury. They were arranged there according to his order, and soon tenanted, each with a large tiger.

‘After the death of Colonel Bailey, we were paraded before these ferocious animals, and had an opportunity of

4. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

2. M.F. Hasan, *Bangalore Through the Centuries: A Historical Narrative of Bangalore*. Historical Publications, Bangalore, 1970 (first edition), p. 13.

seeing them fed once or twice a day; one of the nine was as black as a coal, the only one I ever saw of that colour. They were all taken in the Curakee jungles, which abound with elephants, tigers, wild boars, panthers, tiger-cats, leopards, & c., and lie about twenty miles from Patam, and about ten from Mysore. Those tigers, above stated, were designed for the punishment of high crimes and misdemeanours: three of his principal officers, namely, his head inchewalla, or general postmaster, his buxey, or paymaster general, and another, were severally thrown to the tigers, and devoured in an instant, all but their heads; for which purpose the tigers were always kept hungry! These all suffered within the short space of four months.

‘Confinement, however, soon proved destructive to the animals themselves, as scarcely one of them survived above eleven months. At this period, there was a regular import of wild beasts at least twice a week, taken from the jungles by himself, on his hunting excursions.’⁵

Accounts such as these demonstrate the ecological knowledge of the hunters and animal keepers. Animals with rare colouring such as the black tiger described by Scurry above, or Immambucies, a massive 15-foot elephant of docile temperament belonging to Tipu’s court, who was ‘much caressed’, were especially prized. Royal battles were staged between tigers and elephants, and tigers and wild boars, as described by a Portuguese member of Hyder’s army, Captain Eloy Jose Correa Peixoto.⁶ Thus, overall, the hunting, taming, and deployment of tamed wild beasts in court was a stra-

tegic act, seemingly for entertainment, but in reality as an important sign of kingly prowess and prestige.

Perhaps the most grotesque of the encounters between people and wild-life came from the influence of the Indian ruler’s fascination with *shikar* (hunting) on the British elite. The accounts of hunting among the Europeans appear immediately after the defeat of Tipu Sultan in 1799, when the British East India Company had conquered the Mysore State. The British officers’ disingenuous efforts to recreate the shikar very often led to the farce of urban ‘hunts’, a favourite pastime among the elite in Bengaluru. These hunts were usually conducted by British officers on horseback, armed with guns and spears, against tigers and other wild cats brought in cages from the forests surrounding Bengaluru, to be ‘hunted’ after being let loose in the urban backdrop of Bengaluru’s Race Course. In this, the new urban elite was influenced by Indian royalty’s use of the hunt to demonstrate bravery and prowess. Yet, the urban hunt in actuality demonstrated neither of these supposedly masculine virtues.

In 1811, a vivid account by a British officer, Colonel James Welsh described the hunting of tigers on the urban premises of the Bengaluru Race Course. The reinstated Maharaja of Mysore, making up for a dull audience with him the previous day, ‘sent us a fine royal tiger to be hunted on the race course. Mr. Cole, always the leader, speared him four times, though scarcely drawing blood: after which Lieutenant Aubrey pinned him to the ground, the pike entering the loose skin of his jowl while he lay crouching under a small

paddy bank; Captain Pepper struck him next, and provoked him to rise and wrench the first spear out; he then staggered a short distance, and took to a small tank, where several spears were flung at him, and one thrown by Pepper pierced his ribs, and actually drowned him. Mr. Cole, being well mounted, and a capital spear-man, was the only person who, for a long time, dared to face him; and, weakened as he was, it was no easy job to destroy him. A small rough dog belonging to Lieutenant Mercer never quitted the tiger till he was drowned, when a Sepoy volunteered to dive and bring him out, and actually did so.

‘The next day a couple of royal tigers were sent, when Mr. Cole killed the first single-handed, though a large and active one. The second, being a more knowing brute, immediately gave chase to Major Russel, of our cavalry, who was nearly overtaken by him, when two black men ran in his way, one of whom he killed with a single bite, and then retreated under the new race stand. Into this place a woman and child had crept for safety, and as he came in at one end, and laid hold of her cloth, she wisely left it with him, and retreated with her infant uninjured. As we could not contrive to lure him out again, I pistoled him; by breaking his back, and then dismounting, we killed him with our spears. Whilst we were undecided, however, as to his back being fairly broken, he seized a square stone lying in front of him and actually broke several of his teeth upon it.

‘I shall not give any further notice of this, our favourite amusement at Bangalore, but remark only that the panthers, though smaller, were always fiercer and more active than the royal tigers and generally gave better sport... Only one European was ever badly wounded in these sports; and we thus established the long contested fact, that tigers might be speared by men on horseback.’⁷

5. J. Scurry, *The Captivity, Sufferings, and Escape of James Scurry, Who Was Detained a Prisoner During Ten Years, in the Dominions of Hyder Ali and Tippoo Saib*. Henry Fisher, London, 1824, pp. 109-110.

