

POONA  
IN BYGONE DAYS

BY

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Dattātraya Balavanta Pārasnis  
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BOMBAY  
THE TIMES PRESS

1921

It may be worth mentioning here that the Peshwas were very fond of elephant fights, and had specially trained their elephants for this purpose. William Price, a member of the Bombay Government, who came to Poona on an embassy in 1759 mentions in his diary :—

“ Sunday 30th, Nana (Balaji Bajirao) sent me an invitation to a tent pitched without the town, where he entertained me with the combats of elephants, which lasted for three hours.”

Such animal fights were generally arranged on the occasions of entertaining distinguished guests and for that purpose a number of animals were kept and trained in the Peshwa's menagerie at Poona.

In the park at the foot of Parvati was the menagerie or zoological garden, a fine collection of animals, birds, reptiles and fish. Altogether there were more than a hundred animals. This collection of animals was unique of its kind in the Deccan and there was a regular department opened in Poona by Nana Phadnavis for its up-keep. Major Price who visited Poona in 1791 had seen the Peshwa's menagerie :—

“ During my residence at Poona,” writes Major Price, “I do not recollect that any thing

made a more lively impression on my mind, than a visit which, in company with some of our friends from the Sungum, I paid to the Peshwa's menagerie, at the foot of the hill of Pahrbutty. It then contained some of the finest, if not the very finest, specimens of the brute creation that I had ever beheld. There were, in particular, a lion and rhinoceros ; as perfect in their condition and proportions as if they had been at large in their native wilds. The king of animals and lord of the forest, appeared full worthy of his awful dignity. He was in full flesh, perfectly clean ; and presented a forehead of such stately and massive proportions, that taken altogether, as a symbol of majesty, activity and strength, there seemed in all nature nothing comparable. Being uncaged and in an open shed, chained only to a strong upright post driven into the ground, the air had sufficient access all around, so as to prevent the nauseous effluvia, which we experience when these animals are more closely confined. The tranquil indifference with which the majestic creature, seated on his hind legs, and presenting his stupendous chest and forearm, contemplated his strange visitors, in dress and complexion, so different to what he had been accustomed to, could not but impress us

with a peculiar sensation of awe. And now, more than ever, I could not be surprised that the celebrated Alep Arslan, should, in the disposition of his hair and beard, have endeavoured to exhibit some resemblance to the features of this most formidable of animals. In this noble creature, at the same time, from its being regularly fed and carefully attended, we had an opportunity of beholding a sample of the species in much higher perfection, than by a transient view in the solitude of the wilderness ; or the exhibitions at Exeter 'Change' in its most flourishing state."

" Next to the lion, and equally as accessible to the fresh air, was, also fastened in the same manner, the finest and most perfect model of a rhinoceros, that I have ever seen, either before or since. For, unlike the shapeless monster that we usually see exhibited, with his body enveloped in loose and flaccid folds of indurated hide, this stupendous animal was filled out to its utmost proportions ; and its huge armour-like exterior being stretched almost to bursting, it was as round as a hog's-head ; and at the same time as lively, I was going to say, as any sucking pig. Indeed, when the keeper, by a slight touch with his wand,

made him rear up a little on his hind legs, while the alertness surprised me, I could not but compare him to a wine pipe, set a little on one end. At all events, the ponderous agility of the animal was astonishing. Its small, but prominent eye, appeared sparkling, and full of animation ; and the horny mass upon its snout, though it did not yet seem to have attained to its full growth, by its backward turn and hook-like shape, furnished sufficient proof, that when applied by a momentum of such force, its effect must be tremendous ; and renders less surprising the accounts we receive of its power to subdue the otherwise surpassing strength of the elephant. There were several tigers, and other animals in the same range ; but they seemed unworthy of observation, or sunk into insignificance, by the side of the other stupendous creatures.”

It may be said to the credit of Sir Charles Malet, the British Resident, who showed considerable interest in this department, presented several animals and birds to this collection which was located at the foot of the Parvati hill, a spot still shown as the Peshwa's *Shikarkhana*.