6. E.J.C. Peixoto (1770). *Memoirs of Hyder Ally From the Year 1758 to 1770* by Eloy Joze Correa Peixoto, in *Annual Report of the Mysore Archaeological Department*, Government Press, Bangalore, 1938, pp. 82-119.

These and other equally detailed and gruesome accounts by Welsh, describe hunts where Indian residents – even unarmed women and children – were in danger, but Europeans were generally untouched. British officers spearing tigers at a safe distance on horseback, armed with guns, and using peons on foot to do most of the dirty work of spearing and weakening the tiger.

Prey did not only come neatly boxed in cages. When the Prince of Wales visited Bengaluru, the Maharaja of Mysore prepared a royal hunt by having a large area of forest surrounded, into which tigers were driven and then fed well, in preparation for the eventual kill. The practice of the hunt continued well into the 20th century. The Bangalore Hunt, conducted annually from 1924 until the 1940s, was attended by European and Anglo-Indian participants, as well as members of the Mysore royal family. The impact on the surrounding countryside must have been severe, as Janaki Nair notes, with hounds and horses trampling over grasslands and fertile agricultural fields reckless of the damage caused to local residents.⁸

For the Indian residents, the dangers of wildlife were severe as the city grew, leading to an intensive period of targeted kills. During an 18 month period in 1835-1836, 2397 cattle and 14 humans were killed by wildlife, with an additional nine people wounded in the division of Bengaluru. One elephant, 22 tigers, 55 cheetahs, 21 leopards and one bear were destroyed during the same time. In 1836, rewards were instated for the destruction of wild

7. J. Welsh, *Military Reminiscences; Extracted From a Journal of Nearly Forty Years' Active Service in the East Indies*. Vol. II. Smith, Elder and Co., Cornhill, London, 1830, pp. 5-6.

8. J. Nair, *The Promise of the Metropolis: Bangalore's Twentieth Century*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005, p. 59.

predators, after which their number greatly decreased.⁹

Today, about two centuries later, the extermination of wildlife has been spectacularly successful. With the exception of Bannerghatta Tiger Reserve, tigers are not to be found in Bengaluru (although, as evidence of how far urban life is from that of mega fauna, I have heard a child of about 12 wonder if tigers lurk in an exotic eucalyptus plantation adjacent to a road choked with traffic!). Some types of wildlife are harder to confine to boundaries, like elephants, for instance. A few months ago, several schools at the eastern periphery of the city near Sarjapur were closed for a couple of days while a herd of elephants moved through the surroundings, trampling over tennis courts and damaging lawns at one school. And as further evidence of the urban detachment from wildlife realities, newspaper accounts described groups of urban gawkers converging in large groups and shining flashlights at the herd, further disorienting them and rendering it difficult for them to return to their familiar forest habitat.

Other wildlife invasions of urban habitats have been noted in recent times as success stories. The return of the lesser flamingos to Mumbai's busy port harbour was much easier to handle than the challenges of dealing with a herd of marauding elephants in Bengaluru. Stories of such animal-human conflicts are on the rise across India, as the city continues its seemingly relentless advance into the countryside. The herd that visited Bengaluru sadly killed four people in the rural areas surrounding the city during their brief excursion.

Hunting wildlife, as exercised by Indian rulers, was an act of symbolic

9. Charles Irving Smith, *A Statistical Report on the Mysore*. 1854, p. 24.

importance. Use of captive wildlife was a strategic act, inspiring fear and awe, and underlining the bravery, military prowess and valour of the Indian ruler's administration. While engaging in hunts, or training captured leopards for use in their courts, Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan were following in the footsteps of the Mughal rulers of the past.¹⁰ The British colonial regime took this practice one step further, engaging in travesties of a faux hunt of tigers captured in cages from local forests and released on the Bengaluru Race Course, at a safe distance while mounted on horseback, and armed with spears and guns. Such hunts were an integral part of the practice of global imperialism across European colonies in the tropics, shaped by a conception of dominance over wildlife as a manifestation of imperial power.¹¹

The roots of the current conflicts between Indian cities and urban wildlife incursions may lie deep in this history, influencing our framing of the wild beast as the 'other': a being to be valorized in battle, conquered in a hunt, trapped in a cage, butchered for trophies, and exoticized in print, but not capable of coexisting with humans. In smart cities of the future, we expect to have high-speed digital highways where we can browse for photographs of tigers and elephants, and watch spectacular youtube videos of wildlife at a safe distance. Yet, can we see the real thing? Unless we seek out a different imagination of coexistence with nature – on her terms, as much as on ours – there is little hope for the maintenance of urban nature in an increasingly urban planet.

10. M. Rangarajan, *India's Wildlife History: An Introduction*. Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2001.

11. J.M. MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1988.