In this menagerie there was a number of tame deer and antelopes some of which were of a beau-

tiful species and were perfectly familiar. The antelopes had an ear for music and were specially trained in dancing and swinging for the purpose of entertainments. Sir Charles Malet has given an interesting account of an entertainment given by the Peshwa in 1792 :—

“The Peshwa having invited me to a novel spectacle, at his *rumna*, or park, about four miles from Poonah, I proceeded thither about two o'clock in the afternoon, with the gentlemen of my party, where we found a tent pitched for the purpose, and were received at the door by some of the principal nobles. The Peshwa arrived soon after, and when we were all conveniently seated on carpets, agreeably to oriental costume, four black buck antelopes, of noble vein and elegant form, made their appearance at some distance, moving gracefully before a party of cavalry, who forming a semi-circle, gently followed their pace, each horseman holding a long pole, with a red cloth at the end. On approaching the tent, a band of music struck up in loud notes, and three of the antelopes entered in a stately manner. Two swings, commonly used by the Indians, being suspended for the purpose, an antelope ascended on each swing, and couched in the most graceful

altitude ; the third reclined on the carpet in a similar posture. On the loud music ceasing, a set of dancing girls entered, and danced to softer strains before the antelopes, who chewing the cud, lay in a state of sweet tranquillity and satisfaction. At this time the fourth antelope, who had hitherto appeared more shy than his comrades, came into the tent and laid himself upon the carpet in the same manner. An attendant then put one of the swings in motion, and swung the antelope for some time, without his being at all disturbed. The amusement being continued as long as the Peshwa thought proper, it was closed by the game-keeper placing a garland of flowers over the horns of the principal antelope, on which he rose, and the four animals went off together.

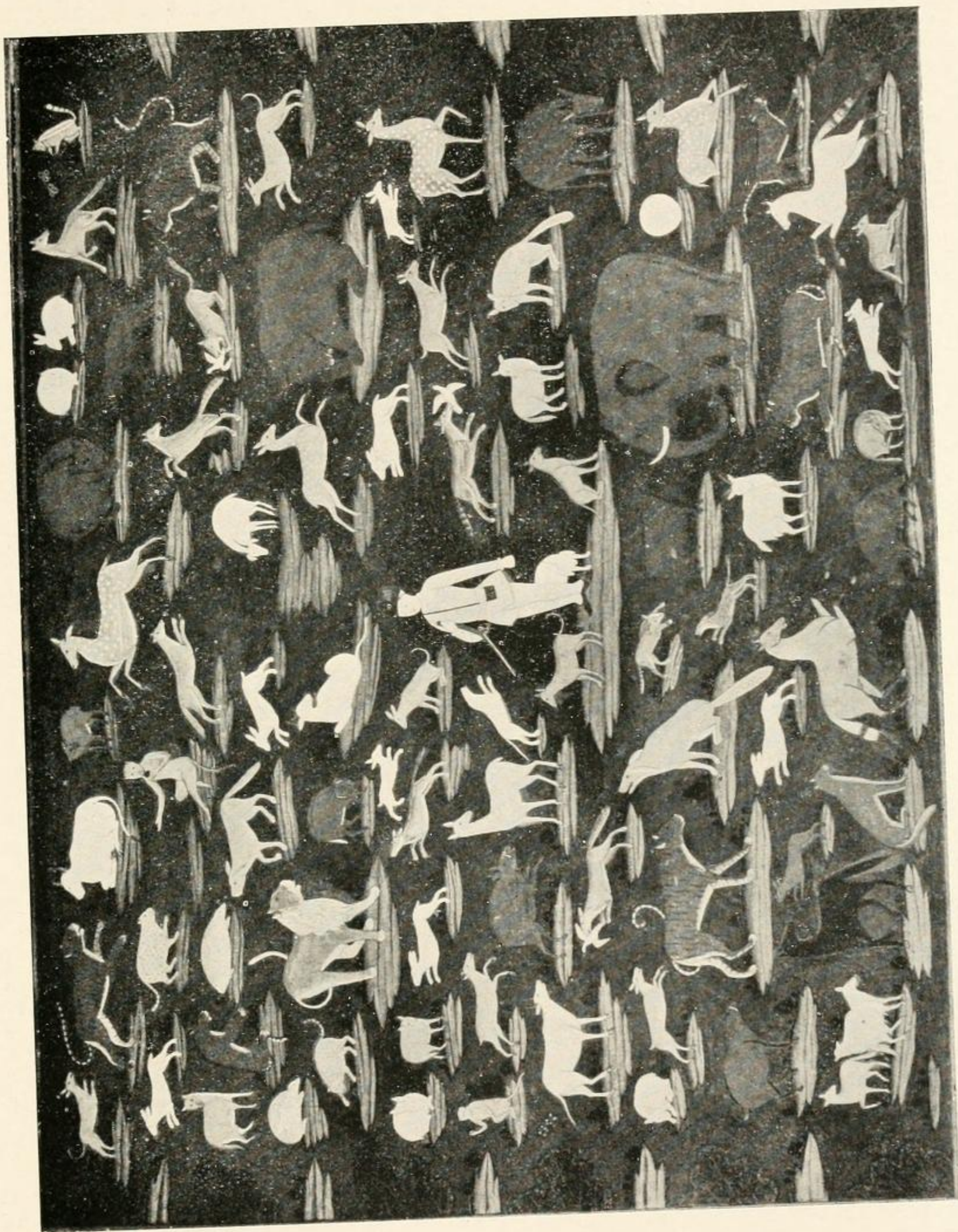
“ The Peshwa informed me, that seven months had been employed to bring the antelopes to this degree of familiarity, without the smallest constraint, as they wandered at their pleasure, during the whole time, amongst large herds of deer in the *rumna* ; which, although I have mentioned as a park, is not enclosed, nor has it any kind of fence. I was also assured these animals were not

impelled by appetite, no grain or food of any kind having been given them : on this I am somewhat of a sceptic. The Peshwa was persuaded they were thus attracted by the power of music; aided, perhaps, by some particular ingenuity of the men who profess the art of familiarizing this beautiful and harmless animal. The Peshwa seemed to be much pleased with the amusement ; which in innocence is suited to the tents of the Brahmins, if not to their present character.”

Sir Charles Malet had all these animals represented in clay by a clever Brahmin artist who had earned great merit in modelling. A painting of these interesting models, with Sir Charles Malet in the middle, is still in existence and is preserved in the historical collections at Satara.

From this place the Peshwa's hunting reserve was not at a far distance. There was a number of deer in the vicinity of Parvati and the Peshwa Sawai Madhavrao was very fond of their hunt. An amusing incident is recorded in old papers that in 1793, the Peshwa one day chased many a deer and succeeded in capturing some. Mahadji Sindia who happened to be one of the party begged the Peshwa to give him one antelope, but the Peshwa suspecting that Mahadji might





THE PESHWA'S MENAGERIE. (CLAY MODEL PREPARED FOR SIR CHARLES MALET.)

kill it, declined the request. The shrewd Maratha quickly understood the reason of the Peshwa's refusal and willingly promised that the animal would be safe with him, whereupon the Peshwa was pleased to grant the favour.

For the pleasure and recreation of human mind gardens and pleasure-houses are also necessary and the Peshwas did not neglect them. In 1791 the following gardens belonging to the Peshwa were famous in Poona :—

1. Hira Bag.
2. Saras Bag.
3. Vasant Bag.
4. Moti Bag.
5. Bag Parvati.
6. Bag Bungalow.
7. Bag Wanavdi.
8. Bag Hingne.
9. Bag Ramana.
10. Bag Wadgaon.
11. Bag Manik.
12. Bag Pashan.
13. Bag Katraj.

Out of these the most noted was the Hira Bag where Balaji Bajirao in 1755 built a pleasure house for himself. Here the Peshwa and his descendants often used to come for recreation and the fêtes in